



Slovensko predsedstvo EU 2008  
Slovenian Presidency of the EU 2008  
La Présidence slovène de l'UE 2008

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## **Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union**

**Permanent Council No. 716  
12 June 2008**

### **EU statement in response to the report by the Head of the OSCE Office in Baku, Ambassador Jose-Luis Herrero**

The European Union warmly welcomes Ambassador Herrero back to the Permanent Council and thanks him for his comprehensive report.

Four months ahead of presidential elections in Azerbaijan, the EU attaches the utmost importance to all activities aimed at assisting the Azerbaijani authorities in conducting the electoral process in accordance with international standards and in addressing the shortcomings of the 2005 parliamentary election, as identified in the final report of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission. We regret that some areas of major concern are still to be addressed. We note the amendments to the Electoral Code were recently approved by the Azerbaijani Parliament, look forward to the expert opinion by the ODIHR and the Venice Commission on these, and strongly encourage the Azerbaijani government to follow up on any recommendations that they might make. We attach high value to the activities of the OSCE Ambassadorial Working Group on elections and to the plans presented on 30 April by Ambassador Herrero, jointly with the representatives of the Council of Europe and of the European Commission, offering their assistance to ensure free and fair elections. We also look forward to a timely invitation to send international election observers.

The presidential elections in October will provide Azerbaijan with an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to the democratic reform process. Enhancing the political dialogue between government and opposition, promoting pluralism and a

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wider participation of civil society in political life, as well as strengthening freedom of the media, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly are in our view crucial elements for creating a sound electoral climate. We therefore share Ambassador Herrero's concern over the 14 May court decision to cancel the registration of the Election Monitoring Centre and call on the Azerbaijani authorities to re-register the Centre promptly.

The situation of the media in Azerbaijan remains a matter of grave concern. While we welcomed the release of five journalists on the occasion of Solidarity Day of World Azerbaijanis, we are disappointed that a number of media workers are still imprisoned. The harsh sentences recently imposed, failure to identify perpetrators of physical assaults, as well as public campaigns to discredit journalists are particularly worrying, as they could suggest that intimidation and repression are being used to silence the free press ahead of the forthcoming presidential elections. We call again on the Azerbaijani authorities to abide by their OSCE and Council of Europe commitments in this field. We express our full support for the work of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Miklos Haraszti, and urge the Azerbaijani authorities to make use of all of his suggestions and recommendations, to stop the harassment of the remaining few independent media and reform the existing defamation legislation.

Freedom of the media and freedom of expression are vital to the conduct of free and fair elections, as set out in the Copenhagen 1990 document. We therefore highly value the Office's cooperation with Mr. Haraszti with a view to improving the media environment and legislation, as well as to providing technical assistance to the media and to journalists. The Office's activities supporting the TV channels in conveying to the population the plurality of political options, in a fair and unbiased manner, are in our opinion of key importance for the promotion of a truly democratic electoral

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process. We welcome the initiative to launch a working group to foster dialogue between the media and the government.

All activities carried out in the framework of the Rule of Law Programme are very valuable, as they enhance the Azerbaijani government's efforts to strengthen the effective and the impartial administration of justice. We note the outcome of the recent Trial Monitoring Report and encourage the Office to assist state authorities to ensure speedy and effective implementation.

The EU commends the Office for its activities in the framework of the Police Assistance Programme, allowing for the creation and formal adoption of a new curriculum for the Police School and the further expansion of the Community Policing project. The role the Office has assumed coordinating the public assembly management training plan is extremely important, and should contribute to enhancing respect for the freedom of assembly. In this pre-electoral phase, we join Ambassador Herrero in looking forward to the implementation of the recently adopted Law on Freedom of Assembly in a manner that allows all political groups to freely express their political views and interact with the electorate without restrictions.

In the Economic and Environmental Dimension, we highly appreciate the support given to the Advocacy and Legal Advice Centres in the capital and in the regions, thus enhancing the government's efforts against corruption, and we encourage the Office's activities aimed at helping Azerbaijan to face a range of environmental challenges, including by supporting the implementation of the Aarhus Convention.

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate the importance the EU attaches to its intensified relations with Azerbaijan and we invite the Azerbaijani government to make full use of the opportunities offered by the European Neighbourhood Policy

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Action Plan to further the reform process, in the interest of the country's domestic development and of its international image.

We thank Ambassador Herrero and his staff for their hard work and 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 candidate countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia, as well as the European Free Trade Association country and member of the European Economic Area Iceland align themselves with this statement.

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

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