

“The A.D. Sakharov Armenian Human Rights Protection Centre” NGO

STRATEGIC PROGRAM

2021-2025

Preface

This strategic program (hereinafter referred to as the Program) is a project document regulating the activities of the “The A.D. Sakharov Armenian Human Rights Protection Centre” non-governmental organization (hereinafter referred to as the Sakharov Centre), which is developed by the main employees of the organization and is submitted to the assembly for approval every five years.

This Program is based on the principles of universal values, which are fixed in the international documents for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, in the RA Constitution and other legal acts. While developing the Program, the conclusions and recommendations of the 2020 external evaluation of the Sakharov Centre were taken into consideration.

It is expected that this Program should be practical and up-to-date, which will enable the Sakharov Centre to impartially respond to the situational challenges of the public life of the Republic of Armenia in a timely manner within the framework of the current legislation of the Republic of Armenia, while protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The Sakharov Centre is an independent public association that has the status of a non-profit organization. The Sakharov Centre, which is the successor of “The A.D. Sakharov Armenian Fund for Progress, Protection of Human Rights and Mercy”, was founded on October 9, 1990. It operates in the territory of the Republic of Armenia, it has three branches: in Shirak (1996), Gegharkunik (1997) and Syunik (1997) regions, respectively in the cities of Gyumri, Gavar and Goris. The organization independently determines its organizational structure, object of activity, goals and forms. The organization operates on the basis of the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, laws, other normative legal acts, international treaties of the Republic of Armenia and its charter.

1. Mission

The mission of the Sakharov Centre is to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms and promote the development of the democratic system in the Republic of Armenia.

Principles

The principles of the organization's activity are legality, exclusion of discrimination, good faith, voluntary membership, common interests of members, self-management, accountability.

Objectives of the activity

- Contribute to ensuring the protection of human rights and freedoms.
- Contribute to strengthening the capacities of civil society structures.
- Contribute to ensuring public participation in decision-making and public administration control processes.
- Contribute to raising the level of legal awareness, legal culture and perception of the population.
- Provide free legal services.

- Support the holding of fair and transparent elections in the republic and the establishment of an electoral institution, for this purpose, to carry out public control over elections and referenda, including an observation mission.
- Conduct studies, monitoring and evaluation of the activities of state and local self-government bodies and the programs implemented by them, as well as in the socio-political, socio-economic, educational, cultural and environmental fields.
- Participate in the creation of laws and other legal acts and public discussions on the protection of human rights in the Republic of Armenia.
- Carry out other activities in accordance with the goals of the organization and not prohibited by the legislation of the Republic of Armenia.

Organization Structure

- The highest body, the assembly, approves the organization's strategic plan, if the organization plans to have a strategy.
- The executive body, the director, participates in the development of the strategic plan and ensures the implementation of the decisions made by the meeting and the board.
- The collegial governing body, the council, participates in the development of the strategic plan and submits it to the meeting for approval, as well as directly participates in all processes aimed at the implementation of that plan.

Main directions of activity

1. Protection of human rights
2. Educational work aimed at strengthening civil society
3. Monitoring and Advocacy
4. Research-analytical work
5. Resource Centre services

All the above-mentioned types of activities are interrelated and imply the protection of human rights at the individual and national levels, increasing human civic self-awareness, increasing the role of civil society at the community, regional and national levels.

Values

The values of the Sakharov Centre can be viewed from two perspectives:

- **internal values** that strengthen the potential of the public organization to effectively implement its statutory goals,
- **external values** that contribute to the democratization of RA public life and the supremacy of rights.

Internal values are:

- apolitical nature of the organization,
- continuous improvement of employees' professionalism,
- high level of discipline and responsibility,
- quick response to challenges arising in Armenia,
- intolerance of any discrimination in public life.

External values are:

- The supremacy of international norms for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms,
- The supremacy of the RA Constitution and national legislation,
- Equality of natural and legal people before the law,
- Independence from external and internal influences.

The Sakharov Centre is independent of political and other influences, impartial in its activities and responsible for the results of the work performed.

