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Country Report

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“Less(ik) is more”

The 2nd European Games might attract more tourists at lower costs – a European Sports spectacle in a country which itself is in motion

Jakob Wöllenstein

Minsk is just a few days away from a major sporting event that could be a loss-making venture despite moderate total costs. Nevertheless, the city is happy and has the opportunity to parade itself to international guests and the media. This could help further promote a more pragmatic, improved relationship with the West, as relations with Russia remain tense and the host country becomes increasingly affected by a number of economic problems.

The city dresses up

Those who travel to Minsk these days cannot help noticing the flurry of activity. Street repairs and fresh building facades throughout the downtown, a squad of gardeners planting flowers in a newly created bed, while a painter draws the last brushstrokes across a newly gleaming concrete partition. Further down the road trees are planted on the sides of an avenue, while the dull thumping of rubber hammers reveals someone finishing a sidewalk. The Belarusian

capital is dressing up for a big event of a special kind – the “European Games 2019”. The format, launched in 2012 by the European Olympic Committee (EOK), has brought Europe's tradition of Olympic continental games, since spread to other continents, back to Europe. Following the first games held in Baku, Azerbaijan in 2015, this year Belarus will host the second occasion under the slogan “Bright Year, Bright You!” June 21-30. Posters, stickers, and video billboards on the wide streets and spacious squares of Minsk feature a sports figure smiling at the visitors —

"Lesik", a fox-inspired mascot selected from more than 2,000 submissions who competes in different sports, changes his track suits, and builds up anticipation.

Any visitor who still has an image of Minsk from a few years ago in mind will see significant changes in the cityscape. In addition to repaired roads and trams and the newly built Olympic Sports Complex — an archery and beach football venue — the Dinamo Stadium stands out especially. Located in the city center between the main train station and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and built in the 1930s, the stadium had already undergone a general overhaul with excessive fanfare after the devastation of the Second World War. Today it serves as the home arena for the national football team and has been completely refurbished and modernized. President Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who this summer can look back on a quarter-century term in office and whose re-election in the coming year is considered a formality, was particularly satisfied with this city center sporting pearl. Full of pride and anticipation are also the approximately 8,000 volunteers who are to provide support and ensure that everything runs smoothly. Their number was increased by another 2,000 this year and it is predominantly young people who will have their hands full.

About 4,000 athletes are expected in 50 delegations of National Olympic Committees (NOK). They will compete for 200 medal sets in 15 sports, including gymnastics, cycling, table tennis, badminton, canoeing, and track and field events. Eight of the sports allow for qualification for the XXXII Tokyo Olympics next year. Judo and boxing, however, were given European Championship status.¹ In addition to the athletes, the city is expecting about 6,000 official foreign guests, including 1,000 media representatives and 2,000 referees. About 30,000 tourists are expected to fill the grandstands. This benchmark, however, has yet to be reached, according to available data. 190,000 tickets are expected to be sold and so far about 130,000 have been distributed, however only 10-15% to foreign guests. Since a large proportion of the visitors are expected from the neighboring countries of Poland, Russia and Ukraine, these figures may yet change as the games progress, especially if the performance of respective national athletes can draw greater

numbers.² Still, this number seems dwarfed by the more than 1.5 million international guests who attended the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia. It's important to keep in mind though that the FIFA World Cup is a much larger, better known and more expensive sporting event – a case of apples and oranges. The international reputation and profile of the European Games remains relatively low. By comparison, during the more popular Ice Hockey World Championship in 2014, despite the shadow of the Ukraine crisis, more than 70,000 foreign guests came to Belarus.³ That said, the first European Games in Baku attracted only about 28,000 visitors a year later, while offering 20 sports to watch, of which twelve were set to qualify for the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, meaning that it was broader event than this year's Minsk games.⁴

