

Red Star Fans Muzzled

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Serbia's sizzling pre-election atmosphere spills over onto the football terraces

Traditional terrace chants at Belgrade's premier football club Crvena Zvezda (Red Star) have given way to blatantly anti-government songs.

The chants, including a smash hit dedicated to Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic - "Slobodan, Save Serbia! Kill Yourself" - have proved too much for the government to bear, prompting heavy-handed police intervention.

"We will not allow anybody to 'hang' Slobodan Milosevic in Yugoslav stadiums," said the Yugoslav Football Association, FSJ, Safety Commissioner, Kosta Vukovic. Any repetition of these chants, he warned, and police have orders to clear the stadiums - the football clubs as well as the fans will suffer.

Red Star fans are known for their anti-establishment views. When the independent TV station Studio B was closed in a media crackdown in May, they joined in the protests and many were involved in violent clashes with police. Banners of the student movement Otpor (Resistance) mingle with the sea of Red Star flags on the terraces.

"We show publicly we are against the tyrant all the way," said Nane, a Red Star fan. "So the police beat us up. But we're not afraid and we won't back down."

During a recent match between Red Star and Georgia's Torpedo Kutisi the police demonstrated they too would not back down. When fans launched into their first anti-Milosevic song, the police brutally intervened. Around 20 police officers and fans were injured, and 151 supporters were arrested.

"The police were beating anything that moved," said Nane. "They clubbed children as well - one girl was no more than 12-years-old. The fans responded so fiercely the whole northern stand turned into a pitched battle."

More dramatic accounts of the violence appeared on the official Red Star website. "It was like the movie 'Braveheart' - the clash was unbelievable. Some of us were 'bombing' the police with the seats, and the rest were 'breaching the frontline'. The police were brutal as never before, so they got beaten as never before, too."

The regime is so unnerved by the fans that Serbian State TV has switched off the sound during football coverage when anti-Milosevic chants start up. At the recent Red Star-Torpedo Kutisi game, the commentator managed to ignore the entire battle unfolding in the stands, remarking instead upon the "wonderful ambience on this magical night of football."

The police attributed the violence to "drunken hooligans, amongst whom drug-addicts were distributing pyrotechnics, breaking chairs and throwing torches on the pitch."

But an official from the Red Star club, who wished to remain anonymous, disagrees, "It's not true that the fans caused the unrest, because our fans are the best organised in Serbia. It's obvious someone ordered

the police to punish the fans because they publicly declared themselves against the regime."

The official media laid into both the fans and the club's management. The state-owned daily newspaper Politika called the supporters' behaviour "a form of terrorism," while Belgrade television accused the club's managers of helping to create "vandals."

Pressure from the Yugoslav authorities combined with warnings from the Union of European Football Associations, UEFA, that the club could be suspended if violence on the terraces continued, prompted Red Star's management to ask its followers to drop their political songs ahead of the August 23 game against Dynamo Kiev.

Two days before the match, a spokesman for the fans sent a message to the police saying they didn't want trouble, but that the songs and chanting would continue.

"People have a difficult life," he said "There is no law saying people who are hungry have to be quiet about it. The political songs we sing are chanted spontaneously. People gather in large numbers and express their dissatisfaction with the society they live in. We neither want to nor can prevent the songs against the regime."

In the event, though, the supporters restrained themselves. The regime was equally restrained; there wasn't a single uniformed policeman in the stadium.

Observers could only assume a deal had in fact been struck between Red Star management, the fans and the state, so that the supporters would keep quiet and the police would stay away.

But peace may be short-lived, according to one Red Star fan. "Football stadiums are a safety valve to express dissatisfaction. It's the only place where more than ten people can gather without the police arresting them straight away."

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