# Albania-Serbia World Cup qualifier revives fraught Kosovo tensions amid heightened security



A highly anticipated World Cup qualifier between Albania and Serbia is set to stir significant political and emotional currents, with the match in Tirana serving as a poignant reminder of the historical and ethnic tensions that have long defined the relationship between these two nations. Beyond the thrill of football, the encounter encapsulates substantive issues related to the status of Kosovo, transforming the game into a stage for political expression and national pride.

The historical rivalry extends far beyond the football pitch; the animosity has its roots in past conflicts, particularly the Kosovo issue, where ethnic identities and national narratives clash. This rivalry ranks as one of the most politically charged in European sport, making the stakes exceedingly high. The memories of the infamous 2014 match in Belgrade—abandoned after a drone carrying an Albanian flag incited widespread violence—continue to loom large. This incident culminated in Albania being awarded a 3-0 victory, which remarkably secured their qualification for the Euro 2016 tournament. Such disruptions only further underline the fragile nature of both sporting events and diplomatic relations in the region.

As the two teams prepare to face off once again, the undercurrents of the Kosovo conflict are palpable. Albanian defenders, like Elseid Hysaj, call for calm while acknowledging the intense atmosphere. Hysaj emphasised the importance of not repeating past chaos, reflecting the collective desire for a peaceful match this time around. Meanwhile, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has expressed provocative sentiments, urging his coach Dragan Stojkovic to emulate the competitive spirit of past fixtures. In contrast, both Stojkovic and some players advocate for a focus solely on sport, attempting to downplay the surrounding political tensions and reduce the pressure on the players.

In an effort to mitigate potential violence, Albanian authorities are implementing stringent security measures for the match. Notably, Serbian fans will be barred from attending, a precaution designed to avoid the kind of unrest that has historically accompanied these contests. Armand Duka, president of the Albanian Football Federation, has appealed to fans to embrace the spirit of sportsmanship and respect, framing the event as a celebration rather than a battleground. This approach comes in light of broader efforts by both nations to enhance relations, including a shared commitment to co-host the men's Under-21 European Championship in 2027.

The ongoing struggle over Kosovo’s independence, which Serbia continues to contest, further fuels the rivalry. Almost half of the Albanian national squad has roots in Kosovo, North Macedonia, or southern Serbia, imbuing the match with personal stakes that extend beyond professional performance. This interplay between sport, identity, and politics complicates the narrative and adds layers of intensity to a seemingly straightforward football match.

