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Croatian Player Sparks War of Words With Pro-Ukrainian Video Statement

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Vida's "Glory to Ukraine" sparked ire in Russia. **Carl Recine / Reuters**

FIFA has sanctioned a Croatian football player and coach for making pro-Ukrainian statements after their team's victory over Russia in the World Cup on Saturday.

In a video published on social media after the game, Croatia defender Domagoj Vida shouts "glory to Ukraine," while coach Ognjen Vukojevic adds "this win is for Dynamo [Kiev] and Ukraine."

FIFA prohibits the tournament's participants from making political statements or gestures. It previously fined three Swiss players for a hand gesture in the shape of the Albanian flag during a match against Serbia in the group stage.

The "glory to Ukraine" phrase also elicited the ire of Russian politicians and internet users, some of whom linked the slogan to Ukrainian nationalism. Russia has been at odds with Kiev since the ousting of pro-Moscow President Viktor Yanukovich.

“It was a challenge, it was a provocation and it was deliberate,” Federation Council deputy Franz Klintsevich was cited as saying by the state-run RIA Novosti news agency, before demanding an official response and calling Croatians “the traitors of the Slavic world.”

“The ‘glory to Ukraine’ slogan is seen as being highly reactionary and unpleasant for what is likely to be the vast majority of Ukrainian citizens,” Sergei Tsekov, a Federation Council deputy from Crimea, was cited as saying by the RBC news website on Monday. Tsekov went on to call the slogan “fascist.”

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Vida, who scored Croatia’s second goal against Russia on Saturday, has been issued a warning over the video by FIFA, Interfax reported Sunday.

Meanwhile, Vukojevic was relieved of his duties as a member of the Croatian national team by the country’s football federation on Monday. He was also given a $15,000-fine from FIFA’s disciplinary committee for “unsportsmanlike behavior.”

The two members of the Croatian delegation, who both played for Ukraine’s Dynamo Kiev football club in the past, have since apologized and said they had not intended for their words to be interpreted in a political context.

“It was definitely not a political message, but a simple thank you for all the support from Ukraine,” Vida was cited as saying in a statement published on the website of Croatia’s football federation.

The federation also apologized “to the Russian public” over the incident and noted its “long-term friendly relationship” with its Russian counterpart.

Meanwhile, Ukraine’s Football Federation issued a letter to FIFA on Monday in support of Vida. It also offered to pay the footballer’s fine.

“The ‘glory to Ukraine’ slogan is a greeting, a celebration of the fallen and a patriotic symbol of the independence, liberty and freedom-loving nature of the Ukrainian people,” the statement said.

“[It] is a commonly used greeting in Ukraine ...[and] is not a discriminatory or far-right sign or symbol that can be negatively interpreted,” the federation added.

Since the incident, social media users have leftover 158,000 comments on FIFA’s Facebook page, many of which repeated the Ukrainian slogan, in protest of the punishment.

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