

Euro 2012: Ukraine rocked by racism controversy

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- This file photo dated on May 1, 2006 shows Ukrainian skinheads and nationalists gesture as they take part in a May Day rally in downtown Kiev, Ukraine. With a week to go until the Euro 2012 soccer tournament, Ukraine has been rocked by accusations of rampant racism after a British documentary showed thugs in one the Euro 2012 host cities violently beating dark-skinned soccer fans during a domestic league match. Photo: Sergei Chuzavkov / AP

KIEV, Ukraine (AP) — [Victor Chikelu](#), a Nigerian medical student, was punched and told to go back to Africa by a drunk in the Kiev subway two years ago. But he, like other Africans who have suffered racist abuse in Ukraine's capital, has a message for soccer fans: Don't boycott Euro 2012.

"I don't think this should prevent the fans from coming down," said Chikelu. "People just need to take precautions and everything should be fine."

He points to no fatal attacks in the last 2 or 3 years as a sign that the situation is perhaps improving. Still, he says he plans to leave the country as soon as he graduates next year.

A tall and muscular man, Chikelu says the memory of the attack haunts him whenever he's out in public.

"I have gotten used to this feeling ... If I notice anything, I am always ready to run," he said, sitting by Kiev's main avenue, which within days will turn into a fan zone with big screens, packed with people from all over Europe as the soccer tournament, co-hosted by Ukraine and Poland, kicks off.

With a week to go until the tournament, Ukraine has been rocked by accusations of rampant racism. A British documentary showed thugs in one of the Euro 2012 host cities violently beating dark-skinned supporters of the same team during a domestic league match. And former England player [Sol Campbell](#) warned fans to stay at home or risk coming back in a coffin.

Ukrainian officials were outraged by the comments, saying the country has many sins but that racism isn't one of them. They are vowing that foreign fans will be safe and will have fun.

Experts and ethnic community leaders paint a different picture. They say several dozen ethnically motivated attacks take place here each year and that authorities are reluctant to investigate and punish the perpetrators and protect the victims. Dark-skinned students feel uncomfortable in public places, avoid public transport and prefer to hang out in groups.

"If we talk about physical attacks and cases of hate crimes, it's definitely a problem in big cities," said [Iryna Fedorovich](#), an activist with the Kiev-based advocacy group No Borders. "If we talk about xenophobia, it's everywhere."

But while racism exists in Ukraine, it's not so rampant that foreign visitors should be scared of coming, community leaders say. In fact, they believe that hosting a major international event will attract attention to the problem and promote diversity.

"Racism is a problem in Ukraine, but I don't think (Campbell) was right to say that you will return in a coffin," said [Charles Asante-Eboa](#), President of the [African Center](#) in Ukraine, which unites tens of thousands of African working and studying here.

"They (fans) will come, they will be happy and they will go away with a lot of memories and nostalgia for the welcome they will receive in Ukraine," Asante-Eboa said. "I am sure Ukraine will meet them with open arms."

The accusations of racism — and Campbell's comment in particular — have caused outrage and disbelief here. Authorities say Ukraine is being slandered by people who've never been to the country.

"I am sure nothing is going to happen — we all need to calm down and return back to reality," said [Foreign Ministry](#) spokesman [Oleh Voloshyn](#).

Ukrainian authorities are so confident of a peaceful tournament that police officers won't mix with fans during the games and will be discreetly positioned a few minutes away from the action.

"We will have a normal, safe atmosphere for foreign citizens," said Oleh Motveitsov, an [Interior Ministry](#) official charged with security measures during the Euros. "Ukraine will be hospitable."

"The only piece of advice I have for foreign fans is not to get into trouble, not to get drunk and not to get involved with people they don't know to avoid problems," Motveitsov said. "Better to stay together as a group than going alone in dark back alleys."

Chikelu painted a grim picture of being an African in this former Soviet nation. Like many other African students, he chose Ukraine's top medical school for his education because it costs him a relatively cheap \$5,000 per year. But he said his female colleagues stay in their dormitories after dark — and that men tend to drive in cars or take taxis to avoid racist confrontations.

Another Nigerian student, Olaolu Sunkalmi Femi, appeared in court this week to face attempted murder charges after he fought back against an attack by five Ukrainians in what he says was a racist crime. He

fended off his assailants with a broken bottle, fearing for his life, and some of them suffered light cuts, his defense team says. If convicted he faces a minimum 10-15 years, and up to life.

"We hope that the court will do justice, but the very fact that he's accused and in jail is lamentable," said Maksym Butkevych, a human rights activist with the Kiev-based advocacy group No Borders.

Most observers here agree that boycotting Euro 2012 would be a bad idea. Chikelu said many of his Ukrainian friends are unaware of racism being a problem and that being exposed to people from different cultures and backgrounds will boost tolerance.

"Their coming is an instrumental way to solve the problem," he said. "Staying away doesn't help it."

Euro 2012 "will give an opportunity to Ukrainians to see that people of different colors live in other countries and that will help promote diversity in Ukraine," said Asante-Eboa, the African community leader.

Activists say the Euros should also prompt Ukrainian authorities to investigate and prevent racist attacks and promote tolerance when the championship is over.

"I would be more happy if they can guarantee that this country is racism-free after the Euro period," said Fedorovich, the anti-racism activist.