



Football in the Balkans I

Internal Views, External Perceptions

Edited by

Dariusz Wojtaszyn and Maroš Melichárek



PETER LANG

The book is devoted to the phenomenon of football in the Balkans. It provides an interdisciplinary perspective on the political instrumentalisation of football and its social significance in the region. In doing so, it offers readers an in-depth look at Balkan societies and the determinants of their political and social functioning. The topics are geographically wide-ranging, covering Greece, Romania, the former Yugoslavia, and the states that emerged from the latter's disintegration: Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina. Across these regions, the contributors cover issues including the legitimacy of power, political manipulation, problems of political transition, corruption, collective identity, nationalism and antagonism between the Balkan nations, and armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. Collectively they offer fresh perspectives in conveying a sense of the complexity and diverse historical experiences of football across the Balkans. The book is aimed at a wide academic audience as well as journalists, analysts, and sport enthusiasts.

“This book is dedicated to the phenomenon of football in the Balkans, a region known for its strong links between sport and politics and the hot atmosphere at matches. It gives the reader an in-depth view of Balkan societies and their political and social turbulence. This interdisciplinary publication will undoubtedly interest a wide academic audience (scholars and students), as well as journalists and all those interested in sport in the Balkans.”

—Magdalena Rekść, Associate Professor, University of Łódź (Poland)

“This is an eclectic and geographically wide-ranging collection of essays. In conveying a sense of the complexity and diverse historical experiences of football across the Balkans, authors based both in the region and beyond offer a number of fresh perspectives. From a consideration of Greek football through the eyes of coaches and footballers hailing from the Polish People's Republic, via original archival research into the highly irregular sporting world of post-Tito Yugoslavia, to the survival battle between privatised Romanian clubs and their fan-backed ‘clones’, this book makes some intriguing contributions to the burgeoning literature on the (not so) beautiful game.”

—Richard Mills, Associate Professor, University of East Anglia (United Kingdom);
Author of *The Politics of Football in Yugoslavia*

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FOOTBALL BETWEEN HISTORY, POLITICS, SOCIETY, AND CULTURE: INTRODUCTION

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Football has played a significant role in social life since its beginnings. It gained special significance in the twentieth century, when it achieved the status of a cultural phenomenon, becoming an important element of human life and sometimes even taking over certain spheres of perception previously reserved for so-called high culture (Kowalski, 2004, 263; Orwell, 2002, 326; Wojtaszyn, 2013, 5). As many social phenomena were undergoing significant transformations, football was plugged into the changing reality, often acting as a catalyst for change. Sports arenas became places where new norms and standards of behavior were created, which could permeate other spheres of social interaction. The development of mass culture drew this sport into the sphere of mechanisms shaping the contemporary world—it influenced social behaviors and cultural patterns, and the best players became stars of pop culture, heroes of mass media, and recognizable among all social groups, and many have ended up as politicians. From the region of the Balkans we could mention the Serbian former football player Savo Milošević (famous mainly for his career in Spain—Real Zaragoza, Espanyol Barcelona, Osasuna Pampeluna, Celta de Vigo) who was a political supporter of the Democratic Party led by Boris Tadić, having supported it since 1993 and officially becoming a member in 2003. He took part in the 1996–1997 protests and the 5 October 2000 overthrow of Slobodan Milošević (Nikčević, 2014). Hakan Sükür tried his hand at politics from 2011,

when he was voted in as an Istanbul MP for the Justice and Development Party in Turkey. However, he did not stay long in his post, and resigned in December 2013 after just two years in parliament. We could also mention the former Bulgarian prime minister Boyko Borisov, who became the oldest person ever to play for a Bulgarian professional club when he appeared for FC Vitosha Bistritsa in the B Group, the second division of Bulgarian football (Krasimirov, 2013).

