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Eastern Europe was the crucible of modern football. Now it's a wasteland.

Political and economic interests have limited Eastern Europe's recent success in football tournaments – but the region continues to produce some of the best football players in the world

There is a theory that, other than Uruguay at the inaugural tournament in 1930, every World Cup winner has been in some way influenced by the wave of great Hungarian coaches scattered across the globe in the aftermath of World War I.

It's not entirely tenuous, even if some are sceptical. Nobody, by contrast, truly doubts that gegenpressing, perhaps the dominant mode of the modern game, has its origins in the Soviet Union — and was kindled from a friendly in 1983 between the German side Viktoria Backnang and Dynamo Kyiv, who were managed by the great Ukrainian coach Valery Lobanovsky. Pressing itself, whose introduction in the '60s can be said to mark the birth of modern football, was developed by Viktor Maslov, a Russian coach who enjoyed great success at Torpedo Moscow and Dynamo Kyiv.

These are no isolated instances of influence. For the best part of the 20th century, football looked east for inspiration. In two very different periods, before and after World War II, Eastern Europe was a beacon of modernity and progressive thought in football. Yet, at the World Cup in Qatar this year, only three of the 32 qualifiers are from the former Communist bloc, while it is 23 years since a club team from the region last reached the semifinal of the Champions League. The region, its highest-profile coaches nowhere near the game's summit, is now just another producer of talent for the wealthy leagues of Western Europe.

Football, politics and the economy

From crucible to wasteland, Eastern Europe has a story to tell about the power of politics and economics to define sporting destiny.

Even as the brightest thinkers were leaving Hungary in the ’20s and ’30s, the flow of Hungarian talent was maintained by the rivalry between two Budapest giants: MTK, the club of the assimilated Jewish middle class, and Ferencvaros, whose support was largely working class and ethnically German. Yet politics intruded.

MTK was shut down by Miklos Horthy’s far-right regime in 1942 and Ferencvaros was deliberately run down by the Communist government that took power in 1947. Although nationalisation brought short-term success – most famously lifting Hungary to the final of the 1954 World Cup – the two great wellsprings of Budapest’s football culture, damaged by the mass defections that followed Soviet repression of the 1956 uprising, soon ran dry. The Hungarian game has never recovered.

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After Hungary’s eclipse, the centre of Eastern European football shifted to the Soviet Union itself. Maslov, an avuncular Muscovite, prepared the ground in the ’60s. But it was Lobanovsky, a trained mathematician, who really moved things forward. An advocate of pressing, he also pioneered – in conjunction with the computer scientist Anatoly Zelentsov – the use of computer analysis in match preparation. In the process, he inspired Dynamo Kyiv to two European Cup Winners’ Cups and led the Soviet Union to second at the 1988 European Championship.

But this period came to an end with the collapse of Communism. As the region suffered economic ruin, the most gifted players and coaches left — and state funding that maintained the clubs and academies was turned off. The infrastructure of club football was hollowed out, just as the advent of the Champions League increased revenues for the elite.

The impact was devastating. At the 1990 World Cup, four of the 24 sides were from the East. Four years earlier, Steaua Bucharest, the club of the Romanian army, had won the European Cup (the forerunner of the Champions League), and reached the final again in 1989. Two years later, as Yugoslavia tipped into civil war, Red Star Belgrade triumphed. Since then, no side from Serbia or Romania has even made it through the group stage of the Champions League, while an arduous ownership dispute means there are currently two different clubs, both claiming continuity from the original Steaua.

Steaua represents an extreme example, but corruption, disorganisation and diminished resources dog football in the East. Even in the former East Germany there is a stark disparity with the West. When Germany won the World Cup in 2014, its squad included only one player from the East. The Bundesliga, Germany's top league, features only two clubs from the East, each in their own way isolated from the economic difficulties of the region.

For a time, Russia had seemed the great hope. There were successes in the UEFA Cup (European football's second-most prestigious tournament) for CSKA Moscow in 2005 and Zenit St Petersburg in 2008, while the national team, playing thrilling football, reached the semifinal of the European Championship in 2008. When in 2011 Suleiman Kerimov, an ally of Vladimir Putin, bought Anzhi, a previously unheralded club from the Dagestani capital of Makhachkala, and signed eye-catching stars, the potential reach of Russia's oligarchs on the game became clear.

Sanctions imposed after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February have effectively ended Russian investment in foreign clubs.

But UEFA's Financial Fair Play regulations, introduced that year, restricted just how much could be invested. Some preferred to invest abroad anyway, such as Roman Abramovich at Chelsea or Dmitry Rybolovlev at Monaco. Were they seeking to raise their profile and so secure a degree of protection from machinations in the Kremlin? Were they tying their assets into Western economies, gaining a degree of influence? It remains uncertain.

In any case, a collapse in the price of potash forced Mr. Kerimov to slash budgets at Anzhi. Then in 2014 came Russia's invasion of Crimea and parts of the Donbas. Even the limited sanctions that followed had an effect, particularly on the long-term president of CSKA, who has significant business interests in Ukraine. Sanctions imposed after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February have effectively ended Russian investment in foreign clubs.

Within Russia, the consequences have been profound. There has been an exodus of foreigners from the Russian league: the German coaches of Lokomotiv Moscow and Krasnodar, for example, quit almost immediately. The country is cut off, expelled from the World Cup and its clubs suspended from UEFA competitions. Perhaps Gazprom, the state energy company that used to sponsor the Champions League, will instead invest its resources at home. Yet more likely, Russian football will wither in isolation.

Which leaves what, exactly? Ukraine, despite the invasion, was one game from qualifying for the World Cup, and the restart of its domestic league in August, albeit with air-raid protocols, was proudly presented as evidence of returning normality. Great individuals can emerge anywhere: one of the brightest prospects in the modern game is Napoli's 21-year-old Georgian winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia. The Balkans and Ukraine continue to produce talent in bulk: a CIES Football Observatory report this year ranked the academies of five Eastern European clubs among the top eight in Europe. But they are essentially producing to sell to the West.

Hungary has seen a mini-revival recently, thanks to a series of tax breaks Viktor Orbán, a huge football fan, has provided for clubs. With investment, some achievement is possible, at the national level at least. Without it, the result is Bulgaria or Romania, whose national teams lit up the 1994 World Cup but are currently footballing deserts.

In this year's tournament, Poland, Serbia and Croatia – a consistent high achiever, against the odds – will do their best. But their performance mostly underscores how far the region has fallen. Football may be the universal sport, accessible to anybody with a rough ball. But, as the Eastern European experience sadly shows, it can't escape the vagaries of history.

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