



EUROPEAN UNION

OSCE Permanent Council Nr 959 Vienna, 4 July 2013

EU statement on the Report by the Head of the OSCE Office in Baku

The EU and its Member States warmly welcome H.E. Ambassador Targay to the Permanent Council and thank him for his comprehensive report.

The report duly reflects the dedicated and competent work of the OSCE Office in Baku and its important role in assisting the host country in meeting OSCE and international standards and commitments. We take this opportunity to reiterate our strong support for the activities of the Office in all three dimensions and commend the office for expanding its activities outside Baku including to the Autonomous Region of Nakhchivan and for its valuable engagement with civil society.

As regards the Azerbaijani request to review the mandate of the OSCE Office in Baku, the EU recalls its support for the current mandate. We believe that the mandate of any OSCE presence in Baku should remain meaningful, both for Azerbaijan and the OSCE.

As the report states, Azerbaijan has continued to make important progress in many areas, especially relating to economic stability and development. The report is clear that many challenges remain, in particular with regard to political democratic pluralism and, the full exercise of all fundamental freedoms, and the proper implementation of legislation in various areas.

In the 1st dimension, we support the further assistance to foster a human-rights-based approach to police services, including in the area of police-media relations and dialogue with civil society, especially in the context of Public Assembly Management (PAM). We also support the Office's role regarding combating trafficking in human beings and the fight against transnational threats.

In the 2nd dimension, we believe that sustainable economic growth, based on economic diversification and environmental responsibility, remains key. We therefore see a useful role for the Office in supporting various aspects of good governance with special emphasis on the fight against corruption. We also welcome work on natural resources management and public awareness raising on environmental security. While we generally support Azerbaijan's efforts to strengthen small-and-medium enterprises we believe that the other organisations are better placed to support this process.

In the 3rd dimension, we reiterate our call on Azerbaijan to ensure full protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms and to fulfil the country's international commitments with regards to democracy and the rule of law. Azerbaijan should be able to conduct free, fair and transparent elections, in accordance with international standards, where opposition candidates can compete on an equal footing. As the Presidential elections are fast approaching, we trust Azerbaijan, in accordance with its Copenhagen commitments, will extend a timely and unrestricted invitation to the OSCE/ODIHR and other international observers to monitor the elections, including the period of pre-election campaign. The Office can play a helpful role in strengthening electoral processes and in encouraging unhindered political participation of civil society in the democratic process, online as well as offline. We would also urge effective follow-up co-operation with the OSCE/ODIHR, especially with regard to implementation of election-related recommendations.

Respecting freedom of expression and the plurality of the media, including the safety of journalists, is of utmost importance. In this context, we share the concern expressed by Ambassador Targay that the Government of Azerbaijan continues its firm control of broadcast media. We also share the concern expressed by the OSCE RFOM about recent legislative amendments that criminalize defamation on the Internet.

We encourage the Azerbaijani authorities to improve compliance with its Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Freedom of Association commitments. Public assemblies should be facilitated to allow people to freely express opinions and civil society groups to disseminate messages, including by holding public assemblies in Baku city centre. We are concerned that recent amendments to NGO-related laws will restrict the role of civil society.

We attach importance to the issue of judicial reform and encourage Azerbaijan to fully implement OSCE commitments on judicial independence, fair and transparent trials and conditions of detention. This applies in particular to the protection of property rights. We therefore strongly support the Office's approach to continue its assistance in the field of judicial reform as well as public access to justice. We also recommend that the Office keeps in close contact with respective Parliamentary bodies, with the Ombudsman's Office, the Prosecutor's Office, the Bar Association and other actors involved in justice sector reforms and their implementation.

We underline the importance of the issue of gender equality in Azerbaijan and we encourage the Office to continue its cooperation both with the Government and civil society to this end.

We reiterate our commitment to strengthening relations with Azerbaijan. We are particularly interested in making further progress on issues related to the agenda of the EU Eastern Partnership in view of the forthcoming Summit in November 2013 in Vilnius.

In conclusion, we would like to thank the Head of the OSCE Office in Baku and his able team for their excellent work and wish them all the best in their future endeavours.

The Candidate Countries MONTENEGRO* and ICELAND+ align themselves with this statement.

* The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

+ Iceland continues to be a member of the EFTA and of the European Economic Area.