These processes and mechanisms have played a particular role in the Balkans, not an uncontested term, which is a special area of the European continent. Indeed, recently, there have been many discussions on how best to approach the conceptualization of the region's oft-used names—the Balkans or Southeast Europe. In the past, this region has also been variously known as the “*Balkanhalbinsel*” (Balkan Peninsula), “*La Turquie D’Europe*” (European Turkey), and “the Southeast-European Peninsula.” The concept of Southeast Europe is more of a neutral, non-political, and non-ideological term, while use of “the Balkans,” mainly since World War II, has been described by Maria Todorova, for example, as an “abstract demon.” In 2008, the academic conference *Two Hundred Years on the Road: The Term “Balkan Peninsula” (1808–2008)* held in Sofia itself addressed this phenomenon. As reported from the conference: “there was also a consensus that the term South East Europe is more neutral, with the Balkans associated with theories of a distinctive geographical, cultural and political space, to which long-term negative images and stereotypes are applied” (Melichárek, 2020). For many years people from “the West” saw this area of Europe as backwards, “a poorly mapped area separating orderly European civilization from the chaotic Orient” (Melichárek, 2020). “The Balkans,” on the other hand, is the term that is most widely used and anchored in the consciousness of European societies. Regardless of its positive or negative connotations, it captures the “spirit” of the region and is clearly inscribed in the minds of Europeans in the complex, complicated history and fascinating social and identity processes in which sport, and football in particular, also play an important role, sometimes becoming the key to understanding what is going on.

The definition of the Balkan Peninsula mixes the geographical, historical, and political. The region of the Balkans is dynamic and “the Balkans” should be seen as a dynamic concept that corresponds to the current process of historical transformation. The Balkan Peninsula has repeatedly been in a process of transformation: the period of Ottoman dominance was not just a period of stagnation, the interwar period saw not only an increase in Balkan nationalisms, and the Yugoslav conflict of the 1990s was not a continuation of

the Balkan wars of 1912–1913. The Balkans is a unique laboratory in which we can monitor a wide range of parallel political processes. Over the last three decades, the region has experienced several state disintegrations, and violent and non-violent conflicts between and within states, as well as a slowed transformation from socialism to democracy and a market economy. All these experiences have been conceived through the parallel, overlapping, and contradictory dynamics of nation-state building and efforts to join the European Union (Melichárek, 2021).

Special attention of the authors of this volume has been devoted to a few specific regions, including Romania as an example of a post-communist country, Greece as an example of a country originating from a capitalist system, and the countries of the former Yugoslavia as an example of a region in the Eastern bloc that had considerable political autonomy. This selection of case studies attempts to look at the region through the lens of selected areas representing different political, social, and cultural systems, but at the same time representing their own rich and varied histories and cultures, thus reflecting the complexity of the Balkans. In doing so, it responds to the situation in the publishing market, where it is mostly works which focus on the extremely interesting problem of the former Yugoslavia and the countries which emerged after its break-up that are available (Mills, 2018; Brentin and Zec, 2018; Hodges, 2020). The extension of the scope to include case studies from Romania and Greece is a first step towards including the other countries from the region, in order to show its geographical, political, and social complexity. This exposition is also complemented by an analysis of the situation in other parts of the Balkans with regard to political and social issues. The present book furthermore forms a coherent element within the framework of a research project on football as a social phenomenon in the Balkans, carried out jointly with the Balkan History Association. A continuation of these reflections considering other areas of the Balkans is in preparation (*Football in the Balkans II: A Social and Political Phenomenon*).

The key issue that this book explores is the analysis of various aspects of football as a political and social phenomenon. The aim of the authors of the individual chapters is to make a theoretical and practical contribution to the reception of football events, both in their sporting dimension and, above all, in their interconnection with non-sporting aspects: with political, social, and economic issues, while focusing on a kind of Balkan microcosm. Indeed, football in the Balkan countries analyzed did not constitute a monolithic, uniform model and differed significantly in some aspects. Despite this, the book

“Football in the Balkans I: Internal Views, External Perceptions” attempts to identify overarching frameworks that can be helpful in understanding the football phenomenon in the region. One of these is the legacy of communism and the specific tradition and culture of football (Greece), the result of which is, among other things, the creation of an approach to the sport that is characteristic of all the countries analyzed, sanctioning many inappropriate and sub-standard behaviors (such as corruption or extreme politicization). The instrumentalization of football in the Balkans has had a long tradition. The use and focus of the football experience has often had specific political, social, or economic objectives. Due to its considerable and growing potential for social impact and its universal nature, football was doomed to have close links with the political and economic spheres. As a result, political leaders and business people have tried to make football useful for their own purposes. However, football has always been somewhat problematic in this regard. The relative transparency of the game has not always led to the desired results from a propaganda perspective. The autonomous character of the game has also threatened dictatorships, which sought organizationally and ideologically to monopolize the leisure time of the people as the game served to counteract the permanent mobilization of the masses (Koller and Brändle, 2015, 200).

