

PRESS RELEASE

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Europe hails Armenian dialogue as amnesty is implemented

Over the past 3 days, almost all European organisations hailed the amnesty passed by the Armenian National Assembly on 26 May 2011 and implemented within less than 24 hours. With this, the government has made a good-will gesture following demands of the Armenian National Congress (ANC), the most vocal of the three major opposition blocks. The amnesty follows an unprecedented dialogue between the ANC and the government, which already led to an agreement over allowing demonstrations on the most central square in Yerevan, Opera / Liberty Square. The developments are in line with the recent memorandum on the EU-Armenia 'partnership for reform' signed by EU Commissioner **Füle** and Foreign Minister **Nalbandian** in April. They have been welcomed extensively by European organisations [excerpts]:

- “The release of these persons and the renewed investigation in the 10 casualties that occurred during the March 2008 events remove the last obstacles for the normalisation of the political climate and open the door for the start of a constructive dialogue between the authorities and opposition. This is a very positive development for Armenia.” (Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) co-rapporteurs for Armenia, **John Prescott** and **Alex Fischer**)
- “I sincerely welcome this decision which will open a new chapter in dialogue with the opposition.” (OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, Lithuanian Foreign Minister **Audronius Ažubalis**)
- “I encourage political forces in Armenia to take this opportunity to renew their dialogue.” (EU High Representative **Catherine Ashton**)

“This is excellent news for the Armenian people and a big victory for the ANC and the government. The two sides kept word and turned towards conciliation and reasonability. The next litmus tests will come with the ANC rally on 31 May and then the progress of the renewed investigations into the March 2008 events. If the constructive climate continues throughout the upcoming pre-election phase, the political class can rebuild some of its shattered credibility. The parties who will be most credible will gain most!” comments EuFoA Secretary General Dr **Michael Kambeck**.

In an opinion poll ordered by EuFoA in November 2010, respondents expressed strong distrust towards the political class at large while acknowledging that Armenia is overall on the right track (<http://www.eufoa.org/uploads/Armenia%20Final%20Report.pdf>). On 17 and 18 May, EuFoA met separately with representatives of the ANC and the government. We conclude that they still fundamentally disagree about advancing the presidential elections due in 2013. Parliamentary elections will be held in April 2012.

The ANC claims that the now released party activists and a number of others detained under the outgoing Kocharyan government in March 2008 were political prisoners. However, the Council of Europe stopped short of naming them as such amid unclear evidence. The current amnesty is the last in a series initiated by President Serzh Sargsyan, following a first large one in June 2009 (<http://www.eufoa.org/newsroom/14/23>) and several individual amnesties and releases connected to the March 2008 detentions.

European Parliament President **Jerzy Buzek** today made a statement welcoming in one sentence the Armenian development and the release of journalist Eynulla Fatullayev on Friday in Azerbaijan, following a condemning verdict of the European Court of Human Rights. "This statement is a misunderstanding. Despite deficiencies, Armenia is a democratic country with freedom of assembly, an uncensored press and a vibrant opposition and there have been many improvements since the 2008 elections. Any independent expert would agree that the situation in Azerbaijan has always been closer to that in Belarus and recently dramatically deteriorated. Baku has merely given a candy to the West which is incomparable to everything we see in Armenia." **commented Kambeck.**

EuFoA is happy to provide commenting or background analysis in English, German, French, Italian, Polish, Russian and Armenian. Members of the Europe-Armenia Advisory Council may also be available for comments; for enquiries please contact our secretariat.

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