Big events come at a price

While the inaugural event in Azerbaijan was reported to cost between one and five billion U.S. dollars (for comparison, the football World Cup in Russia cost about 17 billion USD)⁵ and these expenditures brought modest revenues of under 20 million, Minsk from the very beginning was focused on keeping costs reasonable. In response to requests to host 50 different sports by different NOCs, in line with the 2020 Sustainability Agenda of the International Olympic Committee, the country considered what infrastructure it already had and which sports are popular in the country and chose fifteen sports accordingly, so as not to build one-time stadiums that would later sit vacant or require expensive rebuilding. Officials stated that \$112 million were earmarked for expenditures in various budget lines to cover the costs of infrastructure, housing, meals, and transfers for all athletes on site.⁶ A success in negotiations for the Belarusian side — the travel expenses for the athletes are borne by the European Olympic Committee. In addition, a number of companies have been required by the state to provide financial and logistical support.⁷ There is no official statement on expected earnings, except for a statement by the President in November 2016 that the then expected \$50 million expenses are likely to be covered by the

games.⁸ In order to make life for international guests easier, not only were websites of some ministries updated with special instructions in English, but entry into the country was also streamlined. Belarus, which has been granting visa-free travel by air for up to 30 days to EU citizens and other 46 countries since December 2017, not only allows free entry and speedier border clearance for ticket holders from 98 countries, but also the toll-free use of the roads for vehicles under 3.5 tonnes.⁹

Fickle political weather

However, the loosening of the border regime raised questions with its eastern neighbor and main ally, Russia, as there are formally no international border crossings that foreigners must use to travel from one country to the other. An agreement on the mutual recognition of national visas is currently being negotiated, but its conclusion seems unlikely before the start of the games.¹⁰ In any case, the relationship between the two "brother states", which not only form part of the same military and economic alliances but formally form a common Union State since 1999, has noticeably deteriorated since the time of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Belarus, which during nearly two hundred years of being a part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union has undergone a strong "russification" and at times repression of its own language, culture and tradition, feels closely connected to its neighbor in many ways. Not in the least by the common victory over Nazi Germany and the subsequent reconstruction, while friendships developed and business and family ties welded the countries and societies together. Nevertheless, Belarus attaches great importance to its state sovereignty and independence, so Minsk has reservations about the demand made by the Russian side in December 2018 for "deeper integration" within the framework of the Union State. Especially in economic terms, there is already a strong one-sided dependence on Moscow and the estimated Russia's annual support for its neighbor amounts to between five and six billion dollars.¹¹

However, with Russia also seeking ways to bolster its troubled economy, it might seem a reasonable concern that the Kremlin could use this aid as a political lever even more than before. The announcement by Russia of the gradual reduction of current gas and oil preferential rates for Belarus by 2024, if the country does not agree to far-reaching steps towards political integration, points in this direction and poses a major challenge to Belarus. Minsk could lose as much as \$10 billion, and the World Bank has already warned that if no compensation were to be found, the growth of the Belarusian economy, which had only tentatively started to recover from the recession after 2015, could fall to zero in 2019.¹² From the Minsk point of view, it would also be a massive distortion of competition within the Eurasian Economic Union if Belarusian companies would have to buy energy at world market prices, while their Russian competitors in the same economic area benefit from government-subsidized energy supply. Belarusian authorities likely will not go for a closer political union at the expense of the country's sovereignty. However, Russia is unlikely to engage in a union in which important decisions are made on an equal footing. Both sides have now set up working groups to develop proposals for steps towards deeper integration in the coming years. According to a comment made by the Belarusian Minister of Economy, the positions "are 70% aligned."¹³ The results of the talks should be presented to the prime ministers of both countries by June 21 — the very day of the opening of the European Games.

