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UPCOMING MEGA-EVENTS IN THE CAUCASUS

- Azerbaijan's Eurovision Story: Great Chances to Improve, But No Political Will 2
By Shahin Abbasov, Baku
- Georgia and the Sochi Olympic Games 5
By Molly Corso, Tbilisi

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.

Georgia and the Sochi Olympic Games

By Molly Corso, Tbilisi

Abstract

The planned 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi are both an opportunity and a challenge for neighboring Georgia and the Caucasus region at large. The event offers a chance for the region to bask in the international limelight as the host for the world's athletes—for the first time since the 1980 Moscow Games. But security concerns, underscored by an uptick in terrorist attacks in the North Caucasus, and Russia's willingness to include contested Abkhazia in the Games' preparation, threaten to overshadow the event itself.

Olympic Dreams

Before Sochi won its bid for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in July 2007, Tbilisi had its eyes on Olympic Gold. President Mikheil Saakashvili backed an Olympic campaign, initiated by the late billionaire Badri Patarkatsishvili, for Borjomi-Bakuriani, a ski resort in Georgia.

The bid—far-fetched as it was—was based on Saakashvili's plan to use tourism as the foundation of Georgia's economy: Olympic Games are not always financial windfalls for countries, but hosting thousands of athletes and their fans was seen as a surefire way to bolster development in Tbilisi, Borjomi and Bakuriani—the three cities tagged in Georgia's application.

Borjomi's bid lost out, however, to Sochi—and Saakashvili initially welcomed Russia's success as a victory for the region: Sochi's application was only slightly more plausible than Borjomi's had been—both cities faced fierce competition from Austria, Spain and South Korea.

The upcoming Games were also—briefly—perceived as a chance to improve relations between Tbilisi and Moscow. In fact, despite Russia's 2006 embargo against Georgia, Saakashvili called Vladimir Putin to congratulate him personally, going so far as to say Georgia had supported Sochi's bid for the Games “from the very beginning,” according to media reports.

Saakashvili's exuberance for the Sochi Games was tempered, however, by concern Russia would use the Games—and their proximity to Abkhazia—to support the de-facto authorities in Sukhumi.

The Olympic-inspired bonhomie between Tbilisi and Moscow was short lived, however. A year after Sochi had won its bid, Russia and Georgia were entangled in a five-day war that ended with Moscow formally recognizing Abkhazia—Georgia's wayward territory that borders the future site of the 2014 Games. Despite the terms of the peace deal that ended the war, Russia did not remove its troops from Abkhazia, leaving a militarized bordering the Games.

The war was a turning point in Russo-Georgian relations—and Georgian support for the Sochi Olympics was one more victim in the fall-out between the two

countries. By October 2008, Saakashvili had flirted with the possibility of boycotting the Olympics, although that idea was quickly abandoned. Instead, Tbilisi downshifted to a policy of focusing international attention on Russia's ‘un-Olympic’ Sochi Games, particularly stressing Moscow's use of Abkhaz resources—land, people, infrastructure—to build its Olympic village and the ongoing controversy between the ethnic Circassian population that was nearly annihilated by Russia when it absorbed Sochi into the Russian Empire.

Terror in the North Caucasus—Past and Present

Tbilisi's strategy appears to hinge on two conflicts: the on-going frozen conflict with Abkhazia, a breakaway region with its own de-facto government since its bloody 1992–1993 bid for independence, and the Circassian genocide, a 19th century campaign by Tsarist Russia to annex Sochi and the surrounding territory.

By focusing on Russia's alleged use of illegal force, Georgia hoped to undermine Moscow's moral right to host the Games—an international symbol of peace and accord. It also hoped to underscore Russia's role as a regional bully and king maker, with invested interests in conflicts throughout the region from Abkhazia to Nagorno-Karabakh, not to mention Chechnya and Ingushetia.

While Moscow views the Sochi Olympics as a chance to flex its muscle in the North Caucasus, Tbilisi sees the Games as an indication of Russia's destructive role in the region.

One main point of contention for the Georgian government is Russia's use of Abkhazian labor, resources and infrastructure for the Sochi Games. Tbilisi considers these acts a direct violation of Georgian sovereignty and the embargo it has sought to enforce on the Abkhaz since it lost direct control of the territory nearly 20 years ago.

Abkhazia is just shy of 30 kilometers from the site of the 2014 Olympics, and potential Russian investments in Sukhumi's defunct airport—as well as ongoing projects to improve the road, rail and hospitality infra-

structure—have been welcomed by the de-facto government and its struggling economy. Real estate prices have increased, according to media reports, and the increased demand for cement and rock has bolstered employment.

For Georgia, however, that is all just another sign that Moscow is annexing Abkhazia. In February 2011, in comments to Georgia's Russian-language regional television station, PIK, Saakashvili lambasted the Russians for perpetuating strife and ethnic cleansing even as it prepares for the Olympic Games.

