

England-Bulgaria match highlights growing fascist activity around European soccer

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Due to the minimal coverage in newspaper and broadcast media of international events, the extent of far-right activity in Europe is not widely known. But millions were confronted with evidence of the flourishing of these forces during the recent Bulgaria-England soccer match.

The October 14 game in Sofia's Vasil Levski Stadium was halted twice, and England players threatened to walk off the pitch after racist chanting and fascist salutes from some Bulgarian fans.

The game was played in front of a reduced crowd. Of the stadium's 46,340 capacity, 5,000 seats were empty for the visit of England, as the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) ordered a partial closure following racist behaviour by fans at Bulgaria's games this year against the Czech Republic and Kosovo.

Bulgaria was already set to face a reduction of 3,000 seats for this month's qualifying game against the Czech Republic, but this week it was announced that it will have to play two matches behind closed doors—including against the Czech Republic—and pay a £64,650 fine due to the behaviour of its fans during the England game.

England captain Harry Kane spoke to the referee, Ivan Bebek, 28 minutes into the game, after a sustained period of monkey chants directed against black England players Marcus Rashford and Tyrone Mings. Some Bulgarian supporters were seen giving Nazi salutes and holding up shirts with the UEFA logo and the words "No Respect." The anti-racism campaign launched by the UEFA, the game's European governing body, is titled "Respect."

Kane's appeal to the referee was in line with the first step of the UEFA's three-stage protocol for responding to racist abuse during a game. Such an intervention is followed by a PA announcement. Step two involves the referee taking the players from the pitch and suspending play for a period. The final step is to abandon the game.

After Kane's intervention, Bebek instructed the stadium announcer to broadcast a message in Bulgarian and English calling for a halt to "racist behaviour" and warning that the match could be abandoned. When the abuse continued,

England manager Gareth Southgate spoke to match officials 41 minutes into the game, and play was halted again shortly before half-time.

Under the UEFA protocol, the England players were entitled to walk off after the second incident.

At the end of the first half, Bulgarian captain Ivelin Popov confronted a section of the crowd and appealed for an end to racist abuse. During the interval, some 50 people were ejected from the ground, and the game was played out to completion, England winning 6-0.

Popov told the media later he had not been asked to intervene by the England players, but "We are 11 vs 11—your colour does not matter. It's no problem. We are all the same."

In contrast, Bulgarian team manager Krasimir Balakov told the press after the game that he had not heard the abuse, and that he would only apologise if the UEFA proved there had been discriminatory abuse.

Immediately after the match, the UEFA charged the Bulgarian Football Union (BFU) with four offences: racist behaviour, throwing of objects, disruption of the national anthem, and replays on a giant screen. The English Football Association was also charged with disruption of the national anthem, and with having insufficient travelling stewards.

The day after the game, Bulgarian police raided the BFU's headquarters. Eleven fans were arrested, with the Interior Ministry saying they have identified 16 people believed to have taken part in the racist abuse. The most serious charge levelled so far is "grave hooliganism," which carries a prison sentence of up to five years.

Fallout began immediately, including the resignations of Bulgaria's manager and senior figures in the BFU. BFU President Borislav Mihaylov resigned on the orders of Prime Minister Boyko Borissov. This was followed by the whole BFU executive committee resigning in solidarity with Mihaylov. Three days later, team manager Balakov quit.

There was a nauseating self-congratulatory response within British ruling circles. A spokesman for British Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson called for the

UEFA to investigate and issue strong punishments, saying, “The racism...was vile and has no place in football or anywhere else.”

Johnson only last year described women in burkas as looking like “letter boxes” and “bank robbers.” Previously, he wrote of the Commonwealth’s “regular cheering crowds of flag-waving piccaninnies” with “watermelon smiles.”

England manager Southgate pointed out that racist abuse of players was in no way confined to Bulgaria, eastern and central Europe. The England team has long had a far-right following. Video footage this summer showed fascist Tommy Robinson punching a man outside an England game in Portugal. Every year, there is widespread condemnation of particularly notorious chants during games in the UK, including anti-Semitic chants against Tottenham Hotspur—a club with a large Jewish following—for example.

The far right are increasing their activity within football at all levels. Two Bulgarian club sides were punished in September for racism during Europa League games. Montenegro will play its next home game with crowd restrictions following racist abuse of England players in March.

However, the rise of the far right is not a sporting phenomenon that can be eradicated by bans and fines.

In the days before the Bulgaria-England match was played, a German Nazi thug killed two at a Yom Kippur service in a Halle synagogue. Just last month, the nationalist Vetevendosje (Self-Determination) party won the most votes in the Kosovan election. In Poland, the ultra-right Law and Justice Party (PiS) was re-elected with an increased vote.

These events are part of a broader turn to authoritarianism and fascistic rule by the ruling elite in Europe and internationally. In Hungary, Fidesz Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s vicious anti-immigrant policies and anti-Muslim xenophobia have gone hand in hand with his enthusiasm for the fascist Horthy regime, Nazi allies during World War II.

Borissov’s demand for Mihaylov’s resignation was largely an exercise in saving face. When his right-wing conservative GERB won the most votes in the 2017 parliamentary elections, he agreed to a coalition with the United Patriots (UP), an alliance of fascist parties including the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria, the Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO) and Attack (Ataka).

The WSWs wrote that the programme of the new government “provides for a massive build-up of state forces in order to prevent any refugees entering the country. The borders are to be reinforced to repel all immigrants. Illegal immigrants are to be rapidly deported. Police presence is to be stepped up in all cities and villages, with some police duties transferred to private security companies and local authorities. In reality, this means that the existing fascist

gangs, which are already intimidating immigrants, have been officially legitimised.

“For some time, fascist militias have been hunting down refugees along the country’s borders. There have already been fatalities as a result. The government has tacitly tolerated this policy.”

This official encouragement of the far right explains the events at the Vasil Levski Stadium.

The growth of fascist parties throughout Europe resulted in the establishing in June of the Identity and Democracy (ID) group in the European Parliament. ID is the fifth-largest grouping in the European Parliament and was set up at the behest of the Italian far-right Lega and the fascist National Rally in France. ID comprises 73 MEPs from parties in seven other EU states. The other parties in the group are the Alternative for Germany, Freedom Party of Austria, Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang), Freedom and Direct Democracy (Freedom and Direct Democracy), Danish People’s Party, Conservative People’s Party of Estonia and the Finns Party.

The resurgence of fascistic forces in central and eastern Europe in particular has been fuelled by the restoration of capitalism following the collapse of Stalinism three decades ago. The promises that capitalism would lead to rising living standards and the flourishing of democracy are belied by the grim reality of social deprivation and gross social inequality. This is overseen by a tiny clique of financial oligarchs, who, in the absence of a left-wing alternative, are actively encouraging the growth of ultra-right and fascistic parties that are being primed for a ferocious onslaught against the working class under conditions of a resurgence of the class struggle on a global scale.



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