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Football fans as an example of a community beyond the government's control in the conditions of the authoritarian regime

In Belarus, the term "civil society" became used extensively in the 1990s, and since then has been traditionally used in its narrow meaning in the media and official documents to describe public associations and initiatives. However, a broader understanding of civil society as associations which are characterised by the ability to self-organise, define their goals without a push from the state, and assume certain social responsibilities (preservation of peace and good in society), allows us to include a wider circle of actors into this concept. This article focuses on informal associations of football fans, which are an element of civil society in Belarus.

Unlike established NGOs, associations of football supporters are not institutionalised organisations. They can be described as informal groups of young people that share a passion for a football club and the values and style of the fans subculture. This article studies associations of fans in the context of the theory of new social movements.[1] Fans movements – like "classical" new social movements (animals' rights defenders, hackers, LGBT-movement and others) – are characterised by mistrust of centralisation, subordination and controls from the above. They are creative in using less institutionalised forms of protest. In the case of Belarusian sports fans, this boils down to the boycott of fans' sectors during conflict situations with the police or the administration of a club, banners, graffiti, fire shows. Although fans movements are capable of uniting for the sake of a specific demand, they usually do not have a long-term strategy and they do not strive to influence the policy of the authorities. All they seem to be interested in is creating an autonomous control-free space.

At the same time, football fans do not limit themselves only to chanting to encourage their teams at the stadiums. Fans organise concerts, sports tournaments, and charity events. In 2014, under the influence of mass protests and war in Ukraine, they started to

[1] Neveux Eric. *Satsyalogia satsyalnykh rukhau.* // Sociology of social movements. Vilnius 2010. Pp. 81–90.

express publically their citizenship attitude to the events there. The flash-mob during the Belarus-Ukraine match at the stadium in Barysau can be recalled as the largest protest action in Belarus in 2014.[2]

Fans movements are significantly more independent than classical public associations. In recent years, NGOs have functioned in conditions of constant pressure from the state. Having introduced legal, bureaucratic, fiscal and ideological barriers, the authorities create preconditions for marginalisation of public associations. Operating in the current legal environment, NGOs have very limited opportunities for manoeuvring and are often forced to reduce or suspend their activities in response to fresh restrictions from the authorities. Communities, existing outside of the system and, hence, not following the logic of the system, function differently. Football fans groups are exactly these types of communities. Unlike registered NGOs, fans subculture followers cannot be fully controlled by the authorities. These communities do not take part in formal associations, do not seek state registration and cannot be liquidated by a ruling of the executive power body.

What is the difference between football fans and ordinary supporters? There are several criteria in scientific literature, which allow adding usual ordinary supporters to the ranks of fans. Firstly, they regularly attend all home matches of their football club. Secondly, several times a year they follow their favourite team travelling to other cities to attend away fixtures. Thirdly, they accept the subculture of football fans.[3]

This article looks at the evolution of the football fans' subculture in Belarus, the ideas they share, and their relationship with the authorities. Further on, the terms "football fans" and "fans movement" will be used to refer to both subculture followers and the public movement. Besides, the term "fans movement" is used to refer to both the movement supported by a club and the nation-wide fans movement. The term "football fans" is broader; it is used to refer to all subculture followers.

This article is based on the sources that include online fans' communities and forums, media stories, and several academic papers describing this subculture.

Football fans in USSR

Football fans have existed in Belarus for more than 30 years. It is assumed that this subculture emerged in Belarus at the end of 1981. The then-fans recall, in interviews

[2] Chyzhova Tatsiana. *Pratestnaya aktyunasts u Belarusi u 2014 hodzie (vulichnyya aktsyi, vybarchyya pikyety, satsyyalnyya kanflikty)* // *Protest activities in Belarus in 2014 (street actions, election pickets, social conflicts)* // http://palityka.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Chyzhova_Pratesty-2104.pdf.

