

Stray Dogs Lose Out as Azerbaijan Prepares for Eurovision

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Baku authorities hunt down strays as part of efforts to tidy up city, and fail to grasp animal rights concerns.

As Azerbaijan gears up for the Eurovision Song Contest, the authorities in the capital Baku are shooting stray dogs in an effort to clean up the city.

A massive programme is under way to smarten up old buildings and repair the roads before the first Eurovision semifinal is broadcast across Europe on May 22.

The municipal hygiene and utilities department, meanwhile, has turned its attention to the thousands of stray dogs living in Baku, and decided that they have to go.

The cull has shocked city residents.

"There were a few dogs in the courtyard of the house I was working on, and we used to feed them," builder Ahmad Dadashov told IWPR. "A truck drew up and two men got out, one of them with a gun. Without paying us any heed, he started shooting the dogs. One of them managed to hide, but they killed the others, loaded them into the truck and drove off. It was a horrible sight even for me, and I'm 42 years old."

City authorities deny the cull is universal, insisting that dogs are only destroyed when there is no other way of dealing with them. But activist groups in Baku have logged dozens of calls from concerned citizens.

"I was taking my grandson to school one morning when we saw a terrible sight. Workers from social services had come to shoot the dogs," pensioner Gulnara Akhundova recalled. "It was like a nightmare. Although I tried to get the boy out of there as quickly as I could, I can still hear the howl of that wounded dog."

Akhundova said her grandson was traumatised by the incident.

"We spent a long time persuading him that the dogs hadn't been killed, they'd just been taken somewhere nice," she said. "I think it's dreadful. I can't understand how such frightening things can happen in a civilised country."

Valerie Garber, head of an animal charity called Friends, said her organisation was receiving numerous reports of shootings from callers.

"Often the animals are just wounded and are left bleeding. People who witness it get very stressed," she said. "People want to protect these dogs in their courtyards, which they love and feed. But the people with guns can't be dissuaded. There have even been fights over this. An elderly woman appealed to us one time, and she had hit one of the city workers."

Azer Garayev, head of the Azerbaijan Society for the Protection of Animals, says the cull is counterproductive. Instead of making Baku look good for Eurovision, it is denting the whole country's reputation.

"Despite the fact that Azerbaijan was the first country in the former Soviet Union to sign up to the European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals, you still see cases of extreme brutality against animals. The requirements of the convention are not being met," he said. "Under this convention, stray animal populations must be regulated using humane methods, specifically by sterilisation and special shelters."

Mansura Rasulzade, the head of environmental group Alliance, says that around 23,000 dogs were put down by the authorities in 2009, and another 53,000 in 2010. She said it would be far more cost-effective to catch and sterilise dogs to prevent them from breeding.

Ahmad Mammadov, head of the city department tasked with dealing with stray dogs, denied that shootings were taking place on a mass scale. Only sick animals were being destroyed, he said.

Critics of the campaign, however, note that Mammadov has previously suggested that the hides of stray dogs could be used to make clothing, and they argue that he does not have the animals' best interests at heart.

"We've held frequent talks with these people [officials], but all our suggestions have evoked nothing but puzzlement and laughter," Rasulzade said. "That indicates that those who are currently busy shooting dogs don't understand the need to treat them humanely."

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Topic: Environment

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