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From: Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Steering Committee

To:

- Government of Azerbaijan
- Heads of all EU institutions
- Governments of the EU member States
- Council of Europe

12 October 2011

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum calls for:

- the respect of freedom of expression and assembly, and the immediate release of political prisoners, in Azerbaijan

The work of civil society - including those formally recognised within the framework of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum - continues to be obstructed by government authorities in Azerbaijan.

Democracy campaigners receive jail sentences in Baku

Since their detention for participation in peaceful demonstrations on 2 April 2011, 14 civil society activists and opposition leaders have been sentenced to jail for periods of up to six years in politically motivated trials based on falsified evidence. On 2 April 2011, peaceful protesters were beaten and arrested in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, and others were arrested in pre-emptive police action before the 2 April public gatherings calling for democratic reforms in Azerbaijan. These actions were condemned by the Civil Society Forum in its statement of 5 April 2011.

The fourteen individuals sentenced include a well-known human rights defender, the deputy head of the opposition Musavat Party, and the chairman of the National Statehood Party. The convictions were based on charges ranging from kidnapping and hooliganism to disobeying police orders and forcing a citizen to vote against his will or preventing him from voting. The results of the monitoring of the investigation process and court hearings by Azerbaijani Human Rights Defend Organizations shows that the right to a fair trial was violated both during the investigation and court hearings, and that the accusations against the defendants were of a political character and based on ungrounded and suspicious conclusions.

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum calls upon the government of Azerbaijan to immediately release the political prisoners, and to respect freedom of expression and assembly.

The Steering Committee of the Civil Society Forum considers the court decisions unfair and politically motivated, and calls upon governments of the member-states of the European Union, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and the European Commissioner for Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy, to communicate to the Azerbaijan authorities their unambiguous disapproval of these sentences, and to call upon the government of Azerbaijan to release the prisoners immediately.

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum strongly condemns these politically motivated convictions, which are clear violations of the obligations of Azerbaijan as a member of the Council of Europe and a party to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and urges the European Commission, the EU Council, and EU member-states to consult extensively with representatives of civil society, and to ensure that they meet directly with them on every official visit to Azerbaijan to hear first-hand about the observance of human rights and democratic freedoms in Azerbaijan.

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