



“ Ahmadinejad simply greeted us, shook our hands and then... sat down on the ground. We all—about 60 people—followed him: we could not look down at the leader ”

tic atmosphere that night. I haven't seen anything like it before in my life. We won the game 1:0.

Some months later, however, I made the decision to leave Iran. In the upcoming months there were no international games and I was looking forward to a new challenge.

### About Russia

I traveled a lot, attended courses, met other coaches and colleagues. I was in Dubai, when one night I got a phone call from...who do you think? Frank Vercauteren! He was asking me if I wanted to go to Russia. Russia? Wow! I knew very little of Russia, save that I had met lots of Russian tourists in different countries. They stood out from the crowd with their slightly louder voices when talking and being

poor is tremendous. In Belgium this is also an issue, but the middle class is much bigger. We all have to have equal opportunities. Another problem which concerns Samara of all other places are the damaged roads. Nowhere else in Russia have I seen such roads! But my personal number one difficulty in Russia was the language. Very few people speak English. It's very uncomfortable when the only things you can say to the people around you are "yes", "no", "don't know", "tomorrow", "yesterday". In the beginning even going to the supermarket was difficult, because I could never reach an understanding with the cashiers. I would often call my interpreter and say "Alex, do me a favor, translate this thing for me..." Sometimes the other coaches and I (there are three of us Belgians and

I know I have to say "No". Then she'll tell me the price of the ride and I'll say "Spasibo" ("Thank you").

My relationship with the Russian cuisine burgeoned a lot faster than with the language. I love food, and in Russia I have made a lot of discoveries. I love the way they eat herring here: with onions, boiled potatoes and bread. I like borscht, toasts and sushi... Sure, I know that sushi is not Russian cuisine, but they serve it in so many places that it seems now that sushi is a part of the Russian national tradition. Vodka I don't like, that's not up to my particular standards of taste. And the local beer simply can't compare with Belgian — Belgian beer is the best in the world! Even better than German. I'm saying this not because I'm from Belgium... All right, not only because of that. (laughs). I am quite accustomed to some Russian traditions. Say, I don't extend my hand to shake if I'm standing in the doorway. I also like this tradition of yours when you don't put empty bottles on the table, but, in all honesty, I don't quite understand why you shouldn't do that.

Now I feel quite comfortable in Russia. When I was just getting ready to come here my relatives would all go "Are you crazy?" Russia is not thought of well in the West these days. I think the problem is that the majority of broadcasting companies in Europe are American, and the local news programs give Russia a negative coverage. But Russia is so huge and complicated that any story about it could not just fit into a couple moments of air time. If our TV told us more about the good that is there in your country, the attitude towards it in the West would change. My family and my best friends have been here. They see all these nice restaurants, hotels, shops and embankments, lots of wonderful people. They go back to Belgium and tell everybody that Bart has settled down pretty good and nothing horrible is happening in Russia.

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in a bit of a hurry all the time. You may guess that I did my googling again. It took some hard thinking, but I trusted Frank's choice, and so far we've been working in Samara over a year. We managed to win the FNL championship, to get promoted to the Premier League and this season we are doing well once again. We have traveled already to more than 20 cities, crossed a few time zones, worked in different conditions, from +40°C in the summer to -30°C in the winter. In Samara I live in 'the baza', training complex where all players and staff have their own rooms.

I don't agree with the opinion that the Russians are morose and closed people. At first, it might seem so but once people get to know you more closely, then they are kind and responsive. What really upsets me about Russia is the serious divide in society: the difference between the rich and the

one Dutchman here) go for a dinner to a restaurant. Most of these outings end up in a mess too. The waiters either bring all the dishes together, or too late, or even forget some of them entirely!

Finally, on my last winter vacations in Dubai I started attending a private course to study the Russian language, and it was quite a challenge. There are more letters in the Russian alphabet, and you write in a strange way. One of the most difficult things was the word 'zdravstvuite' ('hello'), but I think I pronounce it quite well now. I still need to remember what the right way of saying 'na zdorovje' or 'za zdorovje' ('to your health') is. I continue my Russian lessons and now I can even call a taxi for myself: I know that the operator lady will ask me for my pick-up. I do my best to speak distinctly. Then she'll ask me something about my loyalty card and