

## The *European Games* in Minsk 2019

**Following the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia 2018, the German Bundestag on June 14, 2018 among other things intensively debated the political framework conditions in Russia and the connection between sports and politics. In 2019 the union sister state of Russia, the Republic of Belarus, is expected to host the *European Games*. Which framework conditions must be expected and considered here?**

After the European Olympic Committee (EOC) established the *European Games* in 2011 by analogy with games on other continents, these took place for the first time on June 12-28, 2015 in Baku (Azerbaijan). Initially, the Netherlands were chosen as the venue for the second *European Games* in May 2015 during an extraordinary general meeting of the European Olympic Committee (EOC). However, a few days later the Dutch Government declared that they will not host the *European Games*. According to one of the top managers of the Belarusian Directorate of the *European Games* in Minsk, the stumbling stone for the Dutch, besides the logistical challenges, was the sum of 60 million Euro which had to be contributed by the Netherlands on top the original total budget of the Games in the amount of 125 million Euro.<sup>1</sup> Therefore the EOC started negotiations with other associations which showed interest in organizing of the Games. On October 21, 2016 the EOC appointed the capital of the Republic of Belarus, Minsk, as the host of the second *Euro-*

*pean Games*. The Games will take place here from June 21 to June 30, 2019.

In the course of the second *European Games* about 4.000 athletes are expected to arrive in Belarus to take part in more than 200 medal-yielding competitions in the Belarusian capital. Furthermore, about 2.000 participants of the Games represent the official delegations from 50 European National Olympic Committees (NOCs). The competition program includes 15 sports. 10 of these will be a part of the qualification system for the XXXII Olympic Games 2020. The competitions will be officiated by 650 international and 410 national sports judges. Minsk expects more than 1.000 foreign media representatives as well as about 100 representatives of European sports associations and NOCs, sports ministers of the European countries, more than 250 representatives of the EOC Headquarters and also heads of governments and senior officials of the European states. Approximately 6.000 Belarusian volunteers will service the event.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> V Belarusi proyduť yevropeyskiye igri. Onlin-er.by. Available at: <https://goo.gl/o3hjpE>. Accessed on 29.06.2018

<sup>2</sup> About the games. Minsk2019.by. Available at: <https://goo.gl/dLcbtD>. Accessed on 29.06.2018.

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**August 2018**[www.kas.de/belarus](http://www.kas.de/belarus)**Benefits for Belarus**

By analogy with the Ice Hockey World Championship 2014, the Belarusian government might hope to, first of all, use the *European Games* to improvement of the image and raise the awareness about the country. The government sees the Games as a part of their worldwide political dialog program, which was launched some years ago. Moreover, Belarus has been trying for many years to open itself further up for tourism, which is also supported among other things by visa liberalization, investments in tourism and in the infrastructure, navigation in foreign languages and modern tourism concepts. For the government in Belarus it seems to be important to position itself as a part of Europe with these Games. The *European Games* are an opportunity to this end and they are in line with the attempts of many recent years to make a more intensive turn towards Europe politically.

It can therefore be assumed that the *European Games* will lead to significant additional revenues in the tourist sector. As in the case of the Ice Hockey World Championship, it should be expected that the people will be excited about the Games: the fact that Belarus is a host of such a major event and therefore enjoys international attention is expected to warrant a predominantly positive attitude. In contrast to industrialized states of the West, such sports events are still rare here, and therefore the population generally reacts positively and enthusiastically to such attention. Even today many Belarusians still have fond memories of the Ice Hockey World Championship. Critical voices in Belarus criticize, first of all, the costs and the use of state resources for the Games.<sup>3</sup> This indicates that there is no effective public relations work concerning the benefits of the Games for the country.

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<sup>3</sup> Yevropeyskiye igri 2019. Naviny.by. Available at: <https://qoo.gl/YZ24k3>. Accessed on 29.06.2018.

