

Brussels, 24 March 2020

**Statement of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
on the suppression of civil liberties in Azerbaijan in the context of the COVID-19
pandemic**

At a time when governments around the world have taken the difficult decision to restrict the movements of their citizens in order to limit the propagation of the COVID-19 virus, the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum expresses concern at the apparent intention of President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, to use the COVID-19 public health emergency to initiate an unacceptable crackdown on civil liberties in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

During his annual Novruz address, President Aliyev raised the prospect of declaring a state of emergency to combat the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, he was also explicit in the view that “the isolation of representatives of the fifth column” would be “a historic necessity” in the context of such an action. Having referred to the alleged instigators of unspecified “open provocations” in relation to the COVID-19 emergency as “anti-Azerbaijani forces, the fifth column and national traitors” – identical language to that which he used to describe his political opponents earlier in the same address – it is clear to the Steering Committee that any limitations on the movements of Azerbaijan’s citizens, adopted ostensibly in response to the ongoing global pandemic, are likely to be abused to the benefit of the ruling regime.

Indeed, the arrest on 22 March of Tofiq Yagublu – a member of the opposition Musavat political party and the National Council of Democratic Forces – represents a worrying prelude to what may be to come. Charged with “hooliganism committed with the use of a weapon or an object used as a weapon” under Article 221.3 of the Criminal Code, following a vehicle collision in the Nizami district of Baku, Mr Yagublu faces between 3 and 7 years’ imprisonment. With additional reports of police intimidation against civil society activists who have expressed criticism of the government’s response to the COVID-19 crisis, the Steering Committee condemns this emerging pattern of politically motivated attacks on Azerbaijani civil society.

As well as celebrating the arrival of spring and the Persian new year, the Novruz holiday also promotes the values of peace, solidarity, and reconciliation. With this in mind, the Steering Committee urges President Aliyev to embrace the spirit of renewal embodied by this most ancient of holidays – a veritable cornerstone of Azerbaijani culture – and release those detained on false or exaggerated charges. It further urges the Azerbaijani government to ensure that any measures it undertakes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic meet the country’s human rights obligations.

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