

Ice hockey: Lukashenka's private "circus"

On 4-7 January 2018 Minsk hosted its 14th amateur Christmas ice hockey tournament, where Alexander Lukashenka's team celebrated victory for the 11th time. In Belarus, ice hockey has become Lukashenka's private "circus."

"Zero-first" and "the black helmet"

The Christmas tournament allows Lukashenka to bring together friends and colleagues. The organisers invite famous retired professionals either to play or to take a ceremonial part in the event. This year Phil Esposito, the Boston Bruins legend and a member of the NHL Hall of Fame, opened the match between China and Lukashenka's team on 5 January.



Alexander Lukashenka with Phil Esposito in Minsk. Source: president.gov.by

Besides these two teams, amateur players from Switzerland, the

United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Czech Republic, Sweden, Russia and the Balkans took part in the event. Traditionally, Lukashenka plays in all his team's games and this year he scored 6 goals. He even hit a hat-trick against UAE. The Belarusian leader clearly gets pleasure from playing hockey and being part of the winning team.

On the ice, Lukashenka can be identified by two special details. The number '01' adorns his shirt; nobody else in the country is allowed to wear a '01' shirt. The second detail – he is the only man in the country to play in a black helmet. This gave rise to two nicknames for the president widely used by Belarusians: “Zero-first” and “The Black Helmet.”

A unique moment occurred in this year's tournament – for the first time Lukashenka was sent off for 2 minutes. During a face-off, the president fell onto an opponent from the UAE team. Belarusian media widely shared the amusing moment and it quickly became a popular internet meme. Many social media users joked about the fate of the referee (whether he kept his life) and claimed that “Belarus experienced freedom for 2 minutes”.

Illusory full house

Traditionally, all the Christmas tournament matches draw almost a full house at the Čyžoŭka-Arena on the outskirts of the city. Neither the wide media coverage nor the popularity of ice hockey in Belarus explains this. Although entrance to the event is free, people do not want to watch low-quality friendly matches involving amateurs and veterans on work days.

To fill seats, Minsk school teachers take pupils to the matches instead of classes. Teachers trying to avoid the obligation may face problems at work. At the same time, some state enterprises distribute tickets among their employees, who are also obliged to go. Usually, they leave the arena

after a couple of minutes of the game. Thus, if at the beginning of the match the stands are full, then after the first period one can easily count the number of spectators.



Alexander Lukashenko with his son Mikalai. Source: president.gov.by

In fact, hockey proves not so popular in Belarus. The average attendance for championship matches stands at around 700 people per game. "Dinamo" Minsk, which plays in the Continental Hockey League (CHL) along with the best teams from Russia, Latvia, Kazakhstan, Finland, and China, represents an exception. "Dinamo" regularly attracts a full house at the Minsk Arena (around 15,000 people) and draws the best average attendance in the CHL. The level of competition, entertainment, and a top-notch arena explain its success in drawing attendances.

"Dinamo" includes players from various countries, but Belarusian nationals constitute its core. It twice qualified

for the play-offs, but has never reached the semi-final stage. At the same time, some of its Canadian and American players received Belarusian passports, making them eligible to play for Belarus's national team, which lacks good quality players. This usually causes a big wave of criticism from fans, who disagree with naturalization for the benefit of national sports teams.

From father to son

Returning to the Christmas tournament, one should emphasise that Lukashenka's team won the competition for the 11th time in its history. The Russian team celebrated victory in the 3 other contests. At the end of the tournament, Lukashenka honoured the winners of the children's hockey competition called "Golden Puck". The top-scorer of the tournament was... surprise! surprise! Mikalai Lukashenka. His father handed him the prize, though his team lost the final match against other Minsk representatives.

Ice hockey has already brought success to Mikalai Lukashenka. Playing as a forward, he routinely wins awards as the best attacking player in youth tournaments. In December, the public learned that youth hockey coaches address Lukashenka's son in the most respectful way possible – using his patronymic – "Mikalai Alexandrovich." The joke runs that Belarus already has a prospective striker for its national team. One who will strike fear into all his opponents.