[3] Ille A. *Futbol'nyi fanatizm v Rossii: Fan-dvizhenie i subkul'tura futbol'nykh fanatov* // *Football fan movement in Russia: movement and subculture of football fans* // http://subculture.narod.ru/texts/book2/ille.htm.

and memoires lately, that an organised and active support by fans of FC Dynamo Minsk, Belarus' best football side back then, began after visits to Minsk by supporters of Moscow and Leningrad (now St Petersburg) clubs. Impressed by the visitors' organised support-base and the fact that Russian fans possessed scarves, badges, banners and other accessories in their clubs' colours, Minsk supporters spontaneously organised themselves into groups supporting the local team.

The history of the fans subculture in USSR can be conditionally divided into two periods: 1) from the moment the fans movement emerged in the 1970s until 1987, and 2) afterwards. In the first period, organised cheering at the stands was not allowed, and the police and KGB routinely harassed fans. At the stadium entrance, police officers would take away flags, badges and scarves. Supporters were allowed to cheer only when seated. Security agencies also tried to prevent fans from attending the away games of their team. During the perestroika period, security forces significantly relaxed controls over fans movements, thus creating space for a remarkable growth of the fans subculture across USSR towards the end of the 1980s. That is when Dynamo Minsk's supporters lived in the heydays of their fans movement. Although one can find mentions on the Internet that fans movements in the late 1980s also existed in Homel, Mahilou and Hrodna, it is worth noting that Dynamo Minsk was the only Belarusian club in USSR Championship's elite league. No wonder so many young people from the Belarusian provinces were among fans of the Minsk club and were active supporters of Dynamo during both home and away games.[4]

The way the former members of the Belarusian fans movement recall those times suggest that they were sceptical about the Soviet government. For example, a former Dynamo supporter recalled in a media interview that once, on a train to Kutaisi in Georgia, he and his fellow fans marked the death of the Soviet Union Communist Party's Secretary General Chernenko by drinking alcohol and singing songs.[5] Moreover, the fans' appearance differed greatly from how Soviet citizens were supposed to look. Apart from having accessories in club's colours, some of them had long hair and torn jeans, hence often triggering clashes with the so called "street toughs" or thugs – urban youths with a notoriously aggressive behaviour.

It can be argued that in the first half of the 1980s Dynamo Minsk fans differed from the stereotypical image of football hooligans in Western Europe (young blue-collars with a low social status and prone to unmotivated violence), imposed by Soviet propaganda. As a rule, Minsk fans avoided getting into fights with the fans of other teams. They valued their life style: lively cheering at the stadium, long-distance trips to follow their beloved

[4] *History of "Dynamo" fans (Soviet period)* // http://www.lads83.ru.

[5] Maslovski, Andrei. *Prinimaya v fanaty, bili* // *When they initiated me into becoming a fan, they beat me* // http://goals.by/football/articles/174804.

team to away fixtures and non-conformist appearance – largely, they strived to overcome the boundaries of the grey Soviet reality.

However, in the second half of the 1980s, conflicts with the fans of other clubs became increasingly common. Vilnius was traditionally a difficult ground for away matches. Clashes between fans of the local club Zalgiris and Minsk supporters, several hundred attending the matches in Vilnius, were not rare. Hostility could also be observed later in relations with Ukrainian fans from Kiev and Dnepropetrovsk. Anyway, when the last USSR championship ended in November 1991, the Soviet period of the Belarusian fans movement was also over.

Fans movement in independent Belarus

By the early 1990s, the fans movement in Belarus – just like elsewhere in the former Soviet states – was in decline. A new wave of the fans movement arrived in the second half of 1990s when relatively large groups of fans (20–100 people) began to appear at the stadiums of the teams playing in the elite division of the Belarus Championship. The largest in numbers were the fan groups of Dynamo Minsk and Dnepr Mahilou. Torpedo Minsk, Dynamo Brest, FC Homel, Shakhtsior Salihorsk, Belshina Babruisk and others also had a relatively strong support-base. The new fan groups had their titles written on their banners displayed during matches. For example, the Dynamo Minsk grouping was called "Blue-White Gang". Dnepr fans called themselves "River Lions". Torpedo Minsk fans were "Black-White Tornado". Some groups began to produce scarves and print self-published newsletters devoted to the fans culture (The Hooligans (Dynamo Minsk), Torpedo Fan Courier and others). By that time, the biggest hostility in Belarus had been between the fans of Dynamo Minsk and Dnepr Mahilou football clubs. Other fans supported either of these two groupings based on their geographical proximity. For example, Belshina Babruisk fans were natural allies of Dnepr Mahilou, because Babruisk is a city in the Mahilou region. Dynamo Minsk fans were backed during third-party fixtures by fans of another capital-based club, Torpedo.

