

## **SPORTS: WAR ON HUTS, MONEY FOR PALACES**

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### **Summary**

All socioeconomic hardships Belarus is suffering now had not affected national-level sports until recently. In 2011, the economic crisis hit them as well, which however did not result in fewer medals. On the contrary, Belarusian athletes won more of them than in 2010 as concerns world championships only. Elite athletes were safeguarded from adversities but the sports reserve suffered heavily and training of newcomers is still flawed. The use of doping in youth sports is as huge a problem as before. The lack of a quality reserve is often remedied by naturalization of foreigners.

Football players of the national youth team won European medals for the first time and will play in the Olympics, while the national adult team did not make it through the UEFA European Championship 2012 qualifying round.

The new presidential decree on support for physical training and sports organizations does not look revolutionary, although it is meant to raise sports management up from zero.

Much effort has been made to prepare for the Ice Hockey World Championship which Minsk is going to host in 2014. The focus is on construction of new ice arenas. At the same time, the performance of the national teams of all ages in world championships is rather depressing.

### **Trends:**

- Large scale construction of ice palaces;
- Intense preparation for the 2014 Ice Hockey World Championship;
- Priority funding of the sports elite;
- Troublesome situation with training of the reserve;
- Progressing naturalization of foreigners;
- Declarative struggle against doping.

### **Commerce motivators**

The crisis that has overwhelmed the national economy entailed poorer sponsorship of the sports branch. The inflation has eaten up a number of regular training events and pruned sports delegations a little. Such saving sometimes helped to optimize expenses, though. Medium level athletes and trainees of Olympic reserve schools, whose "ration" was cut down considerably, suffered the most. By

the year-end, the situation was rectified, and potential Olympians were not affected at all.

Team sports were prioritized in terms of funding. Football, basketball, volleyball and handball teams were provided for by presidential decrees on state support which attached clubs to enterprises and territories. In 2008, state funding reached USD 74 million as compared with USD 66 million in 2010. More than a half the money was consumed by ice hockey alone.

A wage ceiling was established for the hockey teams playing in the Belarusian Extraleague (aka Belarusian Open Championship): no more than USD 75,000 a month per team, which means nearly a 30% reduction. The restriction however only concerns budgetary funds and sponsor money is allowed. Interestingly, the wage reduction concurred with creation of new Hockey Club Lida with a budget of several millions of dollars that approximately equals the saved funds.

Twice (in May and September 2011), Lukashenko demanded to do away with addiction to budget money injections, learn how to earn independently and work out a financing program which would suit the government in the new economic situation. Borisov-based Football Club BATE is the only self-sustaining sport club in Belarus. It made EUR 1.7 million during the 2010-2011 season in the European Football League. In 2011, the Borisov club fought its way to the Champions League, made a handsome profit by selling its players Nekhaichik and Shytov, and its incomes were up to EUR 13 million. According to *Pressball* newspaper, the budget of the entire football league stands at USD 40 million<sup>1</sup>.

On November 3, 2011, the president issued decree No.497 on support for physical training and sports organizations which will remain in force till 2012<sup>2</sup>. This decree abolishes the list of enterprises "sentenced" to compulsory sponsorship. Sport clubs will have to engage in management to ensure self-financing at the rate of 50% by 2014. So far, most of them have been able to cover just few percent of expenses. According to the decree, the local authorities are to pay the clubs up to 40% of the minimum of subsistence, and clubs' children and youth sports schools will be sponsored by the state.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.pressball.by/news.php?t=0102&id=70645>.

<sup>2</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus № 497 of November 3, 2011 // [Electronic resource] Mode of access: [http://www.belta.by/ru/articles/officially?cat\\_id=1484](http://www.belta.by/ru/articles/officially?cat_id=1484).

In order to stimulate economic activity, *sports institutions established as non-governmental organizations, associations and unions are entitled to do business without formation of profit-making entities and/or participations in them.* The year 2012 will show whether the new decree is working better than the previous ones.

### **Minsk Championship-2014 in question**

The situation is complex with the most fondled sport — ice hockey. Huge money is channeled into preparation for the world championship of 2014 in Minsk. There is a possibility though that Belarus will be stripped of the right to host the event. The European Parliament, Bundestag, U.S. Congress, human rights and public organizations in Europe and North America want another place for the championship due to numerous violations of human rights in the country.

The preparation is going on, no matter what they say. Minsk builders construct and reconstruct hotels, erect eight two-level traffic intersections, broaden motorways inside the city and those connecting the capital with Mogilev and Bobruisk. One more air strip is being arranged at the national airport Minsk-2. Suburban railway transportation system is being upgraded. The second ice hockey complex Chizhovka-Arena, which can handle 8,500 viewers, is on the way. One more 2,000-seat arena, the sixth one in Minsk, will be constructed in Dzerzhinsky Avenue.

