

## Modern Moscow's cultural clash

Chicago Sun-Times (IL) - Sunday, May 16, 2010

Author: Hedy Weiss, The Chicago Sun-Times

In the late 1990s, while Americans were still dizzily contemplating the end of the Soviet Union and all it might mean, Chicago hosted several Russian theater companies. One that left an indelible impression was the Spartacus Square Theatre, now known as Theater Moderne, which was established in Moscow in the wake of all the monumental changes of that time. Its young actors, under the direction of Svetlana Vragova, bore a striking resemblance to their Chicago counterparts both in their dynamic physicality and emotional fearlessness.

The play they brought with them, Lyudmilla Razumovskaya's "Dear Elena Sergeevna" (presented under the auspices of Victory Gardens Theatre), told the story of a veteran high school mathematics teacher and four of her graduating students who arrive to celebrate her birthday, but ultimately betray and terrorize her as they seek to assure passing grades on their final exams.

Vragova's theater was one of the first independent companies in Moscow -- a city in which theater always was, and continues to be, a crucial art form. Now, housed in a rehabbed 19th century stock exchange building that still suggests times past, the company continues to attract passionate audiences and continues to operate on the old repertory system -- meaning that a group of plays are performed on an alternating schedule by a tight-knit ensemble of actors who are fully employed year-round. (The idea of actors taking "day jobs" is still quite foreign in Russia, and you can see the results in the fiery, superbly intimate performances on the stage.)

During a recent trip to Moscow as the guest of this company, I found that the work remains as fierce and physical as ever. But I also came to understand how the company is now wrestling with changes every bit as monumental as they were 20 years ago.

Among the plays in Moderne's rep are Aleksey Kazantsev's "The Old House" (about two very different families in a shared residence, and their emotional dynamics over time), and Rustam Ibragimbekov's "The Noose" (a marvelous work that Vragova would like to bring to the U.S. that tells of Russian emigres in Paris in the 1930s who are still haunted by the overthrow of the czar and the rise of the Bolsheviks). Both plays explore notions of identity, shifting personal values, and uprootedness. And each is intensified by the use of galvanic movement, music and architectural design -- all crucial elements in Vragova's signature style.

Throughout the Soviet era, art and artists were at once grandly used and abused. The lavishly state-supported institutions produced brilliant artists whose expression was ferociously controlled, but whose achievements often were used as powerful propaganda tools. At the same time, such official suppression fueled incredibly imaginative work that also could be hugely, if subtly, subversive, and audiences clung ferociously to it.

Now, the level of work remains high. But like all Russians today, artists can travel freely and work anywhere and everywhere they wish, especially if they are not constrained by language. Meanwhile, arts organizations are seriously starting to look at the American nonprofit model for support -- or laughing about what they dream might be the largess of the country's fabled oligarchs. In addition, the urgency of their work has been modulated by the society's relative openness and normality.

Nevertheless, the theater is still a potent arena for the discussion of the tension between some Russians' hunger for globalization and others' resurgent feelings of nationalism. You can almost feel the tug of war between those engaged in raging, ruthless capitalism and those crying out nostalgically for "the old values." In fact, I had to laugh one morning at breakfast as I read a cover story in the Moscow Times, the English-language daily, which had a front-page story headlined "Critics Hit 'Anti-Socialist' Health Bill." As the article observed the irony: "While Washington plans to pump unprecedented sums into what critics [in the U.S.] call a government takeover of health care, Moscow is moving in the opposite direction by backing legislation that could force hospitals to go commercial or close."

The Moderne Theater's Vragova is a fervent Muscovite who mourns "the loss of beauty in our society." She has had a

controversial tangle with Mikhail Khodorkovsky --once a top oligarch who headed up Yukos, the Russian petroleum company, and now an inmate (some call him "a political prisoner") sitting in a remote jail. His name gets her talking heatedly about what she perceives as a loss of values, cultural and otherwise, in her country.

Attend a performance of the Bolshoi Ballet, as I did in Moscow -- a "revised" take on "Romeo and Juliet" -- and you will see that Yuri Grigorovich, who ruled the company from 1964-95, still exerts control, both onstage and in the media. His choreography is nothing short of wooden, and the dancers are a far cry from what they were in decades past.

Yet there is much to admire on the cultural scene.

