

‘A lofty battle for the nation’: the social roles of sport in Tudjman’s Croatia

Dario Brentin*

School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies, University College London, London, UK

In post-socialist Croatia, sport can be described as a unique source of social knowledge contributing greatly to the formation, establishment and conservation of the emerging national identity after the country’s secession from socialist Yugoslavia in 1990–1991. Throughout the 1990s, sport, including interpretation, images, metaphors and actual events, proved to be a highly politicized form of national expression in which narratives of nation, identity and culture were intensely articulated. After all, the country’s first president, Franjo Tudjman, proclaimed that ‘football victories shape a nation’s identity as much as wars do’, showing a remarkable awareness of the galvanizing effect sport can have in times of crisis. This paper examines narratives expressed within the field, pointing out how ideological contents were transmitted through sport events, media reports and fan culture in order to show what functions and social roles sport had taken during the first 10 years of Croatian independence.

Introduction

The starting point for this research is the general assumption expressed by Sack and Suster that ‘given the intensity of ethnic and nationalist sentiments in the Balkans and the importance of sport [. . .] in this region, the former Yugoslav Republic provides a natural laboratory for examining the intimate connections between sport, religion, ethnicity, and nationalism’.¹ A closer look at the relevant literature reveals that in the case of post-socialist Croatia, sport can be described as a unique and malleable source of social knowledge contributing greatly to the formation, establishment and conservation of emerging national identity after the country’s secession from Yugoslavia in 1990–1991. Moreover, scholars agree that throughout the 1990s, sport, including interpretation, images, metaphors and actual events, proved to be a highly politicized form of Croatian national expression in which narratives of nation, identity and culture were intensely articulated.² Yet, sport has remained a peripheral research topic within the (post-)Yugoslav context, with the existing scholarship largely focusing on isolated and ‘sporadic outbursts of ethnic hatred in sport arenas’,³ leaving its other significant social functions – i.e. strengthening national defence, endorsing social control, influencing foreign or economic policies, (re-)producing traditional gender roles, etc. – as an under-researched aspect of the region’s nation- and identity-building processes.

Throughout this time, the Croatian state and society experienced extensive political, economic, cultural and social changes. While the introduction of multiparty elections in 1990 ultimately resulted in secession from the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, the establishment of statehood and international recognition, the post-socialist transition remains predominantly characterized by the *Homeland War*,⁴ ethnic polarization, societal deterioration, severe economic disruption and authoritarian regime

*Email: dario.brentin@ucl.ac.uk

policies.⁵ The first democratic elections in April and May 1990 saw Franjo Tuđman and his party, the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica* – HDZ), win a two-thirds majority in parliament and set the ground for the president's political hegemony over the next decade. Although the political success of the 'state-building forces' (*državotvorne snage*) initially unleashed an outpour of national euphoria and consequently led Croatia into independence, Tuđman's autocratic style of government – evident in his influence on state institutions and organizations, the expansion of presidential authorities, his interventions in civil society and popular culture or the firm control of the media – triggered international isolation and often only exacerbated inherited social and political problems. During his presidency, ethno-nationalist ideology became the prism through which Croatian politics of identity were conceptualized and promulgated, resulting in the dominance of nationalist narratives in almost all fields of life and everyday parlance.⁶ As the self-proclaimed *spiritus rector* of the Croatian nationalist movement and 'father of the nation', Tuđman operated as the main ideologist and sole political leader presiding over Croatia in an increasingly undemocratic manner as his regime lingered.

In such a political culture, the field of sport repeatedly epitomized central ideological narratives imposed by the government – often the president himself⁷ – functioning as an 'icebreaker'⁸ for future political developments and an influential transmitter of political and symbolic messages. This paper's objectives are therefore to reconstruct how Croatian sport was (mis-)used as a mobilizing tool to generate popular support for Tuđman's 'national idea' and to legitimize his rule, as well as to illustrate when the limits of exploitation would be reached. Shifting the analytical focus away from single and/or de-contextualized sporting events, this approach will offer a more balanced perspective of sport's symbolic significance in the country's nation- and identity-building processes.

