

# International conventions on the right of association ratified by the Republic of Azerbaijan and their legal implications

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## Abstract

*The article offers a comprehensive analysis of civil society institutions in the Republic of Azerbaijan, key elements of modern civil, legal-democratic states. It examines the Right to Association—including freedom of association, the formation and participation in political parties, trade unions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)—through a comparative lens, contrasting international standards with domestic legislation. The study emphasises the principles of permissible restrictions, such as national security, public order and societal stability, as established in both international conventions and national law. Drawing on an extensive normative-legal framework, the article systematically evaluates the integration of international conventions into Azerbaijani legislation and provides a comparative assessment of various forms of association. It offers a solid legal foundation for scholars investigating civil society and association rights, while highlighting the necessity of unified legislation and updated regulatory acts within ongoing legal reforms. The study concludes with proposals aimed at strengthening the effective protection and implementation of the Right to Association, thereby contributing to the consolidation of democratic governance and civic participation in Azerbaijan.*

## Keywords

Right to Association • NGO • trade union • human rights • ILO conventions

## INTRODUCTION

The international organisations in which the Republic of Azerbaijan is a member and the international conventions adopted within the framework of these organisations have had a significant impact on ensuring the Right to Association more reliably in the Republic of Azerbaijan. In this context, it is necessary to specifically mention the International Labour Organization (ILO), which the Republic of Azerbaijan joined on 19 May 1992. One of the main motives for the establishment of the organisation was stated as the unification of efforts towards ensuring social justice. From this perspective, one can clearly see the main conceptual foundations of the right to associate in the ILO's Charter (ILO, 1944). The Republic of Azerbaijan has been a member of the ILO since 12 May 1992 and has benefitted from the principles expressed in the Constitution of the ILO when developing provisions guaranteeing the Right to Association in its domestic legislation. We would like to note that the Republic of Azerbaijan has joined 54 Conventions of the ILO (Republic of Azerbaijan, n.d. 2025).

## RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Main part

Among the ILO conventions that are of great importance for our research, I would like to specifically mention Conventions No. 87 and No. 98, which were ratified by the *Milli Majlis* of the Republic of Azerbaijan on 3 July 1993. Convention No. 87 of the ILO is entitled 'Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise' and was adopted on 9 July 1948. Another important Convention, namely, No. 98, entitled 'Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining', was adopted in 1949. Both conventions have been ratified by the Republic of Azerbaijan and have played an important role in shaping the foundations of national legislation in the field of ensuring the Right to Association (Ganbarov, 2018). Over the past years, the Republic of Azerbaijan has implemented comprehensive measures to establish a normative legal framework and take necessary practical steps to ensure labour rights and freedoms in the country, in accordance with the principles of the ratified ILO conventions.

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(Ganberov, 2022). Thus, all necessary legal opportunities have been created to improve the working conditions and social protection of employees, in addition to protecting their Right to Association. In general, when we deeply analyse the legal reforms taking place in the country, we see that the Right to Association (which is one of the main elements of the rule of law) and the final product of this right—the process of building civil society—are being successfully implemented in the Republic of Azerbaijan. One of the rights that the state must ensure in this regard is related to simplifying the possibilities for establishing public associations. The issue is again conditioned by the provision of the Right to Association. The Constitution, which forms the basis of the legal system of the Republic of Azerbaijan, clearly states the provisions on the Right to Association. Thus, Article 58 of the Constitution states that everyone has the right to establish any association or join an already existing association (Aliyev, 2009). This is based on the provisions contained in existing international conventions and include political parties, trade unions and other public associations. The common thread that unites them is that they are all created around common interests and work towards achieving common goals. The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan also includes a provision guaranteeing the free activity of all associations. The third paragraph of Article 58 of the Constitution states as follows: ‘Nobody may be forced to join any association or to remain its member’. This point is also in line with the standards enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights.

It should be noted that although the Republic of Azerbaijan has undertaken specific obligations by joining international conventions; however, there are certain restrictions on the realisation of the Right to Association, which is not an absolute right. Obviously, restrictions on the Right to Association may occur in special cases and in a justified manner in accordance with international documents. International conventions provide for the prevention of the creation of associations that would threaten national security, public order and violation of the rights of others. In other words, the possibilities of restricting the Right to Association are identified. This point is expressed in Article 58, Clause IV of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan as follows:

*‘Activity of associations the purpose of which is the forcible overthrow of legitimate state authority on the whole territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan or in any part thereof, as well as those having objectives which are considered a crime, or which use criminal methods are prohibited. Activity of associations which violate the Constitution and laws may be prohibited only by a court decision’* (Republic of Azerbaijan, 1995).