The split between "ultras" and "hooligans" was yet to be known in the Belarusian fans movement in the second half of 1990s – early 2000s. In the fans subculture, ultras groups are fans who use choreography (colourful shows during the match, including banners, serpentines and flares) and vocal support in large numbers to encourage their team. "Hooligans" are fans who attend matches seeking clashes with hooligans amongst the supporters of other teams. In the 1990s, both cheering the team at the stadium, and fighting with supporters of other teams was a must for all fans. Scheduled fights between fans were not yet in existence back then. Clashes would take place before or after matches in direct proximity to the stadium or near transport terminals. Fights were possible due to the relatively relaxed attitude of the police. In the second half of 1990s, riot police was

not deployed to stadiums where regular police force officers were usually small in number. Outside the stadium, officers did not pay attention to the fans that were not violating public order. There was no strict discipline in the ranks of fans, either. To do or nor not to do sports was a matter of personal choice. It was considered a norm to consume alcohol prior to home and even away fixtures.

In the same period of time, attempts, in some cities of Belarus, to create and spearhead fans movements on "orders from above" could be observed. For example, in 1998 in Hrodna, the local branch of the Belarusian Patriotic Union of Youth tried to create a fans club of FC Neman. The union started to issue fans-club membership IDs and provided several coaches for fans to travel to away games. Some football clubs also attempted to create their own fans clubs. MPKC Mazyr, Naftan Navapolatsk, and BATE Barysau provided buses for their fans to attend away games. Participating in those trips were ordinary supporters who did not share the values of the fans youth subculture. Eventually, those attempts would just die out.

In the late 1990s – early 2000s, the booming Russian fans movement was the primary role model for fans groups in Belarus. Along with the fashion trends (bomber coats, army boots, and number-one haircuts), they also borrowed from Russia, radical right-wing ideas, which were growing increasingly popular with Belarusian fans. One could notice that even judging by the accessories used by fans at the time. For example, scarves and banners often depicted Celtic crosses – a solar symbol used extensively by the neo-Nazis. Sociologist Aliaksei Lastouski argues in his article on the skinhead culture in Belarus, that football fans circles gave birth to numerous "skinhead" groups, while Dynamo Minsk fans played a significant role in the subculture of neo-Nazi "shaven heads". The article also points to the popularity among skinheads of pan-Slavism ideas borrowed from Russia in the late 1990s – early 2000s.[6]

According to Russian sociologist and subculture researcher Alexander Tarasov, the penetration of neo-Nazism into the subculture of Russian football fans occurred, because this subculture was not complete. Lacking even a primitive philosophy and ideology, it was vulnerable to external influences. Since the subculture of football fans is a priori xenophobic (there is a clear division between foes and friends) and the intellectual level of its members is low, fans turned out to be receptive to the skinheads' ideology. This influence is manifested via slang diffusion and appearance (common for both subcultures, clothing, fashion and haircuts). A high level of xenophobia in the Russian society fuelled by the systematic work of some neo-Nazi organisations to spread their ideas among football fans

[6] Lastovskii Aleksei. *Idei i praktiki molodezhnoi kontrkul'tury skinkhedov v Belarusi // Ideas and practices of the skinhead youth counterculture in Belarus. Palitychnaya sfera*. No 10. 2008. Pp. 17–25.

was also a powerful contributing factor.[7] By having shared the extreme right wing views of its eastern neighbours, Belarusian fans either distanced themselves from the ideas of Belarusian nationalism or treated it – symbolised by the Belarusian Popular Front back then – with a negative attitude.

