

Reporters Without Borders

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Europe/Ex-USSR - Azerbaijan

Spotlight on repression

Eurovision - A word about media freedom?

24 May 2012

The eyes of more than 100 million TV viewers will turn to the Azerbaijani capital of Baku in two days' time for the Eurovision Song Contest final. The European public will be shown a beautiful country and a hospitable people.

"But there is another side to Azerbaijan that the authorities have done everything possible to mask – a repressive and brutal regime that stops at nothing to silence the few journalists who try to investigate sensitive subjects or provide critical news coverage," Reporters Without Borders said.

"We are not trying to spoil the party or, still less, promote any 'hostile' political agenda, as the Azerbaijani government likes to claim, but how can song be completely dissociated from freedom of expression? Singers have come from 40 countries to make their voices heard in Baku but other voices will remain unheard.

"What about the voices of the blogger and five journalists currently in prison for what they wanted to say, the two journalists who were murdered, the dozens of journalists who have been the victims of physical attacks that go unpunished, and the independent media that have been largely eliminated? Civil society will struggle to make its voice heard. They should all, in their own way, be contributing to the concert."

The Azerbaijani authorities have spent hundreds of millions of petrodollars on giving the capital a facelift for this event, which crowns an international charm offensive. No effort has been spared to project the image of a modern, dynamic and open country, a new Dubai growing at a breakneck pace, with trendy discotheques and welcoming beaches. A paradise for investors if you can turn a blind eye to the corruption.

But Azerbaijan is definitely not a paradise for journalists. Nor for human rights in general. Ranked 162nd out of 179 countries in the latest Reporters Without Borders press freedom index, it also has two of the world's "predators of freedom of information" that Reporters Without Borders has identified – President Ilham Aliyev and his loyal henchman, Vasif Talibov, who tests the most draconian repressive methods in the isolated exclave of Nakhchivan

The International Partnership Group for Azerbaijan, a coalition of NGOs that includes Reporters Without Borders, issued a report on 26 March documenting the appalling state of freedom of information in Azerbaijan.

A broadcast media regulatory body under the president's direct control ensures that all radio and TV stations support the government. The few independent publications hardly circulate outside the capital. The media situation deteriorated even more as a result of the violent crackdown on a wave of pro-democracy demonstrations in the spring of 2011, in the wake of the Arab revolts. Bloggers were arrested and beaten, opposition journalists were abducted and foreign journalists were deported.

The remaining handful of independent journalists are often the targets of threats and smear campaigns. The murders of two outspoken journalists, Elmar Huseynov in 2005 and Rafik

Tagi in 2011, are still unpunished, as are the frequent physical attacks on journalists.

"We urge the performers taking part in this event to express their support for Azerbaijan's civil society and media," Reporters Without Borders added. "France's representative, Anggun, is said to be sensitive to human rights issues. Will she point to the parallels between the prison environment shown in her video clip and the fate that Azerbaijani journalists often suffer?"

"The European Broadcasting Union, which oversees the contest, should start to speak out about the grave situation of Azerbaijan's media, in accordance with the principles and values it is supposed to promote. Finally, we appeal to each of the 1,600 journalists who are expected, urging them to assign at least a few hours of their visit to conducting interviews and research into this issue."

By turning the international spotlight on Azerbaijan, the authorities have given civil society an unexpected chance to make its voice heard. Azerbaijani civil society now needs the support of the international community. It must also be ready for the reprisals that are liable to follow once all the cameras have left.

Get informed, join the campaign!

- [International Partnership Group for Azerbaijan](#)
- [Sing for Democracy campaign](#)
- Read the report "Running scared. Azerbaijan's Silenced Voices":



IPGA 2012 report

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