

# World Soccer

## Polish football fights anti-semitism

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Last May, Polish football was to bear witness to a disturbing spectacle from a handful of fans from Resovia, a football club based in the city of Rzeszow.

During a local derby against bitter rivals Stal, they exhibited a banner displaying a cartoon of a Jewish man in an Auschwitz uniform with a no entry sign on his face and the slogan “*Death to those with curved noses.*” on an accompanying banner as the fans sang “*The Aryan horde is coming.*”

Fans were arrested, clubs were fined and sanctions were imposed but the episode was just one recent affair in the ongoing battle to in the fight against anti-Semitism in Poland.

When Legia Warsaw were banned from Europe for the violence of their fans in 2008, their president, Leszek Miklas openly admitted that 15-20% of his clubs fan base were part of neo-Nazi organisations and openly racist during home games.

A recent collaborative study carried out by the *Never Again* campaign based in Warsaw and *Football Against Prejudices* based in Kiev presented disturbing figures of around 56 separate incidences of fascist symbols or slogans – 36 of which were anti-Semitic – used in Polish football grounds between September 2009 and March 2011. With the 2012 European Championships set to be co-hosted by Poland, the country is looking to the future while fighting to put prejudice and discrimination firmly in the past.

“*It is vital to step up anti-racist activities in Eastern European countries as they prepare to host major international sports events,*” – **Piara Powar, head of Football Against Racism in Europe (FARE)**  
Like many countries which suffer from a hateful minority of fans who go beyond the exaggerated profanities and petty insults that serve as a vent for frustration for an average football fan, the roots of the problem lie outside the stadia.

Of course, anti-Semitism isn't a new problem in Polish society and has roots that go as far back as the end of the Second World War. Famous Polish historian and sociologist, Jan T. Gross suggested in his controversial book *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz* that as the Jewish population migrated back to the country after the war, they were greeted by a hostile Christian community who felt their jobs and livelihood were at risk from the flock of Jewish immigrants. Coupled with a strict communist regime that promoted an ethnically pure race through propaganda to gain support, this led to violence and a prejudice towards Jews that is still evident in Polish culture today.

As the country moved out of communism in the early nineties and into the democratic nation of the EU that it is today, anti-Semitism was pushed from the mainstream in to the margins of minority right-wing political groups and neo-Nazi youth gangs. Like so many countries around the world, football plays host to every element of Polish society and you don't have to travel far to find signs of these people at football grounds around the country.

Despite the horrific impact the Nazi party had on the country, many young men distort the facts correspond with their idea of what modern Poland is and should be. Their views aren't based on history or facts, but those of hatred and revulsion.

*The championship is a chance to have some positive change. We can't end racism in time for Euro 2012, but maybe we can raise awareness of the problems.*" – **Rafal Pankowski, Never Again activist.**

Football has always been used as a measuring stick from one society to the next – a universal constant from border to border. Next summer raises the opportunity of change for a country still stuck in its past, yet trying desperately to move into the future.

The wheels of change have already been set in motion. A few years ago the Polish FA were pushed by UEFA to deal with the problem and set up the Safety and Security Delegate to help stamp out racism from the grounds by checking all banners and fans with routine searches before they are allowed into the stadium. The association have done well to change the ethos surrounding the stadia in the top division with the suppression of such threatening groups and banners that has liberated Poland's silent majority of unbigoted fans.

To help throughout the tournament, UEFA appointed the FARE (Football Against Racism in Europe) organisation to set up initiatives similar to those at Euro 2008. These plans include pre-match speeches from team captains on the subject, to slogans on banners on the side of the pitch, to small scale cooperation between the Never Again organisation, as well as a network of stationary and mobile fan embassies in every host city throughout Poland and Ukraine. Also, a small army of 2500 trained helpers throughout the host cities will be on hand to deal with everything from public transport, to paramedic emergencies.

Poland hopes to use Euro 2012 as a stepping stone to promote racial and social equality. To discourage the racist minority, but more importantly, to encourage the silent majority of Poles that such xenophobic behaviour isn't welcome across Europe and specifically in Poland. Despite how desperate the situation may be, there are signs of improvement and hope as the country looks to overcome racism, with the help of the beautiful game.

By Stefan Blenkowski

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