

Digital Diplomacy of Azerbaijan's Civil Society: Current Status and Prospects

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15421/172637>**Suleymanzada Laman Surkhay****Ph.D., Student, <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8647-277X>, lyama13@gmail.com,
Baku State University (Baku, Azerbaijan)**

Abstract.

Relevance of the study Rethinking traditional diplomatic activities and turning to multi-level, multi-directional diplomacy armed with innovative digital tools and algorithms is a pressing issue for the international community. The purpose of the study is to analyze the potential influence of non-state actors in Azerbaijan on the diplomatic agenda in the context of digital reality. The scientific novelty of the study lies in its attempt to analyze the political modernization of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), associations, and institutions in the digital reality, the role of digital communication platforms as a factor in the free participation of civil society members in inter-state processes, as well as the associated problems and risks.

Results. In the future, non-state actors may become more effective than state agencies in areas of diplomacy such as trade, health care, human rights, and the environment, where they already represent not so much national as global interests, changing the very nature of diplomacy, which promotes and protects exclusively the national interests of the state.

Conclusions. In academic literature, the concepts of “civil diplomacy” and “digital civil diplomacy” have not yet been theoretically conceptualized or comprehensively analyzed. Nevertheless, the rapid development of digital technologies is already contributing to the growth of the influence of citizens and civil society institutions in global foreign policy processes. Civil society in Azerbaijan is essentially in the process of formation, with a dynamic process underway to define its functions in the state, the extent of its participation in international, inter-state, and inter-regional processes, and mechanisms for interaction with government structures. The need to define the mechanisms and directions for the transformation of Azerbaijan's civil society institutions in the digital reality predetermined the topic of this study.

Keywords: digital diplomacy, civil society, state monopoly, track II diplomacy, non-governmental organizations, digital communication platforms

Цифрова дипломатія громадянського суспільства Азербайджану: сучасний стан та перспективи

Сулейман-заде Ламан Сурхай**Бакинський державний університет (Баку, Азербайджан)**

Анотація.

Актуальність дослідження Переосмислення традиційних дипломатичних заходів та перехід до багаторівневої, багатовекторної дипломатії, озброєної інноваційними цифровими інструментами та алгоритмами, є нагальним питанням для міжнародної спільноти. Метою дослідження є аналіз потенційного впливу недержавних акторів в Азербайджані на дипломатичний порядок денний в контексті цифрової реальності. Наукова новизна дослідження полягає в спробі проаналізувати політичну модернізацію неурядових організацій (НУО), асоціацій та інституцій у цифровій реальності, роль цифрових комунікаційних платформ як чинника вільної участі членів громадянського суспільства в міждержавних процесах, а також пов'язані з цим проблеми та ризики.

Результати. У майбутньому недержавні суб'єкти можуть стати ефективнішими за державні органи в таких сферах дипломатії, як торгівля, охорона здоров'я, права людини та навколишнє середовище, де вони вже представляють не стільки національні, скільки глобальні інтереси, змінюючи саму природу дипломатії, яка просуває та захищає виключно національні інтереси держави.

Висновки. В академічній літературі поняття «цивільна дипломатія» та «цифрова цивільна дипломатія» ще не отримали теоретичного осмислення та всебічного аналізу. Проте стрімкий розвиток цифрових технологій уже сприяє зростанню впливу громадян та інститутів громадянського суспільства на глобальні процеси зовнішньої політики. Громадянське суспільство в Азербайджані, по суті, перебуває в процесі формування, триває динамічний процес визначення його функцій у державі, ступеня його участі в міжнародних, міждержавних та міжрегіональних процесах, а також механізмів взаємодії з урядовими структурами. Необхідність визначення механізмів та напрямків трансформації інститутів громадянського суспільства Азербайджану в цифровій реальності зумовила тему цього дослідження.

Ключові слова: цифрова дипломатія, громадянське суспільство, державна монополія, дипломатія другого треку, неурядові організації, цифрові комунікаційні платформи

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Introduction.

Global problems of our time: climate change, hunger, poverty, economic inequality, local and ethnic conflicts, terrorism, cyber threats, migration these are complex and long-term challenges, the solution of which is hampered by competing national interests, asymmetrical power dynamics, geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions, and the instability of global political processes. In these conditions, rethinking traditional diplomatic activity and turning to multi-level, multi-directional diplomacy armed with innovative digital tools and algorithms is a pressing issue for the states of the international community. According to Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells, digital diplomacy is a source of new opportunities for development and resolution of contemporary global problems, the scale of which is incomparable to the resources of any single state, since the institutions of modern society are built around networks, information, and communication technologies. (Castells, 1999, p.495). Of course, digital diplomacy does not change the essence of traditional diplomatic practice, but by facilitating the free participation of new actors directly involved in solving global problems, as well as the use of digital algorithms, it significantly transforms many of its processes.