"As far as Russia's political problem is concerned [in respect to the Sochi Olympics], it is a huge problem, because just a few kilometers from the Olympic site Russia has officially on the political level legalized ethnic cleansing [in Abkhazia]," Civil.ge quoted him as saying. "In this sense they have problems, but this problem was not created by us. We would be happy if we could resolve this problem gradually through joint efforts with Russia."

Saakashvili's comments came as a response to comments from Russian President Dmitry Medvedev that indicated Georgia could pose a threat to the Olympic Games—a charge Saakashvili denied.

While Georgia is not a physical threat to the Olympics, it is working hard to undermine Russia's moral right to hold the Games. Georgian government officials and law makers have been pushing the cause of ethnic Circassians, a nation that was nearly annihilated by Tsarist Russia in the 19th century.

The Circassian cause is not influential locally, regionally or internationally, and the Circassian efforts to take ownership of the Games, or force Russian authorities to pay tribute to the memory of the Circassians who once lived in and around Sochi have been unsuccessful.

The Circassians were defeated by the Russian Army, and many were killed and forced into exile after a bloody battle that occurred on the site of the Sochi Olympics. Georgia became the first country to formally recognize the Circassian tragedy as a genocide in May, a legal act that added traction for Saakashvili's efforts to promote a "United Caucasus."

The movement is nebulous and vague—it is unclear, for example, how Georgia will be able to unite with the Abkhaz in light of the on-going conflict between Tbilisi and Sukhumi—but it highlights the deep-seated flaws in Russia's ambitions in the region. While Moscow perceives itself as a superpower with unquestionable jurisdiction over the Caucasus, Saakashvili has called for an alternative source of authority by working to create a united front out of the ethnic groups that populate the region.

Over the past year instability has been endemic in the Caucasus. In January, a terrorist attack shook

Domodedovo, a major airport in Moscow and, in February, terrorists killed three Russian tourists skiing near Sochi.

Stability and Security

The issue of security at the Sochi Games has become a troubling one for Russia and its immediate neighbors, including Georgia. While there are reports that Moscow is taking precautions to protect the Games' venues and future guests, rhetoric from Russian officials indicates that the Kremlin is prepared to blame Tbilisi for any problems that occur during the Olympics.

For Putin, the Games are a personal mission to showcase Russia's development and return as a major international power since he came to office in 2000. He drove the Sochi bid, and pledged the state would invest billions to turn the dilapidated Soviet-era resort into a world-class sporting venue.

But even as the Olympics have the potential to recast Russia—and the Caucasus—as a development success story—the Games are also perceived as a target for terrorists who are bent on bringing the Kremlin's wars in Chechnya and neighboring Dagestan and Ingushetia to Russian households.

The February attack on skiing tourists struck a nerve and subsequently Putin has been diligent about reinforcing his image as the man who can make the Olympics a success. In November he attended the 100th anniversary celebration of the Russian Olympic Committee, promising Sochi would deliver.

While security measures around the Olympic site are tight, according to media reports, the Russian authorities have done little to address long standing problems of poverty, corruption and inequality in the region.

In addition, the Abkhaz conflict is frozen but not settled. A similar conflict, between breakaway South Ossetia and Georgia, is further away but still close enough to cause concerns for Olympic organizers.

Against this backdrop, Georgia remains a scapegoat for Russian authorities as the Kremlin seeks to root out any threats to the Games. In August, the Russian National Counter-Terrorism Committee accused Tbilisi of supporting Islamic terrorists in the North Caucasus—a charge that the International Crisis Group reported has no real substance. The Georgian government has repeatedly denied any connection with terrorist groups in the North Caucasus or elsewhere.

The International Crisis Group warned in its 2011 report, however, that Russian authorities might be making occasional, unfounded accusations against Georgia to "prepare the ground" in case there is an attack or security problem at the Sochi Olympics.

Conclusion

The 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi should be a success for the Caucasus—an opportunity to showcase, on a global scale, the incredible potential of the region as a venue for international events and tourism.

For Georgia, the challenges of an Olympic event less than 50 miles from its own conflict with Abkhazia are coupled with the opportunities the Games provide for Tbilisi to emerge as a stable regional player.

Three years before the Games will be held, however, the turbulent mix of political ambition and failed pol-

icy in the North Caucasus is creating problems for Moscow—and the region—as it prepares for the Games.

Security issues and tense relations between Russia and Georgia, as well as other players, threaten to overshadow the Games and could present a serious threat to the event. On-going conflict in the region could undermine Russia's goal to cement its role as the dominant force in the North Caucasus.

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Molly Corso is a freelance journalist based in Tbilisi. She is also the editor of *Investor.ge*, the business magazine published by the American Chamber of Commerce in Georgia.

ABOUT THE CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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