Strategy 2024-2027

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Azerbaijani National Platform

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1. Foreword

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) serves as a distinctive and multi-faceted regional platform within civil society. Its primary aim is to advance European integration and support democratic reforms across the six Eastern Partnership countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Functioning as an essential component of the Eastern Partnership initiative, the EaP CSF focuses on bolstering civil society, fostering diverse perspectives in public discussions and policy formation, and championing participatory democracy and fundamental freedoms. It's important to note that the EaP CSF is an impartial and genuine non-governmental organization.

National Platforms (NPs) play a crucial role in realizing the objectives outlined by the Eastern Partnership policies within each respective EaP country. These platforms were established to actively engage civil society from partner countries in the reform processes. The National Platforms hold a stake in policy dialogues within their individual countries.

The Azerbaijan National Platform (AZNP) was founded in November 2009 and currently boasts a membership of 70 organizations. The activities of the NGOs within the National Platform align with the themes of the Working Groups at the Forum level. The highest governing body of the Platform is the General Assembly, while the Board of Governance oversees its execution. The Board comprises Working Group coordinators and the coordinator of the
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entire Platform, who serves as both the Country Facilitator and the representative of the National Platform in the Steering Committee.

Since its inception, the AZNP has made significant progress, evolving into the largest and most active network organization in Azerbaijan. It has played a pivotal role in fostering collaboration among the Azerbaijani government, civil society organizations (CSOs), and the European Union (EU). Since 2020, the AZNP has transformed into an online resource hub for CSOs and NGOs operating within Azerbaijan. Its main objectives are to enhance their capacities, contribute to the conducive environment for CSOs and donors in Azerbaijan, and facilitate dialogue and advocacy mechanisms that support the country's European Integration process.

In order to chart a new strategic direction, the AZNP initiated a process to update its initial plan, which was completed in 2016. To achieve this, the organization enlisted the expertise of a consultant. The consultant's role was to help the AZNP reflect on lessons learned from previous years, identify key insights, and create a strategic framework that effectively aligns with Platform priorities and responds to the evolving landscape of programming, funding, and best practices within Azerbaijan and on a global scale. This process involved informational meetings, a review of relevant literature, and stakeholder interviews to validate the proposed strategies.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP)[1] constitutes the European Union's foreign policy, an integral part of its European Neighbourhood Policy, directed towards six countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

Primarily instigated by Poland and Sweden, the EaP emerged as a structured policy to endorse regional collaboration and foster closer ties between the EU and its Eastern European counterparts. Unveiled during the European Council summit in June 2008, the initiative garnered backing from both the European Commission and EU Member States. The program received its official launch on May 7, 2009, at a summit involving heads of state and government from both the EU and the partner countries. In 2019, the Eastern Partnership policy reached its tenth anniversary, prompting Poland to actively promote the EaP through cultural, political, and expert events, while also conducting comprehensive deliberations about the EaP's future beyond 2020.

EaP Pillars:

1. Enhancing State Institutions and Governance: This pillar is designed to enhance the quality of state institutions by aiding reforms in public administration, civil service, judiciary, and anti-corruption efforts.

It also encompasses collaboration in the domain of the Common Security and Defence Policy.

2. Economic Development and Capitalizing on Market Opportunities: This pillar seeks to ensure macroeconomic stability across the region. It achieves this by supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, ensuring equitable labor market access, bridging developmental disparities between different regions, and fostering digital market development. The significant instruments within this realm are the deep and comprehensive free trade area agreements established with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Implementing these agreements represents a pivotal responsibility for the partner countries.

3. Broadening Connectivity and Addressing Energy and Environmental Concerns: This pillar revolves around expanding both tangible connectivity, including transport, energy, digital, and people-to-people links, as well as intangible connectivity, including standards and best practices. This multifaceted

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[1] https://eap-csf.eu/strategy/

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expansion aims to establish enduring connections between the EU and the EaP countries in terms of leg...

frameworks and infrastructure. These connections are expected to translate into intensified cooperation spanning societies, economies, and politics.

4. Facilitating Mobility and Encouraging People-to-People

procedures and bolstering communication infrastructure

roaming networks, this p... the number of visits to the citizens from the Eastern .

5. Neighbourhood. This, in turn, should foster direct interactions between these citizens and those of the EU. Moreover, enhanced youth exchange programs are anticipated to foster

Situation analysis/ External Factors

The trajectory of civil society in Azerbaijan has undergone distinct stages, commencing with the downfall of the Soviet regime, when a surge in public interest for liberty and civil rights emerged. Initial disorganized movements eventually transformed into more structured civil movements.

