

A network of policy centres in
Central and Eastern Europe and
Central Asia

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**Catherine Ashton, Vice-President, European Commission,
and High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, European Council**
Štefan Füle, European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy
Martin Schulz, President, European Parliament
Anne Brasseur, President, Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe

Prague/Baku, 31 January 2014

PASOS urges President of Azerbaijan to reject restrictive amendments to NGO legislation

Dear High Representative, Dear Commissioner, Dear President of the European Parliament, Dear Ministers, Dear President, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

Restrictive amendments to the NGO Act and associated legislative amendments passed by the Parliament of Azerbaijan on 17 December 2013 would impose administrative burdens and arbitrary controls, and the resulting regulations could require non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to re-register with the Ministry of Justice every 90 days. PASOS, a network of independent think-tanks spanning 28 countries in Europe and Central Asia, calls upon the support of the heads of EU institutions and the European Commission and External Action Service, as well as the Council of Europe, to mobilise diplomatic pressure on the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, not to sign the legislation into force.

PASOS members, leading independent think-tanks in Azerbaijan, are among the 60 members of the Civil Society Defence Committee, an alliance of NGOs trying to head off the repressive legislation. As the decision of the President is anticipated in the coming days, appeals to his office are necessary as soon as possible to prevent the enactment of additional restrictions on the activities of civil society actors in Azerbaijan.

If the amendments came into force, Azerbaijan authorities would gain enhanced powers to arbitrarily fine, and close down, non-governmental organisations that perform important monitoring functions and serve as an independent critical voice towards government policies. Furthermore, the changes would create new administrative burdens for NGOs upon receipt and reporting of grants.

The legal changes would limit the legal forms available to registration of new non-governmental organisations, and would allow the courts to close down an NGO if it has been served notices for infringing any legislative requirements more than twice in one year. The Parliament of Azerbaijan passed the legislation a day after a three months' detention order was imposed on Anar Mammadli, the Chair of the Election Monitoring and Democratic Studies Center (EMDS), a respected civil society organisation that criticised the conduct of the Azerbaijan Presidential elections of 9 October 2013. The charges against him are entirely unfounded. EMDS is one of the human rights and pro-democracy civil society organisations in Azerbaijan that has repeatedly been denied permission to register.

It is important that all EU and Council of Europe representatives travelling to Azerbaijan meet with human rights defenders and representatives of civil society, and vocally support their calls for freedom of association and the removal of restrictions on civil society.

PASOS is a network of more than 56 independent think-tanks spanning 28 countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Signatories of statement, 31 January 2014

PASOS Board:

PASOS members: