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## SPORTS MEDIA INDUSTRY IN PANDEMIC SITUATION: CASE OF AZERBAIJAN AND BELARUS

**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic affected all industries, as well as sports, media and sports media industries. However, that effects were not the same in every country. In this paper, you will find comparative analysis of COVID-19 pandemic situation in Azerbaijan and Belarus in the fields of sports, media and sport media. As the pre-COVID period conditions of both countries were different, the process happened in the sports media industry was also different. Moreover, while Azerbaijan put some restrictions on sports, in its turn Belarus did not. In other words, when there was live broadcasting matches, athletes were matching in Belarus, everyone was staying at home in Azerbaijan. But, most of the population of both countries were watching everything about sports only on social and online media due to different reasons.

**Key words:** Sports media, pandemic, COVID-19, Azerbaijan, Belarus.

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### Pandemiya şəraitində idman media sənayesi: Azərbaycan və Belarus nümunəsi

**Xülasə:** COVID-19 pandemiyası bütün sənaye sahələrini, o cümlədən idman, media və idman mediası sənayesini əhatə edib. Lakin bu təsirlər hər ölkədə eyni deyildi. Bu məqalədə Azərbaycanda və Belarusta COVID-19 pandemiyasının idman, media və idman mediası sahəsindəki vəziyyətinin müqayisəli təhlili verilmişdir. Hər iki ölkənin COVID-dən əvvəlki dövrdə mühitləri fərqli olduğu üçün idman media sənayesində baş verən proseslər də fərqli idi. Bundan başqa, Azərbaycan idmana müəyyən məhdudiyyətlər qoymuşdu, öz növbəsində isə Belarus da bunu etməmişdi. Başqa sözlə desək, Belarusta matçlar canlı yayımlanır, idmançılar yarışlara qatılır, Azərbaycanda isə hamı evdə qalmalı idi. Lakin hər iki ölkə əhalisinin əksəriyyəti müxtəlif səbəblərdən yalnız sosial və onlayn mediada idmanla bağlı hər şeyi izləyirdi.

**Açar sözlər:** idman mediası, pandemiya, COVID-19, Azərbaycan, Belarus.

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### Индустрия спортивных СМИ в условиях пандемии: кейс Азербайджана и Беларуси

**Резюме:** Пандемия COVID-19 затронула все отрасли, а также спорт, СМИ и спортивные СМИ. Однако этот эффект не был одинаковым во всех странах. В этой статье вы найдете сравнительный анализ ситуации с пандемией COVID-19 в Азербайджане и Беларуси в области спорта, СМИ и

*спортивных СМИ. Поскольку условия периода до COVID в обеих странах были разными, процесс, происходящий в спортивной медиа-индустрии, также был разным. Более того, если Азербайджан ввел некоторые ограничения на занятия спортом, то Беларусь, в свою очередь, этого не сделала. Другими словами, когда в Беларуси шла прямая трансляция матчей, в Беларуси состязались спортсмены, в Азербайджане все сидели дома. Но большая часть населения обеих стран по разным причинам смотрела все о спорте только в социальных сетях и онлайн-сетях.*

**Ключевые слова:** Спортивные СМИ, пандемия, COVID-19, Азербайджан, Беларусь.

The COVID-19 is one of the biggest viruses that stopped the life on the world in the whole history of the world. This virus has been noted as pandemic. Therefore affected the whole world without depending on the size of the business, religion or race of the people, administration forms of the states and etc. In this paper, we will compare two countries, Azerbaijan and Belarus during the pandemic period in terms of sports, media and sports media industries. Since early March 2020 almost all countries locked themselves down by accepting different restrictions. However, Belarus has not undertaken any measures to combat the pandemic (Åslund, 2020).

One of the restrictions was postponement of sports events. On the 27th of the March 2020, the first online football press conference was held by Brighton's manager Graham Potter in the zoom platform due to pandemic (Cunningham, 2020). This was the first initiative in order to remove the barriers for sports media. By following it other tools were appeared. Some countries did it while being in lockdown regime like Azerbaijan. However, there was Belarus which did locked down the country.

#### What happened to the sport in Azerbaijan vs Belarus during pandemic

In the beginning of the March 2020 all the sports events has been postponed in Azerbaijan for an indefinite period. After a while, all leagues were suspended. Thus the rules for finalizing the leagues has been changed. For instance in Azerbaijan professional football league the 1st ranked team was declared as the champions, the clubs qualified for European Cups based on their respective ranking. No team was relegated, and no team was promoted from the lower division (Colucci et al., 2020).

However, the Belarusian Premier League was one of the leagues that were not suspended due to country not accepting lockdown or any other strict restrictions. On 16 March, the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, dismissed the threat of coronavirus. In his later comments, the Belarusian president referred to it as "psychosis", and on 28 March he played a game of hockey, later stating in an interview "it is better to die on our feet, than live on

your knees; sport, especially on ice, is better than any antiviral medication, it is the real thing" (Parshakov, 2021). Therefore, all the sports leagues continued. It has become the only country in Europe where soccer matches and other sports are still being played (Åslund, 2020). However, we cannot say that COVID-19 did not affect the sports in Belarus. At least some athletes could not attend the matches due to infecting to the virus or they could not participate World or European leagues. However, in Belarus there have been non-significant postponements because of players' contacts with COVID-19, the 2019/20 professional football season will have been completed by December 2020. The 2020/21 season was scheduled to start in March 2021 (Colucci et al., 2020).

Another difference was audience in the stadias. In Azerbaijan even when the live sports matches were allowed, the spectators were not allowed to watch the match from the stadias or it was limited. However, in Belarus there was not any restriction about it. At national level football matches there are no restriction on attendance at stadia. As a result, supporters can attend games with the compliance of general safety measures. (Colucci et al., 2020). Nevertheless, stadium attendance demand in Belarus declined significantly in the initial period of maximum uncertainty and risk, but then slowly recovered (Reade et al., 2021).

Moreover, in Belarus the sports affected COVID-19 in a different way. A recent study proved that there has been a significant increase in the number of COVID-19 cases after attending football matches (Parshakov, 2021).

While talking about the situation of the sports industry during COVID-19 pandemic, we should mention about financial aspect as well. Thus, due to effect of pandemic to the businesses we cannot say there was a huge amount of the investment into the clubs, federations or leagues. However, situation of Belarus was better than Azerbaijan's in terms of matchday revenue. As we mentioned above that Belarus did not put any restrictions on spectators for the matches.

#### Difference between Azerbaijani and Belarussian media during pandemic

The impact of COVID-19 did not bypass without affecting media industry. In both countries there has been journalists and media professionals who got infected. However, the situation was totally different. It is worth noting that the official Belarussian media are more cautious in covering the pandemic and tend to downplay its scope and consequences (Shpakou et al., 2022b).

According to my interviewee Rufat Nadirli, professional sports journalist and the host of the "Arena" radio program, said that in Azerbaijan it was very different, the big percentage of the news was about pandemic and its statistics. The media is the most efficient tool to rule the society. Therefore it



made the big difference between the mental health of Azerbaijanis and Belarus people. For instance one of the conducted surveys in Poland and Belarus resulted with that student athletes from Poland had higher levels of COVID-19-related anxiety (trait and state) than did respondents from Belarus (Shpakou et al., 2022b). Thus, it does not mean there was not any information about COVID-19 pandemic or hygiene safety in the media. The important role of the mass media (media), and the opinion of the medical community and health authorities, which directly or indirectly influenced the behavior of the population and modeled the situation through the provision of information, came into play (Shpakou et al., 2022a).

Moreover, we should mention the situation of the media in Belarus as well. As the government did not accept pandemic situation, it did not let media to talk widely about COVID-19 situation. In May 2021, Belarus revoked the accreditation of two Russian journalists who were reporting on the growing number of Covid-19 cases in the country – a subject that has been downplayed by the Belarusian government since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic (Przetacznik & Tothova, 2022).

All in all, Azerbaijani media was in better situation due to being more free and accepting the pandemic situation. Although news about COVID-19 could affect the people's mental health, it also led people to obey the hygiene rules and protect themselves from virus with masks and other equipment. In its turn Belarussian media was sharing news about other stuff as well, main topic of the media was not COVID-19 which from my point of view is reducing the anxiety and stress.

#### The situation of sports media in Azerbaijan and Belarus during pandemic

The impact of COVID-19 on sports and media industries manifested themselves. Thus we explored the effect on sports media industry. Although from some aspects the signs of the COVID-19 were the same, but in this part of article we will mostly focus on different effects.

Due to pandemic a lot of fans started to watch the sports from social networks rather than TV. According to the survey conducted among 40 sports fans in Azerbaijan: 80 percent of the respondents answered that "Due to the ban on live sports matches because of the COVID-19 Pandemic, sports fans started to watch sports news, programs or videos more on social networks rather than traditional media" is true and 20% denied this statement (Figure 1)

Figure 1.  
"Due to the ban on live sports matches because of the COVID-19 Pandemic, sports fans started to watch sports news, programs or videos more on social networks rather than traditional media"

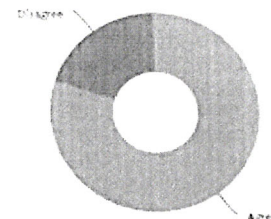
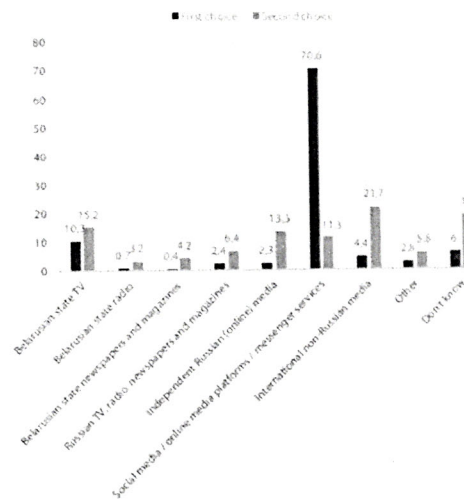


Figure 2.

Main sources of information (Przetacznik & Tothova, 2022)



However, in Belarus it was different that people has been mostly relying on social and online media news even before pandemic. A March 2021 report by the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOIS) shows that 70.6% of Belarusian citizens use social and online media as their primary source of information (Przetacznik & Tothova, 2022) (Figure 2). At the same time due to different reasons we found out that people of both states watched the sports from social and online media.

Another case was that for more than 5 months there was not broadcast of the live matches in Azerbaijan. However, as there was no any restrictions in Belarus, the BPL did not profit financially from being one of the only professional football leagues in the world taking place throughout March and April 2020. The BPL was able to sell its international broadcasting rights to more than 10 countries, including India and Russia (Reuters, 2020).

The customers of the sports media are spectators or fans. According to Rufat Nadirli, during pandemic when the live matches allowed without spectators in Azerbaijan, the statistics of views of local matches was living its highest period. Almost the same situation can be seen also in Belarus. The most of the football fans, though not all, decided to stay at home in the initial period of maximum COVID-19 uncertainty (Reade et al., 2021).

Baku's Olympic Stadium has also hosted prestigious men's UEFA football events, namely the 2019 UEL final between Chelsea and Arsenal, and four Euro 2020 matches. The latter tournament was delayed until 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and restrictions were imposed on international visitors and stadium attendances, limiting prospects for impact and income generation (Rookwood, 2022). As we mentioned above, Belarus was one of the very few countries did not implement quarantine restrictions, it also lost income generation from hosting international events. The formation of modern political identities in the post-Soviet sphere is often connected to pursuits of global recognition, including hosting international events (Ismayilov, 2012).

Overall, the sports, media and sports media industries of both countries suffered from COVID-19. While comparing we saw that depending on aspects either Azerbaijan or Belarus gained the upper hand. Implementing restrictions is obvious that will make disprogress, however we did not know what will bring not applying restrictions. Almost all the world countries locked downed themselves, what could Belarus do without doing it, especially in the sports media industry. As communication through media and technology is rapid in the modern world, the complexity and diversity of sport governance response became apparent, while the context of the pandemic continued to change and vary across the globe (Byers et al., 2022). The sports media field has survived from pandemic with developing itself media and sports industries both from managerial side and digital side. We believe that COVID-19 pandemic and its

restrictions let these industries to develop by challenging them. It does not matter it is Azerbaijan or Belarus or United Kingdom, any development in any of these industries will affect each other.

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