



## EU: Use Brussels visit of Kyrgyzstan's president to secure human rights commitments

*Brussels, 26 March 2015.* The EU leaders should prominently address human rights issues with Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambayev, who is in Brussels for meetings on 26-27 March, and insist that he use his powers to ensure compliance with the country's international human rights obligations. This is the message in a [joint letter](#) sent to European Council President Donald Tusk, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and European Parliament President Martin Schultz by a group of NGOs ahead of Atambayev's visit.

"The three EU presidents should raise concerns about current human rights threats in Kyrgyzstan both privately and publicly during President Atambayev's visit and seek concrete commitments from him to counter them," said Tinatin Tsertsvadze, International Advocacy Manager at Brussels-based International Partnership for Human Rights. "That would be in keeping with the EU's pledge to place human rights high on the agenda of all political dialogue with third countries and show how serious the EU is about human rights in its relations with Kyrgyzstan."

The letter to the EU leaders was signed by International Partnership for Human Rights, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, the Netherlands Helsinki Committee, the Polish Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders. In their letter, the six organizations detail a number of key issues that they believe should feature on the agenda of the EU meetings with the Central Asian leader.

Two draft laws currently under consideration in Kyrgyzstan's parliament are of particular concern. One draft law could be used to force virtually any NGO that receives foreign funding to adopt the stigmatising label of "foreign agents" or else stop its work. Another one banning "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" would thwart advocacy, awareness-raising and discussion on LGBTI issues and serve to legitimise prejudice against LGBTI members. Both have been inspired by similar legislation adopted in Russia.

"The EU leaders should press President Atambayev for assurances that he will not endorse these two repressive draft laws," commented Ivar Dale, Senior Adviser of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee. "If adopted, they would deliver a strong blow to Kyrgyzstan's vibrant civil society and reinforce patterns of intolerance and discrimination, as we have seen happening in Russia."

Another alarming issue is the lack of accountability for gross human rights abuses perpetrated during and after the June 2010 inter-ethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan. In a selective justice process, mostly ethnic Uzbeks have been prosecuted for involvement in the violence and tried in legal processes undermined by systematic fair trial violations, torture allegations, and courtroom attacks against defendants and lawyers. Torture and ill-treatment also continue to be widely perpetrated with impunity, and it is a major concern that prompt access to legal safeguards against such practices is not guaranteed to individuals deprived of their liberty.

A victim of torture and the miscarriage of justice related to the June 2010 events, well-known human rights defender Azimjan Askarov remains imprisoned after a new investigation into his case was stalled last year.

“The EU officials should emphasize to President Atambayev that recommendations made by international human rights bodies on ensuring accountability and combating torture must be fully and effectively implemented,” said Lenur Kerymov, Project Coordinator with the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights. “They should call for justice and the immediate release of Azimjan Askarov.”

EU-Kyrgyzstan relations are primarily governed by the bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) signed in 1999. This treaty sets out human rights as an essential element of mutual relations. The EU is also financially supporting rule of law reforms in Kyrgyzstan, which has a more open political system than other Central Asian republics and has shown more willingness to reform than neighbouring regimes. For the years 2014-2020, the EU has committed €38 million for this purpose.

“During their meetings with President Atambayev, the EU presidents should reaffirm that the rule of law and human rights lie at the heart of the EU’s partnership with Kyrgyzstan,” said Jan de Vries, Deputy Director of the Netherlands Helsinki Committee. “They should make clear to him that backsliding on human rights may affect EU-Kyrgyzstan relations.”

A similar request was made by the European Parliament in a recent [resolution](#). The Parliament expressed concern in particular about the “homosexual propaganda” bill that is pending in Kyrgyzstan and said that the EU institutions should convey to Kyrgyzstan’s authorities that the adoption of this bill could have implications for mutual relations under the PCA.

President Atambayev’s Brussels visit is part of a tour to several European countries. It comes at a time when Kyrgyzstan is set to join the Russia-promoted Eurasian Economic Union in the near future after signing an accession agreement in December 2014.

“We have heard the argument being made that the EU risks pushing Kyrgyzstan and other countries in this region closer to Russia if it is too assertive on human rights,” noted Gerald Staberock, Secretary General of the OMCT. “That is a flawed argument. It is only by staying true to its founding values and insisting on respect for universal human rights principles that the EU can help strengthen Kyrgyzstan’s integration into the international community.”

“Presidents Tusk, Juncker and Schultz should all use the occasion of President Atambayev’s visit to push for human rights progress in Kyrgyzstan,” added Karim Lahidji, President of the FIDH. “They should speak

up in support of NGOs, minority members, torture victims and others whose rights are at imminent risk in this country.”

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