

Who is Baku Trying to Impress?

Author: [Arzu Geybull](#)

The costs of Azerbaijan putting its name on the map are high, but the benefits are not clear.

Baku is about to host yet another in a steady stream of international sporting events. On May 29, football's Europa League Final will come to Azerbaijan's capital, following swiftly on the heels of a Formula 1 Grand Prix.

Officials claim these events serve as a major boost to both the country's image and its tourism industry. But many others are sceptical, raising questions over the real economic and reputational benefits of such mega events in a country where rights and freedoms are regularly abused, corruption remains rampant and economic and other reforms are long overdue.

Over the last ten years, the country has hosted everything from the Rhythmic Gymnastics European Championship (twice) to wrestling, boxing and taekwondo championships.

Along the way it's taken in the women's World Cup, the European Games and the World Chess Olympiad (2016), as well a Formula 1 Grand Prix for the last four years. And who could forget their hosting of the Eurovision song contest finale in 2012.

But as the country's international profile has risen, its record on overall freedoms and rights has not. Azerbaijan is categorised as "not free" by Freedom House and was ranked at 166 in the 2019 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders.

According to Azeri human rights NGOs, there are more than 70 political prisoners behind bars, including numerous journalists. To take just one example, almost exactly two years ago Azeri journalist and IWPR contributor Afgan Mukhtarli was kidnapped in Tbilisi, smuggled across the border to Azerbaijan and sentenced to six years in jail in a trial marred by violations. Mukhtarli is one of six journalists **currently** behind bars.

The regime is clearly aware that this doesn't look good, and has taken pains to enact some reforms ahead of high-profile events. On March 16, for instance, President Ilham Aliyev released 51 political prisoners in a flurry of pardons. The following month, the travel ban on another former political prisoner, Ilgar Mammadov, was lifted, allowing him to **leave** the country after six years behind bars. Then in May, the prosecutor's office **removed** travel bans on several reporters who had been prevented from leaving the country since 2016.

But government critics make clear that such changes are merely **superficial** efforts intended to impress the international community.

Domestically, repeatedly hosting these sporting occasions also comes at a cost.

The country is still suffering from the financial crisis and currency devaluation it experienced in 2016, and some argue that the money invested in events like Formula 1 would better benefit the country's failing infrastructure.

The government argues that it is all part of an economic recovery scheme, attracting swathes of foreign tourists. Official figures show that tourism has indeed steadily risen from 1.8 million in 2009 to 2.6 million in 2017, although this can also be attributed to a simplified visa regime and greater availability of accommodation.

While there are no clear records on expenditure and revenue for Formula 1 race, a recent article by presidential aide Ali Hasanov indicated that the country had spent around 100 million US dollars over the first two years of hosting the race.

Hasanov went on to quote the 2018 Economic Impact Report by PwC **commissioned** by the Baku City Circuit that reported 277.3 million dollars in total profits since the first race in 2016, indicating a tidy profit.

Some nonetheless dispute this apparent success. Independent economist Rovshan Agayev argued that expensive mega-events needed to be part of a sustained strategy.

"Such events serve as a way to introduce the country so that tourists keep coming," he continued. "In 2017 total revenues from tourism amounted to 3.1 billion [dollars] but in 2018 the number dropped to merely 500 million. So if the presentation isn't bringing in visitors in the long term, I consider the investment lost."

Popular opinion also remains divided on the need for Baku hosting, at great cost, events that bring few benefits to the public at large.

Many Baku residents **complained** about unannounced road closures during the Formula 1 event and the additional traffic jams the race caused, as well as the noise pollution.

And ahead of the Europa League, there was concern at social media reports the authorities were planning to seal off parts of downtown Baku to local residents to ensure visitors tourists felt comfortable walking around.

The ministry of the interior subsequently **refuted** these claims, although it did confirm that it employees would roll out an “intensified regime” to ensure the safety of foreign guests. Designated areas have been set up for football fans on Baku’s promenade and several parks protected by local security forces. The usual May 28 celebrations marking the anniversary of the first republic were also banned.

The city infrastructure cannot handle a large influx of visitors – so only 12,000 tickets were allocated to the foreign clubs, even though the Olympic stadium has capacity for 70,000 people. Neither can Haydar Aliyev International Airport handle the influx of passengers expected, as the Association of Football Federation of Azerbaijan said in a previous evaluation **report** for the UEFA Club Competition Finals.

Sports Minister Azad Rahimov suggested that fans simply arrive early and take time to enjoy the city, thus staggering the impact of the influx of tourism. “Everybody getting acquainted with our beautiful city, with our hospitality, will be happy to be back again,” he said, although he did not elaborate on the lack of infrastructure.

Facts matter less to the leadership than whatever image it is trying to project. In 2017 the European Parliament called for an investigation into reports that Azeri officials paid off EU members to whitewash their rights record, and it’s clear that the glitz and glamour of international sporting events is part of the same strategy of reputation management.

There’s no denying that sports fans in Baku are excited; for human rights defenders, there is nothing beautiful about this game.

Location: Azerbaijan

Topic: Corruption
Detentions
Regime

Focus: From the Borderland to the
Steppes

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/who-baku-trying-impress>