

Ice Hockey World Championship in Minsk: Authorities Struggle With Challenges

The World Ice Hockey Championship will take place in Minsk on 9-25 May. Although not as extensive as those for the Winter Olympics in Sochi, preparation for this major sporting event is riddled with abuses and mistakes.

Belarusian authorities are accused of using forced labour in the ice hockey arena's construction and struggle with organising English language classes for the police. They also produced a large number of souvenirs that have subsequently been prohibited to sell.

Some in the Belarusian opposition tried to persuade the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) Ice Hockey World Championship [to relocate](#) the championship from Minsk because of its human rights violations. But the campaigners failed to persuade the organisers. For the first time in its history Belarus will be hosting a sporting event of this magnitude.

Belarusian officials are waiting for thousands of foreign tourists projected to be coming to Minsk and preparing a huge PR campaign which should transform the negative image of Belarus in the west.

Forced labour at ice hockey arena construction

Two major Ice Hockey arenas in Minsk will host the championship in 2014. One of them is Chy Zhouka Arena with capacity 7,700 seats projected and built especially for the tournament. Chy Zhouka Arena was supposed to open on 7 November – October Revolution Day which has remained a holiday

and day off in Belarus since Soviet times. As often happens during these kinds of big sporting events, the builders failed to finish the construction on the fixed deadline.

To speed up construction, Belarusian officials made a very typical decision for Belarus. They sent hundreds of students from Minsk universities to work on the construction [for free as unskilled labour](#) during the academic day. Many students claimed that universities administrators threatened to create problems for those who would refused to work.

When asked by a journalist from Naviny.by about the compulsory labour of students the rector of Belarusian State University of Informatics and Radioelectronics answered that the university does not force students to work who do not want to. He mentioned that very few students were actually involved. "Anyway we will not use any kind of crackdowns to those who will refuse working. Do I look like a man who is behaving in such a way?" stated the rector.

Nevertheless it is very difficult to imagine large numbers of students volunteering to work for free. Officials responsible for the ice hockey arena construction are doing everything possible to avoid the wrath of Lukashenka, the country's most famous hockey player. An economic crisis and very low salaries for unskilled jobs have resulted in labour migration, which lead to the conditions of the current scenario.

The forced labour of students became an extreme measure which [the lack of a labour force](#) has provoked. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated case. According to a report released a International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) – Human Rights Center "Viasna" joint [report](#) in 2013, forced labour is widespread in Belarus in various sectors and in various forms.

Lost in translation

Belarus announced visa-free travel to Belarus during the Ice

Hockey Championship from Western countries. The government expects thousands of tourists. Those who will show up at a border control desk a ticket to the ice hockey match will be able to enter Belarus without a visa from 25 April to 31 May 2013.

Most of the tourists will likely try their hand at doing some shopping and try to find a common language with local population using English. But, those who have travelled to Belarus know that even that country's border guards often do not speak single word of a foreign languages.

Although every Belarusian secondary school has foreign languages classes as a required part of their curriculum, it is almost impossible [to find in Minsk an English speaking](#) policeman or shop assistant. To change the situation the Minsk city police force organised English language classes for 500 policemen. Belarusian universities published a number of phrase books especially for the ice hockey championship.

One of the phrase books issued for roadside activities attracted the attention of journalists. Many translations in the book look very formal. Some phrases can be a cause for laughter. For example "Mrs.=Mistress/Miss", vacuum cleaner translated as "vacuum cleaner food" etc. Some phrases seem to be useless. According to the phrase book foreigners will ask in the shop such question as "How many customers do you have?" or they will address shop assistant with words "I must buy much things" etc.

The head of the foreign languages department of The Belarusian Trade and Economics University of Consumer Cooperatives Tatsiana Dubaucova compiled the phrase book. She complained to journalists that the department had very very little time to prepare the phrase books. When speaking about the mistakes in the book she mentioned that university employees do not have opportunities for internships in foreign countries. Otherwise there would be fewer mistakes.

The phrase book illustrates well the current situation of Belarusian education system. [Isolated from the Bologna process](#), Belarusian scholars have very few opportunities for academic exchange and to gain work experience abroad. The small salaries provided at universities do not encourage ambitious students to pursue an academic career. All these factors led to the difficulties surrounding the compiling of a phrase book for the universities.

Souvenirs not for sale

Perhaps the most frustrating incident to surface for Belarusian officials related to the championship occurred in autumn. Belarusian state enterprises produced millions of souvenirs and different products with the championship's official symbols. However, according to the IIHF rules they had to be removed from sale on 9 February 2014 – three months before the championship. It is an obligatory measure to that protects the rights reserved by an official merchandise supplier.

In November the IIHF signed a contract with the Swedish company NEH which obtained exclusive rights to manufacture the products with the championship's symbols. Beginning on 9 February the company will be an exclusive manufacturer of all souvenirs for the World Cup. So the Belarus-made souvenir-magnets, notepads, cups, bags, T-shirts and flags with championship symbols will be possible to buy only after championship's is finished, long after all the tourists have left.

Justifying the epic failure of Belarusian marketing, state media declared that all the souvenirs would be sold before 9 February. But it is hard to believe that at the height of economic crisis Belarusians will rush to buy useless products such as clay pucks, pennants, badges, caps etc.

The Ice Hockey championship 2014 will be held the same year as

the Winter Olympics, a time when all the hockey's stars will play in Sochi. It would appear that, as a result, interest in the tournament will be low. Nevertheless the Belarusian authorities expect lots of tourists to bring in the foreign currency so very badly needed by the Belarusian economy.

To attract more tourists and to have more noticeable PR campaign, Lukashenka even could release some political prisoners. That being said, even if tourists come in droves to Minsk it is highly unlikely that it will solve the problems of the Belarusian economy, which is an outsider in world market. The same as Belarusian ice hockey team which will be an outsider at the tournament and will struggle for its survival in Division A of world ice hockey according to experts.