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Soccer Racism in Europe: Struggle with Transition

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Recent instances of soccer-related racism highlights European nations' tortured transition from relatively homogeneous ethnicity to multicultural immigration societies. They denote a resurgence of entrenched racial attitudes that flourish in times of economic crisis, and are not limited to Muslim communities.

Commentary

FOOTBALL FANS across Europe have lined up on both sides of the racism divide in a debate that involves Jews, Africans and Europeans of immigrant extraction as much as it does Muslims. Besides recent attacks on freedom of speech and Jewish symbols in Denmark and France, the debate is being waged against the backdrop of the rise of the extreme right in a Europe that struggles with high unemployment, low economic growth and thousands of refugees washing up on its shores seeking refuge from conflict in the Middle East and Africa.

The targeting of Muslims and non-Muslims alike by racist fans is evident in a survey of numerous racist expressions on and off the pitch. It has sparked opposition from soccer enthusiasts to whom racism is abhorrent. Right-wing fans often have links to racist political organisations whose legitimacy is enhanced by European leaders like British Prime Minister David Cameron who recently refused to rule out a future coalition with the UK Independence Party (UKIP). The UKIP has no issue with associating itself with Holocaust deniers and denounces not only Muslims but also economic immigrants from Eastern Europe.

A body blow

Europe's transition to multiculturalism was first dealt a body blow by Al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, subsequent bombings of public transport in Madrid and London, the murder in Amsterdam of a Dutch filmmaker, the flow of Europeans fighters joining the ranks of Islamic State, the jihadist group that controls a swathe of Syria and Iraq, and finally the recent attacks in Copenhagen and Paris.

European leaders have been at pains to insist that the continent's confrontation with political violence constitutes a conflict with radicalism rather than with Islam. Yet, racism on and off the pitch is rooted in entrenched racial attitudes that became publicly taboo post-World War Two but were never eradicated. They are reinforced by a failure to acknowledge that immigration, starting with

decolonisation and a wave of Mediterranean guest workers in the 1960s, has fundamentally changed the nature of European society accompanied by discrimination in education, employment and off-the-pitch soccer.

The latest incident of soccer racism in Paris with supporters of Chelsea FC, which fields some of England's most talented black players, chanting "we're racist, we're racist, and that's the way we like it" demonstrates the point. The fans repeatedly shoved a native Parisian off a metro train because of his skin colour. Italian police days later arrested 22 fans of Feyenoord Rotterdam for rioting in Rome and damaging the Baroque fountain on the Spanish Steps.

Neo-Nazism

Right-wing, self-styled hooligans in Germany supported by the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) that in November set aside rivalries to riot in Cologne against the spread of what they termed radical Islam, pride themselves on also targeting anarchists, Marxist-Leninists and other left-wing extremists. Some 50 police officers and 20 fans were injured in clashes.

By contrast, the English Defence League that traces its roots to a right-wing soccer sub-culture emerged as exclusively anti-Muslim as have similar groups in Norway and Denmark. "What we're seeing...is that the groups of ultra sports fans are themselves infiltrated by neo-Nazis," said Esteban Ibarra, president of Spanish advocacy group Movement Against Intolerance.

Increased expression of racism on the pitch is not going unchallenged. European clubs which thrive on fielding multicultural teams are opportunistically recognising, when convenient, the continent's new reality in which immigrants account for up to 20 percent of the population. Real Madrid CF has removed the traditional Christian cross from their official club crest in a gesture that was as much designed to signal multiculturalism as it was to cement a lucrative three-year sponsorship deal with the National Bank of Abu Dhabi.

Broader picture: Rallying against racists

Yet, the gesture follows repeated expressions of anti-Semitism in Spanish sports, including some 18,000 people last May endorsing a profane and anti-Semitic hashtag after Real Madrid was defeated by Maccabi Tel Aviv in the final of Europe's main basketball tournament.

Newcastle United football fans meanwhile rallied against German anti-Islam movement Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West (Pegida) that held its first British march on February 28, the day Newcastle United played Aston Villa at St James' Park. Pegida said the march was to "show the Islamists we show no fear."

Holland's Vitesse Arnhem was criticised last year for playing a friendly in Abu Dhabi despite the fact that its Israeli defender Dan Mori was refused a visa. Similarly, when Brazilian striker Dani Alves was taunted last year with a banana by fans, politicians and supporters across Europe ate bananas to denounce the insult to the Barcelona player because of his skin colour.

The failure to acknowledge societal change is reflected in the fact that senior soccer management in Europe does not reflect the cultural and racial diversity of society and the sport itself. Soccer management remains dominated by white Christian males, some of whom have in recent years been embroiled in controversy over racist and discriminatory remarks.

Piara Powar, executive director of Football Against Racism in Europe (FARE), warned in an interview with England's Press Association that the wave of racism in soccer was part of a broader picture. "People don't respect ethnic minorities, except as players," he said.

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