



German Presidency of the Council of the European Union

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Statement of the European Union in response to the Head of the OSCE Mission in Baku, Ambassador Jose-Luis Herrero

The European Union warmly welcomes Ambassador Jose-Luis Herrero on the occasion of his first appearance before the Permanent Council. The comprehensive report he has presented today reflects an ambitious programme for the coming months. We are pleased to see that the Office is furthering its constructive co-operation with the Azerbaijani authorities.

The EU fully supports the proposal to expand the Office's activities in the regions suggested in the 2008 Programme Outline. This would help to bridge the current gap between the regions and the capital and strengthen the Office's interaction with regional and municipal authorities and civil society. In our view, regional activities should be based on the comprehensive approach to security of this Organisation and cover activities in all three dimensions.

The EU has welcomed the Presidential decree of December 28, followed by the adoption of a new National Action Plan for the Protection of Human Rights, and looks forward to the Government taking all necessary steps, with the involvement of the OSCE Office and of competent OSCE Institutions, to ensure full respect, for the citizens of Azerbaijan, of all their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

As 2008 will be marked by presidential elections in Azerbaijan, objectives such as increasing the level of public debate, enhancing political dialogue between

government and opposition, promoting wider participation of civil society in political life, and strengthening the freedom of the media, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly, are of the utmost importance. In this context, we reaffirm our support for the Office's efforts to foster dialogue between the government and the opposition as well as for its contribution to the improvement of the election legislation. We encourage the Azerbaijani Government to heed the recommendations of the ODIHR and the Venice Commission in order to bring the electoral framework into line with international standards.

The EU strongly shares the opinion expressed by the Chairman-in-Office, Minister Moratinos, on the occasion of his recent visit in Azerbaijan, that an independent press is essential for democracy. We regret the deterioration in the situation of media freedom in Azerbaijan and hope to see a reversal of the trend in the months leading up to the Presidential elections. In particular, as stated previously, the EU is concerned that seven journalists are serving prison sentences on charges of defamation or incitement. This gives rise to the concern that criminal defamation or incitement suits are being used to limit media freedom.

We were pleased to learn from the distinguished Ambassador of Azerbaijan last week that the issue of reforming the existing defamation legislation is under the Azerbaijani Government's careful consideration. We encourage Azerbaijan to continue the constructive dialogue and cooperation with the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr. Haraszti, and to take advantage of his offer for assistance in bringing the legal framework and practice concerning the media and freedom of expression into line with international standards. The EU highly appreciates the Office's cooperation with Mr. Haraszti in this field, as well as its efforts aimed at providing assistance to media and journalists.

The EU commends the Office's emphasis on strengthening the rule of law, and in particular the support which is being given to the development of the judicial system through activities in the field of trial monitoring, pre-trial and police detention and by assistance to courts.

We also welcome the ongoing activities of the Office in the Economic and Environmental dimension, particularly those supporting the implementation of the State programme on Combating Corruption, adopted in January 2005, the creation of Anti-corruption Legal Advocacy Centres in the regions, and the improvement of the legislative framework, thus fostering a positive business climate for diversification and development of Small and Medium Enterprises.

We encourage the Office to maintain its focus on police assistance, in particular on those activities aimed at bringing the police closer to the community and to improving public events management in order to enhance freedom of assembly, which is one of the cornerstones of a democratic society. In this context, we look forward to the results of the legislative review of the draft amendments to the law on Freedom of Assembly, carried out jointly with the ODIHR and with the Venice Commission.

In conclusion, we would like to underline the great importance the EU attaches to its intensified relations with Azerbaijan following the adoption of the European Neighbourhood Policy Action Plan in November 2006.

We thank Ambassador Herrero and his dedicated staff for the work done and we wish him every success for the future.

The Candidate Countries Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia, as well as EFTA countries Iceland and Norway, members of the European Economic Area, align themselves with this statement.

* Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.