Sporting nationalism, identity and nation-building

Over the past two decades, several influential nationalism scholars have argued that modern sport has become one of the major rituals of popular culture, substantiating concepts of the nation as an 'imagined community'.⁹ By encompassing social axioms, structures, norms and values, it significantly contributes to their reproduction and therefore qualifies as an 'integral part of society [...] which may be used as a means of *reflecting on society*'.¹⁰ The ceremonial and ritual surroundings of sporting competitions represent 'arenas for the display of national symbols and the alignment of national allegiances'¹¹ functioning as moments of national crystallization. Expressed through an array of cultural symbols – national flags, anthems, songs, chants, colours and folklore – which signal preferred conceptions of national unity and powerfully invoke feelings of identity, representative sport conveys a public expression of national identity. While uniting people domestically, these symbols simultaneously project national distinctiveness and individuality on an international stage drawing external boundaries against others.

For post-socialist Croatia, Alex Bellamy writes that due to the disastrous conditions in other areas of everyday life affected by the *Homeland War*, sport played a significant role in 'forging Croatian unity, promoting Croatia internationally and creating a popular homogenising sense of national pride'.¹² Generally, we can observe that, particularly in times of crisis and conflict, the cultural domain of sport often becomes a highly politicized terrain enabling the ruling government to 'enhance prestige, secure legitimacy, compensate for deficiencies in other areas of life [or] pursue international rivalry by peaceful means'.¹³ John Hoberman describes this 'sportive nationalism' as the 'ambition

to see a nation's athlete excel in the international arena [which] may be promoted by a political elite or [...] may be felt by many citizens without the promptings of national leaders'.¹⁴ It gains its strongest momentum in its elusive opposition towards official forms of nationalism orchestrated by government propaganda, appearing to foster a purely emotional and 'passionate nationalism' which transcends political, social and ideological boundaries. The phenomenon of 'sporting nationalism' has consequently received considerable academic attention,¹⁵ often being emphasized as an ambiguous social phenomenon due to its capacity to legitimize and undermine political authority at the same time.

However, in the first decade of Croatian independence – although offering some spaces for agency – sport generally proved to be a social field where alternative political standpoints remained marginalized and almost non-existent. The country's president, Franjo Tuđman, stated that 'after war, sport is the first thing by which you can distinguish nations'¹⁶ and as such a salient national habitus code, it needed close monitoring and political guidance. Experienced in how quickly sport can turn into a contestation of political power, the HDZ government was adamant in keeping Croatian sport strictly centralized with the president himself, or politically loyal *nomenklatura*, in control of 'sporting associations, clubs, coaches, referees, delegates for international tournaments' all the way to 'sport editors and commentators'.¹⁷ Tuđman later often emphasized that during the war, he 'knew about the importance of sport [and] personally governed the procurement of some people into sport'. He continued asserting that:

it is politics, which [should] decisively influences sport [because] everything is politics [and while] they say sport should be separated from politics, that economy should be separated from politics [...] I am telling you, such a thing does not exist.¹⁸

The president's extensive personal involvement enabled him to interfere in clubs' financial matters and to appoint coaches, reaching comic levels at times with him 'dictating' who should play for the national team or indicating what scoreline 'he would like to see' for certain games.¹⁹ An arguable pinnacle of political interventions in sport was disclosed in the summer of 1999, when the political weekly *Nacional* published documents proving that Croatian football league referees were systematically put under pressure by people close to the president's office in order to secure *Dinamo Zagreb* – which had the name *Croatia Zagreb* back then (the name change will be detailed later) – the win of the 1998–1999 Croatian football championship.²⁰

Sport as a 'national motor'

In the late 1980s, Yugoslav sport and in particular Yugoslav football rapidly deteriorated into an ideologically contested terrain with supporters increasingly demonstrating a strong sense of national allegiance. Expressions of nationalist sentiments – the appearance of 'national' flags and various *Ustaša* and *Četnik* symbols, the singing of 'forbidden and nationalistic song' and the open pronouncement of anti-Yugoslav sentiments or hatred against 'other' republics – were repeatedly articulated, transforming sport stadia into 'stands of free will'²¹ open to otherwise rigorously sanctioned political standpoints. Although predominantly visible within the relatively small and socially marginalized community of 'football fan tribes',²² the tense situation in sporting arenas resulted in reoccurring and brutal violence emblemizing the critical and fragile condition of the Yugoslav state system in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Manifested through acute economic problems, hyperinflation and a drastic rise in unemployment, the inability of Yugoslavia's communist regime to resolve the crisis gradually aggravated social problems across the federation accompanied by the rise of nationalist politics and demands for

stronger autonomy in some republics. The diverse political standpoints on how to solve the crisis eventually culminated at the extraordinary 14th Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) in January 1990 when the Croatian and Slovenian delegation walked out as a sign of protest against the Serbian standpoint. This political statement ultimately resulted in the dissolution of a unitary LCY and the establishment of a multiparty system.

In this phase of political turmoil and general insecurity, football-related violence peaked on 13 May 1990 when the game between the 'eternal' rivals in the Yugoslav football league *Dinamo Zagreb* and *Crvena Zvezda Beograd* at Zagreb's *Maksimir* stadium had to be suspended due to violent clashes between the opposing set of fans, who turned the stadium into a 'gladiatorial arena of madness and hate, danger and rage'.²³ Two decades later, the dominant narratives in Yugoslav successor states suggest that the riots represent the 'symbolic date when the Yugoslav dissolution began' – 'the day, the war started'.²⁴ Only two weeks after Tudjman's election as president, the tensely awaited game escalated into wild stadium and street fights, with the club's hooligan groups – the *Crvena Zvezda* fan group *Delije*, who were headed by the future Serbian war criminal and paramilitary leader Željko Ražnatović (better known as Arkan), and the *Dinamo* fan group *Bad Blue Boys (BBB)* – clashing. It resulted in the worst riots in Yugoslav sporting history. Journalists across the country described it as a Dantean 'circle of hell' where 'something wild awoke'.²⁵ According to Croatian accounts, the police – widely perceived as a mechanism of Serb domination – acted inadequately, intervening 'suspiciously' late, 'focusing' solely on the *BBB* and openly protecting the *Crvena Zvezda* supporters.²⁶ The Serbian press counter-narrative saw the events as a meticulously planned incident, orchestrated by Croatia's new government, which wanted to exploit the riots politically.²⁷ However, the riots should be understood as a 'condensed symptom' of an ongoing political radicalization in the Croatian and Serbian republics and a deductive 'consequence'²⁸ of these polarizing policies. Srđan Vrcan argues that:

in fact, in the attitudes, behaviour and actions as well as the contents of mass chants and symbols used in Zagreb, Split and Belgrade [...] one could already see the unambiguous signals of a breakdown of the ruling socialist system and the appearance [...] of political strategies that would lead to the unavoidable conflicts [...] and consequently to a war.²⁹

In the following weeks, the event served as a strong argument for one of HDZ's main political demands, the reduction of Belgrade-based governmental influence over police and state institutions in Croatia. By posing the question whether 'their police' could still be in charge of securing 'us', the government strategically underlined the 'urgent necessity'³⁰ for structural reforms.

Amidst the chaotic scenes of that day, one particular incident of great symbolic weight can be singled out. At one point, *Dinamo*'s team captain, Zvonimir Boban, entered the rioting crowd to help a *Dinamo* supporter who was being beaten by police. His – meanwhile – 'mythical'³¹ kick against an officer strikingly captured the antagonisms of Yugoslavia's political situation and made him instantly 'immortal' not only for *Dinamo* fans, but also for many Croats. Boban's attack was perceived as a brave act of resistance against an alleged 'Serbian hegemony' within Yugoslav institutions, blatantly demonstrated by the unwillingness of the police to defend *Dinamo* supporters. Not even a month later, on 3 June 1990, the Yugoslav football association, in an attempt to regain the affection of Zagreb supporters, staged the last preparatory match ahead of the 1990 FIFA Football World Cup for the Yugoslav side against the Netherlands at *Maksimir* stadium. The officials had entirely misjudged the situation and the extent of fan

politicization, which is why the game is mostly remembered for the spectators' behaviour; the predominantly Croat crowd of 20,000 shouted down the Yugoslav national anthem, insulted Yugoslav team players, cheered for the opposition and jeered national coach Ivica Osim, attacking him for allegedly disregarding Croatian players.³²

