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THE CASE OF POST-YUGOSLAV STATES**

Abstract

In the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, as well as in the states that emerged after its break-up, various types of conflict were evident at many levels. One such conflict has been sports rivalries, which, although intended to be separate from the prevailing political disputes, became a significant element in the escalating conflict between the federation's nations and republics. This article aims to present and analyze the role of sport and its associated competitions in political conflict, both before and after Yugoslavia's break-up.

Keywords: sports rivalry, socio-political conflict, Yugoslavia

Sport and politics have long been areas of social activity that intersect in numerous ways. This is evident both in events within individual countries and in international rivalries. The latter, especially, is of great interest as, in certain situations, it goes beyond mere sports rivalry. In extreme cases, it becomes part of an impending, ongoing, or past inter-state conflict. Examples include the "football war" between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969, the terrorist attack on Israeli athletes in the Olympic village in Munich in 1972, the 1986 World Cup match between England and Argentina, the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics by Western countries and the counter-boycott by the Eastern Bloc countries four years later in Los Angeles¹.

From just a few examples (among many others that could be highlighted), it can be concluded that sport and its associated international relations extend far beyond the initial perceptions of "pure" interpersonal competition, as seen, for instance, in the Olympic movement. Additionally, there is another dimension to this unique sports rivalry: the desire

¹ See for more examples: P. Lonyszyn, *Najważniejsze przykłady wpływu polityki na sport – próba geograficznego ujęcia*, in: *Interdyscyplinarność w naukach o Ziemi. Studia przypadków. Vol. 2*, (ed.) P. Aniśkiewicz, M. Olejniczak, Szczecin 2016.



to showcase one's strengths (be they economic, ideological, civilizational, etc.) during the organization of major events such as the Olympic Games, world championships, or continental championships. Interestingly, the pursuit of an outstanding global presentation has often been a hallmark of regimes that lean towards authoritarianism. This was evident in the Olympic Games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen and Berlin in 1936, and later in events like the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, the aforementioned Olympic Games in the USSR's capital, and more recently, the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014 and Beijing's hosting of both the Summer (2008) and Winter Olympics (2022).

The situation is similar for countries that emerged from the break-up of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In this context, the scale of rivalry and resources, considering the population and economic potential, is understandably smaller. However, this does not diminish the nationalism-infused emotions surrounding the sports rivalry or its political significance on both national and regional stages. It is noteworthy that internal sports rivalries with pronounced political undertones persisted throughout the existence of this multinational state. In the late 1980s, they even directly influenced the acceleration of its disintegration. Against the backdrop of Yugoslavia's break-up, it is challenging to disentangle the dramatic events of the ensuing bloody civil war from the rising nationalism among fervent football or basketball supporters.

This article aims to delve deeper into selected instances that highlight the connection between this seemingly apolitical sports rivalry – as M. M. Kobierecki² astutely observes – and the complex, enduring political conflict in the post-Yugoslav region. The first section of the piece will recount events from the era of the federal state's existence and its gradual break-up, while the latter section will examine key incidents from the time of the independent nations. Simultaneously, it should be clarified that this article will not address matters pertaining to sports policy, that is, the oversight of sports by authorized governmental or local governmental bodies³.

The analysis of the ties between the world of sport and politics in Yugoslavia necessitates at least a brief mention of the state's formative period following the First World War. From the outset, the authorities, primarily the monarch, aimed to centralize and oversee all facets of social life, even those they deemed less significant. This naturally extended to sport, which, despite not being the primary focus of the Belgrade elite, encompassed both mass and competitive sports. These were aligned with the objective of forging a unified community. A prime illustration of such an approach by the authorities of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was the 1919 amalgamation of the "Sokol" (translated as "Falcon") sports societies, which had existed since the 19th century. These societies were brought under a single central board that championed the concept of Yugoslavism, encapsulated by the motto "One nation, one state, one Sokol"⁴. However, the centralization efforts and the push for standardized practices in sports during the inter-war years faced numerous challenges. The diverse traditions of the individual nations constituting the new state were evident. For instance, the Slovenes looked down upon team sports, especially football,

² M.M. Kobierecki, *Upolitycznienie sportu jako następstwo konfrontacji politycznej państw*, "Przegląd Politologiczny" 2016, No. 1, p. 108.

³ See for more details: T. Matras, *Polityka sportowa – interpretacja pojęcia i problemy definicyjne*, "Athe-neum. Polskie Studia Politologiczne", 2017, No. 55, pp. 51–62.

⁴ R. Mills, *Nogomet i polityka u Jugoslaviji. Sport, nacionalizam i država*, Zagreb 2018, p. 14.

which was widely embraced in other parts of the country. They perceived it, in contrast to individual sports like skiing, as a pursuit favored by the violence-prone and corruption-endorsing “southerners”. Concurrently, despite the pervasive Yugoslav propaganda and the ban on club names alluding to national identities or historical events, clubs reflecting the specific ethnicities of their members sprouted across the nation. The Serbian clubs, closely tied to the royal administration, were particularly prominent. For instance, the stadium in Novi Sad bore the name of the 19th-century Serbian leader Karađorđe, and a club in Belgrade underwent a name change from Velika Srbija to Jugoslavija⁵.

