

Forbidden match: Ukraine vs Russia

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Main points:

- The rivalry between Ukrainians and Russians goes back to the 1920s;
- the national teams of both countries have only played against each other twice;
- the gas crisis which followed after the Ukrainian Orange revolution led to Gazprom becoming a major football sponsor in an attempt to improve Russia's image in the eyes of the Western European countries;
- Ukrainian footballers playing for Russian clubs cannot count on being recalled to play in their national team;
- due to the continued armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine, one of Ukraine's best football clubs, Shakhtar Donetsk, continues to operate outside of Donbas, however, despite this it continues its charitable work which has a positive effect on the reinforcement of the Ukrainian national identity in Eastern Ukraine;
- Ukraine's new football kit has called outrage on the Russian side.

Introduction

When looking at the Ukrainian-Russian conflict through the lens of football, one needs to look further than just the last 7 years as this relationship goes far deeper. Since the times of the USSR, football has played a key role in the Ukrainian-Russian relationship, with the recent development being just new chapters of the already long book.

Under the Red Flag

The history of the Ukrainian-Russian football rivalry did not start after the fall of the USSR, and we could downright say that, since the early 1990s, we have experienced the epilogue of this rivalry as the majority of the most important chapters of this decades-long tale were written when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union. Over the years, the 6 biggest Russian and Ukrainian football clubs played over 1800 football matches against each other. **Looking at it from a geographical point of view, the Ukrainian clubs represented all corners of modern-**

day Ukraine: Dynamo Kyiv, Shakhtar Donetsk, Dnipro Dnipropetrovsk, Metalist Kharkiv, Zaria Voroshilovgrad (now Zorya Luhansk) or Chornomorets Odesa. In the case of the Russian teams, the majority of them came from the USSR key cities: Dynamo, CSKA, Lokomotiv, Torpedo (all from Moscow) and Zenit Leningrad (today Zenit Saint Petersburg).

The Football Stands demand independence

Football stands have constituted, for many years, an enclave where it was possible to nurture matters related to Ukrainian ethnicity and national independence. In the case of the USSR, this phenomenon was common since the beginning, because already in the 1920s (when formally the USSR football league did not even exist yet) incidents in football stadiums occurred which were said to be inciting citizens against the state. In 1923, claims were being made that the Maccabi Kyiv team displays Zionist or Jewish colours to set the proletariat against the Party. The importance of the Ukrainian clubs in the USSR football world enabled the emergence of pro-Ukrainian and pro-independence movements. A few clubs being unofficially involved with such movements, which, for example, almost lead to the disbanding of Karpaty Lviv in the 1980s by the local authorities, with one of the reasons being a “too Ukrainian squad”.

Today it is believed that the intensification of the Ukrainian independence aspirations, which could be seen through the lens of the football stands, began in 1961. This was when Dynamo Kyiv won its first USSR championship (the first of a record-breaking thirteen), which up until this point was not something achieved by a non-Moscow based club. For years supporters of the six best Ukrainian football clubs formed an informal anti-Soviet pact, with supporters often chanting the same pro-independence songs which included verses such as: “our flag is yellow and blue”, “Ukraine will be free”, or “our fatherland will be independent”. When the lifespan of the USSR was coming to an end, football stadiums in Ukrainian cities were seeing more and more Ukrainian national symbols, leading to the Ukrainian flag finally appearing in 1989 in one of the football stadiums in Kyiv.

The only interstate, two-legged tie

There has only been one such occurrence between the Ukrainian and Russian football teams which took place during the UEFA Euro 2000 qualifying tournament. Today that would be impossible as UEFA has forbidden matches between Ukrainian and Russian national and league teams due to the political tensions between the two countries.

The first-leg match, which took place in the Kyiv Olympic stadium and was attended by 82,000 fans; comparatively, the whole qualifying tournament saw a larger turnout in other matches. Ukraine won 3-2.

During the second leg, neither of the teams were eligible to qualify for the tournament directly but were both fighting for a chance to take part in the play-offs. Ukraine only needed to draw, whilst Russia required a win. **Approximately 80,000 fans attended the match at Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow, including Vladimir Putin who was the Prime Minister at the time.** Everyone who was present at the stands witnessed a draw, a favourable outcome for the Ukrainian team, meaning that in the two-legged tie Ukraine came out on top.

