

## Speech by Intigam Aliyev

Dear Chairman of Conference,  
Dear Conference participants and guests,  
Dear Friends,

I am pleased to welcome you all in this event!

First of all, I would like to extend my appreciations to the dear organizers for inviting me to this highly-regarded event and giving me a floor to speak. It is both a responsibility and an honour to speak in such a reputable event.

I apologise to for my poor English. Due to the load of work while in freedom I never had time to improve my English. However, thanks to my government who took care of me and put me in jail, I could work on my knowledge of English while in prison. I was thinking that I would have a chance to improve my English within seven years and six months and additionally to learn French, which is my most favourite language. Very pity that I was released very early – one year and eight months later that didn't allow me to realize my plan. ☺

Unfortunately, there are still Council of Europe member countries where it is considered a crime to have a different opinion, defend human rights, carry out monitoring of election frauds and human rights violations, address violations through ECHR, enjoy a freedom of assembly against the government policies, investigate corruption cases, prepare a list of political prisoners and demand their release, raise such issues to ECHR, etc. In the best case, you can face an accusation such as “they are engaged in politics”. My country is among them and dozens of people are being arrested just because of their activities.

Factically, the civil society of Azerbaijan has been eliminated by political repressions that have been going on for a long time and have intensified in the last 2-3 years. Politically motivated charges were fabricated against dozens of NGOs and their leaders. The environment of fear was created in society. Many civil society activists were forced to leave the county due to the fear of persecution.

The calls from the international organizations and several countries for authoritarian governments to fulfill their obligations were interpreted as interfering with the internal affairs of the country and even overthrowing the government. OSCE and others international organizations were kicked out of the country one by one. There was another factor that was complicating the whole situation: the interest of EU countries in energy resources and caviar of some countries prevailed over the concerns for human rights in those countries.

At this event today, there are participants who supported us in the gravest times I would like to specifically mention one of them. This is Niils Muiznieks. I would like to mention a case related to him now during this event. The response of Mr Muiznieks to the question of a journalist asking why the Council of Europe defends the persons that the Government of Azerbaijan recognizes as criminals was incredible: "Listen, there are two possibilities: either the Council of Europe is composed of idiots who just cooperate with separatists, drug addicts, suicides and revolutionaries, or there is something very bad with the legal system of Azerbaijan. I can assure you - we are not idiots!" - said Muzhnieks.

The circle of the countries and organizations defending of political prisoners and civil society became larger thanks to the tireless efforts and systematic work of our friends. The European Parliament, Council of Europe, UN, OSCE and other international organizations, as well as the

Parliaments of several States adopted important decisions and documents addressing the real situation of civil society and human rights in Azerbaijan. Due to their efforts, a number of political prisoners in the country were released.

However, a serious fearsome environment still exists in the society. Today, dozens of NGO leaders, journalists, politicians and youth activists are banned from leaving the country. Their names are mentioned in court cases that have been launched 2 years ago against civil society and international organizations including the NED, IREX, OXFAM, Norwegian Human Rights House Foundation, Marshall Foundation and etc. Bank accounts of dozens of NGOs and their leaders are still frozen. They have illegally been ordered to pay large amounts of tax fines. The current legislation and socio-political situation in the country makes it impossible for NGOs to operate, especially in the fields of democracy, human rights and transparency. Azerbaijan still remains as a one of the leading countries in Europe for the number of political prisoners.

In the recent years, we have been observing the narrowing of the scope of operations of civil society organizations in several Council of Europe countries. This is a very dangerous tendency. I consider it critical to emphasize the role of Russia as one of the factors encouraging this dangerous tendency. This country is one of the powerful players in the region. Russia has a bad government, but it had a strong civil society. This country has turned into a polygon where the nastiest techniques have been applied for many years to destroy the civil society. Later on, similar regimes started applying these techniques in their countries. The bad government of Russia still remains as a source danger for the civil societies of the region.

Earlier to these events, such cases also happened in Turkey, Armenia, Belarus and other countries. In Belarus, the arrest of Ales Belyatski was a serious blow on human rights movement not only in Belarus but also throughout the countries of the Post-Soviet region. Still there exist serious restrictions imposed on the legal functioning of NGOs engaged in human rights defence. In order to avoid any risk of criminal persecution human rights NGOs are forced to get registered in other countries in order to continue their work.

In a number of countries, the repressive legislation and public-political conditions make it impossible for NGOs to get engaged in democratization, human rights defence and transparency activities. Such conditions available in these countries make everyone involved in these fields a potential victim.

In democratic states, NGOs play a role of bridge and communications between the government and citizens. Unfortunately, we are deprived of such communications between our government and communities in our countries. We are not as bad as we are presented by our governments. We do understand that our efforts as civil society organizations will yield more results through cooperation with our governments. But we have been deprived of this opportunity. Our governments set extremely severe conditions for cooperation. If you need cooperation, you should not prepare reports highlighting election frauds. You should not report on torture and ill treatments in police and prisons. You should not publish investigative reports on facts of high-level government corruption. You should not file cases to international courts that address violation of freedoms of expression, assembly, association and consciousness or the right not to be subjected to torture. You should not speak out at Council of Europe, UN, European Union, OSCE and other international organizations against imprisonments based on political motivations. The number of NGOs who have accepted these conditions for cooperation with the government has remarkably increased. The conditions are sufficiently beneficial. Significant amounts of funds have been allocated from government budget for their financing, their staff members are funded to travel to foreign countries, they are involved in various working groups

established within government structures and in international organizations, or they benefit from a variety of privileges extended.

The beginning of economic downturn and post-oil era create serious challenges for authoritarian countries. They no longer feel as comfortable as they used to. Their financial needs induce them to improve the ruined relationships with the international organizations. Those structures, including the Council of Europe should apply a cautious approach to the programs and projects in the authoritarian countries. Such projects should aim to revive civil societies and support reforms. Therefore, a major condition for cooperation with those regimes should be the release of all civil society activists, improvement of the NGO legislation, preserving pluralism and creating better conditions for activities of international organizations.

I see a number of civil society activists from risky countries. Their involvement in such events is not only the demonstration of support by Council of Europe structures to the people presented as criminals by their governments. This event also proves necessary in conveying the sufferings and challenges of the people from such countries to the diplomats, politicians and activists from other countries.

I also think that the disastrous situations, political abnormalities and the growing extremism in the world, as well as in those countries ensuring the wellbeing of their citizens are also the results of indifferent attitude by their countries' governments and societies to the sufferings and challenges of people in authoritarian countries. This is very dangerous!

Such communications enable to create connections between the nations, civil societies and human fates, and present lessons to be learned for others. I am confident that this event will be conducive in addressing the problems faced by the civil societies of our countries.

Taking this opportunity, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to everyone for the support they have always given to the civil society of our country.

When in prison I was happy to hear of my acceptance to the Expert Council of the Council of Europe. It was a moral support to know that there was a name tag with a seat for me in every gathering of this Council. For this reason, I especially thank my friends and colleagues!