

5 April 2019

Statement by Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum on the current rule of law situation in Azerbaijan

The Azerbaijani authorities must re-establish the rule of law in their country, free the remaining at least 70 political prisoners, respect constitutional rights, such as the freedom of assembly, and give those charged with political offences the right to effective defence in court. Harassment of oppositionists who are now being detained for periods of 30 days in prison must cease, as well as ill-treatment and torture of prisoners by guards in the country's penitentiary institutions.

Legal reforms planned by President Ilham Aliyev should include removing the monopoly that the Azerbaijani Bar Association (ABA) has on licensing defence lawyers – and rebuilding a corps of lawyers ready and willing to defend those charged for political reasons in court. The ABA must become an organisation, which is independent from the authorities. The number of lawyers in Azerbaijan per 100,000 of population is the lowest in the Caucasus. This trend must be reversed.

But above all, there must be no repetition of cases of torture, such as that of Bayrah Mammadov, recently detained for 30 days and brutally beaten on the first day of his detention. What is more, Giyas Ibrahimli, another recently released prisoner, was summoned to the Chief Police Department in Baku and warned that he could be assaulted by “persons unknown” if he continued to criticise the President. In such case, he was told that the Police would be unable to come to his aid. The ABA also continues to harass its members. Fariz Namazli, a politicians' defence lawyer has had an investigation opened against him – and Elchin Sadigov, another defence lawyer has been reprimanded by ABA.

As much as the recent release of 51 prisoners is to be lauded, such actions after their release undermine the impact of the Novruz amnesty.

Progress must be made on implementing the rule of law if Azerbaijan is to be a credible partner of the European Union.

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