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Sport As an Ideological Weapon

Dictatorial governments often tend to prioritize sports. Sport achievements help authoritarian leaders gain some recognition. The government imposes fondness for sports and physical training on the people using it as a way to teach discipline and order, and promote the cult of force.

East Germany used sports as a means of propaganda in the 1970s and 1980s. “Victory at any price” was the motto of East German sport executives. East German athletes increasingly used performance enhancing drugs, which helped them achieve outstanding results. Sport gave East Germany an opportunity to create an illusion of superiority. The Belarusian government currently acts in a similar way.

Like in the former Soviet Union, there is a fashion for parades involving athletes who march in front of their revered leader. An impressive parade was held in Moscow on Athlete’s Day in the terrible year of 1937. A similar show took place during the Munich Olympics in 1936.

In authoritarian Belarus, sports play the same role as in totalitarian countries of the 20th century. The state-controlled newspaper *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* ran a story about the Republic Day parade held on June 4, 2004. It says, “According to the established tradition, athletes and gymnasts report on their achievements and successes during major state holidays. In the last few years, sports and care of the nation’s health have not only become part of the state’s policy, but also an internal need of the residents of Belarus.... The sport parade evokes memories of the last winter and the great spirit of top-level competitions that took place in Minsk — the Davis Cup, the World U20 Ice Hockey Championships, the World Junior Weightlifting Tournament, the European Biathlon Championships. Belarusian fans did not even dream of such events a few years ago. More is yet to come. And you know what is good? These are not tales.

But the truth is that the Belarusian capital hosts secondary events that

would go unnoticed in other countries. State-controlled newspapers and television channels present them as major tournaments. State television journalists’ favourite question to visiting foreign athletes is “What is your impression of the country?”.

“For Olympic Belarus!”

The government’s high money rewards for Belarusian Olympic medalists are publicized to impress ordinary fans and fill them with admiration and respect. During the last Olympic Games the government promised \$60,000 for a gold medal, \$30,000 for silver and \$20,000 for bronze. Rewards rose 12-fold from what athletes received for medals earned at Lillehammer 1994, Belarus’ first Olympics after the country gained independence.

Belarusian state media often stress that the government spends more on sports than sport superpowers like the United States, Germany, Norway and China.

Belarus is far from holding the top spots in the world rankings of living standards, but its athletes often perform better than competitors from developed

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journalist

European countries. This gives the authorities another good reason to assert that the country is on the right track.

The propaganda billboards that authorities posted in the run-up to the 2006 presidential election included one saying “For Olympic Belarus!”. Sports along with agro-towns have been given priority attention because of their propagandistic role.

Not a single athlete refused to join Belarus’ Olympic team for political reasons during the Łukašenka rule. It was not for political reasons, as some observers claimed, that footballer Arciom Mileuski became a Ukrainian citizen.

Not a single athlete refused to compete under the red-green flag condemned by opponents of the regime as a colonial legacy. Although Belarusian fans usually display more white-red-white flags than red-green ones at away games.

The opposition has no appeal for the sports community. Quite the contrary, most athletes publicly express their support for the president who gives them care and attention.

Biathlete Alena Zubryłava, who lived in Ukraine for the larger part of her sport career, has been with the Belarusian team for a few years. After her comfortable win in the World Cup finals on March 19, 2006, she said, “My Sunday’s victory was in support of the incumbent president of Belarus. My victory is his victory. This is something I wish him with all of my heart.” Belarus had a presidential election on the same day.

Zubryłava is not a Belarusian-born athlete. She came to this country to do sports for money. Below are remarks made by young Belarusian gymnasts Lubou Čarkašyna and Valeryja Kurylskaja in an interview with the newspaper *Pressbol*. Kurylskaja: “During the presidential election I tried to persuade my family to vote for the president. We almost had an argument about it. My mother and aunt were ‘for’ [the incumbent president], but my father was ‘against.’” Čarkašyna: “As for me, I did not try to persuade anyone because I knew that the winner’s name was known

in advance. There is no one to challenge the incumbent president. They [rivals] are not shown on television. He is doing a good job — he has it his own way while others yield to him. If they yield, he is the real leader. This is the law of life.”