**Financial aspects**

Contrary to the Games in Baku, which cost Azerbaijan about one billion US dollars – according to unofficial data even more than five billion US dollars<sup>4</sup>, mainly because of the construction of numerous new buildings and facilities – according to the information the costs in Belarus are to be way lower. The competent authorities still assume that the country would get by with investing up to 50 million US dollars<sup>5</sup>, because the sports infrastructure largely exists. President Lukashenko even had an opinion, that the Games could even be profitable for the state treasury. However, other estimates concerning the expenses are also mentioned in the media: up to about 120 million US dollars depending on the fact which expenses will be directly earmarked as pertaining to the *European Games*.<sup>6</sup>

This manifests itself, for example, in the planned purchase of about 300 new vehicles for the local public transportation: the Belarusian Directorate of the *European Games* wants to modernize the infrastructure of the local public transport in Minsk and in the surrounding area before the Games, in order to take some pressure off the road network, which is already working on the limit of its capacity, and to enable fast and comfortable transportation of participants of the *European Games* as well as guests of Minsk by means of public transport and special lines. It is clear that also after the Games Minsk would profit from the upgraded local public transportation infrastructure.

A cost factor is also represented by the temporary drying up of revenues from the payment of the road toll: for the period of the Games Belarus announced the toll-free

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<sup>4</sup> V Belarusi proyduť yevropeyskiye igri. Onliner.by. Available at: <https://qoo.gl/o3hjpE>. Accessed on 29.06.2018

<sup>5</sup> Belarus to spend about \$50m. BelTa. Available at: <https://qoo.gl/VeaMCE>. Accessed on 29.06.2018.

<sup>6</sup> V Belarusi proyduť yevropeyskiye igri. Onliner.by. Available at: <https://qoo.gl/o3hjpE>. Accessed on 29.06.2018

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use of all the roads for vehicles under 3,5 tons. According to estimates, the missed revenues will be recovered by the expected increase in tourist flow following the period of higher state expenditures, and the seeming losses can actually turn into revenues very quickly.<sup>7</sup>

In order to minimize the cost for the country, Belarus was negotiating with EOC for almost a year: after the basic consent in October 2016 up to the signing of the relevant contract concerning the holding of the Games in September 2017. As a result, the country was able to negotiate the comfortable implementation conditions (from the financial standpoint) and the status of the Games was also raised. The qualification competitions in ten out of the total of fifteen sports will attract more first-class athletes to Belarus and therefore secure more advertising and tourism revenues for Belarus. Additionally, Belarus could enforce a favorable distribution of revenues for the broadcasting rights, which should be sold in 160 countries. Besides Belarus saved on their contribution to the EOC for the right to organize the event. Only this expenditure item amounted to 25 million US dollars for Azerbaijan.<sup>8</sup>

However currently it seems unclear, to what extent the participating countries are ready to bear the required costs for their athletes' delegations. At the current stage the Federal Government of Germany, for example, does not plan to bear the costs for the delegation of German athletes. Insofar it is still unclear, to what extent, for example, Germany will participate in the European Games.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Special traffic lines for guests. BelarusFeed. Available at: <https://goo.gl/39Z8RK>. Accessed on 29.06.2018.

<sup>8</sup> V Belarusi proydut yevropeyskiye igri. Onliner.by. Available at: <https://goo.gl/o3hipE>. Accessed on 29.06.2018

<sup>9</sup> DOSB wants more influence on the sports budget. Bundestag.de. Available at:

This issue will to a large extent determine the quality the Games will attain. However, Belarus already has created a level of certainty by the strategically professional choice of sports for the event: the qualification for the Olympic Games 2020 will be a sufficient reason to plan a trip to Minsk for many first-class athletes.

