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Glitzy Facade Hides Azerbaijan's Dark Reality

By Casey Michel

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Last week, during the lavish opening ceremony of Azerbaijan's European Games, Lady Gaga performed a unique, haunting rendition of John Lennon's "Imagine." The organizers behind the Games reportedly splurged $2 million on the performance, replete with a flower-decked piano and soaring score.

The production — grand and gilded, ornate and ostentatious — matched Azerbaijan's self-image.

On the back of its hydrocarbon trade, Baku has positioned itself as the jewel of the Caspian. The political regime in Azerbaijan styles itself as a tolerant, progressive bulwark against Islamist fundamentalism and Russian expansionism.

But Baku doesn't rest on its laurels, allowing observers to come to their own conclusions.

Azerbaijan has crafted one of the most active PR machines in the former Soviet sphere.

The prestige of hosting the European Games is only part of that machine.

Lobbyists circumvent regulations in Western capitals, wooing legislators and policymakers with caviar and carpets. PR hacks, paid by the Azeri government, claim an unbiased position when praising Azerbaijan in the Western media.

There's a reason Azerbaijan has cultivated such a PR machine. There is a reason that Azeri officials feel the need to shell out millions for a one-off appearance from Lady Gaga.

There's a reason that Baku stood as the lone contender to host the inaugural European Games — which, as it happens, may be the only European Games ever held.

Baku would like the world to see it as a diamond in the post-Soviet rough, but in reality the regime stands far closer to Central Asia's brutal autocrats than a reforming neighbor of the European Union.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Azerbaijan remains the fifth-most censored country in the world.

Khadija Ismayilova, Azerbaijan's most well-known investigative journalist, remains behind bars on trumped-up charges.

PEN America recently offered Ismayilova the Freedom to Write award, but her status seems no closer to resolution.

Nearly a dozen other journalists and bloggers join Ismayilova behind bars. Many fear persecution or arrest. Emin Huseynov, a leading press rights advocate, spent months hidden in the Swiss Embassy, fearing arrest by the authorities.

There are also the political prisoners. Political opposition in Azerbaijan is almost nonexistent; the Aliyev clan has ruled the country as a fiefdom for decades.

Some of the names of the imprisoned are worth highlighting — U2's Bono called for their release at a recent concert in Montreal.

Intigam Aliyev is a widely respected human rights lawyer. Anar Mammadli sought to improve the election-monitoring system in Azerbaijan — a country that has not seen a free and fair election in the past 20 years.

Leyla Yunus, a human rights activist — along with her husband Arif — remains behind bars and in failing health.

And at only 30, Rasul Jafarov, known widely for his work compiling lists of political prisoners, is the youngest member of the list. All jailed simply for trying to defend human rights in Azerbaijan.

More broadly, according to Freedom House, Azerbaijan remains a "consolidated authoritarian regime" — bested in autocratic atrocities only by the regimes in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

With a fragile economy, the regime's crackdowns are only likely to worsen in the future.

These are the realities of Azerbaijan, squirreled away behind the glitz and glamour of the European Games.

Of course, such an image — such a reality — is bad for business. This is why the regime continues pouring so much funding and subterfuge into beguiling Western officials and businessmen. Given Azerbaijan's recent history, there should be little doubt such methods will cease anytime soon.

And Gaga? She now joins the ranks of Western artists willing to sell a chunk of their pride, a piece of their reputation, to enrich their bank accounts.

It's not as if Gaga was the first; Jennifer Lopez regaled Turkmenistan's elite. Kanye West performed at the wedding of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev's grandson. Actress Hilary Swank partied with Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov. All did so shamelessly, with little concern for those trampled under the regimes' jackboots.

Gaga is just the latest in the litany. But her decision to perform as the Aliyev regime's Games, their great claim at modernity and progress, may well prove the most damaging, foolhardy move yet from a Western artist floundering in the post-Soviet space.

Calls for Gaga to return the $2 million abound, led by Sports for Rights — a campaign launched to draw attention to the repression, corruption and censorship behind the European Games.

Should Gaga publicly return the funds, she would make it that much less likely for another artist to follow in her footsteps.

Perhaps, in the end, Gaga will be the last Western artist to lend her reputation to paint a post-Soviet dictator in a far brighter light than he deserves.

Imagine that.

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