

Ilham Aliyev, President, Republic of Azerbaijan

Donald Tusk, President, European Council

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

Jean-Claude Juncker, President, European Commission

Johannes Hahn, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations

Martin Schulz, President, European Parliament

Ministers of Foreign Affairs, EU Member States

Michel Forst, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

Anne Brasseur, President, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Nils Muižnieks, Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe

Thorbjørn Jagland, Secretary General, Council of Europe

Ilkka Kanerva, President, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

Lamberto Zannier, Secretary General, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

Michael Georg Link, Director, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

20 August 2015

Statement by the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum on the Court Decision in the Cases of Leyla and Arif Yunus

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, as much as the international community, is appalled by the news from Azerbaijan on the sentencing of Dr Leyla Yunus, Director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, historian and renowned human rights activist, and her husband, famous historian Dr Arif Yunus.

Dr Leyla Yunus and her husband Dr Arif Yunus were sentenced to respectively 8.5 and 7 years in prison having been convicted of illegal business activities. Such a conviction is a nonsense, since Leyla and Arif Yunus have never engaged in entrepreneurial activities. The basis for this court decision was alleged evasion of paying taxes on received grants that are considered by the court as income from business activities. However, those grants were intended to provide funding for human rights work. The court did not consider the fact that the registration of grants has become an extremely complicated procedure in recent years in Azerbaijan and its outcome usually depends on subjective preferences of government officials. The age and serious health conditions of Dr Leyla Yunus and her husband Dr Arif Yunus were not taken into account by the court either.

It is not the first time in Azerbaijan when civil society activists opposing the government receive heavy sentences for alleged illegal business activities without being entrepreneurs. The conviction of the human rights lawyer Intigam Aliyev and human rights defender Rasul Jafarov this year are among those examples.

All these events in Azerbaijan are alarming and are in contradiction with the principles of humanism and tolerance proclaimed by the country's leadership, as well as far from the values of freedom and democracy enshrined in the Constitution of Azerbaijan.

Taking into account all of the above, we call upon the leadership of Azerbaijan to show its adherence to humanism and commitment to the values of freedom, democracy and human rights, and rectify the situation by releasing Dr Leyla Yunus and Dr Arif Yunus.

We also urge international institutions to contribute to the speedy release of these Azerbaijani civil society representatives.

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