In 1999, Belarusian and Russian fans were involved in a fight at the stadium during a friendly match between the Belarus and Russian national teams. Mostly probably, none of the existing Belarusian fans groups participated in the clashes. At the same time, rumours among fans suggested that the clashes were provoked by "Belarusian Popular Front activists".[8] A FC Lida fans group was the only exception, as it was in contact with the local community of the Young Front (the youth wing of the Belarusian Popular Front). However, that group did not exist for a long time.[9]

It is also known that some Belarusian right-wing radical nationalist organisations attempted to spread their ideas among football fans. For example, the *Nacyja* (Nation) magazine, published by the Belarusian Freedom Party, ran several articles devoted to football fans. However, those attempts, eventually, were not successful.

When the authoritarian rule in Belarus grew stronger in late 1990s – early 2000s, security forces began to pay more attention to the fans subculture. It was also so, because the number of clashes between fans and the quantity of participants in those clashes was increasing, both at home and away matches. In 1999, the fan sector of FC Dynamo Minsk at the stadium (on average between 300 to 400 fans per match) was under permanent video surveillance by security officials. It became routine for fans to be removed from the stadium on various pretexts. In the final game of the matchday between BATE and Dynamo Minsk at the Barysau stadium, Dynamo fans were involved in serious clashes with the local police. The match was eventually stopped, and 72 Minsk fans were detained. Three of them faced criminal proceedings.[10] Largely, the police provoked the fight but the situation grabbed huge media attention, and criminal proceedings did not end with prison terms for the detained fans. However, about a year after, the police started to film, check personal data and interview fans at stadiums across Belarus.

It is worth noting that the fight against violence and increased presence of the security forces at stadiums was not an isolated trend in Belarus only. In the UK, authorities started

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[7] Tarasov Aleksandr. *Subkul'tura futbol'nykh fanatov v Rossii i pravyi radikalizm* // *Football fans' subculture in Russia and right-wing radicalism* // http://scepsis.net/library/id_2965.html.

[8] *Minsk-1999. Vyezd za sbornuyu* // *Minsk 1999. Trip with national team* // http://belultras.by/stati/minsk-1999-vyezd-za-sbornuyu.

[9] Maslovskii Andrei. *Poyavlenie levykh sektorov – moda* // *Emergence of left-wing sectors is a fashion trend* // http://goals.by/football/articles/128916.

[10] *History of fan movements: Dynamo Minsk* // http://belultras.by/stati/istorii-fan-dvizhenij-dinamo-minsk.

fighting against football hooligans no later than in the 1980s. In the 2000s, the problem of football violence was relevant in almost all the countries of Eastern Europe.

The reaction of Belarusian football fans to police persecution was the same as elsewhere in the region. The "casual wear" style replaced bomber coats and heavy-duty boots. This way, a football fan had the same appearance as an ordinary supporter and was able to avoid additional attention from security agents before the game. As was mentioned above, there was a split inside the subculture between "hooligans" and "ultras". The term *Ultras,* used for the first time in Italy, refers to ultra-fanatical supporters using vocal support and elaborate display at stands to encourage their team during matches. Ultras groups also popularise their movement by publishing stickers and painting graffiti. Radical supporters or *hooligans* are united into groups or "firms", in fans' slang, of 15–30 persons with the primary objective of fighting similar hooligans from other teams. For them, attending games and cheering their team is secondary.

In the 2000s, the number of fights between football fans in the streets of Belarusian cities dropped significantly. Disturbed by increased police attention, it became common practice for "firms" to schedule fights in advance in a city's remote areas or parks, or in the suburbs and "sort thing out" away from ordinary by-passers and the police. In other words, "radical supporters" of the 2000s differed greatly from fan-movement followers of the 1990s. They were no longer drunken debauchers that openly terrorise citizens on a matchday. Rather, they became invisible and well-organised fight clubs.

