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Introduction: Football, History and the Nation in South-East Europe

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In October 2014, Serbia's European Championships qualifying match against Albania was abandoned after a drone flew on to the pitch in Belgrade with a banner showing Kosovo as part of a Greater Albania and a fight broke out between both teams and their fans. While the flight of the drone was a technologically novel reminder that the nation's territorial space is not two-dimensional but three-dimensional, the subject of a politics of verticality and volume (Weizman, 2012: 12; Elden, 2013), the imagery of its invasive entry and violent ejection from the symbolic territory and battlefield of the nation restated a conclusion that could have been offered at any point since the institutionalisation of international sporting competition in the late 19th and early 20th century: that controversies over sport, between and within nations, reveal the deeper contestations of territorial and cultural boundaries that are the very process of constructing national identity. Yet all this has taken place within a framework of supposed internationalism and sporting fraternity; indeed, it is the very structure of organised, calendrical competition between nations that makes these sporting encounters regular and possible.

This unsteady balance between the uniqueness of nationhood and the ubiquity of the transnational is summed up in Michael Billig's notion of "the world of nations", a key pillar in his theory of "banal nationalism" (Billig, 1995: 16). The idea that all the world's surface (and indeed its volume) is naturally divided into national homelands, each with boundaries that ought to be (from a given nation's point of view) self-evident, is a historically situated product of political imagination and yet has to be taken for granted in order for nationalism to operate as an ideology. Nowhere is this more successfully dramatised, and nowhere is it dramatised in front of so many spectators at once, than in international sporting competition (Billig, 1995: 86) – or in cultural events based on the same world-of-nations logic, such as the World's Fair or, in Europe since the mid-1950s, the Eurovision Song Contest (Urry, 2002; Fricker and Gluhovic, eds, 2013). At the same time as theorists of nationalism have continued to rework understandings of how the media are implicated in re-producing the world of nations in ways that are certainly not limited to, but often dominated by, their coverage of sport (Mihelj, 2013; Sked, 2014), the argument has permitted a wealth of empirical studies – of south-east European nations and many others elsewhere – that illustrate how struggles to define the nation and its boundaries continue to unfold through sport (e.g. Bellamy, 2003; Hughson and Skillen, eds, 2014). Yet, it goes or should go without saying, sport is more than