



EaP CSF Steering Committee Statement in support of Human Rights Defenders on occasion of Human Rights Day

10 December 2022, Brussels

Today, 10th of December 2022, marks the International Human Rights Day. On this occasion, we would like to bring the spotlight on the many human rights defenders currently unlawfully held in prison in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region, highlight the fundamental role they play in protecting human rights, and express our solidarity with them and their families.

On this day, like any other day, thousands of people in the EaP region, including recently arrested activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, will wake up in prison, where they are being held because of protecting human rights, promoting democratic values and principles, and trying to ensure meaningful participation, equality, security, and inclusive societies.

On this day, thousands of women, men and even underage youth will wake up in a cold, poorly lit cell, with a meal that barely fulfils nutrition norms, experiencing fear, loneliness and uncertainty about their future. Some of them will experience physical and mental torture. Their day would end like it began – behind bars. The large majority among them, are brave Azerbaijanis and Belarusians – political prisoners convicted for daring to challenge autocratic regimes and for their human rights activism.

Human rights defenders devote their lives to promoting democracy, human rights and freedom for the benefit of all of us. As Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, we wish to express our solidarity and extend enduring support to all human rights defenders and political prisoners behind bars and to their families.

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum calls on all EaP governments, but particularly on to the Azerbaijani and Belarusian authorities:

1. To cease any form of persecution against human rights defenders and respect the freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of which they are signatories, and adhere to their commitments to free expression, peaceful assembly, and elections, which are among others outlined in the Declaration;
2. To release immediately all political prisoners, including recently arrested activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev. All unlawfully detained civil society activists, human rights defenders, journalists and students should be freed and upon their release, protected from torture, any inhuman or degrading treatment, and have unconditional access to justice, legal and medical assistance;

The European Union and Member states:

1. to continue supporting human rights defenders, including free media and exiled civil society, so that they can continue to exercise their watchdog function to the extent that it remains possible, and to shed light on human rights abuses and others;
2. to pay continued, structured, public and political attention to the situation of thousands of human rights defenders and political prisoners, particularly in Belarus and Azerbaijan;
3. to keep following the situation of repressed Azerbaijani and Belarusians and more generally EaP journalists, activists and civil society representatives who are facing increasing pressure and hostilities at the hands of the regime;
4. to continue supporting, implementing and executing sanctions against the Belarusian regime, thus limiting the means of the dictatorships to terrorise Belarusian people;
5. to avoid any kind of compromise on human rights with the Azerbaijani authorities in light of the renewed EU-Azerbaijan cooperation in the energy sector, sealed by the Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy signed in July 2022 and to use all the elements of EU conditionality advanced by the EaP policy to prevent the environment in which the Azerbaijani civil society operates from shrinking and deteriorating even further;

To the press, human rights activists and civil society:

1. to continue telling the stories of human rights defenders, keeping a spotlight on the hostile environment they work in, and on their imprisonment and persecution. The solidarity thus expressed serves as a lifeline helping those unjustly deprived of freedom to maintain their “*coordinates of existence*” as Belarusian Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Ales Bialiatski put it.

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