## Sports facilities and construction

The competitions will be held in the largest sports facilities in Minsk, e.g. at the "Dinamo" stadium, "Minsk Arena", "Chizhovka-Arena" and other eight venues in Minsk and its suburbs.<sup>10</sup> Thanks to the Ice Hockey World Championship 2014, Minsk already has substantial sports infrastructure, the central "Dinamo" stadium in the center of Minsk is being modernized. While in connection with the Football World Cup in Russia 2018 the conditions at the construction sites of sports facilities and the health and safety of the workers became a center of a public debate, no such conditions were reported from Minsk in the media or seen in situ. And given that the scale on the build-up needed in Belarus is much lower, such notorious construction seem much less likely to be reported. Provided it already has a modern new airport, a good capital-city transport infrastructure, as well as a variety of modern hotels, the capital of Belarus seems to stand prepared. Moreover, the Games fall on the period of local school break, during which the city is less crowded anyway.

## Human rights

In connection with the Football World Cup in Russia the international community was increasingly critically examining the human rights situation there, the political freedoms

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<https://goo.gl/ONdxCK>. Accessed on 29.06.2018.

<sup>10</sup> Yevropeyskiye igri 2019 v Minske. Belarus.by. Available at: <https://goo.gl/QQCMZ9>. Accessed on 29.06.2018.

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**August 2018**[www.kas.de/belarus](http://www.kas.de/belarus)**Impressum**

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and the security policy and the behavior of Russia in this regard. For Belarus the issues of international policy should be expected to play a lesser role in general, first of all because during the recent years Minsk has positioned itself positively as a peacemaker and as a negotiating platform for regional conflicts. As far as the situation with the human rights is concerned, Belarus still remains the only country in Europe that applies death penalty and is not a member in the European Council. In fact, Minsk has expressed its willingness to discuss the issue of death penalty, however it is unlikely, that this will be addressed before the Games. Concerning the political freedoms, in the recent years in Belarus has demonstrated slight, if not tentative improvements: the lower house of the Parliament has had two independent deputies in its ranks since 2016. Also in 2017 official registration of the "Tell the Truth" movement marked a first case of an oppositional political organization being registered in many years.

Compared to previous years the situation with human rights and political freedoms has eased up considerably, however in some areas, for example, concerning the media freedom and the repressions of demonstrations, there are still occasional regresses. So, it should be assumed that these issues will come up for Belarus in connection with the Games, whereby it is worth taking a very close look to compare the Belarus of today with the situation, for example, in Russia.

**Entry and visa**

Belarus and Russia have signed an inter-governmental agreement about the entry for the participation in international sports events. The agreement was signed by Foreign Ministers of both countries, Vladimir Makey and Sergey Lavrov, in Minsk on May 29, 2018.<sup>11</sup> According to this agreement, on

the one hand, foreign fans, athletes as well as members of national delegations could travel through Belarus during the FIFA Football World Cup 2018 in Russia from June 4 to July 25 without a visa. On the other hand, Russia will introduce a visa-free entry and stay on its territory for foreign citizens which take part in the second *European Games* in Belarus in 2019. The signing of this agreement is a significant step for the facilitation of access to Belarus for foreign sports fans and participants of the second *European Games* through Russia.

**Summary**

The European Games will be held in 2019 for the second time only because the Republic of Belarus was the only country to offer itself as a willing host at the end of the selection process. For Belarus the Games are an important step towards greater international attention and recognition. Minsk would like to present itself as a modern, open and European city, and thanks to the Games the country also hopes to secure more revenues from tourism in the long run. Since good infrastructure already exists, the costs and construction activities will stay within reasonable limits. So these factors rather are not likely to play any role in international commentaries in the coming months. The situation with human rights and political freedoms in Belarus without any doubt will attract more international attention on the occasion of the Games, although during recent years in Belarus there was no discernible progress in this field. Thus a clear and objective watch over the developments in Belarus up till the European Games and beyond is important.

<sup>11</sup> Russia, Belarus sign visa recognition agreement. TASS. Available at: <https://goo.gl/UBjEUz>. Accessed on 29.06.2018.