

Preventing racism at Euro 2012 is not just the responsibility of Poland and the Ukraine. UEFA must take a harder line

The lead up to the Euro 2012 football competition has been fraught with concerns about racism in the host countries Poland and Ukraine. [Daniel Burdsey](#) argues that the organising body UEFA must do more to show that it will not tolerate racism, both on and off the field.



After a domestic Premier League season that will be marked indelibly by its associations with on-pitch racism between opposing players, the thoughts of English football supporters now turn east, to Poland and Ukraine, and the problems that a number of commentators have predicted will arise during the forthcoming European Championships. Last week the [BBC's Panorama programme](#) documented what many scholars of race and sport, as well as anti-racist campaigners have identified for some time: that racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism are widespread and entrenched among certain supporter groups in these nations.

The overt display and celebration of white supremacist iconography, choreographed fascist salutes, abuse of black players, and chanting of vitriolic anti-Jewish songs are common characteristics of the fan experience at many league matches. An especially terrifying incident captured by the documentary was a group of Indian students being attacked by fans of the club they were supporting during a match in Ukraine. Such occurrences have called into question the capability of the tournament organisers to provide a competition that will be enjoyable, inclusive, and safe from prejudice and violence.

Critics of the decision to hold Euro 2012 in Poland and Ukraine have raised two principal concerns. First, the prospect of racism towards *players* from local supporters, particularly during matches involving either of the co-hosts. Second, the potential dangers faced by minority ethnic *supporters*, primarily outside of stadia, in the public spaces of the host cities. This issue is not without precedent as previous international matches and tournaments attest. Indeed, it should be noted that minority ethnic England supporters have, on occasions, even experienced discrimination from fellow followers of their national team.

It is the possible scale of the problem at Euro 2012 that is generating such apprehension though. The cosmopolitan atmospheres created at previous tournaments are unlikely to be repeated in countries with limited histories of – and, among some individuals, unconcealed resistance towards – multiculturalism, while a marked decrease in travelling supporters from other participating nations will reduce the opportunities for convivial fan interactions. Former England international footballer, [Sol Campbell](#), has advised minority ethnic supporters not to travel to the [tournament](#), while current squad members, Theo Walcott and Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, have told their families stay at home.



In spite of compelling evidence, there appears to be a steadfast refusal by the footballing and state authorities in these (and, one should not forget, many other European) countries to acknowledge not only the extent of racism in their football, but that a problem exists *at all*. For instance, Ukraine's Euro 2012 director, Markian Lubkivsky, claims that security procedures at stadia will prevent racist chanting and

violence, and that the host cities will be safe, welcoming environments. Moreover, he contends that Campbell's assertion to the contrary is 'insolent'.

For Poland and Ukraine, there is much more than just football at stake. A successful tournament, free from negative publicity, could generate significant political capital as the continent's easterly nations clamour for a place at the table of European modernity. Reputation management is essential, even to the point of attempting to refute what seems to be irrefutable. Nevertheless, serious questions remain around the organisers' competence and determination to prevent and penalise incidents of racism during the tournament. For example, the introduction of UEFA-funded 'inclusivity zones' – contained, policed areas in the host cities where fans of all backgrounds can congregate – implies that the issue is being simply circumvented rather than tackled directly.

Preventing racism at Euro 2012 is not just the responsibility of Poland and Ukraine though. The decision to award the tournament to two nations in which racism remains commonplace at their domestic football matches was made by UEFA. Arguably the European governing body should therefore be held similarly accountable for any incidents that arise, having seemingly accepted the anti-discrimination 'guarantees' given to them by the tournament organisers. UEFA continue to endorse the rejoinders from the host countries that claims of racism are overstated and even contend that the tournament will leave an anti-racist legacy in these nations. The dominant historical discourse articulated by countless self-appointed moral guardians of sporting integrity – that sport is able to detach itself from and evade wider social and political concerns – remains seemingly immutable. Put simply, the show must go on.

Yet, while UEFA (and its global counterpart FIFA) have finally begun to engage in the rhetoric of anti-racism, their will to implement this in practice is still a moot point. Proclamations of 'zero tolerance' and punishment through points deductions, expulsions and match abandonments lack credibility, given that world football is run by a man, Sepp Blatter, who recently claimed that there is 'no racism' in football and that any incidents that might occur can be dealt with by a handshake between players at the end of the match.

The indignation that reports of racism from Poland and Ukraine have caused within English football (and among many genuine supporters in the host nations too) is highly commendable. It highlights the degree to which racism has become regarded widely as unacceptable in our own stadia. Nonetheless, while memories of mass monkey-chanting and banana throwing in this country are beginning thankfully to fade, it is crucial to recognise that racism in English football has by no means been eradicated. It maintains a pervasive and pernicious presence here too. Although a sizeable proportion of racism occurs in increasingly subtle, nuanced and covert forms, unambiguous and systemic modes of discrimination continue to exist alongside them.

In September 2011, the FA made the significant step of reporting the racism that England players had received from home supporters during a European Championship qualifying match in Bulgaria. Yet the FA did not see fit to reprimand publicly the substantial number of England supporters who – as was clearly audible on the television coverage of the game – were involved in repeated anti-Roma chanting. It should also not be forgotten that when England line up against France on 11 June they will likely include a player who, on his return, faces a criminal trial for racially abusing a fellow professional player.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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