2. Analysis of the external environment (security, political, social-civil, socio-economic, educational-cultural, environmental-health, other)

In 2020 the Republic of Armenia faced 2 serious crises - the Covid-19 pandemic and Azerbaijani military aggression - which weakened the country's economy and caused political instability. A state of emergency was declared with consequent restrictions to prevent the spread of the virus. To remedy the situation, the government initiated 22 support programs, some of which were aimed at supporting workers and others at employers. Obviously, the Government's programs have contributed little to the neutralization of the economic and social consequences of the epidemic. There are many cases of violation of workers' rights. The right to social security is poorly protected. The sharp decrease in private transfers and tax revenues, the significant increase in unemployment, the reduction of jobs, and the decline in the incomes of the population also contribute to the continuous deterioration of the social situation.

On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan, with the open support of Turkey and the involvement of mercenary terrorists, launched a pre-attack along the entire length of the Artsakh-Azerbaijani contact line, as well as in some parts of the Armenian-Azerbaijani contact line. The war lasted 44 days until November 9. The Azerbaijani side cooperated with the "Islamic State" terrorist organization, and at least 300 Syrian Islamists participated in military operations. According to the ceasefire agreement signed on November 9, most of the territory of the Republic of Artsakh is handed over to the control of Azerbaijan, including the cities of Shushi, Karvachar and Hadrut, and the control of the borders of the Republic of Artsakh is ensured by Russian peacekeepers. Thousands of soldiers, civilians, including children, were killed during the fighting, and more than ten thousand people were injured. Currently, the Armenian side has many missing and about 200 captured people. The Azerbaijani side has continuously attacked civil infrastructures in Stepanakert, Shushi, and other cities of Artsakh, targeting residential houses, hospitals, schools and kindergartens. The Azerbaijani side used banned cluster missiles, chemical weapons, particularly phosphorous weapons that cause an environmental disaster, which are prohibited by the relevant UN conventions. After the start of the war, more than 90,000 residents of the Republic of Artsakh remained in Armenia. According to the official sources of the RA government, now 30.000 residents of the Republic of Artsakh continue to live in Armenia, because their settlements in Shushi, Hadrut, Karvachar and a large number of rural communities were occupied by Azerbaijan. The number of displaced people is especially large in Yerevan, Gegharkunik, Syunik and Shirak. The sharp decrease in private transfers and tax revenues, the significant increase in unemployment, the reduction of jobs, and the decline in the population's income also contribute to the deterioration of the situation.

The state of emergency declared during the pandemic and martial law imposed during the war generally led to significant restrictions on human rights and public

freedoms, including the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and access to information. In 2020 gross domestic product decreased by about 7.2%.

The accumulated problems in Armenia for years have led to the emergence of a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty in society, which is compounded by the imperfection and contradictions of legislation, the centralized decision-making system, the imperfection of accountability mechanisms, the lack of independence of the judicial system, the low level of public awareness, the growth of intolerance and hate speech, free and the reduction of the space of independent media, the weak level of inter-sectoral cooperation, the lack of dialogue between the authorities and the political community, the populist internal policy of the current government, the sowing of hatred and enmity in society, the division of society, the dual perception of the role of political society structures by the public, non-public and non-accountable state structures work, the reduction of the role of civil society based on state policy, low wages, unemployment, emigration, the decline of demographic indicators.

In the past few years, many CSOs have been involved in political processes from both sides: the Government and the opposition (according to the NGO Law on Public Organizations, CSOs must be non-political), they have actively expressed their political views in rallies, public discussions, mass and in social media. On the other hand, many activists of the civil society have become part of the parliament, government, and territorial administration. There is a setback in the field of protection and advocacy of CSOs.

In this situation, the Sakharov Centre continues to remain apolitical, based on the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. It works exclusively in the field of raising awareness, empowering civil society, keeping decision-makers accountable and transparent, influencing decisions, restoring and protecting human rights.

As a result of urgent parliamentary elections in 2018 and subsequent developments, Armenia did not become a parliamentary country, the National Assembly did not become a full counterweight to the executive power. A one-wheeled system of power and decision-making is gradually forming in Armenia. Local self-government continues to be an appendage of the Government.