At the Pushkin Museum, the lines snaked around the block for a vast exhibition of the work of Picasso, whose art had a decidedly checkered history during the Soviet era, organized as a part of a yearlong exchange between France and Russia. And at the recently established Garage -- a former bus depot transformed into an ultra-hip nonprofit exhibition space for contemporary art by Dasha Zhukova, the beautiful California-bred girlfriend of oligarch Roman Abramovich, -- there were several fascinating exhibits. One featured the first glimpse in Moscow of the paintings of Mark Rothko, the Latvian-born American expressionist painter who surely would have been dubbed "decadent" in Soviet times.

Alongside that show was "Futurologia," a project that brilliantly melded the old, by way of the pioneering work of Kazimir Malevich, a major figure of the avant-garde in early 20th century Russia, with the new, commissions by 18 contemporary Russian visual artists responding to his work. An intriguing show dealing with the recurring theme of utopia in Russian art and thought also was on view.

One of the loveliest moments of my trip occurred on a chilly, overcast Sunday morning as I walked past a grand old yellow stucco building a few blocks from my hotel. It turned out to be the Tchaikovsky Conservatory, the great concert hall where Rachmaninoff, Scriabin and others once worked, and where, in 1958, a young Texan by the name of Van Cliburn won the first International Piano Competition. From the open window of a practice room came the beautiful sounds of another pianist at work. Some things in Moscow are forever.

## THE NEW RUSSIA

Sun-Times theater critic Hedy Weiss recently returned to Moscow for the first time in more than 20 years. This is the second of two Sunday Commentary stories about the changes she observed there.

**Caption:** Color Photo: The ceiling of Bolshoi Ballet's New Stage is decorated with the work of Leon Bakst. Color Photo: Hedy Weiss, Sun-Times / Oleg Tsarev and Elena Starodub star as Russian emigres in Paris in "The Noose," directed by Svetlana Vragova at Moscow's Theater Moderne. Color Photo: Hedy Weiss, Sun-Times / The Tchaikovsky Conservatory continues to uphold the grand tradition of classical music.

**Edition:** Final

**Section:** Editorials Column; Series

**Page:** A26

**Series:** The New Russia

**Record Number:** 201005160039

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## Azerbaijani Opposition Nominates Single Presidential Candidate

**Government Press Releases (USA)** - Tuesday, July 2, 2013

By RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service

July 2, 2013

BAKU -- Azerbaijan's political opposition groups have united to nominate a single candidate for October's presidential election.

At a session of the National Council of Democratic Forces on July 2, prominent screenwriter Rustam Ibragimbekov (aka Ibrahimbayov) was chosen to represent the opposition in the presidential race.

The session also produced a memorandum outlining a "transition period."

The document states that, if elected, the opposition's candidate would remain in office for only two years.

During that period, the National Council would establish a "government of national trust" to implement constitutional and electoral reforms. The proposed reforms would decrease the powers of the presidency, widen the parliament's responsibilities, and establish an independent judiciary system.

Azerbaijan's ruling New Azerbaijan Party nominated incumbent President Ilham Aliyev as its presidential candidate last month.

Aliyev has held power since 2003, after succeeding his father.

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**Provided By:** FIND Government Press Releases

**Dateline:** Jul 02, 2013 (Radio Free Europe Documents and Publications/ContentWorks via COMTEX) --

**Record Number:** 200005897

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## **Azerbaijan Opposition Pins Hopes On Cultural Heavyweight For Presidential Vote**

**Government Press Releases (USA)** - Tuesday, July 2, 2013

By Arifa Kazimova and Daisy Sindelar

July 2, 2013

Surprises are hard to come by in the highly managed world of Azerbaijani elections.

But Azerbaijan's opposition has already managed the first twist in what may prove an unusually lively electoral season by backing screenwriter Rustam Ibragimbekov to face off against incumbent Ilham Aliyev when the oil-rich nation votes for a president this October.

The National Council of Democratic Forces - an umbrella group pulling together the country's main opposition parties - voted overwhelmingly on July 2 to nominate Ibragimbekov, the screenwriter behind such classics as "White Sun of the Desert" and "Burnt by the Sun," the Academy Award-winning film made with his longtime collaborator Nikita Mikhalkov.

Ibragimbekov's name has been dangled as a potential nominee ever since he was appointed council chair last month. But it remained uncertain whether Azerbaijan's fractious opposition could ultimately unite behind a single candidate and whether the 74-year-old Ibragimbekov -- who has described himself as a "political neophyte" -- would rise to the challenge.

Speaking by phone from Moscow shortly after his nomination, Ibragimbekov told RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service he was daunted but determined.

"This is a huge responsibility. I am grateful to my comrades for their trust," he said. "I will do everything in my power to achieve success. My hope is in the people of Azerbaijan. They will decide their own historic destiny. If I didn't believe in it, I wouldn't agree to take this responsibility. I will fight to the end."

