

EU Ministers Debate Euro 2012 Boycott

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Yulia Tymoshenko's daughter is asking for support for her jailed mother. **Gleb Garanich**

BRUSSELS — European Union foreign ministers debated Monday whether to boycott this year's European football championship matches played in Ukraine to protest alleged abuse of jailed opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko.

"We've been very consistent in sending messages to Ukraine about the importance of justice being done and seen to be done," EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton said.

When Tymoshenko launched a hunger strike last month after saying she was beaten by prison officials, several European leaders vowed to shun Ukraine during Euro 2012 in protest, but critics have warned that boycotting the matches would mean mixing sports with politics and could do more harm than good.

She said Poland, co-host of the tournament, would brief the ministers on the situation. Ukraine is not a member of the EU, but Poland is.

Officials said no formal decision on the move was expected at the meeting on Monday. Instead, the 27 ministers were expected to agree to jointly decide on any future moves

regarding Ukraine, said a senior EU official speaking on condition of anonymity.

“It would be more of an undertaking that they won’t make any individual decisions [on the boycott] — that would give the impression of lack of coordination,” he said.

President Viktor Yanukovych had been hoping to welcome ministers and government leaders for the high-profile Euro 2012 tournament in Ukraine and Poland starting on June 8.

The Dutch, whose national team is scheduled to play a game in Ukraine’s second-largest city Kharkiv on June 9, have said they will not send any political representatives. Nor will the European Commission, the European Union executive.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague said he personally had no plans to attend the games.

“It’s very important that there is a focus on Ukraine,” he said. “But as far as ministerial attendance is concerned, that will be kept under review.”

Critics say shunning the matches could lead to boycotts of other nations with questionable democratic credentials, including Russia when it hosts the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014 and the World Cup in 2018.

Some ministers also played down the political significance of a possible boycott of the tournament.

“I fail to see attendance or nonattendance of football games as an instrument of European policy,” Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt said as he arrived for the meeting.

Former Prime Minister Tymoshenko, 51, was jailed last October for abuse of office after a trial denounced by the EU and the United States as politically motivated. She denied the charges and says she is the victim of a vendetta by Yanukovych who narrowly beat her for the presidency in 2010.

Last month, she said prison guards had beaten her, prompting calls for a boycott of the football championship. Ukrainian authorities deny Tymoshenko was ill-treated, saying they had been unable to verify her claims of physical mistreatment.

On Friday, Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaite became the first foreign leader to see Tymoshenko since her imprisonment and later met Yanukovych. She warned Yanukovych that he was courting EU “isolation” because of the case. ☒

(AP, Reuters)

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