The article "Avant-garde of football hooliganism", posted on the website of Dynamo Minsk's fans group Lads82 in 2004, describes the rules of behaviour for "hooligans". To be able to defend the honour of the club outside the stadium, members of a "firm" must restrict alcohol consumption, not smoke or use drugs, not curse but do sports and develop intellectually by reading books.[11]

In the 2000s, extreme right-wing political views remained widespread among Belarusian fans. It was in line with the general trend within the fans movement in Eastern Europe. For example, the above-mentioned article suggests that one of the reasons why a "hooligan" is not supposed to use drugs is because "churki" (a derogatory slang term to describe non-Slavic (Asian or Caucasian) people) profit from drug sales. The most notorious case when neo-Nazi views were openly expressed at a stadium in Belarus was the display of a Nazi leader, Rudolf Hess, on a banner in the Dynamo Minsk's fans sector in 2010. Despite an apology from the leaders of the Dynamo Minsk's fans movement, that incident has been widely used in media to create a negative image of football fans. However, unlike elsewhere in Eastern Europe,[12] in the second half of the 2000s and in

[11] *Avant-garde of football hooliganism* // http://lads83.ru/avangard.htm.

[12] Legkov Timur. *Radical clubs try to rule football teams. FARE prepared the report on racism in Russian football* // http://www.sovsport.ru/gazeta/article-item/782093; Kornak

the 2010s, radical left-wing views grew in popularity among Belarusian fans. This trend singles out Belarusian fans in the region and puts them closer to the Western European context, where football fans with left-wing views are a relatively widespread phenomenon.

The left-wing fans got united around the Minsk-based FC MTZ-RIPO, founded in 2002 (renamed Partyzan in 2010). Already at the very beginning, supporters of the newly founded team positioned themselves as a youth movement, which is wider than the limited subculture of fans. For that reason, the fans sector attracted not only football supporters as such but also representatives of "leftist" youth subcultures – punks, anarchists, etc. Probably the most famous supporter of the club – political prisoner Ihar Alinevich, was sentenced to 8 years in prison under the so called "Anarchists case" in 2011. In his book "On my way to Magadan", written in a KGB pre-trial jail, the political prisoner recalled supporting MTZ-RIPO during away matches.[13]

The number one enemy of MTZ-RIPO's fans outside the stadium were fans of Dynamo Minsk, while the matches between these two teams were rightfully considered Minsk derbies. Despite being isolated inside the country, the "left-wing" fans movement was gaining strength quickly – not only due to the attractiveness of their ideas but also due to the club's success in football. In 2005 and 2008, MTZ-RIPO finished third in the Belarus championship. The club also won the Belarus Cup several times. Fans had many allies outside Belarus, for example, "left-wing" groups of Arsenal Kiev and Babelsberg Potsdam. With time, other fans groups with similar views appeared in Belarus (Ivatsevichy, Orsha, Haradzeya and others). When FC Partyzan owner and Lithuanian businessman Vladimir Romanov refused to fund the team in 2011, fans revived the club and even signed it in to play in the Belarus championship – the first ever precedent in the country where the team was resurrected by fans.

The reason why *Antifa* ideas became popular among Belarusian fans may be that unlike in Russia, Poland, Serbia and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, ethnic nationalism was never a dominant ideology in Belarus.[14] Another factor is the myth about the Great Patriotic War, which became the primary historical myth of the state. In the minds of the youth, socialised in Belarusian society, there is a stable opinion that during

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Marcin. *Brunatna księga 2011–2012* // http://www.nigdywiecej.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=261&Itemid=20; Atanasov Vitaly. *Ultra-silencing. Racism on football fields of Ukraine is common.* // http://www.ukrrudprom.com/digest/Ultrazamalchivanie_Rasizm_na_futbolnih_stadionah_Ukraini_stal_ob.html.

[13] Olinevich Igor. *Yedu v Magadan.* // *I am going to Magadan.* P. 30.

