



THE BUDAPEST TIMES

Understanding Hungary



Euro zone?

Baku's odd game plan for acceptance

HOW EUROPE'S FIRST-EVER CONTINENTAL MULTI-SPORTS GAMES ENDED UP OUTSIDE EUROPE

Things that make you go hmmm

Sitting in the press section at the opening ceremonies of Europe's first-ever European Games, the burly journalist beside me made an earnest observation: "That right there", he said with a wink as he pointed to the costumed actors and actresses at centre stage who looked as if they'd jumped right out of the latest Aladdin sequel, "is traditional European clothing."

■ **LEE REANEY, BAKU, AZERBAIJAN**

His glib comment notwithstanding, there was some irony in hosting Europe's first-ever continental multi-sporting event in a place that virtually no European considers part of Europe. The extravagant, \$100 million-dollar production was supposed to mark Azerbaijan's emergence as a member of the European community. Instead, the Mughal singing, flying carpet, and jeering of the Armenian athletes, only seemed to highlight the alien ambience of the host locale.

There was no mention of the secretive manner in which the event was delivered to Baku, not a peep about the polit-

ical prisoners or foreign journalists and human rights activists that were barred from covering this festival of European sport, not even a mention of the Austrian athletes who were severely injured the day before in a ghastly Games-related accident from the safety of the Athlete's Village.

Here or there? While the United Nations Statistics Department recognises Azerbaijan to be part of Asia, the World Factbook lists the country as part of the Middle East, and the EU says it is part of the European "neighbourhood".

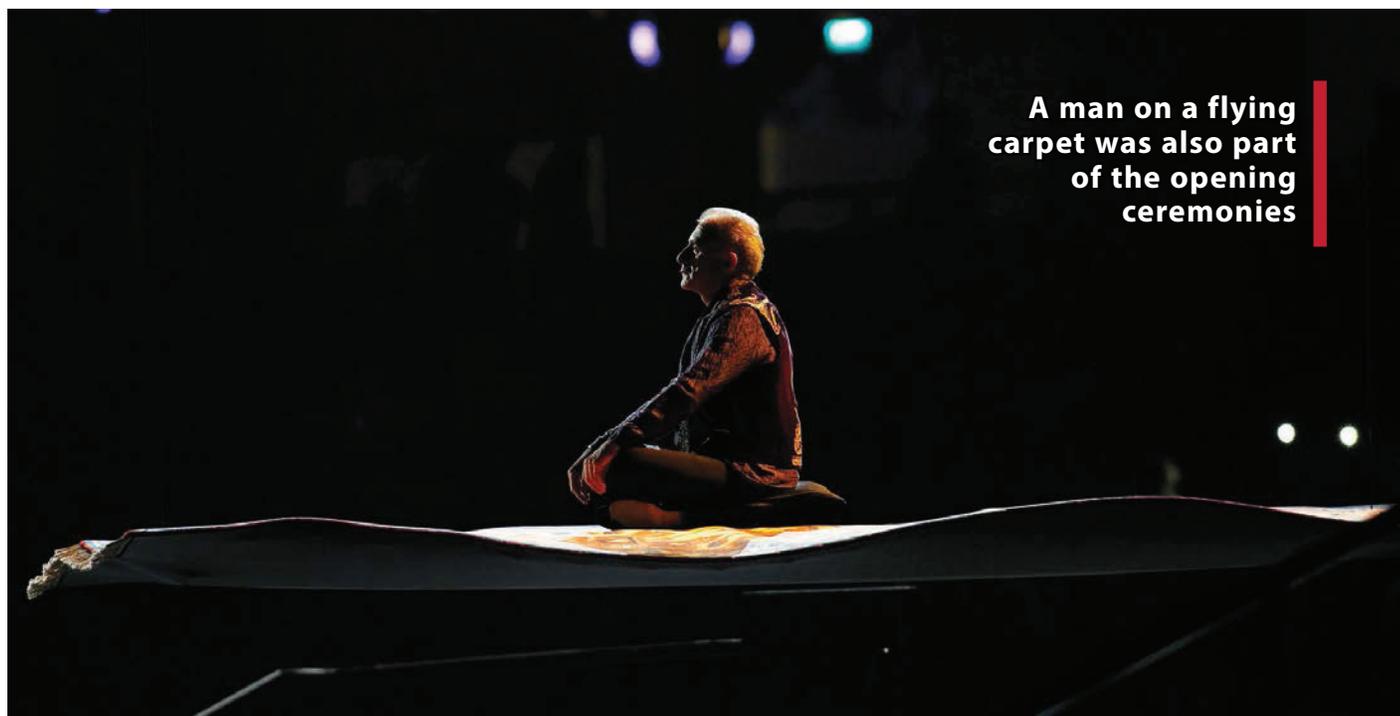
As we were left to wonder how Europe's first multi-sporting festival somehow ended up in a place outside Europe,

the immortal words of C+C Music Factory came to mind – some things just "make you go hmmm".

The European façade

What the opening ceremonies failed to convey, really, is the reality of the current Azerbaijan. The country is a curious crucible of Persian religion, Turkic language and Soviet governance, forged by the forces of once-great empires, that combines to create something altogether different: modern Azerbaijan.

This mish-mash of history leads to a mixed up identity - at once a Muslim nation that prides itself on its secularity, and at the same time a dynastic post-Soviet "illiberal democracy" that strives to be Eu-



A man on a flying carpet was also part of the opening ceremonies



ropean. Even the Azerbaijani Ministry of Tourism seems confused, as its “European charm of the Orient” slogan suggests.

“The Orient” necessarily implies that the nation is not European, and offering “European charm” suggests that the norm in the area is something other. Imagine the Austrian government paying for ads touting their European-ness during a European event such as the Eurovision Song Contest – it’s absurd.

Yet what the Azerbaijani Ministry of Tourism touts in its tourism campaign is what those in the European Olympic Committee are loath to admit – that Azerbaijan simply isn’t yet European.

The Azerbaijani government has made a concerted effort to forge ties with Europe and has joined such European organisations as the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the European Union’s Eastern Partnership.

However, a brief look into the political situation belies the façade of European democracy. Here’s a quick run-down – the current President (Ilhan Aliyev) is son of the former President (Heydar Aliyev), who used to head the KGB, led Soviet Azerbaijan for nearly 20 years, and independent Azerbaijan for another 10.

If you don’t know who these two are, it won’t take long in Baku to find out. Although I’ve been told that many posters of

the two have been removed for the duration of the Games, they can still be found dotting walls and billboards around the city.

As the only dynastic leader in post-Soviet countries, Ilhan Aliyev ensured that he could try to top his father’s long run at the top by overseeing a referendum that scrapped the presidential term limits laws. He is head of the National Olympic Committee – and has been since 1995.

His wife (Mehriban Aliyeva) hails from “the most single powerful family in Azerbaijan”, one that owns many major businesses, including at least three banks, a television station, a mobile phone provider and a cosmetics line. She’s the one generally considered to be next in line.

The name game: The cult of personality that surrounds the Aliyev family, especially its patriarch Heydar, makes map-making in Azerbaijan a tricky experience. An idea of some of the things named after the man include: the Baku airport; 60 museums; a cultural centre; an oil refinery; a street in every city; a mosque; and, of course, an arena. The Heydar Aliyev Arena is hosting judo, wrestling and sambo at the 2015 European Games.

She also heads up the European Games Organising Committee. Oh yeah

– and the current guy has politely asked the OSCE to do their work elsewhere. As you can see, a model European democracy to host the initial European Games.

