

# The experience UEFA EURO 2012 in Poznań - priceless?

*Sebastian Pape, Germany*

Two years after the European Football Championships there are still landmarks of EURO 2012 in the city of Poznań, Poland. Among them is a huge stadium, uncompleted roads and broken buildings; but also invisible landmarks, which are in the heads of the citizens and visitors: Memories. I was one of those visitors, now returning to explore how the event has changed the city.

Refresh. Refresh. Again and again; every few seconds. The "F5"-key was maybe the busiest of my computer during those weeks at the beginning of 2012. I was eager to snatch one of the last tickets for the European football championships and chanced my luck at the reselling portal of the UEFA, as the official ticketing phases had already been over. One could see the offers appear and vanish minute by minute, mostly for matches involving the participation of Italy or Spain, but my object of desire was a different one and it was rare. So I visited the page every free minute and I refreshed the browser constantly, hoping for the one determinative offer to appear.

I do not usually support these truly commercialised events, namely, all international and also most national football competitions, which have turned into during the last decades, but in this case I had to make an exception. After it had been announced that the Irish national team would face Croatia during the group stage in Poznań, I decided together with my best buddy, Gregor, to visit this match which appeared to be the most promising one of the entire tournament - at least to us, as we knew about the enthusiasm of both the Irish and the Croatian supporters, each in a different, but equally fascinating way. Also I had never been to Poznań before, even though I live in Frankfurt (Oder), which is located directly at the German-Polish border and just two hours away.

There were two things I had in common with the population of Poznań regarding the championships. The first was the excitement before, during and after this mass event. The second was the feeling that it might have been a very expensive enjoyment. When I finally found the tickets I had been seeking, everything went extremely quickly. It took only a few minutes to spend more money on two football tickets than it would be reasonable for a student. On the 3rd of February I received the email containing those magical words: "You have successfully purchased tickets for the UEFA EURO 2012™." It was also a brief moment on April 18th 2007, when Michel Platini announced Poland and Ukraine would host the EURO 2012; the acceptance of Poznań as one of the host cities. But, this instant moment should have a huge impact on the development of the city, but would turn out to be more expensive than would have been reasonable for the town. A report from May 2012 by the Erste Group

came to the conclusion that the EURO would have a positive impact on the Polish economy even in a pessimistic scenario. The population would benefit from modernized infrastructure, especially from new roads, railways and stations, which makes up the majority of all investments taken.

In the new logo of Poznań the accent on the last letter turns into an asterisk as it is used in many advertisement, which delivers the message, "There is a hitch somewhere". Regarding the EURO and its after-effects, the parallels are as remarkable as ironic. Around 3 billion Euros were invested in and around Poznań, of which the city paid € 2.4 bn.; the rest came from national budgets and EU subsidies. For comparison: this sum makes out around two thirds of the city's annual budget. Loans were taken, cuts on public and social budgets were made, in hope that future income would pay off for this.

Two years later, town officials are still hoping. "The costs for the stadium and other investments will be covered in the nearer future, if they have not done so already", says Pawel Przepiora, who was responsible for coordinating, organizing and promoting in the EURO office. "More tourists come to Poznań every year." He does not answer if the EURO had really given a boost to tourism. Even the Erste Group report doubted the occurrence of a so called Barcelona-effect, when tourism increases due to a risen attractiveness of a city or region, but which is dependent on many factors. It rather expected only short-term effects on tourism which could just cover additional expenses during the championships. Przepiora also mentions one of the biggest problems of the EURO. "The city had to carry most of the costs and was left with most of the organisational work. The UEFA only set the regulations, monitored the process and got the revenue from ticket sales and broadcasting rights."

In their annual report, UEFA state that their revenue out of EURO 2012 was € 1.3 bn. Deducting operational costs and distribution payments to the participating associations, they were left with a profit of € 500m. This is the same amount Poznań earned from sponsors and tourists; not enough to even partly cover the costs. Apart from new loans, which put Poznań to a debt ratio of 60%, budget cuts were the only option left. Przemysław Nosal, sport journalist and sports sociologist from Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań calls Poznań "the dark city", as streetlights have been turned off for longer periods to save costs.

Cuts in public budgets are also the main criticism by Agnieszka Mazur. She campaigns in trade unions and social movements, such as "Bread instead of Games" which organised protests during the EURO. "We are not against sports, but we are against those events which are only accessible for a minority of the population." In her view it was a wrong decision to host the

EURO in Poznań. "At the beginning they told us, the stadium would cost 700m Złoty (about € 180m). Then it got more and more. Today we have paid more than € 2bn for Stadium and infrastructure. In the same time when they built yet another fountain in the city centre, they closed down five schools. They invested into one hospital but this was only a precaution as they closed down several others because they were too old and expensive to operate."

It seems that the officials are the last ones who still hope that the investments will pay off one day. "The stadium is the main thing. It was way too expensive and everyone knows that it will never yield the money that was invested there", says Nosal. By the moment when Poznań's bid was accepted, the Miejski stadium was already under construction and one stand had been completed. The three remaining stands now had to be a lot bigger than initially planned. The smaller first stand remembers the spectator how it could have been without the EURO, as it does not really fit the other three-tiered stands and the huge roof covering 43,000 seats, making the stadium look like a tortoiseshell-shaped asterisk to the city and to the championships.

