

EU-Azerbaijan people-to-people contacts

The European Union and Azerbaijan are negotiating a comprehensive agreement in order to reinforce their partnership. Even if Azerbaijan is geographically the most distant Eastern Partnership country, the EU remains its main trading partner. In 2019, the EU and Azerbaijan will celebrate the 20th anniversary since their partnership and cooperation agreement (PCA) entered into force in 1999. In recent years, EU support for civil society in Azerbaijan has been made more difficult by a new legal framework against foreign-funded NGOs.

EU and Azerbaijan heading towards a new agreement

After the signing of the EU-Azerbaijan PCA, the [European Neighbourhood Policy](#) (2004) and the [Eastern Partnership](#) (2009) further reinforced cooperation between the two parties. In 2017, ahead of discussions on a new EU-Azerbaijan agreement, European Council President, Donald Tusk, emphasised the EU's commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of expression. The discussions led to the formulation of new [partnership priorities](#) (PP) in 2018, which highlighted the need to ensure the efficiency of the visa facilitation (2013) and readmission (2014) agreements signed with Azerbaijan, as well as assisting its education reform. The PPs also include the fight against corruption, public administration reform and capacity-building for combating crime and terrorism.

The EU is also supporting a peaceful resolution of the conflict in [Nagorno-Karabakh](#), with France being one of the countries taking part in the [OSCE Minsk Group](#).

Role of civil society in Azerbaijan

According to the Ministry of Justice, the number of NGOs [registered](#) in Azerbaijan is around 4 500; of these, sports and charity organisations represent approximately 25 %.

In recent years, it has been more difficult for the EU to assist Azerbaijani civil society because of a number of government [restrictions](#) imposed on foreign funding of NGOs. The law on NGOs changed in 2017, tightening the conditions for opening and running an NGO.

International NGOs, such as [Amnesty International](#), denounce the situation of human rights and political prisoners in Azerbaijan. Even if state control [diminished](#) in 2017, the state continued to interfere in NGOs' activities. As a result of this interference and the restrictive legal environment, in June 2017 the [Open Government Partnership](#) organisation declared Azerbaijan's status in it inactive, and Baku withdrew from the [Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative](#). In December 2017, the Committee of Ministers of the [Council of Europe](#) launched an infringement procedure against Azerbaijan over inaction related to rulings demanding the release of political prisoner Ilgar Mammadov.

The EU has supported Azerbaijani NGOs through a variety of programmes. For example, in 2014, the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) [supported](#) training for youth on social activism, involving 60 young participants. The EED also supported Meydan TV, an alternative media channel in a media environment mainly [controlled](#) by the state.

Mobility and tourism

The EU-Azerbaijan Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements try to ensure a secure and easy system for travellers. In [2017](#), the EU (Schengen members) received 60 491 visa requests from Azerbaijani citizens and issued 51 165 visas to Azerbaijani citizens. In [2014](#), Azerbaijan launched an online visa application system to facilitate EU citizens' visits to the country. According to Azerbaijani data, around [106 000 EU citizens](#) travelled to Azerbaijan in 2017. The EU High Representative for the South Caucasus, Herbert Salber, [declared](#) in 2017 that there is a possibility for both parties to work on a visa-free regime with the EU.

Education and academic exchanges

Azerbaijan takes part in the EU's Erasmus+ programme. In 2017, [Erasmus+](#) supported 258 Azerbaijani students and staff moving to the EU, as well as 181 EU students and staff moving to Azerbaijan. The EU also funded eight scholarships for Azerbaijani students involved in Erasmus Mundus joint master's degrees. In addition, [over](#) 1 800 young people and youth workers from Azerbaijan have been involved in joint exchanges, volunteering, and capacity-building projects.

The EU is also active in the modernisation of higher education. In 2017, the EU [supported](#) one project in this field, coordinated by Azerbaijan and aimed at strengthening capacity-building in research development and innovation. In 2018, the EU and the UNDP jointly funded a [US\\$3.4 million project](#) for strengthening vocational training in two Azerbaijani regions, Ganja and Jalilabad. The project aims to raise the quality of education, make it more equal and inclusive, and bring it closer to European standards.

Fair opportunities for women are also a priority. EU support has helped open four women's resource centres in Azerbaijan, benefiting 416 women directly and over 1 500 people indirectly. Over 350 women have received entrepreneurship training and 50 new women-led businesses have been established.

Modernising the administration

Azerbaijan is actively cooperating with EU national administrations through [twinning](#) arrangements. In the past 10 years, 26 ministries and public institutions have taken part in 46 twinning projects to provide their citizens with the most efficient methods and know-how used in the EU Member States. Especially in the justice sector, the EU is supporting reforms to fight corruption. In 2018, the EU [funded](#) the opening of a resource and legal aid centre in Baku. Under the umbrella of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the centre provides free legal services to members of vulnerable groups.

EU support for dialogue between Azerbaijani and Armenian civil societies

EU-funded since 2010, the European Partnership for the Peaceful Resolution of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh ([EPNK](#)) is a programme run by five organisations from both Armenia and Azerbaijan. The third phase of the EPNK (May 2016 – April 2019) has a total budget of €4 732 120. The EPNK has enabled meetings between Armenian and Azerbaijani civil societies, and funded research on how to best tackle the effects of the conflict and support civil inclusion of displaced people in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Under the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), the EU funds the Peacebuilding through Capacity Enhancement and Civic Engagement ([PeaCE](#)) programme, with a total budget of €1 860 000 and a duration of 36 months. Since January 2017, it is being implemented by the Eurasia Partnership Foundation in Armenia ([EPF-Armenia](#)), the Eurasia Partnership Foundation in Azerbaijan ([EPF-Azerbaijan](#)), the Caucasus Research Resource Centre in Georgia ([CRRC-Georgia](#)), and [International Alert](#) (IA).

European Parliament position

Fostering young leaders' exchanges of ideas

In 2018, the European Parliament designed a programme for young leaders from Armenia and Azerbaijan in Brussels. The programme brought together young leaders, NGO representatives and academics, to discuss and find new ways to promote peace on the ground. The programme included sessions with key Members of the European Parliament and other experts, as well as two facilitated case studies.

European Parliament resolutions

In its July 2018 [recommendations](#) to the EU negotiators of the EU-Azerbaijan comprehensive agreement, the Parliament called for an ambitious deal delivering concrete benefits, but based on provisions to ensure fundamental freedoms and strengthen the fight against corruption, money laundering and tax evasion. The Parliament called on Azerbaijan to release its political prisoners and prisoners of conscience as a condition for the Parliament to ratify any bilateral agreement. In January 2019, the Parliament [called](#) for the release of Mehman Huseynov, an anti-corruption blogger and director of the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS), serving a two-year sentence for complaining about ill-treatment and torture by the police. The Parliament recalled that the media environment and freedom of expression in Azerbaijan have not seen any substantial progress, and that 10 journalists are currently serving prison terms in the country.