Athletes usually spend a long time abroad. Before the 2006 presidential election tennis player Uladzimir Vaučkou said, “I will cast my vote for Alaksandr Ryhoravič Łukašenka because I have travelled a lot. I have seen how people live. I have seen what is going on there and what democracy is.” While Michail Usačou, a handball player, explained his attitude to the president in the following way, “I ignored the referendum [the 2004 constitutional referendum that allowed Łukašenka to run for a third term]. If there were an alternative to Łukašenka in our country, voting would make sense regardless of who you support. But I should note that as an athlete I do not have any grudges against the president. He really promotes sports. But my brother and mother-in-law are in business and they have reasons for discontent. I don’t have such reasons.”



Alaksandr Łukašenka is a fan of skiing, skating and hockey.

“Do not look for trouble” is the principle guiding most athletes.

Olympic president

President Łukašenka was elected as chairman of the National Olympic Committee (NOC) in 1997. Chess grand master Viktor Kuprejčyk was the only person to oppose his bid. But it was far from a democratic election.

Łukašenka was unanimously reelected as head of the NOC on March 27, 2001. His candidacy was unanimously supported in November 2004. No surprise, he was the only nominee.

Łukašenka was proposed for the job by the country’s top athletes — 2000 Olympics champion Elina Žvierava and 2004 Olympic gold medalist Julija Nieściarenka.

Apart from the NOC, President Łukašenka is the captain of his own “legendary” ice hockey team which has been beaten just once in its history. In what appeared to be a diplomatic move, it lost to Gazprom in 2007. Playing with the presidential team at different times were NHL stars Ruslan Salei and Nikolai Khabibulin, and key players of the Belarusian Ice Hockey League.

Łukašenka routinely wins annual cross-country ski races and roller ski competitions. He has created himself an image of the world’s most sporty president. All professional athletes are aware of the phony and artificial nature of events involving the president, but they have never refused to participate. The Belarusian leader shows up at all major sporting events in Belarus.

Alaksandr Łukašenka’s younger son, Dźmitry, is in charge of a sports club functioning under the auspices of the Presidential Administration (the elder son oversees security agencies). The club distributes presidential scholarships to young talented athletes.

Medal planning

Medal planning has become part of the phenomena described by the



Julija Daraškiewicz

The government imposes passion for sports and physical training to teach discipline and order, and promote the cult of force. At a football match in Minsk.

Presidential Administration's ideology mouthpiece *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* as "protectionist policies in the area of sports." Before the Athens Olympics, the NOC head instructed the national team to earn at least 25 medals. The chairpersons of all sports federations that contributed athletes to the team were ordered to sign a pledge to produce a specific number of medals. Alaksandr Hryhorau, chairman of the Boxing Federation, was the only one to refuse. He was not sacked, but instead promoted to sports minister after boxers showed a better-than-expected performance unlike other members of the Olympic team.

After the games, Łukašenka scolded the Olympic team for its failure to produce the planned number of medals and sacked Sports Minister Jury Sivakou, a former army general and ex-minister of the interior suspected in the West of involvement in the disappearance of opposition politicians. Due to these allegations, Sivakou was not granted an entry visa to visit Greece during the games.

Bureaucrats in charge of sport federations

When Łukašenka took over the NOC, high-ranking officials were put in charge of sport federations. Hienadz Niavyhłas, head of the Presidential Administration, chairs the Soccer Federation. Interior Minister Uładzimir Navumau, who is also on the EU's travel ban list, was appointed as chairman of the Ice Hockey Federation. House of Representatives speaker Uładzimir Kanaplou heads the Handball Federation and Finance Minister Mikałaj Korbust is responsible for the Gymnastics Federation. Alaksandr Kazulin, former rector of Belarusian State University, used to head the Freestyle Skiing Federation before he sided with the opposition.

The chairmanship of federations is often inherited by successors in government posts. For instance, the Biathlon Federation has been headed by officials who succeeded each other as KGB chiefs — Uładzimir Mackievič, Leanid Jeryn and Šciapan Sucharenka.

In November 2004, new heads were appointed to four sport federations. Only

one of them was not a career bureaucrat. The election of 1988 Olympics champion Alaksandr Ramańkou as chairman of the Fencing Federation came as a big surprise.

Belarusian sport federations rely heavily on subsidies from the government, which has been using administrative tools to raise money for the purpose. General Sivakou once admitted, "When the president was meeting with entrepreneurs they complained about exactions. Can they reject [a request for donations from] Navumau? No...Niavyhłas? No. Others follow [with their requests], probably they would like to give something, but they have nothing left to give. To say nothing of how our officials can collect money for greenery planting, pollination and other landscaping efforts."