Another identified factor influencing football in the countries analyzed is the activity of football fans. Their activity has had a specific dual character. On the one hand, they have been an object of political instrumentalization. They have played an important part in the social engineering and internal policy-making of the respective countries and regions. Football fandom in the Balkans has always been a truly democratic and egalitarian activity, independent of social groups and socio-political status—the spectators and fans have ranged from schoolchildren through workers and intellectuals to the most privileged members of local and national authorities. Thanks to this, it gained significant social legitimacy, with the help of which it has been possible to shape desired models of social behavior, create specific ideological visions, or pursue current economic interests. On the other hand, fans have been active actors trying to create new realities and initiate social and political change. They have often proven an important factor contributing to making the process of local identity formation more dynamic. Football is in fact a phenomenon of mass culture, focusing the attention of local recipients. In the world of sporting competitions, the construction of “the stranger” and “own,” typical in the formation of identity and well recognized in the fields of sociology and cultural anthropology, manifests itself extremely clearly (Mosz, 2007, 56–62).

Based on the immanent feature of rivalry—the opposition between “us and them”—and its distinct spatial location, football naturally shapes models of local identity. Above all, it can—thanks to its formally apolitical character—be used in the process of identification with a given state, nation, geographical area, or political vision. This aspect was particularly intensively used in periods of the creation or attempted modification of specific national and ethnic identities in the individual states of the region.

The theoretical framework of the volume is built on work rooted in sports studies, with a special focus on the meaning of sports culture (Marschik et al., 2010). However, this volume takes an interdisciplinary approach, offering greater insight into broader methodological approaches. The individual authors offer treatments of specific research problems using a variety of methodologies from within sports studies melded with other research approaches. The individual chapters of the volume have been prepared by scholars representing different academic disciplines and research areas, coming both from the countries of the region and from other parts of Europe. Thus, this book offers a space for academic reflection on the phenomenon of football in the Balkans from both inside and outside. The authors do not merely reproduce the dominant image of football in the region as presented in the global media, but try to plumb, through the example of individual case studies, the great depth of Balkan football culture in all its complexity.

The volume opens with a chapter on the evolution of the role of football in Romanian society, shown against the background of socio-political changes and the history of Romanian football, by Andrea Antonie (“A Popular Game in Dracula’s Land? A Socio-Historical Overview of Romanian Football”). In line with the volume’s objectives, special attention is given to the communist era, which helped to create the specific character of football, as well as to football culture, shaping the norms of fan behavior. Romania is also addressed in the text “From Commons to Commodity and Back Again: Football’s Great Transformation in Post-socialist Romania” by Razvan Papisima. At the center of his analysis are the processes that co-shape the activities of football fans of individual clubs. Using a material-relational approach and taking into account the socio-economic context, he seeks to identify the reasons and values behind their involvement in club activities. The next two chapters are devoted to key frameworks for understanding the phenomenon of football in the former Yugoslavia: the politicization of football and the activism of football fans—their capacity for causal action and their instrumentalization. In the chapter “Yugoslav Football from Tito’s Death to the Breakup of Yugoslavia: Situation and

Problems in the Climate of Political Conflict,” Davor Kovačić analyzes the loosening of “ideological discipline” and the growing political and economic confusion in public life in the 1980s. Against this backdrop, he shows the complexity of the dependency of the football fan community, which became active actors on the political and social scene, initiating trends of a nationalist nature and becoming a catalyst for political processes towards the break-up of Yugoslavia. From a different perspective, this issue is analyzed by Maciej Górski in “Football and Politicians: Tito, Tuđman, and Milošević and Their Political Instrumentalization of the Social Phenomenon of Football.” He portrays football as a tool in the hands of selected politicians who use it to evoke certain social emotions. The instrumentalization of football and the activities of fans depended on vested political interests, serving both to fuel nationalist sentiments and to silence national particularisms. A case study of the state emerging from the break-up of Yugoslavia: Bosnia and Herzegovina, correlates with these chapters. Giordano Merlicco, Danilo Kovač, and Luca Alteri, in the chapter “Competing for the Nation on the Football Pitch: Ideology and Sports in Mostar,” analyze the socio-political dimension of football in Mostar against the backdrop of the political context, based, inter alia, on the statements of local politicians and the various means of expression found in the repertoire of fans. The subsequent chapters deal with football in Greece. Artur Pasko presents a characterization of the situation of the football community in the 1970s and 1980s, interpreted from the perspective of representatives of the socialist state, “Greek Football of the 70s and 80s in the Memories of Polish Coaches and Footballers.” Through the analysis of memoirs, interviews, and archival material, one can see the differences and peculiarities of Greek football that determined its specific character. Continuing these reflections—this time from a twenty-first-century Greek perspective—is the chapter “The Odyssey of Greek Football: Politics, Corruption and the Spirit of Division” by Theofilos Pouliopoulos. The chapter analyses the cultural elements influencing football and isolates phenomena specific to the wider social and political context that have permeated the football milieu.

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A POPULAR GAME IN DRACULA'S LAND? A SOCIO-HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF ROMANIAN FOOTBALL

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Abstract: This study is about the changing role of football in Romanian society and provides a brief overview of the history of Romanian football. By dividing the development of Romanian football into seven historical periods, it debates how football has been influenced by the country's socio-political changes. Special attention is paid to the communist era, which heavily influenced the development of football in Romania. Links between Romania and Central and Eastern European countries are made in order to identify the development of Romanian football. Comparisons are also made between Romanian and international football in order to understand Romania's position on the world football stage. Lastly, football culture is briefly analyzed because it is important to understand how fan culture has been impacted by politics. In conclusion, although Romania is a footballing nation, it has not built a national identity through football in the same way as other Balkan countries.

Keywords: football history, Romania, communism, capitalism, national identity

Introduction

“Football is a mass sport because it can be pursued by several persons and supported by masses of people in the stands. The teams as carriers of identity

can satisfy the distinctive collective needs of different social strata” (Hadas, 2009, 46). As it is the most important sport in Romanian society in terms of publicity and public recognition, all football players receive special treatment. Thus, Romanian football has become an increasingly interesting sphere for social scientists because it has been highly influenced by socio-political factors.

In 2020, the audit company KPMG conducted a study for European Leagues (EL), an association representing 37 professional leagues, on the financial turnover of each league over the previous five years. According to the results, the 55 UEFA leagues included in the study were divided into five clusters. The Romanian league was ranked in the fourth group (11 leagues), on the same level as Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. As of January 2022, the Romanian national team’s current ranking in the International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA) list was 44th. Its highest ranking ever was in September 1997 when it was ranked third in the world, according to FIFA. The visibility of Romanian football on the international stage has been bolstered by the appearance of the national team in European and World Cup tournaments.

This study has two main objectives. Firstly, it intends to determine the main historical periods of Romanian football and the core features of each period, also taking into account how major international developments have impacted Romanian football. Its second objective is to analyze how the Romanian socio-political situation has influenced Romanian football and its development. In brief, the study intends to be a historical-sociological analysis of Romanian football, treating the game as a cultural and sociological phenomenon.

My key sources are those publications that describe the different stages of the development of Romanian football and include annual reports and yearbooks from the Romanian Football Association (*Federația Română de Fotbal*). In accordance with football’s stature as the most popular sport in the world, it is also the most researched sport, and has been much researched from a socio-historical perspective (Eisberg, 2006, 170–208). I make use of both international and Romanian research literature. Most previous studies on Romanian football focused on the communist period when football was used as a propaganda tool by the party, and there are barely any studies on other periods (Patrascu, 2013; Adam, 2020; Peter, 2018).