The hardcore management

During 2017 Lukashenka drew attention to the results of Belarusian ice hockey teams several times. He characterised the situation the following way: "It's a disgrace!" Moreover, Lukashenka appointed the Minister of Internal Affairs, Ihar

Šunievič, to the position of president of the “Dinamo” Minsk club, which once again shows the importance of ice hockey to the country’s ruler.



Minister of Internal Affairs and HC “Dinamo” Minsk president Ihar Šunievič.
Source: kp.by

In summer 2017, after another call from Lukashenka, [Šunievič](#) offered to produce uniforms and equipment for children’s hockey schools in prisons. The president personally examined the first outputs produced by the prisoners, which impressed him. He gave some recommendations for modernising them. The officials plan to distribute hockey equipment, produced by the prisoners, in hockey schools across Belarus.

Today many Belarusians view ice hockey as “a circus” designed to entertain the president. Information about Belarusian ice hockey clubs and the national team losing matches have become the target for trolling and mockery among Belarusians. Preparations for the 2021 World Championship in Minsk and Riga meet a wave of criticism for the same reasons.

The Rise of Belarusian Handball

However unfortunate could be the political and economic situation within Belarus, thanks to some Belarusians the national pride can still be high.

In 2012 Belarusian handball players were among the ones to thank for that. After a longest decline of Belarusian handball, the hope for its revival is now glimmering. While the beliefs that Belarusian handball has died with the Soviet Union step back.

Both Europe and the world know not only that Belarusian handball exists, but also its face – Sergey Rutenko.

Sergey Rutenko: But Perhaps A Wizard?

Sergey Rutenko comes from Minsk region, township Pryvolny. Fond of sambo wrestling and basketball as a child, he finally chose handball. The choice has proved to be right.

The number of prizes and titles granted to the prominent 31-year old Belarusian has become countless. Sergey has been a 5-times champion of the EHF Champions League, the most expensive transfer in the history of handball (€ 1,2 m), the best goal-scorer of the EHF Champions League in 2004 and 2005, as well as of 2006 European Men's Handball Championship.

The sharp rise of Sergey Rutenko's carrier started in 2000 with silver medal at the European Handball Junior Nations Championship. Shortly, he left Belarusian "Arkatron" and moved to Slovenia. There he played first for "Gorenje" (afterwards substituted for the leader of Slovenian handball – "Pivovarna

Laško”), as well as Slovenian national team. In 2005 he moved to Spanish “Ciudad Real”, in 2009 – to “FC Barcelona”.



In order to save the right to play in Spanish League in 2008 Rutenko had to accept citizenship of Spain. Like earlier in Slovenia, the Spanish invited him to play in their national team. Acceptance of such proposal could allow Sergey to make a new huge step in his carrier.

But this time he seemed to care about the carrier’s development less: in 2008 Rutenko expressed the wish to return to the Belarusian national team. In September 2010 Sergey finally got the right to play for his motherland and soon captained the national team.

Still, Rutenko has not turned Belarus into an unconquerable handball empire instantly. Soon after his arrival, defeats to Denmark and Russia followed. Rutenko’s 11 goals in the two games could not save Belarus. In this regard, Sergey had only one response: *“I’m not a magician”*.

But perhaps he is close to one. For the first time he is playing for the Belarusian national team and for the first time since 1995 Belarus is participating in the World Men’s Handball Championship. Rutenko participated in all the 2012’s games with Slovakia, Lichtenstein and Romania – the games that have paved Belarus’ route to the Championship. And within its first circle is bringing to the Belarusian national team almost a half of its goals.

“Dinamo”: The First Among Equals

Belarusian handball clubs are currently gaining strength as well.

In 2012 after the victory over Turkish “Beşiktaş”, “Dinamo Minsk” burst into play-off of the EHF Champions League. This sole fact proves the team’s recent progress. In 2010-2011 “Dinamo” fell out of the Championship even before 1/16.