By August 1990, the Yugoslav state crises had alarmingly deepened with the jibe rhetoric of the preceding months and the inability to resolve the 'constitutional crisis', leading to the so-called 'log revolution' (*balvan revolucija*). It saw the Serbian minority in the *Krajina* region revolting against Croatian governance by sealing off the region around the city of Knin, thus bringing the country to the brink of war. Over the next few weeks, the political situation remained tense with the Yugoslav People's Army backing the Serb rebels and preventing Croatian police forces from intervening to re-establish state power. This ongoing polarization was highly anticipated by Croatian 'fan tribes' and so on 26 September 1990, only 90 kilometres away from the uprising's epicentre, yet another football game caught Yugoslav-wide media attention. During a regular league game between *Hajduk Split* and *Partizan Beograd*, the home crowd made a far-reaching political statement when the organized section of *Hajduk* spectators – *Torcida* – invaded the pitch, set the Yugoslav flag on fire and hoisted the Croatian check-board flag while chanting 'Croatia – independent state'.³³ Hailed with 'salvoes of acclaim', the few hundred organized *Torcida* fans operated under the impressions of constant 'burn the flag' – chants coming from the spectators who remained in the stands.³⁴ Dražen Lalić attributes the game's significance to the fact that the aggression was not directed towards an opposing set of fans but directly against the Yugoslav state and its symbols. If the *Maksimir* riots are interpreted as the 'day the war started', then this game had to be termed as the 'day Yugoslavia stopped existing' (at least on sporting grounds) with the symbolic burning of the most meaningful national symbol which signalled a total lack of state legitimacy.³⁵

Sport as an actor of international diplomacy

During the summer 1990, the HDZ government intensely pursued their political agenda by emphatically asserting nationalist standpoints and pushing towards independence. Wanting to create international support for the emerging nation- and state-building processes, Tudjman showed a remarkable awareness for the potentially influential role sport could have in affirming the government's political goals. An opportunity to capitalize politically from a sporting competition came at the peak of the *Krajina* crisis in late August 1990, when the coastal city of Split was to host the European Athletics Championships. Tudjman saw the games as a great chance to 'present Croatia to the world', to display his government's 'democratic maturity' and to underline Croatia's membership of 'old, good Europe's course of civilisation'.³⁶ Hence, the opening ceremony and its symbolic messages were consciously elaborated as a cultural performance promoting a particular 'narrative of nation',³⁷ which ostensibly represented the 'new values' of the host nation. Yugoslav's five-pointed star flags were outnumbered '1:1000' by Croatian flags including the historical coat of arms, and the attendees expressed a clear and distinctive sign of belonging by singing the Croatian national anthem in a state of 'emotional ecstasy',³⁸ while the president stressed in his opening speech that the event had more than a 'ceremonial, but a real and important meaning'³⁹ for the recognition of the political changes in the socialist federation.

As part of HDZ's efforts to galvanize popular support, numerous mass demonstrations and celebrations were organized all over the country throughout that summer and autumn. Most notably, on 16 October 1990, the Croatian government staged a 'grandiose

celebration of mammoth proportions⁴⁰ celebrating the re-installation of the *Ban Josip Jelačić* statue – a symbol for the Croatian resistance against the Ottoman forces removed during communist rule – in Zagreb’s main square. An international football game between a selection of Croatian football players was also organized – advertised as the ‘Croatian national team’ – and the USA national football team. Although the Croatian branch of the Yugoslav Football Association had to use a legal loophole that allowed selections of republics to play against other international teams, the sheer fact that the game took place was seen as a huge diplomatic success. Regardless of what the game’s outcome would be – the Croatian side won 2:1 – the game was perceived as an ‘undeletable sign of international recognition of Croatia in the world of democracy’.⁴¹ The spectacle glorified – as headlined by the daily *Večernji list* – the ‘unsubmissive spirit of the Croatian people’ with the crowd perpetually chanting traditional songs and political slogans such as ‘Let’s take Knin, we’re not giving up Croatia!’ or ‘To battle, to battle, for your nation’.⁴² Extensively using Croatian national symbols, particularly the checkerboard pattern, to juxtapose the present US symbols, the event also served to associate the proclaimed government’s political affiliation with ‘western values’ and to suggest an informal recognition by the USA. The spectacle’s dimensions, the ‘vividness of the symbolism’,⁴³ the charged atmosphere and belligerent rhetoric left no space for interpretation, but clearly signalled to the world’s greatest power the irrevocable wish for independence.

