

# **Athlete Development in Post-Soviet Russia**

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For most Western commentators, the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 was an unquestionably positive turning-point in Russian and world history. It swiftly became the defining moment in a new American triumphalist narrative, and the hope that Mikhail Gorbachov's democratic market reforms of 1985-91 would prevail was soon cast into oblivion.

The opposing view – that there had been other possibilities in Soviet history was dismissed. Gorbachov's perestroika reforms, despite having dismantled the Communist Party dictatorship, had been a chimera and the USSR therefore died from a 'lack of alternatives'.

A large majority of Russians, on the other hand, as they have regularly made clear in opinion surveys, regret the end of the Soviet Union, not because they pine for 'communism', but because they lost a secure way of life. In addition, a growing number of Russian intellectuals have come to believe that something essential was lost – a historic opportunity to democratise and modernise Russia by methods more gradualist, consensual and less traumatic, and thus more fruitful and less costly, than those adopted after 1991.

One common post-Soviet myth is that the dissolution was 'peaceful'. In reality, ethnic civil wars erupted in Central Asia and Transcaucasia, killing hundreds of thousands and brutally displacing even more, a process that is still underway with the genocide in Chechnya.

Having ended the Soviet state in a way that lacked legal or popular legitimacy, the Yeltsin ruling group that evicted Gorbachov soon became fearful of real democracy. Yeltsin's armed overthrow of the Russian parliament soon followed. Dissolving the union without any preparatory stages shattered a highly integrated economy and was a major cause of the collapse of production across the former Soviet territories, which fell by almost half in the 1990s.

That in turn contributed to mass poverty and its attendant social pathologies. Democracy never came to fruition: the Russian regime reverted to a familiar method of autocratic rule: assassination of opponents. Last year over 5 000 known 'hit' killings were carried out; many were dissident journalists or political opponents. Apart from an ice pick, revolver, mine and helicopter 'engine failure', poison has been the common means of ridding the regime of irritants.

If intimidation were not enough, every national TV network is now either state-run or owned by a state-run company. Foreign humanitarian groups and charities have been forced to cease activities (including Amnesty International and the British Council). Priests have been ordered to supply the names of worshippers.

'All power, every decision that matters, is in the hands of one man. Putin handpicks the mayors and regional governors who were once elected; he appoints the heads of the vast oil and gas companies, in which the state is the single biggest shareholder, and these men sit in the Kremlin as his ministers' (Jonathan Freedland, *The Guardian*).

### **How did all this come about?**

The Soviet Union was parcelled up on the last day of December 1991 into fifteen independent states, the biggest of which was Russia whose president was Boris Yeltsin. Mostly one-time bureaucrats and black marketers took control of the state's vast wealth. To enrich themselves they took the most valuable assets – natural resources such as oil, gas and metals – first through 'spontaneous privatisation' (otherwise known as 'post-communist kleptocracy' or 'piratisation') and, after 1991, through Kremlin decrees issued by Yeltsin.

Fearful for their dubiously acquired assets and even for their lives, the new property holders and bankers strove to create a political system devoted to and corrupted by their wealth. Hence their choice of Vladimir Putin, a lieutenant-colonel in the KGB, to replace the corrupt, autocratic and frequently drunk President Yeltsin in late 1999.

With Putin's presidency (agreed on condition that Yeltsin and his business partners would not be brought to book), some of the 'violent entrepreneurs' reconstituted themselves into legal oligarchs operating within the bounds set by the regime. The oligarchs are those tolerated and supported by the President. As long as they do not threaten his power, they may coexist with the regime – like Roman Abramovich. If they overstep the mark (like Boris Berezovsky, now based in Britain), they have to seek political asylum abroad. If they remain and challenge the President's power, as the oil company Yukos chief Mikhail Khodorkovsky did, they can find themselves in a Siberian labour camp or get bumped off (like Litvinenko in London).

Besides being fabulously wealthy chiefs of state firms, the oligarchs also act as servants of the Kremlin and have to toe the political line, thereby helping to ensure state control of the media and total commercialisation of the welfare state, as recommended by the IMF and the World Bank (which pays part of the salaries of 'research staff' in several Russian ministries).

