

ANNUAL ACTIVITIES REPORT

AZERBAIJANI NATIONAL PLATFORM JANUARY 2016 – NOVEMBER 2016

The Azerbaijani National Platform (NP) was established in November 2009. The number of non-governmental organizations involved in the activities of the Azerbaijani NP is around 63. The database of all members of the Azerbaijani NP was renewed and the handbook including the contact details of all organizations was delivered to every NP member. The webpage of the platform ¹ was created and information about members was uploaded there. Simultaneously, a Facebook page² for the National Platform was created, enabling members to share information with each other and to start constructive discussions on the page.

Nine new member organizations joined the Azerbaijani NP in 2015. At the same time, various consultations and information exchange sessions were proposed in order to foster initiatives and activism by the members of the NP. As an outcome of these activities, it is important to highlight that the numbers of the applications from Azerbaijani organization interested in joining the Forum reached its peak in 2016. Especially during the last years, civil society and its organizations have faced increasing difficulties in having access to grants from international organizations and donors; none of the National Platform members received any financial support for projects since 2014. Furthermore, the bank accounts of the member organizations of the NP were frozen and their projects cancelled or suspended.

KEY TOPICS/ISSUES OF FOCUS FOR THE AZERBAIJANI NATIONAL PLATFORM

The Azerbaijani National Platform developed its activities according to the fundamental and core principles of the Eastern Partnership Program. Its priorities for 2016 included the following:

- Contribution of the EaP CSF Azerbaijani NP to the new negotiation process for the EU-Azerbaijan Strategic Partnership agreement;
- Activities aimed at eliminating the problems and obstacles faced by civil society in Azerbaijan, which have emerged since 2014;
- Advocating for the release of jailed members of the NP and planning activities for their rehabilitation;
- Promoting public awareness of European values in Azerbaijan;
- Working to ensure amendments to the legislation on NGOs;
- Holding consultations to expand the scope of the country's integration with the European Union within the framework of the EaP.

¹ <https://csfnpazerbaijan.wordpress.com/>

² <https://www.facebook.com/%C5%9ETP-VCF-Az%C9%99rbaycan-Milli-Platformas%C4%B1-104339469630952/>

POSITION PAPER OF THE AZERBAIJANI NATIONAL PLATFORM

The NP states that the Eastern Partnership program is an opportunity for Azerbaijan to develop its political relations with the European Union, as well as to establish a free trade zone with the EU and lift the visa regime applied to Azerbaijani citizens.

The NP recognizes that by engaging in the Eastern Partnership program, the European Union aims to integrate the EU and Azerbaijani economies; strengthen the Azerbaijani state; make public administration more efficient; develop civil society; protect the environment and enhance the border cooperation of its member states in line with common European standards.

The NP considers that the Association Agreement is a unique type of agreement on foreign and security policy, law, human rights, economy and culture, which underpins a bilateral and comprehensive partnership within the framework of the Eastern Partnership program.

While it is necessary to bring the trade regulations of partner countries in line with the regulations of member states, becoming a member of the World Trade Organization is crucial. Therefore, we would welcome this opportunity as an advantageous aspect of this partnership. We think that it is important to accelerate the process of bilateral and multilateral negotiations in order to quickly adjust Azerbaijani standards, particularly the country's standards on foreign trade, to European Union standards and to accelerate the accession process to the World Trade Organization.

We call for the commencement of the negotiations on signing a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement between Azerbaijan and the European Union.

Furthermore, we declare our willingness to develop partnerships with the European Union institutions, especially "Euronest", within the framework of the Eastern Partnership program.

We consider that it is vital for our country to continue the partnership based on the five "Flagship Initiatives", established under the Eastern Partnership program. We strongly believe in the continuation of initiatives, such as the integrated program on border control, programs supporting small and medium enterprises, the increase in the investment towards the environment in the Eastern Partnership countries and the program on ecological management.

