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Sir Suma Chakrabarti  
President  
European Bank for Reconstruction and Development  
One Exchange Square  
London, EC2A 2JN  
United Kingdom

**Azerbaijan: Crackdown on Critics Undermines Sustainable Development**

Dear President Chakrabarti,

We are writing to follow-up on our letter to you dated May 19, 2016 and to share our concerns and recent research regarding the Azerbaijani government's ongoing repression of independent civil society and its impact on sustainable development. We appreciate the efforts made in May during your visit to Azerbaijan to meet with civil society, and welcome the EBRD's attention to the issues raised. We write now to urge you to build upon these efforts.

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) is currently considering several projects that would benefit Azerbaijan's extractive industries, including financing elements of the Southern Gas Corridor. At the same time, the Azerbaijani government is waging a vicious crackdown on critics and dissenting voices. Arrests and imprisonment of activists, human rights defenders, and journalists, as well as laws and regulations restricting the activities of independent groups and their ability to secure independent funding, have virtually extinguished the space for independent activism and critical journalism.

In October, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), which the [EBRD has endorsed](#), decided to uphold its demotion of Azerbaijan to candidate status as the government's crackdown on civil society falls afoul of its EITI commitments. Azerbaijan risks suspension from EITI if the government does not implement [the corrective actions](#) outlined by the EITI board by the next board meeting, scheduled for late February 2017. These actions include legal and regulatory amendments eliminating:

- (a) The need for civil society to obtain a certificate every two years confirming their registration;
- (b) The need for civil society to register grants with the Ministry of Justice;
- (c) The need for foreign donors to register individual grants with the authorities and obtain an opinion on the purposefulness of the grant.

Human Rights Watch's October 2016 [report](#) *Harassed, Imprisoned, Exiled: Azerbaijan's Continuing Crackdown on Government Critics, Lawyers, and Civil Society*, attached, documents the government's concerted efforts to paralyze civil society and punish those who criticize or challenge the government through prosecutions and legal and regulatory restrictions. Based on more than 90 in-depth interviews with civil society actors, it details the arrests and convictions of activists, journalists, and other critics, harassment of their family members, restrictions placed on civil society organizations, and proceedings against independent lawyers. With these targeted actions, the Azerbaijani government has largely eliminated avenues for civil society organizations and others to hold it accountable.

As emphasized in the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's own [Articles of Agreement](#), the Bank's purpose includes promoting "multiparty democracy and pluralism," which it recognizes include civil and political rights. The Azerbaijani government's repression of civil society presents a serious impediment to multiparty democracy and pluralism. In assessing government's commitments to these principles, the EBRD has indicated that it focuses both on the gravity of the abuses and on the government's trajectory. Azerbaijan's record on freedom of expression, assembly, and association has been problematic for many years, but prior to the government's commencement of this most recent crackdown in 2012 and 2013, civil society in the country was vibrant. The viciousness and broad base of these attacks on civil society clearly meet both the gravity threshold and indicate that the trajectory is negative. Going forward, the EBRD should ensure that its engagement in Azerbaijan supports human rights, maximizes social well-being, and advances civil society participation, accountability, and the reversal of the government's crackdown on independent civil society.

Human Rights Watch and Bankwatch strongly urge the EBRD to:

- (a) Limit its engagement in Azerbaijan until the government meets benchmarks developed by the EBRD to illustrate the government's commitment to the principles of multiparty democracy and pluralism, in accordance with the Bank's Articles of

- Agreement. This so-called “calibrated approach” was used by the EBRD in Belarus and Turkmenistan. The EBRD should work with civil society to identify meaningful benchmarks and, until these benchmarks are met, cease providing financial support to the government or extractives industries projects in Azerbaijan;
- (b) Abstain from providing additional financing for extractive industries projects, including support for the Shah Deniz Gas Fields and the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline, which is owned 58 percent by the Azerbaijani government and the state-owned gas company, SOCAR, until the government has implemented the corrective actions outlined by EITI. It is essential that there be a framework within which natural resource revenues can actually benefit inclusive development. In light of the EBRD’s endorsement of EITI, it is crucial that the Bank not undermine the initiative by continuing to finance extractives projects in Azerbaijan at this time. Instead, the bank should finance projects that go directly toward meeting the urgent social and economic needs of the people of Azerbaijan; and
  - (c) Through its diplomatic engagement with the Azerbaijani government and in public statements, raise concerns about the continued crackdown on independent civil society, emphasizing how the crackdown undermines civic participation and social accountability and the importance of an enabling environment for civil society for sustainable development.

We would appreciate the opportunity to discuss these matters with you further. We look forward to your positive response and engagement with us to ensure your efforts and lending practices enable a safe space for civil society in Azerbaijan.

Sincerely,



Jessica Evans  
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Cc: Board of Executive Directors  
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