The uncertainty and destruction of people's living standards that accompanied the break-up of the Soviet Union have resulted in two disastrous consequences. The first concerns health and education. The World Health Organisation today ranks Russia at 127th out of its 192 member nations, and at 75th according to the amount the government spends on health care. Not surprisingly, life expectancy has drastically fallen, especially for men – down to 58, six years less than it was under Brezhnev in 1965.

The second consequence is that from a Soviet population of 286m people, the population of Russia is now 149m; but with the swiftly falling birth rate, the population could be half as much, 75m, by 2050. This has resulted in the

government having to encourage large-scale immigration for the first time in history – initially from China, India and Vietnam.

At the same time, Russia boast some 50 billionaires, hundreds of dollar millionaires and 100 000 euro millionaires. The gap between rich and poor is surely unparalleled: some 50m people, a third of the population, live below the poverty line (of 65 euros a month). The basic fact is that the great bulk of the Russian people are worse off today than they were in the last thirty years of communist rule.

### **Oligarchs and Sport**

In the wake of the crumbling communist edifice, a deadly struggle commenced for control of sport. As the ostentatiously rich robber barons, the so-called New Russians (succeeded by the 'Very Newest Russians'), went about acquiring symbols of wealth, sport became a convenient place to invest their riches (that is, commercially profitable sports like football, ice hockey, basketball, boxing, wrestling, cycling and tennis).

Like the primitive capitalism that underlay their power, the methods they used to exploit sport were often primitive in the extreme, including the fixing of results, the bribing and intimidation of referees and even the 'hit' killings of those who stood in their way or tried to expose their nefarious operations. In many ways, the 1990s in Russia were reminiscent of mafia-dominated Chicago in the 1920s, with football taking the place of baseball.

All these developments weakened Russian interest in the Olympic movement and led to the removal of sinecures of an army commission and studenthood for all top players, and to the dismantling of the 42 sports boarding schools.

The free trade union sports societies (such as Spartak and Lokomotiv) as well as the KGB-sponsored Dinamo, and the sports club of the armed forces, TsSKA, mostly disappeared in favour of private sports, health and recreation clubs. The various nationalities preferred their own independent teams to combined Soviet effort and success. One result was a massive 'brain' and 'muscle' drain of top athletes, coaches, sports medics and scientists to the richest overseas 'buyer'. The multiplicity of grass roots sports organisations that had sprung up during Gorbachov's time, covering the disabled, women, small-scale private swimming and tennis clubs, and senior fitness associations were soon steamrollered by a 'revolution' as far-reaching as anything in the past: exposure to the 'free' market and selling out to the global economy.

The new Russian elite had, by the turn of this century, accumulated so much wealth that they had to seek ways of both investing and hiding it from the tax authorities. Sport, especially top-flight football, seemed to be a convenient shroud to cover their less sporting activities, an enjoyable plaything that brought them popular acclaim and prestige, and a means to launder their vast wealth.

There are abundant examples of such a sporting gloss put on shady business and political deals in the history of US baseball, Spanish football (particularly the investment in Real Madrid of the fascist Santiago Bernabeu, the club's president

from 1943 until his death in 1978) and the business-run football teams of England, Portugal and Latin America (9 of the 20 English Premier League teams are already foreign owned, with another nine targeted).

Initially, oligarchs treated sports clubs like any other 'turf' that had to be won and retained. They took control, by fair means or foul, of the major clubs and tried to 'buy success' in domestic and international tournaments. In case one might think such practices were part of the 'teething troubles' of the corrupt Yeltsin era, as late as last year, the Moscow Times was claiming that 'there has been one fixed football match in every week of the second half of the season.' No Premier club has ever been punished for match-fixing, just as no one has been charged with bumping off the regime's political opponents.

As Russian players moved westwards in the late 1990s and early 2000s, another migration was occurring. Leading European and South American players, whom the Russians dub 'legionaries', are heading eastwards at an ever-increasing rate. Last season, the Russian Premiership had an astonishing average of 11-12 foreign players on the books of each club. What entices foreign players to Russia is the cash inducements (high wages and tax scams) and lack of any work permit obstacles.

