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“Euro 2012 violence among Polish and Russian fans could prompt changes by UEFA and FIFA” by Martin Rogers

The most widespread case of soccer hooliganism for more than two decades erupted between fans of Poland and Russia on Tuesday, and the incident has prompted the sport's two biggest governing bodies to order an investigation that may change the way major tournaments are organized. In the hours leading up to a 1-1 draw between the two teams in Group A of Euro 2012, hundreds of fans fought bloody battles with fists, bottles and metal weapons on the streets of the Polish capital Warsaw, as riot police firing rubber bullets and releasing tear gas tried to keep them apart.

A series of factors combined to make this the highest-risk match of the championships in terms of fan violence, as highlighted by Yahoo! Sports on Monday, and unfortunately violence transpired. Although officials claimed only 10 people had been seriously injured, onlookers estimated that figure to be much lower than they observed.

The disgraceful scenes, the likes of which soccer hoped were a thing of the past, will prompt an immediate response from both UEFA (the European governing body that is organizing the tournament) and FIFA (the international overseer of all things soccer).

A wide-ranging investigation into Tuesday's events has already begun, in conjunction with Polish police, anti-hooliganism agencies from both nations and Euro 2012 security bosses. Once the tournament is over, the same group of FIFA and UEFA officials will consider ways to avoid a repeat of clashes that overshadowed the on-field action on day five of the tournament.

A FIFA source told Yahoo! Sports that one proposal certain to gain support is for the organizing committee for the World Cups and European Championship to have leeway to alter the scheduling and location of certain matches in order to make outbreaks of hooliganism less likely.

The fact that the Poland vs. Russia game took place on Russia's national independence day has been cited as a major cause of Tuesday's problems because fans celebrated the occasion with a march across an iconic Warsaw bridge toward the stadium.

It was on Poniatowski Bridge that the most serious flashpoints occurred, with groups of Poland fans waiting for the Russian contingent and chanting insults. One wire report stated that Russian fans responded by hurling missiles, setting off heavy skirmishes. Other reports told of instances where the Polish fans attacked first – but it is clear that neither side was innocent in this sorry saga.

With the game taking place in Warsaw – the easiest location for Russian fans to reach via air and ground travel – the likelihood of trouble was ramped up further.

Under current guidelines, the match was played on this date, and in this city, simply because that is how the Euro 2012 draw came out. The source confirmed that changes may soon be made to alter the system and allow more flexibility.

"If the fixtures could have been switched around even by one day it could have made a big difference," said the source. "Of course, tensions would still have been high, but take away the factor of Russia's national day and
things could have been a little better. Then there is location: Putting the game in a different city could have affected the number of troublemakers who traveled. A more compact city might also have made it easier for police to control things. It is food for thought and it is one of many things that will be discussed."

Tensions between Russia and Poland have long been high aside from soccer. The Soviet Union exercised control over Poland for decades during the Cold War and there have been disagreements between the nations over the way the death of Polish president Lech Kaczyński, killed in an airplane crash over Russian airspace in 2010 along with 95 others, was handled.

As of 2 p.m. PT on Tuesday, Yahoo! Sports was told that the number of arrests had unofficially reached 159, but a police spokesman insisted that figure did not take into account those held in some of the city's smaller police stations and was expected to grow significantly.

"This operation will not end for some time," said the spokesman. "We want to find all of those responsible for causing this situation and stop those who still want to cause more problems."

Polish freelance photographer Zbigniew Kucharski witnessed many fights between groups of fans. "The truth is it that both sides wanted to fight," Kucharski told Yahoo! Sports. "I was told that some of the more extreme hooligan groups from either side had contacted each other and arranged where and when the fighting would take place."

Inside the National Stadium, one of the most entertaining games of the tournament was played out. Russia had the chance to guarantee its place in the quarterfinals when Alan Dzagoev scored his third goal of the tournament to establish the lead after 37 minutes.

However, Jakub Blaszczykowski produced a spectacular equalizer on 57 minutes with a magnificent left-foot strike that ensured the outcome ended even. Going into the final round of matches in Group A, a draw or better against Greece would see Russia advance regardless of what happens between Poland and the Czech Republic, where the Poles must win to avoid elimination.

Regardless of whatever exploits their national teams can muster in the rest of the competition, though, the soccer reputation of both countries has been seriously tarnished.

Possible Reflection Topics:

1. Do you believe that people take sports too seriously? Do fans of different sports become too involved, thereby provoking violent outbreaks? How so?
2. What measures can be taken to prevent such actions from occurring in the future? Would your solution fix the problems entirely, or do your suggestions have shortcomings, as well? How so?
3. Are you a sports fan? Are there ever times when you personally become too involved in the game? What prevents you from rioting?