

Lavish Spending on Euro-Games as Azeri Economy Falters

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Splashing out cash on first-of-its-kind sporting event seen as a valuable PR exercise by Azerbaijan's leaders.

Hosting the European Games is seen as a way of polishing Azerbaijan's international reputation, which has been dented by criticism of human rights abuses. But as spending goes through the roof, there is increasing concern that money is being squandered at a time when the country can least afford it.

The European Games on June 12 to 28 will be the first ever, so hosting them is a particular honour for Azerbaijan. The Olympic committees of European states voted to support its application by 38 out of 48 votes. Then again, Azerbaijan was the only country bidding.

Sports minister Azad Rahimov is chief executive of BEGOC, the committee running the games in Baku. He says four billion US dollars has been spent on building a new sports "city" and refurbishing existing facilities.

Interviewed by the APA news agency, Rahimov made it clear that the games were about putting Azerbaijan on the map.

The international audience watching the games will get a further opportunity to become better acquainted with Azerbaijan, a fast-developing country," he said.

He added that the funding for the games was being "properly monitored" and that "the public is regularly informed about this".

According to Joshgun Eldaroglu, sports commentator for the opposition newspaper Azadliq, "this competition hasn't got anything to do with developing sport. For the Azerbaijani government, the games are above all political."

Eldaroglu says the international Olympic movement has benefited by "not having to spend a dime".

Azerbaijan is paying the travel and accommodation costs of all 6,000 sportsmen and women who are competing.

Eldaroglu noted that Russia was hosting the football World Cup in 2018, and Qatar four years after that.

"Only dictators are in a position to hold games like this," he said.

Arastun Orujlu, head of the East-West think tank, agrees that hosting the European Games is a public relations exercise with a political motive. In his view, the government will fail in its attempt to deflect attention from the concerted campaign to silence dissident voices by arresting opposition members and independent journalists and shutting down the organisations they work for . (For more, see [Arrests Continue Ahead of Euro-Games](#) and [Grim Year for Press Freedom](#) .)

"There will be no profit from these games. They represent the pursuit of political goals," Oruglu said. "But it won't have the desired effect. Lots of money was spent and cultural facilities were built for the Eurovision Song Contest [in Baku in 2012], yet Azerbaijan was highlighted in the foreign media through shaming reports on human rights violations."

The total cost of the 2015 European Games is known, but a figure of around eight billion dollars has been reported for the budget.

Zohrab Ismayil, head of the Association for Promoting a Free Economy, is concerned about no-holds-barred funding for the games at a time when Azerbaijan is tightening its belt in other areas. A 30 per cent currency devaluation in February left borrowers struggling to repay loans at a much increased rate, while prices in the shops went up sharply in anticipation of higher import costs. (See [Personal Debt Crisis Bites in Azerbaijan](#).)

In the current economic climate, Ismayil believes the lavish spending on the games is not just imprudent, but potentially dangerous, especially as the income they generate is likely to be modest.

"The price of oil on world markets is fairly low, and it is forecast to fall further," he said. "In that scenario, limitless spending doesn't bode well. An economic crisis is already emerging.

One warning sign for any post-Soviet state is when public-sector institutions stop paying their staff.

“I haven’t been able to get my wages for three months now,” said a 52-year-old teacher originally from Kelbajar in western Azerbaijan. “The last time I spoke to the education department about my salary, they told me not to worry, the back pay would come to us in chunks once the European Games were over. But for now, we should just put up with it.”

Nurgul Novruz is the pseudonym of an Azerbaijani journalist.

Location: Azerbaijan

Topic: Economy
Human rights

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/lavish-spending-euro-games-azeri-economy>