

be multiple communication strategies. One is needed on the general EaP level, and the CSF Steering Committee will have the job of designing it. However, it may be even more important for civil society groups within participating countries to develop operational communication

instruments (especially through the Internet) to make the best use of new opportunities emerging from EaP and its CSF. These institutions will not work miracles – but as we said already, EU instruments are at their best when they work in incremental steps.

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## Civil Society in Azerbaijan: Under Fire but Still Resisting

By Shain Abbasov, Baku

### Abstract

The situation with basic human, civil, and political rights and freedoms has been deteriorating considerably in Azerbaijan since 2003 – the year in which a new president took office and a massive inflow of petrodollars started to fill the state coffers. Azerbaijan's democracy record has been traditionally poor, but it has worsened during the last seven years. Today, there is no political opposition or independent media. Society lives in a general sense of apathy and fear. Against this background, the country's civil society sector, which numbers more than 3,000 non-government organizations (NGOs), remains the only safeguard resisting the country's slide into full-scale dictatorship. Thus, the civil society sector is gradually becoming the main target of government attacks.

### Azerbaijan's Democracy Record in 2009

The system of checks and balances between the branches of power does not work in Azerbaijan as the executive, headed by President Ilham Aliyev, exercises tight control over the legislature and judiciary. Neither parliament nor the court system provides any efficient mechanism to protect civic, property and media rights. The windfall from oil revenues, which was the basis for economic growth in Azerbaijan during recent years, as well as the country's close ties to foreign oil companies and Western states, provided the government with the confidence it needed to pursue an authoritarian path in domestic affairs. This authoritarianism works in parallel with massive corruption. According to Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index, Azerbaijan ranks a dismal 143<sup>th</sup> out of the 180 countries on the list.

Azerbaijan's democracy record worsened considerably during 2009. In January, the government canceled the FM broadcast licenses for several popular foreign radio stations, including the Azerbaijani services of Radio Liberty, the BBC and Voice of America. A popular referendum on constitutional changes conducted in March

removed the two-term limit for presidents, allowing the incumbent to remain in office indefinitely. Also in March, parliament reduced the freedom of religion by tightening state control over Muslim communities and limited freedom of speech through amendments to the laws dealing with the mass media and television and radio.

### Curbing Internet Freedom and Arresting Bloggers

In 2009, the government began attacking freedom of speech on the Internet. Traditionally, this area had been a relatively free space in which young people could express their opinions and take part in vigorous debates. However, now the authorities are openly speaking out in favor of legislative restrictions and supervision over publications on the Internet. Government officials also seek to regulate audio and video products placed online.

The purpose of these efforts is to slow the development of civic journalism, including Internet TV and radio, and also to curb the growing activity of youth groups via online social networks. Due to the lack of

independent traditional media and general restrictions on free debate in society, the Internet became the single most important tool for young people in Azerbaijan to express their political views and to obtain unbiased information. Therefore, the younger generation rushed to take advantage of the opportunities offered in the virtual world, and currently Azerbaijan leads the South Caucasus in the number of personal blogs and Facebook pages, with more than 25,000 blogs compared to 6,000 in Georgia and about 4,000 in Armenia.

The social potential of the Internet became apparent to the government when the day after a terrorist attack against the Azerbaijan State Oil Academy in April 2009 about one-thousand young people took to the streets after organizing a meeting over Facebook.

Internet social networks also played a critical role in the huge international public campaign launched to defend two bloggers and youth activists, Emin Milli, 30, and Adnan Hajizada, 26, who used new technologies and social networks extensively in their public activities. In November 2009, a district court sentenced Milli and Hacizada to two-and-a-half and two years of prison respectively. They were charged with hooliganism following an incident in a restaurant in July. International human rights advocates argue that the two bloggers were arrested for political reasons and that they did not receive a fair trial or sentences. The authorities have used the case to harass young people as they prepare for the November 2010 parliamentary elections.

International civil society organizations, high-ranking European and US officials, and parliamentarians from many countries expressed deep concern over the case. Council of Europe Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland even warned that continued repressions against the free media might challenge Azerbaijan's membership in this organization. However, the authorities continue to confidently ignore all international criticism.

Social activities and networking on the Internet had been on the rise before the arrest of the two bloggers. It was particularly popular among the alumni of Western universities. The Internet is still seen as a major arena in the fight for freedom of speech in Azerbaijan, and it is unlikely that the government will be able to fully control it. Yet the harsh sentences given the two bloggers could discourage many youth from engaging in social networks, at least in the near future.

### **Pressure on NGOs: The Case of Nakhchivan State University**

NGOs in some Azerbaijani regions are facing even more serious government pressure. In December 2009, the

authorities used violence against journalists and human rights activists in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. During the morning of December 15, about 40 people led by Mammad Razi, Vice President of Nakhchivan State University, and Elman Jafarly, chief of the university branch of the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan party, severely beat three investigators studying corruption at the university.

The victims were Ilgar Nasibov, an employee of the Nakhchivan Resource Center and correspondent in Azerbaijan for Radio Liberty, human rights activist Vafadar Eyvazov and journalist Elman Abbasov. "We interviewed students and distributed booklets among them to familiarize them with their rights. Nakhchivan State University demanded that we leave the university building. We left and continued our work in the Resource Centre office, but they came here without notice and attacked us," Nasibov told journalists.

Nasibov's rib and nose were fractured and he suffered cuts and bruises on his face. The others were also injured. However, the hospitals in Nakhchivan refused to provide first aid to them. Law-enforcement agencies also refused to accept their complaints. Nasibov and Eyvazov applied to the Media Rights Institute Director, who will lodge complaints with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Azerbaijan General Prosecutor's Office.

Following the incident, the representative office of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in Baku issued a "Soviet style" statement on the events. The statement denied that the authorities had used violence against the journalists and representatives of civil society, but declared their activity as "hostile and anti-national." Nakhchivan's representation claimed that the Resource Center and Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS), a nation-wide media watchdog, have been operating in Nakhchivan "illegally," because "they have not been granted state registration." "Ilgar Nasibov and Vafadar Eyvazov were born in Nakhchivan, but they are ready to sell everything for money," the statement reads in the best Soviet traditions. However, Malahat Nasibova, head of the Resource Centre, said that it was registered in the Nakhchivan Justice Ministry in 2004.

Increased government pressure on all areas of public life combined with the controlled judiciary have narrowed the space for NGO activity throughout Azerbaijan. According to official statistics, there are more than 3,000 registered non-governmental organizations in the country, however, only about 100 of them are active and truly independent. Many so-called GONGOs (pro-governmental NGOs) have appeared during recent years to serve various purposes – to dilute the free civil society