

7 January 2019

**Statement of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Azerbaijani National Platform on renewed criminal proceedings against imprisoned blogger, Mehman Huseynov**

We, the undersigned members of Azerbaijani National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), condemn the new criminal case initiated by the staff of the penitentiary facility against the imprisoned blogger, Mehman Huseynov. The proceedings are based on Article 315.2 of the Criminal Code (resistance or application of violence towards a representative of authority – application of violence, posing a threat to life or health, punishable by imprisonment from three up to seven years), only two months before the end of his prison term. As Huseynov's lawyer was not allowed to visit him in Prison No. 14, Huseynov started a dry hunger strike in the penitentiary facility, now reaching its 12th day.

Mehman was imprisoned because he publicly complained of his experience of police torture, and he was persecuted due to his criticism of government officials, through exposing their unexplained wealth. This is already the fifth case of this type recently, where a political prisoner is facing new proceedings while in prison just before the end of the current term.

After only two hearings, a Baku court found Huseynov guilty and sentenced him to two years in prison on 3 March 2017. Several appeals were rejected by the courts in Azerbaijan, the latest on 24 August 2018, when a regional court in Garadagh ruled against the motion for Huseynov's conditional release.

Huseynov is the Director of the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) and we consider his imprisonment in 2017 a serious threat to civil society and to the freedom of expression.

The renewed effort to keep the acclaimed blogger Huseynov in jail on fabricated charges is happening on the eve of the next round of the EU-Azerbaijani Human Rights Dialogue – which is going to take place at the beginning of February 2019 in Baku, casting serious doubts about its prospects.

EaP CSF Azerbaijani National Platform further notes that Azerbaijan is a member state of the Council of Europe and has ratified several legally binding conventions, which put legal obligations on contracting parties.

EaP CSF Azerbaijani National Platform expresses, with deep concern, that the intention to keep Huseynov imprisoned with new fabricated charges contradicts the obligations of Azerbaijan as a member state of the Council of Europe and creates a troubled environment for civil society organisations and journalists, in their free, unrestrained activities.

EaP CSF Azerbaijani National Platform calls on the government of Azerbaijan:

- to abandon the practice of keeping political prisoners imprisoned under new fabricated accusations and to grant an immediate, unconditional release of Mehman Huseynov
- to put an end to the ongoing pattern of arrests, prosecution and imprisonment of journalists, bloggers, human rights defenders, civil society activists and dissident voices on politically

motivated grounds – release all of those who are currently behind bars in retaliation for their legitimate exercise of freedom of expression and other fundamental rights

- to take concrete and effective measures to implement the recommendations relating to freedom of expression issued by the Human Rights Committee, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and other international bodies

EaP CSF Azerbaijani National Platform calls on the European Union:

- to put as a condition the release of Mehman Huseynov, and other political prisoners, before the next upcoming round of EU-Azerbaijan Human Rights Dialogue to take place in Baku in early February 2019 – prior to signing the Strategic Partnership Agreement between the European Union and Azerbaijan

Recently, some government-oriented media launched a commissioned slander and smear campaign against a number of civil society activists. The smearing articles are intentionally designed to impair honour and dignity of the activists, impact on their public image – and, in our opinion, represent a new wave of pressure put on the country's civil society. Furthermore, we believe the acts of this nature will most definitely have an adverse effect on the global image of Azerbaijan, which is already ailing.

As members of EaP CSF Azerbaijani National Platform, we urge the government of Azerbaijan to put an end to smear and slander campaigning against civil society activists and to respect the commitments taken by the government before international organisations, in particular the commitments under the EaP policy initiative.

***Here, undersigned, members of Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum – Azerbaijani National Platform:***

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|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Anar Mammadli       | 20. Sevil Yuzbasheva  |
| 2. Anar Orujov         | 21. Shahla Ismayil    |
| 3. Arzu Abdullayeva    | 22. Samir Aliyev      |
| 4. Avaz Hasanov        | 23. Zaur Akbar        |
| 5. Aynura Adullayeva   | 24. Ziya Guliyev      |
| 6. Bakhtiyar Hajiyev   | 25. Zohrab Ismayil    |
| 7. Dilara Afandiyeva   | 26. Sabina Alakbarova |
| 8. Elchin Abdullayev   |                       |
| 9. Elchin Sultanov     |                       |
| 10. Emin Huseynov      |                       |
| 11. Fuad Hasanov       |                       |
| 12. Ilgar Huseynli     |                       |
| 13. Intigam Aliyev     |                       |
| 14. Gubad Ibadoglu     |                       |
| 15. Khalid Kazimov     |                       |
| 16. Leyla Aliyeva      |                       |
| 17. Mirvari Gahramanli |                       |
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