

STATEMENT

of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center
on the detention of representatives of Toplum TV, the Institute of Democratic Initiatives and
the "III Republic" Platform

The Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center (EMDS) considers the detention of the employees and founders of "Toplum TV" on March 6-8, as well as the members of the Institute of Democratic Initiatives and the "III Republic" Platform, and the bogus charges against them, as a continuation of the government's political repression against free media and independent civil organizations in Azerbaijan.

EMDS reminds that on March 6, the searches conducted by the police in the offices of Toplum TV, Institute of Democratic Initiatives and the III Republic Platform were carried out without submitting court decisions. During the searches, the phones of the persons present were taken from their hands, and thus their ability to call a lawyer and inform their relatives were limited. The representatives of Toplum TV stated that during the search, the editorial equipment and computers were seized, as well as the videos collected over a long period of time as a result of illegal access to YouTube and Instagram pages were deleted.

In total, 9 people were charged under Article 206.3.2 of the Criminal Code (smuggling is committed by a group of persons who colluded in advance) and 7 of them were detained, thereby grossly violating the right to freedom under Article 18 of the European Convention.

EMDS notes that the accusations brought against representatives of Toplum TV, the Institute of Democratic Initiatives and the "III Republic" Platform coincide with the period when the Azerbaijani government officials and pro-governmental media outlets intensified smear campaign against free media and independent civil society groups. Thus, in recent years, the activities of independent civil society representatives, human rights defenders and journalists have been presented as working for "foreign political forces" and the cases of political repression have increased for discrediting critical voices.

EMDS expresses concern that the political persecution and arrests against Toplum TV are aimed at stifling the freedom of expression and free media in the country, and this wave of repression will be a serious blow to the political pluralism and alternative platforms in the country.

EMDS also declares that the targeting of the Institute of Democratic Initiatives and the III Republican Platform in the latest wave of political repression is an indication of the gross suppression of the rights to freedom of association and right to participate in political life in

the country. This process is aimed at eliminating independent citizen groups that are not under the political patronage of the authorities.

EMDS urges that as a result of the political arrests in past years, the crisis in the protection of political freedoms in the country has deepened, and along with the Azerbaijani government the international human rights institutions are also responsible for the current political environment due to reluctance in the protection of human rights in Azerbaijan.

EMDS calls on Azerbaijani government and international organizations to adopt following measures to overcome the current crisis for protection of political freedoms:

- The Azerbaijani authorities should show political will for the release of journalists, civil society leaders and political activists arrested for their professional activities;
- The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and the Secretary General of the Council of Europe should take the initiative by preparing recommendations on the implementation of the judgements of the European Court of Human Rights regarding the violation of the rights of Azerbaijani citizens under the European Convention on Human Rights;
- The co-rapporteurs of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe should visit to Azerbaijan for meetings with persons arrested for political motives, their lawyers and family members;
- The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression and the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media should visit Azerbaijan and present their proposals for the protection and safety of journalists and bloggers in Azerbaijan;

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Baku, Azerbaijan