The article analyzes the following priority issues of the foreign policy of the Azerbaijan Republic: the growing participation of a new actor in international relations civil society in solving supranational problems; the presence of Azerbaijani civil society institutions in international processes; digital means of communication that contribute to these processes; and the related issues of state security.

Analysis of previous research and publications. The process of steadily reducing the state's monopoly on diplomacy began in the 1990s. According to American political analyst Robert Kelly, this is due to the "expansion of the concept of international agencies to include companies, non-governmental organizations, and other entities" that are increasingly encroaching on diplomatic activities and "have global interests and the will to make them felt on the world stage" (Kelly, 2007, p. 87).

The vertical, hierarchically structured interaction with civil society institutions established by the state in the digital reality has gradually transformed into a horizontal one. The perspective of French philosophers Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze is interesting, as they compare digital society to a rhizome a root system whose central root has been replaced by a multitude of chaotically intertwined shoots that develop spontaneously. "The rhizome is an image of the modern world in the postmodern era polycentric, asymmetrical, and disordered" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2010. p.6).

In the 1980s, American diplomat Joseph Montville and psychiatrist William Davidson coined the term "second-track diplomacy", which originally referred to

the emerging practice of informal interaction between unofficial but influential actors in armed conflicts. (Davidson & Montville, 1981-1982, p. 147).

By the mid-1990s, a more profound definition of "second-track diplomacy" had emerged, proposed by American scholars Louise Diamond and John Macdonald: "non-governmental, informal, and unofficial contacts and interactions between private individuals and organizations (non-governmental actors) in the international arena in the interests of public policy" (Diamond & McDonald, 1996, p. 63).

Referring to the global growth of non-state diplomacy, Loughborough University professor Brian Hocking defines post-globalist diplomacy as "diplomacy conducted by states, international organizations, and non-state actors [...] integrated into complex, multifaceted models of world politics" (Hocking, 1999, p.277).

According to Stuart Murray, associate professor at Bond University in Australia, this "post-globalist" perspective can be attributed to the Innovative School of Diplomatic Studies, which recognizes the complex coexistence of various types of actors on the world stage, from civil society activists to transnational business corporations, from non-governmental organizations to terrorist groups (Murray, 2008, p. 25).

Defined as "non-sovereign entities" capable of exercising economic, political, or social power and exerting influence at the national or international level, non-state actors are increasingly influencing political discourse and agenda setting, mobilizing resources to address problems, and engaging directly with civil societies in different countries through participation in global networks. Non-state actors are gradually increasing their influence, power, legitimacy, and authority, acting both in addition to and independently of states, and even challenging their role. Participants in "second track diplomacy" today include: non-governmental organizations; multinational corporations; academic communities, think tanks, and universities; epistemic communities or political networks; trade union organizations at the national or international level; international media organizations; representatives of religious circles; transnational diasporas; local, national, and international political parties; armed groups, criminal and terrorist organizations; nationally and internationally known individuals and representatives of big business, former political leaders, and prominent public figures.

According to J. Nye and R. Cohen, "thanks to the global mass communication system, groups belonging to different strata of society students, radicals, the military, racial minorities, etc. have the opportunity to observe each other's behavior." Thus, in the digital reality, the civil society of a particular country interacts with civil societies of other countries and the international community of civil societies that are external to it but similar in their goals and objectives. These include multinational enterprises, international trade union secretariats, global religious

organizations, and foundations with a broad geographical reach (Nye & Cohen, 2002, p.1 57).

At the same time, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the initiatives of civil diplomacy actors can often be critical to state security. For example, NGOs financed by foreign forces exporting colour revolutions, entering into confrontation with the state, are capable of interfering in political processes, serving as a cover for the illegal activities of private commercial organizations, the criminal world, armed groups, etc. It is necessary to develop legal mechanisms for the implementation of citizens' rights and freedoms in the digital reality and, at the same time, if necessary, to restrict these freedoms when it comes to state interests. (Nagiyev, 2003, p. 77).

The methodological basis of the study consisted of the dialectical method, applied to analyze civil society institutions in digital reality; the systemic method, to reveal digital reality as a complex and multifunctional system; the institutional method, used to study the specifics of civil society institutions; and the sociological method, used to study various political views on the role of civil society and the state in the context of digital reality.

Results.

The integration of national civil society organizations into transnational networks of civil activists leads to the transnationalization of a wide range of social relations that were traditionally considered exclusively internal issues of the state.