There are environmental problems in Armenia. In recent years, the processes of swamping in the ecosystem of Lake Sevan have become more active due to the pollution of the lake, as well as water intake, improper use of the recreation area, and the presence of sewage. According to various scientific studies, by 2050 Armenia's water reserves will decrease by 20-25% due to the warming of the climate and the decrease in the amount of precipitation. And until 2030 a decrease of up to 9% in the amount of water is expected. There is a risk of soil salinization and desertification in the plain areas of Armenia. Garbage collection, solid and liquid waste management are also serious problems. Construction on the green areas of Yerevan continues.

3. Internal environment analysis

Summary of strengths

The Sakharov Centre has been working for several decades and has a reputation as a "mentor organization".

The Sakharov Centre is an organization recognized by the RA public and enjoys the trust of its beneficiaries. It is represented outside Yerevan through its branches, and the Yerevan office ensures the normal operation of the organization. The organization has an orientation and experience in helping socially vulnerable groups. The Sakharov Centre is

flexible in the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms and the development of civil society.

The Sakharov Centre develops effective cooperation with local self-government bodies.

The organization is willing to provide legal and management advice to community groups and organizations.

As a result of studying the individual applications of the beneficiaries, the Sakharov Centre is able to see the commonality in the case of one beneficiary and highlight the problems existing in Armenia, as well as take steps towards their solution.

The Sakharov Centre has a dedicated, loyal and professional staff that enjoys the respect of its beneficiaries. The Sakharov Centre also manages to form groups of volunteers who not only gain experience, but also help the organization spread the impact of its activities.

The presence of the Sakharov Centre in the regions, through its branches, gives an opportunity to activate the public life of the community, highlight the needs of different regions and help the interested public to actively participate in solving them.

The Sakharov Centre has established strong and effective links of cooperation at the local and national level.

The Sakharov Centre has a clear management system, is transparent in its activities and accountable not only to its staff, but also to its beneficiaries.

Due to regional branches, it is accessible to a wide range of people. Decentralization of activity (from large cities to small towns and rural settlements) is characteristic of the Sakharov Centre.

Summary of weaknesses

The Sakharov Centre has limited international connections, so it does not take advantage of valuable opportunities: mutual support, exchange of ideas, co-financing and general cohesion. It is especially important for human rights organizations, which, maintaining principle, do not apply for state grants to maintain their independence. The approximations of human rights protection and civil society empowerment components, effective mechanisms of interpenetration and complementarity are insufficient.

Not having a main office space somewhat hinders the opportunity to use the opportunity to carry out business activities.

Working with one donor for many years limits an organization's ability to have a greater impact.

It is difficult to involve professional lawyers in the work in remote and border regions of Armenia.

Due to the lack of strategic approaches to fundraising, the organization has an insufficient level of logistical resources.

The salaries of Sakharov Centre employees are not competitive with the salaries of government and business sectors.

4. Relations and collaboration with interested parties

- *Standing Committees of the RA National Assembly, Members of Parliament*
- *RA government, ministries*
- *Judicial system*
- *Territorial administration bodies, local governments*
- *Civil society, media, church*
- *International donor organizations, development agencies*
- *Individual beneficiaries, target groups, partners*
- *Private domain*
- *Board of organization, members, volunteers*

Relations with state structures (RA National Assembly, Standing Committees of the RA National Assembly, MPs, RA Government, Ministries, Judiciary, Territorial Administration Bodies) are mostly one-sided (information is provided by relevant structures, implementation of public control by CSOs). Institutional relations of partnership are very unique and temporary (councils, commissions). Consulting services are carried out mediated.

The unification of communities in the local self-government system has not yet produced great results. There are more unused than used resources. It can be said that there was zooming, but not uniting. The social capital of communities is not measured and used, and cluster approaches to development are not developed. The councils of elders in the united communities are still not able to adapt to the new situation and at best try to solve the problem of the settlement from which they were elected.

