

Ilham Aliiev, President, Republic of Azerbaijan
Ogtay Asadov, Speaker, National Assembly, Republic of Azerbaijan
Catherine Ashton, Vice-President, European Commission,
and High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, European Council
Štefan Füle, European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy
Martin Schulz, President, European Parliament
Ministers of Foreign Affairs, EU member states
John Kerry, Secretary of State, United States of America
Thorbjørn Jagland, Secretary-General, Council of Europe
Anne Brasseur, President, Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe (PACE)
Didier Burkhalter, Chairperson-in-Office, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

6 August 2014

Statement of Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum on arrests of internationally respected civil society leaders in Azerbaijan

Civil Society Forum calls for immediate release of Leyla and Arif Yunus and Rasul Jafarov, arrested on fabricated charges following their calls for the release of other political prisoners

Imprisonment of prisoners of conscience and harassment of civil society is a breach of international commitments of Azerbaijan, which currently chairs the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe

Dear President, Dear Speaker, Dear High Representative, Dear Commissioner, Dear President of the European Parliament, Dear Ministers, Dear Secretary of State, Dear Secretary-General, Dear President of PACE, Dear Chairperson-in-Office,

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum strongly condemns the arrests of **Leyla Yunus, Arif Yunus** and **Rasul Jafarov**, highly respected civil society leaders and human rights defenders in Azerbaijan. Their arrests, and the harassment of other activists and journalists in Azerbaijan – including freezing of bank accounts and arbitrary raids of offices, paralysing the work of many civil society organisations and media – are part of a concerted campaign by the Azerbaijan authorities to silence criticism of the repression of democratic freedoms in Azerbaijan.

On 30 July 2014, Leyla Yunus, Director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy (IPD), was arrested on fabricated charges of high treason, fraud, illegal business, tax evasion, and falsification of documents. Her husband, Arif Yunus, was also charged with fraud and treason. Charges against them allow the authorities to hold the trials closed to the public and to apply prison sentences of up to 15 years.

Leyla Yunus has been an active campaigner against the plight of political prisoners in Azerbaijan and in working with Armenian counterparts for a peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

On 2 August 2014, Rasul Jafarov, Chairman of Human Rights Club (HRC), an active member of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, was arrested on fabricated charges of illegal entrepreneurship, abuse of power, and tax evasion, and like Leyla Yunus served a three months' pre-trial detention order by the Nasimi District Court.

Two campaigns launched by Rasul Jafarov — Sing for Democracy in relation to the Eurovision Song Contest, held in Baku in 2012, and the Art for Democracy campaign -- gained widespread public attention for the need to improve Azerbaijan's human rights record.

The arrests of Leyla Yunus, Arif Yunus and Rasul Jafarov follow a series of arrests of independent figures, including journalists, opposition politicians and civil society leaders, in Azerbaijan. On 26 May 2014 last year's Civil Society Forum Working Group 1 Co-ordinator, **Anar Mammadli**, Chair of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre (EMDS), was sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison on blatantly false charges. Anar Mammadli was nominated in 2014 for the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, an annual award presented by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. On 14 July 2014, **Hasan Huseynli**, head of "Intelligent Citizen", another devoted community leader and civil rights activist in Azerbaijan, was sentenced to six years in prison on charges that have drawn protests from the international diplomatic community. **Rauf Mirkadirov**, political commentator with independent *Ayna/Zerkalo* daily, was arrested on 19 April 2014 following his critical reporting on the governments of Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey and charged for espionage. Suspension of publication of this popular newspaper followed his arrest.

The Civil Society Forum calls upon all EU member states to exert maximum pressure on the government of Azerbaijan to cease its legal and extra-judicial harassment of civil society organisations, opposition politicians, independent journalists and concerned citizens working to strengthen and protect democracy, freedom of expression and human rights in the country. In the name of all human rights defenders and political prisoners, we strongly endorse the nomination of Anar Mammadli for the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.

The Civil Society Forum urges the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to denounce the persistent breaches of fundamental human rights and freedoms by the authorities in Azerbaijan, and to urge the Government of Azerbaijan to comply with its international commitments to human rights and civil liberties as a member of the Council of Europe. On 16 May 2014, Azerbaijan assumed the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe: the existence of political prisoners in Azerbaijan is not compatible with membership of this organisation.

The Civil Society Forum urges the authorities in Azerbaijan to release all prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan immediately. Every additional political prisoner in Azerbaijan undermines the country's image abroad and its position in the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and weakens the country's relations with the democratic world.

We, representatives of civil society, urge the European Commission, the EU delegation in Baku, the US Government, Members of the European Parliament, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to condemn their imprisonment in the strongest terms, and to support the Civil Society Forum in pressing the Azerbaijan authorities for their immediate release.

Yours faithfully,

Steering Committee, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum