

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/azerbaijan-international-freedom-of-21-05-2012,42653.html>

Europe/Ex-USSR - Azerbaijan

"Running scared"

International freedom of expression coalition launches website ahead of Eurovision

21 May 2012

The International Partnership Group for Azerbaijan (the IPGA), coordinated by Article 19, has launched its website www.AzerbaijanFreeXpression.org and Facebook and Twitter profiles ahead of this week's Eurovision Song Competition, which will commence in Baku, Azerbaijan tomorrow 22 May.

Looking behind the glitz of Eurovision, the IPGA website examines the alarming freedom of expression situation in Azerbaijan, where journalists and others face blackmail, intimidation, violence, and imprisonment for expressing critical views.

As the stage is set for the 57th Eurovision Song Contest, which will take place this week in Baku, the Azerbaijani authorities are working hard to promote a positive image abroad. But at home they are severely restricting the right to freedom of expression and other fundamental freedoms.

"As Eurovision approaches, our new website shows that the freedom of expression situation in Azerbaijan continues to worsen", said Article 19 Executive Director, Agnès Callamard. "The broadcast media is completely dominated by the state, leaving no room for independent voices. The organiser of Eurovision, the European Broadcasting Union, must end its policy of silence and hold the Azerbaijani authorities accountable for their freedom of expression violations."

"With seven journalists behind bars, Azerbaijan is among the top 10 global jailers of the press", said CPJ Europe and Central Asia Program Coordinator Nina Ognianova. "This crackdown comes in the run-up to the Eurovision Song Contest, which will gather journalists from more than 40 participating countries and fix the world's eyes on Azerbaijan. The significant resources official Baku has poured to polish the country's image abroad will be meaningless without implementing systematic reforms to improve press freedom conditions at home. The immediate and unconditional release of our colleagues would be a good start."

"In Azerbaijan, journalists become the targets of violence when they stand up in the face of pressure from the authorities", said Reporters Without Borders Director-General Olivier Basille. "These attacks have created a climate of intimidation that is all the more frightening because those responsible enjoy complete impunity. The murders of two journalists remain unsolved due to a lack of political will. The authorities must take action now to find their killers and bring them to justice".

Along with its website, today the IPGA is launching its Facebook and Twitter profiles, through which it will provide regular updates on freedom of expression developments in Azerbaijan.

Note to editors: The IPGA is a coalition of international NGOs working to promote and protect freedom of expression in Azerbaijan. For more information about the Partnership, please contact Article 19 at +44 (0)207 324 2500 or ipga@article19.org.

The following IPGA spokespersons are available for interviews:

- Rebecca Vincent, IPGA Coordinator, Article 19, on +44 (0)20 7324 2500 (London, UK)
- Nina Ognianova, Europe and Central Asia Program Coordinator, Committee to Protect

Journalists, on +7 964 513 7267 (Moscow, Russian Federation)

- Johann Bühr, Head of the Europe and Central Asia Desk, Reporters Without Borders, on +33 1 44 83 84 67 (Paris, France)

To follow the IPGA on the web, please visit www.azerbaijanfreeXpression.org, or find us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/AZfreeXpression> or Twitter at @AZfreeXpression. The IPGA will be tweeting live during the Eurovision Song Contest final on 26 May 2012.
