

The 2012 Eurovision Song Contest can be a tool for change in Azerbaijan.

This month, Azerbaijan will host the Eurovision Song Contest. The Azerbaijani dissident blogger [Emin Milli](#) believes this is a great opportunity for the country: He calls upon the participants to voice public criticism of the Azerbaijan government's human rights violations and to demand the release of political prisoners.



This week, 42 countries will be participating in the 57th Eurovision song contest in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. The government has even commissioned and constructed a 23,000 seat 'Crystal Hall' to host what is certain to be a glamorous event with a great deal of international fanfare. But few have looked behind the glamour to see the sad and cruel authoritarian reality in Azerbaijan today.

I look at the lost opportunities and millions of stolen hopes in this authoritarian system that continues to thrive thanks to high oil prices in the world markets. There is no sustainable economy in the country. There are around 70 political prisoners, including seven journalists, currently held in Azerbaijan according to various local human rights organizations. I was among them and only recently released. The Parliament has not had any opposition members since the 2010 elections which were rigged like many of the previous elections.

This is the moment when the Eurovision Song Contest enters the stage in Azerbaijan. While some activists have called for a general boycott of the contest, I was strongly against such a move. This event should be used as a platform to show to the world what is happening in Azerbaijan. It is important to engage with authoritarian systems like Azerbaijan in order to expose them to the processes and factors of change which is far more difficult to do through isolation, boycotts or sanctions.



Baku's 'Crystal Hall' Credit: Zeljko Joksimovic (Creative Commons BY)

One important thing for any European to know about Azerbaijan is my country's democratic heritage: established in 1918, it was the first parliamentary republic in the Muslim world. Women were granted voting rights in 1919, impressively early even by European standards: France, for example, granted this women as late as 1944. Unfortunately the young Azerbaijan did not survive Bolshevik occupation in 1920. But by the end of the 1980s, Azerbaijan had one of the most vibrant national liberation movements in the Soviet Union. In the process of regaining our independence we survived a war with Armenia and the occupation of parts of our territories. Since then the country has turned into a battlefield between authoritarianism and an invincible democratic spirit.

When I studied European Law in Germany in 2001, I argued with my German professor that Azerbaijan would join both the European Union and NATO within 10 years. The same year I participated in an accession ceremony where Azerbaijan, together with Armenia, became a member of the Council of Europe. That was the year of hope, and hundreds of political prisoners have been released since then.

The Eurovision song contest turns out to be both curse and blessing for Azerbaijan. It is a curse because it has cost Azerbaijan already more than \$700 million by [some estimates](#). It will be the most expensive party in our history and the most expensive Eurovision Song Contest in history. But it is also a blessing because it is the first time that Azerbaijan will enjoy such unprecedented international media attention to the human rights violations going on in Azerbaijan. The potential for the reporting and coverage of the true reality in Azerbaijan has already put the government in a situation it had never experienced before; it started to produce a series of [propaganda material](#) highly critical of Germany. It was a primitive reaction from the authoritarian government to the media coverage of the human rights situation in Azerbaijan by the German media.

As a former prisoner of conscience who spent more than 16 months in jail just for speaking up against injustice, I think that it is a moral duty of singers coming to the Eurovision song contest to consider the political prisoners in the country and use the Eurovision platform to openly demand their release of all during the live show which will be watched by more than 125 million people. Yes, singers may be disqualified for such actions, but even one act of courage and defiance can turn this Eurovision into the most subversive and meaningful event in the entire history of European music.

This is the moment to make the music a truly powerful and meaningful tool to call for change in Azerbaijan. This would give the oppressed in our society and beyond the hope and creative energy to carry on the struggle for the liberation of the human spirit.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Emin Milli is an Azerbaijani blogger and dissident. He was sentenced to two-and-a-half years of prison for hooliganism in 2009, "[a charge laughable to anyone who knows him](#)". Prior to his imprisonment, he worked for the [International Republican Institute](#), the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation and the Council of Europe. He is writing now his Masters thesis, "New Media and Arab Revolutions" at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) in London.



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