

The Woes of Luka Modrić: Croatia, Nationalism and Football

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Juraj Vrdoljak of Telesport was convinced. "I think half the population didn't show up to work on the morning after the win against England." The victory had inspired early shop closures, a feeling of rampant escapism.

"Croatia is a country with a deep economic crisis. Every day, life is really hard. It's full of bad stories and tough times. There is lot of poverty. A lot of people are emigrating."

Members of Croatia's football team have become national talismans of endurance, the shock troops of resilience and hope. Ivan Rakitić, when he takes the field against France, will be playing his 71st match of the season, the most than any top-flight player this year. Luka Modrić remains unflinching in the midfield as the team's general. Domagoj Vida has been granite in defensive solidity.

Football teams can be held up as mirrors of the nations they represent. This sociological gazing can always be taken too far, a scholar's fruitless pondering, but Croatia's national side is instructive. It was Dinamo Zagreb's Zvonimir Boban who stirred matters with his [heralded assault](#) on a police officer engaged in a violent scuffle with fans in a match against Red Star Belgrade. Croatian football was fashioned as a vehicle of protest and dissent against what was seen as a Serb-dominated federation.

In time, football kicks became shells and bullets in the murderous dissolution of Yugoslavia. To this day, a legend stubbornly holds that the truculent Bad Blue Boys of Dinamo and the countering *Deljije* of Red Star precipitated the first shots of that war.

Starting with its current inspirational captain, the link between social ill and patriotic performance can be seamless. When he finishes the tournament in Russia, Modrić will have to turn his mind back to his relationship with mentor and former Dinamo Zagreb executive Zdravko Mamić, a towering figure who finds himself facing a six-and-a-half year prison sentence for corruption and fraud. From Bosnia and Herzegovina, he does battle with the authorities, attempting to avoid extradition after fleeing Croatia.

A bursting feature of the case mounted against Mamić involved claims of ill-gotten gains from transfers of Modrić from Dinamo Zagreb to Tottenham Hotspur in 2008 and Dejan Lovren to Lyon in 2010. Modrić, it seemed, [was implicated](#) in signing an annex to his

Dinamo contract, suggesting a 50-50 split of any future transfer fee. What was significant was the *timing* - 2015 as opposed to any earlier dates. Through his tenure, suggestions that Mamić had conducted a "[silent privatisation](#)" of the club were rampant, producing inflated transfer prices and a cult of acquisitiveness.

Modrić, having been billed as a star witness who initially supplied anti-corruption investigators with gold dust on Mamić's penchant for cooking the accounts, notably in terms of pocketing millions of euros of the transfer fee, froze in the dock. His memory, it seemed, had failed him; the contract annex was not signed, as he initially claimed, in 2015 but 2004. This testimony was effectively rendered worthless. Croatia's captain now faces the prospect of a perjury charge that carries a possible sentence of five years in prison.

The Croatian Football association, in [an official statement](#) in March, was not having a bar of it, unsurprising given the powers that be within the country's football hierarchy. The body insisted upon "the principle of innocence and considers every person innocent until proven otherwise." It was also "deeply convinced of the correctness of Luka Modrić's testimony before the court in Osijek, and especially because of Modrić's behaviour since his first appearance for the Croatian U-15 team in March 2001 to date."

While every inch the commander in the field, with his team keen to impress in their following, not all Croatian supporters are in the Modrić tent of fandom. The Bad Blue Boys have found themselves split in loyalties over the years, with some, such as Juraj Ćosić, forming a breakaway team, Futsal Dinamo.

"Zdravko Mamić," [claims](#) football sociologist Ben Perasović, "is a typical member of the new rich class."

It is a class that continues to afflict Croatian football with their depredations, a looting tendency that is only now being reined in with mixed success.

The other team members have also shown this side to be rather prickly. Vida, and the now sacked assistant coach Ognjen Vukojević, were [caught on film](#) making comments supportive of Ukrainian nationalists in the aftermath of the side's defeat of Russia in the quarter-finals. FIFA's benevolence prevailed, and the centre-back was permitted to play in the semi-final against England.

Such a background adds more than a touch of complexity, with all its discomforts, to the World Cup final against France. Croatia's team will not merely be facing their opponents on the field in a battle of wits and tenacity. Off it, pens and knives are being readied and sharpened, with prosecutions being prepared.

Even now, the team is being written off by the smug pundits of football orthodoxy, though with less disdain than before. Three matches on the trot into extra-time suggest imminent exhaustion, a possible overrunning by a more refreshed French team. But desperation, in meeting talent, can be the most potent of elixirs. This Croatian team has pushed the sceptics to the edge, and threatens to leave them there. And with players like Modrić, adversity remains their closest companion.

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