In Nosal's opinion, the crucial point is not only the costs of building the stadium, but also the maintenance and operational costs. When I travelled again to Poznań later in 2012 to watch an Ekstraklasa-match of football club LECH Poznań (and visit the same-named brewery), I found the stadium half-empty. The average attendance is constant at around 20.000 but it has not increased since the EURO. Therefore other sources of income have to be found. "In Warsaw they have found new opportunities, had a lot of concerts or even hosted an NFL football match. But the only thing that happened in Poznań was two concerts of Sting and Alicia Keys", Nosal faults. It seems that the plan did not work out, investors were not flattered enough to queue up in front of Poznań. The stadium is now being operated by a subcontractor of the city, which sold the stadium name to the telecommunication company INEA - for half the price it was valued. "In Korea they just demolished the stadiums after the World Championships because it was cheaper than operating and maintaining them", Nosal says with a mixture of sarcasm and despair in his voice. But not only the stadium itself; also other investments into infrastructure faced difficulties. The new highway A2 between Berlin and Warsaw, on which Poznań lays half-way in the middle, was completed two days before the opening of the EURO. In Poznań, not all the roads and tram lines had been finished by the first kick-off between Ireland and Croatia on June 10th. When I returned two years later to ask officials and NGOs about the outcome and the after-effects of the EURO, everyone was talking about that roundabout in the city centre that should have been completed by 2012 and still is not even

close to finalisation.

And even if finished, the buildings seem to have the asterisk attached as well. There are huge problems with constructional faults. "The VIP area of the stadium had to be closed during an important match due to unguaranteed security of the people", tells Mazur. "And last week a 300m<sup>2</sup> part of the roof in the new built train station collapsed." She gets angry and cynical when she speaks about that. "The officials just did not mention it. They could do that because it happened at night. If this would have had taken place during daytime, there would have been hundreds of injured or even dead people - then they would have had to talk about it."

The other thing that makes Mazur angry is the fact that the population has to pay for those improvements, but only a minority will be able to benefit from it, just like the EURO matches themselves. "There were no highways in Poland before, but to use the new ones drivers have to pay fees that are disproportionally high compared to their average income. The new railway station is basically a shopping centre, so it will merely be private companies which profit from this and the new swimming pool at Malta Lake has an entrance fee of 12 Euro, which is not accessible for average families", Mazur explains. But was it really a mistake to apply for hosting this event, as social activists say? They feel vindicated by the example of Cracow, where their campaigns led to a vast majority of 70%, which opposes an application to host upcoming Olympic Winter Games, taking Poznań as a cautionary tale. On the other hand, Nosal remembers the spirit that had been spread in the city, by the supporters from Italy, Croatia and Ireland.

I can agree with him. On the 10th of June in 2012 the old market square was flooded in green, red and white, football fans celebrating peacefully together. Especially, the Irish fans were remarkable. "It was very important that everything stayed calm, no major clashes or injuries were registered", says Nosal. "The most difficult task was to convince the people from the old town that they could leave their homes without being killed during the EURO." Well, for my case: I am still quite alive.

"It was definitely not helpful that just before the championships BBC published a documentary on violence in Poland, including a comment that people should not come to Poland because otherwise they would 'return home dead'", says Jacek Purski from "Never again" association. Before 2012 they focussed on music events and published a magazine, fighting racism, fascism, anti-Semitism, sexism and homophobia. This kind of work is incredibly difficult in Poland, as racism is widely spread among the stadiums. In 2010, Lech Poznań was one of three clubs being punished by the UEFA for the racist behaviour of their supporters. "I bet with a lot of friends that we would not win the application. I saw the video we sent to the UEFA and it was basically pictures of the atmosphere in our stadiums, showing firework for half of the time and you know what the UEFA think about pyrotechnics",

says Purski. But suddenly, the huge and unique chance occurred for "Never again" to spread their work and use the platform of millions of spectators in the stadiums and via television. It was difficult to establish this work, but Purski can look back on a successful campaign, building up networks in Poland and also establishing new structures in that field in Ukraine, which had not have such organisations at all before.

Also an observer programme in the stadium has been adapted by the UEFA and will be continued during other European competitions.

"This first intercultural encounter, the friendly spirit and the joy was an experience for the people of Poznań, which you cannot measure with money", says Nosal. His words sound quite similar to town official Przepiora, who called the "Satisfaction of Poznań Inhabitants: Priceless" like in a well-known commercial, yet sounding like he wants to distract attention from the huge financial problems the EURO caused. But from Nosal these words sound more honestly and sincerely: "There are more than 140.00 students in Poznań, especially the young people profit from this spirit. There were a lot of concerts for free in the Fan Zones and the attitude towards voluntary work has increased since the opening ceremony was also created with contribution by volunteers from Poznań, mostly students. Even though the Fan Zones were under strict regulations by the UEFA, people got used to them during the days and enjoyed the program very much", Nosal adds, also mentioning that the Fan Zone in Poznań, where he worked during the EURO, was better organised and offered a better program than in some other cities, especially compared to Ukraine. He believes that the huge party in the city was an intercultural success.

"Next time it could be interesting to host Germans, because you know, for many Polish people Germans are still...well, Germans."

At last it lies in the eye of the behavour if such accomplishments are worth the money that was paid and the way costs and benefits were being distributed among the population. In any case, it was an expensive but valuable experience for the Poznań citizens as well as for Gregor and me. Maybe it is true that there are things which you cannot measure with money; where traditional economic calculations simply fail. But if there are such, among them are memories like these in June 2012. Memories with an asterisk. Its explanation says: unforgettable, priceless.