

Wednesday, 19 June 2013

**To: Mr Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council
Mr José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission**

Dear President Van Rompuy,
Dear President Barroso,

The Warsaw branch of the Polish Association of Journalists (OW SDP) calls on you to raise the issue of human rights in Azerbaijan when you meet with President Ilham Aliyev in Brussels this week. In view of the deteriorating human rights situation in Azerbaijan, we hope you will use this opportunity to reaffirm the primacy of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in the European Union's relations with Eastern Partnership countries.

The approach of presidential elections in Azerbaijan scheduled for October 2013 has triggered an increased abuse of fundamental freedoms in that country. A new legislative framework for the operation of NGOs adopted in February 2013 places additional burdens on the already difficult operation of NGOs. Moreover, in May 2013 the criminalization of libel was extended to include online activities. Also the length of the maximum prison sentences that can be imposed for involvement in peaceful public protests was increased from 15 days to two months.

The European institutions have already begun to voice their profound concern about the lack of respect for human rights in Azerbaijan. The European Parliament in a resolution of June 13, 2013 dealing with the arrest of Ilgar Mammadov, the presidential candidate of the opposition, condemned the Azerbaijani authorities for countless deficiencies in human rights protection and called for immediate action.

Earlier this year the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a resolution on the need for Azerbaijan to honour international obligations and commitments. The resolution noted that since Azerbaijan joined the Council of Europe not a single parliamentary or presidential election has fully met democratic standards. Moreover, European MPs criticized the lack of an independent judiciary, abuses of freedom of expression and the repressive environment towards human rights defenders.

The OW SDP urges the Commission and EEAS to follow-up on the European Parliament's resolution and fully comply with the request therein, including the calls addressed by the Parliament to the authorities of the Republic of Azerbaijan. We hope you will stress that respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law are prerequisites for an Association Agreement. Most immediately, we call on you to urge President Aliyev to: release all political prisoners, to decriminalize libel, and to repeal all restrictive laws with respect to freedom of expression, association, and assembly.

Moreover, we call on the Commission and EEAS to follow-up the resolution of the European Parliament and to:

- Request granting the Azerbaijan Human Rights House unconditional authorization to reopen, registering the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre and the Human Rights Club as well as the Free Thought University without further delays or

- administrative burdens;
- report to the EP on the way the EEAS will apply the 'more for more' principle, with a specific focus on inclusive, free and fair elections, the independence of the judiciary, democratic reforms and fundamental rights and freedoms, and lay down the consequences of lagging behind in relation to reforms;
 - report to the EP on the way the EU Delegation in Baku will pay close attention to human rights concerns during the forthcoming election cycle, showing support for human rights defenders by attending events organised by civil society and speaking out on their behalf, closely monitoring court trials and supporting media freedom, inter alia by demanding the viable transmission of independent radio and television channels during the election campaign.

Yours sincerely,

Grzegorz Cydejko
President
Warsaw Branch
Association of Polish Journalists (SDP)