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PACE members should live up to their duty to protect and promote human rights

Last week, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan attended the third part of the 2014 Ordinary Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in Strasbourg. This was the first visit of the Azerbaijani President to the Council of Europe (CoE) since the country took over the Chairmanship of the organisation's decision-making body – the Committee of Ministers on 14 May 2014.

President Aliyev declared that “All the fundamental freedoms are provided in Azerbaijan ... We have freedom of political activity ... freedom of expression and media freedom [and] freedom of association and assembly is also fully provided.”¹

Some of the PACE members challenged President Aliyev regarding the ongoing human rights violations in Azerbaijan. In response, President Aliyev made a number of statements, which directly contradicted evidence from Azerbaijan, including cases documented by Amnesty International.²

Thus, the Irish PACE member Mr McNamara reminded President Aliyev that Amnesty International has recognised at least 19 prisoners of conscience in the country. In response, President Aliyev accused him of basing his allegations on “false information” and denied the existence of prisoners of conscience in the country.

Amnesty International has documented numerous human rights violations in Azerbaijan. At least 19 individuals have been arrested under fabricated charges solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression and criticising the Azerbaijani government.³

The fact that PACE is not elaborating a strong and consolidated stance on human rights violations in Azerbaijan indicates that PACE itself is struggling to meet its human rights expectations. Although PACE decided to proceed with a separate report on “Azerbaijan's Chairmanship of the Council of Europe: What follow-up on respect for human rights?”, it remains to be seen whether PACE is ready to impartially scrutinize the human rights situation in Azerbaijan. The rapporteur appointed for this report is already the PACE co-rapporteur on the monitoring of Azerbaijan. Not designating a separate rapporteur raises questions about impartiality of the process.

In Amnesty International's view this adds to a worrying trend within PACE to avoid any critical discussion on human rights in Azerbaijan, as highlighted previously when PACE failed to adopt a report on political prisoners in Azerbaijan in January 2013.⁴ This concern is especially relevant as the Azerbaijani government has acknowledged that Azerbaijan has been engaging in extensive lobbying⁵ in order to tone down criticism of the country's human rights record in PACE.

PACE should live up to its responsibility in promoting and protecting human rights in Europe including by impartially scrutinising Azerbaijan's human rights record. PACE members should effectively use all means at their disposal, including CoE mechanisms, to compel the Azerbaijani government to fully respect and protect fundamental human rights in the country.

¹ Verbatim of the Address to the PACE by President of Azerbaijan, 24 June 2014, at <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/Records/2014/E/1406241000E.htm> (accessed 2 July, 2014)

² Amnesty International, “Azerbaijan: Behind Bars: Silencing Dissent in Azerbaijan” (AI Index: EUR 55/004/2014), 6 May 2014, at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR55/004/2014/en> (accessed 2 July 2014)

³ Idem

⁴ Amnesty International, “Azerbaijan: Letter to the Council of Europe's Co-Rapporteurs”, 31 January 2013, http://www.amnesty.eu/content/assets/Doc2013/AI_letter_to_co-rapporteurs_CoE_eur550032013eng.pdf (accessed 2 July, 2014)

⁵ Verbatim of the Address to the PACE by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, 23 June 2014, <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/Records/2014/E/1406231500E.htm> (accessed 2 July, 2014)