In the long term, non-state actors may become more effective than state agencies in areas of diplomacy such as trade, health care, human rights, and the environment, where they already represent global rather than national interests, changing the very nature of diplomacy, which promotes and protects exclusively the national interests of the state.

Digital communication platforms have provided the potential for global discussions that foster an atmosphere of trust in multifaceted and varied international relations formed and implemented by various actors. The Internet is shaping a new type of democracy network democracy which creates an environment and mechanisms for civic activism and volunteerism, protection of vulnerable groups, effective vertical and horizontal communication in society, creative work, accumulation of social capital, and acceptance of innovation.

Over the past twenty years, Azerbaijan has seen a noticeable increase in civic participation in the country's public and international life and in political decision-making processes, which led to the creation of the Agency for State Support of Non-Governmental Organizations in 2021. The distinctive features of Azerbaijani civil society are: developing an active civic stance, participation in social movements and organizations, formation of patriotic feelings and civic identity, education in civil law norms and values, shaping civic awareness, free exchange of information, media freedom, information

literacy, combating disinformation and hate speech online, introduction of digital technologies, simplifying and speeding up processes of interaction between citizens and the state, development of civil society networks and initiatives in the online space, protection of citizens' rights and interests.

Over 4,000 institutions in the country represent a diverse range of organizations, including human rights, cultural and educational, religious, ethnocultural, environmental, independent media, academic, and expert communities. Among them are: Azerbaijan Environmental Standards Monitoring Center, Azerbaijan Union of Journalists, Azerbaijan Public Association of Volunteers, Azerbaijan Center for the Protection of Human Rights, Azerbaijan Young Educators Organization, Azeri-Turk Women's Union, Azerbaijan Youth Union, Public Association "Center for the Protection of the Rights of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in Azerbaijan", Youth Organization of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees in Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan Public Association of the Blind, Public Association of the Migration Center of Azerbaijan, Union of Veterans of the Great Patriotic War of Azerbaijan, Public Association "Association for the Support of Civil Society Development in Azerbaijan" and others. The Heydar Aliyev Foundation undoubtedly plays a leading role in the structure of Azerbaijan's non-governmental organizations, as it is an authoritative public institution both in the republic and throughout the region. The foundation has implemented a large number of international projects in the fields of science and education, healthcare, culture, social welfare, sports, IT, and others. (Yagublu, 2013, p. 12).

The dynamic ecosystem of Azerbaijan's civil society actors is a combination of objectively formed social communities of people; relationships between the state, political parties, socio-political movements and associations; the political and cultural choices and values of citizens; scientific, educational, cultural, religious institutions and organizations; and the social information system, which is the result of people communicating via the Internet. It should be noted that the Internet space in Azerbaijan is an important factor in the modernization of the country, influencing the formation, cooperation, and systematization of civil society institutions. Social networks, blogs, forums, and online media are becoming not only platforms for interaction, but also key tools for self-organization and civic mobilization. In addition, digital means of communication facilitate the search for foreign partners, participation in international movements, membership in various online communities, and rapid response to important events in the world and the region. (Bayramli, 2025, p. 119).

On July 18, 2023, Azerbaijani civil society organizations appealed to the international community and the United Nations regarding the environmental disaster caused by mining operations on the border of Azerbaijan carried out by Armenia. The appeal noted

that the ongoing work is leading to the degradation of the region's ecosystem, causing irreparable damage to the environment.

On September 19, 2023, representatives of Azerbaijani civil society and survivors of anti-personnel mine explosions sent a joint appeal to the UN, demanding condemnation of the mine terror against Azerbaijan and an assessment of Armenia's actions in laying approximately 95,000 mines on the territory of our country.

In September 2024, on the initiative of Azerbaijani civil society, an open letter was sent to the leadership of the OSCE and the Council of Europe calling on them to urge Armenia to restore and preserve, in accordance with its international obligations, monuments of the tangible cultural heritage of the Azerbaijani people, whose representatives, forcibly expelled from their historical homeland more than thirty years ago, still do not have the opportunity to return to Yerevan, Goycha, and other places.

On November 15, 2024, as part of the UN Climate Change Conference, COP29, at the initiative of the Azerbaijan National Forum of Non-Governmental Organizations, an international conference of NGOs from the Non-Aligned Movement countries was held, entitled "Developing Climate Action through South-South Cooperation: The Role of NGOs" was held as part of the UN Climate Change Conference, COP29, at the initiative of the Azerbaijan National Forum of Non-Governmental Organizations. As a result, a statement was signed by 1,023 NGO representatives from 137 countries, and an initiative was put forward to create a Global South NGO Platform.

