

STATEMENT BY THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM STEERING COMMITTEE ON THE CIVIL SOCIETY SITUATION ON THE DAY OF AZERBAIJAN'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Brussels, 7 February 2024 – In the context of the snap presidential elections taking place today in Azerbaijan, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Steering Committee observes with utmost concerns the ongoing crackdown on independent media and civil society, and the implications it holds for all future democratic processes in the country.

We are deeply concerned about the ongoing crackdown on civil society and media, as well as the persistent challenges surrounding the registration, operation and funding of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Azerbaijan.

These ongoing restrictions on civil society operations in Azerbaijan have been at the centre of numerous recommendations from international stakeholders over the past decade. Organisations such as the Venice Commission, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, the Open Government Partnership, the European Parliament, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and many others have consistently highlighted these concerns, underscoring the threat they pose to the effective engagement of civil society organizations in the country's public and political processes.

On the day of Presidential Elections in Azerbaijan,

We *call* on the government of Azerbaijan to broaden the space for civil society and enact the necessary legislative changes to facilitate the registration, operation and funding of CSOs, and donors within the country.

We *ask* the government of Azerbaijan to cease all forms of harassment and persecution against independent journalists and their media outlets, civil society, and political opposition, and instead foster an enabling environment conducive to genuine political pluralism.

We *call* on the government of Azerbaijan to release all media and civil society leaders and activists, including the members of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum – Gubad Ibadoghlu, Bakhtyar Hajiyev, Aziz Orujov as well as Absaz Media journalists – Ulvi Hasanli, Mahammad Kekalov, Sevinj Vaqifqizi, Nargiz Absalamova, Elnara Gasimova, Hafiz Babali, and others that remain behind bars.

We *call* on the European institutions and EU member states to closely monitor the civil society situation in Azerbaijan and condition the EU's cooperation with Azerbaijan, including most crucially on the energy sector, on the improvement of the overall human rights and civil society situation in the country.

We *call* on the European institutions, EU member states and the international community at large to prioritise meeting with Azerbaijani civil society organisations when visiting the country, providing them with crucial political and financial support that ensures their continued livelihood.

Members of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society