However, in the grand scheme of things, the King and subsequent governments did not prioritize sport as a significant tool in political maneuvering, especially when juxtaposed with issues such as language or administrative divisions. This stance shifted post-Second World War with the advent of communist rule. In Yugoslavia, mirroring other socialist nations, sports were officially deemed pivotal in domestic politics, representing the zenith of society’s physical activity. Unwaveringly, only amateurism was acceptable in competitive sports, as professionalism contradicted ideological tenets⁶.

Party propaganda advocated that citizens, generously funded by the state, should actively engage in diverse physical activities, and only those who excelled were permitted to participate in competitive sports, but without officially recognizing it as a professional endeavor. However, the actual allocation of resources told a different story. Sports rivalry was too valuable to the Communist leadership and Josip Broz Tito to be entrusted solely to “pure amateurs”. It is thus unsurprising that a substantial chunk of the sports budget (around 75%) was directed towards professional athletes, leaving a mere 25% for grassroots sports⁷.

Communist Yugoslavia viewed sports, notably team sports, as a crucial facet of its foreign policy. Paradoxically, the rivalry with the USSR after the break-up of relations in the late 1940s serves as a prime example. At the 1952 Helsinki Summer Olympics, a football tournament witnessed a match between the two national teams, which was extremely prestigious from the point of view of bilateral relations. The USSR’s debut team, specifically assembled for the Olympics, was anticipated to showcase its dominance over Tito’s “fascist faction”. However, the game ended in a 5:5 draw, with Yugoslavia having a 5:1 lead just 15 minutes before the whistle. As per the rules, a rematch was scheduled two days later⁸. In Tampere, where it was to take place, Finnish supporters cheered the Balkan players, remembering the recent war with the USSR and the loss of part of their territory to their communist neighbor. In the end, Yugoslavia won 3:1, which caused real euphoria in the home country – from Slovenia to Kosovo, regardless of nationality. Victory over “Stalin and the Cominform” was widely celebrated. The team, upon returning from Finland with the Olympic silver medal (having lost to Hungary in the final), was greeted by Marshal Tito himself, who personally handed out prize money in “hard” currency (dollars). The

⁵ Ibidem, pp. 13 and 15.

⁶ I. Stanić, *Sport za svakoga. Sportske aktivnosti radničke klase u Hrvatskoj od 1945. do početka 1960-ih*, “Historijski zbornik”, 2016, vol. 1, pp. 124–125.

⁷ D. Kovačić, *Nogometni profesionalci u udruženom radu*, “Časopis za suvremenu povijest”, 2016, vol. 1, p. 71.

⁸ M.M. Kobierecki, *“Sportowa wojna światowa”. Implikacje polityczne międzynarodowej rywalizacji sportowej w okresie zimnej wojny*, Łódź 2017, p. 121.

memory of the victory in Tampere remained in the public consciousness for a long time as a symbol of the successful fight for Yugoslav unity⁹.

While the victory over the Soviet football team in 1952 was leveraged by the authorities in Belgrade to bolster supranational unity in the early days of the socialist state, the 1984 Winter Olympics, held in Sarajevo, became a kind of sporting buckle and symbolically marked the end of this community. The capital of the Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina was selected to host this premier winter sporting event in May 1978, during Tito's lifetime. Throughout the Olympic Games, supporters from across the country enthusiastically supported Yugoslavia's representatives, irrespective of their national origin. The country's first-ever medal at the Winter Olympics, won by alpine skier Jure Franko, was met with immense joy. Similarly, the unfortunate performance of ski jumper Primož Ulaga, whose jump was entirely unsuccessful, led many in the audience to leave the stands. The fact that both athletes were Slovenian made no difference to the local supporters¹⁰.

It is notable that Yugoslavia was the first socialist country honored with hosting the Winter Olympics. According to federal authorities, this was meant to highlight its superiority over the Eastern Bloc and Moscow's version of socialism. Sarajevo excelled in its challenging role as host, a fact echoed in numerous Western press articles. This achievement carried socio-political and economic implications, offering not only a chance to reaffirm the country's international prestige but also to stimulate tourism and provide a substantial boost to the state's finances, which were increasingly strained¹¹.

