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EU/Azerbaijan partnership

Human Rights under the red carpet?

Ulrike Lunacek (EP-Vice President and Green Member of the EP) together with **Kati Piri**, (S&D Member of the EP) hosted a panel discussion “: Human Rights under the red carpet?” during Azerbaijan President **Ilham Aliyev** visit in Brussels on February 6, 2017. They invited **Emin Milli**, azerbaijani writer and human right activist and **Khadija Ismayilova**, azerbaijani investigative journalist (via skype from Baku) to speak at this event.

In recent years, the Azerbaijan government has made concerted efforts to restrict independent activism, critical journalism, and political opposition by imprisoning and harassing many activists, prominent human rights defenders, and journalists.

In September 2015 a resolution was adopted by the EP that called for the release of all the political prisoners in Azerbaijan. That resolution was of great importance and further motivated Azerbaijani civil activists to continue their struggle for fundamental freedoms.

In 2016, following pressure by Azerbaijan’s international bilateral and multilateral partners, including the EU, the Azerbaijani authorities released 17 human rights activists including Sakharov Prize finalist Leyla Yunus, as well as Rasul Jafarov, Khadija Ismayilova, Intigam Aliyev, journalists and political activists.

This long-awaited release paved the way for resuming relations between the Milli Majlis (National Assembly of Azerbaijan) and the European Parliament and contributed to a general improvement in the climate of bilateral relations between Baku and Brussels.

Many observers hoped that this could be the starting point of a genuine process of reform and democratisation of the society that would enable Azerbaijan to move closer to European standards and more in line with Baku's ambitions to deepen the relations with the EU.

“Unfortunately this impression proved wrong because the Azerbaijani authorities have intensified the crackdown on freedom of expression,” stated **Ulrike Lunacek**. They are introducing harsh penalties for critical speech online, imprisoning young activists for nothing more than graffiti, blocking access to websites of independent media, and harassing and violating the rights of journalists and activists. *“Civil Society must be able to speak up. Azerbaijan must honour its treaty commitments as a state party to the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.”*

„The Azerbaijan government is a champion in violations of human rights and corruptions.“ says **Emin Milli**. He refers to a case which happened last weeks. For the first time in the history of the Council of Europe, The Bureau of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) has taken a groundbreaking move to investigate allegations of corruption and fostering of interests made against two Azerbaijani members of PACE.

Ulrike Lunacek reassured that there is already a follow up on that matter.

„The Azerbaijan government should be reminded over and over again about the 119 political prisoners who are still being held in prison“ says **Khadija Ismayilova**. **Ulrike Lunacek** and **Kati Piri** announced to draw up a written question to Council President **Donald Tusk** and Hr/VP **Federica Mogherini** to ask about whether or not they both raised human right issues in their talks with Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev.

Is it possible to negotiate a new agreement with Azerbaijan?

“Under the current circumstances we don't understand how it is possible to negotiate a new agreement: EU must not lose its credibility on human rights. It is enshrined in our treaties and we need to live up to it. The EU and its member states must spare no efforts to support and defend all human and fundamental rights activists who in Azerbaijan promote and uphold the values upon which the EU was built. All the activists who are in jail in Azerbaijan or journalists like Khadija Ismayilova who are under a travel ban because of their critical and/or investigative journalism, must feel the solidarity and support of the EU institutions.”

As the EU and Azerbaijan forge a new era of cooperation, now is the time to make good on those EU promises. *“We are not against negotiations and agreements between the EU and Azerbaijan but human rights must not be swept under the carpet.”*

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Ulrike Lunacek

EP Vice-President, Member

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