One of the forms of realisation of the Right to Association is the right to strike. The right to strike is also an integral part of the Right to Association and is aimed at protecting common interests. The right to strike is enshrined in Article 36 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Thus, Article 36, Paragraph I of the Constitution states as follows: *‘Everyone has the right to strike, both individually and together with others’*. Moreover, the relevant Article of the Constitution clarifies the issue of restricting the right to strike. Article 36, Paragraph II of the Constitution states as follows:

*‘Right to strike for persons working based on employment contracts may be restricted only in cases prescribed by law. Soldiers and civilians employed in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Azerbaijan have no right to go on strike’.*

At this point, it should be noted that, at this stage, the issue of eliminating restrictions on the Right to Association of certain categories of employees is being widely discussed.

The Right to Association is not limited to being enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Numerous normative legal acts have been adopted in the Republic of Azerbaijan regulating the realisation of relevant rights. The following documents related to the exercise of the right to direct association can be noted:

- Law on Political Parties, adopted on 16 December 2022 (Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022)
- Law on Trade Unions, adopted on 24 February 1994 (Republic of Azerbaijan, 1994)
- Law on Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) (Public Associations and Foundations), adopted on 13 June 2000 (Republic of Azerbaijan, 2000)

#### **Political parties and the Right to Association**

Political parties occupy a central place among public organisations created and operating as a result of the exercise of the Right to Association. An analysis of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Political Parties leads to the conclusion that this law is aimed at ensuring the Right to Association, which belongs to the category of fundamental human rights. Thus, Article I of the Law explains the concept of a political party and states as follows:

*1.1.1. political party—a non-commercial legal entity established by the citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan in accordance with this Law in order to participate in the political life of the country and the expression of the political will of the citizens* (Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022)

Similar to other non-profit public organisations, political parties reflect all the aspects and characteristics of the Right to Association. Political parties should be evaluated and considered as a vital element of a democratic state. The participation of political parties in the socio-political life of society ensures, above all, ideological pluralism. As we know, one of the main indicators of democracy is ideological pluralism. In addition, in accordance with the main purpose of political parties, society exerts influence and certain control over the activities of political authorities through them. The main characteristic that distinguishes political parties from other public associations is that they have clearly stated political goals. That is why the main motive for the creation of political parties is to gain political power. This is why political parties have become the object of stricter legal regulation. Stricter regulations manifest themselves more clearly in registration, financing, participation in elections and other cases. The regulation of the establishment and the activities of political parties can accordingly be considered as the regulation of the Right to Association. The experience of international regulation of issues related to political parties has also been sufficiently developed. For example, in 1999, the Venice Commission approved the 'Guidelines on Prohibition and Dissolution of Political Parties' (Venice Commission, 1999). It is important that the approved principles be observed by the participating states, and this should be considered a point of serious importance in terms of more effective provision of the Right to Association. An in-depth analysis of the legislation of more than 40 Member-States of the Council of Europe clearly proves that the principles of the Right to Association also apply to the activities of political parties. In general, this means that the state is obliged to ensure the right of everyone to associate in political parties. The Venice Commission document mentioned above states that one of the most important conditions is the prohibition of the activities of political parties and the strict justification for their dissolution. The document states that prohibition or enforced dissolution of political parties may only be justified in the following instances:

- in the case of parties that advocate the use of violence;
- in the case of violence as a political means to overthrow the democratic constitutional order;
- in the case of undermining the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the constitution.

Other international documents also stipulate the possibility of restricting the activities of political parties and generally dissolving them if the above circumstances are observed. If a political party attempts to change the constitutional structure through peaceful, legal means, this cannot be a basis for restricting its activities or, in general, completely closing it down. From a procedural point of view, the prohibition or dissolution

of a political party should be considered as a last resort. In other words, if the party really represents a source of danger, as mentioned above, then it is possible to prohibit and dissolve it. In accordance with the principles of limiting the Right to Association, the prohibition or dissolution of political parties must also be carried out in accordance with a certain procedural rule. Thus, a decision on this can only be made by a competent court. In this case, an open and fair trial must be conducted. As can be seen, political parties are also associations of citizens created on the basis of the voluntary principle of the Right to Association. This point is more clearly expressed in Article III of the above-mentioned law. Thus, this article states as follows:

*Political parties are established and operate on the basis of the principles of freedom of association, voluntariness, equality of rights of their members, self-government, legality and transparency. The activities of political parties cannot be aimed at restricting the fundamental human and civil rights and freedoms of their members as stipulated in the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, international treaties to which the Republic of Azerbaijan is a party and other legislative acts of the Republic of Azerbaijan.*  
(Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022)

The law clearly emphasises the right to freedom of association in the establishment of political parties and establishes the inadmissibility of restricting participation in the activity of political parties. Thus, restrictions on citizens' membership in political parties based on any grounds are not permitted. This can also be considered as a guarantee of the right to freedom of association. When analysing the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Political Parties, we can see that it also contains possibilities for restricting the Right to Association. Naturally, in this case, the possibility of restricting the activities of political parties in specific cases is envisaged, based on the prism of national security and general state interests, as well as the motives of ensuring the stable development of society. As is already known, international normative and legal acts also justify restrictions on the right to associate under certain conditions. For example, Article 11 (Part 2) states that no restrictions shall be placed on the exercise of these rights other than such as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. It also allows for legal restrictions on the exercise of such rights by certain professions and service personnel, such as members of the armed forces, of the police or of the administration of the State. The possibility of similar restrictions is stated in Article IV of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Political Parties. Thus, Article IV of the Law states as follows:

*It is not allowed to establish and operate political parties for whose purpose or activities which are aimed at forcible change of the constitutional structure of the Republic of Azerbaijan, fragmentation of territorial integrity, promoting war, violence and cruelty, as well as racial, ethnic and religious hatred. It is not allowed to establish and operate political parties of foreign countries, as well as their divisions and organisations, on the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022).*

### NGOs and the Right to Association

One of the most common forms of exercising the Right to Association is through NGOs. It should be noted that the term 'non-governmental organisation' (NGO) entered scientific and legal circulation in 1945 with the adoption of the Charter of the United Nations. Subsequently, this concept began to be used more broadly. From the 1970s onwards, the notion of an NGO was widely applied in relations outside the United Nations system. Essentially, the term 'non-governmental organisation' referred to non-profit organisations. These are primarily organisations engaged in activities beneficial to society. Since terminological ambiguities sometimes arise in academic literature, 'non-governmental organisations' are often presented as the Azerbaijani translation of the English term 'NGO'. According to generally accepted practice, non-profit organisations operating in accordance with the applicable legislation for the protection of common interests and objectives are characterised as NGOs. In the framework of modern international organisations and documents, the concept of 'NGO' has been defined in a universal manner and is applied globally. Accordingly, it should also be noted that the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms provides clarification on the concepts of 'association' and 'union'. In particular, the term 'association' within the meaning of the Convention has an autonomous interpretation. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) determines, at its own discretion, whether a particular collective activity of individuals constitutes an association within the meaning of the Convention (Willetts and Smith, 2008). It should be considered that alongside the concept of 'NGO', other terms such as 'non-state organisation', 'public associations', 'voluntary organisations', 'citizens' organisations' and 'transnational organisations' are also used in the academic literature. Although different terms are used to denote collective human activity, they are all united by the right to freedom of association (Willetts and Smith, 2008). In other words, without the right to freedom of association, as characterised by its defining features, the use of the above-mentioned concepts would be meaningless.

In most states, sectoral laws exist regulating the activities of NGOs. Accordingly, on 13 June 2000, the Law of the Republic

of Azerbaijan 'On Non-Governmental Organisations (Public Associations and Foundations)' was adopted. This law regulates issues related to the establishment and operation of public associations and foundations. A number of important provisions of the Right to Association are also reflected in this law. The law further clarifies the essence of the concept of an NGO.

Article 1.3 of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On Non-Governmental Organisations' provides as follows: '*This law defines non-governmental organisations as legal entities to the rules of their establishment, activity, reorganisation and liquidation, as well as rules of their functioning, managing, relation to the government*'. As can be seen, the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On Non-Governmental Organisations' may be considered as one of the forms of state guarantees of the Right to Association. NGOs constitute a central element of civil society. Furthermore, in the Republic of Azerbaijan, the process of building civil society—including the establishment, operation and termination of NGOs—is regulated by relevant legislation.

The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On Non-Governmental Organisations' also sets forth the legal grounds for restricting the Right to Association. Thus, Paragraph 2.3 of Article 1 of the said Law provides as follows:

*Non-governmental organisation can be formed and function with the purposes not forbidden by the Constitution and laws of Azerbaijan Republic. Establishment and activity of non-governmental organisations, as well as branches and representations of foreign NGOs, which aims to change structure and secular nature of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan by force, infringe territorial integrity, promote war, violence and cruelty, incite racial, national and religious hatred is prohibited (Republic of Azerbaijan, 2000).*

It should be emphasised that the provisions of the Law concerning restrictions on the Right to Association largely correspond to those enshrined in the Conventions of the ILO and other international normative acts. These instruments similarly stipulate that the Right to Association may be restricted under specific conditions. This, once again, demonstrates that in the preparation of Azerbaijan's legislative framework in this field, reference is made to relevant provisions of international normative legal acts.

### Trade unions and the Right to Association

Another common form of exercising the Right to Association is the creation of trade unions, which are professional associations. Based on this research, I can state that in the Republic of Azerbaijan, trade unions constitute the largest

public association in terms of membership. On 24 February 1994, the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On Trade Unions' was adopted (Republic of Azerbaijan, 1994).

Since then, a significant number of amendments and additions have been made to this law. The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On Trade Unions' is one of the normative legal sources that play an important role in ensuring the implementation of the Right to Association. This law establishes the mechanisms, principles and opportunities for workers and employers to form their associations voluntarily around common interests and objectives and to participate in their activities. It should be noted that the Preamble of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On Trade Unions' stipulates that the Law guarantees the protection of workers' rights and interests in compliance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Conventions of the ILO and the European Social Charter. Article 1 of Chapter I, entitled 'General Provisions', clarifies the essence of a trade union organisation and shows that the Law provides a suitable platform for guaranteeing the Right to Association. Article 1 of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On Trade Unions' provides as follows:

*Trade union represent independent public non-political organisation that joins employees, engaged in production and non-production sphere, as well as pensioners and persons, being educated, on a voluntary individual membership principle for the protection of their labour, social, economic rights and legal interests at working places, professions, branches and on the general republican level. It operates on the basis of own Articles and present Law. (Republic of Azerbaijan, 1994)*

As is evident, the establishment of a trade union is directly linked to the Right to Association. Without the guarantee of this right, the very possibility of forming a trade union cannot even be discussed (Ganberov, 2021). As mentioned above, the principles for the establishment and operation of trade unions in the Republic of Azerbaijan are directly aligned with the Conventions of the ILO and also refer to other relevant international legal instruments.

Article 3 of Chapter I of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On Trade Unions' directly addresses the Right to Association. Article 3 is entitled 'The right for consolidation into trade unions'. It provides as follows:

*Employees, pensioners, persons, being educated have all uniform right to voluntary set up trade unions at their choice and without preliminary permission, as well as join trade unions for the protection of their legal interests, labour, social—economic rights and conduct trade union activity.*

An analysis of this provision demonstrates that the principles enshrined in the Charter of the ILO are fully reflected herein. This once again confirms that the mechanisms and principles for establishing and operating trade unions and participating in their activities are based on international conventions, as indicated in the preamble of the Law. It must be noted that the Conventions of the ILO also present the Right to Association as the possibility for workers to voluntarily unite with others for the protection of their common interests. In line with this, Article 3 of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On Trade Unions' also provides the following:

*Trade unions can set up their initial organisations, professional, branch, republican and other territorial organisations on a voluntary and independent basis.*

As already reviewed, the general principle governing the establishment and operation of trade unions in the Republic of Azerbaijan is enshrined in Article 58 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Part II of this Article guarantees that everyone has the right to form any association, including a trade union, and to participate in its activities (Republic of Azerbaijan, 1995). The Right to Association in trade unions is also clearly expressed in the Labour Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan (LC). Article 19 of the LC is entitled 'Trade Union'. Paragraph 1 of Article 19 expressly stipulates the Right to Association, stating as follows:

*A trade union may be established on a voluntary basis without discrimination among employees or without prior permission from employers. Employees may join the appropriate trade union and engage in trade union activity in order to protect their labour and socio-economic rights and legal interests. (Republic of Azerbaijan, 1999).*

Nevertheless, I believe that it would be advisable to consolidate the Right to Association in a broader manner in the LC. As mentioned earlier, only one article of the LC is devoted to trade unions, and the Right to Association is reflected solely in this Article 19. From this perspective, the inclusion of a separate chapter on trade unions in the LC, in addition to a more detailed elaboration of the Right to Association, would be appropriate. As already observed, the right to establish trade unions was formally recognised at the international level in 1919 with the establishment of the ILO. This fact alone confirms that the Right to Association has a well-established practice and deep historical roots. The organisational structure of the ILO is tripartite in nature. That is, each Member-State is represented by representatives of state authorities, trade unions and employers' organisations. Thus, three groups are formed within the ILO, which may be viewed as follows:

- representatives of the national authorities of Member-States;
- employers;
- workers.

