

To the Participants of the 27th Meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Economic Cooperation Organization Organization

Dear meeting participants,

I sincerely welcome you to the 27th Meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Economic Cooperation Organization held in Shusha, the sacred city for the people of Azerbaijan and our cultural capital.

Azerbaijan is an active member of the Economic Cooperation Organization and attaches particular significance to developing relations with its member states. ECO enjoys favorable opportunities to utilize our region's vast economic potential better and advance the ties in economy and trade between the regional countries. Azerbaijan is in favor of expanding cooperation within the organization across every domain. I extend my gratitude for declaring the city of Shusha – the ECO Tourism Capital for 2026 several days ago.

You have arrived in Azerbaijan at a very notable and historic time. Our people are experiencing the joy and pride of restoring Azerbaijan's sovereignty and constitutional order. Eliminating a grey zone in our territory after 30 years and ending separatism is a culmination of international law and justice.

Azerbaijan has always been a proponent of peace and the author of peace initiatives in the region. Stemming from the principle that regional matters must be resolved with the involvement of the countries of our immediate region, Azerbaijan has proposed the "3+3" cooperation format. A historic environment has emerged today for normalizing Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, signing the peace treaty and transforming the South Caucasus into a region of peace and cooperation.

Immediately upon the liberation of our ancestral lands from Armenia's occupation in 2020, we have launched large-scale reconstruction and development efforts here. Critical infrastructure projects have been implemented across these territories in a short time, including constructing and putting into service two airports. The construction of the third airport in Lachin is underway. I want to thank the brotherly Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for the already commissioned school and the ongoing construction of a creativity center in the city of Fuzuli. We

regard this as a vivid testimony to our countries' brotherhood, solidarity and friendship.

The program of the Great Return to the de-occupied territories is among our national priorities. As part of successfully implementing the program, the displaced persons' return has been ensured to the cities of Lachin and Fuzuli and the villages of Aghali, Zabukh and Talish. Nearly 100 hundred thousand displaced persons are envisaged to be returned to their homes in the coming three years. Along with the revival of Karabakh and East Zangezur economic regions and ensuring sustainable resettling of the population, implementing the projects also enables conditions for turning these areas into a developed region.

One of the gravest consequences of a 30-year occupation for the Azerbaijani people was the deliberate damage to our cultural heritage of universal significance, including all the sites associated with the Islamic faith. Regrettably, throughout that time, 65 out of 67 mosques were razed to the ground, and the remaining ones were desecrated by being used for housing animals. The fact of destroying another mosque was revealed most recently where the Malibeyli mosque was used as a barn. All of this is an insult to the feelings of Azerbaijanis and the world's Muslims.

The choice of the theme of Azerbaijan's ECO chairmanship as "Green Transition and Interconnectivity" is particularly relevant today. Such matters as decarbonization and adding green energy types are at the core of our country's sustainable development agenda. In the meantime, the large-scale reconstruction and renovation work across Karabakh and East Zangezur – declared energy zones – are implemented according to smart city and smart village concepts.

Azerbaijan is also a reliable transit country, and our transportation and logistics infrastructure is available to all the ECO nations. Given the increased demand for cargo shipping along the East-West route, we aim to increase the throughput capacity of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway from the current 1 million to 5 million tons. Furthermore, an agreement has been reached with the Islamic Republic of Iran to use this country's territory for the construction of a highway and a railway to ensure access to the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic. Simultaneously, Azerbaijan is working on expanding the throughput capacity of the North-South transportation corridor.

I am confident that this meeting will be a substantial platform for a productive discussion around the cooperation opportunities targeting the lasting development and prosperity of our nations and region as a whole and coordinating efforts while enriching our mutually beneficial cooperation with new substance.

I extend to you my best wishes and wish the meeting success.

Sincerely,

Ilham Aliyev

President of the Republic of Azerbaijan

Baku, 9 October 2023