Not only did the team have the chance to conquer for the place among top 16 teams of Europe. It seems to succeed in implementation of this chance. As of now, “Dinamo-Minsk” is taking the third place (out of 6 teams) in its Group D: after “FC Barcelona” and “Füchse Berlin”. However, “Füchse Berlin” is only one point ahead of “Dinamo” and the latter still have 3 circles of games to change the ranking.

As a pleasant contrast to hockey “Dinamo Minsk” and football [“BATE Borisov”](#) handball “Dinamo Minsk” has real competitors within Belarus. “Handball Club Meshkov Brest”, as well as “SKA Minsk” does not allow “Dinamo” to relax. In these circumstances fans’ hopes, that the team’s results will only grow, can reasonably strengthen.

Less fortunately, “Dinamo Minsk” is far from being a purely Belarusian team. More than half of its players are foreigners. Last year it even got an unpleasant name of branch of the national team of Ukraine. 5 Ukrainians are playing for the club!

Date / Time	Match	Venue
9 February 2013 /18:00	Zagreb  v  Dinamo Minsk	Arena Zagreb, Zagreb
16 February 2013 /17:15	Pick Szeged  v  Dinamo Minsk	Városi Sportcsarnok, Szeged
21 February 2013 /20:00	Dinamo Minsk  v  Barcelona	Dinamo, Minsk

Schedule of EHF Champions League's matches of "Dinamo Minsk" for February 2013

Still, Belarusian fans are looking forward to February games of “Dinamo Minsk” against “Zagreb”, “Pick  Szeged” and “FC Barcelona”.

Especially, the game with "FC Barcelona", which will bring an additional chance to watch Sergey Rutenko at work.

Call For State's Attention

The today's achievements, however, represent just a vague shadow of Belarusian handball's success of Soviet times. "SKA Minsk" still ranks as one of the most titled clubs in Europe. For three times it won EHF Champions League (1987, 1989 and 1990). Twice – in 1983 and 1988 – it wrested EHF Men's Cup Winner's Cup.

Up to 1992, Belarus supplied most professional players to the USSR team. To put it into figures, at 1988 Olympics the victorious USSR team included 5 players from Belarus!



But almost for 20 years up to now Belarus has been wasting the talent of its youth. Salaries of children's coaches are insufficient to make ends meet. Low popularisation of handball decreases children's and parents' motivation to take up handball.

The Belarusian national team and "Dinamo" have proved Belarusians' talent for handball is still strong.

Will now the state prove the ability to display these talents? It really seems to be an urgent task. Otherwise, Belarusian clubs will have to rely on foreign mercenaries, while Belarus – to hope that its all children will, like Rutenko, sacrifice their personal profit for the motherland's sake.

Lukashenka's Sport Diplomacy

As the new diplomatic war between Belarus and the European Union unfolds, Belarus may lose its right to host the World Ice Hockey Championship in 2014. Because of problems with democracy and human rights The Congress of the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) may reconsider its decision taken three years ago.

According to IIHF Communications Director Szymon Szemberg, the reason is numerous demands from human rights groups and Western governmental organisations. IIHF President Rene Fasel stated in the past that sports had nothing to do with politics. But in Belarus sports are much more than just sports. It is one of the ideological pillars of Aleksandr Lukashenka's politics.

Sport As a National Idea

For 20th century totalitarian regimes, sport became a tool of mass indoctrination and propaganda. 'Sport constructs the culture of optimism and cheerfulness,' stated a Bolshevik ideologist Anatoly Lunacharsky. Not surprisingly, Soviet authorities maintained a widespread system of state sport associations, clubs and competitions. During the most [terrible period of political repressions](#) in 1930s, Joseph Stalin enjoyed watching pompous mass marches of Soviet athletes and football matches at the Red Square in Moscow.

Alexander Lukashenka, elected as the first President of Belarus in 1994, loves massive parades too.