Fresh Urgency

Ibragimbekov's nomination is not necessarily expected to alter the outcome of the vote, in which the country's 51-year-old president, Ilham Aliyev, is widely expected to win a constitutionally permitted third term as the candidate of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP).

But the participation of an esteemed cultural figure like Ibragimbekov, whose work is known and respected far beyond the borders of Azerbaijan, may lend fresh urgency to calls for change in the increasingly autocratic Caspian country, which has been ruled by a single bloodline for the past two decades.

In addition to Ibragimbekov's nomination, the National Council on July 2 approved a formal memorandum outlining a radical overhaul of Azerbaijan's political system in the event of an opposition win.

The memorandum foresees a two-year, single-term "transitional" presidency, fresh parliamentary elections in 2014, and a recalibration to narrow presidential powers and broaden legislative ones.

Ali Karimli, the head of the Popular Front Party, attended the July 2 National Council session and said Ibragimbekov was the ideal candidate to guide Azerbaijan through a political transformation.

"This is for the position he's demonstrated in recent years, for his efforts at forming the National Council, and for his authority in the world and among the Azerbaijani people," Karimli says. "This man will only be president for two years. He will not participate in the next elections. He will remain nonpartisan. He will not think about naming heirs in the presidential or parliamentary elections. He will work for this nation to join the democratic world during the transition period. We think Rustam Ibragimbekov can become this person."

#### Celebrity Status

For his advocates, Ibragimbekov's assets go beyond his perceived political incorruptibility. He is also seen as having celebrity status in both the United States and Russia, where he is expected to generate a drumbeat of support ahead of the election. (A formal date for the election has not been announced but constitutionally it is due to be scheduled on the third Wednesday in October, which would make the vote the 16th.)

Ibragimbekov, who won an Academy Award for "Burnt by the Sun" in 1995, traveled to Washington in June, where he said lawmakers expressed enthusiasm for steps for the "development of democracy" in Azerbaijan.

Now in Moscow, Ibragimbekov is expected to draw on an especially powerful circle of friends, including the so-called "billionaires' union" -- the Union of Azerbaijani Organizations of Russia, a diaspora support group that includes LUKoil President Vagit Alekperov and property mogul Araz Agalarov -- of which he is a member.

Gathering support abroad, however, comes at the expense of face time at home. Having thrown their weight behind his nomination, opposition supporters are now eager to see Ibragimbekov return to Azerbaijan as soon as possible - even if it means his possible arrest or even murder, as Ibragimbekov has himself suggested.

#### READ NEXT: Azerbaijan's Opposition Gears Up To Give Aliyev Serious Challenge

Isa Qambar, the head of the Musavat opposition party, backed the National Council decision but is also keeping his own party nomination active in the event that Ibragimbekov does not return.

"Ibragimbekov says he will come to Azerbaijan by the end of the month. We want to believe this," Qambar says. "I hope we won't hear in a month, 'Gather 100,000 people and I'll come to Baku.' That we won't hear in two months, 'I'll come after my candidacy is registered.'

"Registering a candidate is a risk. If there are other candidates in addition to our single candidate, the authorities will have a chance to choose between them, and there's a risk of that happening. The National Council could be left out the elections altogether."

#### Registration Perils

The ruling party has already raised the possibility of a National Council collapse, with YAP's deputy executive secretary, Siyavush Novruzov, saying on July 2 that "every political party leader is going to put forth his candidacy as the elections approach. Nothing the National Council does has any significance for YAP."

The registration period is certain to present its own perils to a potential Ibragimbekov run. By law, each nominee is required to gather no fewer than 40,000 signatures in at least 60 electoral districts -- a demand that can expose opposition candidates to the vagaries of local officials loyal to the ruling regime.

Ibragimbekov, who holds a Russian passport and owns homes in Moscow and California, may also hit procedural snags over an electoral ban on candidates holding "foreign commitments."

For many Azerbaijanis, the potential of an Aliyev-Ibragimbekov face-off in the October vote is a drama as personal as it is political.

Despite a 2012 YouTube video showing the Azeri president raising a lavish vodka toast to the filmmaker on his birthday, Ibragimbekov has had a hot-and-cold relationship with both Ilham and his father, Heydar, and recently criticized the ruling elite for failing to nurture the Azerbaijani intelligentsia.

"They think they are the salt of the earth, and they think our history began in 1993," he said. "Such neglect offended me. That's why I'm speaking up."

