

**Azerbaijan must stop its crackdown on civil society
and free all political prisoners**

Statement by the Co-Chairs of the Steering Committee of EaP CSF

Brussels, 2 May 2024

The Co-Chairs of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum strongly condemn the detention of human rights defender, Anar Mammadli, on 29 April 2024, and urgently call for his immediate and unconditional release. Mammadli's arrest reconfirms the need for a strong international response to Azerbaijan's ongoing crackdown on independent civil society.

Less than a week after the European Parliament urgency resolution on "Azerbaijan, notably the repression of civil society and the cases of Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu and Ilhamiz Guliyev", **Anar Mammadli**, prominent human rights defender and member of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), has been arrested on 29 April in Baku. Abducted on the street by policemen wearing civilian attire, Mammadli's is now in a 3-month and 28-day pre-trial arrest for "smuggling by a group" under article 206.3.2 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code. He denied all accusations as unlawful and politically motivated.

"We join the international community in condemning Anar Mammadli's arrest and call for his immediate release. His abduction and detention are part of an ongoing trend of repression against independent civil society and media that has intensified over the past year and led to the detention, on bogus charges, of nearly 300 activists, journalists and political opposition figures, including several members of the EaP CSF Azerbaijani National Platform, namely Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu, Aziz Orujov, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, Hafiz Babaly, and, now, Anar Mammadli. As a Host Country of the UN Climate Change Conference COP29, Azerbaijan has the obligation to uphold human rights and provide concrete assurances that civil society, both local and international, is free to attend COP29 without fear of harassment and legal action. To stay credible on the global stage, Azerbaijani authorities must undertake genuine human rights reforms without delay. A first step is to free all political prisoners and cease any persecution against them now." said **Ana Otilia Nutu and Irina Suky, EaP CSF Steering Committee Co-Chairs.**

Anar Mammadli is the chairman of the independent Center for Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre (EMDS), an organisation that has been carrying out independent election monitoring in Azerbaijan since 2001, including independent observations of the recent snap presidential elections on 7 February 2024 for which it reported widespread shortcomings. A prominent human rights defender and an outspoken critic of Ilham Aliyev's regime, Anar Mammadli has already served two and a half years in prison after unlawfully being detained in 2013, shortly after the October 2013 presidential elections for which EMDS reported numerous irregularities. Recognised globally as a political prisoner, in 2014, Anar Mammadli was awarded *in absentia* the Vaclav Havel Prize by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, for "his commitment in promoting democratic institutions and civil and political rights". In 2018, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled that

Azerbaijan had violated several human rights enshrined in the European Convention of Human Rights in Mammadli's case.

In the context of Azerbaijan hosting the UN Climate Change Conference of Parties COP29 and in line with its international human rights obligations,

- We *urge* the Azerbaijani authorities to drop all charges and immediately and unconditionally release Anar Mammadli, and all other political prisoners, human rights defenders, and journalists unjustly held behind bars,
- We *remind* the Azerbaijani authorities of their human rights obligations in line with International Law and *urge* them to immediately halt the wave of arrests and ongoing crackdown on civil society,
- We *call on* the Azerbaijani authorities to take heed of the Venice Commission recommendations and repeal increasingly restrictive legislation that curtails the activities of independent activists,
- We *urge* the European Union and Member States to scrutinise the implementation of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) judgments on politically motivated cases in Azerbaijan,
- We *call on* the European Union and Member States to consistently uphold EU democratic values and human rights when engaging with the Azerbaijani authorities and government and to reconsider its strategic partnership on energy given Baku's track record on human rights and fundamental freedoms,
- We *call on* the COP29 organisers to enshrine and guarantee human rights as well as free, full, and effective participation of local and international civil society in the Host Country Agreement,
- We *call on* the international community to put pressure on the Azerbaijani authorities to deliver on their human rights obligations prior, during and after COP29.

Ana Otilia Nutu and Irina Sukhy, Co-chairs of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum