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Henrikh Mkhitaryan: Politics and Fear in the Europa League

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The final of Europa League is due to be played in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, but there were some concerns about such nomination which have proven to be right, as the player Henrikh Mkhitaryan has decided not to travel for the match, and thus to deprive his club, Arsenal, of his presence that has been fundamental for the Gunners during the whole season.

But this is not the first time that Mkhitaryan declined to play in that country, as he failed to appear in a match in 2015 when he was under contract with Borussia Dortmund and not too far in the present season with Arsenal in October 2018 when due to play a match in the Europa League group stage.

The issue of politics and sport or religion and sport is a never-ending story and I am unfortunately certain that Baku's case will be repeated. We simply need to remember the two Iranian footballers that were sanctioned by their own FA after playing with their Greek club Panionios against Maccabi Tel Aviv in the Europa League in 2017. Or, outside football, not long ago in March 2019, the young Iranian chess prodigy Aryan Golamin failed to appear against his Israeli adversary at a tournament in Sweden.

In the case of Mkhitaryan it was said that fear was the issue and that him and his family decided together not to go to Azerbaijan. We all might understand that, but when you know how UEFA and a host nation of a UEFA final control all and every possible problem that might emerge, it is rather strange to think that his was a mere fear of going to Baku.

So, the Armenian player has made his choice allegedly based on panic to go to a country that is in a cold war with its neighbour, but I guess that politics are behind his decision. Thus, what could his club, or even UEFA, do? As for Arsenal, there is not much room as its footballer's behaviour is an internal matter and either they can sanction him for not fulfilling his contractual duties or let it pass, which is what seems to have been the case.

As for UEFA, having to face the desertion of a world-class player due to a personal decision directly or indirectly linked to politics in a final of one of its competition, is really a shame but nothing can be legally done against the footballer or his club, which is the only one that can take a disciplinary path against him.

I personally remember the case of the then-called *Pamesa Valencia*, a basketball club that did not appear at a match of the Euroleague against Maccabi Tel Aviv in 2004 and lost it as a sanction, and with that, a real and strong possibility of going through the Final Four of that season. The players of the team sent a letter to their club stating that they would not travel to Israel due to the political situation and the threats of Hamas to start new terrorist attacks.

The players and their families panicked and the club had to back them, despite the sure sanction of losing the match and other probable disciplinary issues. But as an old Spanish saying states, "Fear is free" and thus nobody can control it as it is based on personal thoughts and issues. And as most of our dismays have already been felt by our antecessors on Earth, let us remember the great Sophocles who gave us a phrase for eternity that can close this case: "To the man who is afraid, everything rustles..."