

Ukraine's Image Takes a Beating as Euro Football Nears

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Ukraine hopes that hosting the football fest will help bring the country further into the European mainstream. **Alik Keplicz**

KIEV — It was never meant to be like this. When Ukraine was named co-host of Europe's biggest football fest in 2009, its leaders hailed the award as a milestone on the road to joining the European mainstream.

A delighted Yulia Tymoshenko, then prime minister, told compatriots that her government had scraped together "every kopek" to make the dream possible.

Her jubilant tone foresaw the country turning a confident, smiling face to the world in the monthlong Euro 2012 football tournament that it will co-host with Poland, its cheerleader in Europe.

That was in December 2009.

Now, with the first games to be played on June 9, Tymoshenko lies in prison on hunger strike,

nursing bruises after what she said was a beating by prison guards. Images of her show her trademark peasant braids lying in a forlorn tress across her shoulder.

Western leaders, some of whose national teams will compete in Euro 2012, have reacted with horror.

Led by Germany, leaders of several European Union countries have called off scheduled visits to Ukraine in protest at the treatment meted out by President Viktor Yanukovich's leadership.

Amid talk of a possible boycott of the June 8 ceremonial opening by European politicians, Ukraine has accused European powers of resorting to Cold War tactics.

A series of mystery bomb blasts in the city of Dnipropetrovsk last week, which injured 30 people, have raised security concerns.

The government says they were organized by forces out to destabilize the nation. Identikit suspects have been issued, but there have been no arrests. The opposition has hinted darkly that the bombs could be the work of authorities to divert attention from the Tymoshenko affair.

The trial and sentencing of Tymoshenko to seven years in jail for alleged abuse of power have already cost Ukraine a landmark political agreement with the European Union. Its signing has been put on indefinite hold.

It has even put Yanukovich offside with Russia. President Dmitry Medvedev just last week said: "The persecution of political opponents [in Ukraine] is absolutely unacceptable."

Some believe Yanukovich, also under pressure from the United States on the issue, will release Tymoshenko — or at least let her go to Germany for medical treatment.

But he has refused to budge since sentence was passed on Tymoshenko last October, despite intense EU pressure.

With EU politicians apparently prepared to take only piecemeal action ahead of the Euros without concerted sanctions, it seems more likely he will seek to ride out the displeasure.

"It's very close to a deadlock. I would not see any bright future for Ukraine's relations with the European Union," said Olga Shumylo-Tapiola, a visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe.

The 2004-05 Orange Revolution street protests made Ukraine many friends in the West.

So for Ukraine, a lot of the European reaction is unexpected and seems unfair — especially given its huge efforts to overhaul a ramshackle infrastructure quickly and make it fit to host one of Europe's biggest sporting events.

In less than two years, it has laid thousands of kilometers of new road, built new airport terminals and laid on high-speed train services between Euro locations.

Kiev's Olympisky Stadium, where the July 1 final will be played, has been completely revamped from the outdated Soviet relic which first opened in 1923.

UEFA president Michel Platini, who has toured Euro venues over the past two years and often chided Ukraine along the way, recognized the huge effort.

"Bravo to all responsible for Ukraine's preparations," he said late last year, giving a thumbs up.

But long-standing suspicions among Ukraine's critics that the country is too much of a lightweight to be entrusted with the Euros have persisted.

Platini last month harangued Ukraine over the sky-high price of accommodation on offer to visiting fans.

Ukraine's hoteliers were "bandits and swindlers" for jacking up prices tenfold, he said.

The Kiev government, which expects at least 1 million fans to visit Ukraine, has sought to curb hoteliers with antitrust investigations and a planned deal with a low-cost airline that officials say will offer \$300 return trips from London.

All the same, there are signs that many fans are opting to stay at home and follow their national team's fortunes on television rather than make the trek.

Yanukovich, who has run Ukraine since February 2010 after narrowly beating Tymoshenko for the presidency, may still hope the Euro competition will infuse people with some joy amid mounting economic woes that threaten his party's success in an end-of-year election.

He has a lot of prestige among Ukraine's powerful elite riding on a successful tournament.

But freeing Tymoshenko still does not seem an option for Yanukovich. The charismatic opposition politician directly threatened the business interests of many of Ukraine's oligarchs when she was in power.

Commentators say Yanukovich has nursed a deep grudge since his humiliation in the 2004 Orange Revolution, which she led and which deprived him of the presidency when his election was judged rigged and overturned.

Sharp of tongue, she went out of her way to belittle him in a later campaign for the presidency in 2010, which she lost.

"Yanukovich only gets irritated by statements on boycotts and is very unlikely to decide as the EU and Americans want him to decide," Shumylo-Tapiola said.

"It is personally difficult for him to release Tymoshenko. One of the reasons is that he feels he will look weak at home," she said.

But boycott threats by European politicians are multiplying.

Czech President Vaclav Klaus and German President Joachim Gauck have canceled participation in a summit in Yalta on May 11-12. A German government spokesman has said a visit by Chancellor Angela Merkel during the tournament will be linked to Tymoshenko's fate.

And in Brussels, a spokeswoman for European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso said he would not take part in any events in Ukraine because of the Tymoshenko affair.

Ukrainians themselves are divided over the case and Europe's reaction.

"Boycott is not what football is about. Football is football and it should be allowed to take place in any conditions and in any weather," said Serhiy, a passerby on a Kiev street.

But Anatoly Shirokov, an employee at the Ukrainian national academy, backed European pressure on Yanukovich.

"Europe is playing by its rules and that is where human rights are observed, where there is transparent democratic exercise of power and where you do not see parodies like the mock trial of Yulia Tymoshenko."

But Tymoshenko seems able to create trouble for Yanukovich by just lying in prison. Kharkiv, the city where she is being held, will stage three matches in the Euro qualifying stages.

With the city flooded with foreign journalists, the Yanukovich leadership is aware of the fertile PR ground that Tymoshenko will be able to exploit without even stirring from her prison bed.

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