

## FROM THE "GOLDEN GENERATION" TO SYSTEMIC ENGINEERING: HOW UZBEKISTAN'S FOOTBALL BECAME "EUROPEANIZED"?

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For Uzbekistan's football, the ticket to the 2026 World Cup is not just a sports result. It signifies that the country's football system, having drawn conclusions from half a century of mistakes, has finally entered an era of "tactical and infrastructural awakening". For many years we dreamed of the status of "Asian Brazilians," but our failures in the international arena were mainly related to gaps in professional preparation and mentality. Today, however, we are witnessing a completely different approach: cold-blooded strategy has replaced emotions.

The biggest problem in Uzbekistan's football has constantly been the disproportion between "personnel and system". The gold medals of the team led by Rustam Akramov at the 1994 Asian Games in Hiroshima awakened a dangerous illusion in us that "we are strong anyway". At that time, we had no infrastructure; we merely had a talented generation.

But the foundation of today's successes is strictly connected to the reforms implemented by the Uzbekistan Professional Football League (UzPFL) after 2018:

- **Club Licensing:** From now on, every Super League club must have its own academy, a high-quality non-artificial pitch, and financial transparency.
- **VAR System:** Uzbekistan became one of the first countries in Central Asia to fully implement VAR into its domestic championship. This not only ensured refereeing fairness but also sped up the tempo of the game.
- **Development of Academies:** The "Nasaf" and "Bunyodkor" academies transitioned to international standards. Specifically, the systematic work of the Qashqadaryo football school is worth noting – there, youth are learning not just to kick a ball, but to understand modern tactical schemes.

In previous years, it was very difficult for our players to go abroad. Often, they preferred to stay in the local championship, operating under the principle of "let me be a king at home". However, in the last 3 years, the situation has changed radically.

- **Eldor Shomurodov** – the first "Euro-ambassador" in the history of Uzbek football. His move from "Rostov" to Italy's Serie A, and then to "Roma" and "Cagliari", opened a new door for Uzbek football. Eldor not only scored goals but also proved that an Uzbek player can withstand European demands – strict discipline and high physical load.
- **Abduqodir Husanov** and **Abbosbek Fayzullaev** represent the second wave of this process. Husanov consistently plays as a center-back for France's "Lens" club, showing that an Uzbek defender can also become a "brand" in Europe's most prestigious leagues. Fayzullaev, playing for CSKA in the Russian Premier League, was recognized as the best young player. When these players come to the national team now, they arrive not with "star syndrome," but with professional experience forged in Europe.

The arrival of Srečko Katanec was the most important personnel change in Uzbekistan's football. Until then, we often worked with coaches (Samvel Babayan, certain periods of Vadim Abramov) who favored a "beautiful game" but did not deliver results. Katanec, however, brought pragmatism.

- **Tactical Flexibility:** The team now alters its scheme depending on the opponent. The 3-4-2-1 or 5-4-1 formations allowed for the creation of a "concrete" wall in defense.
- **Change in Mentality:** Under Katanec, the team got rid of the "fear of a strong opponent" complex. Even in matches against regional giants like Iran or Qatar, Uzbek players now fight on equal terms.

#### 4. Historical Archive: Painful Lessons

The road to the World Cup was not easy. We experienced many "last-minute" tragedies in history:

- **2006, The Bahrain Case:** While winning 1:0 in Tashkent, referee Toshimitsu Yoshida canceled a penalty. As a result, a replay was ordered, and we lost valuable points.
- **2014, Match against Qatar:** In the final round, we needed to score many goals. Although we won 5:1, we lost the chance to South Korea based on goal difference.
- **2018, The Draw in Seoul:** The ball that hit the goalpost from Geynrikh's strike... That 0:0 deprived us of the Mundial in Russia.

These defeats forced Uzbek football executives to conclude that "results cannot be achieved without reforming the system".

According to famous football analysts and international experts, Uzbekistan's participation in the 2026 World Cup should not remain a "one-time event". For this:

- **Privatization:** Transitioning clubs entirely to private ownership and reducing dependency on the state budget.
- **Children's Football:** Increasing the quality, not the quantity, of academies, and introducing European licenses for coaches.
- **Scale of Legionnaires:** Rather than the current 2-3 European players, dozens of young players must flow into European championships.

"Uzbekistan's football has entered its stable era of 'burning slowly, but lasting a long time'".

The Uzbekistan national football team's qualification for the World Cup is not merely the product of the labor of 11 players, but of an entire national system over many years. We are now not just playing, but planning. The World Cup is not a finish line, but the elevation of Uzbekistan's football to a new, higher stage.

The primary task now is to remain a competitive team rather than just a participant in the tournament. For this, we need pragmatism, discipline, and most importantly – belief in our own strength.