

Football in Kosovo: What does independence bring?

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By Tom Dunmore - It might not be Kosovo's first priority as an independent nation — greater political recognition is probably higher on the agenda — but football's never far below the surface in the Balkans, and it's worth asking what the future holds for them in international football.

Kosovo do not yet have national colours, but they've long been hoping to join the international football community, an important symbol of independence. And they might actually be pretty good on the field.

Kosovo already has a team unrecognised by FIFA who have been playing friendlies since 1993, following the break-up of Yugoslavia. Perhaps not surprisingly given Kosovo's predominant ethnic Albanian population, their first game was against Albania, a 3-1 defeat in Tirana. They would wait nine years — following the war — before playing another game, once more against Albania, this time a 1-0 defeat.

The past three years has seen Kosovo gain considerable momentum on the football field, recording its first win against Monaco, 7-1, and in a considerable breakthrough, beating Saudi Arabia 1-0 last June. Kristian Nushi scored the surprising winner in the 84th minute from the penalty spot.

Their coach Edmond Rugova, who once played for the New York Cosmos in the NASL and had starred for KF Prishtina in the 1980s, had expected his team to be “whacked” by the Saudis.

A number of high-quality players could be available to the team, including Lorik Cana of Marseille (a current Albanian international), who Rugova thinks “will be captain of Kosovo”. There's also Lazio's Valon Behrami who represents Switzerland and Fulham's Finnish striker Shefki Kuqi and his brother Njazi Kuqi, once of Birmingham, all of Kosovan origin. It's unclear to me whether given the exceptional state of Kosovan football's emergence players who have represented other countries in FIFA competition would be able to turn out for Kosovo or not: it's more likely the Albanians would than anyone else.

They would be able to play for Kosovo in the kind of non-FIFA sanctioned matches the country is currently restricted to anyway.

The bigger question is whether Kosovo will be able to play in FIFA competition at all anytime soon. There was an approach by the Kosovan football association to FIFA in 2006 exploring membership that went nowhere. Now the country is independent, there is more chance of that happening of course, but as Gramsci's Kingdom explains in a superb post on small countries and FIFA membership, it might not be straightforward at all.

Kosovo would, presumably, first seek membership of UEFA. But he notes that UEFA's membership rules require a nation to be recognised as such by the United Nations — not really likely given Russia's veto on the Security Council.

He speculates that Kosovo could still gain membership of FIFA, which does not have such a stringent article on recognition by the UN itself, by joining another confederation instead of UEFA, which would be geographically awkward but technically possible.

It might be a while before we see Kosovo in the World Cup.

Tom Dunmore is the editor of Pitch Invasion, where this article originally appeared.