

Azerbaijan Set to Host European Games Amid Criticism of Rights Record

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A general view of Baku.

BAKU — The European Games, the first major multi-sports event of the continent, are set to kick off in Azerbaijan's Baku on Friday as gleaming new sports venues await 6,000 athletes, lured by qualification spots for next year's Rio de Janeiro Olympics.

The Azeri capital has pulled out all the stops as it looks to establish itself as a viable option for international sports events with a string of impressive venues, including a brand new Olympic stadium that will see just two days of competition.

Azerbaijan, however, is under criticism over its human rights record and some rights organizations have said their officials have been barred from entering the country during the Games.

The athletes will compete in 20 sports, 16 of which are on the Olympic program and 12 of them

offering qualification spots, indirect or direct, for next year's summer Olympics in Brazil.

Organizers have also added several experimental events, including 3x3 basketball, beach soccer and mixed pair aerobic gymnastics among others, with the European Olympic Committees, the umbrella organization, eager to test them for possible future inclusion in the Olympics proper.

Athletics and swimming, two of the biggest sports on the Olympic program, however, have refused to send their top athletes to the event, opting to send lower-ranked teams, robbing the Games of additional exposure.

Azerbaijan, on the outer fringes of the European continent, may not be the obvious choice but given its financial clout at a time when other major European nations struggled with the economic crisis, it was a safe choice.

Sparing no cost, the Azeris have raced to complete preparations in less than three years with several spectacular venues sprinkled over the capital, including the national gymnastics arena and the brand-new 68,000-seater Olympic stadium.

With a future Olympics bid firmly in its sights, Azerbaijan wants to prove its ability to host a major international sports event of this size.

Human Rights

But not everything is sparkling under the hot summer sun on the shores of the Caspian sea, with energy-rich Azerbaijan under constant criticism over its human rights record.

On Tuesday the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was given one month to halt its operations in the former Soviet republic, months before a parliamentary election this autumn.

Amnesty International officials were then barred from entering Baku later on Tuesday, the organization said.

"It is deeply ironic that the launch of a briefing outlining how critical voices in the country have been systematically silenced ahead of the European Games cannot be held," said Denis Krivosheev, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for Europe and Central Asia in a statement.

"But rather than bury this message, the actions of the authorities have only highlighted their desperate attempts to create a criticism-free zone around the Games."

Azerbaijan, governed by President Ilham Aliyev since he succeeded his father in 2003, has been courted by the West because of its role as an alternative to Russia in supplying oil and gas to Europe.

EOC officials and Games organizers have repeatedly avoided to be drawn into this issue, saying politics should not be part of the Games.

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