Two months later, in December 1990, the Croatian parliament passed a new, ethno-nationalized constitution which had been first introduced to the public as a manifesto shortly after the *Maksimir* riots. Identifying Croatia henceforth as the homeland of Croats and thereby downgrading the Serb minority from a constitutional nation to the status of a minority, the already strained relations between the Croatian government and the *Krajina* Serbs subsequently worsened and led to a series of isolated armed incidents between Serbian paramilitaries and Croatian troops during the spring of 1991. At this point, the relationship between the Serbian and Croatian government, as they sought to restructure everyday life along ethnic lines, had worsened to such an extent that peaceful coexistence in one federative state seemed increasingly unfeasible. Soon after Croatia and Slovenia’s declaration of independence on 25 June 1991, the military conflict escalated into a full-scale war.

Once the *Homeland War* broke out, many established athletes, in order to create pressure on the United Nations (UN) and the ‘western world’ – i.e. the footballer Davor Šuker, or Dražen Petrović, Dino Rađa and Toni Kukoč⁴⁴ who were among the first European basketball players to find success in the National Basketball Association – protested in various ways demanding help and immediate action from the international community. High-profile athletes refused to play for Yugoslavia, initiated the removal of Yugoslav flags at international tournaments, took part in international funding tours, demonstrated outside the UN headquarter or gave pathos-loaded interviews to international media, fighting ‘their war’ by peaceful means with the ‘checker board on their forehead and the flag in their hands’.⁴⁵ ‘Anyone can go and fight’, tennis player Goran Prpić said, explaining why he had not taken up arms, ‘because someone has to tell the world what’s happening in Croatia’.⁴⁶ Tudjman affirmed athletes’ outstanding significance saying that Croatian ‘circumstances [sport had] a higher political dimension than elsewhere [because] when the world didn’t want an independent Croatia our athletes contributed to the affirmation and recognition of our homeland, often more than some ambassadors’,⁴⁷ especially because Croatia had no diplomatic missions abroad. During the first years of the war, another tennis player, Goran Ivanišević, proved to be one of the most notable ‘patriotic defenders’ of his country. His credo, ‘my racket is my gun’, was his way

of ‘fighting for the Croatian cause against the Serb propaganda’ while ‘his friends were dying in the war’.⁴⁸ When the international community recognized Croatia’s independence in January 1992, the Croatian government asserted that this ‘historical victory’ was also partly achieved due to sports officials’ and athletes’ tireless endeavours taking over ‘the responsible mission [to] interpret the incidents, inform about the atrocities of the war and spread the message of peace’⁴⁹ to the world. Although the intensity of the war decreased in the spring of 1992, athletes continued to be significant international promoters and advocates of the dominant national narrative on the *Homeland War*, securing its legitimacy and legacy.

Sport as a legitimator of politics

In the years following the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995, Croatia was still confronted by numerous challenges. The social and economic development was stagnating while thousands of displaced people and refugees awaited return to their homes. Many soldiers who had fought during the *Homeland War* returned to destroyed and deserted hometowns. In addition, Croatia’s reputation suffered with the first indictments made by International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and international isolation. Bellamy argues that in the aftermath of the *Homeland War*, the HDZ purposefully mobilized athletes’ international achievements in order to create a popular homogenizing sense of national pride, which could not be provided by other ‘failed’ social fields.⁵⁰ The political elites tried to transform the enthusiasm generated by sporting success into tangible political capital by using the national team’s sporting superiority for the symbolic enhancement of the ruling political elite. These ‘politics of *panem et circenses*’ are best exemplified by the 1998 FIFA Football World Cup where the national team’s success was portrayed as a sublimation of national character, culture, and collective will and strength.

Croatia finished third in the tournament and the success was ascribed to a unique feeling of togetherness, motivation and resilience uniting the national team with ‘its people’, drawing them mutually into a ‘deep horizontal comradeship’.⁵¹ Identified as a non-hierarchical community, every single victory was portrayed as a victory of the Croatian people, ‘the result of the Croatian battle for freedom and independence’⁵² and hence an evocative victory of the Croatian state and its political elites. The national team coach Miroslav ‘Ćiro’ Blažević repeatedly highlighted the president’s ‘invaluable role’ declaring that ‘without him all my young players would play for Yugoslavia and not for Croatia; [without] his bravery and his party we would not have experienced any of this’.⁵³ The team captain and ‘national hero’, Zvonimir Boban, added that the president had to be acknowledged for being the ‘father of all things we Croats love, also the father of our national team’.⁵⁴ On return, Tudjman personally congratulated the players in front of a crowd of more than 100,000, insuring them that ‘the entire Croatian people, numbering some eight million, from the homeland and abroad stood behind you’⁵⁵ attributing the success to the ‘Croatian spirit’ rather than actual skill. For a whole month, Croats ‘across the homeland and from abroad were united’ in a ritualistic performance of national unity ‘around the common, holy interest – the national team’s success’.⁵⁶ The ecstatic level of intensity with which the tournament was celebrated recalls Emile Durkheim’s notion of ‘collective effervescence’⁵⁷ to describe the essence of the ritualistic experience and its power to function as the nation’s integrative cultural force. Tudjman elaborated that:

