

PROTEST EURO 2020 GAMES HELD IN BAKU

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Toronto, Ontario 6 July 2021

The below protest letter was sent to the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) on June 24, 2021 by a collective of Armenian organizations that constitute the [Global Network to Free Armenian POWs](#).

Dear Union of European Football Associations,

When UEFA first announced in 2012 that it would award hosting rights for EURO 2020 to Baku, we were guardedly optimistic that the international attention that accompanies such high-profile football events might encourage Azerbaijan — and its [authoritarian leader](#), President Ilham Aliyev — to improve its xenophobic stance against Armenians and its harsh repression of dissenting Azerbaijani citizens.

Sadly, in the time since you awarded co-hosting rights to Azerbaijan, it has unleashed an illegal war on Armenians, and conditions for Azerbaijani citizens have worsened. **Today, we are shocked that you have not yet suspended Azerbaijan's hosting rights.**

As you are certainly aware, [the Azerbaijani regime waged a deadly war against the de facto state of Artsakh \(also known as Nagorno-Karabakh\) last year](#) — the year you initially planned to host the European Championship in Baku. An estimated 7,000 soldiers and a further 200 civilians lost their lives in this war. This includes not only Azerbaijanis and Armenians (including those from Artsakh) but also Russians and an Iranian. Additionally, five journalists — two French and three Russian — were wounded by targeted attacks, while 150,000 people were forcefully displaced. Many of these refugees still cannot return, and, due to the change of control in some territories, may never be able to. An estimated [200 prisoners of war and civilian captives](#) remain in custody in Azerbaijan, where they are tortured regularly, according to reports by [Human Rights Watch](#) and other [organizations](#).

We understand that the host of the games in Baku is not President Aliyev, but rather the Association of Football Federations of Azerbaijan (AFFA), which is meant to celebrate the Azerbaijani nation as a whole, not its regime. However, AFFA in particular is not only strongly politicizing and militarizing its activities, but is also directly involved in the regime of President Aliyev. The president of AFFA, Rovnag Abdullayev, who owns the stadium you are using for matches of the European Football Cup, is also a member of the Azerbaijani government as part of President Aliyev's party. In March of this year, Abdullayev [stressed that](#), "under the resolute leadership of Commander-in-Chief Ilham Aliyev," he and the company he chairs, SOCAR, made "a worthy contribution to the valiant military campaign of National Army." After the statement, we were certain that UEFA would no longer want to cooperate with AFFA and its president, given the clear and obvious contradiction to UEFA's own principles. Yet, to our shock and dismay, you decided to continue working with individuals and with an organization that boasts about its major role in starting and fighting a war that violated several UN resolutions and in which numerous human rights violations were committed by Azerbaijan.

The government of Azerbaijan has discriminated strongly against Armenians, including footballer Henrick Mkhitaryan, who was barred from traveling to Azerbaijan with Arsenal, his team at the time, merely because of his Armenian identity. This anti-Armenian-football agenda is so strong in Azerbaijan that, when the Europa League final was hosted in Baku in 2019, fans with "Mkhitaryan" Arsenal football shirts were stopped on the streets by Azerbaijani policemen. In other cases, fans were forced to undergo body examinations for Mkhitaryan signs, flags, or jerseys. This discrimination continues to today: reporters with ethnic Armenian names from different countries are not allowed entry into Azerbaijan to cover the UEFA events.

But Azerbaijan's discriminatory practices extend to those outside of the Armenian community. Just days ago, a transgender person was almost beaten to death in a hotel in Baku and hospitals refused to treat her. Along with physical violence against the LGBTQ+ community, the government of Azerbaijan uses false charges to jail and silence dissidents, as reported by Human Rights Watch. Baku, the city that you have chosen as the sports capital of Europe, has sadly become the capital of violence against inclusion and basic human values.

Given that the UEFA describes itself as being "committed to supporting and safeguarding human rights, with special focus on the potential impact of its major competitions," we therefore ask that UEFA strip Baku of its hosting rights for any remaining EURO 2020 games.

At the very least, we urge you to make **crystal clear that UEFA will not tolerate any form of discrimination**, including that against Armenians, people with Armenian-sounding names, the LGBTQ+ community, and members of the opposition who are being persecuted for their political views. We respectfully urge you to take the following additional actions:

1. **Deny entry into the stadium to members of the Azerbaijan army and regime** who have committed numerous human rights abuses and crimes against humanity within the last twelve months.
2. **Enforce the promotion of UEFA values at all matches**, including those in Baku. Demand from Baku and other host cities that the media not be restricted inside or outside the stadium. Actively encourage critical media by giving full access to Azerbaijani outlets that have been harassed by the government from overseas. We note that Azerbaijan is ranked 167th out of 180 in the Press Freedom Ranking of "Reporters Without Borders."
3. **Demand from Baku that all UEFA member flags** — including that of Armenia — **be equally displayed and promoted** and thus send a strong message showing that xenophobia has no space in a UEFA football stadium.
4. **Actively demand the release of all political prisoners including the 200+ Armenian prisoners of war** that are being tortured in Baku and across the country. Read their names throughout the halftime or after the anthems of the competing teams.
5. **Ensure the safety of everyone involved**, including citizens of Armenia and Artsakh attending the games. Should any humiliation, like the discriminatory actions targeting Mkhitaryan fans

mentioned above or, worse, any form of physical violence against players, staff members, referees, sponsors, fans or journalists occur during the Euros, we expect that you **ban Azerbaijan from hosting any football matches for 2 years**, including those of the Azerbaijan national team. It is simply unbearable that your own football community is endangered by one of your members.

6. **Demand the immediate closure of the racist military [Trophy Park in Baku](#)**, which recently opened in the vicinity of the Olympic Stadium where the EURO 2020 quarterfinals will be played on July 3rd. This is how Emin Huseynov, an Azeri journalist exiled to Switzerland, [describes](#) this monument to hate: " exhibited helmets of young enemy soldiers killed in action. It's barbaric, worthy of Native American scalps. There are also mannequins of Armenians with big noses, like the caricatures of Jews under Hitler. The host country of a European sports competition must respect and comply with all human rights values. That country cannot promote hate speech and xenophobia."

We will follow the developments in Baku closely. We sincerely hope that every spectator, every Armenian, and every Azerbaijani is safe throughout the event. We ask that you find the right words and actions to clearly condemn the daily ongoing human rights violations that your partners are committing.

For more information, please consult the following links:

- [Armenian Civil Society Open Letter to UEFA and FIFA](#)
- [Letter to UEFA from the Global Network to Free Armenian POWs](#)
- [Petition for UEFA on change.org](#)
- [Armenian Legal Center's resources on Armenian POWs](#)
- [The Global Network to Free Armenian POWs](#)

Sincerely,

[Zoravik Activist Collective](#)

[HAYREN Partners for Humanity](#)

[Charjoun le mouvement](#)

[Theophanu Club Germany](#)

[Armenian Council for Human Rights](#)

[Global Network to Free Armenian POWs](#)

[Federation of Armenian Organisations in the Netherlands \(FAON\)](#)

[Abovian Cultural Centre](#)

[Justice Armenia](#)

[Armenian Healthcare Association of the Bay Area](#)

Comments



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Armenian organizations would do much better if they refrained from such childish games. Instead of educating the Armenian youth in more serious and profound pursuits. They are dumbing them down to futile and imbecile actions. Grow up Armenians! Or are you determined with unshakable obstinacy into clinging to historical irrelevancy?