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## European Games Open in Azerbaijan Amid Controversy

by Mike Richman



Participants perform during the opening ceremony of the 2015 European Games in Baku, Azerbaijan, June 12, 2015.

More than 6,000 athletes from 50 countries converged Friday for the opening ceremonies of the inaugural European Games at Olympic Stadium in Azerbaijan's capital, Baku.

Azerbaijani officials are hoping the biggest athletic event in the country's history, two weeks of competition involving 20 sports to be broadcast in 45 countries in Europe and 98 non-European nations, will put the former Soviet republic on the 21st century map. Some of the sports will serve as qualifiers for the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.

But the games are taking place under a cloud of controversy because of Azerbaijan's record of suppressing democracy and free speech and cracking down on journalists, activists and opponents of the autocratic regime of President Ilham Aliyev.

There are at least 20 "prisoners of conscience" in Azerbaijan, "detained solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression," according to rights group Amnesty International.

The U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists described Azerbaijan as the leading jailer of journalists in Europe and Central Asia, noting that eight independent journalists are in prison because of their critical reporting.

Among those imprisoned is Khadija Ismayilova, an award-winning investigative journalist for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Azerbaijani service, Radio Azadliq. Ismayilova, who has written about government corruption in Azerbaijan, has been in pre-trial detention since December.

### Human rights crisis

In a [letter to the editor](#) published Friday in *The New York Times*, Ismayilova wrote that Azerbaijan is "in the midst of a human rights crisis" and that "things have never been worse." She said she has been targeted along with dozens of other political prisoners for "telling the truth about the situation in my country."

Veronika Goldston, Human Rights Watch's advocacy director for Europe and Central Asia, slammed Azerbaijan's government in an interview with VOA's Azerbaijan service.

"The message has been clear from many parts of the international community ranging from the Council of Europe and the European Union's parliament to [a] number of European governments, as well as the U.S. government, that the crackdown that [the] Azeri government has waged against civil society and imprisonment of dozens of government critics for no reason other than legitimate civic activism is wrong and must stop," she said.

"The European Games have been a project by Azerbaijan's leadership," Goldston added. "President Ilham Aliyev has been personally and extremely invested in this. Azerbaijan came up with the idea of European games and offered itself as a host.

"It is beyond any doubt that the games have a very strong political dimension. It is therefore all the more important from our perspective and many others for the European Olympic Committee to respond to this incredible crackdown over the past 12 months against critics."

In an apparent attempt to quash coverage of the country's questionable human rights practices, the Azerbaijani government has barred some journalists and human rights activists from attending the European Games.

In recent weeks, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW), Azerbaijani authorities denied or failed to provide required press passes and visas to at least three foreign journalists with European media outlets. They included Regis Gente, a journalist with Radio France Internationale who has been based in the South Caucasus reporting on Azerbaijan since 2002.

HRW also noted that police at the airport in Baku recently refused entry to, and deported, Emma Hughes, an activist with the London-based group Platform who was accredited to cover the games as editor of Red Pepper magazine. Hughes has advocated the release of government critics wrongly imprisoned by Azerbaijani authorities.

### 'Unfair' criticism

Amid the torrent of criticism, Azerbaijani officials have remained steadfast in their efforts to put on a successful European Games. The oil-rich nation, which had no competition in the bidding process, has spent billions on the event, building glittery new facilities and paying for the athletes to come to the country.

Elin Suleymanov, Azerbaijan's ambassador to the U.S., [wrote in an op-ed](#) Friday in *The Washington Times* that Azerbaijan's ability to organize a sporting event of such magnitude is not only a success for his country, but also a "transformative experience for the entire region."

Azerbaijan, he noted, is not perfect and has its share of critics.

"In fact, the nation has recently been subjected to an orchestrated, persistent and repetitive campaign of denunciation, which focused solely on negativity and purposefully ignores the nation's remarkable progress," Suleymanov wrote.

"Singling out Azerbaijan, a progressive, diverse nation, is unfair," said Suleymanov. Against the background of increasing regional security threats, a rise in religious violence, including a terrifying pattern of mass attacks on women and the potential spread of ongoing conflicts, a campaign against Azerbaijan is myopic and highly counterproductive."

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