



# Why Eurovision song contest should not be held in Azerbaijan

**By: Maran Turner**

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(CNN) -- For some, this week in Europe will be consumed by a singing contest. Eurovision. A contest where musical ambassadors from all over Europe and beyond come together as an instrument for political jockeying... I mean to showcase their talent in a performance of free expression.

In either case, it makes this year's venue --Azerbaijan -- a controversial one, but also an excellent opportunity for international advocacy to do some good.

Eurovision is a singing contest whereby each country participant, which includes most countries in Europe and others who are members of the Eurovision Broadcasting Union, like Russia and Israel, sends musical acts to a competition that pits country against country.

It should be about the performances. But, it isn't. It's European politics at its most flamboyant. And this show has been a curious reflection of regional politics since 1956.

Historically, Eurovision has offered some interesting outlets for citizen voters. Britain received no votes in 2003 after joining the U.S. in invading Iraq. On the other hand, the contest provided for a coalition with encouraging indications in 2007 when Serbia won after it nabbed the support of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Slovenia.

This year's contest is in Azerbaijan, which is a member of the Eurovision Zone. The venue is a contested one, both when it comes to the country and the actual site for the competition itself. Claims of corruption and political repression plague the Baku government led by President Ilham Aliyev.

The Aliyev government is especially infamous for corruption, and Transparency International rates it as one of the most corrupt governments in the world. The Aliyev family is reported to have interests in just about every private sector (which does not include oil and gas in the public sector), including telecoms, construction, real estate, aviation, and mineral mines.

Few were surprised to learn recently that the president is profiting off the Eurovision contest. It was recently uncovered by the Organized Crime and Reporting Project in conjunction with Radio Free Europe that his family appears to have a stake in the company actually constructing the venue.

Azerbaijan won the honor of hosting this year's contest in Baku because its singing duo, Eldar & Nigar won with their song, "Running Scared" in 2011. Coincidentally, plenty of people in Azerbaijan are in fact scared. And this reality flies in the face of the polished pro-Western exterior the government transmits to the world.

The, actually very, autocratic government cracks down on any dissent. Some reports indicate that the Azerbaijan government is imprisoning 17 "prisoners of conscience"; others say it is more like 70. These are individuals imprisoned not for a crime but as punishment for their exercise of a fundamental freedom, most often freedom of expression.

On World Press Day earlier this month, Azerbaijan's Ambassador to the United Nations, and current Security Council President, Agshin Mehdiyev told a room of journalists that Azerbaijan has a "free media" and "does not need world press day." People in Azerbaijan tell a different story. And embarrassingly, the ambassador was clearly unaware of the occasion. The month before, an Azerbaijani journalist, Eynulla Fatullayev, had been awarded UNESCO's World Press Freedom Prize.

Eynulla Fatullayev had been unjustly imprisoned in 2007 and released in 2011.

In another attempt to cut off criticism, the Azerbaijan government imprisoned two well known bloggers, Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade, in 2008. The bloggers' crimes: hooliganism. Their real crime: a video poking fun at the government's recent extravagant payment for donkeys. The two men -- now known as the donkey bloggers -- were released early, after a coordinated international campaign.

Today among these prisoners of conscience is Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, a former student of the Harvard University Kennedy School of Public Policy. After the program, Bakhtiyar went home to Azerbaijan to stand in a parliamentary election. He used his campaign platform to call for an end to government corruption. The government did not appreciate this, and began hassling him about compulsory military service.

The Council of Europe, of which Azerbaijan is a member, has called repeatedly for alternative civil service to be permitted. The government added constitutional language to provide for alternative service, but in practice does not permit alternative service. Despite legal deferments

and a plea for alternative civil service, Bakhtiyar was sentenced to two years in prison -- the longest prison term observed for this crime.

With the Azerbaijan government in violation of the Council of Europe, infamous for corruption, notorious for repression against expression, it is indeed ironic that Europe's most beloved singing contest is held in Azerbaijan.

Certainly, the Azerbaijani people are proud of this attention. And they should be.

But, this is not just an opportunity for the Azerbaijani people to shine, Eurovision is also an important opportunity for us all to focus on the host country's government and to demand reform, which to start should be the release of individuals like Bakhtiyar Hajiyev.