The cult of sport

While the cult of personality surrounding the presidential Aliyev family seems more reminiscent of bygone communist days, so too does his administration’s attempts to create an Azerbaijani cult of sport. Not unlike fellow former-Soviet state Belarus’ leader Alexander Lukashenko, Aliyev seems intent on turning his country into a sporting superpower to underscore his political messaging – that Azerbaijan is a fully recognised member of the European community.

It seems to be a successful strategy too, as can be evidenced by the European Olympic Committee’s (EOC) decision to award the Belarussian leader – commonly referred to as “Europe’s last dictator” – with a special award “For outstanding contribution to the Olympic movement”.

Yet while Aliyev strives to prove to the world that his state is truly European, it seems that a few pesky European freedoms keep getting in the way. One in particular seems to be a thorn in the Azerbaijani President’s side – freedom of the press.



The right to remain silent

Respected international human rights group Amnesty International estimates that there are no less than 80 political prisoners currently being held in Azerbaijan, with at least 20 prisoners of conscience – detained for exercising their constitutionally recognised right to freedom of expression.

Among them include the leader of opposition party REAL (Republican Alternative), deputy leader of the New Equality Party (Musavat), award-winning investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova, and human rights lawyer Intigam Aliyev.

When asked about political prisoners at a government press conference on the eve of the European Games, Ali Hasanov, the President's aide for public-political affairs, stated that Azerbaijan was a member of the Council of Europe and that the convicted criminals were free to take up their appeals with that organisation.

If that sounds like a cumbersome process, it's because it is. Out of 256 applications concerning Azerbaijan in 2014, 245 were declared inadmissible and in only one case was the state found to have violated the European Convention on Human Rights.

Hasanov also neglected to mention that the group most likely to take up the cause of the prisoners – Amnesty International – was prevented from visiting the country in advance of the Games. Nor that his government had raided Ra-

dio Free Liberty's offices forcing them to leave the country; or that the Guardian newspaper would be denied accreditation for the European Games; or that his government had requested the OSCE to pack up and get going.

Instead, he answered planted questions about the event's "spectacularly innovative" transportation system (that include such ground-breaking innovations as air-conditioned buses and dedicated lanes for Games vehicles) and "anti-Azerbaijani campaigns" by European and American media. He also lauded the spectacular venues built for the event, likely one of the reasons that the country was able to lure the games to Baku in the first place.

Who said the European Games should be in Europe anyways?

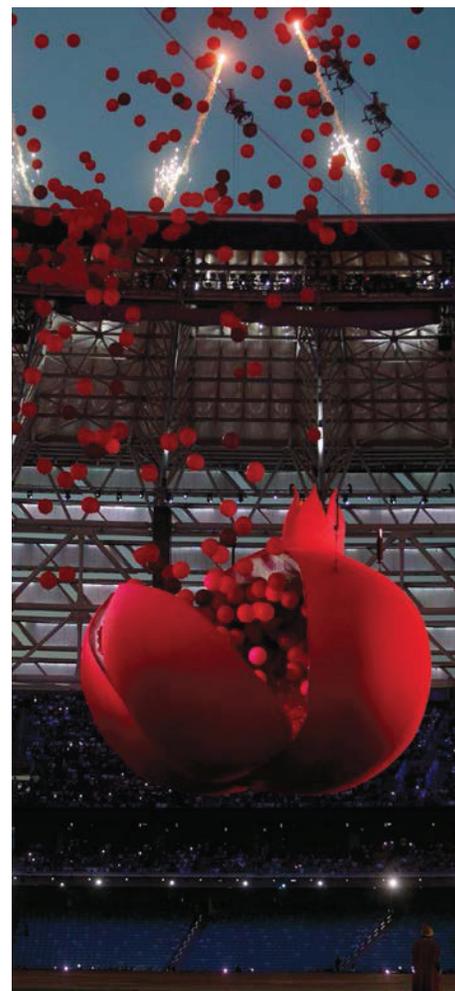
The first thing to realise about mega-sporting events is that they are less about sport and more about revenues. That Europe was the only continent not to host its own multi-sporting event – the "missing fifth ring to the continental Games of the world" as EOC President Patrick Hickey put it – is a smokescreen for what is a rather apparent attempt by Europe's Olympic committees to try to get a piece of the Summer Olympic sporting events' proverbial pie.

