

Belated Russia sanctions show politics and sport cannot be kept apart



- The IOC, FIFA and UEFA dragged their feet before imposing bans on Russian athletes and teams after the invasion of Ukraine

DUBAI: Among the many consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been the death knell for keeping sport and politics separated.

For years the concept has been trotted out whenever convenient for authorities such as the International Olympic Committee, FIFA or UEFA.

But history is full of examples of politics sticking its nose into sport, and of sanctions that followed. Who can forget boycott of the Moscow Olympics in 1980 by 66 countries, led by the US, or the reciprocal boycott by 16 countries from the Eastern Bloc of the Los Angeles Olympics four years later?

Even further back, politics interfered in football in the 1930 World Cup, the first occasion the event was held, with the participation of just 13 countries due to the distance between Europe and Uruguay, where the tournament took place.

There were other political issues; Yugoslavia faced a problem choosing its squad for the tournament after Croatian players refused to sing the Yugoslav anthem, with the team predominantly made up of Serbian players to avoid the issue.

Six decades later, Yugoslavia was in the news again.

Just prior to Euro 92 in Sweden, the war-torn country was ejected from the tournament as it slowly disintegrated into Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Republic of Socialist Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia.

It was a historical precedent, and the first suspension by UEFA.

Astonishingly, Denmark came in as an 11th hour replacement and went on to win the trophy, beating Germany 2-0 in the final.

The Yugoslav Wars apart, Europe has mostly seen relative peace in the last 50 years, until the conflict in Ukraine.

At first, FIFA and UEFA dithered and dragged their feet, as had the IOC for years, before having no option but to eject Russia from all club and international tournaments, including the UEFA Champions League and the FIFA World Cup qualifiers for Qatar 2022.

The ban on the Russian national team has benefitted Poland, their opponents in the World Cup qualifier initially scheduled for March 24. Now the Poles will meet the winners of Sweden vs the Czech Republic, both of whom announced they would refuse to play Russia should they be allowed to stay in the competition.

Similarly, at club level, German club RB Leipzig have qualified for the Europa League quarter-finals, after the expulsion of their opponents Spartak Moscow.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of the sanctions on Russia has been the freezing of all of Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich's assets, meaning the reigning Champions League winners now cannot be sold, sell tickets for

upcoming matches, or carry out any transfers, among other restrictions.

Historically, sanctions against non-European teams have been far easier for the likes of FIFA to implement.

Iraq, due to crowd trouble, socio-political concerns and the outbreak of several wars, has been banned from holding competitive matches on home soil no less than six times since 1980. The latest of those — imposed in 2013 — came to an end only last week when FIFA announced that the Iraqi federation will now be allowed to hold a World Cup qualifier against the UAE in Baghdad on March 24.

But it is not just home matches they were banned from.

In 2009, football's governing body banned Iraq from all international competitions after the government dissolved its National Olympic Committee and national sport federations in breach of FIFA and Olympic regulations. The suspension was removed in March 2010.

Kuwait, who in the 1970s and 80s were, alongside Iraq, two of the region's powerhouses, have also suffered several FIFA suspensions for government interference.

The latest came on Oct. 15, 2015, when Kuwaiti clubs and the national team were barred from international competition. FIFA President Gianni Infantino lifted the ban Dec. 12, 2018, but the damage done to Kuwait's football development, not to mention its reputation, will take a lot longer to fix.

In Africa too, many suspensions and sanctions have been imposed on nations which have flouted FIFA's regulations.

Most famously South Africa was banned from international competition for effectively 40 years due to apartheid, and were only welcomed back into the football family by FIFA in 1992. They would go on to win the 1996 Africa Cup of Nations on home soil.

No doubt, during conflicts such as the one we are witnessing in Ukraine, football and sport in general are not among the concerns of many who are suffering, but to claim that politics and sport should be kept apart is not only

historically hypocritical, but allows for nations and individuals to literally get away with murder.

FIFA, UEFA and the IOC did not initially cover themselves in glory, but having taken major steps to sanction Russia, it remains to be seen whether other nations who have similarly stepped out of line will suffer the same consequences.
