

Azerbaijani Writer Accused Over "Disloyal" Novel

Author: [Maharram Zeynalov](#)

Akram Aylisli wanted to show that his fellow-Azerbaijanis could admit past mistakes, but his ritual humiliation suggest he was wrong.

Azerbaijani writer Akram Aylisli has been stripped of a top state honour and subjected to public abuse for publishing a novel seen as too sympathetic towards Armenians.

As the criticism mounted, the novelist said he felt as if he was living through the worst days of Stalinism.

Ayisli's novel "Stone Dreams" was published in the December issue of the Moscow magazine *Druzhba Narodov*, and included descriptions of mass killings of Armenians in Nakhichevan in the early 20th century, and in Sumgait at the end of the Soviet period.

Protesters burned portraits of Aylisli and members of parliament called for him to lose his citizenship.

President Ilham Aliyev issued a decree on February 7 removing Aylisli's title of "People's Author".

The presidential administration had already made its views clear. Ali Hasanov, head of its political department, told the APA news agency, "We, the Azerbaijani people, must display public scorn for such people. A man who belongs to no nation has no right to speak about human feelings."

Hasanov compared Aylisli to Turkish author Orhan Pamuk, who outraged his government by saying genocide was committed against Armenians in the early 20th century.

"Orhan Pamuk earned the condemnation of his nation with the phrase, 'Turks must recognise the Armenian genocide'. He said this only in order to win the Nobel Prize, but as a result, he lost his homeland," Hasanov said. "It appears that Akram Aylisli wants a Nobel Prize. But if your nation and your people reject you, is that honour worth having? Nothing stands higher than national sentiment."

The beginning and end of the 20th century were scarred by violence between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. Both sides now tend to downplay the suffering of the other nation, and artistic depictions of this are extremely rare.

It is not clear how many people in Azerbaijan have read Ayisli's novel, but officials queued up to condemn it as unpatriotic.

"The Armenians should erect a monument to Akram Aylisli," Siyavush Novruzov, a member of parliament from the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan party, said. "If all the Armenian writers got together and articulated the 'Armenian truth' in Russian, they couldn't have done so as successfully as Aylisli."

When parliament debated the novel on February 1, one member, Nizami Jafarov, suggested that Aylisli be stripped of his citizenship, adding, "Let him go to Yerevan and serve in some church there." Other members proposed a ban on the publication of his works, while deputy speaker Bahar Muradova accused him of treason.

The day before that debate, a group of pro-government youth activists staged a protest outside the premises of the official Writers' Union. Burning pictures of Aylisli and posters bearing the titles of his books, they chanted: "Armenian Akram, leave the country."

Aylisli said he was staying put.

"If they want me to leave the country, they should choose more civilised methods," he told IWPR by telephone. "I'm looking out the window, and I can see some young people gathering yet again."

Discussing his novel, Aylisli said he had wanted to send Armenians the message that Azerbaijanis were able to acknowledge past mistakes.

The writer said his wife, son and daughter-in-law had been dismissed from their jobs.

"They sacked my wife in a very strange way - they accused her of having books by Armenian authors in her library. Where else should they have been? And anyway, they were talking about books that weren't by Armenian authors," he said.

"What is happening is just incomprehensible. We live in Azerbaijan, which has responsibilities to the Council of Europe, which has a constitution, where they talk about freedom of speech, yet it feels like

we're living in the Soviet Union of 1937," Aylisli said. "Our Academy of Sciences has decided to conduct an entire investigation into my book, which also shows things in this country in very poor light."

He speculated that the campaign against him might also have stemmed from his membership of the Intellectuals' Forum, which is headed by well-known screenwriter Rustam Ibrahimbeyov who is in trouble with the authorities. (See **Giant of Azerbaijani Cinema Under Fire**.)

Gunel Movlud, a poet, is among those who have read the "Stone Dreams".

"As a writer, I couldn't fail to appreciate the literary qualities of the novel, which is beautifully written. As a reader, I also got great pleasure from it. As a citizen, and also – and I stress this – as a refugee from Karabakh, I can say that the novel in no way hurt my feelings," she said. "As for the public reaction to the novel and the attacks on the novelist, many countries have civilised ways of expressing disagreement. You can go to court if a book hurts your feelings."

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