

Five minutes with Azerbaijani political activist Yegana Hajjiyeva: “Opposing the regime in Azerbaijan is difficult and dangerous.”

Last month, Azerbaijan hosted the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest. In an interview with EUROPP editors Chris Gilson and Julian Kirchherr, the Azerbaijani political activist [Yegana Hajjiyeva](#) argues that the event has been a tool of change in Azerbaijan. However, many challenges remain before the country can become a democracy.



Competition favourite Loreen triumphed for Sweden at this year’s Eurovision Song Contest in Baku. Do you think that the contest has been a tool for change in Azerbaijan?

Yes, I think so. The content has helped Azerbaijan: Usually our country is barely noticed by the international community. But during the weeks before the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest many journalists from all over the world reported on human rights abuses and the state of non-democracy in Azerbaijan. This media coverage created momentum. Our activists are now more motivated and more eager to continue fighting for a democratic Azerbaijan than a few months ago. I am grateful we were able to host this event in Baku.

Protests against Ilham Aliev, the president of Azerbaijan, are routinely crushed. His critics have been beaten and imprisoned. What is it like to oppose the regime in Azerbaijan?

Opposing the regime in Azerbaijan is difficult and dangerous. The government limits our scope of actions to a great extent. We are deprived of our funding, deprived of our property, deprived of our right to assemble.

The current regime in Azerbaijan has been in place in the country for the last 18 years. In 1993, after a coup d’état by former KGB general and politburo member Heidar Aliyev came to power in Azerbaijan. He immediately cracked down on our democratic institutions, de facto abolishing most of the freedoms which the people of our country gained after independence. All elections during his period have been fraudulent; thousands of opposition members have been arrested, beaten and persecuted. Azerbaijan is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Despite huge oil wealth the vast majority of our population lives in extreme poverty. In 2003, Heidar Aliyev started transferring power to his son, Ilham Aliyev.

Do you think the European Union (EU) has a responsibility to help foster change in Azerbaijan?

I do think the EU has such a responsibility. And we were glad to read that the EU condemned past elections in Azerbaijan as fraudulent. Irritatingly, many other international observers acknowledged these elections as a step towards democracy. That is a judgment I do not understand. A peaceful change of power in Azerbaijan remains impossible. There is no country within the Council of Europe in which democracy is in such a dreadful state except for Azerbaijan. But because of our oil resources too many observers and neighboring countries remain silent. This silence is very disillusioning to our countrymen.

Where do you think Azerbaijan will be ten years from now?

When Azerbaijan gained its independence the vast majority of the population looked towards the EU for assistance. We hoped the EU would help us establishing democratic institutions in the country, to share with us the experiences of living in the free society and to show us the path to a prosperous future. However, after 18 years of disappointments, there is now a great danger that most of the people will look somewhere else: some are nostalgic of the Soviet past, some see Russia as a role model and a few look to the East, towards our Islamic neighbors.

For a long time it seemed that majority of the international community has accepted the status quo in Azerbaijan and believed that no change is possible. But history has already proved that they are wrong.

Azerbaijan has been inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, and by the courage of the people in Syria, Bahrain and Yemen. We are ready to go out on the streets.

We believe that the time has come for a major change to happen in our country. Our nation deserves a better future than our current regime is able to deliver. We are the country which established the first parliamentary republic in the Muslim world back in 1918; we are the nation which built the first opera in the Muslim world, where women had the right to vote before they gained it in most Western countries. Our people deserve to be a democracy once again and to be free and happy. We are calling upon the world to be with the people of Azerbaijan.

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