

International news

Shadow of racism over Euro 2012 finals

Black football fans face uncertain welcome in Ukrainian host city

Rajeev Syal Lviv

In a crumbling corridor in a university in Ukraine, a Nigerian student nods in agreement as he listens to former England footballer Sol Campbell's comments that black football fans should stay at home rather than join the crowds at Euro 2012 matches in the eastern European country.

He should know. The student, known as J, plays amateur football in Lviv, one of eight host cities for the tournament that starts this week. He said spectators sometimes come armed with bananas even when the game is for fun and played in front of a crowd of a few dozen. "It has happened to me - the monkey chants, racist comments and the fruit. I try to ignore it or turn it into a joke by eating the fruit."

Black and Asian students in the city said that racism here is rarely challenged and racist violence lies just below the surface. There are random beatings, pepper spray muggings and a liberal dose of insults - as well as an unsympathetic response from the police. The students leave their campus for home before dark, seldom go into the city centre unless in a group and stay away from gangs of men.

In Lviv, allegations that the authorities have allowed racism to fester have prompted incredulity and soul-searching among councillors and government officials. Few in the city believe that the tournament will experience high-profile racist incidents - each match will be heavily policed and monitored while many hardcore hooligans show little interest away



Fascist echoes ... supporters of Karpaty Lviv display a Nazi swastika Reuters

from club football. The authorities admit, though, that they have previously given little thought to the concept of racism until prompted to do so by intense media scrutiny. Before Campbell's comments, the families of two of England's black players, Theo Walcott and Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, said they would probably not attend the 16-team tournament, fearing abuse or violence in Ukraine, where England will play their first three matches.

Lviv's ruling party, Svoboda, whose slogan is "one race, one nation, one fatherland", has been variously described as fascist, neo-Nazi and extreme. Members prefer to say they are nationalists and friends of Marine Le Pen's Front National.

Andriy Khomytskyy, 29, a Svoboda councillor in Lviv, said that there are no issues of race to confront within

the city because there are so few foreigners. "There is no problem here, not like other Ukrainian cities. In Kerch [in eastern Ukraine] they have a problem because of illegal Chinese and Koreans."

Khomytskyy, a one-time regular on the terraces of the local team, Karpaty Lviv, remains resistant to confronting racism either on the terraces or on the streets where students have been beaten. He said of the fans at Karpaty: "They are patriotic, not racist."

When told of how black students said they feared for their safety, he shrugged and said that racist incidents are difficult to prove: "It is nuanced. It is difficult to say if it is racism if a black man is attacked. Often, it is just banditry."

Khomytskyy said that the best way to limit racist incidents is to limit

immigration and ensure that the resident culture prevails, adding that he has spoken at length about race "problems" with his associates in the Front National. "They tell me that they cannot go to certain [Arab] areas in France because you would get beaten and they might take your white girl," he said.

Oleh Berezuk, who is head of the mayor's office, said that the city and the country were trying to develop strategies to educate local people and allay the fears of immigrants. "Lack of knowledge presents a problem for us. One has to remember our history - the Nazis killed or deported most of the Jewish population in the 1940s and we were under Russia and the Soviet Union until 1991. These issues are relatively new for us," he said.

Some have swung towards the extreme right because of a belief that the left let them down during the Soviet era, he claimed. Ukraine has not had the benefit of experiencing what it is like to adapt to a generation of immigrants in the same way as Britain and France have.

"The brutality of the Soviets was something that we were told about by our parents and grandparents. We still feel it, in the same way that people in the west still feel the lessons about race. We need some time and understanding as we learn," he said.

Rafal Pankowski, of the Warsaw-based Never Again Association and co-ordinator of the anti-racist programme for Euro 2012, said it should be remembered that this is the first major football event to be held in eastern Europe in the modern era.

"These countries are beginning to talk about these issues. We have started a dialogue. We have already achieved something before the tournament has started," he said.

Timothy Garton Ash, page 20 »