

Eurovision Song Contest: NATO and Western Oil Giants Behind the Stage of Euro Trash Spectacle

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Theme: [History](#)

The Eurovision Song Contest tonight watched by over 120 million TV viewers may be seen as a fun spectacle – a “carnival of kitsch” as one commentator put it – but off stage there are deadly serious political and economic interests at play.

This year’s annual finale of the 56-year-old competition comes from Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, where the purpose-built Crystal Hall on the shores of the Caspian Sea will project glitzy images of the Caucasus nation to the rest of the world.

The autocratic government of President Ilham Aliyev has spared no expense or effort to stage the event – a spectacle that has become over the decades a byword for feelgood “Euro Trash” pop culture.

In the weeks leading up to tonight’s event, Azerbaijan’s state paramilitaries and secret police have been cracking down on the slightest public protest, jailing hundreds of human rights and pro-democracy activists.

The majority Muslim nation saw a surge in public protests against the authoritarian Aliyev administration back in early 2011 as a spillover from pro-democracy uprisings in the Middle East. Azerbaijanis have grown weary of the Aliyev dynasty, accusing the leader’s family of misappropriating the Central Asian country’s vast oil wealth. While Azerbaijan – the biggest of the Caucasus nations that were formerly Soviet Republics – has parliamentary elections, few consider Aliyev to have a genuine mandate from the less than 10 million population.

The president succeeded his father, Heydar, in 2003 and has been “re-elected” twice with landslide majorities. The president is aiming to run for a third term. His father, Heydar Aliyev, formerly a Soviet Union strongman, came to power in 1993 following a coup in the newly established Azerbaijan republic. Since then, political power has remained in the hands of the family.

The president appoints the cabinet, judiciary, has veto over the national assembly parliament and has direct control over Azerbaijan’s supposedly state-owned oil company. Many of the pro-democracy protesters who were arrested during in the street demonstrations of 2011 remain in detention.

In recent weeks, as tonight’s Eurovision Song Contest approached, anti-government activists have sought to highlight their grievances by mounting public demonstrations in the capital, Baku, which, in turn, were met with brutal crackdowns. Journalists have been blackmailed, beaten and jailed by the authorities in a desperate attempt to convey a rosy

atmosphere for the song gala.

Spokespersons for the Eurovision event have defended going ahead with the spectacle in the face of public criticism across Europe, claiming that the contest is “non political”.

But contrary to this claim, the evidence points to the fact that the entertainment extravaganza is deeply political. For a start, the ruling circle of Ilham Aliyev is using the event as a giant photo-op to present the country in a positive light. Azerbaijan has ambitions to join the European Union and the rulers are keen to burnish pretensions of being a secular new democracy.

This indulgence in Azerbaijan’s fifteen minutes of global fame is shared by European capitals and Washington. Azerbaijan under the Aliyev family has emerged as a pivotal European and US ally in a sensitive geopolitical region. Moreover, the country, which straddles Central Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe, has vast oil and gas reserves beneath its Caspian Sea.

While these hydrocarbon reserves eluded the former Soviet Union because of technical challenges to extraction, European and American oil companies are in a unique position to tap Azerbaijan’s oil and gas wealth. In the 1990s, the state oil company signed a \$7.4 billion 30-year contract with 13 companies, including BP, Statoil, Eni, Total, Exxon and ConocoPhillips.

Historically, Azerbaijan’s oil and gas abundance was so famed that Zoroastrians of ancient times would build religious temples on the sites of surface wells that spontaneously ignited with skyward flames. At the beginning of the 20th century, before the discovery of Arab oil, almost half of all the world’s then supply came from Azerbaijan.

This wealth was a major factor in why the Bolsheviks in the newly formed Soviet Union moved swiftly to head off a brief window for Azerbaijani independence following the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917. During the Second World War, the German Wehrmacht targeted Azerbaijan in a bid to choke off Stalin’s staple oil supply.

Today, the strategic value of the country has perhaps grown even more important. The 1,768-kilometre pipeline commissioned in 2006 from Baku to Ceyhan on Turkey’s Mediterranean coast has a capacity to deliver one million barrels of crude oil per day from the Caspian Sea to Western markets. This delivery compares with Saudi Arabia’s daily oil production capacity of 8 to 10 million barrels per day. In other words, Azeri oil provides an important hedge for both Europe and America to diversify away from Russian and Arab oil.

Furthermore, Aliyev’s Azerbaijan has become a staunch supporter of NATO’s military campaigns. As a member of NATO’s “Partnership for Peace” it has contributed troops to operations in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan, and has granted special privileges to the US military in particular, with landing, refuelling and overflight permissions.

Azerbaijan has become something of a thorn in Russia’s southern flank, thwarting Moscow’s interests in its volatile former Caucasus backyard of Georgia, South Ossetia and Armenia.

Azerbaijan’s relations with Iran in recent years have also suffered a marked cooling as the former aligns ever more closely with Washington. Azerbaijanis form the largest minority population group within Iran – some 24 per cent of the total. Recent dissent within Iran among the Azeri population has underscored the potential for creating internal political

problems for the government in Tehran.

Tonight as viewers sit back and indulge in seemingly harmless Euro Trash entertainment beamed live from Baku, we can be sure that Western powers and their Azerbaijani ally are counting on the spectacle being a hit for huge vested interests.

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Finian Cunningham has written extensively on international affairs, with articles published in several languages. Many of his recent articles appear on the renowned Canadian-based news website [Globalresearch.ca](#). He is a Master's graduate in Agricultural Chemistry and worked as a scientific editor for the Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge, England, before pursuing a career in journalism. He specialises in Middle East and East Africa issues and has also given several American radio interviews as well as TV interviews on Press TV and Russia Today. Previously, he was based in Bahrain and witnessed the political upheavals in the Persian Gulf kingdom during 2011 as well as the subsequent Saudi-led brutal crackdown against pro-democracy protests.

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