Azerbaijan drew upon its historical form of civic organization known as "mahalla" (neighborhood). Informal representatives were chosen based on factors like age or education to address communal issues. Elders, part of "Agsaggal" councils, held wisdom and were consulted during disagreements or pressing matters. However, these informal structures lacked institutional mechanisms and had limited longevity.

Even during the Soviet era, a form of civic organization existed, particularly through trade unions such as the Union of Petro-industrial workers of Baku. While workers could influence management through these unions, there was no democratic tradition in their formation and management.

By 2019, the number of NGOs in Azerbaijan had significantly increased, reaching 4,500 officially registered CSOs. Yet, the stringent registration process has hindered many organizations, even those involved in social care, from gaining approval. This has ultimately curtailed the capacity of NGOs to effectively represent citizens in the country's public sphere.

In 2012, civil society organizations (CSOs) engaged in discussions with the Azerbaijani government concerning a range of matters, including the registration and financial backing of NGOs. The government committed to simplifying the registration process,

removing constraints on CSOs hosting events throughout Azerbaijan, and reducing taxes. Regrettably, these proposed changes were never implemented.

By 2014, the crackdown on civil society had intensified significantly. Amendments to NGO legislation imposed limitations on NGOs, particularly regarding their utilization of foreign donations. Consequently, several NGOs were compelled to shut down or leave the country. Government officials openly accused the United States of collaborating with non-governmental organizations to destabilize the government. Those able to continue operating encountered various limitations. The situation experienced minimal improvement in the subsequent years. Following negotiations, a number of foreign organizations (including the EU Commission, EU Mission, USAID, Japan Embassy, among others) resumed collaborations with Azerbaijani non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A pathway to register grants through the Ministry of Justice was introduced; however, this privilege was granted only to a select few.

"Foreign entities can provide grants to local NGOs and FNGOs with registered offices in Azerbaijan only if they have a registered branch or representative office in Azerbaijan and have signed an Agreement with the MoJ." Additionally, NGOs and activists were required to obtain licenses for organizing events like seminars, training sessions, and conferences.

Nevertheless, CSOs have remained the crackdown in 2014. 100 organizations and active groups, estimated by experts, have managed to persist by operating under individual service contracts from foreign organizations, executing projects funded by registered grants, or acquiring funds unofficially.

The restriction on foreign funding renders access to financial resources nearly impossible, greatly complicating day-to-day operations. The issue of government-associated non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the established "elite" within civil society further exacerbates the situation. The prevailing undemocratic environment and prevailing apprehension have led to certain individuals occupying leadership roles within civil society for extended periods. These individuals are often those favored by the government or endorsed by Western entities. Operating as an independent NGO in the country has become highly challenging due to the absence of freedom of expression. This environment curtails activists' capacity to express themselves freely, diminishing the effectiveness of their initiatives and subjecting them to both overt and covert forms of control, including censorship.

Problem Statement: The Azerbaijani National Platform (AZNP) faces several critical gaps and challenges in its functioning, including limited engagement beyond issuing statements, regulatory obstacles for independent NGOs, ineffective working groups, and a lack of cooperation between AZNP members and the government.

Outcomes:

1. **Enhanced AZNP Effectiveness**: AZNP becomes a more effective platform for advocacy, collaboration, and project implementation.
2. **Improved Regulatory Environment**: The regulatory environment for NGOs in Azerbaijan becomes more conducive to their operation and project implementation.
3. **Strengthened NGO-Government Cooperation**: Independent NGOs establish productive and meaningful partnerships with government bodies.

Activities for Each Outcome:

Outcome 1: Enhanced AZNP Effectiveness

Activity 1.1: Develop and maintain an Operational Website
- Input: Web developers, content creators, funding for website development
- Activity: Continue the operation of a user-friendly website that serves as a hub for information, resources, and communication.

Activity 1.2: Diversify Communication Beyond "Statements"
- Input: Communications team, training, outreach resources
- Activity: Develop and execute a communication strategy that includes regular publications, webinars, and engagement with stakeholders.

Activity 1.3: Strengthen Working Groups and Board of Directors of the AZNP
a) Conduct Training Workshops:
   a. Input: Trainers, training materials, training venues
   b. Subactivity: Organize regular training workshops for members of working groups and the Board of Directors. These workshops should cover topics

such as leadership, strategic planning, conflict resolution, and effective communica...