You see, while the Americas have their Pan-American Games and the Africans have their All-Africa Games and Asia has its Asian Games, Europe has long relied on its European Championships

to crown the continent's sporting kings and queens. The problem with that, if you are an Olympic committee member, is that all the television and other associated revenues for those championships go to their respective sporting associations – not the Olympic committees.

In order to shake this up, the EOC decided to begin their own multi-sporting event and looked for a willing host to foot the bill. Word has it that Mr. Hickey first approached Belarus with an offer before settling on the Azerbaijani capital. Certainly the promise of billions of dollars' worth of new venues had a nice ring to it, as did the pledge to cover the costs for all 6,000 athletes.

It is estimated that the total cost of the European Games to the country is \$6.5 billion. That's nearly \$700 for every single Azerbaijani citizen. The price to draw American singer Lady Gaga – a truly inspired choice of talent for the first European Games – was reported as \$2 million. Or, put another way, one month's rent for nearly 3,000 Azerbaijanis.



Several Azerbaijanis are disappointed with the number of foreign visitors that have made the trip to Baku. The government promised thousands of intrepid tourists, and many locals were hoping to run into them in one of the city centre's many pubs, restaurants, and teahouses. Unfortunately, things haven't worked out quite as planned. The first and foremost reason is the difficulty to reach Azerbaijan. Unlike many club football competitions, where fans can drive, bus, or train to follow their favourite teams, for the vast majority of visitors, an expensive flight was the only option.

Secondly, the lack of cooperation with the sporting federations has deprived these games of some of Europe's most notable athletes. Europe's two most powerful bodies – the Fédération Internationale de Natation (FINA) and the European Athletics Association (EAA) – have both kept their top-draw athletes from the competitions. Instead, aquatic events from synchronised swimming to diving to water polo, will see their national junior teams compete.

Athletics at the games will feature just one event over two days; and the EAA has only committed to sending Tier 3 (the lowest) athletes to the competition. Despite this, thousands of Europeans have converged on this little country that most have never seen before. Many are here to watch those they love and hold dear compete.

However, despite initial government assurances that the first European Games host would waive visa requirements for Europeans hoping to see their own continental sports festival, it just didn't happen. The government instead offered expedited visa processing at the airport. So, as long as the mother of the athlete has filled out her application properly and provided appropriate photos, she should be able to receive the visa on arrival. Of course there too are the fees, and for those parents of British athletes, that's an extra £250 quid to cough up – just to watch their son or daughter play in Europe.

Conclusion

Right now, the Azerbaijani government may seem an easy target – you just need to look at the bulk of the European

media coverage of the Games – but at the same time it's easy to forget that there is a burgeoning population in the country that the government doesn't necessarily represent.

While Azerbaijanis would not like to even consider themselves European, they would take issue with the idea that they don't believe in the "European" ideas of media freedom, democratic elections, the market economy, and the rule of law. Although Muslim, they are more secular than several traditional European nations. Mini-skirts, alcohol, and Facebook are just as popular here as anywhere else in Europe.

Azerbaijanis could not care less whether you feel they are European – they will follow their own way to European val-

ues, in spite of their government. As one member of the opposition REAL party mentioned to me, "He (Aliyev) has used the games to improve his image, but he could have released the political prisoners to improve his image instead."

The government may be unsightly but Baku is beautiful. And the weather wonderful – warm, windy, and sun-soaked. This is why I've decided to remove my shirt, to even up some of those unsightly tan lines from covering the sun-soaked triathlon.

Then the realisation of where I was hit me again: "Sir, sir!" a dark man in a traditional Azeri outfit runs up to me, "This is a Muslim country. You must put your shirt back on." Welcome to Europe's first European Games.

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