

The Telegraph

Ukrainian oligarch and friend of Roman Abramovich who is trying to remain a man of the people

The term ‘oligarch’ positively drips with malign connotations. Our distaste aroused by the rise of Roman Abramovich at Chelsea, we self-styled democrats of Planet Football recoil instinctively at the concept of such power being concentrated in the hands of so few.



Global exposure: Oleksandr Yaroslavskiy meets the mascots for Euro 2012 Photo: Sergei Illin

By Oliver Brown, in Kharkiv, Ukraine
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But I invite you to join me, just briefly, in the office of Oleksandr Yaroslavskiy. Shirt slashed open to the waist, feet resting in elegantly stitched moccasins, this billionaire is typically partial to flaunting his fortune in Ukraine’s north-eastern city of Kharkiv. On the wall hang pictures of himself alongside Bill Clinton and his “friend of 20 years”, Mr Abramovich.

The chances of enjoying similar access to the court of Abramovich are roughly equivalent to the likelihood of Chelsea fans taking a holiday to Chukotka, the province the owner used to govern on Russia’s desolate eastern extremity. Yaroslavskiy, though, radiates charisma.

This mischievous, balding figure, greeted on every street as plain “Alex”, seizes upon the presence of a foreign journalist in Kharkiv to demonstrate the transformation he has wrought here.

Aesthetically, Kharkiv is unprepossessing. Rows of Stalinist tower blocks line every approach road like upturned tombs, while its signature moment is a 60ft-tall statue of Lenin in Liberty Square. And yet, precisely one year from today, it will host its first group game at the 2012 European Championship.

The prospect of global exposure is enough to galvanise Yaroslavskiy, responsible for rendering the local Metalist team a major force in the Ukrainian game, into spreading the wealth with quite staggering zeal.

This begins at a relatively minor level. For instance, I am suddenly the proud owner of a Metalist cap and blue-and-yellow scarf: both tokens of his elaborate hospitality. Throughout Kharkiv's more monochrome boulevards, the influence of Yaroslavskiy is more profound. Luxury hotels are being thrown up in haste, to satisfy Uefa's minimum requirement of 2,000 five-star rooms.

On the outside walls of the Soviet-style flats, immense Metalist murals are plastered. The subtext is not difficult to divine: 'I am your benefactor. And don't you forget it, either'.

During a meeting at the city hall, the 51 year-old is asked how much his construction company has invested in preparation for Euro 2012 and replies casually to the tune of £200 million. Although it is tempting to suggest such spending is geared towards the glorification of his own image, it is also rooted in his desired connection with the ordinary citizen.

Where Abramovich ghosts in and out of his gilded Belgravia residence with the type of security detail more befitting a KGB chief, Yaroslavskiy, a former policeman who keeps only the one bodyguard, likes to play the civic-minded oligarch.

"I am not political, bureaucratic — I am a free guy," he explains. "It is social essence. I am a businessman. I could live in London, Paris or New York, but who would know me in London? I live here, I walk in the street, people say, 'Hello, Alex'. I am very happy. My friend is Abramovich, but who knows Abramovich in London? Maybe the supporters of Chelsea don't."

The fans of Metalist assuredly know the man who has elevated their club, furnished them with a 50,000-seat stadium and brought them into the Uefa church just in time for the European finals.

Such is his pride in the club, who join the Europa League play-offs this season, that he trumps up a tour of the arena by piping Queen's We Are The Champions at deafening volume over the public address system.

The choice is apt, given that the reformed band's open-air concert in Kharkiv in 2008 did so much to signify the city's embrace of western European culture.

Yaroslavskiy sold his share in one of Ukraine's premier banks five years ago, in return for a cool £1 billion. But he has refused to forsake the community that made him.

"I wake up at five o'clock every morning and don't go to sleep until 12 o'clock at night, I am checking all the time. We have made great progress. Look at Metalist.

"One year ago this was empty land, Metalist were in the second division; now we are ready to challenge the top clubs of Europe. Once I took the first step, I made a commitment and have gone all the way."

Upon the 'one year to go' mark to Euro 2012, Yaroslavskiy is most passionately committed to ensuring that Ukraine, next year's co-hosts with Poland, advertises itself in a flattering light.

To all the Jeremiahs who fear that the country's privilege is premature, he is living proof to the contrary. He proves it is possible to be an oligarch, but still human after all.

