

SPORT FOR RIGHTS EUROPEAN GAMES PRESS BRIEFING

The inaugural European Games opens in Baku, Azerbaijan on 12 June. The authoritarian regime of Ilham Aliyev is using the games to present an image of itself as a progressive nation. But in reality Azerbaijan is a country where dissenting journalists and activists are brutally repressed while the president and his cronies engage in corruption and embezzlement with impunity.

Gulnara Akhundova, an exiled Azerbaijani activist and campaigner for Sport for Rights says:

"Sport isn't above human rights. In the run-up to the European Games, the government of Azerbaijan has arrested the country's most prominent human rights defenders and journalists – yet those at the top of European sport stay silent. Why is sport now synonymous with corruption?"

Also see press release: human rights groups condemn European Olympic Committees for 'sportswashing' corruption and abuse of Azerbaijan's dictator.

Azerbaijan's corrupt regime

According to <u>Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index</u>, Azerbaijan ranks as 126th out of 175 for transparency, scoring just 29 on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (clean). <u>Reporters Without Borders</u> ranks Azerbaijan 162nd out of 180 for press freedom. <u>Freedom House</u> says Azerbaijan's press is "not free" and its internet only "partly free", giving the state an overall "not free" rating.

In 2009, a Baku-based US diplomat described Azerbaijan as a mafia state in <u>a cable</u> leaked to Wikileaks. The cable compared the Aliyev regime to the Godfather's Corleone family, saying that President Ilham Aliyev was "Michael (Corleone) on the outside, Sonny on the inside."

SPORTSWASHING

Azerbaijan is engaged in *sportswashing*: attempting to distract from its human rights record with prestigious sponsorship and hosting of events including the European Grand Prix 2016, matches in the 2020 European football championship and this month, Olympic spin-off the European Games.

The Azerbaijani government hopes the games will "showcase Azerbaijan as a vibrant and modern European nation of great achievement". To this end, President Aliyev has invested

\$6.5bn in the games, building venues across Baku. The regime is paying for all travel and accommodation for visiting teams.

The **Sport for Rights** campaign was set up to draw attention to Azerbaijan's human rights record ahead of and during the games. In a grim irony, Azerbaijani activist Rasul Jafarov, who was to head the campaign, has been jailed. He was due to appear in court to appeal his six-and-a-half year sentence for "abuse of power" on the day of the European Games opening ceremony, but, fearing attention from the international media heading to Baku for the games, the authorities have postponed the hearing.

Jafarov is far from the only person in Azerbaijan to suffer from speaking out. **Khadija Ismayilova**, a recent recipient of a <u>PEN free speech prize alongside Charlie Hebdo</u>, was arrested in December 2014 and detained on charges of embezzlement, abuse of power, tax evasion, and illegal entrepreneurship after reporting on the ruling family's links to corruption in telecoms deals that may have leached up to \$1bn from the Azerbaijani economy. In spite of her imprisonment, Khadija's investigative reporting is being <u>published</u> by the The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project.

Human rights activists **Arif Yunis** and **Leyla Yunis** have been detained and await trial for treason. **Emin Huseynov** – Director of the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety, has been forced to seek refuge in the Swiss embassy in Baku to avoid trumped-up charges. He will be arrested if he sets foot outside the embassy. For full list see Appendix A below.

WHAT ARE THE EUROPEAN GAMES?

The European Games were instituted by the European Olympic Committees in 2012. The 2015 games in Baku mark the first occasion the games will be held. The games are not "Olympic", but do count as qualifiers for the Olympic games. Many major European athletes will not be appearing at the games including Olympic champions Jessica Ennis and Mo Farah, though the games will host events such as 3x3 basketball and beach soccer.

One of the key figures behind the European Games is EOC President Patrick Hickey. Hickey has been effusive in his praise of the the Azerbaijani regime: in April 2015 he commented that: "Baku 2015 will come to life through the dedication and effort of your entire country. It has been an absolute pleasure working with the Azerbaijani leadership. Your professionalism and focus has never failed to impress us."

Mr Hickey has form in courting dictatorships. In 2008, Hickey was behind moves to give an <u>award</u> for "Outstanding Contribution to the Olympic Movement" to Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko. <u>According to Andrew Jennings</u>, the journalist who uncovered corruption at FIFA, Belarus was Patrick Hickey's first choice for the European games:

"Hickey gets cozy with people many of us wouldn't invite home to meet our loved ones. Seeking a wealthy patron in Europe to pay for a regional Olympics to mirror the Pan-American Games and not finding any takers among reputable leaders, Hickey turned to the president of the

national Olympic committee of Belarus, whose day job is being Europe's last dictator. Ignoring Belarus's unenviable doping record, Hickey presented the thuggish Alexander Lukashenko with a plaque commending his 'Outstanding Contribution to the Olympic Movement.' But Lukashenko is broke, so Hickey pursued the oil-rich president of the Azerbaijan Olympic Committee, another head of state. A noted kleptomaniac and jailer of reporters, Ilham Aliyev has reportedly offered millions to fund the event in 2015."

