

Statement by Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum on the detention and accusations against Gubad Ibadoghlu in Azerbaijan

Brussels, 25 July 2023

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum strongly condemns the arrest of Gubad Ibadoghlu on July 23, 2023 and demands his immediate release.

Gubad Ibadoghlu, is a prominent civil society activist and Chairman of the 'Democracy and Prosperity Party' in Azerbaijan and one of the few remaining independent voices in Azerbaijan. He has been a founding member of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and one of the most prominent and active human rights defenders denouncing violations perpetrated by the Aliyev's regime.

On Sunday, 23 July 2023, Gubad was arrested on counterfeiting charges under Article 204.3.1 of the Azerbaijani criminal code and for allegedly being allied with the exiled Turkish cleric Fetullah Gullen. According to Gubad's daughter, Jala Bayramova, both Gubad and his wife Irada Bayramova were subjected to physical violence while in police custody. While Ms Bayramova was later released, Gubad remains in police custody and has not been allowed to receive medications vital for his health. His pretrial detention hearing took place yesterday, 24 July 2023, and determined that he will be detained for a period of 4 months. The accusations moved towards him warrant a sentence ranging from 8 to 10 years in prison.

The motives behind these accusations appear to be strongly linked to Gubad's activism against Aliyev's regime. A sum of allegedly counterfeited US \$40,000 appears to have been planted in an apartment owned by Gubad in Baku, and later seized by the authorities and leading up to the charges. The accusation linking him to Fetullah Gullen instead appears to be based on the testimony of an individual who was previously arrested and claims to have a connection with Gubad. Gubad maintains he never met this person. Apart from his academic career, Gubad Ibadoghlu is the chairman of the Azerbaijan Democracy and Prosperity Party, which the authorities have refused to register. It's worth noting that Azerbaijan's new 'law on political parties' enacted in January 2023 has made it significantly more difficult to establish political parties, resulting in 15 political parties disbanding and drawing criticism from human rights defenders. Additionally, Gubad recently established the Azerbaijani Youth Education Foundation in the United Kingdom, and publicly announced the plan to fund it through donations and money confiscated from corrupt Azerbaijani elites. This initiative has been met with a smear campaign against him.

We call on the Azerbaijani authorities to put an end to the politically motivated persecution of civic and political activists and to immediately release Gubad Ibadoghlu. Moreover, authorities should investigate thoroughly, fairly and impartially the use of violence against Gubad Ibadoghlu and his wife Irada Bayramova during their detention.

We call on the European Parliament, particularly on the Chair of the Delegation for relations with the South Caucasus, MEP Marina Kaljurand, European Parliament's Standing Rapporteur on Azerbaijan, MEP Željana Zovko, to propose an emergency resolution calling for the release of Gubad Ibadoghlu and all other political prisoners in Azerbaijan.

We call on the other European Institutions, particularly on the President of the European Council Charles Michel, to call onto Azerbaijani's authorities to release Gubad Ibadoghlu and of all other political prisoners, and to continue supporting the development of an inclusive political environment for civic society and political parties, thereby supporting democracy, freedom of expression, and human rights principles in Azerbaijan.

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