

Ilham Aliyev, President, Republic of Azerbaijan

Ogtay Asadov, Speaker, National Assembly, Republic of Azerbaijan

Donald Tusk, President, European Council

Jean-Claude Juncker, President, European Commission

Federica Mogherini, Vice-President of the European Commission, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Johannes Hahn, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations

Martin Schulz, President, European Parliament

Ministers of Foreign Affairs, EU Member States

24 April 2015

Statement by the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum on Political Prisoners in Azerbaijan

Civil Society Forum demands immediate and unconditional release of Intigam Aliyev and Rasul Jafarov together with all prisoners of conscience currently held in Azerbaijan

The European Union and its Member States should defend the values on which the Eastern Partnership is founded and take into account the human rights situation in Azerbaijan when negotiating with its government

Heavy prison sentences were passed on Intigam Aliyev and Rasul Jafarov in recent days. Intigam Aliyev, the head of the Azerbaijan Legal Education Society, was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison on highly questionable tax evasion charges and Rasul Jafarov, the head of the Human Rights Club, was sentenced to six and a half years on similar charges. Both of them were active members of the Civil Society Forum. The trials of these well-known civil society activists were conducted with violations of the law of Azerbaijan.

Intigam Aliyev, a lawyer, was instrumental in preparing cases regarding the behaviour of the government before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg while Rasul Jafarov organised the protest campaign related to the Eurovision Song Contest and was planning another campaign against Azerbaijan's human rights violations during the forthcoming European games in Baku.

In line with the arrests and sentencing of human rights defenders go investigations of non-governmental organisations and blocking of NGO bank accounts, humiliating searches of well-known civil society activists at their departure from and entry into the country. The government combines these measures with the adoption of new laws that considerably limit grant support for projects of local NGOs by international donors, as well as other legal restrictions, which make any activity other than approved by the Azerbaijani authorities impossible.

This campaign is accompanied by Soviet style rhetoric from a number of senior officials of Azerbaijan and insults against reputable civil society representatives as members of the "fifth column", aimed at creating an atmosphere of fear for NGO activists.

We, the members of the Steering Committee, demand the immediate and unconditional release of Intigam Aliyev and Rasul Jafarov together with all prisoners of conscience currently held in Azerbaijan. We urge the European Union and its Member States to take into consideration important issues related to human rights when negotiating with the government of Azerbaijan. The EU must defend the values on which the Eastern Partnership is built. Harassment of civil society organisations, opposition politicians and independent journalists, working on strengthening democracy and freedom of expression, by one of the Eastern Partners must not be tolerated by the European community based on the rule of law.

We call on the members of the CSF and all people of good will to demand the release of all political prisoners in Azerbaijan and restoration of the country's normal conditions for the work of local NGOs.

Members of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum