

FRANCE - OPINION

European football - Champions League final chaos: France picks up the trophy for incompetence

Saturday 4 June 2022, by [RAMDANI Ilyes](#) (Date first published: 30 May 2022).

The showcase event of European football, the final of the Champions League, was marred by numerous incidents at the Stade de France in the northern suburbs of Paris on Saturday night. Hundreds of Liverpool fans were 'kettled', blocked at the entrance to the stadium, and then tear or pepper gassed by police officers before the club's match with Real Madrid. As Ilyes Ramdani writes in this opinion article, this failure comes on the back of years spent by the French public authorities pursuing a repressive, incompetent and often violent approach to maintaining order at public events.

French know-how is being exported to the world. Reserved for a long time for troubled city suburbs, then used against the ['yellow vest'](#) protestors and afterwards for any form of demonstration, France's failed approach to maintaining law and order was beamed live to more than 300 million television viewers around the world on Saturday evening.

At Saint-Denis in the capital's northern suburbs where the Champions League football final took place, and in Paris itself where thousands of fans gathered to watch the match on a giant screen, journalists filmed images of crowds being charged by police officers, sprayed with tear gas or ['kettled'](#) in confined areas. At the approaches to the Stade de France stadium in Saint-Denis itself the chaos was such that the match kick-off was - highly unusually - delayed by more than 30 minutes.

The full details of what took place are still emerging, but what we do know is depressing enough. The measures put in place by the city's police to filter arriving supporters in advance of the match quickly collapsed; thousands of people found themselves jammed against the Stade de France railings with or without a ticket for the game; it took several hours for some supporters to get into the ground; some people got into the ground by climbing fences; and overwhelmed police officers sprayed tear gas at crowds even though they were calm and included men, women and children.

Paul Machin, creator and presenter of the independent The Redmen TV which covers Liverpool football club, wrote on [Twitter](#): "I've been going the footy for 33 years and followed Liverpool all around the world. I've been to 5 Finals in Europe. I have never seen such ineptitude in organisation, but worse was the horrendous heavy handed behaviour of the French police. Tear gas. Guns pointed at fans." Ian Byrne, a Labour Member of the British Parliament from Liverpool, [Tweeted](#) that he had just "endured" one of the "worst experiences" of his life. "Horrendous security and organisation putting lives at risk. I pray no fans have been injured because of the disgraceful lack of organisation & expertise," the MP wrote.

In a statement Liverpool FC said they were “hugely disappointed” by what took place outside the stadium before their match against Real Madrid. “.... Supporters should not have to experience the scenes we have witnessed tonight. We have officially requested a formal investigation into the causes of these unacceptable issues,” the club said.

France’s ‘repressive’ approach backfires

While we await for that much-needed investigation, we should note that there is no great mystery about the structural causes behind the fiasco in Saint-Denis on Saturday evening. To understand that we simply have to note that access to the Stade de France was managed together by the Paris police force - the Préfecture de la Police - and the French football authorities the Fédération Française de Football (FFF), the latter acting as a kind of subcontractor for its European big sister UEFA. Football fans in France know this administrative and sporting double act well: it is the same one which has for more than a decade applied a doctrine of “full-on repression” that is dazzling in its failure.

Faced with violence in and around football stadia in France the public authorities chose to resort to repression. This approach was subsequently criticised in a [report in May 2020](#) jointly written by communist MP Marie-George Buffet and fellow MP Sacha Houlié from the ruling La République en Marche party.

On top of stadium bans (known as ‘IDS’ in French), the widespread gathering of intelligence on individuals, a smoke bomb ban and collective punishments, the authorities have also deployed a new weapon, one popular with state prefects: a travel ban. In the absence of a more targeted solution, the authorities got used to avoiding the issue of managing fans by banning everyone from everywhere in many cases - even at the risk of undermining basic freedoms.

It is this approach that came back to bite the French authorities on Saturday evening. As they had failed to develop a doctrine and any know-how in this area, France became caught out by its own blinkered approach.

Yet nothing that happened on Saturday evening was in any way unforeseeable. The number of fans with tickets? This was evidently known, and simply linked to the capacity of the Stade de France. The number of fans without tickets? There was every indication that there would be a lot of them: the intelligence services, for example, had [estimated](#) that up to 50,000 ticket-less Liverpool fans would come to Paris. The risk that some people without a ticket would try to get inside the stadium? All this was known, too, coming just a year after the Euro final at Wembley in London where the same scenario occurred, and which was subject to an independent review whose [report was published in December 2021](#).