Athletes rebel on retirement

Although some athletes do highlight problems in Belarus' sports establishment, they do not do so until they change their country of residence or retire.

In the last few years, a number of Belarusian athletes have moved abroad for one reason or another. They include swimmers Alena Popčanka and Hanna Ščerba, footballer Arciom Mileuski, handball player Siarhiey Rucienka, shooter Lalita Jauhleuskaja and, most recently, biathlete Alaksiej Ajdarau.

When no longer dependent on the Belarusian sports establishment, athletes raised the issue of retirement benefits for Olympic medalists, voiced concern about the lack of an anti-doping laboratory and unclear criteria applied in the selection of coaches for rewards in connection with successful performance at international competitions.

On the other hand, during Łukašenka's rule prominent athletes often addressed their concerns directly to the president. Among those who sent letters to Łukašenka were swimmers, members of various sport teams and the skater Žalazouski. The country

has a flexible system of control and incentives; this is why requests are more common than protests.

Nevertheless, some members of the sports community dare to criticize the current system or take an independent position.

When Alaksandr Łukašenka sought reelection as chairman of the NOC in 2001, Uładzimir Kaminski, 1976 Olympic cycling champion, severely criticized the practice where the president is in complete command of the key sports body. Following his statements, Kaminski was forced to resign from the NOC.

The opposition activity of Uładzimir Parfianovič, a three-time Olympic kayaking champion, had far-reaching repercussions. After his election as member of the House of Representatives of the Belarusian National Assembly in 2000, Parfianovič formed the Respublika opposition faction together with Siarhiej Skrabiec and Valery Frałou. In response, the NOC executive board recommended his expulsion from the Committee on the grounds that “members of the NOC lost confidence” in him. In addition, Parfianovič lost his post of the chairman of the Canoe/Kayak Federation.

In 2004 Parfianovič, Frałou and Skrabiec went on a hunger strike to demand that the House of Representatives consider a bill aimed at democratizing the Electoral Code. Parfianovič said then that the hunger strike was supported by prominent athletes Mikalaj Alochin, Viktor Sidziak and Uładzimir Kaminski.

Siarhiej Lištvan, an Olympic silver medalist in Greco-Roman wrestling, launched his parliamentary bid as an independent candidate the same year. However, he was denied registration for the race in one of the Mahilou region's election districts. The athlete's father lost his job because of his son's attempt to run for parliament.

Siarhiej Kanyhin, another former Greco-Roman wrestler and Olympic medalist, intended to run for the Viciebsk

Regional Soviet (elected council), but was not registered as candidate on far-fetched grounds.

Legendary gymnast Volha Korbuto decorated her website with a white-red-white flag used by opponents of the Łukašenka regime.

The authorities have repeatedly denied official registration to the Olympic Champions' Club, an association formed by Sidziak, Parfianovič, Kaminski and other former athletes.

Rumour had it that famous gymnast Ivan Ivankou, known for his sceptical attitude to the authorities' policies, endorsed Uładzimir Hančaryk's presidential bid in 2001. However, the athlete never made any statements to that effect. His father was later appointed as trade minister.

These are probably all the manifestations of dissent in the sports community during Łukašenka's first 13 years in office.

It is impossible to imagine a situation in Belarus where athletes would be equally divided between the two camps like during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

Sport and power

Sport is the sphere of life where dissent rarely takes root. The authorities under-finance culture and humanities, but spare no expense on sports. Victories of Belarusian athletes in international competitions inspire patriotism and loyalty for the state and its symbols.

Hundreds of people took to the street in Minsk waving red-green flags to celebrate the Belarusian ice hockey team's victory over Sweden during the 2002 Winter Olympics. A Davis Cup win over Russia was celebrated like a national holiday. After this victory, Łukašenka honoured Maks Mirny and Uładzimir Vaučkou with Belarus' highest awards.

Łukašenka is active in sports, while the opposition has completely ignored sports in its platforms, having inherit-

ed a feeling of dislike of sports from the Soviet intelligentsia.

On the other hand, Łukašenka's challengers in the 2006 presidential election, Alaksandr Milinkievič and Alaksandr Kazulin, both connected with sports, did pay attention to the topic during their presidential campaigns in what appears to be a sign of change in the opposition's attitude.