



To:

President of the European Council, Charles Michel

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Ambassadors of the European Union, Kestutis Jankauskas (to Kazakhstan), Marilyn Josefson (to Kyrgyzstan), Raimundas Karoblis (to Tajikistan), Diego Ruiz Alonso (to Turkmenistan) and Charlotte Adriaen (to Uzbekistan)

Brussels, 19 October 2022

Re.: Human rights issues for visit to Central Asia

Dear President Michel,

We are writing to you ahead of your upcoming visit to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for meetings with the presidents of these two countries, as well as other Central Asian leaders.

Your visit to Central Asia comes at a time of unprecedented security, socio-economic and other challenges in the wider Eurasian region and there are undoubtedly many issues that deserve attention. However, in accordance with the EU Strategy for Central Asia, which sets out human rights as an essential element of the EU's relations with the Central Asian countries and recognises that strengthening the rule of law, accountability and respect for human rights is a key condition for sustainable development in the region, we urge you to prominently raise pressing human rights issues in your discussions with the Central Asian leaders. At this time, it is particularly important to make it clear to the region's governments that that the EU is closely monitoring and assessing their compliance with international human rights obligations and that the EU expects tangible progress in this area as a condition for the further deepening of relations.

First, we ask you to stress the need for prompt, impartial and effective measures to investigate serious human rights violations reported in connection with major crises, which erupted in Central Asia this year, and to ensure accountability for them.

Under circumstances that remain unclear, peaceful mass protests against government policies evolved into violence and clashes between security forces and protesters in Kazakhstan, the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) in Tajikistan and the Republic of Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan earlier this year, resulting in significant loss of lives and other casualties. The authorities of the respective countries

employed harsh measures to end the protests and unrest, with widespread allegations of the excessive use of force, arbitrary detentions, torture and ill-treatment, due process violations and other abuses characterising their responses.

In order to ensure justice, alleviate popular grievances and prevent renewed unrest, it is of paramount importance that the crises in the three countries and the alleged violations are investigated in an independent, transparent and thorough manner with a view to holding accountable all those responsible for violations and providing redress for victims. These investigations should be carried out in accordance with the governments' international human rights obligations, with the participation of both national and international experts, and in close cooperation with civil society.

In order to deliver justice, reduce tensions and facilitate reconciliation in the longer term, it is also essential to ensure that an independent, international investigation is conducted into the most recent hostilities at the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which claimed dozens of lives and had a devastating impact on local communities. This investigation should cover any alleged violations of international humanitarian and human rights law reported during the hostilities.

Second, we ask you to call for an end to excessive restrictions on civil society engagement and to the pattern of persecution of those who legitimately exercise their freedoms of expression, association and assembly in the Central Asian countries.

In a trend seen across Central Asia, civil society activists, journalists, bloggers and others who speak out on issues of public concern and criticise the authorities are subjected to intimidation and harassment, ranging from online threats to arrest, prosecution and imprisonment on politically motivated charges.

Among those recently targeted are activists, journalists and bloggers who were detained during the government crackdowns launched in response to the crises mentioned above and subsequently charged with various offenses, despite the lack of any substantial evidence that they would have engaged in unlawful actions. We are seriously concerned about the situation of these and other activists, journalists, bloggers, lawyers and outspoken individuals in the Central Asian countries who have been arrested, charged and convicted in apparent retaliation for their peaceful exercise of fundamental freedoms. They have often been charged with spreading false information, inciting discord, instigating riots, extremism and other broadly worded offenses, which are open to abusive interpretation, and tried in proceedings that do not meet international standards of fairness and due process. Thus, the authorities of the region are using criminal prosecution as a tool of repression against individuals who criticise their actions and expose wrongdoing among those in power.

The Central Asian authorities also stifle discussion on issues of public interest and obstruct civic engagement by imposing unjustified and disproportionate restrictions on access to online information, the conduct of assemblies, and the activities of civil society organisations and opposition groups.

We urge you to insist that the Central Asian governments take concrete measures to roll back repressive policies and practices, which run counter to their international obligations with respect to fundamental freedoms, undermine prospects for any genuine democratisation in their countries, and threaten sustainable stability both nationally and regionally. This should include dropping the charges against any activists, journalists, bloggers and others who have been prosecuted because of their peaceful and legitimate activities and promptly releasing anyone who is currently behind bars on such grounds.

The issues summarised above are described in more detail in the briefing paper attached to this letter, which also provides information on individual cases of particular concern to us. We urge you to raise, as a priority, the cases of opposition leader Zhanbolat Mamai in Kazakhstan and human rights defender activist Aziz Yusupov in Uzbekistan with the leaders of the two host countries for your visit. These cases are described in the briefing paper and more information can be found in the following joint statements on their cases: <https://www.iphronline.org/kazakhstan-drop-trumped-up-charges-release-opposition-leader.html>; and <https://www.iphronline.org/uzbekistan-activist-detained-on-trumped-up-charges-before-major-human-rights-conference.html>

We thank you in advance for your attention to these issues.

Sincerely,

International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR)
Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR)
Association for Human Rights in Central Asia (AHRCA)
Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR)