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## LEGAL FOUNDATIONS OF YOUTH POLICY IN AZERBAIJAN: NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK AND STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

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**Abstract.** This study examines the legal foundations and strategic priorities of youth policy in Azerbaijan, focusing on its normative framework and implementation mechanisms. The research explores the constitutional provisions, legislative acts, presidential decrees, and national strategies that shape youth development policies, assessing their alignment with global trends and national objectives. The study highlights key milestones, including the 1991 and 2002 *Laws on Youth Policy*, the 1999 decree on state youth policy, and the establishment of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Additionally, it evaluates long-term state programs such as *Azerbaijan 2020* and *Azerbaijan 2030*, emphasizing their role in fostering youth empowerment through education, employment, social inclusion, and international engagement. By employing a qualitative legal and policy analysis approach, the study provides insights into the evolution of youth policy in Azerbaijan, its effectiveness in addressing contemporary challenges, and its contribution to national development. While legislative and institutional advancements have reinforced youth participation in socio-economic and political spheres, challenges remain in bridging the gap between policy formulation and practical implementation. The findings contribute to broader discussions on youth governance, highlighting the necessity of continuous policy evaluation to ensure sustainable youth development in Azerbaijan.

**Key words:** Youth Policy, Legal Framework, State Programs, Youth Empowerment, Azerbaijan.

**Introduction.** In the modern time, youth policy has gained increasing significance as governments worldwide recognize the critical role young people play in shaping the social, economic, and political landscape of their nations. Rapid technological advancements, globalization, and evolving labor market demands necessitate a well-structured youth policy that equips young individuals with the necessary skills, opportunities, and resources to actively participate in society. Additionally, rising concerns about youth unemployment, social inequality, and political disengagement have intensified the need for comprehensive policies that ensure equal access to education, employment, and civic participation. In this context, youth policy is no longer merely an auxiliary component of governance but rather a strategic priority that directly influences national development, economic sustainability, and social cohesion.

In this regard, the relevance of this topic is underscored by the growing global emphasis on youth empowerment as a key driver of sustainable development. International organizations, including the United Nations and the European Union, actively advocate for policies that integrate young people into decision-making processes and economic development strategies. In Azerbaijan, the increasing focus on youth policy reflects the state's broader vision of fostering a dynamic and capable generation that can contribute to national progress. Given Azerbaijan's ongoing socio-economic transformations, the country's youth policy plays a crucial role in addressing challenges such as workforce adaptation to modern industries, social integration of disadvantaged youth groups, and the strengthening of national identity in an era of globalization. Thus, a thorough analysis of the legal foundations and strategic priorities of youth policy in Azerbaijan is essential for assessing its effectiveness and alignment with contemporary global trends and national objectives.

This study seeks to explore the legal foundations and strategic priorities of youth policy in Azerbaijan, addressing the key question of how the country's legislative and institutional framework supports the development, empowerment, and integration of young people into various socio-economic and political spheres. By analyzing constitutional provisions, national laws, presidential decrees, and state programs, the research examines the extent to which these policies align with global trends in youth development and Azerbaijan's broader national strategies. The study employs a qualitative research methodology, primarily focusing on a legal and policy analysis approach, complemented by a review of secondary sources, including governmental reports, international organization publications, and scholarly literature on youth policies. This methodological framework allows for a comprehensive evaluation of how Azerbaijan's youth policy has evolved over time, particularly in the transition from the early post-independence period to more structured and institutionalized state interventions. In terms of its contribution to the literature, this research fills a critical gap by systematically assessing the coherence and effectiveness of Azerbaijan's youth policy within both a national and comparative global context. While studies on youth policies in post-Soviet states often focus on broader socio-political transformations, this study provides a detailed legal examination of the mechanisms through which the Azerbaijani government has institutionalized its youth policy agenda.

By highlighting the relationship between youth policy and national development priorities, this research offers valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners interested in the intersection of legal frameworks, governance, and youth empowerment. Moreover, the study contributes to discussions on policy implementation challenges, particularly regarding the effectiveness of legislative measures in achieving tangible outcomes in youth education, employment, civic engagement, and social protection. Ultimately, this research enhances the understanding of youth policy as a crucial component of state development strategies, demonstrating how legislative and policy instruments can be utilized to shape the future trajectory of a nation's youth.

### **Normative and Institutional Framework of Azerbaijan's Youth Policy**

The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, adopted in 1995, provides a foundational legal framework for youth policy, focusing specifically on promoting comprehensive youth development and active participation in social life. The provisions in the Constitution are designed to support young people through social-economic and legal guarantees, thereby enhancing their rights and ensuring their welfare. For instance, Article 17 of the Constitution specifically addresses the family and children, defining state responsibilities toward protecting children's health, prohibiting harmful activities, and outlawing employment of children under 15. Additionally, the state maintains supervisory functions to safeguard children's rights and prevent their exploitation (Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 1995).

Following the constitutional foundation, youth policy in Azerbaijan is further regulated by two key legislative documents, namely the "*Law on Youth Policy*" of 1991 and its subsequent revision in 2002. These two laws reflect distinct phases in Azerbaijan's approach to youth policy, demonstrating significant development from an initial, transitional period immediately after independence to a more comprehensive, structured approach. The 1991 Law, signed by President Ayaz Mutallibov shortly after Azerbaijan gained independence, represented one of the earliest attempts to establish youth policy frameworks in the post-Soviet context. By contrast, the 2002 Law provides a more detailed legal foundation, highlighting the progression in addressing contemporary youth challenges and aligning national youth policy with international standards.

The fundamental principles outlined in Azerbaijan's 1991 "*Law on Youth Policy*" emphasized ensuring equality of rights and providing comprehensive social protection for youth, regardless of their gender, nationality, religious affiliation, or social background, thereby establishing a legal foundation that fostered an inclusive environment for all young citizens. Furthermore, the law explicitly aimed to create supportive conditions facilitating the holistic development of youth, including their

social, moral, and physical growth, while simultaneously safeguarding their essential rights and freedoms. An additional critical dimension of the law concerned the formation and empowerment of youth organizations, specifying their legal status and ensuring legal provisions were in place to support their activities effectively (Law on Youth Policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 1991). By granting such guarantees, the legislation sought to promote structured participation of young people through organized initiatives, thereby actively integrating them into broader social, cultural, and political processes, and highlighting the state's commitment to developing youth capacity within Azerbaijani society.

In addition, the 1991 law also outlined certain measures concerning youth entrepreneurship, social security provisions, and educational rights. However, this legislation was somewhat general in nature and lacked concrete regulatory mechanisms for its implementation. The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Youth Policy," adopted on November 13, 1991, was substantively influenced by the USSR Law "On Youth Policy," enacted on April 16, 1991. The Soviet legislation primarily established general principles aimed at safeguarding youth rights and promoting their development, serving as a legal framework across all union republics at the time (Law on the General Principles of State Youth Policy in the USSR, 1991). Similarly, the Azerbaijani law incorporated these foundational elements to ensure youth rights protection, social security, and active participation in society. Given that Azerbaijan was in the early years of its independence, the law reflected a transitional approach by maintaining legal continuity with Soviet legislative principles while gradually adapting to the evolving national context.

Eight years later, on July 29, 1999, the decree "On State Youth Policy", signed by Heydar Aliyev, marked a significant stage in the implementation of state youth policy in Azerbaijan. This decree underscored the role of youth in Azerbaijan's history, emphasizing their organization and their contribution to addressing national issues. It highlights that the youth movement, which began forming in the late 19th century, and the active participation of young people in Azerbaijan's national liberation struggle were among its key considerations, thereby establishing the historical and cultural foundations of state policy directed toward youth. The primary objective of the decree was to restructure Azerbaijan's youth policy in accordance with the demands of the new era and to ensure the active participation of young people in state-building processes. Key priorities were identified to foster both the moral education and socio-economic development of youth (Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on State Youth Policy, 1999). Notably, the establishment of the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the creation of a research center for studying youth-related issues were pivotal steps aimed at ensuring the systematic implementation of this policy. The decree also emphasized the necessity of conducting scientific analyses of youth-related issues and increasing the involvement of young people in public administration. In this regard, Heydar Aliyev's decree stands as a strategic document that laid a solid foundation for the continuous development of youth policy in the country. Furthermore, it established essential financial and administrative mechanisms to coordinate activities across state institutions in the field of youth affairs and to implement comprehensive measures. This initiative contributed to the formation of a broad policy framework aimed at ensuring the effective utilization of the potential of modern Azerbaijani youth. Subsequently, on April 9, 2002, another law, initiated by Heydar Aliyev, introduced a more systematic and comprehensive approach to youth policy. This law replaced the 1991 legislation with a more extensive legal framework, incorporating several new aspects that reflected a broader and more structured vision for youth policy in Azerbaijan.

The 2002 law on youth policy in Azerbaijan introduced a more precise and structured approach to regulating the rights of young people, ensuring their broader inclusion in society and fostering their active participation in various spheres of life. One of its fundamental principles was the comprehensive protection of youth rights, with a specific focus on their intellectual, physical, and moral development. The law emphasized the necessity of implementing specialized programs to support these aspects of youth development, thereby creating a structured legal framework that extended

beyond the general provisions of the previous legislation. Additionally, it underscored the importance of social protection and employment opportunities for young people, acknowledging the necessity of ensuring economic stability and well-being for this demographic. In this regard, the law introduced a systematic set of measures aimed at facilitating young people's access to social, economic, and cultural rights, particularly by implementing targeted programs for those in need of social protection and those belonging to at-risk groups (Law on Youth Policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2002). By addressing these dimensions, the legislation sought to create a supportive environment where young people could fully develop their potential while benefiting from adequate legal safeguards and institutional support.

Another key principle of the 2002 law was the organizational and institutional structuring of youth policy, which granted both state and non-state entities more defined and extensive powers in its implementation. The law established clear mechanisms for financing youth policy initiatives, ensuring that state programs were effectively applied and periodically evaluated for their impact. Moreover, it placed a strong emphasis on expanding international opportunities for Azerbaijani youth, recognizing the importance of global engagement in an increasingly interconnected world. The law introduced measures to facilitate young people's participation in international events and cooperation with foreign youth organizations, thereby fostering cross-cultural exchange and enabling Azerbaijani youth to fully realize their potential on a global scale. By integrating these principles into the national youth policy framework, the 2002 law not only strengthened the legal foundation for youth rights and development but also set the stage for a more dynamic, inclusive, and internationally engaged generation of young Azerbaijanis.

A comparison of the two laws reveals that the 1991 law, as the first legislative document adopted at the dawn of independence, played a crucial role in establishing the legal framework for youth policy in Azerbaijan. However, the 2002 law presents a more comprehensive, detailed, and progressive approach that reflects the socio-economic realities of its time while outlining concrete measures for youth development. The significance of the 2002 law lies in its demonstration of the state's increased commitment to youth affairs, as it establishes broader opportunities for ensuring their social, economic, cultural, and political rights. The law's modern and structured nature underscores its superiority in supporting the holistic development of young people and in creating more effective mechanisms for the implementation of youth policy.

### **Strategic Priorities and Implementation Mechanisms**

The decrees issued in 1994 and 2006 concerning the Ministry of Youth and Sports of the Republic of Azerbaijan hold significant importance in shaping the country's youth and sports policy. The 1994 decree established the primary directions of the Ministry's youth policy, emphasizing the implementation of measures aimed at ensuring the social, economic, and cultural development of young people. A central objective of this decree was to secure the active participation of youth in the national state-building process, foster their moral and physical development, collaborate with other state institutions to address unemployment and social issues, and promote patriotism and entrepreneurship among young people. This approach sought to harness youth potential for national development while reinforcing a society built upon national values (Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the Ministry of Youth and Sports, 1994).

The 2006 decree, signed by President Ilham Aliyev, along with the accompanying statute on the Ministry of Youth and Sports, laid the legal and institutional foundations for youth and sports policy in Azerbaijan. These documents serve as fundamental normative acts that guide state policy in these areas and regulate the implementation of a unified national strategy. The decree formally established the Ministry, defining its scope of activities and organizational structure. The Ministry plays a crucial role in shaping and executing youth and sports policy, with core functions that include fostering patriotism among young people, training specialists in sports and physical education, ensuring

social protection for young families, promoting a healthy lifestyle, and directing youth creativity toward national development initiatives. The decree further underscores the Ministry's responsibility in implementing state-level youth policy, advancing various programs, facilitating the growth of youth and sports sectors, and incorporating international best practices into national strategies (Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the Approval of the Charter, Structure, and Staff Regulations of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2006).

At the same time, the Youth Foundation, established by the decree signed by President Ilham Aliyev in 2011, provided a significant impetus to the development of youth policy in Azerbaijan and became an essential instrument for supporting youth-driven public initiatives (Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the Establishment of the Youth Foundation, 2011). The decree issued on March 7, 2018, aimed to further enhance governance in this field by transforming the Presidential Youth Foundation into a public legal entity under the name "*Youth Foundation of the Republic of Azerbaijan*." This step facilitated a more efficient and independent organization of youth-related activities while expanding opportunities for supporting both local and international youth projects. Additionally, the approval of the new institution's Charter established a legal framework for the implementation of various initiatives aimed at fostering the social, cultural, and intellectual development of young people. These decrees not only reaffirm the state's commitment to youth development but also highlight its active role in channeling youth initiatives and potential toward the country's progress.

In recent years, a significant number of decrees and orders signed by the President have comprehensively supported various aspects of youth policy, including sports, physical education, patriotism, employment, and other areas. These legal acts aim to facilitate youth development and ensure their active participation in state-building and various sectors of society. However, since these decrees and orders are considered secondary legal instruments rather than fundamental legislative frameworks, they are not the primary subject of this research. Instead, these acts primarily serve an executive function, facilitating the implementation of existing legal provisions and enabling the execution of specific measures. Nevertheless, these documents represent important steps that positively impact youth development, social and economic empowerment, and patriotic education, playing a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness of state policy.

