

Azerbaijan's Eurovision Story: Great Chances to Improve, But No Political Will

By Shahin Abbasov, Baku

Abstract

Holding the Eurovision song contest in Baku in May 2012 will bring intense international attention to Azerbaijan and pose numerous logistical and infrastructure challenges for the current government. Many civil society groups hope to use the opportunity to press for liberalization, but the authorities show no sign of giving in to such pressure.

Victory

Thousands of people flooded the Baku streets late at night on May 15, 2011, to celebrate the victory of Azerbaijan's "Ell & Nikki" duo at the Eurovision contest in Duesseldorf. The partying continued until dawn at squares and parks where people waved national flags, danced, honked car horns and shared their joy together. Two newly-born babies in the country's Geychay region were given the names Eldar and Nigar in honor of the winning singers.

The victory at the continent's annual pop-music contest was an important matter of prestige for Azerbaijani authorities as well. Top-government officials had never hidden their ambitions to win after Azerbaijan decided to participate in Eurovision only four years earlier.

Azerbaijan's influential first lady Mehriban Aliyeva personally contributed a lot to this victory. Aliyeva's semi-governmental Heydar Aliyev Foundation invested in the singers' preparation for Eurovision, the publicity campaign surrounding it, and other issues related to the contest. Accordingly, President Ilham Aliyev later appointed his wife to chair the Organizing Committee to host Eurovision-2012 in Baku.

President Aliyev basked in Azerbaijan's victory, calling Eurovision "the most prestigious music contest worldwide." "Its audience was more than 100 million people this year. To win first place in such a prestigious contest is the historical victory of Azerbaijani youth, people and the state," he said.

The victory in Duesseldorf has indeed drawn extensive international attention to Azerbaijan. In the course of two days—May 16 and 17—more than 800 million people searched the word "Azerbaijan" on the Internet. Thus numerous government officials declared repeatedly that the victory had great "political importance for Azerbaijan's international image."

Human Rights Challenges

In the meantime, along with the joy and obvious benefits it brought, the Eurovision victory also posed several challenges to the government both domestically and internationally. Azerbaijan has a poor human rights

and democratic record and the victory became another tool that local civil society groups and the international community could use to pressure the authorities to liberalize.

Not surprisingly, the pardon of Azerbaijan's best known political prisoner, journalist Eynulla Fatullayev, a few weeks after the Eurovision victory struck political analysts, human rights defenders and even foreign diplomats as evidence of Baku's desire to host the event next year with a good image. US Ambassador to Azerbaijan Matthew Bryza claimed that Fatullayev's pardon and release from jail "launches a new era of reforms in Azerbaijan." "What can be a better start for the preparation process to Eurovision-2012 in Baku?" the US Ambassador said. Unfortunately, the authorities did not follow this initial gesture with other concessions.

Azerbaijani officials have said several times that the country will comply with all its obligations concerning hosting the Eurovision contest, including allowing the arrival of Armenian delegations and tourists to Baku during that period. In the past, Baku has hosted Armenian sports teams for various international tournaments. In the meantime, Armenia has yet to decide officially if it will send participants for the competition. There are no publicly available black lists for other potential visitors. One such list includes the names of people who visited Nagorno-Karabakh without coordinating with Baku, but it is not known how many people are on the list or their identities.

The Role of Civil Society

Local human rights defenders said that they hoped that the authorities would gradually release all or almost all political prisoners. These inmates are mostly opposition and youth activists arrested during unauthorized rallies in Baku in March and April 2011.

In late May, a large group of local civil society activists (human rights defenders, journalists, political experts) signed an appeal to President Ilham Aliyev calling on him to release all political prisoners. "Hosting Eurovision in Baku is of course a very important

event and it will attract increased international attention to Azerbaijan, to its rich culture but also to the current political situation in the country," the letter reads. It calls on the president to "undertake steps to reduce tension in society" in part by releasing all political prisoners, including journalists, youth activists, and civic and political activists. On July 1 this group held a large civil society forum entitled "Eurovision Without Political Prisoners" in Baku.

Later, in September, another group of civil society organizations initiated a second campaign called "Free song in an unfree country," seeking to attract international attention to human rights problems in Azerbaijan. The campaign found support among respected human rights organizations in France, the Czech Republic, Poland, the Netherlands, Norway, Germany and other countries. This coalition plans to launch a special web-site and post a series of videos addressing human rights problems in the country.

"For us Eurovision is not just a song contest. It is a historical chance to improve the situation in the area of human rights and democracy," according to Emin Huseynov, the director of the Baku-based Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) and an active member of the coalition.

However, despite the efforts of human rights organizations and the optimism of some political analysts who believe that the government will have to take liberalizing steps under the glare of the international attention surrounding Eurovision, there is no sign that the authorities in Azerbaijan are planning any steps to satisfy these expectations. The political prisoner problem remains unsolved, the human rights record has not seriously improved and freedom of assembly is still a problem in the country.

Moreover, there have been several incidents involving foreign journalists recently. In April the government deported three Swedish journalists, and in July a German journalist left the country because of obstacles blocking his work in Nakchivan, he said.

These incidents, along with numerous appeals by local civil society groups, led the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), Eurovision's official organizer, to question the government of Azerbaijan concerning freedom of speech and movement for journalists and other guests of the upcoming show. In his letter to the EBU in October, Prime Minister Arthur Rasizadeh provided assurances concerning the simplification of the visa regime for Eurovision-2012 guests and ensured their safety. The government, according to the prime minister, also guarantees the freedom of assembly and expression of media representatives and other guests in line with the European Convention on Human Rights.

