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Delegation for relations with the South Caucasus

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**Statement by the Chair of the Delegation for relations with the South Caucasus, MEP Marina KALJURAND,**

**on the 16th meeting of the EU-Azerbaijan Parliamentary Cooperation Committee of 16 December 2021**

**Brussels/Strasbourg, 17 December 2021** - *“The EU-Azerbaijan Parliamentary Cooperation Committee met via videoconference on 16 December 2021. Together with Mr Javanshir Feyziyev, MP, I had the honour to co-chair this meeting, which was a much-needed occasion to renew our commitment to interparliamentary dialogue and exchange views on issues of common concern.*

*We held an open and frank discussion on issues related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict one year after the Trilateral Statement of 9 November 2020, on economic and energy cooperation, and on the situation of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Azerbaijan.*

*I recognised the significant challenges faced by Azerbaijan in connection with the conflict, notably the reconstruction and demining of the regions around Nagorno-Karabakh and the return of IDPs, emphasising the EU’s continued willingness to provide support. I stressed that a comprehensive settlement of the conflict still needs to be found and that negotiations are the only way to lasting peace. The EU continues to support the process led by OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs as the forum for conflict settlement.*

*We welcomed the recent meeting between European Council President and the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia and appreciated its focus on creating an atmosphere of trust. I also stressed the need to avoid inflammatory rhetoric on both sides and appealed for more openness to reach progress on outstanding issues, in particular the release of Armenian detainees, and also the unblocking of regional communications and the protection of cultural heritage.*

*Our discussion on economic and energy cooperation reconfirmed the shared interest of both our delegations in the deepening of ties and in building a newly connected, stable and prosperous South Caucasus region.*

*We exchanged views on the situation of human rights in Azerbaijan and recalled the importance of respect for the rule of law and fundamental freedoms. I shared my concern about the recent violent crackdown on peaceful protesters demanding the release of Mr Saleh Rustamov and about the state of his health. I stressed the importance of ensuring an independent judiciary, avoiding the misuse of the criminal law against government critics and human rights defenders, and fully implementing the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights. I also appealed to the Azerbaijani legislators to remove restrictions and undue*

*administrative burdens for the functioning of civil society organisations and shared my concerns about a draft media law that risks to further restrict media freedom in the country.*

*We agreed on the need to continue our dialogue on these and other important issues and expressed the hope to be able to meet in person for the 17th meeting of the Committee in Baku in the course of 2022.”*

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