In the late 1990s, after the break-down of Belarus-Western relations, it was Lukashenka who proclaimed that 'our athletes are the best diplomats,' and their performance showed the front of the country. When his ideologists failed to produce a coherent state ideology based on the the Soviet period of Belarusian history rather than on national traditions or democratic values, sport was promoted as a national ideal for the state. To demonstrate his serious intentions, Lukashenka appointed top security figures (*siloviki*) to the key sport federations' positions.

Since 1997, Lukashenka himself has been the president of the Belarus National Olympic Committee. All major sport events and appointments to the national team take place with his approval. Every two years the ruler assigns the number of medals Belarusian athletes must win in Summer and Winter Olympics.

Sport as the Ruler's Plaything

Being a huge ice hockey fan, Lukashenka decided to start promoting this particular sport in Belarus. Ice hockey requires immense infrastructure and investments. An average Belarusian has to pay his full monthly salary to buy ice hockey equipment for just one 10-year-old boy.

As the first step, Lukashenka ordered construction of new ice hockey venues across the country. In 1994 there were only three indoor arenas, today there are 23, and 23 more are under construction. Belarus' leader does not care that most of the venues are too expensive for Belarus and will not pay off in the near future.

Lukashenka visited the Olympic Games at least twice – in 1998 in Nagano and in 2008 in Beijing. However, world ice hockey tournaments usually take place in Western countries closed for 'the last dictator in Europe' because of visa sanctions. To fix the problem official Minsk applied to host a World

championships several times. Finally, the Congress of the IIHF supported Belarus' tender in May 2009.

Then Lukashenka wished to have a super ice hockey club in Minsk. Within a few years, over 60 foreign players have appeared on the roster of Dinamo Minsk and participate in the Continental Hockey League. This star team costs tens of millions of dollars a year, and it is not entirely clear who sponsors the club. Experts point to the state-owned JSC Belaruskali – one of the world's biggest producers of potash mineral fertilisers and its affiliates. Like in the USSR, Belarusian sports is not commercial and almost entirely depends upon state subsidies.

Easier to Buy Than to Train

The need to carry out the president's orders for medals and to challenge the developed Western states makes Belarusian sports an important tool for the regime's propaganda. Instead of investing state money into the nation's healthcare, or the promotion of junior and college sports, Belarusian functionaries 'buy' trained athletes abroad – mostly in Russia. While these 'Vikings' receive all the amenities immediately, many young Belarusian athletes stay unwanted and leave the sport in the early stages of competition.

For instance, more than 120 foreign ice hockey players (mostly Russians) received Belarusian citizenship in recent years. The entire sports system in Belarus witnesses the same trend.

Officials say that the huge financial spending such as those for ice hockey is justified because people enjoy the show. Around 14,000 spectators usually attend home games of Dynamo Minsk. That is a lot. All authoritarian regimes follow these tactics: to give its people bread and circuses distracting their attention from politics and real life problems.

Why There Is No National Sport in Belarus

Still, ice hockey cannot be regarded as a national sport in Belarus. It will never become like basketball in neighbouring Lithuania. There is a basketball ring in every Lithuanian courtyard, and the whole nation plays it. As a result, with only 3 million inhabitants Lithuania regularly wins medals at the major international forums.

Sports are a part of the Lithuanian market system and by contrast to Belarus, Lithuania's authorities do not aim to send its representatives for half of the Olympics' program events. Instead, the state supports one national sport – basketball, and a real cult of sport reigns in the country. Young Lithuanians find it patriotic, fashionable, attractive and accessible to go into sports.

Belarusians do not have such a feeling. Of course, they rejoiced when Belarus hockey team managed to beat Sweden in the quarterfinal of the 2002 Olympics or Belarus gained 19 Olympic medals in 2008. However there is no one national sport which would be accessible to everyone in Belarus. In fact, Belarusians do not have the cult of a sports at all.

Whatever the decision of the Congress of the IIHF regarding Minsk as the host city for the 2014 championship will be, one thing is clear. For the country where seven out of nine opposition candidates can be imprisoned right after the presidential elections, and the permanent ruler manages its National Olympic Committee, sports are an important tool for internal ideology and external propaganda.

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