Written in Prague by Daisy Sindelar, based on reporting by Arife Kazimova and RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service in Baku

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**Provided By:** FIND Government Press Releases

**Dateline:** Jul 02, 2013 (Radio Free Europe Documents and Publications/ContentWorks via COMTEX) --

**Record Number:** 200031040

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## **Azerbaijani Opposition Leader Vows Return To Baku, Despite Fearing Arrest**

**Government Press Releases (USA)** - Thursday, July 25, 2013

By RFE/RL

July 25, 2013

The Azerbaijani opposition's pick for president, Rustam Ibragimbekov, has vowed to return to Baku next week, despite fearing arrest.

In an interview with RFE/RL in Brussels, the screenwriter-turned-political figure insisted he would go ahead with plans to fly to Azerbaijan on July 31 and start preparing his campaign.

"I wouldn't exclude that I will be arrested as soon as I land, or in two or three days," he said. "But I understand that the main goal is to prevent me from participating in the election, from the opportunity to register [as a candidate]."

The 74-year-old Ibragimbekov is known across the former Soviet Union and beyond as the screenwriter behind such classics as "The White Sun of the Desert" and the Academy Award-winning "Burnt by the Sun."

Azerbaijan's National Council of Democratic Forces, an umbrella group uniting the country's main opposition parties, backed Ibragimbekov this month as their choice to challenge authoritarian President Ilham Aliyev in October's election.

The Aliyev family has ruled Azerbaijan for more than two decades. A 2009 constitutional amendment abolishing term limits allows President Aliyev to potentially stay in office indefinitely.

Unconfirmed reports appeared in the Azerbaijani media this week saying that the government may be preparing to arrest Ibragimbekov upon his return.

Citing unnamed sources, the Olaylar news agency reported that authorities are preparing to arrest the opposition leader on charges of tax evasion.

In January, prosecutors launched a criminal case into alleged tax evasion by Azerbaijan's Union of Cinematographers, which Ibragimbekov heads. According to local media reports, the Tax Ministry questioned one of the union's employees on July 25.

The previous day, the opposition "Yenu Musavat" newspaper asked the prosecutor-general's office if it has opened a criminal case against Ibragimbekov. A spokesperson for the office was quoted as saying that they were "not able to give

any information on that because of investigation secrets."

Ibragimbekov told RFE/RL that "a representative of the office of the prosecutor-general has made a statement that a criminal case is going to be brought against me."

"This means that, being afraid of my participation in the [presidential] election, the Azerbaijani authorities are ready to do anything to prevent me from taking part in the election," he added. "These would be completely fabricated charges that were urgently prepared against me and all this is related to my return to Azerbaijan...[The government] can kill [people], they can imprison [people], they can compromise [people] using all sorts of means."

One hurdle that Ibragimbekov already faces is in regard to his citizenship. He holds both an Azerbaijani and a Russian passport, and Azerbaijan's constitution does not permit individuals holding dual citizenship to run for president.

Ibragimbekov has applied to have his Russian passport rescinded, but the decision could take months -- a fact that has led some observers to highlight how important Moscow's interests are in the process.

Ibragimbekov is in Brussels this week for meetings with EU diplomats as part of an effort to rally Western support for Azerbaijan's pro-democracy opposition and to draw attention to conditions surrounding the upcoming vote. That effort also took him to Washington in June.

Written by RFE/RL correspondent Richard Solash based on an interview by RFE/RL Brussels correspondent Rikard Jozwiak, with contributions from RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service

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**Provided By:** FIND Government Press Releases

**Dateline:** Jul 25, 2013 (Radio Free Europe Documents and Publications/ContentWorks via COMTEX) --

**Record Number:** 201202553

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## **Azerbaijani FM Says OSCE Will Get Invite To Monitor Presidential Vote**

**Government Press Releases (USA)** - Monday, July 8, 2013

July 8, 2013

Azerbaijan says it will allow monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to observe its presidential elections this autumn.

Speaking after talks with OSCE officials in Baku, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov said on July 8 that his country will issue a formal invitation approximately two months before the mid-October vote.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Leonid Kozhara, the current head of the rotating OSCE chairmanship, said he welcomed Azerbaijan's "openness" on the matter.

Azerbaijan's incumbent president, Ilham Aliyev, is due to run for a third term.

His opponents are expected to include award-winning screenwriter Rustam Ibragimbekov, who was picked by the National Council of Democratic Forces -- an umbrella group pulling together the country's main opposition parties -- on July 2 in hopes of rallying the opposition behind a single candidate.

More than 500 monitors from the OSCE and other international bodies observed the country's last presidential elections in 2008. They said that vote failed to meet international standards of proper conduct.

Based on reporting by Interfax and apa.az

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**Provided By:** FIND Government Press Releases

**Dateline:** Jul 08, 2013 (Radio Free Europe Documents and Publications/ContentWorks via COMTEX) --

**Record Number:** 200279327

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## **Azerbaijan to invite OSCE observers to monitor polls**

**Agence France-Presse** - Monday, July 8, 2013

Azerbaijan said on Monday it would invite monitors from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe to observe October's presidential election.

"On the question of whether Azerbaijan will invite observers from the OSCE, I answered that naturally we will invite them," Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov said after talks with OSCE officials in the capital Baku.

The official invitation is to be sent two months before polling day, which is yet to be decided by the country's election commission.

The current OSCE chairman, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Leonid Kozhara, commended Azerbaijan's "openness" for agreeing to let observers in.

Earlier this year, the former Soviet republic requested that the OSCE downgrade the mandate of its Baku office, sparking concern that it might not give permission for observers to monitor the election.

Strongman President Ilham Aliyev is the overwhelming favourite to win the vote, despite a coalition of opposition groups nominating Oscar-winning screenwriter Rustam Ibragimbekov as its sole candidate to challenge his iron grip on power.

Buoyed by petrodollars, Aliyev -- who won the last election with over 85 percent of votes cast -- has overseen impressive economic growth but faces repeated criticism over his government's human rights record.

Any display of public discontent or political dissent usually meets a tough government reaction in the mainly Muslim country, an officially secular nation on the Caspian Sea.

Rights groups have accused the government of stepping up a campaign to crack down on opposition activists and civil society groups in the run-up to the elections.

At the 2008 polls, the OSCE's 450-strong observer mission criticised a lack of real debate in the media and genuine competition.

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**Index Terms:** Azerbaijan-vote-OSCE; Politics

**Location(s):** Azerbaijan, Republic of

**Dateline:** BAKU, July 08, 2013

**Record Number:** TX-PAR-HMF97

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## **Director vs dictator: Oscar-winning film-maker Rustam Ibragimbekov stands for Azerbaijan presidency - One has an Oscar, the other rules oil-rich Azerbaijan with an iron fist. Can Rustam Ibragimbekov overcome Ilham Aliyev in the battle for the presidency?**

**Independent, The/The Independent on Sunday: Web Edition Articles (London, England) - Monday, July 15, 2013**

**Author:** Shaun Walker

During the many decades that the 74-year-old Oscar-winning director and screenwriter Rustam Ibragimbekov spent on film sets, he had little use for bodyguards. But it is not surprising that his friends are worried now. Ibragimbekov – a man who has never had much to do with politics – has just been chosen as the unified opposition candidate to face off against Ilham Aliyev, the heavy-handed leader of his home country, Azerbaijan.

Mr Aliyev – who took over when his father, Heydar Aliyev, died in 2003 – changed the constitution to allow him to stand for a third term in general elections that are expected in the autumn. He has used windfall cash from the country's oil industry to modernise the capital city, Baku, and turn it into a glittering, neon Dubai on the Caspian Sea. At the same time, his family and cronies have been implicated in a multitude of huge corruption scandals.

With one eye on the country's vast oil reserves, Western governments have turned a blind eye to the rampant corruption within the Azeri elite, while heavy-handed tactics and control of the media at home have kept discontent to a narrow segment of young internet-savvy city dwellers, until recently. Vocal critics of the regime have been locked up, often on spurious "hooliganism" charges.

Ibragimbekov is neither a charismatic speaker nor a long-standing critic of the regime; in fact he was once close to both Mr Aliyev and his father. There is footage online of Mr Aliyev toasting the filmmaker's brilliance at a vodka-laden feast and taking pride in the fame he brought to Azerbaijan. The director has long been one of the country's most prominent cultural figures, making the Soviet classic *The White Sun of the Desert* and co-scripting the Oscar-winning *Burnt by the Sun* in 1994.

Ibragimbekov himself says that when Ilham Aliyev took over from his father, he and other cultural figures were happy that a "young, progressive politician" would run Azerbaijan. For the first few years, things were "more or less OK", he says, but by 2007 it was clear that Mr Aliyev's rule was taking an ever more authoritarian bent.

"At that time we thought the government was going in the wrong direction, and noticed that the rampant corruption was becoming worse," he says, during an interview at the Moscow office of his production company. He and other public figures set up a forum of intellectuals, which met in Baku with the hope of providing some gentle guidance for Mr Aliyev and his ruling clique, but they found that the audience was far from receptive. "We invited the authorities to have a dialogue with us, but instead what we got was dirt and accusations, and stories slandering us planted in the media," he says.