[14] Akudovich Valiantsin. *Kod adustnastsi.* // *Code of Absence ntelligentsia expressed support to arrested BATE fansder 193-1 articlesociology. ism in Russian footballs satsyyalnyya kanflikt.* Minsk, 2007 ntelligentsia expressed support to arrested BATE fansder 193-1 articlesociology. ism in Russian footballs satsyyalnyya kanflikt ntelligentsia expressed support to arrested BATE fansder 193-1 articlesociology. ism in Russian footballs satsyyalnyya kanflikt.

the World War II almost all residents of Belarus fought against Nazis.[15] For that reason, radical right-wing views did not become dominant among fans and triggered a negative reaction of a huge part of this subculture's representatives.

Throughout the 2000s, relations between fans and the police remained tense. The police sought gradually to strengthen crowd controls at stadiums. Their reaction to flares and pyrotechnics was ruthless. Personal checks became stricter, making it sometimes impossible to get to the stadium before kick-off. Tipsy fans are banned from the stadium. The police also increasingly make sure that fans do not leave their sector during half time. When fans travel to attend away fixtures, they are routinely accompanied on a train or a bus by riot police officers who escort them within a town prior to and after the match. A beat officer can also summon fans prior to the start of the season. Video recording and copying personal details at the stadium entrance became routine. Already in early 2010s, banners in English were not allowed inside stadium because police officers did not speak foreign languages. To be displayed at the stands, every banner had to be cleared by the police prior to the game.

Match attendance dropped significantly in comparison with the 1990s, making fans engaged in vocal and visual cheering easily spottable by the police. However, the increased number of supporters at fans sectors created a good atmosphere during Belarus championship matches – something that clubs' managers and the Belarusian Football Federation had to respect. Boycott of matches became the only legitimate and relatively effective form of struggle against police's arbitrariness. On 26 September 2010, fans of almost all clubs playing the elite league refused to watch matches from fans sectors. The home fans sector of FC BATE remained empty for almost one year – from 14 August 2010 until 19 June 2011. A Boycott was also announced by the fans of Dynamo Minsk, Neman Hrodna, Dynamo Brest and others. Protests were usually over quickly after negotiations with the management of the clubs, promising to solve the problems with the police.

In the same period of time, fans movements began to hold mini-football and wrestling tournaments, collected clothes for orphanages and organized rock concerts. The media also changed its attitude towards the fans throughout the 2000s. In the early 2000s, sports journalists were mainly interested in sports but by the end of the 2000s – early 2010s sports media started to pay more attention to the fans subculture, covering conflicts with the police and publishing stories about fans. For example, the country's leading Internet portal TUT.BY highlighted the charitable work of FC Homel fans by running a story about a visit to the orphanage in Navabelitsa on New Year's Eve in 2013.[16] Media also reported about charitable actions by fans of Dynamo Minsk, Dynamo Brest, BATE, Partyzan and others.

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[15] Kotlyarov I.V. *Velikaya Otechestvennaya voina v zerkale sotsiologii* // *Great Patriotic War in the mirror of sociology* // http://socio.bas-net.by/be/artdetailed.php?id=8.

[16] *Football fans visit an orphanage* // http://news.tut.by/society/380709.html.

Contacts with supporters in other countries were also strengthened. In 2012, several Belarusian fans groups supported the campaign launched by the Dynamo Kiev ultras for the release of Siarhei Paulyuchenka, a Dynamo Kiev fan, convicted of murder. Support was manifested through banners and performance displays at the stadiums and through graffiti. Apart from the foreign contacts of the Partyzan fans mentioned above, it is worth noting the friendship between BATE fans with supporters of the Polish club Piast Gliwice, that began in early 2010s. With the fans movement in Poland being one of the strongest in Europe, the fact of this alliance with a Polish fans movement speaks for a certain status of Belarusian fans abroad.