It is worth noting that socialist Yugoslavia played a significant role on the international sports stage, both as an organizer of numerous events and as a winner of many medals, particularly in team sports. Regarding the former, besides the previously mentioned Winter Olympics in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, specifically Split, hosted the 1979 Mediterranean Games. These games were held under unique international circumstances, such as the USSR's looming intervention in Afghanistan and domestic events like the passing of the state's second-in-command, E. Kardelj, and the noticeable decline in Tito's health¹². Earlier, in 1976, Yugoslavia hosted the European football championship finals, and in 1970, the men's basketball world championships. In terms of team sports achievements, the SFRY was undeniably a sporting powerhouse. In football, Yugoslavia was a two-time European vice-champion (in 1960 and 1968), and the under-20 national team clinched the World Cup in 1987. Towards the end of the federation's existence, in 1991, Crvena zvezda Belgrade secured the European Cup, the precursor to today's Champions League. The men's basketball team had even more accolades, with an Olympic championship (1980), second place (1988), third place (1984¹³), three world championships (1970, 1978, and 1990), three second places, and two third places. Additionally, in other disciplines, the gold (1986) and

⁹ R. Mills, *Nogomet i politika...*, pp. 106–107.

¹⁰ *Olimpijske igre u Sarajevu 1984.*, <http://historija.info/olimpijske-igre-u-sarajevu-1984/> (accessed: 02.05.2022).

¹¹ *Kako su svjetski mediji doživjeli Jugoslaviju i Zimske olimpijske igre u Sarajevu*, <https://www.index.hr/sport/clanak/kako-su-svjetski-mediji-dozivjeli-jugoslaviju-i-zimske-olimpijske-igre-u-sarajevu/2338142.aspx> (accessed: 02.05.2022).

¹² For further insights into the political implications of these competitions, see: J. Zekić, *Mediterranske igre u Splitu – odrazi političke dimenzije u tiskanim medijima*, "Časopis za suvremenu povijest", 2016, vol. 1.

¹³ Unlike the Eastern Bloc countries, Yugoslavia did not boycott the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

silver (1982) from the world handball championships deserve mention¹⁴. Compared to other Moscow-subordinated socialist countries, these achievements were exceptional, rivaled only by the Soviet Union. While the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was also a sports powerhouse, its dominance was not as pronounced in team sports. Moreover, it later emerged that the GDR's successes in international sports rivalry were largely backed by institutionalized illegal doping, widely supported by the state authorities¹⁵.

The state subtly utilized Yugoslavia's strong sporting position to further its international objectives, especially as a promotional tool among Non-Aligned Movement countries, mainly in Asia and Africa. A special program was even established, aiming for Yugoslav coaches to lead as many global teams as possible, including national teams. For instance, in 1969, 47 Yugoslav football coaches were active in 17 countries, with five serving as national team selectors in Iraq, Iran, Tunisia, Libya, and Kuwait¹⁶.

The final decade of socialist Yugoslavia saw a profound socio-economic crisis, leading to rising nationalism and separatist tendencies across its republics. Yet, paradoxically, this did not immediately result in a decline in Yugoslav athletic performance or a boycott of national teams. Some of the aforementioned triumphs occurred during this tumultuous period, like the 1990 basketball world championship or Crvena zvezda's European Cup win. This latter achievement is particularly noteworthy. The Belgrade team's pinnacle came on May 29, 1991, after the initial Croatian-Serbian conflicts (Plitvice and Borovo Selo). Yet, its squad included, besides Serbs, Macedonians, a Muslim, and several Croatian players, such as future Real Madrid player and Croatian national team stalwart Robert Prosinečki¹⁷. Despite Crvena zvezda's multi-ethnic makeup, Belgrade politicians exploited this sporting success in their increasingly nationalistic propaganda¹⁸.

Returning to the topic mentioned earlier regarding the continuation of games in what were nearly wartime conditions, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is especially noteworthy. In the 1991/92 season, football league matches at the federal level that involved teams from this republic (albeit without the participation of Slovenian and Croatian clubs, which began that season in their own national leagues) persisted until spring. During the 26th round, the Sarajevo club Željezničar was set to face the Rad Belgrade team on April 5, 1992. However, the match was canceled as the Bosnian capital came under shellfire during the warm-up, compelling players and supporters from both sides to seek refuge. That same weekend, another Sarajevo club, FK, competed in Belgrade against Crvena zvezda, while Velež Mostar also played against the Spartak Subotica team away. In this instance, the players could not return directly from Serbia to Herzegovina due to the onset of hostilities; they only managed to return after two days via Montenegro¹⁹.

¹⁴ Own compilation based on data from the official websites of international sports federations.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that during the Sarajevo Winter Olympics mentioned in this article, the GDR topped the medal table with the most gold medals, totaling nine. See: *Sarajevo 1984 Medal Table*, <https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/sarajevo-1984/medals> (accessed: 5/2/2022).

¹⁶ R. Mills, *Nogomet i politika...*, pp. 173–174.

¹⁷ M. Miłosz, *Kilka słów o największym sukcesie Crveneje zvezdy*, <https://pilkarskie-balkany.pl/bari-1991/> (accessed: 5/2/2022).

