Resolution on Azerbaijan: freedom of expression

2009/2806(RSP) - 17/12/2009 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on Azerbaijan: freedom of expression.

The resolution had been tabled by the EPP, S&D, ALDE, Greens/ALE, GUE and ECR groups.

Parliament deplores the sentencing, on 11 November 2009, of the bloggers Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizada to harsh prison terms on the basis of highly unlikely charges and an unfair trial, recalling that these two men were arrested after being attacked in a restaurant in the capital, Baku, where, according to witnesses interviewed by Amnesty International, they were assaulted while dining with other activists. The charges against the two activists appear to have been politically motivated. Members call for the immediate release of Mr Milli and Mr Hajizada and for a new, fully open and fair trial on the basis of an unbiased police investigation and in accordance with all relevant international standards

Parliament states its concern about the deterioration of media freedom in Azerbaijan, deploring the practice of arresting, prosecuting and convicting opposition journalists on various criminal charges, as demonstrated in the case of Eynulla Fatullayev. It calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to release the imprisoned journalists immediately. Members note the temporary closure of independent TV and radio broadcasting organisations, the eviction of leading opposition newspapers from their offices, numerous court cases against members of the media, and physical attacks on journalists. These have caused a widespread sense of fear and self-censorship.

They deplore the series of negative developments in relation to the media and individual journalists in Azerbaijan listed in the Background Report on Respect for Media Freedom recently prepared for the Council of Europe, and note, inter alia, the deep concerns expressed by international NGOs such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters sans Frontières, International PEN and Human Rights Watch.

The resolution calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to do the following:

- address the lack of police investigation into cases of violence and harassment against journalists and the fact that many crimes have so far gone unpunished;
- pay special attention to the safety and freedom of civil-society activists, particularly those involved in non-governmental youth organisations, as well as journalists and the media;
- take immediate steps to allow individuals to engage in peaceful, democratic activities, which activities should be organised freely and without government interference;
- protect journalists, following the recent wave of violence against media representatives;
- **renew the FM radio licences of a number of international broadcasters**, namely the BBC World Service, Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Members point out that the termination of these stations' broadcasting on FM frequencies removes important, objective and valuable independent sources of quality public-service information and restricts media plurality in Azerbaijan;

- demonstrate sufficient progress in meeting the conditions for the upgrading of contractual relations – as stipulated in the Declaration by the European Council of 19-20 March 2009 on the Eastern Partnership – notably in the areas of democracy, the rule of law and human rights;

- implement the UN Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) recommendations of 6 February 2009 in full, including by ratifying the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and decriminalising defamation and libel to eliminate unnecessary pressures on journalists;

- guarantee that the local elections on 23 December 2009 will be free, fair and in accordance with international standards;

- make renewed efforts to implement in full the ENP Action Plan with the Commission continuing to assist Azerbaijan in such efforts.

Parliament goes on to call on the EU and Azerbaijan to **step up their dialogue on human rights issues.** It welcomes the establishment of the new sub-committees of the EU-Azerbaijan Cooperation Committee, which will strengthen the institutional framework for discussions.

Lastly, the resolution calls on the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan to review the work of law-enforcement and state security structures in his country, especially in relation to the media and other human rights issues, as their work and style are deliberately distancing Azerbaijan from the EU.