

Marciniak kept as ref for Champions League final after apologising for appearing at far-right leader's event

DANIEL TILLES
JUN 2, 2023



European football's governing body, UEFA, has announced that Polish referee Szymon Marciniak will take charge of next week's Champions League final as planned after he apologised for recently speaking at an event organised by a far-right leader in Poland.

UEFA had yesterday announced that it was investigating Marciniak – who also refereed last year's World Cup final – over the issue. The referee has received support from Poland's government as well as Polish politicians from across the spectrum, who have noted his previous anti-racism stance.



Last month, UEFA named Marciniak as the referee for the final of the Champions League, Europe's most prestigious club football competition. The game between Manchester City of England and Italian club Inter Milan will take place on 10 June in Istanbul. It will be the first time a Pole has refereed the final.

However, yesterday a Polish anti-racism organisation, Nigdy Więcej (Never Again), reported that earlier this week Marciniak spoke at a business conference organised by Sławomir Mentzen, who is one of the leaders of Confederation (Konfederacja), Poland's largest far-right political party.

Nigdy Więcej noted that Mentzen in 2019 declared Confederation's five-point programme to be: "We don't want Jews, homosexuals, abortion, taxes and the EU." (Mentzen claims his words were taken out of context.) Confederation has also been banned from Facebook for promoting hate speech and Covid disinformation.

UEFA told Polish newspaper *Przełęcz Sportowy* yesterday that it was "aware of the allegations regarding Szymon Marciniak and is urgently demanding an explanation". It added that it "abhors the 'values' promoted by the said group".

Today, Marciniak responded to the allegations in a statement in which he said that he "always put fair play and respect for others first". He added that he has also always disassociated himself "from manifestations of racism, antisemitism and intolerance, as I have shown in the matches that I referee".

In April 2019, Marciniak became the first referee in Poland's top-flight football league to implement anti-racism protocols. When Joel Valencia, a black Ecuadorian player, was subjected to monkey chants from some fans, Marciniak stopped the match.

He instructed the stadium announcer to inform fans that the game would be called off if racist incidents continued. Subsequently, the racist chanting ended and the match was able to be completed.

Following UEFA's announcement that it was investigating Marciniak, the referee has received widespread support in Poland itself, including from the government, which is led by the national-conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party.

Sports minister Kamil Bortniczuk said that the accusations against Marciniak are a "huge manipulation". His ministry today submitted a position on the issue to UEFA.

Meanwhile, the prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, tweeted that "all political forces in Poland speak with one voice regarding Marciniak, the best referee in the world [who] respects every human being...[and] cannot be judged on the basis of one unfair opinion".

An opposition figure, Robert Biedroń, an openly gay MEP from The Left (Lewica), noted that Marciniak has made "strong reactions to xenophobia and racism in stadiums" and said he was "crossing my fingers that he will take charge of the [Champions League] final".

Szymon Hołownia, leader of centrist Poland 2050 (Polska 2050), also said it would be "absurd" if Marciniak, who has "repeatedly proved on the pitch that the values with which Mentzen identifies are alien to him", was barred from refereeing the final.

Poland's football association, meanwhile, issued a statement saying that it was "incomprehensible" for Marciniak to be accused of supporting Mentzen's politics. It noted that the event he spoke at was a business conference and not a political rally. As well as being a politician, Mentzen is also a business owner.

Finally, in a further statement issued this afternoon, UEFA announced that, following a "diligent investigated [into] the allegations surrounding Szymon Marciniak", it had decided to allow him to remain as referee for the final.

It's decision was prompted in particular by a further statement from Marciniak, in which he "expressed my deepest apologies for my involvement [in Mentzen's event] and any distress or harm it may have caused".

"I was gravely misled and completely unaware of the true nature and affiliations of the event in question," he continued. "I had no knowledge that it was associated [with] a Polish extreme-right movement. Had I been aware of this fact, I would have categorically declined the invitation."

UEFA revealed that Never Again, the anti-racism NGO, was supportive of the decision for Marciniak to remain as referee for the final.

D. Tilles: "Marciniak kept as ref for Champions League final after apologising for appearing at far-right leader's event". NotesFromPoland.com, 2.06.2023.

<https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/06/02/marciniak-kept-as-ref-for-champions-league-final-after-apologising-for-appearing-at-far-right-leaders-event>