



**Open Letter to President of France, Mr. Emmanuel Macron,
and Members of the Legislative Assembly of France**

Dear Mr. President,
Dear Members of the French Parliament,

Ahead of the upcoming official visit by President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, we kindly request you to raise problems with freedom of speech in Azerbaijan during your meetings and to call upon Ilham Aliyev to release all his critics from prisons and carry out urgent reforms to increase the government's accountability to the media and the public.

Ilham Aliyev intensified crackdown on his critics immediately after his next questionable re-election in April of this year for a fourth presidential term, which had previously been increased from five to seven years. Having taken over the presidency from his father, the late ex-president of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev, in 2003, Ilham Aliyev has destroyed the free press and civil society institutions for his 15 years in office. Through non-democratic changes introduced to the Constitution of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev succeeded in the abolition of the two-term limit for presidency. Having completely cracked down on the democratic institutions, Ilham Aliyev assigned his spouse Mehriban Aliyeva as the first vice-president of Azerbaijan in February 2017, thus creating an example of outrageous nepotism and kleptocracy unprecedented in the whole world.

Members of the president's family have taken control over almost entire economy of Azerbaijan, thereby earning the country an embarrassing top place in global rankings in terms of the flourishing of corruption.

Today, not only the critics and corruption fighters in Azerbaijan are put behind bars, but the scope of persecution of critics has long gone beyond the borders of Azerbaijan. Along with the attempts to harass critics living in political exile in EU countries, the Azerbaijani authorities do not even refrain from attempts to persecute foreign journalists, including those who are French. For example, the authorities have initiated judicial proceedings against prominent French investigative journalists Laurent Richard and Emmanuel Bach demanding that the French court bring them to account.

Taking advantage of the existing impunity and the lack of a proper civilian control on the part of the civil society, the practices of corruption and money laundering by the ruling elite of Azerbaijan have also gone beyond the borders of Azerbaijan and spread to the countries of the European Union including France. The high-profile journalistic investigations of the last three years show that Aliyev's government has bribed European and French politicians and senior officials of international organizations headquartered in France with the aim of creating a positive image of the ruling elite in the democratic Western countries. As we speak, members of the ruling family and relatives of senior officials continue their suspicious activities in France related to money laundering and tax evasion.

Being one of the leaders of the European Union today, France is actively expanding economic cooperation with Azerbaijan, as the leading French enterprises in the fields of oil and gas production, aviation, construction, telecommunications and military industrial complex are busy implementing large multi-million dollar contracts with Azerbaijan.

In the light of this cooperation and the leading role of France in promoting European values, we encourage you to pay more attention to resolving the serious problems in the fields of human rights, democracy, rule of law and fight against corruption in Azerbaijan.

At present, there are more than a hundred political prisoners in Azerbaijan. The EU, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and the OSCE have repeatedly called upon the Azerbaijani authorities to put an end to the harassment of critics and opponents of the authorities. Journalists Afghan Mukhtarli and Mehman Huseynov, who are most well-known to the international community for their corruption investigations, still remain in jail despite numerous calls for their release.

The authorities refuse to effectively investigate the murders of journalists and other crimes related to violence against media representatives.

Opposition politician Ilgar Mammadov still remains behind bars, despite the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights for his release. Due to Baku's refusal to fulfill its human rights obligations, the Council of Europe has initiated a procedure against Azerbaijan that can end with its expulsion from the Council of Europe.

Today, the rule of law is experiencing a complete decline in values, the courts are under total control of the authorities, independence of the judiciary has practically been destroyed, as only less than a dozen genuinely independent lawyers are left in the country with a population of ten million, which is essentially catastrophe in the field of legal protection.

The loss of hope for justice and democratic changes leads to an increase in social tension that can at any time result in serious spikes in violence and destabilisation in the country and in the region. Last week, the Azerbaijani authorities launched a new wave of repression against freedom of speech. During the coverage of protests in Ganja city on 10 July, a dozen of representatives of online media covering the event was detained and tortured. On the eve of this event, a number of independent online publications were illegally blocked by the Ministry of Communications in the absence of a required court decision and the prosecutor's office simultaneously launched a criminal case against these publications, while prominent journalist Mustafa Hajibayli and his other colleagues faced an imminent threat of arrest.

In light of the above-mentioned problems in the field of human rights and democracy in Azerbaijan, we ask you to use the authoritative international position of France and call upon the leadership of Azerbaijan, in meetings with them, to release all political prisoners from jail, put an end to the pervasive corruption and money laundering carried out both in Azerbaijan and in EU countries, and stop the practice of bribing European politicians for the purpose of turning a blind eye to widespread violations of human rights and democracy in Azerbaijan.

Sincerely,



Emin Huseynov

Executive Director

Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety

19 July 2018