Ambitious Construction Plans

Meanwhile, hardly anyone in Azerbaijan doubts that Baku will be able to host the Eurovision contest next year at a high level given the vast financial resources flowing from the country's growing hydrocarbon exports. The 2011 Eurovision contest in Dusseldorf cost EUR46 million, according to official data. During the last five years, the government has been spending up to EUR5 billion annually for various infrastructure projects.

The government has already launched several ambitious projects in preparation for the May 2012 festivities. The president ordered the construction of a new "Crystal Palace" sport-concert complex for this purpose to be located at the recently opened National Flag Square in Baku bay. In mid-July, after a German company prepared a feasibility study, President Aliyev allocated about \$7.6 million from his reserve fund to start construction.

The scale of the works is huge. Within the upcoming seven months, Baku Boulevard will be extended more than 1 kilometer to reach National Flag Square, according to officials from the Baku mayor's office. All existing buildings along the route have been demolished, including the large ship-building plant, which workers dismantled and will reconstruct outside Baku. "All works are being carried out in order to host the Eurovision contest," officials said.

Lack of Transparency in Government Spending

While officials gladly share their construction plans with the media, the issue of expenditures for all these works has them over a barrel. Members of the first lady's organizing committee do not disclose how much they are spending. They have yet to make public even a preliminary budget.

In late November, some opposition media quoting anonymous well-placed sources reported that the government will spend EUR1 billion to host Eurovision next year. Government officials including Finance Minister Samir Sharifov denied these reports, arguing that the exact amount of budget expenditures for this particular purpose had not been determined yet. Of course, the one billion euro figure is a media allegation but the absence of better data only highlights the lack of transparency surrounding government expenditures in Azerbaijan.

Indeed, it would be naïve to expect transparency in regard to a project as important as the song contest. As with most other large infrastructure projects, the whole process from the selection of the construction companies to the actual outlays will most likely not be revealed to the public. Only after the event is over will the gov-

ernment be likely to announce how much it spent on the preparations.

The lack of transparency for government spending on multi-million dollar infrastructure projects in Baku and the rest of the country has long been a focus of criticism for local non-governmental economic watchdogs. In their reports, independent economists often allege large-scale corruption in the case of projects that cost much more than they should. However, the government ignores these claims and does nothing to increase its accountability to the public. Law-enforcement agencies have never investigated apparent abuses regarding infrastructure expenditures and there is no reason to believe that works to host Eurovision next year will be any different.

Insufficient Infrastructure

A shortage of hotel rooms could be another problem, but the government claims that it has the resources to solve even this problem. Culture and Tourism Minister Abulfaz Garayev said in September that up to 60,000 tourists could be expected for the event. A more realistic estimate would be 20,000–30,000 tourists in May.

According to official statistics, there are currently 114 hotels with a total capacity of 11,000 guests in Baku. Four more luxury hotels—the Four Seasons, JW Marriott, Fairmont and Rixos—with several hundred high-quality rooms will open by 2012 along with several hundred new rooms in smaller three–four star hotels.

Another possible challenge is the readiness of Azerbaijan's Internet infrastructure for the heavy demand expected to surround the song contest. Osman Gunduz, president of the Azerbaijan Internet Forum, a Baku-based non-governmental watchdog, believes that the Internet in Azerbaijan is not ready for Eurovision either in terms of technical capacity or existing content. He said that most of country's on-line portals have weak servers which cannot sustain large number of visitors during the event. "The quality of mobile internet servers, which most tourists will be using during Eurovision is also weak, while prices are twice as high as the European average," Gunduz said.

"Content-wise things are not good either. Eurovision is a European contest, but most of the content in the Azerbaijani internet is in Azeri and Russian. Not much information is available in English, while there is nothing in other European languages such as German, French, or Spanish," Gunduz said. He also noted that there is not enough tourist information about Baku and Azerbaijan available on-line.

Indeed, web-sites which usually received about 1,000 hits a day could be visited simultaneously by as many as 20,000 during the contest and servers should be upgraded to handle these kinds of loads.

Likely Outcomes

Most likely, the government has neither the desire nor the political will to implement serious political reforms in regard to the Eurovision contest. Any liberalization will be "cosmetic" and short-term, covering only the period before and during the show in Baku in May 2012. During the contest, the authorities will try to ensure the creation of the necessary conditions for foreign journalists and guests, but after that, the situation will return to the current status quo.

But even with all these problems, the fact that Azerbaijan will host such a large and popular European song contest in Baku is still positive. First of all, the country will gain invaluable experience in hosting large-scale international events, something that is unprecedented for Baku. World-class international technical and creative specialists will be invited to help implement preparations and local staff will be able to learn from them. Police will be trained to handle large crowds of people and to respect the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community which makes up a key part of the Eurovision fan base. And, finally, local residents will experience the joy of the event and benefit from the opportunity to integrate into European culture.

As the Head of the EU Delegation in Azerbaijan Rolad Kobia said in his address "This will be a golden opportunity for Azerbaijan to show to the world the resolute and sweeping modernization of its society."

About the Author

Shahin Abbasov is an independent Azeri journalist and analyst. Since 2004 he has been a freelance correspondent for the Internet publication Eurasianet (www.eurasianet.org) in Azerbaijan. He has worked for 14 years in the print media, including as a deputy editor-in-chief for *Zerkalo* and *Echo* newspapers in Baku.