

SPORTS AND RIGHTS ALLIANCE

March 26, 2015

Mr. Patrick Hickey
President
European Olympic Committees
Palazzina CONI
Via della Pallacanestro, 19
00135 Rome, Italy
Facsimile (+39) 06 36 85 76 66

Re: Human rights concerns related to the 2015 Baku Games

Dear Mr. Hickey,

The undersigned groups have joined forces to form the **Sports and Rights Alliance (SRA)**, a coalition of leading global organisations working to improve human rights, labour rights, anti-corruption and sustainability in sport, in particular mega-sporting events (MSEs) such as the Olympic Games.

We are writing today, ahead of the Baku European Games in June, to express our concerns about the **escalating repression over the last year by the Azerbaijani government** against its critics coupled with a dramatic deterioration in its already poor press freedom and human rights record. Given the history of abuses and the intensified crackdown on dissent in Azerbaijan, fundamental human rights are likely to be under attack in the context of the Baku Games.

In 2014, and continuing into 2015, President Ilham Aliyev's government has used a range of false charges, including narcotics and weapons possession, tax evasion, hooliganism, incitement, and even treason, to convict or imprison at least 35 political and civil society activists, journalists, and bloggers, prompting others to flee the country or go into hiding. As a sign of the dire conditions in the country, the Swiss Embassy is currently sheltering Emin Huseynov, head of the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety - for his own safety.

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The Azerbaijani authorities have escalated their crackdown on media freedom to unprecedented levels, including by detaining and prosecuting at least 11 independent and opposition journalists and bloggers, raiding one media outlet, and forcing other media as well as media rights organisations to cease their work. The authorities have imposed a series of extremely restrictive laws on NGOs, including a law that effectively cuts off all funding opportunities for groups that criticise the government.

The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Nils Muiznieks, on March 16 made [a lengthy, detailed submission](#) to the European Court of Human Rights, concluding that “There is a clear pattern of repression in Azerbaijan against those expressing dissent or criticism of the authorities. This concerns particularly human rights defenders, but also journalists, bloggers and other activists, who may face a variety of criminal charges which defy credibility. Such charges are largely seen as an attempt to silence the persons concerned and are closely linked to the legitimate exercise by them of their right to freedom of expression.” He advised the Court that the reprisals against civil society “should immediately stop and all persons who are in detention because of their views expressed or legitimate civic activity should be released.”

In its annual report issued in February, Reporters Without Borders ranked Azerbaijan 162nd out of 180 countries surveyed in its ranking of press freedom, singling out the country as "Europe's biggest prison for news providers."

This crackdown on media and civil society could also have a negative impact on the work of journalists covering the Baku Games, including their ability to operate freely and to cover a range of topics in the host city and country.

These blatant attacks against journalists, news outlets, media organisations, human rights groups, and other civil society actors cannot be reconciled with the Olympic Charter’s principles on press freedoms and on human dignity.

But just as these reporters and critics have been arrested and threatened, they could easily be pardoned or released from prison. Last week, two outspoken critics of the authorities, Bashir Suleymanli and Orkhan Eyyubzade, both prisoners of conscience according to Amnesty International, were released. But while their

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release is welcome, they never should have been unjustly imprisoned in the first place, and many more remain wrongly imprisoned.

One of the European Olympic Committees' chief aims is spreading Olympic ideals. Unless action is taken soon to address these abuses and free unjustly imprisoned critics, Azerbaijan will be setting a terrible precedent as the first host of the European Games.

Meanwhile, the Azerbaijani government is paying athletes' expenses as a precondition for hosting these events. We believe this should not interfere with the ability of the 50 participating National Olympic Committees to speak out and defend Olympic principles and values.

In order to ensure that the Baku Games do not violate key principles of the Olympic Charter, we therefore ask you to call on the Azerbaijani government to take the following three steps before the June 12 opening ceremony:

- 1) **Immediately and unconditionally free all unjustly imprisoned journalists and human rights activists.** In particular we urge the prompt release of Khajida Ismayilova, Leyla Yunus, Arif Yunus, Intigam Aliyev, Rasul Jafarov, Anar Mammadli, Ilgar Mammadov, Tofiq Yagulblu and all others who have been prosecuted and deprived of their freedom under trumped-up, politically-motivated charges.
- 2) **End the harassment, intimidation, arbitrary detention and politically-motivated prosecution** of human rights of activists, lawyers, journalists, opposition members and others for the legitimate exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.
- 3) **Refrain from the arbitrary denial of state registration** to human rights and pro-democracy NGOs and **amend the law on NGOs** that unduly restricts media outlets, human rights organisations and other civil society groups from functioning and carrying out legitimate work.

Many international media will cover the inaugural European Games. They will reasonably ask if Azerbaijan's crackdown on journalists and critics places "sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind," promoting a society

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“concerned with the preservation of human dignity” as the Olympic Charter claims to do.

Securing the freedom of unjustly imprisoned journalists and activists and halting the government’s prosecution of critics are crucial first steps to guaranteeing a positive legacy from the first-ever European Games, and ensuring that they are not stained by severe violations of press freedoms and human rights that contravene the Olympic Charter.

We ask you to address these concerns directly, in the short time remaining before the European Games launch.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Sports and Rights Alliance - SRA

- Amnesty International
- FIFPro – World Players’ Union
- Football Supporters Europe
- Human Rights Watch
- Supporters Direct Europe
- Terre des Hommes
- Transparency International Germany