¹⁸ See for more details: I. Đorđević, *The Role of the Red Star Football Club in the Construction of Serbian National Identity*, "Traditiones", 2016, No. 1.

¹⁹ S. Ibrulj, *Kako je upucan nogomet*, <https://telesport.telegram.hr/kolumne/na-posudbi/kako-je-upucan-nogomet/> (accessed: 5/2/2022).

Beyond the aforementioned examples of sustaining supra-ethnic unity in sports rivalry, literature also highlights several sporting events that held additional political significance towards the end of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Of these, the two most commonly cited have become significant symbols of the disintegration of the supranational community. They gained such prominence because they involved the state's most beloved team sports: football and basketball.

One such symbolic event was the renowned league match at the Maksimir Stadium in Zagreb, scheduled for May 13, 1990, between the local Dynamo and Crvena zvezda Belgrade²⁰. This was a politically charged period, as just a few days prior, the second round of the republican parliamentary elections took place in Croatia. The pro-independence, right-wing Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ), led by Franj Tuđman, won by a significant margin. Among the most passionate football supporters, including members of the Bad Blue Boys (BBB), Dinamo's ultras group, many actively supported the HDZ during the election campaign. Concurrently, in Serbia, politicians advocating for a Greater Serbia, notably Slobodan Milošević, were gaining traction among supporters. This sentiment was also shared by Crvena zvezda's ultras group, known as Delije (named after Turkish warriors)²¹. Given the palpable animosity between the two ultras groups, the strained political ties between Belgrade and Zagreb, the tense post-election climate in Croatia, and the fact that the security forces – those responsible for ensuring the match's safety in Zagreb – were predominantly Serbian, severe disturbances were anticipated.

This is what happened. The confrontations began well before the game when a large group of Delije (comprising at least 2,500 supporters led by the later war criminal Željko Ražnatović better known as Arkan) en route from the train station to the stadium, was ambushed by several thousand Dinamo supporters. The chaos subsequently spread to the stands and the pitch²². A particularly symbolic moment of the Serbo-Croatian conflict occurred on the pitch when Dinamo's captain, Zvonimir Boban, kicked a militiaman in the head after the latter had previously assaulted a Croatian supporter. This incident was captured by a television station set to broadcast the match live.

The riots between Croatian and Serbian supporters persisted even after the match was officially canceled. The tumultuous day culminated with Dinamo's ultras group, aided by the typically adversarial Hajduk Split (Torcida) supporters, outside the Croatian Parliament building, where they vocally supported Tuđman. En route to the Sabor, nationalist members of the BBB and Torcida vandalized offices and shops owned by Serbian companies. The day's events resulted in at least 138 injuries, including 79 militiamen²³.

The socio-political impact of the riots at and around the Maksimir Stadium was extremely profound. It marked the first instance where the hatred between Serbs and Croats was displayed so vehemently, a sentiment that was further inflamed by media outlets on both sides in the subsequent weeks. Zvonimir Boban emerged as a symbol: representing

²⁰ According to D. Lalić, the British writer and journalist, James Montague, classified this match, which was not played after all, among the five most important football matches that changed the world. See: D. Lalić, *Nogomet i politika. Povijest i suvremenost međuodnosa u Hrvatskoj*, Zagreb 2018, p. 165.

²¹ R. Mills, *Nogomet i politika...*, p. 107. For more on the football clubs and supporter groups mentioned, see: P. Jaworski, *Navijači. Kibicowski przewodnik po bylej Jugoslavii*, Belchatów 2020.

²² D. Lalić, *Nogomet i politika...*, p. 164.

²³ R. Mills, *Nogomet i politika...*, p. 211.

courage and patriotism for Croats, but nationalism and hooliganism for Serbs. Dinamo's captain was handed a six-month suspension by the Yugoslav Football Federation, and law enforcement authorities charged him with assaulting a militia officer²⁴. It was around this period that newspapers began to openly discuss the possibility of a civil war as a potential fallout from this canceled match²⁵.

It is worth noting that the events of May 13, 1990, at the Maksimir Stadium were not the only instances in the former Yugoslavia where strong emotions of political conflict were evident during a football match. However, they were certainly the most renowned, and for Croats, they became somewhat of a foundational myth for the independent state. On June 3, a friendly football match between the Yugoslav and Dutch national teams took place at the same stadium. During the team presentations, local supporters jeered the Yugoslav anthem and throughout the match, they supported the visitors, even waving Dutch flags, which bear a striking resemblance to Croatian flags. Subsequently, on September 26, during a match at the Poljud Stadium in Split between local teams – Hajduk and Partizan Belgrade, members of the local Torcida supporters removed the Yugoslav flag from its pole, set it alight, and then rehung it, much to the delight of the attending supporters²⁶.

