

**home grief for Djokovic for backing for Croatia**

Serbian tennis star Novak Djokovic has come under fire for voicing support for neighbours Croatia at the World Cup, with one centre right lawmaker dubbing his stance "idiotic".

"Only idiots can support Croatia. Aren't you ashamed Novak?", tweeted Vladimir Djukanovic of President Aleksandar Vucic's ruling Serbian Progressive Party. "I am backing Croatia... I know who I would like to lift the trophy," Serbian media quoted Djokovic as saying from Wimbledon.

Several weeks before the World Cup started Djokovic posted pictures of himself with Croatian

players including midfield stars Luka Modric and Ivan Rakitic to his Instagram account.

When the Croats faced off against hosts Russia in their quarter-final many Serbs who gathered to watch in cafes in central Belgrade were backing the Russians rather than their neighbours from the former Yugoslavia.

Djukanovic, on holiday in Greece, posted a video to social media in which he indicated that "those who say 'Nole' (Djokovic) has called for support for Croatia make me mad" and called the star an "idiot" for his stance. (AFP)

Supporters hold Croatia flag in Moscow on July 10, a day prior to the semi-final match England vs Croatia during the Russia 2018 World Cup football tournament. (AFP)



**Answer expected**

**Germany make Ozil scapegoat**

BERLIN, July 10, (AP): Same coach, same team manager, same president.

And yet after almost two weeks of reflection, the German soccer federation (DFB) appears to have decided midfielder Mesut Ozil is the main culprit for the team's shock early World Cup exit.

Team manager Oliver Bierhoff wondered in a newspaper interview if Ozil should even have been taken to the tournament in Russia, while DFB president Reinhard Grindel followed up by demanding the player provide an "answer."

Joachim Loew has not commented on the matter since deciding to stay on as coach.

Ozil, long a key player for Loew, has been in the firing line since he and national teammate Ilkay Gundogan posed for photos with Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in May. Both German-born players have Turkish roots.

While Gundogan attempted to distance himself from the incident in Britain, Ozil has maintained his silence - antagonizing the same people who said the issue had been dealt with before the World Cup.

"Only DFB officials can come up with the idea that a photo with Erdogan is responsible for a defeat against the football-giants of South Korea," North Rhine-Westphalia minister president Armin Laschet said on Twitter.

Following Germany's first-round exit, Bierhoff told newspaper Die Welt it might have been better to omit Ozil from the tournament. Bierhoff pulled back after criticism, saying it was a misunderstanding and he did not intend to single out any player for the team's failure.

But Grindel kept the issue alive, telling the latest edition of Kicker magazine: "It's true that Mesut has not commented yet. That has disappointed a lot of fans because they have questions and expect an answer. They are right to expect this answer. That's why it's totally clear for me that Mesut should speak on the issue."

Grindel has received just as much criticism as Bierhoff did. The Berliner Zeitung newspaper accused the DFB president of "throwing oil on the fire to shine a good light on himself."

The DFB itself arguably made the Erdogan-photo affair worse with its public admonishment of Gundogan and Ozil. Grindel was scathing in his criticism of the players, who were summoned for talks.

Now Grindel says, "We have to wait for the sporting analysis and see whether Joachim Loew still counts on him."

Ozil has been one of Germany's standout players since starting at the 2010 World Cup. His performances earned a switch from Schalke to Real Madrid. He has made 92 appearances for Germany, contributing 23 goals from midfield.

Ozil was not the only player to underperform in Russia, where defending champions Germany were knocked out after defeats to Mexico and South Korea. But his performances have come under the most scrutiny because of the Erdogan photos and because of his own high profile within the team.

"He and Gundogan suffered from what happened before the World Cup because they have been vindicated in Germany," Ozil's former Arsenal coach, Arsene Wenger, told Bein Sports. Gundogan and Ozil were whistled by German fans during matches, while both have been subjected to abuse off the pitch, too.

German comedian Oliver Pocher impersonated Ozil with large fake eyes, saying he was going "home" on vacation and listing off the Turkish cities he was going to visit before returning.

Far-right politicians have been slating the player, while journalist Claus Strunz said "Mesut Ozil does not belong to Germany" after noting he does not sing the German anthem.



England's Raheem Sterling (left), and Sweden's Victor Lindelof battle for the ball during the quarter-final match between Sweden and England at the 2018 soccer World Cup at the Samara Arena, in Samara, Russia, on July 7. (AP)

**England dreaming but Croatia set to provide biggest WC test**

Three Lions hope to write history

**MOSCOW, July 10, (AFP): England are dreaming of a first World Cup final since 1966 but first they must come through Wednesday's semifinal at the Luzhniki Stadium against Croatia in what looks like their toughest test yet in Russia.**

Excitement has reached fever-pitch levels back in England, with Gareth Southgate's young team making it to the last four of a major tournament for the first time since Euro '96, and for the first time at a World Cup since Italy in 1990.

