



Brno, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2014

## Open Letter

Dear Mr. President Zeman,  
Dear Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic Zaorálek,  
Dear Senate President Štěch,

We are writing to you regarding the planned visit of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, to Prague. We would urge this occasion to be used, in addition to discussing economic relations between the Czech Republic and Azerbaijan, to broach the issue of human rights in Azerbaijan, preferably in a public press conference.

Azerbaijan is a country where human rights are systematically violated. In January 2013 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted Resolution 1917, The Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Azerbaijan. According to this resolution, since Azerbaijan became a member state of the Council of Europe in 2001 the country has not held fully democratic elections, its courts are not independent, various human rights, including the right to freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of speech and the right to a fair trial, are being violated, and lawyers defending activists and journalists who criticised the government are being put under pressure.[1]

According to recent reports by local NGOs, there are several dozens of political prisoners in Azerbaijani prisons.[2] Meanwhile, the 2013 Press Freedom Index, published by the organisation Reporters without Borders, ranked Azerbaijan 156<sup>th</sup> out of the 179 evaluated countries. This ranking is particularly bad as it puts Azerbaijan only one place above Belarus, a country which the Czech Republic has openly criticised for many years regarding its dismal record on human rights, fundamental freedoms and has been supporting human rights defenders. In Azerbaijan, openly critical journalists, such as Khadija Ismayilova or Yafez Hasanov, are common victims of the regime-supported smear campaigns, death threats or violent attacks.[3] The unresolved murders of independent journalists are in fact a sad reality in Azerbaijan.[4]

Nor did the last presidential elections, held in October 2013, bring any change to the country. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) states that the elections were marred by restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly and association, that there was no guarantee of equal conditions for each candidate, and that the election campaign was marked by voter and candidate intimidation. The OSCE's international observers noted the

fundamental problems throughout all phases of the election process and highlighted the serious failings in 58% of the observed electoral wards. With such failings, the election cannot be recognised as democratic and free. [5]

The uncompromisingly repressive nature and cynicism of the current Azerbaijani regime is shown by the detention of Anar Mammadli just two months after the elections. Anar Mammadli, chairman of the Azerbaijani Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre ([EMDS](#)), openly criticised the elections. In December 2013 he was remanded in custody on politically motivated charges of tax evasion and illegal business activities. [6]

While we are aware of the strategic importance of Azerbaijan for both the Czech Republic and the European Union, we strongly believe that we cannot ignore the daily suffering of so many caused by Ilham Aliyev's government. Therefore, in solidarity with the innocent people being persecuted and in accordance with the principles of humans' basic rights and freedoms, which the Czech Republic commits to in its constitution and which Azerbaijan agreed to upon joining the Council of Europe, we ask the representatives of the Czech state to use this visit:

- To call for changes to the legislation and implementation of laws so as to secure the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association;
- To call for an end to politically motivated trials, including the trial of Anar Mammadli, chairman of the Azerbaijani Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre;
- And, in particular, to enable an open discussion with the President of Azerbaijan during his visit through a public press conference.

Sincerely,

[NESEHNUTÍ](#) – Independent Social Ecological Movement

[People in Need](#)

[DEMÁS](#) – Association for Democracy Assistance and Human Rights

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[1] <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewPDF.asp?FileID=19451&Language=EN>

[2] Report by Azerbaijani NGO Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety

<http://bit.ly/15t9APH>. Report by Azerbaijani NGO Human Rights Club

<http://www.civicsolidarity.org/article/800/azerbaijan-updated-list-political-prisoners>

[3] Report on RFE/RL journalists and the growing pressure on Khadija Isamyilova and Yafez Hasaov <http://bit.ly/OnI6Wk>

[4] Report by Reporters Without Borders about murdered journalists <http://en.rsf.org/report-azerbaijan,91.html>

[5] OSCE Press release, <http://bit.ly/19oLPaL>

[6] About Anar Mammadli's case see: <http://bit.ly/1gEHORK>