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Mr. Enrique Cerezo Torres
President of Club
Atlético de Madrid S.A.D.
Paseo Virgen del Puerto
67 28005 Madrid

Dear Mr. President,

On behalf of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, which is one of the leading human rights non-governmental organizations in Poland, we would like to draw your attention to and express our great concern at the current political situation in Azerbaijan. In the light of the recent events in this country, mindful of the difficulties such a move would engender, we call on Atletico Madrid to reconsider the sponsorship agreement between your club and the state of Azerbaijan.

Without a doubt, Atletico Madrid has had a great 2013-2014 season and the popularity of the club skyrocketed, also among the Polish football fans. The success and popularity the club has achieved gives it the possibility to impact great numbers of people around the world. And it is up to the club to choose the message that it wants to promote, whether it will be the message of democracy, or the message of support for one of the worst authoritarian regimes in Europe.

In recent days, the most prominent human rights defenders in Azerbaijan have been arrested. Hasan Huseynli, acting far from Baku, in Ganja, was detained first. He is a renowned activist for people in the regions. Then, Leyla Yunus and her husband Arif Yunus were put behind bars. They were involved in the protection of citizens suffering from massive expropriation in Baku and were promoting a peace process between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh. On 2 August, Rasul Jafarov, a thirty-year-old human rights defender was detained and arrested for three months. He was the mastermind of the 'Sing for Democracy' campaign organised during the Eurovision song contest held in Baku in 2012. He was engaged in counting political prisoners in Azerbaijan and fought to mobilise international organisations to react to Azerbaijani government's human rights abuses. Finally, on 8 August, Intigam Aliyev, a well-known activist and a prominent lawyer, was arrested. Before the European Court of Human Rights, he had won a dozen cases against Azerbaijan.

It is clear that the charges against these activists are spurious; all of them were accused of economic and tax offences, despite the fact that they operate non-profit organisations. What is more, two weeks ago, on exactly the same grounds, prosecution proceedings were opened against 21 non-governmental organisations.

But the recent crackdown is just another step in a long chain of assaults on democratic values. Anar Mammadli, the head of an independent think-tank monitoring elections, who dared to claim that the presidential elections held in the autumn were unfair, was jailed a couple of

months ago; Ilgar Mammadov, the head of the opposition party, was jailed over a year ago, and the European Court of Human Rights has already acknowledged him as a political prisoner. Prominent journalists, such as Tofiq Yagublu, Sardar Alibeili, and Parviz Hashimli, have also been added to Ilham Aliyev's collection of activists behind bars.

In the light of those facts, we do not understand why such an outstanding football team, with a great history and great potential to be a promoter of European democratic values, would agree to promote Azerbaijan on its shirts. This leads to a paradoxical situation in which a dictator – Ilham Aliyev – receives loud support from a large portion of the society in one of Europe's democratic states. The popularity of Atletico Madrid around the world additionally intensifies the impact of its actions, also in Poland where there is a large group of Atletico Madrid's fans.

On the club's website we read that "the link between Azerbaijan and Atletico Madrid is much more than a traditional commercial sponsorship associated with a shirt sponsorship, because it has a tremendous value, as the tool to achieve important goals, through actions of a different nature, sports, commercial, communication, marketing and corporate social responsibility for the benefit of all parties." That statement leads us to believe and hope that Atletico Madrid is open to fight for human rights through this sponsorship agreement.

We would ask you to imagine for a moment that some football team in a democratic country, e.g. ACF Fiorentina, which played against Atletico in the final of the UEFA Winners' Cup in 1962, allowed a former Spanish dictator – Francisco Franco Bahamonde – to promote authoritarian Spain on the club's shirts. How would it feel for the Spanish citizens who had suffered abuse from the hands of the regime? Nowadays, Azerbaijani citizens feel that their country, but in reality – their authorities, receive Atletico Madrid's support, while their own suffering under authoritarian rule remains unnoticed.

We kindly ask you to consider the above presented facts, bearing in mind that in every football match Atletico Madrid supports this authoritarian regime. In our opinion, rather than the "Land of Fire," as it is stated on Atletico Madrid's shirts, Azerbaijan should at the moment be called the "Land of Fire which Burns" democratic values and human rights principles. It is our regret that the Azerbaijani government's oil has so much power to fuel this fire, but Atletico Madrid's support and engagement for human rights protection and promotion of democratic values could be the first step towards change.

On behalf of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights,

Yours sincerely,



Adam Bodnar
Vice-president of the
Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights



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Foundation for Human Rights