



# Weekly Briefing

**Montenegro Social briefing:  
Football and popular geopolitics**  
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## **Football and popular geopolitics**

### **Croatia under football siege**

The 2018 Football World Cup in Russia expectedly had political significance that went beyond sport competition. For Croatia and Serbia, two regional countries which qualified for the World Cup, politicization of football followed by the revival of popular geopolitics was captured by vivid discussions in media and social networks. One of the first issues that have moved focus from sport pages to political op-eds was the game between Serbia and Switzerland on June 22. Some of the reasons were the fact that “more than a half” of Swiss players were of Albanian ethnicity, Swiss Albanian player celebrating the first goal by crossing hands imitating Albanian emblem, “anti-Serbian” referee team, conspiring Swiss lobby in FIFA, etc.

Croatian players who stayed longer under the limelight have also made a few political statements which stirred reactions in world media, and even forced FIFA to issue an official warning to the Croatian players for shouting “Glory to Ukraine” after beating Russia in quarterfinals. The continuing success of the Croatian team attracted a lot of attention across the globe and, after the elimination of Switzerland and Serbia, became the main topic in the Balkan countries as well. However, unlike sheer fascination of a world’s media with an underdog that have played the finals with France, regional media have also reported controversial political statements and blunders Croatian players put on Instagram and Facebook.

After spectacular game with Argentina, Croatian players shared a video celebrating the victory by singing a controversial war-song that explicitly mentions Serbs and glorifies Nazi-era hail banned in modern Croatia. The reactions were very divisive. While it raised eyebrows in some left-wing circles, Croatian public was generally dismissive to political messages sent by players and grew more tolerant to similar statements as the national team advanced

towards the finals. In a words of Croatian Vecernji list journalist, it was their way to boost additional strength needed for the matches. However, in Serbian, Bosnian and Montenegrin media initial reactions that captured the support and good neighbourliness quickly cooled off and brought nationalistic quarrels back in the light. Social media was filling with comments lining up the reasons why not to support Croatian team. Among them, typical reason stated that self-amusing political escapades of Croatian players are bold or, at the best, immature representations of Croatian popular nationalism whose iconography and narrative was always pertaining chauvinist (anti-Serb) attributes.

A part of Serbian (and also Montenegrin) media was very sensitive to broadcasting of songs that claimed to be patriotic but belittled Serb victimhood in the WWII, colonialist and hypocritical public perception in Croatia on the players of Serb origin (especially vis-à-vis self-comforting comments and memes in Croatian social media of French “African team” after the final match), flags and banners dating from early 90s that never vintaged in laid back areas of Croatia where most of the players came from and soft-soaping nationalism by Croatian washed-faced right-wing politicians.

The discussion on Croatian football nationalism even penetrated into Serbian political sphere. Serbian President Vucic in his press conferences on “everything and else” made a comment that added fuel to fire by claiming that Serbians will likely support Russia in quarterfinals, claiming also in a few days after Croatia passed barrage to semi-finales that “England will find many supporters in Serbia”. While narrative on brotherly relations with Russia seemed qualified reason to choose Russia over anyone else but Serbia, opting for England in semi-finals “when the whole world was silently putting bets on Croatia” unnecessary estranged the headlines and trendings into geopolitical realm. Judging by comments on “most popular” online articles published by leading Serbian, Bosnian and Montenegrin news portals, people were either in “anyone but Croatia” mood or supported Croatia as a way to protest reactive nationalist rhetoric of the former.

After quarterfinals and semi-finals national team in Croatia became untouchable, any sort of criticism was temporarily suspended or overwhelmed by those celebrating epiphany of national unity. Corruption affairs within HNS (Croatian Football Association), trial against Z. Mamic aka “the godfather of Croatian football” and Modric`s forgetful testimony in Osijek County Court in May were all put under the carpet. Playful display of otherwise provoking traditional political ideology by Croatian football players and fans occupied the public space. At the same time, internal crisis in SDP, Croatian biggest left-wing party, made the Left silent and winning euphoria furtherly trivialized it into anti-Croatian and Yugophilic bunch. The first signs that euphoria is slowly getting facets of popular anti-establishment movement came out after winning England in semi-finals. The whole country was under “Yes, we can” spell criticizing impotent politicians and subservient leaders. It climaxed after the spectacular reception in Zagreb where, according to some accounts, more than a half million people came to welcome Croatian team after winning the second place in the World Cup. The popular celebration threatened to quickly give a stage to dissatisfaction with the government and it was no surprise when PM adviser Macan characterized subdued orchestration of reception program by authorities as an attempt to avoid coup d`état.

### **Yugoslavia, Russia, NATO and back to Balkan**

While reception celebrations in Croatia continue to date and Croatian public is still slowly digesting the impressions from the World Cup, discussions on the impact of Croatian success on popular perceptions of regional geopolitics continued to thrive on regional social networks and media outlets. As a fairly divided country in terms of popular perception of cultural and political belonging, Montenegrin media captured vivid debates on Croatian football success.

Contrary to Serbia, Montenegrin leadership refrained from any comments or suggestions that could indicate their (personal) inclinations for teams

participating in the World Cup. Montenegrin media was at the beginning fairly neutral while slightly displaying expected favouritism when neighbouring Croatia and Serbia played. The aftermath of the match between Serbia and Switzerland was due given more coverage from Serbian media and comment sections typically entailed “Balkan” obsession with ethnic identity (“Swiss players were Albanians” or “Switzerland is Albanian second team”). Initial victories of Serbian and Croatian teams were followed with Yugo-nostalgic comments imagining how good the joint team of Serbia and Croatia would have played and recalling the successes of Yugoslavia on the World Cup. As a small country with scarce opportunities to participate on the world tournaments, football Yugo-nostalgia in Montenegro is a way to cope with its own indisposition to be on the global sport stage and (indiscriminately) supporting other ex-Yugoslav teams when not playing between each other is usually rarely reasoned in sport terms. Supporting the identification with ex-Yugoslav countries is the myth of natural superiority or exquisite sport talent with which the countries in Yugoslav region are disproportionally endowed. This myth is frequently explained by ethnic or familial origins of particular sportsman (Djokovic, or at least his father, is Montenegrin; half of Serbian team is of Montenegrin origin, etc.) or through sport success that came about in spite of lack of financial support and investments.

Spectacular victory of Croatia against Argentina on Montenegrin social networks and media was greeted through Yugo-nostalgic narratives. Yet, after videos showing Croatian players celebrating the victory with songs deemed an insult to Serbs the forum threads started to be filled with comments against Croatia. Not taking into account those reflecting essentially Croat-Serb identity rift, some comments questioned delusional identification with all sport achievements coming from Yugosphere “when the Croats are chanting against such unity” or checking up reciprocity of supposedly fraternal sentiments (“Why should I support Croatia when they don’t care or are completely indifferent about us”).

The first big geopolitical dilemma arrived with quarterfinal match between Croatia and “orthodox”, “brotherly”, “protecting” and “friendly” Russia. Abundant with superficial discussions on history of Russo-Montenegrin friendship that was partially overlapping with similar threads on Serbian news portals, Montenegrin social networks have talked about the only “non-NATO member left in barrage”. Just like NATO accession polemics in 2014-16, commentaries in similar fashion tried to ascertain can Montenegro ever be threatened by Russia or in likelihood of a new conflict will it be attacked by neighbouring country, itself a NATO member. At this stage, some Montenegrin politicians “were caught” revealing personal preferences, which expectedly suited their political standings. URA Chairman Abazovic was caught watching the match behind Croatian flag. Instagram and Facebook posts before and after the match between Croatia and Russia resembled symbolical referendum on NATO and the EU. There was almost total matching with sport and political preferences.

Last two matches that Croatia played on the World Cup caused much less intensive geopolitical deliberations on social networks. As wrapped up by one Facebook user: “Montenegrins and especially those refusing to be named as such didn’t know who to choose as all four countries [in semi-finals] are NATO and the EU members”. One other Facebook user commented something that could be roughly translated like this: Just like clandestine Informbiro supporters in the 50s were known to only listen Latin pop music (to avoid being framed as enjoying lyrics promoting anti-regime sentiment), the Ruje (derogatory term for pro-Russian political supporters) are now completely ignoring football and started to follow waterpolo tournament instead.

If we exclude those who watched waterpolo, a general impression during the semi-finals and finals was that Montenegro’s public cheered for Croatia. However, the reasons were mixed. Partially, Montenegro joined majority of small nations of the world that became fascinated and silently supported an underdog of the World Cup. But geopolitical argumentation was still important.

The fact that Montenegro and Croatia belonged to the same country and still live in common cultural sphere sharing the language and history and, moreover, having similar “genetic disposition” for such outstanding feat was a key argument which ignored current political borders and even reciprocal feelings on the other side. From this point of view, nationalist faux-pas that incidentally happened on the reception in Zagreb was mentioned but, unlike the comments from Serbia, it helped to identify with the (semi)champion who proved that after all has never left the Balkans.