In historical sociology, it is quite common to describe changes taking place in terms of periods (Itkonen, 2002), and indeed this applies to most of the studies on football history. Firstly, Taylor (2008) structured British football into six different periods, whereas Itkonen and Nevala (2012, 570–583) divided

Finnish football history into four periods. In contrast, Molnar (2007, 293–317) described Hungarian football from a different angle, dividing football history into periods that strictly related to the different political systems that Hungary had witnessed in the previous century. The history of Romanian football was seen through the lens of Melenco et al. (2021, 36–44), although they only focused on the results of the clubs and national team without analyzing any other aspects. Taking into account the social and political factors, this study divides Romanian football history into seven different periods.

The Birth of Romanian Football (1890–1918)

In 1918, at the end of the First World War, came the “Great Union” as it is called by Romanian historians. Transylvania, which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, unified with Romania. It was a monarchy for almost a century from 1866 to 1947 (Barbulescu, 2005, 401). Romanian political unification was a long and arduous process. The same could be said for the Romanian Football Association, which changed its organizational structure several times.

As it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, football in Transylvania developed more quickly than in Romania. Although football was first introduced by German and Dutch entrepreneurs, it was mainly promoted by physical education teachers and Romanian students who had been studying abroad in the late nineteenth century. The first football and rules were introduced in Arad (Transylvania) in 1890 by the dentist Iuliu Weiner, from London where he had been studying (Poenaru, 2013, 232–251). In 1885, Dimitrie Ionescu, a teacher at the Gheorghe Lazăr National College in Bucharest, translated the rules of the game into Romanian for the first time (Manusaride and Ghemigean, 1986, 126), while in 1899 the first “real” football in Romania was introduced by Mario Gebauer, who had been studying in Lausanne, Switzerland (Ionescu et al., 2001).

The first Romanian teams to participate in a competition were from Transylvania and had participated in the Hungarian championship since 1905, though Athletic Club Arad, the first Romanian football club, had already been established in 1899 (Hadas, 2009, 47). The first Romanian Championship was held in 1909 and continued to be organized in a cup competition system until 1921 (Chirila and Ionescu, 1999, 11).

However, a crucial early step in organizing football in Romania was to establish an association. The Romanian Football Clubs Association, which lasted

only three years, held its inaugural meeting in October 1909. Only three football clubs were present, most of the players being foreign workers (Manusaride and Ghermisan, 1986, 128–130). In 1912, Prince Ferdinand I established the Romanian Sport Societies Federation (*Federația Societăților Sportive Române*) in order to govern Romanian sports (Ivan, 2013, 1). It consisted of 12 sports commissions, one of which was the Central Commission of Football Association, with Mario Gebauer as president, which continued the activities of the Romanian Football Clubs Association. Romania's first international matches were mainly played against Transylvania until 1918 (Angelescu, 2009, 24).

The main feature of this period is that the people involved in football were not only playing a sportive role but also an administrative role. For example, although Mario Gebauer and Lazar Breyer both played for Sport Club Olympia, the Romanian Football Clubs Association elected Mario Gebauer as president and Lazar Breyer as secretary (Angelescu, 2009, 16–17).

The Interwar Period (1919–1939)

At the end of the First World War, Transylvania gained its independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire and made the “Great Union” with Romania in December 1918. The Interwar Period was characterized by huge socio-economic development in Romanian society. Many foreign companies started businesses in Romania, investing in the oil and metallurgic industries. In the 1930s, Romania became the sixth largest economic power in the world, being the greatest oil producer in Europe, the second largest gas and gold producer, and the fourth largest grain producer. Consequently, Romanian football took advantage of the economic growth and reforms between the World Wars (Hitkins, 1994, 334–372).

In 1919, realizing that football activity was moving slowly, Mario Gebauer established the Union of Football Clubs Association (*Uniunea Cluburilor de Fotball-Asociație*). A total of 19 clubs joined the association, all of them from Romania and none of them from Transylvania. In 1923, he was Romania's representative at the FIFA congress in Paris at which it was accepted as a member (Angelescu, 2009, 16). The Romanian Federation of Football Association was established in 1930 (Manusaride and Ghemigean, 1986, 136–137).

The first international match played by the Romanian national team was against Yugoslavia in 1922, followed by its participation in the first major international event, the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris (Chirila, 1998,