Russian natural gas and the improvement of Russia's image in Europe (including from a football point of view)

Between 2005 and 2006 (after the Orange Revolution) the Russians decided to reduce the natural gas shipments to Ukraine, which was a way to influence Western Europe's energy security (hoping that this will persuade EU countries to build a new gas pipeline). **Although Russia was able to achieve that goal and the Nord Stream pipeline was constructed, Russia's image in Europe was severely tarnished.** This led Gazprom to seek ways to build back its position in Western Europe.

From this moment we can observe a clear expansion of Gazprom's efforts in the football world. Shakhtar Donetsk and other Ukrainian clubs were doing well in the European leagues and were able to boast frequent appearances in various championships, which helped build a positive image of the young country as it was able to effectively manage its football clubs. On the other hand, the run-down Moscow clubs were not able to boast with such achievements, despite the great amounts of cash that they were being flooded with. **Gazprom stepped in to improve the image of Russian football by sponsoring the most important football events and reinforcing, with an enormous amount of financial capital, the new Russian football**

power – Zenit. However, this was not the end of it. Since 2007, Gazprom became the main sponsor of the German football team FC Schalke 04 and since the 2012-2013 season, it is one of the eight official sponsors of the UEFA Champions League.

Issue of Crimea

Before the first gunshots were fired in Crimea and Donbas, goals were supposed to be scored as part of a new common Russian-Ukrainian football league. The patron of this idea was Alexey Miller, one of the chairmen of Gazprom. During the summer of 2013, a friendly tournament called “Tournament of Unity” took place with the participation of teams such as Shakhtar Donetsk, Dynamo Kyiv, Zenit Saint Petersburg and Spartak Moscow. Teams played in Moscow and Kyiv, and the winner of the first tournament was Dynamo Kyiv. The second edition took place during the winter of 2014, but because of the tense political situation between Russia and Ukraine, the teams played in Israel. This time around Shakhtar Donetsk took the top spot. In the end, the “CIS Super League” (between Russia and Ukraine) did not come into existence. The idea was blocked by top FIFA and UEFA officials, which would have only created the opportunity for the emergence of additional Super Leagues in Europe.

At the same time in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts civil unrests broke out with protests demanding autonomy from the Ukrainian state and the desire to become part of Russia.

On top of that strong anti-Ukrainian sentiments emerged in Crimea, which has a large ethnic Russian population. That is also when the so-called “little green men” made their first appearance. In Crimea, Russian special forces were heavily engaged with the annexation and power in the Republic of Crimea was claimed by local pro-Russian politicians. On the 18th of March 2014, after a referendum that was never recognised by the international community, the Kremlin announced that Crimea has become part of the Russian Federation. Four months later, UEFA announced that Ukrainian and Russian football teams will not be able to compete against each other.

Crimean Football League

In 2014, Crimea was the home territory of two football clubs that were members of the Ukrainian Premier League: Tavriya Simferopol and FC Sevastopol. Before the beginning of the 2014-2015 season, both teams were dismantled and reopened as part of the Russian Football

Union. Two of the Crimean teams which played in the lower league, namely, Tytan Armiansk and Zhemchuzhina Yalta, saw a similar fate. All four teams were relegated to the third division of the Russian Premier League.

Outrage was expressed by several European countries. **Some were demanding the suspension of Russia's membership within UEFA, with others going as far as wanting to revoke Russia's right to organise the 2018 World Cup.** UEFA decided not to meddle with international politics, as Gazprom's financial support of the Champions League would be at stake and limited its actions to not recognising the forced move of the Ukrainian clubs to the Russian Premier League and not allowing matches between Russian and Ukrainian teams.

In the end, UEFA came up with a solution that was not beneficial to any of the parties. A new football league – Crimean Premier League – was formed in Crimea consisting of 8 teams, which is overseen by UEFA, but the teams are not able to participate in the European tournaments. Tavriya Simferopol won the first championship. To this date, FC Sevastopol won the league twice and FC Eupatoria won the league once.

The league is not very popular among football fans. Most of the current players are of Russian origins as the Ukrainian Football Association threatened to fine any Ukrainian player that would decide to play in the league. For the Ukrainian side, especially hurtful was the loss of Tavriya Simferopol, who were the first football champions of independent Ukraine; this later led to the reactivation of the club in mainland Ukraine in 2016.

The lack of proper incorporation of the Crimean clubs into the Russian Super League is also a problem for Moscow, as it would be a symbolic conclusion of the process of Crimea's annexation. Meanwhile, the Crimean clubs are not able to compete within the official UEFA structures neither in Europe nor in Russia, leading to them becoming completely isolated, which also does not help in reinforcing the Russian identity of the clubs and thus effectively making them “lost” clubs.