Since 1997, women's non-governmental organizations in Azerbaijan have been represented in international networks: «Women Against Violence Europe» (WAVE); the organization "Integration of the South Caucasus: An Alternative Beginning"; Network for Combating Trafficking and Violence against Women in the South Caucasus (WRMG); in electronic women's information and documentary resources (REWINDNET); European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR); the Karat coalition; South Caucasus Regional Coalition "Women for Peace"; Stop Violence Against Women Network (STOPAW); Caucasian Women's Assembly (WRMG); networks for the development of gender education in CIS countries, etc.

The integration vectors of Azerbaijan's academic community within the framework of international cooperation in science and education, which significantly influence the country's foreign policy strategy, are: relations with scientific organizations in Turkic-speaking countries; membership in prestigious international institutions; integration of NAS publications into authoritative international databases; use of interdisciplinary social networks for researchers, such as Academia.edu and ResearchGate, with the aim of integrating Azerbaijani scientists into the international

scientific community; integration of articles by Azerbaijani scientists into international databases: Scopus, Web of Science, «Google Scholar» etc.

The Azerbaijan Youth Fund periodically holds grant competitions for the creation of international-level digital projects to unlock the creative potential of the younger generation. At one of the meetings with youth representatives, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said: "Today, the youth of Azerbaijan must unite to solve the pressing problems of our time. [...] Youth organizations can contribute to ensuring Azerbaijan's national interests in the international arena."

The diaspora plays a significant role in maintaining Azerbaijan's positive international image by establishing and developing ties between representatives of international business, public, scientific, and cultural communities. On August 18, 2024, the opening ceremony of the "Azerbaijan House" was held in Virginia, USA. There are plans to create information hubs that will provide opportunities for communication, professional networking, exchange of experience, and provision of extensive information about Azerbaijan's politics, culture, and tourism potential to foreign citizens and compatriots living abroad.

In April 2025, Baku hosted the forum "Solidarity in Action: Strengthening Global South NGOs for a New and Just World," which established the Global South NGO Platform.

An analysis of the participation of Azerbaijani civil society institutions in foreign policy events and processes leads to the conclusion that the use of their capabilities and competencies is situational in nature, which cannot serve as an indicator of the success of their activities. Linking the development of foreign policy decisions to public interests is expedient because Azerbaijan's civil society forms a critically important infrastructure for democracy and plays a central role in all areas of the country's international interaction. (Seyidov, 2016. p. 17).

Conclusions.

Civil society in Azerbaijan is essentially in its formative stage, undergoing a dynamic process of defining its functions within the state, the extent of its participation in international, inter-state, and interregional processes, and mechanisms for interaction with government structures. It is not always ready to accept the peculiarities of the digital age, the value of knowledge and information culture, and the norms of the information society. As noted by Rafiga Azimova, Doctor of Philosophy at the Institute of Philosophy of the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, "A certain level of civic and political culture among the population is required, without which it is impossible to accept the values of civil society and understand the need to implement them in public life." (Azimova, 2016, p. 11).

Second-track diplomacy as a foreign policy resource for Azerbaijan is conducted in a haphazard and limited manner, despite the existence of clear strategic

goals for the country in its relations with regional and global powers. This is due to a lack of serious scientific research, theoretical concepts, strategies, and practical measures. In the future, information and communication technologies will only improve and develop, and therefore the state must use their advantages, taking into account national interests, as the basis for forming foreign and domestic policy. To this end, Azerbaijan needs digital diplomatic initiatives focused on improving soft power, as well as relevant scientific research in the field of digital technologies and education. Digital civic diplomacy has the potential to be an important tool for realizing Azerbaijan's national interests in the international arena, provided that the necessary intellectual, technological, and organizational resources are invested in it, with the active support of government structures and the business cluster.

It should be emphasized that as civil society

develops and becomes institutionalized in international unions, associations, etc., the national-ethnic component is increasingly receding into the background. Therefore, in shaping Azerbaijan's civil society and its focus on the future, there must be room for national ideology with its philosophy, patriotism, and positive attitude toward science, information technology, etc. The state and civil society are essentially the two main components of national interests, which have developed over a long historical process. When civil society reaches a sufficient degree of maturity, a holistic entity emerges, known as the “nation-state,” with mechanisms for balancing private and public interests (Huseynov, 2017, p. 100).

At the inauguration ceremony on February 14, 2024, President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev stated, “We will continue to take steps to build civil society in Azerbaijan. The solidarity of the Azerbaijani people is one of our main successes.”

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