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Russian Sambo Team Shines at European Games in Baku

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Yana Kostenko (R) of Russia and Kalina Stefanova of Bulgaria fight during their women's 60kg Sambo gold medal fight at the 1st European Games in Baku, Azerbaijan, June 22 , 2015.

BAKU — Featuring explosive throws, leg locks, chokes and submissions and counting Vladimir Putin among its biggest fans, sambo and its sambists made an entertaining European Games bow on Monday.

Russia won five and Belarus two of the eight gold medals up for grabs in the one-day competition with home hopes of success in a sambo-mad country dashed, much to the disappointment of a noisy capacity crowd.

The last of the 20 sports to be included at these Games — said to be at the personal request of Russian president Putin, a practitioner of the sport and honorary International federation head — sambo is a grappling art mixing judo and wrestling styles and popular in Russia and the former Soviet republics.

While its origins can be traced by the 1920s when it was developed by the Red Army to train

recruits, the modern-day sambo is desperately seeking global recognition.

The ultimate goal of officials such as European sambo federation head Sergey Eliseev is for it to be included in the Olympic program.

According to Russian Eliseev, sambo is increasing in popularity away from its traditional heartlands.

"We have 84 federations around the world," he told Reuters after presenting a gold medal to compatriot and -57kg champion Aymergen Atkunov.

"We are doing a lot of things. We are hoping we'll get a positive answer from the International Olympic Committee later this year for the sport to be recognized by the Olympic family."

Eliseev sounded hopeful that sambo, whose name comes from a Russian expression which translates as 'unarmed self defense', could feature in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics as a demonstration sport.

If Putin can help along the way, he will, Eliseev said.

"He was doing sambo for five years and that's why he loves this sport, He is always ready to help and support us."

An action-packed competition at the Heydar Aliyev Arena brought plenty of oohs and aahs from fans rooting for Azeri success but the moment of the night belonged to Belarussian Stsiapan Papou.

After defeating clearly injured Azeri Amil Gasimov to win -74kg gold, Papou sportingly lifted his opponent over his shoulders to carry him off the mat.

"I did that, because I know how much it hurts. I've lost that way before and I know the pain," he said.

Sporting excellence and chivalry aside, there is still some way to go raise global awareness of the sport, however, as illustrated by Austrian Kevin Rasit Cekic, one of the few sambists from western Europe to take part in Baku.

"Many of my friends think I am dancing, they confuse it with samba. But then I tell them to come and watch and then they know that I am not dancing," he said.

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