Another significant event, which, despite being a sporting rivalry, had profound political implications, was the final match of the 1990 basketball World Cup held in Argentina. The Yugoslav national team of that era was formidable, a fact they underscored by defeating the USSR team in the final on August 20. The team comprised players from various ethnicities, but the pivotal roles were played by Croats and Serbs. Notably, among the Croats was Dražen Petrović, and among the Serbs, Vlade Divac. Both had joined the NBA in 1989 and had been friends for years, notwithstanding their distinct national backgrounds. However, this match drastically altered their relationship. After the game, as the basketball players celebrated their victory, they were joined by supporters from Argentina's significant Yugoslav, predominantly Croatian, diaspora. One supporter was displaying a Croatian flag, which elicited a strong response from Divac; he took the flag and threw it to the ground.

This incident received extensive media coverage, with Croatian media condemning the act and Serbian media praising it. Although Divac later clarified that he would have reacted similarly to any flag other than the Yugoslav one (even a Serbian one, had a supporter displayed it), the chances of reconciling this dispute seemed slim. Following this incident, tensions escalated in both republics, leading to a symbolic rift between Petrović and Divac and marking the end of one of basketball's most illustrious national teams²⁷.

It is worth noting that 20 years later, a documentary titled "Nekoć braća" was produced, exploring the relationship between these two basketball legends. Among other topics, it

²⁴ D. Kovačić, *Nogomet kao sredstvo nacionalne identifikacije Hrvata*, u *Kraljevini SHS-u/Jugoslaviji i socijalističkoj Jugoslaviji*, "Diacovensia: teološki prilozi", 2020, No. 4, p. 563.

²⁵ R. Mills, *Nogomet i politika...*, p. 213.

²⁶ D. Kovačić, *Nogomet kao sredstvo...*, p. 563.

²⁷ S. Ljugonić, *Divac za Novu TV: Tamo je jedino jugoslavenskoj zastavi bilo mjesto!*, <https://gol.dnevnik.hr/clanak/rubrika/kosarka/divac-za-dnevnik-nove-tv.html> (accessed: 02.05.2022). For more details on D. Petrović and the role he played (not only in Croatian sport) in the late 1980s and early 1990s, see: M. Szczutkowski, *Sport i politika. Wpływ konfliktu w byłej Jugosławii na życie i karierę Dražena Petrovica*, "Świat Idei i Polityki", 2016, vol. 15.

dives into the details of the final game, its political ramifications, and the subsequent war. Vlade Divac narrated the documentary and visited Croatia for the first time since the war during its production. He had previously been apprehensive about visiting due to threats he had received from Croatian supporters. Regrettably, Petrović could not feature in the film as he tragically died in a car accident in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1993 while returning from a qualifying tournament in Wrocław²⁸.

The analysis of both the period during which Yugoslavia existed and its subsequent break-up suggests that sporting rivalries significantly influenced political relations. A similar situation was evident immediately after the emergence of independent states and remains so today.

When analyzing the contemporary ties between sporting and political rivalries in the post-Yugoslav region, it is beneficial to utilize the classification proposed by M. M. Kobierecki. He highlighted five manifestations of this interplay:

- 1) Rivalry in Olympic Games medal tallies.
- 2) Prestigious sporting triumphs.
- 3) Organization of sporting events.
- 4) Engagement in international sporting rivalry.
- 5) Sports boycott²⁹.

Specific cases will be explored and discussed in the following sections, using the aforementioned classification as a lens.

The rivalry in medal tallies among the post-Yugoslav republics does not hold the same significance on the global stage as, for instance, the rivalry between the USA and the USSR during the Cold War era. For instance, at the Tokyo Olympic Games, which were rescheduled to 2021 from 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, athletes from the post-Yugoslav nations secured a total of 25 medals: 11 gold, six silver, and eight bronze³⁰. The most captivating contest in the medal tally was between Serbia and Croatia. While Serbia won more medals overall (nine), Croatia clinched medals of greater value. Both countries secured three golds each, but Croatia won three silvers compared to Serbia's one. Naturally, the method of ranking the medals varied based on perspective (whether from Belgrade or Zagreb) – prioritizing either quality or quantity. By the former metric, Croatia came out on top, while by the latter, Serbia did³¹. Slovenia, with a population of just 2 million, also performed commendably, bringing home five medals, three of which were gold. Surprisingly, Kosovo secured two gold medals, while Macedonia won a silver medal. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro did not clinch any medals³². For context, at the preceding Rio de Janeiro Games, Croatia was the standout performer among the analyzed nations, securing 10 medals, five of which were gold. Serbian athletes returned

²⁸ T. Pakrac, V. Radičević, *Pet velikih propusta u filmu o Draženu i Divcu*, <https://gol.dnevnik.hr/clanak/rubrika/kosarka/pet-velikih-propusta-u-filmu-o-drazenu-i-divcu-2.html> (accessed: 02.05.2022).

²⁹ M.M. Kobierecki, "Sportowa wojna światowa"..., pp. 109–117.