No recall for Ukrainians in Russian clubs

After 2014, even the situation within the Ukrainian football teams became problematic. When in 2016 Yevhen Seleznyov signed a contract with Kuban Krasnodar, he automatically became persona non grata to the Ukrainian national team, with the Ukrainian head coach Mykhaylo Fomenko deciding not to recall him. He was later admitted back into the national team, but

only after his contract with Kuban was terminated based on a mutual agreement between him and the club. No Ukrainian player who was part of the Russian Premier League was recalled for the Euro 2016, Oleksandr Zinchenko and Bohdan Butko switched clubs shortly before the beginning of the tournament. The sentiment persists till today. In 2019, Yaroslav Rakitskyi who has played more than 50 matches as part of the Ukrainian national team, signed a contract with Zenit Saint Petersburg. This was seen as a betrayal within Ukraine and since then Rakitskyi has not been recalled, but he continues to make regular appearances as part of the Zenit match line-up.

Shakhtar Donetsk in exile

The current war in Donbas (that broke out on the sixth of April 2016) has also had its victims. This was the result of unrest in Eastern Ukraine, supported by Russia. On one side, we had the Ukrainian government which wanted to maintain the integrity of Ukraine's borders, on the other side, there were the pro-Russian separatists - Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DPR & LPR) who are supported by Moscow.

The unrest continued over the course of the next 3 months, turning into a regular armed conflict. One of the bloodiest battles took place at the Donetsk airport, where tanks and armoured personnel carriers were used and over 200 people died. **Another important event of the conflict took place when fighters of the DPR shot down the Malaysian Airlines airplane on the 17th of July 2014 which led to the death of 298 people.** So far, the conflict has led to around 13,000 deaths. The Ukrainian armed forces have seen approximately 4,500 casualties, whilst the pro-Russian separatists have seen around 5,700. The fighting has also led to around 2,000 casualties amongst civilians.

In such circumstances, it is hard to play football, even more so when there is an armed conflict taking place a couple of hundred meters away from the stadium. Because of this, Shakhtar Donetsk has begun playing their home games in a location 1,200km away i.e. Lviv. In May 2020, Shakhtar moved again, this time to the Kyiv Olympic stadium, while Donbas Arena, which was built for the Euro 2012 and which cost \$400mln, remains empty. This, however, has not stopped the Donetsk club from continuing their work in the Eastern part of the country. In 2018, Shakhtar created the "Shakhtar Social" foundation, which has become a vital element of the club's work. Through the foundation, the club promotes values such as

physical health, tolerance, education, or gender equality, but the main goal is fighting social exclusion. An enormous success for the clubs and the foundations was continuing their work in the Eastern part of the country which continues to be entangled in an armed conflict. They have become a prime location for children and club supporter communities for coming together, for instance through organising football training sessions as part of its football academy, despite the players not being able to play a match in their home stadium for 6 years. The work has been recognised by the international community and in 2019 the foundations “Come On, Let’s Play!” project received the “More Than Football” award, during the European Football for Development Network conference, in recognition of their charity work.

In the long term, this work can have a positive effect on the reinforcement of the Ukrainian national identity, particularly in Eastern Ukraine. **Consciously or not, the club is helping to create a new Ukrainian community that in the future could potentially cut itself off from the Russian cultural, social, and political influence.** This aligns with other efforts which aim to achieve the aforementioned goal, for example during the Euro 2012 tournament the Ukrainian national team played two matches of the group phase in Donetsk. Playing that many matches during one of the most important sports events in the country’s history is a clear sign of a desire to strengthen the ties of the local community with Ukraine.

Ukraine’s EURO 2020 kit

The most recent development in this conflict is the football kit of the Ukrainian national team. The new kit includes not only the standard national colours but also an outline of Ukraine’s borders, which include Crimea and the full Eastern border. Moscow has called this a blatant provocation, but UEFA thinks differently and has allowed the Ukrainian team to play in the kits.

In a recent development, UEFA has forbidden the Ukrainian team to use the words "Herojam Sława" on their kits, but the words "Sława Ukrajini" are allowed to remain. Both terms are commonly associated with Ukrainian nationalists and emerged in the 1920s. They were later adopted as a salute by the UPA and OUN organisations during World War II.

Although UEFA has ensured that the Ukrainian and Russian teams do not play against each other in the group stage or the early knockout stages, it is interesting to consider what UEFA’s reaction would be if the teams met in either the semi-final or the final itself. One can also

wonder how the footballers themselves will react, or what input the Ukrainian and Russian politicians would give. Although the likelihood of this occurring is extremely low, it can never be fully overlooked.

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