Recently other critics have suffered worse fates. One journalist who investigated corruption in Mr Aliyev's family had her house broken into and cameras installed that filmed her having sex. When she refused to stop her reporting, the video was posted online.



Ibragimbekov is not seen as a modern figure and is thus out of touch with the young urban opposition to Mr Aliyev. However, he is seen by some as a transitional figure who could unite disparate groups in their fight. "He is known in Azerbaijan as a man who achieved huge success in his field," says Emin Milli, an opposition blogger and journalist who spent more than a year in jail after vocally criticising the government. "Everyone knows him and a lot of people respect him. He wins a lot of support from people who would not have supported the old opposition groups," Mr Milli says.

Ibragimbekov says he would be an interim president for two years, hold honest and open parliamentary elections and a referendum to change the constitution to create a parliamentary republic, with the president becoming a symbolic figure. However, he is worried he could face arrest or even be killed on his return to Azerbaijan so he remains in Moscow, drumming up international support for his run against Mr Aliyev. He has recently returned from meetings at the State Department in Washington and travelled to Brussels to meet with Catherine Ashton, the EU's top foreign policy official.

How the regime will respond to his return to Baku, and whether or not he will be arrested, is difficult to predict. Mr Aliyev has not left much room for nuance, however, calling the opposition "anti-nationalist, corrupt and traitorous" during a recent speech.

There has been an "unprecedented crackdown" in the past few months, according to Rebecca Vincent, a former US diplomat posted to Baku who now works on human rights issues there. "Rather than allowing a few reforms to let off steam quickly and relieve pressure, they are doing the opposite and pushing things much harder."

Ms Vincent estimates there are more than 80 political prisoners in the country and points to worrying developments such as a change to the law on defamation that could see people jailed for posts critical of the President or government officials on Facebook or other social networks. In recent months there have been several protests in regional cities, some of which turned violent in a sign discontent may be growing.

"This regime is not as stable as Aliyev wants to sell it as or as the US or UK establishments claim, and the riots we have seen in the regions could be a small taste of what is to come," Mr Milli says. "This is a historic moment, because the traditional opposition has never united at any point in the last 20 years."

While Ibragimbekov says he is convinced he can win honest elections and hopes for a peaceful transition, he dodges the question of putting Mr Aliyev and his family on trial. "I'm not a fan of recriminations, and I certainly don't want bloodshed," he says. "But there would have to be some mechanism to return the stolen money, at least."

As for what happens if the government decides to crack down on the opposition, or obviously falsifies election results, he paints a dark picture. If discontent starts to boil over, he says, there could be an "explosion" of popular feeling. "Pushkin wrote that there is nothing worse than a merciless Russian uprising," he says, shaking his head. "But Pushkin had never seen an Azeri uprising."

Ilham Aliyev: Life in brief

Heydar Aliyev held a firm grip on Azerbaijan when he took power in 1993, two years after the oil-rich nation gained independence from the Soviet Union. Though he restored relative stability, his critics say it came at the cost of human rights and media freedoms.

When Heydar died 10 years later, his son, Ilham, took over as President, winning a landslide victory at the 2003 general election – plagued, according to Western observers, by voter and opposition intimidation and media bias. Described by Heydar as his "political successor", Ilham was well-prepared for office – he had already served as Prime Minister, deputy leader of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (NAP) and vice-chairman of the state oil company.

Ilham won with ease his second term in office in a 2008 election boycotted by the main opposition parties. Having successfully repealed a two-term presidential limit in 2009, he is due to stand again in elections expected this autumn.

**Caption:** Rex Features / AFP Rustam Ibragimbekov and Ilham Aliyev will go head to head for the Azeri presidency

**Section:** *Frontpage*

**Record Number:** 8454364

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**Moscow Backs Down On Festival - Jewish film event gets help from Sovie officials**

**THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE** - Thursday, March 22, 1990**Author:** Michael Parks: *Los Angeles Times*

Under pressure from top Soviet government and Communist Party officials, Moscow city authorities agreed yesterday to permit a week-long international Jewish film festival despite their earlier fears that the festival might cause anti-Semitic demonstrations.

Reversing their previous decision, the city authorities said that "the political situation in the city . . . was less complicated" and that security can be provided for those attending the festival.

Rustam Ibragimbekov, president of the American-Soviet Film Initiative, one of the festival's sponsors, said he had argued in a telegram to Mayor Valery T. Saikin: "Cancellation of a festival of Jewish films because reactionary anti-Semites might protest against it amounted to the surrender of the Soviet Union's capital city to the worst sort of element."

**50,000 VIEWERS**

The festival is expected to attract more than 50,000 people over the course of a week, making it the largest Jewish cultural event in Soviet history. The films deal with a broad variety of Jewish themes that were prohibited here for many years.

"Soviet Jews need to know what Jewish life is outside the Soviet Union," said Deborah Kaufman, the American director of the festival.

Kaufman, of the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, called the reversal here yesterday "quite dramatic -- we have gone from despair to full satisfaction, and that in 24 hours."

**SECURITY WAS ISSUE**

"Take the security issue, for example," she continued. "Only on Tuesday, we were being told that the festival could not be held because security would be difficult; a day later, the police told us there would be no security problems that they could not handle."

Many Soviet officials had intervened this week with forceful arguments on holding the festival before Saikin relented, according to Soviet sources familiar with the struggle over the festival. Still, the battle was not easily won, they said, because of strong opposition to the festival within the bureaucracy.

Andrei S. Smirnov, secretary of the influential Soviet Union of Cinematographers, had declared that the city's decision, denying the festival the three theaters it needed for showing the 29 foreign films, amounted to political censorship.

**THREAT TO NEW IMAGE**

The Soviet Foreign Ministry warned city authorities that the image of the country as increasingly progressive and politically open under President Mikhail S. Gorbachev would be seriously impaired by the festival's postponement or cancellation.

Moreover, such a step could adversely affect all future cultural exchanges with the United States and other Western countries, the ministry reportedly told the city, following strong U.S. Embassy protests over the threatened cancellation or postponement.

Leading members of the Supreme Soviet, the national legislature, including Fyodor M. Burlatsky, Sergei B. Stankevich and Arkady Murashev, met with the festival organizers and later pressed their case with government and party officials.

**PRIORITIES WERE WRONG**

And the ideological department of the party's policy-making Central Committee told Moscow city officials that they had gotten their priorities all wrong -- that their activities, including the latest decision, were undercutting domestic policies and damaging the country's foreign interests.

"Whatever the circumstances, the appearance of tolerating and accommodating anti-Semitism destroys whatever sympathy we have earned generally for Soviet policies," a senior party official commented.

"Sometimes, however, one of our officials has trouble understanding and asks, 'What is so special about a Jew?' That is sort of what has been happening with this festival."

NOT PROFITABLE

Vladimir V. Ploshansky, director of the firm that runs Moscow's cinema theaters, who earlier in the week complained that he would lose money for every day of the screenings, commented yesterday, "We are only too pleased to be able to do this, and I don't think I want to say more than that."

Meanwhile, five ultra-rightist Soviet groups, often seen at the heart of present-day anti-Semitism as well as Russian nationalism, announced yesterday that they had joined forces to promote a Czarist monarchy to save Russia.

"Seeing that our country is now in a very dangerous situation, we decided to form the Russian Orthodox popular sentiments into a fist to smash in the teeth of the scum who want to see Russia destroyed," Evgeny Pashkin, a worker who helped bring the groups together, said, referring to liberals "and especially Jews."

"Russia's salvation lies with God and patriotism."

Much of the groups' program spoke darkly about threats from Jews or Zionists and of conspiracies by them to take over the country, though Jews number only about 2 million people in a country of more than 287 million.

**Edition:** FINAL

**Section:** DAILY DATEBOOK

**Page:** E1

**Index Terms:** SOVIET UNION; MOVIES ; FESTIVALS ; FOREIGN ; JEWS

**Dateline:** Moscow

**Record Number:** 1063440

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## JEWISH FILM FEST TO ROLL IN MOSCOW

Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - Thursday, March 22, 1990

MOSCOW

Under pressure from top Soviet government and Communist Party officials, Moscow city authorities agreed Wednesday to permit a weeklong international Jewish film festival despite their earlier fears that the festival might bring anti-Semitic demonstrations.

Reversing their previous decision, city authorities said "the political situation in the city . . . was less complicated" and security could be provided for those attending the festival.

"Cancellation of a festival of Jewish films because reactionary anti-Semites might protest against it amounted to the surrender of the Soviet Union's capital city to the worst sort of element," Rustam Ibragimbekov, president of the American-Soviet Film Initiative, one of the festival's sponsors, said he had argued in a telegram to Mayor Valery Saikin.

The festival is expected to attract more than 50,000 people, making it the largest Jewish cultural event in Soviet history.

