

# Drone flying “Greater Albania” flag provokes soccer riot in Serbia

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The UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) 2016 qualifying soccer match between Serbia and Albania, the first game between the two countries since 1967, was abandoned on Tuesday night after a drone trailing a “Greater Albania” flag was flown across the pitch at the Partizan stadium in Belgrade.

As the flag flew over his head, Serbian defender Stefan Mitrovic grabbed it. A fight ensued among the two teams, officials, and supporters who ran onto the pitch. As Albania players left the pitch they were pelted with smoke bombs, flares and other missiles. Riot police poured into the stadium to separate the two groups of supporters.

Elsewhere, in Vienna police were also reported to have prevented a “major conflict” between Serbian and Albanian residents of the Austrian capital on Tuesday night.

“What happened is something we can’t comprehend at the moment,” Serbian captain and Chelsea player Branislav Ivanovic, said. “All I can say is that we wanted to carry on and that we shielded the Albanian players every step of the way to the tunnel.” UEFA is considering what action to take against the two countries.

The flag, with its symbols of Greater Albania and including Kosovo, other parts of Serbia and Greece and about half of Macedonia and Montenegro, was a deliberate provocation. Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008 and half of the Albanian players are from the former Serbian province. As Kosovo is not a United Nations member state, it is not an official member of international soccer organisations and, although its national team can play friendly games, it cannot play in international competitions.

Either side of the map were pictures of Ismail Qemali

and Isa Boletini, principal figures in the Albanian Declaration of Independence in 1912, signalling the end of almost 500 years of Ottoman rule. In 2004, Kosovan President, Ibrahim Rugova, awarded Boletini the highest order “Hero of Kosovo” and, in 2012, a statue of him was uncovered in the city of Mitrovica on the 100th anniversary of Albanian independence. Mitrovica still remains bitterly divided, with regular clashes between ethnic Albanians and Serbs, most recently in June this year.

Fears about possible violence had already led to a clampdown on fans. On the Saturday before the match, the Albanian Football Federation had announced Albanian fans would not be allowed to travel to the match and that that the same rule would apply to Serbian supporters at the return game in Albania next year. Three rings of police surrounded the stadium on the night of the game. A Belgrade police spokesman told reporters, “The whole event will be under video surveillance; we’ll also use metal detectors, dogs that track explosive devices, in other words, nothing will be left to chance.”

However, none of these measures were directed at visiting dignitaries, many of whom have been responsible for fomenting nationalism and ethnic divisions in the region. It is alleged that the Albanian Prime Minister’s brother, Olsi Rama, who was sitting in an executive box, has been implicated in the drone incident. Albanian *News24* reported that Rama was detained for 40 minutes at the stadium and then driven to the airport. Upon returning to Tirana, Rama rejected “Serbian media speculation” that he was responsible for the incident and was controlling the drone.

“I was not arrested nor detained. I showed the police my American passport and camera. This lasted for a few minutes,” Rama added.

Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, who is supposed to visit Serbia on October 20, the first official visit by an Albanian leader for nearly 70 years, told reporters, “I am proud because the red-and-blacks [Albanian team] have won a football war. At the same time, I am sorry because of our neighbours [Serbia] who sent an ugly image to the world.”

Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic said that the incident was a deliberate and planned political provocation. “This has never happened at any football game and was prepared in advance. For me, the central question is how will the European Union and UEFA react, because had someone from Serbia unfurled a ‘Greater Serbia’ flag in Tirana or Pristina that would make it to the agenda of the UN Security Council.”

“This incident is particularly controversial because of the fact the brother of the Albanian prime minister, who is supposed to be a guest here, did it,” he added. “All this puts a political dimension of the whole event and this is a political provocation.”

Serbian political analyst Dragomir Anjelkovic declared that, “the Albanian state and some EU centres of power” were behind the provocation, which was “systematically planned and carried out by those who do not wish [Vladimir] Putin to visit Belgrade, who do not wish to see a stable Serbia.”

The Russian president is visiting Belgrade today to attend a military parade to mark the 70th anniversary of the city’s liberation from Nazi occupation in World War II.

On Tuesday, the European Union once again warned Serbia, which has refused to impose EU sanctions on Russia, that it should use the occasion of Putin’s visit to prove how “serious” it is about future EU membership. Spokesperson Maja Kojicancic said the EU “takes note” of the visit and that “Serbia, as all candidate countries... has made a commitment for a convergence (of policies)... including the positions on restrictive measures.” She added that the EU expects that Serbia’s “pro-EU direction will also be confirmed during this visit.”

The events at the Partizan stadium on Tuesday are a far cry from the days when the former Yugoslavia national team, comprising players from all the ethnic nationalities, was a force in world football. It played in eight World Cups, four Euros, and won the Olympic football tournament in 1960.

Responsibility for the descent into the violence that erupted on Tuesday can be firmly laid at the door of the Western powers, led by Germany and the United States.

They played the decisive role in engineering the break-up of Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and early 1990s through their cultivation of communalist politicians in the region.

Ethnic tensions exploded following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany in 1991. German imperialism promoted first the secession of Slovenia and then Croatia, as a means of countering Soviet influence and promoting its own in a region long-seen as a bulwark against any possible Soviet thrust into the Mediterranean.

The US abandoned its earlier opposition to the break-up of Yugoslavia in order to challenge Germany’s efforts to secure its own hegemony. Washington became the main sponsor of Bosnian, and then Kosovan independence against the dominant Serbian government’s efforts to maintain a unitary state.

The aim was the dismantling of the state-run economy and restoration of imperialist domination over Yugoslavia. Policies dictated by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the EU led to soaring inflation and huge job losses. There were mass strikes and protests in opposition, to which the rival ex-Stalinist bureaucrats responded by whipping up nationalism and competing for backing from the western powers. The result was civil war.



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