³⁰ By comparison, Poland, with a population larger than all the post-Yugoslav nations combined, won 14 medals in Rio, four of which were gold.

³¹ It is worth noting that discrepancies in medal counting methods have also been a point of contention among major sporting powers like the USA, USSR, and China. Typically, the methodology that favored the respective country was chosen.

³² M. Protić, *Olimpijske igre u Tokiju: Zavesa je spuštena – Srbija za nijansu bolja od Hrvatske, Balkan ima čime da se pohvali*, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/svet-58136661> (accessed: 5/2/2022).

with eight medals, two being gold, placing them directly ahead of Poland in the medal tally. Slovenia won four medals in Rio, and the debutant Kosovo team secured a gold medal³³. Among the other post-Yugoslav nations, only Bosnia and Herzegovina has yet to win an Olympic medal, while Montenegro's women's handball team clinched silver in London 2012.

In summer sports, the contest for the top spots in the medal tally is primarily between Croatia and Serbia. However, the dynamics shift when it comes to winter sports, where the Slovenians often clinch medals. For instance, they secured two gold, three silver, and two bronze medals at the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. Yet, in the first decade of the 21st century, Croatia overshadowed its northern neighbor, amassing a series of alpine skiing medals at the Games, largely due to the phenomenal performances of the Kostelić siblings: Janica (with four gold and two silver medals) and Ivica (with four silver medals)³⁴.

Beyond the Kostelićs, only one other athlete has clinched a Winter Games medal for Croatia: biathlete Jakov Fak in 2010. His story adds a layer of complexity to Croatian-Slovenian relations. After his success in Vancouver, Fak opted to switch his citizenship to Slovenian. This decision was not merely personal; it took on a political hue, further straining the ties between the two neighboring countries, already tested by issues such as the Krško nuclear power plant dispute and disagreements over land and maritime borders³⁵. In Slovenia, Fak's decision was not universally celebrated. When he was slated to be the flag bearer at the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea, a surge of criticism emerged in the media. Ultimately, under external pressures, Fak relinquished this honor. Nevertheless, he went on to secure a silver medal at those Games³⁶.

Many of the aforementioned Olympic achievements, whether in summer or winter sports, can be categorized as **prestigious sporting triumphs**. However, it is worth noting that not all prestigious tournaments occur within the Olympics. Football and tennis are prime examples of this. In football, among the post-Yugoslav nations, Croatia stands out with its successes. The country clinched three World Cup medals: a bronze in 1998 and 2022 and a silver in 2018, the latter after a final match against France. The 1998 achievement, in particular, held significant political implications. For the fledgeling nation and its leadership, this success served dual purposes: it promoted Croatia on the international stage and, domestically, it bolstered the narrative of national accomplishment championed by then-President Franjo Tuđman³⁷. In tennis, Serbia takes the lead, primarily due to the exceptional talent of Novak Đoković, who has secured 24 Grand Slam titles, marking him as one of the sport's all-time greats. Turning to other sports, notable achievements include Yugoslavia's Olympic gold in men's volleyball in 2000, Serbia's women's volleyball World Championship gold in 2018, Slovenia's European Championship in men's basketball in 2017, and Serbia's European Championship in women's basketball in 2021.

³³ Data from: <https://www.rio2016.com/en/medal-count-country> (accessed: 5/4/2022).

³⁴ Data from: <https://www.fis-ski.com> (accessed: 5/4/2022).

³⁵ S. Bartoluci, M. Doupona-Topič, *A young athlete and the challenges of national identity: the case of Jakov Fak*, "Acta Kinesiologica", 2017, vol. 11, pp. 116–120.

³⁶ *Jakov Fak odstopil od kandidature za zastavonošo*, <https://old.delo.si/zoj-2018/zoj-slovenija/jakov-fak-odstopil-od-kandidature-za-zastavonosu.html> (accessed: 5/2/2022).

³⁷ D. Lalić, *Je li hrvatski nogomet mrtav i može li se oživjeti?*, "Političke analize: tromjesečnik za hrvatsku i međunarodnu politiku", 2010, No. 4, p. 32.

Certainly, when examining the political undertones of prestigious sporting victories, it is essential to consider those that involve direct contests between representatives of the post-Yugoslav nations. Clashes that occurred shortly after the cessation of hostilities were especially charged, often perceived as an extension of the recently concluded conflict. A prime example of such an event was the basketball match between Yugoslavia and Croatia at the 1997 European Basketball Championships. This intense game culminated in a narrow victory for Yugoslavia, a team that, incidentally, went on to clinch the gold medal, just as they had two years prior. Even years later, matches between national teams like Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina continued to stir political sentiments. This was particularly evident when the sports in question were deeply ingrained in the regional psyche, such as the aforementioned basketball. Other notable instances include handball, as seen in the quarter-final match at the Rio de Janeiro 2016 Olympics, where Serbia triumphed over Croatia, and water polo, where in the same Games, Serbia bested Croatia in the final³⁸.

