

Roland-Garros 2023: Kyiv and Prishtina turn the Auteuil ochre pale

Description

The tennis elbow of the yellow ball: the Balkan and Russian-Ukrainian powder kegs invited themselves to the French Open to highlight the tensions between patriotism and sporting values. The 2023 edition of the tournament has been heckled by geopolitical hiccups that have crept in between the white lines, and the unrest in Prishtina and Kyiv has been transferred to the French Open.

Porte d'Auteuil is well known for its stadium, where legends such as Evert, Nadal, and Seleš have left their mark on the Parisian ochre with sporting exploits. But this arena, where people sweat under a blazing sun, can also be transformed into a political arena where people boo, and war dominates. While the sport where balls court the lines have seen many controversies since the beginning of the Open Era in 1968, the 2023 edition of the French Open has become particularly heated in politico-media chaos that has been fanned and exploited by current events in Eastern Europe.

Regarding European conflicts, the battle continues right up to the net. The best opportunities are the Grand Slam tournaments, all of which have experienced controversy since the start of the war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022. But these tensions are not confined to the Grand Slam tournaments: the fates of Kosovo and Artsakh have also occasionally reached the net.



From the Australian Open to the French Open, the shadow of the Đoković and Khachanov controversies

The first to open the Porte d'Auteuil scandal ball was Serbian player Novak Đoković, currently ranked third in the ATP rankings. During the traditional signing on the on-court camera after his first-round win over American Aleksandar Kovachević (6/3-6/2-7/6[1]) on 29 May 2023, the Serb wrote on the marker “?????? ?? ???? ??????! ???? ??????” (Kosovo is the heart of Serbia! Stop the violence). As his father is from the Serb minority in Kosovo (Zvečan/Zvečan municipality), Novak Đoković has always taken a stance against the latter's independence, siding with Belgrade. At his post-match press conference, he insisted he could do it again if necessary and had no regrets. These statements came at the same time as violent clashes in four towns in northern Kosovo, where recently elected mayors of Albanian origin were due to take office in Leposaviq/Leposavić, Mitrovica North, Zubin Potok, and Zvečan/Zvečan. Criticized by Belgrade and even by Brussels, these ballots counted less than 1,500 votes cast out of nearly 45,000 voters. As the powerful Srpska Lista, the leading Serbian party in Kosovo, and with it all Serbian voters decided to boycott the elections (the turnout was 3.47%), the assumption of office by these Albanian mayors presented considerable risks, which the European

Union pointed out in advance. The Serbia of President Vučić and the number 3 in the world, has also been criticized for its lack of sanctions against Russia, its closest ally, since the start of the war in Ukraine. As a result, protesting Serbs have stormed KFOR (NATO's mission in Kosovo) soldiers, perceived as pawns of an illegitimate military force: the death toll is said to have risen to around a hundred injured on both sides. Recently, the President of Kosovo, Vjosa Osmani-Sadriu, said she was open to holding new elections, provided that a petition to this effect was signed by 20% of the electorate.

Thus, A controversy has arisen in which defenders of freedom of expression and the pro-Russian world are pitted against Kosovar institutions. Jeton Hadergjonaj, president of the Kosovar tennis federation, has called for N. Đoković to be excluded from the ATP circuit. On the other hand, tournament director Amélie Mauresmo and the French Tennis Federation preferred to keep a low profile and not initiate any sanctions against him.

A Russian player of Armenian origin, Karen Khachanov, ranked tenth in the world, caused a similar incident at the 2023 Australian Open when he signed "*Artsakh stay strong*" on camera. Displaying his support for the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh/High Karabagh, the player called on the Armenian resistance in the fighting between them and the forces in Baku. The controversy did not cause as much of a stir, as the Russian enjoyed a better reputation than the Serb, and he was not punished either. On the other hand, the Azerbaijan Tennis Federation called for K. Khachanov to be excluded from the circuit.

War darkens the courts, and Ukrainian women cause trouble

The other bone of contention on the Philippe-Chatrier and Suzanne-Lenglen courts was the clash between Ukrainian players on the one hand and Belarussians or Russians on the other. While 6 Ukrainian players and 17 players under neutral banners (4 Belarussians and 13 Russians) were in the main draw in the first round, only four matches pitted Ukrainians against these players. As the players knew, no Ukrainian would shake their hand at the end of the match, as has been the case since January 2023. Marta Kostyuk, Elina Svitolina, Anhelina Kalinina, Dayana Yastremska, and Lesia Tsurenko refused to share a moment of mutual respect with a player from an "enemy" country, despite sporting traditions, pointing to their opponents' lack of commitment to the dictators Aliaksandr Loukachenka and Vladimir Poutine. This controversial practice led to whistles, particularly from Elina Svitolina, who was cheered on by the public throughout her matches.

The chaos comes at a time when Ukrainian tennis is more vital than ever: A. Kalinina became the sixth player from the country to reach the world's Top 25 in the WTA rankings, joining E. Svitolina, the former world number three, is back on the circuit after giving birth in October 2022. Now ranked 73rd in the world after her meteoric rise to the Porte d'Auteuil quarterfinals, Svitolina remains a well-known ambassador for Ukraine. She had to contend with a Belarussian and two Russians along the way. True to her principles, she did not greet either the Russians Anna Blinkova and Daria Kasatkina or the Belarussian Aryna Sabalenka (world number two).

There are, however, some nuances. At the end of the round of 16 match between E. Svitolina and D. Kasatkina, the two players exchanged a look and a thumbs-up on the Russian's initiative. As the Ukrainian knows, the Russian is in the Kremlin's sights because of her relationship with a woman and her anti-war stance; D. Kasatkina even posted a tweet thanking E. Svitolina for her excellent fight. A more unfortunate gesture came at the end of the quarter-final between E. Svitolina and Belarussian A.

Sabalenka, who won 6/4-6/4, went to the net to shake hands with the Ukrainian, who saw it as a provocation (unintentional, according to Sabalenka).

These tensions have also cast a shadow over the reputation of certain Belarusian and Russian players. Veronika Kudermetova, ranked 14th in the WTA, has been sponsored by the Russian oil group Tatnaft since 2021. Under European sanctions because of its central role in supplying Russian military bases, this controversial sponsor does not seem to bother the player, who was forced to remove the logo from her outfit during the French Open and Wimbledon tournaments. As the guest of honor of the President of the Russian Republic of Tatarstan, who has supported V. Putin since the very first hours of the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian also experimented with ending her match without shaking hands after losing to Ukrainian A. Kalinina (7/5-5/7). Kalinina (7/5-5/7-6/2) in the semi-finals of the Rome 2023 tournament. The Belarussian Sabalenka was questioned numerous times about her links with President Lukashenko, who was seen at her side in 2018. After missing two press conferences, she finally declared that she did not favor the war and was not supporting A. Lukashenko at the moment.

Against this backdrop, significant support is also emerging from the tour: Poland's world number 1 Iga Świątek, this year's winner of the tournament, wore a ribbon in the colors of Ukraine at each of her matches, and Slovakia's Anna Karolína Schmiedlová, ranked 74th in the world, wearing a yellow and blue outfit, said she felt very concerned by the fate of her neighboring country.

Heading for Wimbledon

In 2022, the Wimbledon tournament was held without Russian and Belarussian players and did not award any points. The 2023 edition, which will take place from 7 to 23 July, will lift the Russian and Belarussian participation ban. It has been decided that £1 will be donated to Ukraine for each ticket sold. In 2022, the symbolic trophy was lifted by Moscow-born Kazakh Elina Rybakina. The prevailing idea was that, beyond nationalities and borders, sport should bring people together, not punish or divide them.

The same applies to the 2023 French Open: while solidarity is essential, and since sport cannot ignore geopolitics, a Ukrainian-Russian or Ukrainian-Belarussian handshake and a peaceful message on the camera screen can serve as a reminder of the primary value of sport and try to bring people together.

Thumbnail: Daria Kasatkina (May 2023). Booed by the public after her match against Ukraine's Elina Svitolina, the Russian player known for her anti-Putin and anti-war stance called for greater tolerance and not to « spread hatred » (source: Wikimedia commons/Hamelton).

* Arnaud Bezard is a Master's student in European Interdisciplinary Studies at the College of Europe (Natolin, Poland).

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Auteur-article : Arnaud BEZARD*