

Infantino's problems mount as Wenger and key FIFA ally turn on him

Internal divisions cast fresh doubt over FIFA president's bid for another term

● **Infantino faces fresh criticism**

● **Wenger backs withdrawal**

● **UEFA threatens legal action**

AFP | Paris

Pressure on FIFA president Gianni Infantino intensified yesterday, with opposition emerging from within world football's governing body as well as from external critics over his since-abandoned proposal to open the World Cup to private investment.

Former Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger, appointed in 2019 by Infantino as FIFA's chief of global football development, said in a statement yesterday that "the decision to withdraw the project was absolutely necessary and beyond question".

His remarks followed hot on the heels of an extraordinary internal email to FIFA staff, seen by AFP, in which secretary-general Mattias Grafstrom appeared to distance himself from Infantino on the issue.

Previously seen as close to Infantino, Grafstrom describes the fiasco surrounding the plan as "a sad and reproachable series of events".

He adds: "Individuals, unstable moments and unfortunate episodes come and go. The institution, its mission and its

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I was not involved in this strategic plan and first became aware of the project through media reports. The decision to withdraw the project was absolutely necessary and beyond question, because I firmly believe in an independent FIFA that serves our game with commitment, transparency, and integrity

ARSENE WENGER

responsibility towards world football continue."

FIFA had floated the plan last Tuesday, saying it could raise up to \$4.2 billion based on a valuation of \$20 billion for a new commercial subsidiary, called the FIFA Forward Enterprise (FFE), which it proposed would run events such as the World Cup and Club World Cup.

By Saturday it was dead in the water as Infantino announced the humiliating climbdown after widespread condemnation, as UEFA wielded the nuclear option of boycotting all FIFA competitions, including the World Cup.

Far from calming the waters or shoring up his presidency, Infantino has been swamped with criticism of his style of leadership and a previously smooth path to being re-elected unopposed to a fourth and final term



Former Arsenal's French manager Arsene Wenger (L) and FIFA President Gianni Infantino applaud ahead of a UEFA Women's Euro 2025 match (file photo)

next March in Rabat now looks a very rocky one indeed.

'Take immediate steps'

That is a problem down the road. For now, he has others to confront.

Even though he had withdrawn the scheme, UEFA issued a letter through their lawyers in the US threatening legal action over what they had scathingly described as a "shabby, backroom, opaque deal".

Both Grafstrom and Wenger as well as chief operating officer Kevin Lamour, who had

slammed the plan on Friday, are mentioned in the letter as being knowledgeable about the FFE and instructed to keep all "relevant materials".

"Dear Mr Infantino. UEFA hereby gives formal notice that it is actively considering legal action, arbitration, and/or regulatory complaints (together, the 'Proceedings') arising out of and in connection with the FFE plan proposed by FIFA and all related matters as further described below," their lawyer Andrew Levander said in the letter sent last Friday and seen by AFP.

"You and FIFA are required to take immediate steps to identify, locate, and preserve all documents and electronically stored information described in this Notice that are in your or FIFA's possession, custody, or control.

"These obligations arise independently of any internal retention policy you or your organization maintain and supersede any routine document destruction or deletion policies that would otherwise apply."

Several of UEFA's member associations -- Wales, Finland, Sweden and Serbia -- have with-



FIFA secretary-general Mattias Grafstrom, previously seen as close to Infantino, described the episode in an internal email as "a sad and reproachable series of events."

drawn their letters of support for Infantino and the English FA is strongly rumoured to be on the verge of also joining them.

The scant comfort for Infantino came from a handful of supporters, including 2030 World Cup co-hosts Morocco, as well as Kuwait, Qatar, where he has a house, and Lebanon, which granted him honorary citizenship in February.

However, it is the damning remarks by both Wenger and Grafstrom -- who shadowed Infantino throughout the World Cup -- that will twist the knife further.

Their criticism only adds to the impression that Infantino has lost the confidence of even his closest FIFA collaborators.

One of the most devastating blows to Infantino's plan was the resignation on Friday of his special advisor Carlos Cordeiro, who is also close to US President Donald Trump.

Amorim evokes spirit of Baresi as he bids revive AC Milan fortunes

AFP | Milan

New AC Milan coach Ruben Amorim vowed yesterday to honour the legacy of club legend Franco Baresi, who died last week, as he sets about reviving the fortunes of the ailing Italian giants.

Portuguese Amorim has returned to coaching after being sacked in January by Manchester United and faces a Milan derby against bitter rivals Inter in the Western Australia city of Perth on Wednesday.

Amorim's reign began with a 2-2 draw in a friendly against Celtic in Glasgow last month.

The 41-year-old's immediate target will be a top-four finish in Serie A after AC Milan missed out on the Champions League on the final day of last season.

"I feel that the group is really together," Amorim told reporters in Perth.

"The important thing is to continue with this spirit when things become difficult.

"In this club you need to win every game, so we need to keep that spirit all season."



Ruben Amorim gives instructions during a training session

AC Milan were boosted in the close season by veteran midfield maestro Luka Modric agreeing a one-year contract extension.

Amorim said Modric would play against Inter, having just competed at his fifth World Cup where Croatia were knocked out in the last 32 by Portugal.

"We did a lot to get him back at least for one more year," Amorim said of the former Tottenham and Real Madrid star, who turns 41 in September.

'No decision' on Mudryk future after Chelsea return: Alonso

AFP | London

Chelsea manager Xabi Alonso said yesterday "no decision" had been made on Mykhailo Mudryk's future but added the winger could play in pre-season after returning from a doping ban.

Ukrainian international Mudryk was suspended for four years after failing a 2024 drug test, but has won an appeal and was permitted on Friday to resume his football career.

The 25-year-old has not played since November 2024 and there have been rumours that Chelsea could sanction a loan move to bring him up to speed, or even a permanent transfer.

Asked about those possibilities in Hong Kong yesterday ahead of his side's friendly against Juventus, Alonso said: "No decision made.

"Everything has happened so quick, so the main thing is that we were thinking about the person, to feel that he was back in the group dynamic, part of the team.

"And we need to assess, but for sure... it is a special case with him, so we need to be sensitive."



Chelsea manager Xabi Alonso attends a press conference

Mudryk's ban came after testing positive for a low concentration of the prohibited substance meldonium.

He filed an appeal with the Court of Arbitration for Sport, and rule changes in the interim mean that if his test produced the same result now, he would not have faced charges.

Asked if Mudryk could play in Wednesday's game against Juventus, Alonso answered in the affirmative.

"Yesterday was more about the feelings, about the emotions to be back with the team, more

than to assess the fitness level," the Spaniard said.

"But yes, he could play. Maybe 90 minutes (is) too early. But he can be selected."

Alonso said he was also "looking forward to welcoming" Jordan Henderson after the England midfielder signed from Premier League rivals Brentford on Monday.

However, "we need to assess because of the injury he had, how long it will take to be fit".

Henderson broke his arm in a freak injury sustained while celebrating England's win

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XABI ALONSO

over Mexico at the World Cup.

The 36-year-old has followed international teammate Danny Welbeck, 35, to Stamford Bridge, in a shift from the Blues' long-held strategy of snapping up younger talent on lengthy contracts.

Chelsea's pre-season tour so far has comprised two friendlies in Australia -- a see-saw 6-4 win over Western Sydney Wanderers and a 2-1 defeat to London rivals Tottenham.

They face Fulham at Craven Cottage in their opening league game on August 24.