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Euro 2012: A Hard Power Tool of Sports Diplomacy? ^[1]

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On June 8, 2012 the second largest football tournament in the world kicked off: The 2012 UEFA European Football Championship, usually referred to as Euro 2012. Poland and Ukraine, the co-hosts of the tournament, have been facing similar skepticism in regards to their capacity to host such a massive event just as did South Africa with the 2010 FIFA World Cup. The lack of infrastructure, corrupt politics, as well as being on the fringes of the footballing and international diplomacy worlds caused many to question their suitability.

However, another linkage between this tournament and the Republic of South Africa is the utilization of sports boycotts. Currently, negative press stories are an issue in Eastern Europe surrounding the imprisoned Yulia Tymoshenko and the accusations of her mistreatment while jailed for political reasons. While I will not draw too many similarities to the man-myth of Nelson Mandela, there are characteristics in this situation that warrant examination because of the contrast in international diplomatic efforts in each instance.

In 1964, Nelson Mandela was imprisoned shortly after FIFA levied the first sporting suspension against the apartheid government in 1963. While sporting bans and boycotts rarely touched on Mandela specifically, the overall disgust with racially segregated sporting teams was the main cause of expulsion or suspension from sporting organizations. The sporting boycott was pursued vociferously by some countries, especially in the Olympic movement, as part of the worldwide anti-apartheid campaign. Tanzania was prominent amongst the liberated African nations who made sure that South Africa was not allowed to attend the Mexico City Olympics, nor were there to be any concessions in the future.

There is a significant argument to be made that the boycotts of South African sports, rugby in particular, played an underappreciated role in raising awareness among the white South African population of the international community's discontent with the apartheid regime. In fact, I would argue that apartheid in South Africa may have lasted longer had the Springboks been allowed to play internationally and host regular tours from other rugby playing nations. The connection between the Springboks and the Afrikaner-population is hard to exaggerate. Americans are said to be sports mad, yet there is no unifying sport or symbol to rally that American spirit around like the Springboks and South Africans (now both black and white).

Lost in the literature on apartheid and South Africa is the importance of the role of the sporting boycotts. Perhaps because most of it is written by non-South Africans who fail to understand the place that sport holds in Afrikaner culture. The question that is relevant today is whether the same targeting of sport would have beneficial consequences in the Ukraine. Or perhaps it is not necessarily sport that should be targeted, but Ukraine's international stature and prestige? This last question is pertinent because of the commercialization of sport worldwide

and the tendency of organizers to focus on the bottom line rather than democratic ideals or justice. Additionally, rather than states seeing events like these as the celebration of sport and opportunity for diplomacy, they are usually treated as one large tourism advert for the country and its culture.

For the Euro 2012, a sporting boycott is already in place. The list of European statesmen and women boycotting the tournament is impressive: the European Commission President, the Austrian Chancellor, the British and Belgian governments, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel (who has said her attendance depends on Tymoshenko's release). According to the Polish Prime Minister, the Ukrainian brand would suffer dramatically in the event of a boycott. With UEFA, the governing body of football in Europe, taking a non-political stance on all issues, it is up to the member states of the football confederation, and of the European Union, to press this issue further. Whether there is political will in Europe to boycott en masse remains to be seen. The lack of EU unity makes a full scale boycott difficult, unlike the coordinated boycott of nations against South African rugby.

The brands of both Ukraine and Poland suffered even more in the English-speaking countries when Panorama, a BBC television program, explored the racism, anti-Semitism, and hooliganism that is prevalent in both countries. The BBC documentary showed Nazi salutes as well as monkey-noise taunts aimed at black players. While the presentation was not a fair examination of the progress towards tolerance undertaken by both countries in recent years, it still created sensational headlines:

- Fans could come back in coffins.
- Ox's family to stay away from Euros
- Ukraine officials deny Euro 2012 will be tainted by racist attacks on non-white football fans
- Euro 2012: David Beckham calls on English fans to 'stay safe' during tournament

This increased attention on Eastern Europe would appear to bode well for those who have political agendas in the region that clash with those holding political power. While undoubtedly the games will be used by political elites to strengthen their position domestically, there appears to be an opportunity for Tymoshenko supporters to use this tournament as a giant advert for her release. However, the recent reports on racism threaten to derail their momentum and shift the focus of the media off of Tymoshenko to further damaging Ukraine's nation brand with accusations of racism, anti-Semitism, and hooliganism. The use of sports for achieving political purposes and strengthening diplomacy between nations seems to be waning since the fall of the Berlin wall. However, the Euro 2012 will be a good indicator on how viable the coercive aspect of sports diplomacy is in the 21st century.

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