

Football (dis)unites

Olga Konsevych, Ukraine

Racist and fascist slogans, fights and fireworks at stadiums have all turned football into a kind of war. Recently Ukrainian fans have been actively criticized by the European organizations that are monitoring the situation at the stadiums. But it would be wrong to consider Ukraine as the most problematic country.

Anti-discrimination fight

The motto “Good Night Left Side”, a t-shirt with the inscription code “88”, Nazi salutes - all these things were noticed by representatives from Football Against Racism in Europe (FARE) network at the FIFA World Cup qualifier between Ukraine and San Marino on September 6 last year, at the Lviv Arena. This is the latest big scandal, which happened in Ukraine because of radical fans. Stadium Lviv Arena was disqualified for all qualifiers for the 2018 World Cup, but will host a friendly match with national team and qualifying matches for the European Championship in 2016. The problem with racism and neo-fascism in Ukrainian stadiums cannot be solved despite the punishment. During the incident mentioned at the Lviv Arena, the Ukraine Football Federation was fined by FIFA for 45 000 euros and received a warning. Some European organizations believe that nobody paid attention to the seriousness of this problem.

“Three years before Euro-2012 we’ve decided to create an initiative, which was called “East Europe monitoring center”. We wanted to prepare Poland and Ukraine to host a multicultural tournament. It was very difficult. We’ve started it from nothing. Because we’ve found that nobody has contact with any kind of NGO in Ukraine, nobody could elucidate this topic. Some people recommended us to contact the fans. After the month we’ve realized that they are hard core nationalists”, - said Jacek Purski, a “NEVER AGAIN” Association spokesman.

“NEVER AGAIN” is Poland’s anti-racist organization. The mission of the ‘NEVER AGAIN’ Association is to promote multicultural understanding and to contribute to the development of a democratic civil society in Poland and in the broader region of Central and Eastern Europe.

View from Poland

„NEVER AGAIN“ has existed as an informal group since 1992 and it was officially registered in 1996. One of the projects that were brought to life was the edition of “Brown Book”. “We’ve monitored what is happening in Poland and we published this book. It was the only source in Poland which shows a wider perspective of discrimination, racism and fascism”, Purski notes.

The organization has many volunteers from Poland, who give information about the situation at the stadiums. “We started to do some positive work that shows football as multicultural diverse. We look at the football not only as a beautiful game, but also as a field for social work. We think of football in levels – sport and fun – which is a field where we can do proper antiracism work involving young people”, said “NEVER AGAIN” Association spokesman.

The organization also conducts educational work. For example, experts organize special trainings session for match delegates. “It’s mainly about racist symbols, so we teach the match representatives how to recognize racism. We’ve produced a special brochure about racist symbols. Usually referees and match delegates can only recognize the swastika, but not always the Celtic cross or Ku Klux Klan symbols. It was a big breakthrough for our organization”, - Jacek Purski explains. Also “NEVER AGAIN” involves some original African players as ambassadors. One of the first ambassadors was Emmanuel Olisadebe who is known in Polish football as the first black player to play for the Polish national team.

Ukrainians answers

Conversation with one of the leaders of the ultras Dynamo Kyiv Nikolai Pankov was unsuccessful. When I asked if he thinks it is fair that international organizations often accuse Ukrainian fans of an intolerant attitude, Nicholai said: „If you show me some list of problems where these so-called „Nazis“ kill and maim because of these „problems“ it will make sense to speak, but I don’t want comment on things that didn’t happen“. Examples from the FARE decision and the fine for the Dynamo fan with a T-shirt with the number 88 on it have not convinced him.

Ukrainians are critical to FARE and UEFA decisions and you can often hear the argument, „If a few idiots came to the stadium, it does not mean that all fans are racists”.

“Nazism and racism in Ukrainian stadiums is a rarity. We can see the speculation with the image of Stepan Bandera (*one of the leaders of the Ukrainian nationalist movement in Western Ukraine.* - author). The fans of Western Ukraine used exclusively symbolically - wrestler sufferer ideologue, but not xenophobic, chauvinistic or an association with Nazis. But striking confirmation of this came from a favorite footballer of ultras FC Karpaty (Lviv), William Rocha Batista from Brazil”, semiprofessional football player Boris from Ukrainian city Rivne said.

It is interesting to note that fans from Eastern and Western Ukraine are reconciled after Euro-maidan. The question of nationality and political preferences are no longer standing. For example, football fans from Dynamo Kyiv gathered 33 thousand UAH for fans of East Ukraine. Fans have declared a truce between the clubs. So football not only disunites people, but unites as well.