

ECJ adviser delivers setback to football bodies in TV case

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UEFA and FIFA have suffered a blow in their bid to generate maximum broadcast revenues from the European Championships and World Cup after an adviser to Europe's highest court stated that Britain and Belgium should be allowed to retain their free-to-air 'listed events' laws.

The two countries have legislation that blocks pay-TV broadcasters from acquiring domestic rights for the top national team tournaments and therefore restrict the pool of potential broadcast partners for FIFA and UEFA. The governing bodies appealed to the European Court of Justice (ECJ) after the General Court, Europe's second-highest legal body, last year rejected their challenge to a European Commission ruling that backed the stance of Britain and Belgium.

"If those competitions are considered by member states to be events of major importance for their society, those member states may, in order to ensure broad public access, require that they be broadcast on free-to-air television," ECJ advocate general Niilo Jaaskinen wrote in a non-binding opinion.

The ECJ is set to rule on the case in the coming months, but Jaaskinen's opinion is a major setback for FIFA and UEFA as the court follows the advice of its advocate generals in the majority of cases. Britain's 'crown jewels' list ring-fences certain major sporting events for free-to-air broadcasters, including the World Cup, European Championships and Olympic Games, therefore denying FIFA and UEFA the potential to benefit from potentially more lucrative offers from the likes of pay-TV giant Sky.

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