

Liam Mackey

Ukraine making up for lost time

WITH 188 days to go to the kick off of the European Championships, it's now more a case of pretty vacant than anarchy in the Ukraine, as the co-hosts look to follow a major renovation project with some running repairs to their public image.

Eighteen months ago, UEFA were so worried about the country's preparations for the finals that Michel Platini gave Ukraine an ultimatum — get your stadia and related infrastructure up to scratch, or you could be in danger of losing the finals altogether.

The local organisers, to their credit, have done that and more, but the perception that the former Soviet republic is still the poor relation to co-hosts Poland hasn't gone away. Yesterday in Kiev, even as praise was being heaped on Ukraine's "95% readiness" for next summer, a senior UEFA official was forced to acknowledge that, of the 16 competing nations in the finals, at most five countries — including Ukraine itself — and possibly as few as three, will make their bases in the country.

That reflects the widely held view that, for all the work that has been done to bring its stadia to fruition, Ukraine still lags behind Poland when it comes to transport and accommodation. Which it may well do but, listening to the Ukrainian Football Federation President speaking ahead of yesterday's draw, it was abundantly clear that Ukraine has already come a very long way in a very short space of time.

Indeed, Grigoriy Surkis had no hesitation about invoking the ghosts of his country's not so distant past to emphasise the point.

"In the former Soviet Union, there were five-year plans," he told media at the Olympic Stadium, "and nobody believed that they could be done. Now we can say that in one and half years, not five years, everything has been accomplished."

Well, not quite everything. Speaking in the city's Olympic Stadium, which will host the final on July 1, Surkis conceded that there were still numerous "minor drawbacks."

And he gave an example: "On the way into this room you may have noticed traces of dust from construction in the corridor. And our culture of Slavic hospitality demands that, by the time the tournament starts, not just dust but even invisible dust must be absent."

Sadly, there was no time yesterday to get into the subject of invisible dogs, something which has become a, em, bone of contention in these parts over the last few months. Apparently Ukraine has a huge stray dog population, with some 3,000 people reported bitten in Kiev alone last year. Animal welfare groups have accused the authorities of using illegal and inhumane methods to cull dogs, though the organisers of Euro 2012 have denied any involvement.

One high-profile case involved Arien, a golden retriever belonging to the press attaché at the US Embassy. Last January, his owner took him for a walk in a local park but, after eating something poisonous on the ground, the dog died. On the same day, it was claimed, five other family pets met their end in the same park (for the record, the attaché's name: James Wolf).

All in all, the top table at yesterday morning's press conference was anxious to keep things upbeat, with UEFA General Secretary Gianni Infantino declaring: "The sun is shining, the sky is blue, it's the 2nd of December and we're sat in this beautiful stadium. If these are not all fantastic signals for what will be ahead of us, then it's certainly an excellent start."

But trust journalists to bring attention to a notable cloud on the horizon, namely the fact that Ukraine's former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko happens to be languishing in the pokey on contentious corruption charges. The question hung uncomfortably in the air before Grygory Surkis carefully replied that, while he hoped Tymoshenko ultimately proves her innocence, he was anxious, on this day of all days, to keep politics and sport separate. Perhaps sparing Infantino's blushes, a UEFA press officer brought proceedings to a hasty close.

One thing's for sure: those of us who were given a little tour of the venue yesterday can testify that Kiev's vast Olympic Stadium, with its distinctive dimpled roof, will provide a wonderful backdrop for the final next summer. Originally built in 1923 and the host venue for football in the 1980 Soviet Olympics, it has now been almost entirely reconstructed on the same spot — which means that, like all the world's greatest football arenas, it retains its historic place right in the heart of the city.

Our guide was Bo Sundstrom, a Swede who has spent two years in the Ukraine as UEFA's country manager. Asked how he feels about Ukraine being seen to play second fiddle to Poland, he laughed and replied: "For me it's first fiddle. Maybe that's the impression from afar but we are doing the same things in both countries. And when the fans come here, I guarantee it will be a fantastic atmosphere."