



27 November 2018

Ms. Federica Mogherini
HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and VP of the Commission
European Commission
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200
1049 Brussels

Ms. Karin Kneissl
Minister of Foreign Affairs of Austria
Minoritenplatz 8
1014 Vienna

Re: Arbitrary detention of human rights defender Azimjon Askarov in Kyrgyzstan

Dear Ms. Mogherini,
Dear Minister Kneissl,

We are writing to you ahead of the European Union-Kyrgyz Republic Cooperation Council, which will take place in Brussels on 10 December 2018, to urge you to call upon the Kyrgyz authorities to immediately release human rights defender Azimjon Askarov from prison.

Azimjon Askarov's wrongful detention since June 2010 is a serious stain on Kyrgyzstan's human rights record. Although the UN Human Rights Committee called for his immediate release in a decision adopted in March 2016, Askarov remains wrongfully imprisoned. As the EU and Kyrgyzstan negotiate an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, we ask that you prioritize this issue in political dialogues with President Sooronbay Jeenbekov and the government of the Kyrgyz Republic. Askarov's arbitrary detention is related to the June 2010 ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, which claimed hundreds of lives and destroyed thousands of homes.

Before his arrest, Askarov documented prison conditions and police abuse of detainees. He was arrested in June 2010 for "organizing mass disturbances" and "inciting inter-ethnic hatred" that allegedly led to

the killing of a policeman in Bazar Korgon in southern Kyrgyzstan. Askarov was held for days without access to a lawyer in the Bazar Korgon police station. Kyrgyz authorities have never carried out an investigation into his credible allegations of torture and other ill-treatment. The victim's relatives threatened and physically attacked Askarov's lawyer with impunity during a trial that was marred by courtroom violence and procedural violations. In September 2010, Askarov was sentenced to life in prison.

In March 2016, the UN Human Rights Committee found that Azimjon Askarov was arbitrarily detained, held in inhumane conditions, tortured, and otherwise mistreated without redress and was not given a fair trial. The committee concluded that Kyrgyzstan needs to take appropriate steps to immediately release Askarov and quash his conviction. On the basis of the Human Rights Committee decision, a Kyrgyz court agreed to reconsider the case. In January 2017, the court ruled to uphold his life sentence, a decision held up on appeal. Earlier this month, Askarov announced that he would not file an appeal to Kyrgyzstan's Supreme Court because he does not trust the country's judiciary.

Brigitte Dufour, Director of the International Partnership for Human Rights, visited Azimjan Askarov on November 16, 2018, in a pre-trial detention center in Bishkek (SIZO 1). In the room where the meeting took place, Askarov stood behind bars forming a cage. Askarov expressed his humiliation at having to meet in such conditions, as well as his frustration and deep feeling of injustice after so many years of imprisonment with seemingly no prospect of being reunited with his family in his old age.

In April 2016, the EU called upon the Kyrgyz authorities to "fully implement the recommendations of the Human Rights Committee" and during a visit to Bishkek in November 2017, immediately after Jeenbekov was elected Kyrgyzstan's president, you stressed the significant advantages of close cooperation with international bodies, including the UN Human Rights Committee. Now, one year later, the EU should step up its engagement and stress to Kyrgyzstan's top officials, including President Jeenbekov, that Azimjon Askarov's release is critical to strengthening EU-Kyrgyzstan relations. The Kyrgyz government needs to end Askarov's wrongful imprisonment, quash his conviction, and provide him with rehabilitation and reparation.

We thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Philippe Dam
Advocacy Director, Europe and Central Asia
Human Rights Watch



Ivar Dale
Senior Adviser, Geneva
Norwegian Helsinki Committee

Handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "C. de la Campa".

Covadonga de la Campa
Interim Head of the European Institutions Office
and Advocacy Director
Amnesty International

Handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "BD".

Brigitte Dufour
Director
International Partnership for Human Rights