



29 September

Moscow

To the European Parliament

Ladies and Gentlemen!

With this letter we would like to express our support for the nomination of Leyla Yunus for the European Parliament's 2014 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

As members of the last generation of dissidents in the Soviet Union and followers of Andrei Sakharov, we wish to support our colleagues in Azerbaijan who are unfortunately suffering for the brave stand they are taking to defend human rights in their country. By receiving the award, Leyla would also be a worthy successor to Memorial which was awarded the prize in 2009.

We first worked with Leyla Yunus and her husband Arif in 1989 when she was one of a small number of citizens who began the struggle for the honour and independence of Azerbaijan. They helped to form the Popular Front of Azerbaijan. When the Popular Front acquired a mass membership they took a stand against the nationalist wing which tried to take it over.

In that year, the two of them helped Svetlana Gannushkina to meet Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia and thus helped draw broader attention to the inter-ethnic conflicts of the Soviet Union. Their work moved from the political to the humanitarian sphere.

In the tragic "Black January" of 1990 in Baku when anti-Armenian pogroms broke out in the city and then Soviet troops intervened and caused the deaths of dozens of peaceful citizens, the only source of reliable information on what was happening came from Leyla and Arif Yunus. Their work at that time put them in great danger.

In January 1992 Leyla Yunus was the coordinator on the Azerbaijani side of the first meeting of Armenian and Azerbaijani intelligentsia during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. At this intense phase of the Karabakh conflict this meeting had great historical significance. It is enough to say that the best known and most talented writers of the Caucasus, Hrant Matevosian and Akram Ailisli, took part in the meeting.

In recent times Akram Ailisli has been persecuted by the Azerbaijani authorities for publishing his novel *Stone Dreams* in which he described the tragic events of January 1990 and life in his home town of Ailis, where Armenians and Azerbaijanis lived together peacefully. Leyla and Arif Yunus were amongst the very few who decided to speak out in defense of the writer. This Armenian-Azerbaijani peace-building work is now being described as state treason.

In 1996 Leyla founded the non-governmental organization, the Institute for Peace and Democracy and became its director. The Institute worked to protect human rights, promote democracy, defend the supremacy of the law and the rights of Azerbaijan's minorities.

Ever since then, the Institute has consistently fought for the right of every citizen in Azerbaijan to be respected by the law, to decent treatment and to have a fair and honest trial. Amongst those whom they have supported our activists of the Talysh cultural movement and journalists, including the recently arrested correspondent of *Zerkalo* newspaper Rauf Mirkadyrov.

The work of Leyla Yunus has been noted all round the world and been marked with international prizes. Leyla has received France's highest honour, the Legion d'Honneur.

Many hoped that the coming to power in 2003 of a new young president in Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliiev, would lead to democratization and an easing of the situation for human rights defenders—but these hopes were dashed. For example, The International Working Group for the Location of Missing in Action and the Release of Captives in the Zone of the Karabakh Conflict was forced to halt its work in the region because Azerbaijani soldiers released from Armenian captive faced, instead of sympathy, accusations of treason and were sentenced to long prison terms.

Pressure on human rights defenders did not decrease. Instead the methods used against them became even more unacceptable and the children of activists were targeted.

Salur Alizadeh, the son of the well known political figure and head of the Social Democratic Party Zardusht Alizadeh was convicted in 2009 of a fabricated charge of "possessing and distributing narcotics" – his father had fought energetically against the drugs trade. When Adnan Hajizade, the son of the well-known democratic activist Hikmet Hajizade (who served as Azerbaijan's ambassador in Moscow in 1992-3) was attacked in public in July 2009, the police did not detain the attackers, but arrested Adnan and his friend Emin Milli for alleged hooliganism. Both of them were then sent to jail.

In the same fashion Dinara Yunus, the daughter of Leyla and Arif Yunus, received threats and was forced to seek political asylum in Holland.

A new round of persecution against the Yunuses began this year following the publication of a list of political prisoners. Now their names appear on the very same list.

At the end of April, Leyla and Arif Yunus were not allowed to leave Azerbaijan and were detained in Baku airport. Their passports were confiscated. After this their home and office were searched in the most intrusive and aggressive fashion. However, despite the dangers, they continued to work to defend political prisoners and to expose abuses of human rights and corruption in Azerbaijan.

On July 30, Leyla Yunus was arrested. Arif Yunus was arrested a few days later. They were accused of serious crimes, including state treason, embezzling large sums, illegal commercial activity, refusal to pay taxes and falsifying documents. If convicted, they could both face sentences from 15 years to life imprisonment. All court proceedings are carried out in a highly secretive fashion which is closed even to family members.

We hear continuous and disturbing reports that lawyers are being denied access to them, that Leyla, who suffers from diabetes, has been denied food and medicine. Recently there were reports that Leyla was badly beaten.

Esteemed members of the European Parliament! Leyla Yunus, as well as her husband Arif, has worked for many years to defend human rights, develop democracy and protect ethnic minorities from discrimination. She would be a most worthy recipient of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

Awarding her the prize would also help protect her, Arif and the other 96 recorded political prisoners in Azerbaijan from further persecution and draw attention to the disgraceful human rights situation in a country that is a member of the Council of Europe.

The award could make a positive impact on the overall situation in Azerbaijan before it becomes too late for many people.

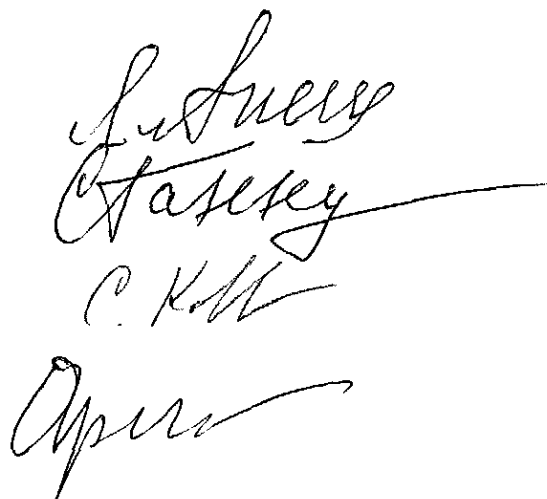
Respectfully,

Lyudmila Alekseeva,

Svetlana Gannushkina,

Sergei Kovalyov,

Oleg Orlov

The image shows four handwritten signatures in black ink, arranged vertically on the right side of the page. The signatures are cursive and correspond to the names listed on the left: Lyudmila Alekseeva, Svetlana Gannushkina, Sergei Kovalyov, and Oleg Orlov.