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Where is Europe's Sports Diplomacy? ^[1]

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Throughout the last decade, no message was promoted stronger in the European Union than the idea of a new Europe, which has overcome its past of war and totalitarianism, and has emerged as a normative power standing for international cooperation, democracy, and human rights.

And yet when it comes to the recent events in Ukraine, discussed below, European soft power appears rather meager.

This summer the 2012 UEFA European Football Championship will be jointly hosted by Ukraine and Poland: An excellent opportunity for the European community to bond over its favorite sport, and for Ukraine, which for a long time has been aspiring EU membership, to promote its image.

However, while the football community and its fans are happily preparing for the event, Ukraine's former prime minister and leader of the democratic Orange Revolution of 2004, Yulia Tymoshenko is being imprisoned in a penal colony. Although suffering from spinal hernia and under constant and intense pain, Tymoshenko is denied the necessary medical treatment available outside of the prison.

Her 32-year-old daughter, Eugenia Tymoshenko, has appealed for help to several international authorities, among others the United States Congress, and the European Parliament, claiming that her mother is being held under torturous conditions.

Her appeal was received with sympathy by the international community, particularly the EU and the United States. Tymoshenko was found guilty of overstepping her authority during a tense natural gas pricing dispute with Moscow in January 2009. However, as U.S. Senator Jeanne Shaheen, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on European Affairs stated, Tymoshenko's imprisonment was based "on dubious, politically motivated charges, and is unacceptable and antithetical to a free and open system."

But what can open condemnation by Western leaders really achieve when the international community has no power to interfere in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state? Western leaders are also well aware of current Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich's close ties with Moscow. There are understandable reasons why the impact of hard politics might be somewhat restricted.

In the meantime, there is dead silence where European leaders and the public could truly make a difference, and raise awareness to the corruption in the Ukraine: through the UEFA European Football Championship.

Sports diplomacy has the potential to serve as a tool for advocacy and soft power. On the one

hand, effective use of sports diplomacy can enhance the image of a country in the eyes of a foreign public, especially for a country that is hosting a prestigious sports event such as the UEFA Cup. The *EUObserver* reported that “President Yanukovich is spending \$9 billion on new stadiums, airport terminals and fast trains to help people have a good time.” Yanukovich has taken a personal interest in the event and is using it as an opportunity to impress the world.

On the other hand, sports diplomacy can also become a tool of exerting pressure, and fostering political change. A famous example of this was the ban of South Africa from various international sporting events as a protest against the country’s apartheid policies. For example, could a boycott of the Euro 2012 have an impact on the Ukrainian government?

Meanwhile the European public and media seem ambivalent. Although there is outrage in the media about the Tymoshenko case, little to no connection is drawn to the upcoming UEFA Cup.

Other than German football team Borussia Dortmund manager Hans-Joachim Watzke, who told the press he considers boycotting Euro 2012 because of the Ukrainian government’s persecution of Yulia Tymoshenko, few Europeans have similar ideas. After all, the event is held only once every four years. And there is nothing more enjoyable than sitting with your friends in front of the TV or in front of an open-air screen, drinking beer and grilling bratwurst while rooting for your national team. Who would deny themselves such a pleasure?

Few Europeans realize that those actions too are sending a political message: one of disinterest and ignorance. For those who are convinced that Europe today stands for the promotion of democracy and human rights should take a moment and reconsider.

The upcoming UEFA cup bringing Ukraine to the spotlight in European media provides an excellent opportunity to bring greater attention to the Tymoshenko case and for the public to express condemnation of Ukrainian government’s undemocratic actions. It is an opportunity where public outrage could truly hurt the government’s image and in turn, be a catalyst for change. However, as of now, the European football community and its fans have not recognized the power of sports diplomacy as a tool of advocacy.