These groups develop mutually beneficial international standards in the field of labour and social relations (ILO, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Thus, based on the analyses conducted, one of the general conclusions is that one of the most frequently disputed issues relating to the Right to Association concerns the absence of clear and precise regulations governing the restriction of this right. It should be noted that the restriction of the Right to Association by the State cannot be carried out solely by reference to domestic legislation. States have international obligations with respect to guaranteeing the Right to Association and cannot disregard them. Although considered one of the principal values of a democratic society, the Right to Association may nevertheless be restricted pursuant to Paragraph 2 of Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This provision states as follows:

*No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of this right other than those which are prescribed by law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order (ordre public), the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. This article shall not prevent the imposition of lawful restrictions on members of the armed forces and of the police in their exercise of this right.*

Furthermore, Article 11(2) of the European Convention also recognises that States may impose certain restrictions on the exercise of the Right to Association. Both international instruments emphasise the importance of applying such restrictions in accordance with the principles of legality, and this principle must be observed in both ordinary and exceptional circumstances. In general, our analysis leads to the conclusion that if the Right to Association is used for activities or conduct that would result in the violation of other rights guaranteed under the relevant international instruments, its restriction is permissible. For example, the prohibition of a political party operating on the principle of racial discrimination is fully consistent with international law. Naturally, the unchanging principle remains that the public danger posed by such associations—and the proportionality of the measures taken—must be determined by a fully independent court, subject to observance of all procedural safeguards.

It should also be noted that in certain cases, there have been disputes concerning the guarantee of the Right to Association in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Some of these cases have been brought before the ECHR and have been the subject of judicial investigation. For instance, reference may be made to the complaint lodged by Azerbaijani citizens Nabat Ramazanova, Emin Zeynalov, Zarifa Qanbarova and Eldar Alizade against the Republic of Azerbaijan (Application No. 44363/02). Proceedings in this case commenced on 22 November 2002 (European Court of Human Rights, 2007). The applicants claimed that the registration of the public association 'Assistance for the Defense of Human Rights of Homeless and Oppressed Citizens of Baku' was unduly delayed. The stated reason was that the charter of the public association did not comply with the requirements of Article 6 of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On Non-Governmental Organisations (Public Associations and Funds)'. The applicants submitted their registration documents four times with amendments but received no response. After their claims were rejected by the courts of first instance, the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court, the applicants applied to the ECHR. Following consideration of the case, the ECHR found that there had been a violation of Article 11 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

Another conclusion is that a comprehensive normative-legal framework has been developed in the Republic of Azerbaijan for the protection of human rights and freedoms. Almost all of the significant international normative instruments in the field of human rights protection have been ratified by the Republic of Azerbaijan. In addition, a normative framework based on international conventions has been established at the level of national legislation to ensure the Right to Association.

Finally, I conclude that the principles for restricting the Right to Association in the Republic of Azerbaijan are consistent with the international conventions to which the country has acceded or which it has ratified. Thus, as provided in international instruments, restrictions on the exercise of this right are permissible where the exercise of the right poses a threat to security, public order, or the exercise of the rights of others. In Azerbaijan, too, the possibility of imposing justified and specific restrictions on the exercise of the Right to Association in such circumstances has been recognised.

We also note that the adoption of the Constitutional Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2002). 'On the Regulation of the Implementation of Human Rights and Freedoms in the Republic of Azerbaijan', apart from the particular attention given in this Law to the Right to Association, demonstrates the existence of a firm will and intention in Azerbaijan to benefit from all advanced practices in ensuring the Right to Association.

## Recommendations

1. The activities of structures related to the right of association in the Republic of Azerbaijan are regulated by the Civil Code, the Civil Procedure Code, the Administrative Procedure Code, the Laws of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On Non-Governmental Organisations (Public Associations and Foundations)', 'On Political Parties', 'On Trade Unions', 'On Freedom of Religious Belief', and other laws. There is no codified unified law governing this field. This may, in some cases, give rise to certain problems. I believe that the adoption of a single, unified legislative act in this area would lead to more effective outcomes.
2. In the Republic of Azerbaijan, the expansion of international cooperation in the field of protection of human rights and freedoms, including the right of association, has been identified as one of the priority issues. It would be expedient to ensure the continuous improvement of domestic legislation in line with the precedents of international courts.
3. The creation of associations is generally regarded as aiming to achieve common objectives. In this process, several fundamental principles (legality, equality, transparency, etc.) must be taken into account, one of which is the principle of voluntariness. In other words, forcing anyone to join any association constitutes a violation of the law, and it would be advisable to establish effective oversight and functioning mechanisms in this regard.
4. One of the forms of exercising the right of association is the registration of NGOs by the state. The introduction of an electronic registration mechanism (similar to that applied for commercial entities such as Limited Liability Company (LLCs) ) would make an important contribution to civil society.

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