b) Establish Clear Roles and Res...
   a. Input: Facilitators, governance...
   b. Subactivity: Facilitate sessions to clarify the roles and responsibilities of members within working groups and the Board of Directors. Develop written guidelines and job descriptions for each position.
c) Promote Inclusivity and Diversity:
   a. Input: Diversity and inclusion experts, outreach resources
   b. Subactivity: Implement strategies to ensure inclusivity and diversity within working groups and the Board of Directors. Actively recruit new members from different backgrounds and regions.
d) Enhance Decision-Making Processes:
   a. Input: Facilitators, decision-making tools
   b. Subactivity: Review and improve the decision-making processes within working groups and the Board of Directors. This may involve adopting consensus-building techniques and transparent voting procedures.
e) Regular Evaluation and Feedback:
   a. Input: Evaluation tools, feedback mechanisms
   b. Subactivity: Establish a system for regular evaluation and feedback collection from AZNP members. Use this feedback to make improvements and adjustments as needed.
f) Foster Collaboration Between Working Groups:
   a. Input: Coordinators, communication resources
   b. Subactivity: Facilitate collaboration and information sharing among different working groups. Encourage cross-functional projects and initiatives.
g) Mentorship and Leadership Development:
   a. Input: Mentorship program resources, leadership development materials
   b. Subactivity: Create mentorship programs within working groups and the Board of Directors to foster leadership development and knowledge transfer among members.
h) Periodic Progress Reporting:
   a. Input: Reporting templates, data collection tools
   b. Subactivity: Establish a regular reporting mechanism where working groups and the Board of Directors provide updates on their activities, achievements, and challenges.
i) Conflict Resolution Mechanisms:
   a. Input: Conflict resolution experts, mediation resources
   b. Subactivity: Develop and implement effective conflict resolution mechanisms to address disputes and conflicts that may arise within working groups or the Board of Directors.
j) Encourage Innovation and Creativity:
   a. Input: Idea generation workshops, innovation resources

    b. Subactivity: Create an environment that encourages innovative thinking and creativity among working group members and the Board of Directors. Support the develop...

Activity 1.4: Organize Regular Working G...
- Input: Meeting facilitators, coordina...

- Subactivity: Set up and facilitate regular working group meetings to enable ongoing collaboration and communication among AZNP members.

Outcome 2: Improved Regulatory Environment

Activity 2.1: Advocate for Legal Reforms
- Input: Legal experts, advocacy resources, research
- Activity: Engage in advocacy efforts to influence amendments to restrictive NGO laws and addendums.

Activity 2.2: Monitor Registration Procedures
- Input: Legal experts, monitoring team, data collection tools
- Activity: Monitor and report on the objectivity of state registration and re-registration procedures for NGOs.

Activity 2.3: Engage with Ministry of Education
- Input: Advocacy team, communication resources
- Activity: Establish dialogue with the Ministry of Education to address obstacles related to grant registration.

Outcome 3: Strengthened NGO-Government Cooperation

Activity 3.1: Identify Interested Government Agencies
- Input: Research, stakeholder engagement
- Activity: Identify government agencies interested in collaboration with NGOs, such as the State Committee on Family, Women, and Children's Problems and the Ministry of Ecology.

Activity 3.2: Develop Collaboration Frameworks
- Input: Legal experts, negotiation resources
- Activity: Create frameworks and agreements for cooperation between independent NGOs and interested government agencies.

Activity 3.3: Promote Cooperation Culture
- Input: Training, workshops, communication resources
- Activity: Conduct workshops and training sessions to promote a culture of cooperation between NGOs and government agencies.

Inputs:

- Human resources (experts, coordinators, facilitators)

- Financial resources (funding for website development, advocacy efforts, workshops)
- Information resources (research
- Communication resources (website, we
- Legal resources (legal experts, advocacy teams,

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Azerbaijani National Platform (AZNP), comprising 71 NGOs, faces a set of critical challenges in its functioning that demand a strategic overhaul. To address these issues effectively, a comprehensive theory of change has been developed, focusing on three key outcomes:

Firstly, to enhance AZNP's effectiveness, we propose activities like the development of an operational website, diversified communication strategies, the implementation of ethical behavior rules, and the organization of regular working group meetings. These actions aim to transform AZNP from a platform issuing mere statements into an influential and agile force for change.

Secondly, improving the regulatory environment for NGOs involves advocacy for legal reforms, monitoring registration procedures, and engaging with government bodies. This will create a more conducive atmosphere for NGOs to operate and implement projects.

Lastly, strengthening NGO-government cooperation requires identifying interested government agencies, developing collaboration frameworks, and promoting a culture of cooperation. This will foster productive partnerships, benefiting both independent NGOs and government institutions.

By implementing these activities under the overarching goal of strengthening working groups and the Board of Directors, AZNP will significantly enhance its capacity to address existing challenges and contribute effectively to positive change in Azerbaijan. This strategic plan sets a clear path for AZNP's future, promoting inclusivity, transparency, and innovation in its pursuit of a better civil society landscape.

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