It is not likely that the Belarusian leadership expects huge revenues from the hockey championship. Right after Minsk was awarded the right to host the event, they were talking about 50,000 visitors, then the number was corrected downward to 35,000 and now it is about 20,000.

It would be natural to expect the national hockey team to try to make Belarusian sport fans and Alexander Lukashenko personally proud when playing at home. In the World Championship-2011 in Slovakia, the Belarusians only managed to gain a foothold in the elite by taking the last safe 14<sup>th</sup> place. It would be naive to hope that talented hockey players will grow up in the next three years, given that the junior and youth teams of Belarus failed to qualify for the top divisions in the 2011 championships. Tragically, 37-year-old Ruslan Salei, Team Belarus Captain, and 21-year-old forward Sergei Ostapchuk died in the plane crash on September 7 near Yaroslavl together with the local Locomotive team.

Three Canadians playing for Dinamo Minsk in the Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) — Jeff Platt, Kevin Lalande and Charles Linglet — were given Belarusian passports. Finn Kari Heikkilä, who earlier trained Finnish and Russian teams, was appointed head coach of the national team of Belarus.

HC Dinamo Minsk enjoys great popularity in Belarus. Fifteen-thousand-seat Minsk-Arena, the largest one in the post-Soviet space, is often overcrowded. It does not upset Belarusian hockey fans that the team performance leaves much to be desired. A dozen Canadians, Czechs, Slovaks, and Finns, and a duet of coaches from the Czech Republic are its driving force. Belarus' strongest players play in North America and Russia.

Dinamo's budget is kept secret and is rumored to reach USD 20 to 25 million. The Belarusian Potash Company is said to be the chief sponsor. In the 2010/2011 KHL season, Dinamo was the 15<sup>th</sup> among 22 teams and lost 2–4 to Locomotive Yaroslavl in the first playoff round. In the 2011/2012 season, the team climbed a bit higher and finished 12<sup>th</sup> but was beaten 0–4 right away in the playoffs by Dynamo Moscow and Marek Sikora announced his retirement after the failure.

## Palace boom

Three new ice palaces opened in 2011, which makes a total of 29 now. Molodechno, with a population of 100,000, has a 2,200-seat arena; Luninets and Ivatsevichi (district centers of the Brest region) were given 800 seats each while their populations are four times smaller. Official sources say the Luninets Arena cost 24 billion rubles and the actual cost could be higher. The palace in Molodechno was opened in grand style as a gift timed to Dozhinki-2011 Festival and most likely cost much more.

Many expected that price hikes and popular discontent would dent enthusiasm of the chief hockey player of the country, Alexander Lukashenko, as concerns the erection of energy devouring monsters. But it didn't. According to *tut.by* portal, 23 more ice arenas are scheduled for construction in 2012–2014! It looks like the Belarusian leadership is eager to impress the world with a half a hundred palaces in 2014 regardless of economic and social hardships.

Ice arenas are coming even to small district centers like Glubokoye and Shklov (18,000 residents each), Lepel and Kostyukovich (17,000), Drogichin and Novolukoml (14,000). Relevancy of

ice arenas in such small towns as Chausy (11,000), Glusk and Klichev (7,000 each) can be probably explained by the fact that they are located in the Mogilev region which gave Belarus the first and the only (for now) president.

Of course, the palaces produce a certain social effect. In 2011, 23 children's sports schools totaled over four thousand young hockey players and probably hundreds of thousands used to come just for skating. However, electric energy is so expensive that makes this pleasure an unaffordable luxury. For instance, after the electricity tariff went up in October 2011, Minsk-Arena had to pay electricity bills to the amount of two billion rubles (nearly USD 228,000)<sup>3</sup>! Small and medium size palaces pay 200 to 300 million rubles a month.

In order to minimize the enormous budgetary expenditure, the palaces host fitness centers, billiard and computer rooms, saunas, and offer skate rental. But even the most qualified management only helps to recover less than a half of the money spent. Those in charge came to the idea to change the form of ownership. The Baranovichi palace hosts a state hockey and figure skating school, which earns some money because the city is paying salaries, procures, equipment, and uniforms now, but it certainly does not resolve the core problem.

### **Successes of national youth football team**

Many things in Belarus take place not owing to something but in spite of it. The bronze medals of the Belarusian U-23 football team in the European Championship in Denmark are an example of that. Impressive is the bare fact that the Belarusians are among the top eight teams in Europe. In the final tournaments of 2004 and 2009, they failed to make it through the semifinals, and now it happened. Circumstances favored the team largely.

The Belarusians only won one out of three games. They beat Iceland 2:0 and lost twice from Denmark (1:2) and Switzerland (0:3). Surprisingly enough, it sufficed to finish second in the group and to go to the semifinals. Belarus led for more than half of the game against the definitive favorite, Spain, but let in a goal two minutes before the end and lost 1–3 in the stoppage time.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> place game, Belarus and the Czech Republic fought for a ticket to the Olympics in London and the Belarusians snatched

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.pressball.by/news/other/94516?page=78>.

a 1-0 victory which, together with the European bronze medals, can be regarded as the greatest football accomplishment of Belarus as a sovereign state.

Successes of the youth team in many respects result from early high-grade game practice in the national championship which however is not very strong. The team-work helps to stay in good shape and contributes to team spirit. Foreign players usually make their way to professional clubs few years later than Belarusians.

A great job done by the truly professional head coach, Georgy Kondratyev, who has created a team out of promising individuals and set high goals is another factor. One can hardly tell that the team's performance was sparkling, but its integrity was obvious. The leaders of the bronze team, Alexander Gutor, Oleg Veretilo, Stanislav Dragun and Dmitry Baga, have a good chance to prove themselves more than worthy in adult teams. Goaltender Gutor was acclaimed as the best football player of Belarus in 2011.

The national team led by Bernd Stange looked weak as compared with the youngsters. Being second in the 2012 European Championship qualification, the Belarusians lost 0:1 to Albania and twice to Bosnia and Herzegovina (0:2 and 0:1 respectively) and finished fourth out of six. The German coach, basically remembered for his populism, ended his four-year career in Minsk and went home after surrendering two qualifying tournaments.

## Results of world championships

In 2010, Belarusian athletes won 16 awards in world championships and three medals in the Winter Olympics in Vancouver (19 in total). The year 2011 brought the same number of medals. However, it would be more proper to compare the recent achievements with those of the odd years when world championships in the same sports are held.

	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
2003	3	9	14	28
2005	5	5	9	19
2007	5	6	4	16
2009	6	4	4	12
2011	4	7	8	19

Since 2003 till 2009, the total number of medals went down from 28 to 12, and the 19 medals in 13 sports must have instilled some hope. The age of most leading athletes arouses concern, as potential sports stars coming up from the reserve are few. Probably this explains the considerable medal decline from 31 down to 21 in European championships.

Dominating in world events were biathletes (one silver and one bronze); freestyle wrestlers (one gold and two bronzes); Greco-Roman style wrestlers (one gold and one silver); track and field athletes (one silver and one bronze), and rowers (two bronzes). Free-style swimmer Alexander Gerasimenya (100 m distance), weight-lifter Anastasia Novikova (U58 kg weight category), and wrestlers Alim Selimov and Alexei Shemarov achieved the most significant victories. Tennis player Victoria Azarenka was ranked third and then first in early 2012.

Igor Zaichkov, First Vice Chairman of the National Olympic Committee of Belarus says the government is going to spend 40 to 50 billion rubles to prepare for the Olympics. He believes 30 to 40 Belarusian athletes are able to bring home medals from London. Before the games in Beijing, 65 to 70 candidates for Olympic heroes were expected to go up the winners' podium. Belarusians could really win 14 to 16 Olympic medals as against 19 in Beijing in 2008 which was the best result in the history of independent Belarus. NOC President Alexander Lukashenko demands 25 medals, though.

## Conclusion

Belarus' sport sector, as well as Belarus' economy is developing in an incoherent way. While the country's debt burden in 2011 is up nearly 20%, loans are used not for creation of high-profit production facilities but for construction of high-cost, but profitless sports complexes. Nothing stops the Belarusian leadership in its aspiration to set a world record in speedy erection of ice palaces.

The enormous amount of money channeled into development of the hockey industry has proved inefficient: the national team only gets weaker and young talented players are barely available.

In most sports, training of the reserve is actually a total failure. Youth sports are "poisoned" with doping and no one is held liable for that<sup>4</sup>. Belarusian passports are given to Russians, Ukrainians,

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.pressball.by/news.php?t=1016&id=75977>.

and currently also to Canadians in order to seal off the breaches. Only one out of five medal-winning wrestlers, Vasilisa Marzalyuk, was born and raised in Belarus.

Nonetheless, the multidivisional structure of the sports branch is still functioning, yet spontaneously, and pushes up super-talented individuals who, together with old-timers, are supposed to achieve the targets set by Belarusian sports bosses in the forthcoming Olympics in London.