Both of those runs ended in defeats on penalties, but there is a belief that something could be different this time. England have already won a shoot-

They beat Tunisia in their tournament opener thanks to a late Harry Kane goal, brushed aside a poor Panama, edged out Colombia on penalties and easily beat Sweden in the quarter-finals.

Their one defeat came against Belgium in their final group game, in a match between two essentially reserve sides.

The challenge posed by Croatia is likely to be more demanding, especially as Zlatko Dalic's side features one of the best midfield pairings around, in Luka Modric and Ivan Rakitic.

Real Madrid playmaker Modric, who was at Tottenham Hotspur earlier in his career at the same time a young Kane was starting out, has been a particular inspiration.

The captain was the man of the match again in the penalty shootout win over Russia in Sochi at the weekend.

That allowed Croatia to reach the

semifinals for the first time since the 1998 World Cup in France, which was their first as an independent nation.

For a country with a population of little more than four million, making it all the way to the final would be a remarkable achievement.

"There is still a lot to play. England is also one of the favourites to win the World Cup and you need to respect that. But we have nothing to lose, we will enjoy this game, and hopefully we can write history," said defender Dejan Lovren, of Premier League side Liverpool.

Since 1998, Croatia have endured disappointments at major tournaments themselves, notably losing on penalties to Turkey in the Euro 2008 quarter-finals. But there is less pressure on them now.

"The biggest pressure came against Denmark in the round of 16 (which also went to extra-time and a penalty

shootout). We feel much easier at this point," said striker Mario Mandzukic.

The fact that Croatia have had to play so much football could perhaps give England an edge, all the more so given the injury problems faced by Dalic.

Goalkeeper Danijel Subasic soldiered on against Russia despite hurting a hamstring, while right-back Sime Vrsaljko is expected to miss the game.

However, Southgate refuses to accept the idea that England will be significantly fresher.

"Any team in a World Cup semifinal is going to find the energy and going to find the motivation. So we won't win the game just because Croatia had half an hour more football than us three days ago. We've got to win because we play better."

**Ukraine offers to pay Ognjen fine**

KIEV, July 10, (AFP): Ukraine's football federation said Tuesday it had offered a job to former Croatia international Ognjen Vukojevic and offered to pay his fine over a pro-Ukraine clip he posted during the World Cup.

The Croatian football association removed him as an assistant in its delegation at the tournament in Russia and FIFA fined Vukojevic \$15,000 over an Instagram video featuring him and Croatia defender Domagoj Vida, who shouted "Glory to Ukraine!"

Vida is expected to be part of Croatia's team to face England in the World Cup semifinal on Wednesday. Vida used to play for Dynamo Kiev and Vukojevic also played for the Ukrainian club and now works for them as a scout.

FIFA said Tuesday it was "looking into" another video of Vida apparently making political statements, including "Glory to Ukraine!"

The phrase was a slogan of the former Soviet republic's pro-EU revolution that toppled a Russian-backed president in 2014. It was followed by Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and a Kremlin-backed separatist war in eastern Ukraine that has claimed more than 10,000 lives.

The moves from the football associations sparked Ukrainian anger towards FIFA as well as a wave of support for both representatives of the Croatian team.

"We decided to compensate Vukojevic from our personal funds the fine that he will have to pay," Ukraine's football federation chief Andriy Pavelko wrote on Facebook.

"In addition, we are ready to consider the options for cooperation of FFU with such a high-class specialist," Pavelko said, in a post that included a picture of himself in a Croatia jersey.

On Sunday, Ukraine's football governing body also sent a letter to FIFA chief Gianni Infantino saying that "Glory to Ukraine! ... is not a discriminatory or far-right sign or symbol".

It "should not be interpreted as an act of aggression or provocation," the body said.

Meanwhile 160,000 angry internet users, mainly Ukrainians, gave the FIFA official Facebook page a one-star review and commented "Glory to Ukraine!" or "Shame to FIFA!"



This combination of pictures created on July 9 shows Croatia midfielder Luka Modric (left), in Sochi on July 7, and England forward Harry Kane (right), in Moscow on July 3. Croatia, who have advanced to their first World Cup semifinal since 1998, will face England, who in turn will be playing in their first semifinal since 1990, in Moscow on Wednesday. (AFP)

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