While both teams gear up for this pivotal qualifier, the echoes of past confrontations remind us that for Albania and Serbia, the line between sport and politics is often blurred. Despite the formidable barriers erected by decades of conflict and rivalry, there exists a shared hope that football can bridge divisions and foster reconciliation—if only for the duration of the match.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://balkaneu.com/albania-and-serbia-a-world-cup-qualifier-steeped-in-political-tension/), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/45bc68ce66709d5c1c5b34457338ba2d)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://balkaneu.com/albania-and-serbia-a-world-cup-qualifier-steeped-in-political-tension/), [[4]](https://time.com/3507951/drone-serbia-albania-soccer/), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/oct/14/serbia-albania-euro-2016-flag-halted)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://balkaneu.com/albania-and-serbia-a-world-cup-qualifier-steeped-in-political-tension/), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/45bc68ce66709d5c1c5b34457338ba2d), [[5]](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29627615)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://balkaneu.com/albania-and-serbia-a-world-cup-qualifier-steeped-in-political-tension/), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/45bc68ce66709d5c1c5b34457338ba2d), [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/european-qualifying-draw-2026-world-cup-2024-12-13/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://balkaneu.com/albania-and-serbia-a-world-cup-qualifier-steeped-in-political-tension/), [[4]](https://time.com/3507951/drone-serbia-albania-soccer/), [[5]](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29627615)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://balkaneu.com/albania-and-serbia-a-world-cup-qualifier-steeped-in-political-tension/), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/oct/14/serbia-albania-euro-2016-flag-halted)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://balkaneu.com/albania-and-serbia-a-world-cup-qualifier-steeped-in-political-tension/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://apnews.com/article/45bc68ce66709d5c1c5b34457338ba2d> - The upcoming World Cup qualifier between Albania and Serbia in Tirana is anticipated to be a highly charged match, not just in terms of gameplay but also due to longstanding political and ethnic tensions. Their rivalry, deeply rooted in historical conflicts including the Kosovo issue, adds a layer of intensity to the competition. Memories of the infamous 2014 Belgrade match, which was abandoned due to a drone incident and resulted in a 3-0 victory for Albania, are still fresh. In light of this, Albanian authorities are taking strong security measures, including banning Serbian fans to avoid violence. Albania Football Federation President Armand Duka urged fans to treat the match as a sporting event, emphasizing unity and respect. Some Albanian players hail from Kosovo and neighboring regions, further highlighting the match's sensitivity. Despite these strains, both nations are set to co-host the Under-21 European Championship in 2027, indicating efforts to foster better relations. While nationalist sentiments remain strong among fans and politicians, team officials from both sides are working to keep the focus on the sport, advocating for a peaceful and competitive match.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/european-qualifying-draw-2026-world-cup-2024-12-13/> - In the 2026 World Cup European qualifying draw, England will face Serbia, Albania, Latvia, and Andorra in Group K, under new manager Thomas Tuchel. The draw held in Zurich features politically charged matchups, notably between Serbia and Albania, given their tense historical relations. The groups are partly incomplete since the winners and losers of the Nations League quarter-finals, which occur in March, will determine the full composition of some groups. France and Spain are among the top teams involved in these matches. The first European World Cup to feature 48 teams expands Europe's slots to 16, with automatic qualification for the 12 group winners. The play-offs involve the 12 runners-up and four Nations League top group winners who did not secure first or second place in their qualifying groups. Matches begin in March 2025 and continue through November, with teams playing each other home and away.
4. <https://time.com/3507951/drone-serbia-albania-soccer/> - A Euro 2016 qualifying soccer match between Serbia and Albania in Belgrade was abandoned after a drone carrying a Greater Albania banner incited violence among players and fans. The game, which ended after 45 minutes with a score of 0-0, turned chaotic when Serbia's Stefan Mitrovic pulled down the banner, leading to brawls and garbage thrown by fans. Greater Albania includes territories where ethnic Albanians live, a notion many Serbs reject, favoring the idea of a united Yugoslavia instead. Serbian officials accused Olsi Rama, the brother of Albania's Prime Minister, of flying the drone, though conflicting reports exist regarding his arrest. The political tension stemmed from Kosovo's independence in 2008 and Serbia's reluctance to recognize it, with historical conflict exacerbating the situation. This was Albania's first match in Serbia since 1967.
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29627615> - Play was stopped towards the end of the first half of Tuesday night's match in the Partizan Stadium when a drone appeared above the pitch, trailing a banner marked with an Albanian flag and a map of 'greater Albania' showing nationalist claims on neighbouring states, including Serbia. Serbia player Stefan Mitrovic grabbed the banner. The banner showed Albanian nationalist claims on neighbouring territory. A Serbia fan confronts an Albanian player in the stadium in Belgrade, 14 October. The incident developed into a brawl as the authorities were unable to take control. Eventually the visiting side had to run for cover. The Serbian foreign minister asked how the international community would have reacted had Serbia fans staged a similar stunt in Albania or Kosovo, the breakaway region of Serbia where the ethnic Albanian majority declared independence six years ago. 'If someone from Serbia had unveiled a flag of Greater Serbia in Tirana [capital of Albania] or Pristina [capital of Kosovo] it would already be on the agenda of the UN Security Council,' he told Serbian newspaper Blic. The Serbians and Albanians have until next Wednesday to respond to Uefa, Uefa spokesman Pedro Pinto told AP. Uefa President Michel Platini said he was 'deeply saddened' by what had happened, adding: 'Football is supposed to bring people together and our game should not be mixed with politics of any kind. The scenes in Belgrade last night were inexcusable.' Fifa chief Sepp Blatter said: 'Football should never be used for political messages. I strongly condemn what happened in Belgrade last night.'
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/oct/14/serbia-albania-euro-2016-flag-halted> - Serbia’s foreign minister has accused Albania of 'political provocation' after they flying of a pro-Albanian flag sparked violence at an international football match in Belgrade. Serbia’s president Tomislav Nikolic also warned on Wednesday of the 'clear intentions' of those responsible to 'provoke unrest in Serbia and to try to destabilise the whole region'. The Euro 2016 qualifier between the Balkan rivals had to be abandoned on Tuesday after a 'Greater Albania' flag was flown by drone low over the Partizan stadium in Belgrade. The banner was pulled down by Serbian player Stefan Mitrovic, triggering a brawl between the two teams. Some of the 20,000 Serbian supporters ran on to the pitch and attempted to kick and punch the Albanian players until the referee ordered the teams to leave the field as smoke flares and other missiles rained down from the stands. The violence could endanger a planned historic visit to Serbia by Albania’s prime minister Edi Rama and risks inflaming fresh ethnic tensions in the Balkans.