As it was mentioned above, fans distanced themselves from Belarusian nationalism in the 1990s and the first half of 2000s under strong influence from the Russian fans culture, associated with Russian nationalism and neo-Nazi ideas. However, by the mid-2000s, the situation began to change. Torpedo Minsk fans were the first to start using the Belarusian language in the mid-2000s. Their website was in Belarusian. They also made the first Belarusian-language stadium banners. One of the factors that triggered "Belarusisation" of the fans movement was the emergence in 2007 of a Belarus national team's fans club B-12, which organised vocal support for the team in Belarusian. Accessories and banners were also made in the titular tongue. On the website, the fans club positions itself as a non-politicised group, which strives to unite the followers of both the red-green and white-red-white flags of Belarus. Its primary goal is to raise the level of fans support in Belarus to European standards.[17] B-12 also made it clear that its role model were fans movements in the West. It demonstrated its strength in the autumn of 2012, when fans announced a boycott to the World Cup qualifier against Spain. The boycott was caused by a surge in ticket prices. As a result, in order to fill the stadium, authorities used the so-called administrative resource, forcing schoolteachers to sell tickets among students. However, it did not help fill the stands, so the match was played almost in silence. The success of the boycott forced the Belarusian Football Federation to make concessions and reduce the costs of tickets.

Beginning in the 2000s, Belarusian fans often use white-red-white flags – the de facto banned national symbol and the official flag in 1991–1995 – to support the Belarus national team and clubs during away matches abroad. In the first half of the 2010s, almost all fan movements in Belarus started to use the Belarusian language on banners, stickers and their websites. From time to time, some ultras groups (for example, Neman Hrodna and FC Minsk) organise vocal support in Belarusian.

The Belarusian-language popularity trend can be explained by several factors. In comparison with the 1990s, Belarusian youths became more mobile in the second half of 2000s. Growth in wages and living standards of the Belarusian population created

[17] http://b-12.by/index/0-10.

the situation where fans had more opportunities for foreign travel and contacts with other representatives of the fan subculture, not only in Russia, but also cross the western borders. This way, they could naturally get to know the latest trends in the subculture directly – not via Russia as before. Affordable travel combined with internet penetration led to a drop in influence of the Russian fans movement and a wider spread of the more relevant for the local context, ideas of Belarusian nationalism. Another factor is almost total annihilation of the pro-independence opposition youth organisations (Young Front and others), capable of staging street protests.[18] As a result, stadiums became one of few venues where cultural beliefs dissenting with the state ideology could still be manifested. It is logical to admit that the youth previously recruited by pro-independence organisations, could see the fans subculture as a good platform for expressing their views.

It is not common for the Belarusian fans movement to manifest its attitude towards the current political situation in the country, at stadiums. The huge presence of the riot police at stadiums as well as ruthless suppression of any opposition activity does not create conducive conditions for that. However, spontaneous protests against the government do happen sometimes. In the summer of 2011 in Babruisk, the riot police used tear gas against Dynamo Minsk fans that, in the views of the police, went too far to celebrate a goal by their favourite team. A 5-year-old child and a Dynamo player were affected. In response, fans chanted "We Hate the Regime" and used abusive words against the police for several minutes. Fans have more freedom to express their political views at away matches of the Belarusian teams abroad. Again in the summer of 2011, in the midst of the financial crisis and the so called "silent protests" that swept across the country, BATE fans chanted «ШОС» (an ambiguous anti-government abbreviation which usually stands for "let him die" or "let him go to jail") during an away match in Lithuania against Ekranas Panevezys.

In late 2013 and early 2014, Ukrainian fans actively supported the protests in Kiev and were part of the group of demonstrators that participated in clashes with the riot police. The fans movements of some Belarusian football clubs supported their Ukrainian friends by posting on the Internet the pictures of fans holding banners in support of Euromaidan with the words "Hold on, Ukraine! We are with you!" and "Glory to Heroes" – a nationalist slogan used by Ukrainian protesters. Two fans were even arrested for five days. The case grabbed huge media attention; rights defenders and Belarusian intellectuals stepped in against the repressions. 20 prominent musicians, writers and culture figures posted a photo on the Internet showing them holding banners with the same content.[19] It

[18] Zaitsev Alexander. *Opponents of regime get punished under 193-1 article* // http://news.tut.by/politics/76679.html; Fedorovich Viktor. *Dashkevich case. Lobov's case. Political hooliganism with two unknown factors* // http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2011/03/23/ic_articles_116_172949/.

[19] *Intelligentsia expressed support to arrested BATE fans* // http://news.tut.by/politics/385602.html.

was for the first time that Belarusian intellectuals publicly spoke out in support of the fans movement that had just recently used neo-Nazi symbols at stadiums.

