



In Brief: Azerbaijan human rights and the Eurovision

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Author: Ben Smith

Section International Affairs and Defence Section

After winning the 2011 competition in Düsseldorf, Azerbaijan will be hosting the Eurovision Song Contest from 22 to 26 May 2012 in the capital, Baku, despite calls for a boycott.

Construction of the Baku Crystal Hall, where the contest will be staged, and 'beautification' of the capital have been controversial: [Human Rights Watch says](#) that the Baku authorities have **forcibly evicted** dozens of families and demolished their homes, particularly in the area where the Crystal Hall is being built. The organisation reports that some houses were demolished in the middle of the night, sometimes with all the residents' possessions still inside. Journalists trying to film the demolitions have been beaten unconscious.

Human rights groups say that the Azerbaijani authorities have a very poor record on **freedom of speech**. Amnesty International reports that there are 18 prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan: activists imprisoned for peaceful protest and, recently, two journalists and two human rights defenders given lengthy jail terms. The group says that the authorities, far from easing off in the face of international criticism, have stepped up their crackdown on dissent. Azerbaijan comes 162nd of 178 nations in a [media freedom ranking](#) compiled by Reporters Without Borders

Khadija Ismayilova, a prominent journalist employed by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has investigated corrupt deals in Azerbaijan and the wealth of the ruling elite. [According to Amnesty International](#), she has been the victim of a smear campaign with strong signs of official involvement. In May 2012, Ismayilova won the 2012 "Courage in Journalism Award" given by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF). Previous winners include Anna Politkovskaya, the Russian journalist famous for investigating corruption.

Peaceful demonstrations in the centre of Baku are regularly **dispersed with violence**, with activists and opposition figures often beaten by the authorities.

The Azerbaijani authorities have given a **guarantee** to the European Broadcasting Union they will respect the European Convention on Human Rights during the Song Contest and ensure the freedom and safety of all participants and reporters. Critics point out that, as a member of the Council of Europe, Azerbaijan is obliged to respect the Convention at all times.

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The **European Broadcasting Union**, the body behind the Song Contest, claims that it supports freedom of speech. Applauding a Council of Europe declaration on the importance of independence in public service media, EBU Director General Ingrid Deltenre [said in February 2012](#) that public service broadcasters (whom the EBU represents) had a crucial role to play:

Well functioning PSM [Public Service Media] can be decisive in the protection of human rights, particularly freedom of expression. The EBU is steadfastly committed to supporting its Members in fostering an informed society where all voices are heard, and we will continue to pursue action to strengthen PSM management structures and cultivate quality journalism.

The freedom of speech campaign Article 19 was one of the organisations to complain about the EBU's approach to Azerbaijan. In spite of EBU official policy, the organisations [wrote on 8 May 2012](#) of the "failure of the EBU to publically criticise or in any way challenge the Azerbaijani authorities on the repressive environment for the press in the country."

The EBU counters that it is an inclusive organisation and that it has raised these matters with the authorities, including at a seminar it organised between the authorities and freedom of expression campaigners at its headquarters in Switzerland. It says that the Song Contest has had a beneficial effect by drawing attention to the human rights situation in Azerbaijan.

There have been widespread calls for a boycott of the contest, but the **Council of Europe** and the **Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe** have come out against calls for a boycott, as have local activists, saying that a dialogue with the Azeri authorities is helpful.

Other countries with questionable human rights records, such as Spain under Franco and, more recently, Ukraine and Russia, have hosted the contest.

In **Parliament**, [EDM 2861](#) calls on Azerbaijan and Armenia, in the context of the Eurovision Song Contest, to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute fulfilling the provision of the relevant UN resolutions. It also calls on the Azeri authorities "release all political prisoners, to respect human rights and freedom of expression and speech, and to end its persecution of the opposition."

Ilham Aliyev has been president of **Azerbaijan** since 2003; he is the son of Heydar Aliyev, who ruled from 1993-2003. In 2008 he was re-elected with 87% of the votes cast, according to official results. The [OSCE said](#) that the election represented some progress in democratic development, but still did not reach international standards. At the 2010 parliamentary election, the president's party received 45% of the vote and well over half the seats in the legislature. No opposition party received more than 1.8% of the vote and the rest went to 'independents' loyal to the government. The OSCE said that the election failed to meet a number of important OSCE commitments for democratic elections.

The Azeri economy has been growing quickly on the back of high hydrocarbon prices, managing 9.3% real GDP growth in 2009, although it has slowed since then. The UK is the largest foreign investor in the Azeri economy. In Transparency International's corruption perceptions index 2011, Azerbaijan ranks 142 out of 182. Azerbaijan is in dispute with Armenia (which has announced that it will boycott the contest) over the occupation by Armenia of the **Nagorno-Karabakh** enclave in Azerbaijan whose population is majority ethnic-Armenian. Armenia has defied [four UN Security Council resolutions](#) calling for withdrawal. Azerbaijan now houses hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons driven from their homes in the enclave.