OFFICIAL GAMES PARTNERS



Among the official sponsors are BP and Azerbaijan's state oil company Socar. A Global Witness report in Dec 2013 detailed the deeply shady nature of Socar's practices, with complex webs of secret deals and contracts all apparently leading to one man, Anar Aliyev, of whom next to nothing is known.

Socar employees have been known to use violence - including an infamous attack on journalist Idrak Abbasov in 2013. Just weeks after Abbasov had won the prestigious Guardian/Index on Censorship journalism award, Abbasov was brutally beaten by Socar security while filming a forced demolition being carried out by the company's employees.

SOUTHERN CORRIDOR PIPELINE

Socar is currently involved in a USD \$45bn project known as the Southern Corridor, building a pipeline from Shah Deniz 2 oil field to Italy. The project's Advisory Council includes Tony Blair, Goldman Sachs chair and former European Commissioner Peter Sutherland and former German foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher.

In 2009 Tony Blair was criticised for accepting £90,000 to visit an Azerbaijani methanol factory owned by a close friend of President Aliyev and appear on state television. Blair made no mention of human rights during his visit.

BANNED FROM AZERBAIJAN

One absence from the opening of the European Games will be United Kingdom culture and sports secretary John Whittingdale.

Other notable personae non grata include soprano Montserrat Caballe, British parliamentarians Stephen Pound, Gordon Marsden and Baroness Flather, Bloomberg editor Tony Halpin and journalists from the New York Times, Washington Post and the Irish Times among others. <u>A</u> 2013 list released by the Azerbaijan Ministry of foreign affairs contained the names of over 300

foreigners declared "personae non gratae", the majority of whom come from the worlds of journalism or human rights.

Appendix A: List of jailed journalists and human rights defenders in Azerbaijan

Jailed journalists:

- 1. **Nijat Aliyev** editor-in-chief of the website azadxeber.az, serving a 10-year prison sentence on spurious charges of drug possession and the illegal import and sale of religious literature.
- 2. **Araz Guliyev** editor of the website xeber44.com, serving an eight-year prison sentence on spurious charges of illegal possession of weapons, inciting hatred, and offensive action against the flag or emblem of Azerbaijan.
- 3. **Parviz Hashimli** *BizimYol* newspaper reporter and editor of the moderator.az website, serving an eight-year prison sentence on spurious charges of organising the sale of weapons from Iran.
- 4. **Seymur Hezi** –*Azadliq* newspaper reporter and presenter of the Azerbaijan Hour satellite television programme, serving a five-year prison sentence on spurious hooliganism charges.
- 5. **Khadija Ismayilova** Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist detained on spurious charges of embezzlement, illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion, abuse of power, and inciting someone to attempt suicide.
- 6. **Hilal Mammadov** editor-in-chief of *TolishiSedo* newspaper, serving a five-year prison sentence on spurious charges of drug possession, treason, and inciting hatred.
- 7. **Rauf Mirkadirov** *Zerkalo* newspaper columnist, detained on spurious treason charges, awaiting trial.
- 8. **Tofig Yagublu** *YenuMusavat* newspaper columnist, serving a five-year prison sentence on spurious charges of organising mass riots and using violence against police officers.

Jailed (and effectively jailed) human rights defenders:

- 1. **Intigam Aliyev** human rights lawyer and Chairman of the Legal Education Society, serving a 7.5-year prison sentence on spurious charges of tax evasion, illegal entrepreneurship, and abuse of power.
- 2. **Emin Huseynov** Director of the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety, trapped at the Swiss Embassy in Baku, facing arrest on spurious charges of tax evasion, illegal entrepreneurship, and abuse of power.
- 3. **Rasul Jafarov** Chairman of the Human Rights Club, serving a 6.5-year prison sentence on spurious charges of tax evasion, illegal entrepreneurship, and abuse of power.
- 4. **Anar Mammadli** Chairman of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre, serving a 5.5-year prison sentence on spurious charges of tax evasion, illegal entrepreneurship, and abuse of power.
- 5. **Arif Yunus** historian and academic, detained on spurious charges of treason and fraud, awaiting trial.
- 6. **Leyla Yunus** Director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, detained on spurious charges of treason, fraud, forgery, tax evasion, and illegal entrepreneurship, awaiting trial.

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