BONN, West Germany

The United States wants the two Germanys to unite as quickly as possible and does not object if Soviet troops remain in East Germany even after unification, a senior U.S. diplomat said Wednesday.

In one of the strongest statements yet of American support for a single German state, the diplomat told reporters that although Washington hopes a united Germany will remain part of NATO, membership in the Western alliance is not a condition of American support.

"The speed of the unification process does not worry us," said the official, who insisted on anonymity but said he was speaking for the American government.

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia

A convoy of trucks unloaded at least 110 tons of food for famine victims Wednesday after safely passing through war-torn northern Ethiopia.

The 11 trucks arrived Tuesday night in Kobo in the Wollo province after leaving the provincial capital of Dessie at dawn. It was a 75-mile journey over mountainous roads through contested territory.

The convoy was the first relief effort since early February, when a rebel offensive closed a Red Sea port being used to unload supplies.

**Section:** AA

**Page:** A20

**Record Number:** 9003220328

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## **Moscow Hitch in Jewish Event - Sponsors of first joint film festival condemn efforts to delay opening**

**THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE** - Wednesday, March 21, 1990

**Author:** Peter Stack, Chronicle Staff Writer

The first Jewish film festival in the Soviet Union, scheduled to start in Moscow this weekend, faced an uncertain future yesterday amid reports that some local Soviet politicians had changed their minds about making three theaters available for 30 movies scheduled to be shown over the course of a week.

Organizers of the festival, the San Francisco-based Jewish Film Festival, said anti-Semitism was to blame.

As soon as reports of the festival's possible cancellation were dispatched through Reuters, the news agency, a key Soviet official of the festival's joint Soviet-U.S. sponsoring organization said the festival would go ahead as planned.

"However, this festival is in real danger of being canceled because some sources in Moscow city hall and in the Central Party Committee do not want this festival to happen," said Rustam Ibragimbekov, president of the Soviet American Film Initiative, a group that promotes film exchanges between the two countries.

In Moscow, the director of a film distribution group financed by the Moscow City Council told Reuters that a lack of funds in the city budget forced authorities there to request that the festival be delayed. But Ibragimbekov disputed the report, saying that the explanation of a lack of funds was "totally false," that the sponsoring organization had all the finances in order and was "fully capable" of paying for the festival to go on as scheduled.

In a statement issued by the Soviet American Film Initiative's Los Angeles office, Ibragimbekov went on to say that he would appeal to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to intervene, "because the cancellation of this festival would have extremely negative effect the world over."

Ibragimbekov, in addition to presiding over the Soviet American Film Initiative, is the secretary of the Soviet Filmmakers Association, and a deputy of the Supreme Soviet. The Jewish Film Festival organization in Berkeley and San Francisco had worked for more than a year with him and his organization to put the festival program together, and to arrange for directors and producers from Hollywood, New York and other international film production centers to attend.

Among those scheduled to be on hand in Moscow was director Paul Mazursky, whose current movie, "Enemies, A Love Story," was to be the festival's gala closing night offering.

"There is a lot of fear and certainly anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, and we believe this was the reason for the change in their decision," said festival director Deborah Kaufman of Berkeley, according to the Reuters report from Moscow.

"It's ridiculous to speak of anti-Semitism," said Vladimir Plashansky, director of Moscow Film Distribution, the group that cited a lack of funds for the festival. "If we had the film festival now, we would have to pay a great amount of funds," he said. Festival organizers said Moscow officials had been aware of the festival for months, and in approving it, had also been aware of its costs.

"Maybe they are afraid of raising tension, but they should have told us earlier," a staff member of the film initiative group told a Reuters reporter.

Many of the 30 films at the festival - some are award winning features from Europe and the United States - deal with such topics as anti-Semitism, Israeli society and the Holocaust. Features scheduled to be shown included "The Chosen," "Crossing Delancey," "Hester Street," "Girlfriends," "Image Before My Eyes," "In Her Own Time," "Kadish," "Tell Me a Riddle," and "A Jumpin' Night in the Garden of Eden."

"We wanted to help Jews who are here to understand Jewish identity and culture and give them the tools they need to organize themselves," festival director Kaufman said.

In San Francisco, a spokesman for the Jewish Film Festival, said the U.S. State Department in Moscow had been apprised of the situation.

**Caption:** PHOTO

Deborah Kaufman: San Francisco organizer of Moscow festival

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**Edition:** THREE STAR

**Section:** DAILY DATEBOOK

**Page:** E1

**Index Terms:** FESTIVALS ; MOVIES ; FOREIGN ; JEWS

**Record Number:** 1063235

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