Furthermore, within the framework of Azerbaijan's long-term socio-economic development strategies—"Azerbaijan 2020: A Look into the Future" and "Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development", the special attention given to youth plays a fundamental role in shaping policies aimed at their development (Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the Approval of the "Azerbaijan 2020" Development Concept, 2012; Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development, 2021). These national strategies are designed to harness the potential of young people for the country's overall progress through multifaceted measures and programs that ensure their social, economic, and intellectual growth. In particular, the *State Programs for Youth Development* (e.g., 2005-2009, 2011-2015, 2017-2021) have facilitated various initiatives, including opportunities for young people to pursue education abroad, thereby enhancing their knowledge and skills at an international level. These programs not only contribute to the formation of the country's future human capital but also strengthen the role of youth in the national economy. Additionally, key priorities of state policy include youth employment, entrepreneurship, access to innovative technologies, and fostering patriotism. Each of these programs represents a large-scale initiative aimed at reinforcing the role of youth in Azerbaijan's future socio-economic development, necessitating an in-depth examination of their scope and impact.

Additionally, the *Youth Development Strategy* of Azerbaijan for 2015-2025 has aligned youth policy with the country's broader development objectives, integrating it into a unified conceptual framework. The strategy prioritizes the utilization of youth potential in the interest of the state, aiming to

enhance their socio-economic participation, strengthen active citizenship, and equip them with essential skills for sustainable development. Particular emphasis is placed on advancing youth in various fields, including education, employment, multiculturalism, and environmental awareness. To achieve these goals, the strategy outlines key measures such as improving educational and employment services, expanding career counseling programs, creating new job opportunities for young people, and ensuring the social integration of individuals with disabilities and those requiring special care (Order of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the Approval of the "2015-2025 Youth Development Strategy", 2015). One of the notable aspects of the strategy is its focus on strengthening international cooperation, expanding global engagement among Azerbaijani youth, and enhancing the capacities of youth organizations. Within this framework, the strategy envisions the development of a highly skilled workforce, aligning youth knowledge and competencies with international standards, and assessing the effectiveness of youth policies through continuous sociological research.

By the end of 2025, the comprehensive implementation of the strategy is expected to result in a decline in youth unemployment, an expansion of international youth relations, and an increase in youth participation in environmental, social, and economic spheres. In this regard, the strategy not only addresses existing challenges but also aims to significantly strengthen the role of youth in Azerbaijan's long-term socio-economic development.

**Conclusion.** In conclusion, an analysis of the legislative framework governing youth affairs in the Republic of Azerbaijan reveals that the country has established a comprehensive legal and institutional structure aimed at systematically and effectively enhancing the social, economic, cultural, and patriotic development of young people. The constitutional provisions ensuring fundamental rights, along with the *Laws on Youth Policy*, presidential decrees, and orders, have played a crucial role in shaping and advancing state policies related to youth. In particular, the clear definition of youth rights in education, employment, and social protection, as well as the establishment of relevant state institutions and the refinement of legal and financial mechanisms for their implementation, have significantly strengthened the effectiveness of youth policy. The legislative transformations from 1991 to 2002, followed by subsequent presidential decrees, demonstrate a more modern and structured approach to youth engagement in state-building, entrepreneurship, and international projects. Initiatives such as the Youth Foundation and various State Programs have created extensive opportunities for youth development, facilitating their active integration into the country's socio-economic landscape. Overall, Azerbaijan's strategic state policy in youth affairs is centered on the continuous improvement of legal and administrative structures, ensuring that young people emerge as a driving force within society and contribute meaningfully to the nation's development.

The primary focus areas of Azerbaijan's youth-related laws, decrees, strategic documents, and policy initiatives encompass education, employment, social protection, entrepreneurship, patriotism, cultural development, and international cooperation. These legal and policy frameworks aim to create a well-educated, economically independent, and socially responsible youth population that actively contributes to the country's development. A strong emphasis is placed on equipping young people with the necessary skills and opportunities to engage in the labor market, fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, ensuring social inclusion for vulnerable youth groups, and promoting national identity and patriotic values. Additionally, efforts to enhance Azerbaijan's international youth cooperation align with the broader objective of integrating the country into global socio-economic and cultural networks. When examined in the context of Azerbaijan's overall state policy, these priorities largely align with the nation's strategic development goals, particularly those outlined in long-term plans such as *Azerbaijan 2020: A Look into the Future* and *Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development*. The state's economic diversification efforts, human capital development strategies, and emphasis on national security and cultural preservation resonate with the core objectives of youth policy. However, challenges may arise in implementation, particularly in ensuring that

youth policies effectively bridge the gap between legislative intent and practical outcomes, addressing disparities in urban and rural access to education and employment, and balancing state-directed patriotic initiatives with fostering independent civic engagement. Nonetheless, the overall trajectory of Azerbaijan's youth policies reflects a strategic alignment with national priorities rather than fundamental contradictions, reinforcing the role of young people as key actors in the country's socio-economic and political future.

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