

Azerbaijani Film in Decline

Author: [Rufat Abbasov](#)

Cinema seats lie empty as Azerbaijanis rent pirate videos, and the film industry is desperately short of cash.

Film-makers in Azerbaijan are facing the same dire problems as other industries- there's no money coming in because no one will risk investing and because too few people are prepared to pay for the product. Internal politics have added to their problems as rival officials grapple for control of the film industry.

The facts paint a stark picture. In the late 1980s Azerbaijan - still part of the Soviet Union - produced about 10 films a year. This year four films are planned. There are few cinemas, and they barely make enough in ticket sales to break even. Money is tight for most people, and it's cheaper to rent a pirate video.

Years ago, Azerbaijani films enjoyed success both at home and abroad. The first ever Azerbaijani film was made in Baku in 1898. The 1945 film "Arshin Mal-Alan", starring the great singer Rashid Beibutov, was dubbed into more than 70 languages and shown in over 130 countries. Hundreds of films were made during the Soviet period.

The industry is now entirely dependent on government funding. It gets 600,000 US dollars a year, and that is to cover everything from making films to running the cinemas and maintaining archives. The whole sum would not pay for a decent-budget film made in Russia.

"Our cinema industry is plagued by financial problems," said Raifa Safarova, an independent film critic.

Blocked by tight government funding, film-makers are unable to attract commercial sponsors because of concerns that a film will never pay for itself. Apart from the shortage of cinema-goers, sweeping violations of copyright cut into profitability.

Industry insiders say potential investors are also put off by the conflicts and rivalries between officials in charge of Azerbaijani film.

The strife began when the state-owned Azerkinovideo company was dissolved in April 2001, and its assets and remit were delegated to the ministry of culture.

According to a film critic who wished to remain anonymous, the conflict peaked when Vagif Mustafayev, a director famous for his prize-winning films "The Scoundrel" and "All for the Best", was made deputy minister of culture and put in charge of the film industry. He was appointed without prior consultation with the minister, Polad Bulbulogly.

In a retaliatory move, Bulbulogly established a central film authority within his ministry, ignoring a presidential decree which assigned the role to Mustafayev.

Relations between Bulbulogly, Mustafayev, and Oscar-winning director Rustam Ibrahimbekov, who heads the Cinematographers' Union, have been strained ever since. At meetings and industry forums, including the national congress held by film-makers, they have engaged in public arguments with each other.

Despite their animosities, all sides in the dispute appear to share the common goal of resuscitating the industry and restoring at least some of its reputation. The question is how to go about it.

After he was appointed, Mustafayev claimed that his "predecessors had ruined the film industry", and said he was going to turn Azerbaijan into an "Oriental Hollywood".

"Negotiations are already underway to go ahead with the project," he told IWPR in a recent interview. "I cannot name our partners, because those who oppose me could disrupt the negotiating process. But I promise that soon Azerbaijan's movie industry will be back on track."

Rasim Balayev, secretary general of the Cinematographers' Union, thinks Mustafayev is deluding himself if he thinks he can create a thriving film industry in a country with such low living standards. "I don't understand how he proposes to boost the industry when people no longer go to theatres. Ticket sales are our main source of revenue," he said.

Box-office figures look bleak. Theatres cannot afford expensive foreign films that would attract larger audiences. The top cinema, the "Azerbaijan", pays an average of 6,000 dollars to show a foreign film under a license for two weeks, but is barely in the black. Audience figures are a fraction of what they were in the early 1990s.

Many Azerbaijanis say they no longer feel a great desire to go to the cinema, and have even begun to forget where the cinemas are.

Housewife Zahra Gulieva told IWPR that it's been years since she last went to see a movie. "The 'Azerbaijan' is the only decent theatre left, and it's quite expensive, an average of two or three dollars for a ticket," she said. "Plus there's nothing interesting showing anymore. I'm 26, and I no longer get excited about action movies. Other cinemas aren't worth the trip either - at best, they'll be showing an Indian film."

Gulieva bemoaned the fact that it is hard to see the few quality domestic films that do get made. "I know our directors have been making films, but I haven't seen any of them. I visited my relatives in Georgia recently, who praised "Sary Gelin" (The Bride in Yellow), an Azerbaijani film I had never heard of."

Jamil Farajov, who heads the culture ministry's central film authority, puts the blame for empty theatres squarely on video pirates. Piracy is so rampant in Azerbaijan, he told IWPR, that a new film released in the US turns up on video on the black market before it hits the wide screen. Most people prefer to rent a video for 20 cents than pay a ticket price ten times that price. That makes it "an unattainable dream" to turn a profit from showing these films in the cinemas, he said.

"The pirates have much more freedom here than in Europe, where breach of copyright is punishable by law. Azerbaijan has no legal framework to prosecute for video piracy. It is a booming shadow business here."

Farajov also sees cultural change as a factor. "You need to feel happy before you want to go and see a movie. It's like a drug - you take it when you're feeling great already, or feeling really terrible. Neither of those happens too often nowadays."

"It is no longer the essential entertainment that it once was for older generations in Baku," he said with some nostalgia.

But he is still cautiously optimistic about the future, even if it is a long time before the film business is back in a healthy state.

Rufat Abassov is a correspondent for the newspaper Olaylar in Azerbaijan.

Location: Stavropol
Russia
North Ossetia
Ingushetia

Focus: Caucasus

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/azerbaijani-film-decline>