Croatia’s performance at World Cup used to promote far-right

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The good performance of the Croatian national team at this year’s FIFA World Cup has been used to promote far-right forces.

The Croatian national team finished second in the tournament, becoming one of the smallest nations to make it to the finals of the event. FIFA awarded the team’s captain, Luka Modri?, the “Golden Ball” as the Cup’s best player.

However, the team’s success was from the beginning overshadowed by incidents testifying to the sympathies of team members and trainers for the far-right. The vice trainer of the team, Ognjen Vukojevi?, was fined 15,000 Swiss francs by FIFA for saying “Slava Ukrainy” (Honor to Ukraine), a greeting associated with the far-right Ukrainian Insurrection Army (UPA), which collaborated with the Nazis during World War II and killed thousands of Jews and Poles. After beating Argentina in one of the group matches in late June, two members of the team sang the song “Za dom-spremni” by the far-right band Thompson in the changing booths. The song begins with the Croatian equivalent of “Heil Hitler!”

The team gave a huge platform to Marko Perkovi?, the lead singer of Thompson, by inviting him to participate with them in the celebrations in Zagreb on July 16. The national team was flown to the country’s capital accompanied by two Air Force carriers. The team was greeted by hundreds of thousands of people singing nationalist songs along with Perkovi?.

Perkovi? is one of the most notorious far-right figures in Europe’s musical scene. He fought in the Balkan wars of the 1990s and named his band after the gun he used (Thompson) to kill Serbs. In his songs, he has glorified the genocidal violence of the Croatian army against Serbs. He has also expressed sympathies for the Croatian fascist organization Ustasha, which collaborated with the Nazis during World War II.

The Croatian national team has a long-standing and notorious relationship with the country’s far-right. When the team came in third at the 1998 World Cup, the team’s main striker, Davor Šuker, had his picture taken in front of the grave of the Ustasha-leader Ante Paveli?, who governed the Nazi puppet state in Croatia from 1941 to 1945.

In 2006, during the European Cup, the national team used one of Thompson’s songs as its official anthem. As in much of Eastern Europe, hard-core Croatian football fans (“ultras”) tend to maintain relations with the far-right. Both the clubs and the Football Federation of Croatia have been fined many times for violence, hate speech and racist slogans. In the World Cup, racist incidents included fans throwing bananas on the field when Brazilian-born Eduardo da Silva was playing for Brazil’s national team.

The team and many of its most important players, including Modri? and Dejan Lovren, have also been involved in high-level corruption scandals.

The involvement of the team with corruption scandals and the far-right has led some cafe and restaurant owners in the country to refuse to broadcast games involving the national team, while fans have boycotted the World Cup.

The use of football to promote nationalism is not peculiar to Croatia. A predominantly working class sport, for millions of people football is not only a way of getting away from the stress and disappointments of everyday life, but is often seen, especially by young people, as a way of self-fulfillment and social advancement. However, the political and financial elites who promote the sport are pursuing entirely different aims: apart from the massive amounts of money that are linked to football, it is used to whip up
nationalism and divert attention from social tensions.

In recent years, this promotion of football by both
governments and companies as a means to propagate
nationalism has assumed ever greater dimensions, as
social and national tensions have risen within the EU.

The Croatian case is a particularly stark expression of
this general tendency. Over two decades after the break-
up of Yugoslavia and the Balkan wars, Croatia remains
mired in poverty and corruption within the ruling
oligarchy is rampant. The legacy of Stalinism and the
horrendous social conditions resulting from the right-
wing policies of the official “left” parties have
facilitated the rise of far-right forces. The ruling classes
also use the far-right to intensify their war preparations
against Russia, in which Croatia, a member state of
NATO and the EU, is deeply involved.

The country’s president, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, a
former NATO assistant secretary general for public
diplomacy, is playing a central role. Grabar-Kitarović
is a former member of the Croatian Democratic Union
HDZ, an extreme nationalist party that enjoys the
support of ultra-conservative and far-right groups, and
is now working to create a commission to
“investigate,” i.e., revise, the history of the Ustasha-run
Jasenovac concentration camp, known as “Auschwitz
of the Balkans,” where some 100,000 people were
murdered, among them Jews, Serbs, Sinti and Roma, as
well as political opponents of fascism.

The almost complete silence of the Western media on
the lineup of the Croatian political establishment and
the national team with the far-right stands in stark
contrast to its loud campaign to vilify Russia, which
hosted the World Cup (see: France wins football World
Cup).

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