A chance to demonstrate good will

Olympic fans can come to a country whose political situation has certain parallels to the sports of the games. On the one hand, Belarus and its society are on the move. In the face of growing awareness of state and cultural autonomy, the Belarusian language is making a comeback not only in a public setting. The interest in the population, especially among young people, has grown significantly, and while only few speak "proper" Belarusian on a daily basis, the ever growing numbers see the language to be an important symbol of the sovereignty of the country. According to a recent

survey, just under 90% of Belarusians see it as an important and valuable cultural asset.¹⁴ On the other hand, in geopolitical terms the country keeps jumping on the spot like a competing trampolinist. It cannot affect the special circumstances of its neighborhood and must perform like a practicing acrobat to keep its act in permanent balance. In terms of rapprochement with the European Union, the potential is far from exhausted. For example, the Deliverables 2020 of the EU's Eastern Partnership and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals provide a whole range of concrete areas of work in which Belarus has committed itself and shares interests with its neighbors. At the same time, however, some observers are saying that a "glass ceiling" is currently being reached in relations with the EU and that the negotiations on the Partnership Priorities Agreement cannot be finalized due to the unresolved issue of the Astravets nuclear power station currently under construction. In addition, Minsk and Brussels continue to have different views on the scope and pace of progress on issues of political freedoms and human rights.

In this respect, 2019 offers Minsk two chances to prove to international skeptics that Belarus is on the right track, albeit through taking small steps. Perhaps the most important test of goodwill of the Belarusian government will be the way the parliamentary elections are held in the autumn. But the European Games also offer a good chance to use the international attention to make a good cosmopolitan and inviting impression with an orderly process and a friendly atmosphere with the support of the many volunteers. The Belarusian non-governmental organization (NGO) "Movement for Freedom" warns foreign visitors in a flyer of certain wrongdoings — photographing public buildings or being in "organized groups" can in the worst case lead to imprisonment. President Lukashenka, on the other hand, is said to have clearly reprimanded his Interior Minister Shunevitch, who was considered particularly loyal, for having overstepped his planned security concept for the games. Shortly thereafter, the Minister went to the press and announced his resignation.¹⁵

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- ¹ <https://minsk2019.by/en/information/about-the-games>
 - ² <https://www.belta.by/sport/view/okolo-130-tys-biletov-prodano-na-ii-evropejskie-igry-349915-2019/>
 - ³ <https://belaruspartisan.by/interview/466008/>
 - ⁴ <https://tass.ru/sport/2085296>
 - ⁵ <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5b279ad89a794703c3b7029b>
 - ⁶ <https://belaruspartisan.by/interview/466008/>, <https://www.sb.by/articles/igry-po-nashemu-krasivo-otkryto-dushevno.html>
 - ⁷ <https://naviny.by/article/20190527/1558964653-chastnyy-biznes-poprosili-skinutsya-na-evropeyskie-igry>
 - ⁸ <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/belarus-to-spend-about-50m-on-2nd-european-games-96271-2016>
 - ⁹ <http://www.customs.gov.by/en/news1-en/view/in-the-run-up-to-the-ii-european-games-2019-belarusian-customs-has-created-a-video-about-the-rules-for-10891-2019>, <https://minsk2019.by/en/news/755>
 - ¹⁰ <https://rg.ru/2019/06/07/rapota-soglashenie-o-vzaimnom-priznanii-viz-mozhet-byt-podpisano-v-etom-godu.html>
 - ¹¹ <https://bit.ly/2XKTXlw>
 - ¹² <https://www.imf.org/ru/News/Articles/2019/01/18/pr1907-imf-executive-board-concludes-2018-article-iv-consultation-with-the-republic-of-belarus>
<https://finance.tut.by/news640819.html?crnd=52183>
 - ¹³ <https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/rumas-medvedev-discuss-belarus-russia-bilateral-cooperation-121816-2019/>
 - ¹⁴ https://www.ipm.by/webroot/delivery/files/SR_19_01.pdf
 - ¹⁵ <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=231914>, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=231927>

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Jakob Wöllenstein
Director Country Office Belarus
European and International Cooperation
www.kas.de/belarus

Info.Belarus@kas.de



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