The Belarusian security agencies carried out an all-out special operation against fans ahead of the World Ice Hockey Championship in Minsk. Several weeks before the tournament, many fans were summoned to the police station for "preventive conversations". On the eve of the championship, the authorities launched what can only be described as a real hunt for football fans that, together with pro-democracy young activists and prostitutes, got onto the list of security risks and could be subjected to arrest.

The most prominent politically coloured conflict between fans and the authorities occurred on 9 October 2014 during the 2016 Euro Cup qualifier between Belarus and Ukraine, played at the stadium in Barysau. The Belarus fans sector supported the visiting fans and shouted abusive chants against the Russian president Putin. In response, the police detained over 40 fans that later stood trial, and got fines or administrative arrests for 15 days.

These cases prove the increased politicization of the Belarusian fans movements in the 2010s compared to the previous years. First, fans' political activism increased during the 2011 "silent protests", which followed the brutal crackdown on protesters during the peaceful manifestation on 19 December 2010. When it was later repeated during the political crisis in Ukraine in 2014, it took the form of the actions of solidarity with the Ukrainian ultras that participated in clashes with the police and pro-Russian security forces. When suppressing the political activism of football fans, security agencies use the same tactics which, beginning from the early 2000s, have been successfully employed against pro-democracy activists: preventive detentions, intimidation, fines and administrative arrests.

Some conclusions

The study of the fans movement's development in Belarus showed that over the past 30 years, followers of the fans subculture have accepted mutually contradicting political ideologies. In the late 1990s, fans communities supported pan-Slavic ideas but in the early 2010s the fans movement started to express interest in Belarusian nationalism. Both right- and left-wing fans movements are existent. One can make a conclusion, from the history of the relationship between the fans subculture and the security agencies, about the ability to resist repressions and a high degree of adaptability to external challenges. The fans movement continued to exist even during the Andropov times in the Soviet Union. Increased controls by the police led to a stronger consolidation of fans movements. Spontaneous clashes gave way to scheduled fights. The fans wear fashion, also changed. As a matter of protest against the police arbitrariness, fans started to use the boycott of matches. In recent years, fans organise their leisure activities (sports tournaments, concerts), and get involved in charitable work and publicly manifest their political views.

Due to its protest potential, football fans in Belarus today feel the biggest pressure from the police and security forces compared to followers of other informal groups. After the 2011 crackdown, no opposition youth organisations capable of organising mass street protests can be found in Belarus. Criminal prosecution of Young Front activists after the 2006 and 2010 presidential elections destroyed a large-scale nationalist youth movement. The so-called anarchist's cases of 2011 weakened significantly the left-wing youth groups. In these conditions, "radical football supporters" remain one of the small groups capable of mobilising the youth critical of the authorities. This fact, combined with the increased interest of fans in politics due to the developments in Ukraine, remains a concern for the Belarusian authorities.

It does not matter that the number of Belarusian fans at stadiums is much smaller than in Ukraine or in its other neighbours, Poland and Russia, and that the age seems very young at first glance (many underage supporters can be observed in fans sectors). Football clubs, the Belarusian Football Federation and the police are forced to take into account the opinion of fans groups. This is proved by the concessions made to fans by the management of clubs as well as annual meetings between fans movement leaders and security apparatus officials and football clubs, hosted by the Belarusian Football Federation, prior to the start of the season.

Unlike the registered NGOs in Belarus, the authorities are not able to control football fans groups. For example, it is impossible to imagine that, similar to the Belarusian Association of Journalists and the Union of Belarusian writers, the authorities will move to create an official fans club of the Belarus national team, whose representatives can attend away matches, use flares and take part in clashes with fans of other teams. Security bodies can put pressure on some fans using repressions. However, they are not able to control fans groups fully, let alone to fight the subculture and its internal trends. Despite the restrictions at stadiums, football fans movement remains a popular subculture with the youth in Belarus, the political emancipation of which the Belarusian regime is not yet able to counteract.

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