When it comes to **organizing sporting events**, the post-Yugoslav states haven't hosted events of the same magnitude as they did during the era of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). This is primarily due to financial and organizational constraints. While there have been instances of championship tournaments in the region, they have not matched the significance of events like the Olympic Games or the World Championships in major team sports. A few notable exceptions include the Men's Handball World Championships in Croatia (2003 for women and 2009 for men) and the European Basketball Championships (Slovenia in 2013 for men; Serbia co-hosted in 2019 for women). Other countries in the region, constrained by the costs and lack of suitable infrastructure, have been less involved in hosting duties. However, there are emerging signs of change, with North Macedonia set to co-host the European Men's Volleyball Championship in 2023³⁹.

A pivotal aspect for the individual Yugoslav republics, post-independence, was the opportunity to **engage in international sporting rivalry**. The break-up of the federation formally began in early summer 1991, just over a year before the Barcelona Summer Olympics. For Slovenia and Croatia, it was crucial for their athletes to secure Olympic qualifications, especially in team sports. Croatia, in particular, was in a rush, recognizing its exceptional basketball talent pool, which had previously been the backbone of the Yugoslav national team. The timing posed challenges. The draw for the qualifying groups was initially scheduled for December, preceding Croatia's expected international recognition. However, the then head of the International Basketball Federation (FIBA), Borislav Stanković (interestingly, or perhaps paradoxically, of Bosnian Serb descent), opted to delay the draw until January. This decision enabled Croatia to participate in the qualifiers, subsequently win them, and earn a spot in the Olympics. There, they achieved a remarkable sporting (and, by extension, propagandistic) feat by securing the silver medal. Only the American "dream team", comprising the NBA's top stars, outperformed them⁴⁰.

³⁸ Own compilation based on the official websites of the individual sports federations.

³⁹ As above.

⁴⁰ M. Ukić, *Politika i sport u hrvatskom kontekstu: slučaj Europskog košarkaškog prvenstva 1995*, <https://repozitorij.kif.unizg.hr/islandora/object/kif%3A26/datastream/PDF/view> (accessed: 5/2/2022).

The participation of athletes from Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Barcelona Olympics was indeed symbolic. The Olympic committee of this newly war-torn country gained international recognition on June 23, 1992, a mere two days before the Games commenced. This recognition enabled a modest delegation of 10 athletes from Bosnia and Herzegovina to partake in the opening ceremony. While they did not make a mark in the sporting competitions, their presence was a significant manifestation of national identity⁴¹. In the case of the other countries that emerged from the break-up of Yugoslavia, Macedonia made its official debut at the most important sporting event, the Olympic Games, in 1996, Montenegro in 2008 and Kosovo in 2016.

In the case of some states resulting from the break-up of Yugoslavia, issues related to **sports boycotts** should also be considered. In the instances mentioned, non-participation in sporting competitions was likely not self-imposed but rather a result of decisions made by international bodies. The most notable instance was the UN Security Council's imposition of a series of sanctions on Yugoslavia on May 30, 1992. This included, among other measures, a ban on participating in international sporting events. The country's national football team had been preparing for the European Championships in Sweden and had even managed to travel to the venue. However, just ten days before the tournament was set to begin, Denmark was invited in their place. Despite their limited preparation, Denmark turned out to be the surprise of the championships, securing the gold medal. The decision to exclude Yugoslavia caused outrage among its supporters, including the vast diaspora residing in Scandinavia. There was even an incident where unidentified individuals fired shots at UEFA President Lennart Johansson's residence in Sweden. This event was kept under wraps by the authorities for a considerable period. Following the incident, Johansson received heightened police protection for several months⁴². Naturally, the Yugoslav national team did not participate in the Barcelona Olympic Games⁴³. However, some team members from Serbia and Montenegro took part in the Games as independent athletes.

Another instance highlighting the influence of political matters on sporting competition is the case of Kosovo. The independence of this former Serbian autonomous district has not been acknowledged by several countries globally, leading to significant repercussions in the sporting world. For instance, UEFA had already structured the system during the preliminary stages of the draws for the qualifying groups to ensure that Kosovo did not face Russia (before its exclusion due to aggression against Ukraine), Bosnia and Herzegovina, and, naturally, Serbia⁴⁴. Amidst the ongoing dispute over Kosovo's status, a controversy arose during the qualifiers for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Kosovo had a qualifying match in March 2021 in Spain, a country that does not recognize its independence. As the guest anthem played, the announcer introduced it as "music from the Kosovo team".

⁴¹ *Historija olimpijskog komiteta Bosne i Hercegovine i BH Olimpizma*, <https://okbih.ba/bs/tekst/historija-olimpijskog-komiteta-bosne-i-hercegovine-i-bh-olimpizma/3> (accessed: 5/2/2022). In comparison, the slightly more numerous 12-strong Slovenian team in Barcelona clinched two bronze medals.

