

Network of Concerned Historians				NCH
Campaigns				
Year original	Year follow-up	Circular	Country	Names
2013		70	Azerbaijan	<i>Akram Aylisli</i>
	2013			<i>follow-up 1</i>

Announcement

Following the message of last week, International PEN has launched a petition on behalf of novelist Akram Aylisli. The subject of a campaign of intimidation, Aylisli wrote a novel about the conflict on the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh (an Armenian-populated enclave in Azerbaijan) and provided a sympathetic view of Armenians in the conflict. He was accused of “distorting facts in Azerbaijani history and insulting the feelings of Azerbaijani people”.

Please sign the petition in his support at:

http://www.ifex.org/azerbaijan/2013/02/20/akram_aylisli_petition/

If all 1400 historians and others concerned with the past on this NCH list sign it, we may make a difference!

NCH SUMMARY

On 29 January 2013, officials from the ruling political party Yeni Azerbaijan publicly called on Akram Aylisli (1937–; pen name of Akram Najaf oglu Naibov), a novelist and former member of parliament (2005–2010), to withdraw a recently published novel and ask for the nation’s forgiveness. The novel, *Daş Yuxular* (Stone Dreams; completed in 2007), was published in the Russian-language literary journal *Druzhba Narodov* (Friendship of the Peoples) in Russia in December 2012. Set during the conflict on the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-majority separatist enclave in Azerbaijan (1988–1994), the novel provided a sympathetic view of Armenians in the conflict. It only referred to Azeri violence against Armenians, including during the 1920s and during pogroms in Sumgait and Baku (January 1990), but not to Armenian violence against Azeris (such as during the Khojali massacre in February 1992).

The call was the start of a hostile campaign of intimidation against him. On 31 January 2013, a crowd of about 70 people gathered outside Aylisli's home in Baku, shouting "shame" and burning his portrait and books. On 1 February 2013, Azerbaijani lawmakers meeting in parliament began to question Aylisli's ethnicity, suggesting that he take a DNA test and be forced to emigrate to Armenia. One of them commented that the novel "insulted not only Azerbaijanis, but the whole Turkish nation," because it referred to the Ottoman Empire's historical persecution of Armenians. Ali Hasanov, a high-level official from the presidential administration, denounced Aylisli for disrespecting the memory of thousands of martyrs. Aylisli's wife and son were dismissed from their jobs.

On 7 February 2012, President Ilham Aliyev stripped Aylisli of his honorary title of "people's writer" and cut off his presidential monthly pension, which he had drawn since 2002. Aylisli was also expelled from the Union of Azerbaijani Writers. Aliyev reportedly argued that the measures were a just punishment "for distorting facts in Azerbaijani history and insulting the feelings of the Azerbaijani people." *Stone Dreams* had also made negative references to former President Heydar Aliyev (father of the current president). NGOs and support groups for veterans and refugees suggested that they could take legal action against Aylisli. On 10 February 2013, the chairman of the pro-government Müasir Müsavat Partiyası (Modern Equality Party), Hafiz Hajiyev (Haciyev), announced that he would pay a ransom to anyone who cut off the writer's ear. The Interior Minister subsequently announced that such calls for violence were unacceptable and would be investigated.

Sources: "Azerbaijani Party Leader Offers Reward for Writer's Ear," *RFE/RL News* (11 February 2013); Human Rights Watch, "Azeri Writer Harassed over Novel about Azeri-Armenian conflict" (http://www.ifex.org/azerbaijan/2013/02/12/azerbaijan_stop_harassing; 12 February 2013); PEN International Rapid Action Network, "RAN 08/13: Azerbaijan—Writer Akram Aylisli under Threat" (12 February 2013); D. Sindelar "Azeri Author Sends Unpopular Message To Armenians: 'We Can Live Together,'" *RFE/RL News* (1 February 2013); Idem, "In Azerbaijan, Anger at an Author, but not Necessarily at His Argument," *RFE/RL News* (8 February 2013); *Wikipedia* (16 February 2013).

PETITION TEXT

President Ilham Aliyev
Office of the President of the Azerbaijan Republic
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Dear President Aliyev,

We the undersigned are writing to protest the threats and harassment of highly regarded novelist, Akram Aylisli, who is in danger after angry protestors gathered outside his home, burning copies of his book *Stone Dreams*, and an opposition figure issued threats against him earlier in February.

Azerbaijani lawmakers accused Aylisli of insult to Azerbaijani people, and questioned Aylisli's own ethnicity, suggesting that he be forced to leave Azerbaijan to live in Armenia. Aylisli was deprived of his special status as a state writer on 7 February 2012, when you stripped him of his pension, which had been awarded to him recognition of his past contribution to literature in Azerbaijan, including winning Azerbaijan's most prestigious literary prize, the Independence Award, in 2002.

Aylisli was penalised for "distorting facts in Azerbaijani history and insulting the feelings of Azerbaijani people".

On 11 February, the chairman of the opposition Modern Musavat Party, Hafiz Hajiyev, announced that he would pay a ransom of 10,000 AZN (approx. €9,500) to anyone who cut off Akram Aylisli's ear, adding that he is quite aware of the criminal liability. The Minister of Interior subsequently announced that such calls for violence were unacceptable and will be investigated. However, we fear the threat to Aylisli remains acute.

We respectfully call on you to:

- Provide Akram Aylisli and his family with protection against attack;
- Ensure that the Minister of Interior investigates any person threatening Aylisli and prosecutes those

found to be responsible;

- End the harassment and penalties imposed against Aylisli linked to his writings.

Yours sincerely,

TEXT ACCOMPANYING THE PETITION

Protest serious threats to Azerbaijani writer Akram Aylisli

20 February 2013

AP/Aziz Karimov

The life of novelist Akram Aylisli is in danger after angry protestors gathered outside his home, burning copies of his book, and an opposition figure issued threats against him earlier in February. The source of the outcry is Aylisli's novel, *Stone Dreams*, set in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, and which provides a sympathetic view of Armenians in the conflict.

The crisis began to build as Azerbaijani lawmakers accused Aylisli of insult to Azerbaijani people, and questioned Aylisli's own ethnicity, suggesting that he be forced to leave Azerbaijan to live in Armenia. He was then deprived of his special status as a state writer on 7 February 2012, when President Ilham Aliyev stripped Aylisli of his pension, which had been awarded to him recognition of his past contribution to literature in Azerbaijan, including winning Azerbaijan's most prestigious literary prize, the Independence Award, in 2002.

On 11 February, the chairman of the opposition Modern Musavat Party, Hafiz Hajiyev, announced that he would pay a ransom of 10,000 manats (approx. €9500) to anyone who cut off Akram Aylisli's ear, adding that he is quite aware of the criminal liability. The Minister of Interior subsequently announced that such calls for violence were unacceptable and will be investigated. However, PEN International says the threat to Aylisli remains acute.

Aylisli, aged 75, is a highly regarded writer, poet and script writer having won numerous awards in the Soviet and Post Soviet eras. Please sign the petition originated by PEN International calling on the Azerbaijani authorities to guarantee Aylisli's safety and that of his family, and to investigate and prosecute any person who has threatened him.