By focusing on democracy, human rights, good governance and stability; the NP reiterates its interest in the partnership on standardization of election system, free media, gender equality, combating corruption, reforming public services, improvement of fair and justice court and system, building confidence and security over the related issues.

Taking into account its economic integration and convergence with the EU platforms; the NP states that it will continue and pursue its efforts aimed at developing cooperation on socio-economic development issues, the unification of market and trade proposals, fighting against poverty, climate change and environment targets.

Reaffirming its environment, climate change and energy security platform, the NP declares that it will encourage the amendment of energy policy and legislation of the Republic of Azerbaijan to conform with EU standards. We hope that Azerbaijan will strengthen its partnership with the EU Energy Union and begin discussions on becoming a member of this organization.

The NP also states that according to its “Contacts Between People” platform, it will support programs for the development of cultural relations, including civil society initiatives such as exchange programs for schoolchildren and students.

Thus, the NP urges the government of Azerbaijan to ensure the participation of civil society in the evaluation of the implementation of a Comprehensive Institution Building program and to the number of Twinning and TAIEX initiatives.

In addition, it calls on the government to foster the development of human capital as well as the improvement of opportunities and standards for small and medium sized enterprises.

The NP declares and performs its readiness to pursue bilateral and multilateral partnerships with civil society organizations from the European Neighborhood and the EU member states in order to attain its sustainable cooperation within the Civil Society Forum.

EVENTS HELD BY THE AZERBAIJANI NATIONAL PLATFORM DURING THE REPORTING PERIOD

The NP held several meetings with various stakeholders to keep the developments regarding the EaP on the agenda in 2016. These included general meetings of the platform with participation of members as well as study visits to other EaP countries.

Meetings with representatives of civil society

During the Meeting of the NP with representatives of local civil society, the situation of the health issues of the arrested NP members was discussed and participants of the meeting emphasized their hopes for the release of the NP members as result of the anticipated pardon decree by the president of the Republic of Azerbaijan in December and its expected positive impact and contribution to the activities of the platform.

Meetings of the NP were organized in March, 2016. After the release of members of the platform, Anar Mammadli and Rasul Jafarov, as a result of the most recent pardon decree and the freeing of Intigam Aliyev by court order, members of the NP were pleased that the platform could function with its full team.

In November 2015, the information about the election of Avaz Hasanov as National Coordinator to the Forum was released with the participation of the NP members and other interested organizations.

In April 2016, Board Members of the Forum organized an event to provide information to journalists and to hold a discussion with the NP members on the statement on human rights in Crimea and the human rights of Crimean tatars.

A session providing information about the application process to the 8th Annual Meeting for the NP members and other NGO representatives was organized.

Meetings with EU officials

The NP members – the National Coordinator of the Forum in Azerbaijan, Avaz Hasanov; the chief of the Entrepreneurship Development Foundation, Sabit Bagirov and the head of the International Eurasia Press Fund, Umud Mirzayev met with the Head of the Baku Office of the EU in May, 2016.

In March 2016, a meeting was held between the Vice-President of the European Commission Federica Mogherini, the Designated European Union Special Representative for the South Caucasus and for the crisis in Georgia Herbert Salber and five member organisations of the NP, focused on the problems faced by civil society and possible steps toward the restoration of relations with Europe.

On 4 April 2016, the NP members met with the Co-president of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly Heidi Hautala. The members of the platform emphasized the position of civil society on the return of Azerbaijan to the Euronest.

Meeting with government officials in Azerbaijan

In 2016, the National Coordinator and the committee of the National Platform met with the Vice-President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the Chairman of the Council on State Support to NGOs. The initiatives and perspectives of civil society within the framework of the EaP program were discussed during this meeting.

LINKS

<https://csfnpazerbaijan.wordpress.com/about/>

<https://csfnpazerbaijan.wordpress.com/members/>

<https://csfnpazerbaijan.wordpress.com/photogallery/>