In 2018 in Armenia before the "velvet revolution" that took place, public organizations were perceived by the public as the most important and principled actors of civil society, with an oppositional attitude. However, after those events, the profile of political society changed significantly. The active actors of the CSO appeared in the newly formed government team, occupying various positions.

CSOs have been affected by general public polarization and a tense political environment. CSOs are allowed by law to attract financial resources through the provision of goods and services, the implementation of entrepreneurial activities, participation in procurement processes at the municipal and state levels, fundraising and receiving financial resources from external donors, which can be directed only to the implementation of the goals defined by the organization's charter. However, CSOs, particularly non-governmental organizations, do not benefit from tax privileges when engaging in direct business activities, because the RA state tax policy is uniform, non-governmental organizations are equal to profit-seeking organizations and are taxed uniformly, which prevents or deters non-governmental organizations from using from that right given to them by law.

In March, 2020, the RA National Assembly adopted the amendments to the "RA Law on Public Organizations", according to which all NGOs were required to submit annual reports, thereby equating the reporting requirements of NGOs and foundations. A mandatory financial audit requirement for funds received from public sources has also been established.

5. Beneficiaries

According to the charter, the organization has included almost all social and vulnerable groups among the recipients of its support, thereby ensuring the reflection of values in strategic processes and the implementation of social responsibility commitment.

Beneficiaries are:

- socially disadvantaged citizens of the population,
- pensioners,
- people with disabilities,
- refugees, people seeking refugee status and temporary asylum,
- citizens of foreign countries,
- migrants and internally displaced people,
- residents of natural and man-made disaster zones,
- servicemen and their family members,
- people with limited functional capacity and people recognized as incapable,
- trafficked and abused people,
- children, young people,
- members and beneficiaries of public associations and foundations,
- individual entrepreneurs and legal entities,
- civil initiative groups,
- people forcibly displaced from Artsakh and temporarily or permanently settled in Armenia.

6. Main problems

Security issues, feeling of insecurity and uncertainty in society

- The imperfection and contradictions of the legislation
- Centralized decision-making system
- Imperfection of accountability mechanisms
- Lack of independence of the judicial system
- Low level of public awareness
- Growth of intolerance and hate speech, division of society
- Reduction of free and independent media space
- Weak level of cross-sectoral cooperation
- Weak level of dialogue between authorities and politicians
- The populist domestic policy implemented by the current government
- The public's dual perception of the role of civil society structures
- Non-public and non-accountable work by state institutions
- Declining role of civil society on state policy

7. Strategic goal

To ensure the protection of human rights in the Republic of Armenia by strengthening the potential and capabilities of civil society structures and consolidating their efforts.

1. Protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms

Human rights protection is carried out for the main stakeholder groups of the organization in individual and group, in-person, out-of-office and online ways free of charge. The main forms of protection of rights are consultations, legal topics, legal analysis, reports, applications, statements, speeches, reports, articles, etc.

Effective actions to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms:

- protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, paying attention to children's rights, education, health and welfare issues,
- continue awareness-raising activities, including legal awareness raising and civic activism, by assessing needs and implementing small research projects in the regions,
- support law-making activities; to take a more active part in the process of developing legislative acts, concepts, programs, using bottom-up advocacy initiatives,
- intensify the work with the National Assembly, the Government, individual ministries,
- cooperate with the Human Rights Defender's Institute, lawyers, public defender's office,
- involve lawyers and advocates in cases of consulting and legal support of solvent beneficiaries,
- implement online and/or outbound legal advice services, ensuring the organization's access to people living in remote and border communities,
- study the international experience of human rights protection, non-governmental structures in order to apply it systematically.

2. Educational - civil society strengthening

The educational activities of the Sakharov Centre are mainly implemented through the services of the Civil Society School and the Resource Centre. The courses of the Civil Society School are organized in five streams.

- Management course for beginner CSOs, initiative groups, community youth teams.
- Media literacy and critical thinking.
- Advanced training for CSOs: monitoring and advocacy.
- "Training of trainers" course.
- Introductory courses for formal and informal community leaders, local governments, education system workers and students, members and volunteers of community-based CSOs, interested individuals.

