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Russia Given Cold Shoulder by Sports World Due to Invasion of Ukraine

By AFP

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UEFA stripped St. Petersburg of hosting the Champions League final at the Gazprom Arena and awarded it to Paris. **TASS / EPA FILE**

Russia was on Saturday further targeted by the sporting world due to the invasion of Ukraine as both Poland and Sweden said they would not play the Russian team in 2022 World Cup play-offs while the Swedish government demanded a blanket European Union sporting ban on the country.

Saturday saw the third day of hostilities since Russian leader Vladimir Putin unleashed a full-scale invasion that has killed dozens of people, forced more than 50,000 to flee Ukraine in just 48 hours and sparked fears of a wider conflict in Europe.

"The time for talking is over. It is time to act. Due to the escalation of the Russian Federation's aggression in Ukraine, the Polish team does not envisage playing the play-off against

Russia," wrote Polish football federation president Cezary Kulesza.

His Swedish counterpart followed suit later on Saturday.

"Whatever FIFA decide, we will not play against Russia in March," said federation president Karl-Erik Nilsson.

Poland are scheduled to play in Moscow on March 24 while the Swedes would be away to Russia were both to win their play-offs. The Swedes first face the Czech Republic.

The three federations issued a joint statement on Thursday demanding FIFA move the respective play-offs from Russia — who only four years ago hosted the World Cup finals.

Polish captain Robert Lewandowski welcomed his federation's move.

"The right decision!" tweeted Bayern Munich's star striker.

"I cannot imagine playing a match with the Russian national team in a situation when armed aggression in Ukraine continues.

"Russian footballers and fans are not responsible for this, but we cannot pretend that nothing is happening."

International team-mate, Juventus goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny — whose wife is Ukrainian — demanded UEFA and FIFA "hold Russian Federation accountable for their actions."

"My wife was born in Ukraine, there is Ukrainian blood running through the veins of my son, part of our family is still in Ukraine," he wrote on Instagram.

"Seeing the suffering on their faces and fear for their country makes me realise I can't stand still and pretend that nothing has happened.

"The moment Putin decided to invade Ukraine he declared war not only on Ukraine but also on all the values Europe stands for. Liberty, Independence but most of all Peace."

FIFA did not react to the latest Polish move on Saturday when approached by AFP.

The Swedish government said they were going to try and persuade the other 27 European Union states to impose a blanket sporting ban on Russia for "as long as the invasion of Ukraine lasts."

"The most important thing is that the Russian aggression ceases," said Swedish Sports Minister Anders Ygeman in a statement.

"If the EU decides on a sporting boycott, that will help achieve this target."

The Swedes are proposing a boycott of all competitions being hosted in Russia and further that no Russian athlete can compete in the European Union.

European football's governing body UEFA are believed also to be considering whether to terminate the reported 40 million euros a year sponsorship contract with Russian gas giant Gazprom.

A source told AFP that they would take a decision next week whilst The Times and The Daily Telegraph said the executive committee had instructed their lawyers to launch the process in terminating a relationship that dates back to 2012.

UEFA had already on Friday punished Russia by stripping St. Petersburg of hosting European club football's showpiece event the Champions League final on May 28 — at the Gazprom Arena — and awarded it to Paris.

The International Biathlon Union (IBU) also took action following Friday's call by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for sports federations to bar the respective national flags of Russia and Belarus being flown at sports events.

"No Russian or Belarusian flags, symbols or national emblems can be displayed at the venue," said the IBU in a statement.

"Instead of the countries' flags, the IBU flag shall be displayed."

Russian and Belarus athletes will still be permitted to compete in the remaining three events but as neutral competitors.

However, Estonia, who host the penultimate event at Otepaeae from March 10-13, have barred Russian and Belarus biathles entering the country.

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