The oligarchs have brought a radical break with the past in world football. In so doing, they are also bringing about a major shift in football's balance of power – from West Europeans to Russians. For the first time the clubs they own can buy players from all over the world, no matter what the price or the wages demanded. Money matters not a little in seeking success.

The oligarchs have not had it all their own way. Just as in their ownership of Russia's natural wealth, they have come under mounting pressure from President Putin to re-invest some of their wealth into domestic sport, especially where national pride is at stake (Olympics, World Cup, European Championships). Roman Abramovich, for example, has been 'persuaded' to pay for a £20m training camp for Russia's national football team through his National Football Academy. Besides being forced to pay part of the national team coach's (Guus Hiddink) salary of \$1.3m a year, Abramovich has pledged funds for a national stadium in Moscow as well as 75 Astro-Turf pitches across Russia. Other oligarchs with close ties to the Kremlin have recently backed several big sports projects. Metals magnate Oleg Deripaska (based in London) has contributed £440m to a sports village near Sochi in the Crimea where the 2014 Winter Olympics are to be held.

What is somewhat surprising is the lack of concern in Britain about who the Russian oligarchs are, how they made their fortunes and what impact they are having on British sport. To give but one example, the Ukraine-born and Israel-based Arkady Gaidamak is 'associated' with ownership of Portsmouth Football Club. Like Vladimir Romanov, owner of Heart of Midlothian, Gaidamak has made his inexperienced son chairman of the club. Gaidamak, for whom an Interpol warrant awaits should he travel to other parts of Europe on one of his three passports, made his fortune gun-running in Angola – selling tanks, missiles, planes and equipment from the defunct Soviet Union to the Angolan government.

The radical shift in sports policy generally has obscured many of the positive features of communist sport in Russia and East and Central Europe as a whole.

The old system was generally open to those with talent in all sports, probably more so than in the West. It provided opportunities for women to play and succeed, if not on equal terms with men, at least on a higher plane than Western women. It gave an opportunity to the many ethnic minorities and relatively small states within the USSR to do well internationally and to help promote that pride and dignity that sports success in the glare of world publicity can bring.

Nowhere in the world was there, since the early 1950s, such reverence for Olympism, for Coubertin, for Olympic ritual and decorum. One practical embodiment of this was the contribution to Olympic solidarity with modernising nations: the training of Third World athletes, coaches, sports officials, medical officers and scholars at colleges and training camps. Much of this aid was free. None of it was disinterested; but it also went to those who were clearly exploited, as was the case with the Soviet-led campaign against apartheid in sport and the success in having racist South Africa banished from world sports forums and arenas.

Post-Soviet Russia's attainments in the 1990s and the present decade should not be underestimated. Parliamentary and presidential elections were held – true, not entirely democratically. A market economy was established and entrepreneurship encouraged. The agencies of the police invades the privacy of ordinary citizens less than at any time in Russian history, and there have been no wars across Russia's international frontiers. Moreover, Russia has no longer been a serious threat to world peace – though its relegation has promoted the one remaining superpower, the USA, to that very dangerous position under George Bush and his acolytes Blair and Brown.

But in some respects the situation became significantly worse under Yeltsin and Putin than it had been under Gorbachov. The former reintroduced violence as a method of political struggle, and huge power was concentrated in the Russian presidency (we might add now – premiership too – when Putin takes over as prime minister). The judiciary lost much of its short-lived semi-autonomy. Criminality is rife, poverty extensive, and the public has little opportunity to defend itself against the threats of the rich and powerful.

The cri de coeur of one of Russia's most famous authors (and communism's fiercest critics), Alexander Solzhenitsyn, poses questions that future Russian and western leaders will have to face up to:

'...all the fundamental sectors of our state, economic, cultural and moral life have been destroyed or looted. We live literally amid ruins, but we pretend to live a normal life... We heard that great reforms were being carried out in our country. They were false reforms because they left more than half of our people in poverty... Will we continue looting and destroying Russia until nothing is left?'