But despite all of that, and despite the fact that the match took place at a site in Saint-Denis that has hosted major events of this type for 25 years and that there was an apparently obedient crowd, the French organisation of the event was a marked failure. On top of this the authorities also disgracefully used a shameless comms exercise to shift the blame - another local speciality.

As is his habit, interior minister Gérald Darmanin used Twitter to try to rewrite the history that was taking place before his eyes. “Thousands of British ‘supporters’ with no tickets or fake tickets forced their way into the entrances and in some cases assaulted stewards,” the minister wrote, flying in the face of all the statements and reports from both French and foreign journalists who were on the spot.

The Interior Ministry has past form for this. On May 1st 2019 Darmanin's predecessor Christophe Castaner published a Tweet which will endure for posterity because of its remoteness from the truth. On that day, after a few dozen people had taken shelter in a well-known Paris hospital to escape the tear gas used at a demonstration, the minister had claimed: "Here, at Pitié-Salpêtrière, they attacked a hospital." It was his way at the time of [justifying a violent charge](#) carried out by his officers.

Three years later and the wrongdoers are no longer French protestors but English football fans. Which is even better as they do not have a vote in France. By resorting to well-worn rhetoric about football fan violence, Gérard Darmanin is appealing to base instincts and clearing himself of any responsibility (as for the far-right, [they](#) are blaming "thugs" from Saint-Denis). In a [statement](#) issued a few minutes after the interior minister's Tweet the police prefecture praised the "rapid intervention of the forces of law and order" which had enabled them to "restore calm".

Interior minister Gérard Darmanin and Paris police chief Didier Lallement have been operating in tandem for two years now and continue to combine with almost mind-blowing self-assurance a mixture of failures and self-satisfaction. Sticking to their long-held approach of turning a blind eye, the police authorities even tried to insist that events had nothing to do with any failure on their part.

Rob Harris a journalist for the news agency Associated Press, [described](#) how members of UEFA had to intervene after the media was stopped from filming crowds being dispersed with tear gas. A colleague of his, Steve Douglas, told how he was taken away, had his accreditation removed and was informed that he would not get it back until he deleted videos of the crowd that he had filmed.

In the French and international press Real Madrid's achievement in winning their 14th European title had to vie for attention with - and was even eclipsed by - the shameful images from outside the stadium; of families sprayed with tear gas, of fans forced to miss of the game even though they had paid hundreds or even thousands of euros to be there, of people who got into the stadium by climbing the fences, of journalists stopped from filming ... What would one have said if these scenes had occurred in Russia, Cameroon or Brazil?

On its website the BBC spoke of "[Paris chaos](#)" and a "miserable night for Liverpool and their supporters on every level imaginable", linking the incidents outside the ground to Liverpool's 1-0 defeat at the hands of their Spanish opponents. The London-based *Telegraph* also reported on events on its website using a [blunt headline](#): "Champions League final chaos after Liverpool fans tear-gassed by Paris police." In the subsequent article the newspaper contrasted the "calm" of the crowd with the behaviour of security guards who were "increasingly worried that they might lose control, causing more pressure on those waiting".

One can at least take some comfort today from the fact that there was no tragedy at the match. For example, a potentially fatal crush of fans; the grim memory of the tragic [Heysel Stadium disaster](#) of 1985 before the start of another European cup final is etched in Liverpool's long history. It is hard not to dwell on what might have happened, given that some people were clearly able to escape any checks and get into a stadium where the [November 2015 Paris terrorism attacks started in 2015](#).

But while, fortunately, the worst did not transpire, there is still the disgrace of what did happen. Emmanuel Macron, who [personally intervened](#) to ensure that a final originally due to be played in Saint Petersburg was [moved to Paris after Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#), now faces a political headache. The position of Didier Lallement, the prefect of police, should be untenable after such a nightmarish evening but the head of state has kept faith with him for three years through thick and thin. It would surely be unrealistic to expect him to change his mind.

Beyond the personalities involved, the state now has to rethink its approach to maintaining law and order and to its relations with the public and journalists. In just two years Paris is due to host the Olympic and Paralympic Games, whose opening ceremony is supposed to take place on the banks of the River Seine.

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P.S.

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- The original French version of this opinion article can be found here:

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