

# Bandera, Poland & Euro 2012

Ukraine's 2011 EU integration relies largely on Polish support but historical wounds continue to pose a threat

William Schreiber

It's hard to imagine a foreign country more invested in the Orange Revolution than Poland. The Orange protests struck a note in the hearts of the Polish public, who were quick to recognize the heritage of their own non-violent struggle, the Solidarity movement which overthrew communism. Then, as the theatrics of the Orange government self-imploded and President Yanukovich retook the nation's helm, something shifted. Out of sheer chagrin and perhaps a bit of personal embarrassment, Europe and Warsaw began rapidly losing interest in their Eastern neighbour. Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski vowed to combat this Ukraine fatigue in a speech this January, promising substantive achievements in the place of verbiage. Much is expected from the current half-year Hungarian presidency of the EU and the Polish presidency, which is due to begin in July 2011. Yet in reality the most powerful tool for fighting Ukraine fatigue could be the chatter created over a sporting event. Next year, Europe's attention will be focused east, as football fans descend on eight cities across Poland and Ukraine. By rebooting the conversation about Ukraine in European circles, Euro 2012 could be a pivotal moment in Ukraine's wayward westward journey.



## Poland's role in Ukraine's historic Orange epiphany

Back in 2004, Polish politicians were quick to recognize the Orange Revolution as the great geopolitical opportunity of the decade. President Aleksander Kwasniewski was part of an official delegation to help mediate the brewing conflict, while Lech Walesa, the former solidarity leader, was hot on the heels of his old rival, ostensibly at the invitation of Viktor Yushchenko, but almost assuredly hoping to rehabilitate his own image after a disastrous tenure in office in Poland following his Solidarity heroics. Walesa caused a scandal by claiming that when he arrived on the scene Viktor Yanukovich had already issued the order for a crack down on protests. As Walesa tells it, it was he who averted a catastrophe on Kyiv's famous Independence Square by delivering an ultimatum to Yanukovich on behalf of the Ukrainian people: victory with or without bloodshed. Regardless of who deserves the credit for Ukraine's democratic breakthrough, the con-

gratulatory feelings generated by the Orange Revolution carried far beyond the intoxicating atmosphere of Kyiv's Maidan and influenced many in Warsaw, creating something of a heyday for bilateral relations. Polish President Lech Kaczynski advocated fiercely for Ukrainian involvement in NATO and the European Union, to the extent that President Yushchenko would later remember him as Poland's Ronald Reagan. Perhaps most importantly, it was during the Kaczynski-Yushchenko presidencies that the leaders agreed to jointly host the 2012 European Championships and then managed to leverage their political collateral sufficiently to emerge victorious over competitive rival bids from the likes of Italy and a well fancied co-host bid from Hungary and Croatia. However, many analysts say this particular football match-up between Ukraine and Poland was born out of necessity as much as love. "It's a good image of Polish-Ukrainian relations. It's a friendship, but not necessarily a very close relationship.

We're friends because we need to be," said Seweryn Dmowski, an expert on the politics and nationalism of football and the University of Warsaw. "Without Ukraine's connections and high-profile players, Poland wouldn't have the tournament. On the other hand, Ukraine would not have won the privilege without Poland's stability," he reasons.

## Poles condemn Bandera revisionism

Even in the later days of the Kaczynski-Yushchenko era, there was plenty of strain underlying the two countries' bilateral relationship. In his final days in office, President Yushchenko passed a bill posthumously awarding Stephen Bandera with the title 'Hero of Ukraine'. Bandera, the Ukrainian nationalist guerrilla who allied with the Nazis in 1941 to fight the Communists before fighting a subterranean conflict against Axis, Red Army and Polish partisan forces, is infamous in Poland for his role in the murder of Poles and Jews living in the border-



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lands separating the two countries. Even Kaczynski himself was moved to denounce the move as purely political, without proper respect for history. The issue continues to exist as an open wound between the two countries as well as a symbolic element of relations with Russia and the country's domestic politics. Only last month a regional Donetsk court annul Bandera's Hero of Ukraine award, a decision that has prompted some political backlash from the right-wing of the political spectrum within Ukraine and contentions that the Yanukovich government does not represent all Ukrainians. In Warsaw and other major cities throughout Poland, groups dedicated to the memory of the Polish victims have openly protested their country's cooperation with a state it accuses of abusing political memory. Father Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski, once a bitter opponent of the communist police state, has been a leading voice in the Polish opposition to any attempt to rehabilitate Bandera. In a recent letter to the president of world football's governing body the priest called Bandera a genocidal fascist, responsible for over 200,000 murders in a campaign of ethnic cleansing. The letter went on to demand not only that Ukraine strip Bandera of his official state honours, but that the federation reconsider allowing Lviv to host Euro 2012 games. Ukraine's cultural capital was accused of being a city "whose community favour chauvinistic and neo-fascist ideology," and are more concerned with erecting a monument to Bandera than they are with developing infrastructure for the tournament.

### Can Euro 2012 boost Ukrainian democracy?

Meanwhile the official line in Warsaw on the Yanukovich administration's progress remains carefully and deliberately skeptical. In his January speech Foreign Minister Sikorski summed up this approach with a word of warning: "While we appreciate the reformist zeal of the authorities in Kyiv, we cannot turn a blind eye to ...the troubling decline in respect for democracy and plural-

ism." This concern is mirrored across EU capitals where there is mounting concern that the past five years of Orange optimism are in danger of being consigned to the dustbin of history, handing Brussels its biggest foreign policy reverse since the inception of the European project. Many believe that Euro 2012 could serve as a integrationist counterbalance to the current administration's authoritarian instincts which appear to be pushing Ukraine towards the Kremlin orbit at the expense of the country's Euro ambitions. However, while it is clear that European leaders would like to create linkage between Ukraine's progress along the democratic path and a successful tournament, in reality such a correlation might not exist. In many ways, Ukraine's joint custody of the championship can be thought of as a regional version of China's Beijing Olympics. The hope at the Beijing Olympics was that the pressure of a prolonged global audience could force progress and reform on a host of issues from civil society to Tibet. In the end the Beijing Olympics were a success, but not a democratic success. The talk of hastily constructed stadiums collapsing came to naught. Likewise, fears that Ukraine could not prepare its infrastructure in time have been dispelled. Indeed, President Yanukovich has announced that the country's preparations should be ready up to a year ahead of the tournament. Perhaps we should learn a lesson from the China 2008 experience and recognize that successful construction of a modern infrastructure has very little to do with democratic progress. Alternatively, renewed Western interest coupled with an understanding of the unique regional challenges which the Yanukovich administration faces might just mean a future Ukraine capable of building both its infrastructure and its democracy at the same time. Poland could have a key role to play in this process, but this support will remain dependent on a conciliatory attitude in Warsaw towards the bilateral historical issues which remain sensitive to many modern Poles.

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