As additional functions of the educational component of the Sakharov Centre, apply the following actions:

- launch a distance learning platform and tools that will make it permanent and accessible to more participants living in remote communities,
- organize mobile courses, hold meetings in communities, maximally decentralize the courses, organize summer and winter camps, making them available to residents of remote communities,
- include media literacy, netiquette, digital security, critical thinking in the courses,
- add game-based human rights courses for juniors, equipped with appropriate tools.

3. Monitoring and Advocacy

Monitoring and advocacy are the Sakharov Centre's main tools for public participation and control, for achieving change, and for holding central, regional and local authorities accountable and transparent. These include the main areas of protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, to all groups of beneficiaries of the Sakharov Centre. Monitoring will serve not only to describe and diagnose the situation, but also to correct it by applying various tools: cognitive, auxiliary, preventive, legislative, etc.

The main types of monitoring will be applied as actions aimed at protecting public interests: legal, public, informational and enlightening intervention, etc.

Priority topics for monitoring and advocacy are presented as an appendix to the strategic plan.

4. Research-analytical, educational-methodological activity

The research-analytical and educational-methodological Centre of the Civil Society School will serve as a unique structure for research-analysis, policy development, and development of non-formal education. It will operate under the School of Civil Society.

The Centre will have 4 main directions of activity:

- Studying the stability of CSOs and community-based structures and foundations in the RA regions,
- development of interest protection strategies based on the results of expert and research activities to present to local governments, regional and state administration bodies,
- developing a constructive dialogue with the local government and territorial administration bodies, academic, educational and business circles,
- educational activity in the context of the development of non-formal education.

The Centre places particular emphasis on capacity building of young researchers and the development of civic activism among young people in communities. The research-analytical and educational methodical Centre will operate in Shirak, Gegharkunik and Syunik branches of the Sakharov Centre. The Centre will form expert councils.

5. Resource Centre services

Branches of the Sakharov Centre will act as resource Centres, providing advisory, educational, information and technical support services. Community youth support Centres to be established by the branch will also have such a function.

Basic services provided by resource Centres:

- Compilation of the package of registration of legal entities,
- legal, organizational, management and project consulting,
- implementation of internal and external evaluation of organizations,
- learning observation of organizations,
- legal and civil society library-reading activity,

- informing, disseminating information about grants, project application competitions, studies, scholarships,
- creation and provision of an information bank of civil society structures,
- conducting intra-organizational trainings for staff, volunteers, beneficiaries,
- implementation of educational practices,
- facilitation and moderation,
- conducting practical ideas generation activities,
- consulting on building public relations of the organization,
- provision of space for meetings and discussions,
- provision of computer and other technical equipment,
- other.

To increase the effectiveness of the Sakharov Centre, apply the following approaches:

- increase the volume of sub-grants, apply the practice of providing two types of sub-grants - with CSO capacity building, public control and research-analytical directions,
- increase staff capacity in terms of self-development, organizational development and flexibility to better understand the changing needs of rights holders or new socio-political situations,
- improve IT infrastructure, e-mail security and online communication between branches;
- improve work with the media and public relations;
- involve more young people in the activities of the organization as incentives for human resource development, mentoring and volunteering,
- form active youth support Centres in rural communities.

8. Assumptions and Risks

Assumptions

- There is a favorable environment for the development of civil society in the country.
- There is continuous improvement regarding the rule of law.
- Courts operate independently and there is access to justice.
- The Sakharov Centre has enough funds.

Risks

- Tense border situation, risk of resumption of active military operations.
- Governmental pressures on the activities of CSOs.
- Restriction of freedom of speech, assembly.
- Applying pressure by law enforcement structures.
- Force majeure situations, natural and man-made disasters.
- Reduction of donor investments.
- Restriction of civil rights and freedoms,
- Changes in staff and management.

The mandatory appendices of this strategic plan are:

1. Conceptual provisions,

2. Civil society school curricula and modules,
3. The procedure for providing sub-grants,
4. The main areas of monitoring and protection of interests.