⁴² *Szef UEFA był na celowniku. "Zalatywimy cie, cholerny grubasie"*, <https://sport.onet.pl/pilka-nozna/szef-uefa-był-na-celowniku-zalatywimy-cie-cholerny-grubasie/kxccfyr> (accessed: 5/2/2022).

⁴³ Paradoxically, Belgrade was one of the candidate cities vying to host the Games in 1992.

⁴⁴ *Kosowo i Rosja nie zagrają w jednej grupie. UEFA podjęła decyzję*, <https://eurosport.tvn24.pl/pilka-nozna,105/euro-2020-rosja-i-kosowo-nie-beda-mogly-zagrac-razem-w-fazie-grupowej,978804.html> (accessed: 02.05.2022).

Spanish state television commentators refrained from using the term “national team”, and the broadcast displayed the abbreviation of Kosovo’s name in lowercase – “kos” – besides the score throughout the match⁴⁵. Indeed, the match was on the brink of being canceled. Initially, the hosts declared they would neither play the Kosovo anthem nor display the Kosovo flag. In retaliation, the visitors threatened a boycott.

It is worth noting that amidst the politically charged sporting rivalries mentioned earlier, there are instances that hint at a potential reconciliation between representatives of the former Yugoslav republics. For instance, the enduring collaboration between the Serbian tennis player, Novak Đoković, and the Croatian, Goran Ivanišević, is a testament to this. Similarly, Croatian Robert Prosinečki’s tenure as coach of Crvena zvezda Belgrade (2010–2012) and later the Bosnia and Herzegovina national team (2018–2019) is another example.

Regional competitions involving sports clubs from different countries are especially significant in this context. A prime example is the Adriatic Basketball League (Jadranska liga, now officially named AdmiralBet ABA League). Established in 2001, it regularly features teams from Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Clubs from other nations, such as Macedonia, are occasionally invited, though a club from Kosovo has yet to participate⁴⁶. Another illustration is the Regional Waterpolo League (Regionalna Vaterpolo Premier Liga), a cross-border club competition in a sport that holds immense popularity and prestige in the former Yugoslav region. In its initial years since its inception in 2008, clubs from Croatia, Slovenia, and Montenegro participated. From the 2014/2015 season onwards, Serbian teams also joined the league⁴⁷. While there have been instances of ethnic hostility from supporters (for example, in February 2019, several Crvena zvezda players were assaulted before a match in Split⁴⁸), this league also indicates a discernible shift in regional attitudes towards cross-border cooperation. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Serbia, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria will co-host the European Women’s Volleyball Championship in 2021.

Amid the aforementioned examples of the positive influence of sporting rivalries on regional stability, the unique situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina warrants attention. In this most fragmented of the former Yugoslav republics, nearly all bodies and institutions are structured along ethnic lines, ensuring equal representation for each of the constituent nations: Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. This ethnic-based system persisted in sports organizations, including football, long after the war. While a central-level football league was theoretically established in 2002, it was still overseen by a tripartite, ethnically-determined presidium. It took the suspension of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s membership by UEFA and FIFA on April 1, 2011, to instigate a change in this status quo, leading to the creation of new structures without the tripartite functions. Consequently, the aspiration to compete in

⁴⁵ *Eliminacje MŚ 2022. Skandal z udziałem hiszpańskiej telewizji. Kosowo upokorzone*, <https://sportowefakty.wp.pl/piłka-nożna/931604/eliminacje-ms-2022-skandal-z-udziałem-hiszpańskiej-telewizji-kosowo-upokorzone> (accessed: 5/2/2022).

⁴⁶ See for details: <https://www.aba-liga.com/>. An interesting fact is that the official website is only run in English.

⁴⁷ <https://regionalnavaterpololiga.com/about-us/> (accessed: 5/5/2022).

⁴⁸ *Incident u Splitu: Nakon napada na igrače Crvene zvezde, vaterpolisti srpskog kluba otkazali utakmicu i krenuli za Beograd!*, https://gol.dnevnik.hr/clanak/rubrika/ostali_sportovi/u-splitu-napadnuti-vaterpolisti-crvene-zvezde-jedan-se-spasio-skokom-u-hladno-more---548743.html (accessed: 5/5/2022).

international sports catalyzed the first deviation from Bosnia and Herzegovina's proportional representation of its constituent nations at the central level⁴⁹.

Signs of the gradual erosion of ethnic barriers are also evident in less mainstream sports. For instance, when Bosnia and Herzegovina's athletes clinched two medals at the European Karate Championships in Novi Sad in May 2018, they were enthusiastically supported from the stands by athletes and coaching staff from other post-Yugoslav nations⁵⁰. Thus, it appears that despite the lingering political tensions in the region, sporting rivalries might, in the future, serve their original purpose rather than acting as catalysts for societal conflict.

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