sport is an integral part of the social and national life of a country [but] when you have equal physical conditions, not to mention material conditions, there is something above that. That is conscience, the will, and that is what our athletes have gained with the formation of Croatia.⁵⁸

In his narrative the nation had returned to its essence, its 'initial phase of unity',⁵⁹ celebrating a spectacle of genuine patriotism.

Critical commentators, however, were quick to interpret the excessive exploitation and identification with the sporting achievement as a 'pathetic and desperate act' to divert the public's focus from the 'countless problems and political apathy' Croatia faced in the weeks and months prior to the tournament.⁶⁰ In 1997, Tudjman rejected the European Union's Regional Approach policy towards the 'Western Balkans' as being another attempt to force Croatia into a supranational entity with its neighbours, a re-establishment of a new Yugoslavia. It was particularly due to HDZ's unwillingness to cooperate in return of Serbian refugees who had fled the country after the military operations *Oluja* and *Blijesak*⁶¹ in 1995, which left the country in 'unofficial isolation' with the European Union freezing Croatia's integration process.⁶² Despite the criticism, Tudjman's isolationist politics indirectly gained legitimacy during the tournament when the international commentary addressed the level of nationalist euphoria and started scrutinizing Croatia's recent past. Some reports – although being rather scattered – portrayed Croatia as 'the most disgusting small nation in Europe' (*London Evening Standard*) saturated with 'fascist undertones' (*The Guardian*), causing outraged reactions. The attacks were shrugged off as 'remains of their genetically inserted colonial superiority',⁶³ and presented as evidence proving Europe's unchanged 'hypocritical' position 'against the formation of an independent Croatia'.⁶⁴

Constructing identity against the 'other'

According to the presidential narrative, Croatia's formative years were defined as a time when the nation was denied a peaceful separation from socialist Yugoslavia to fulfil its democratic and historically legitimate right to independence. The Croatian people were subsequently forced into a bloody war triggered by nationalistic 'Greater-Serbian' aspirations towards 'holy' Croatian territory. This dominant binary of a 'peace and freedom loving Croatia' and an 'imperialistic and ferocious Serbia' prevailed during the war years and remained a potent marker of difference and 'othering' throughout the 1990s.⁶⁵ Since 'Croatianess' was defined in strict opposition to anything perceived as 'Yugoslav', the dichotomy between 'Croatia versus Yugoslavia' was determined as a significant element of national self-understanding. Thus whenever a Croatian team faced a Yugoslav team, sport transformed into a rallying point reasserting national identity in opposition to 'them', transferring war cleavages onto the sport field and constructing the games in question as a continuation of the *Homeland War* by other means.

Although Croatian sports officials called for calm whenever the national team faced a Yugoslav team – in order to demonstrate civilized behaviour and distance Croatian society from the 'wild and brutal Balkan'⁶⁶ fan culture – the games were emotionally and nationalistically charged. Hence, every defeat was titled a 'national tragedy' and every victory proclaimed a 'symbolic pay-back for all humiliation [...] we had to endure from the Great-Serbian aggressor'.⁶⁷ As much as fans and athletes, media commentators often expressed joy over 'historical' victories 'against those from the East' through the glorification of and comparison with the military operations *Oluja* and *Blijesak* as an additional way of humiliating their opponents and suggesting Croatian overall superiority.⁶⁸ These games were furthermore signified by a discourse of victimization and sacrifice in reference to the *Homeland War*. Particularly the city of Vukovar, a besieged and heavily bombarded Slavonian city during the war, was frequently mentioned as the sole motivator and driving force behind Croatian performances.⁶⁹ The fate of this

completely destroyed city, which had been under UN transitional administration (UNITAES) until January 1998, is one of the constituting myths of post-socialist Croatia and still symbolizes a central moment of Croatian resistance, suffering and heroism during the *Homeland War*.⁷⁰ It was important to tell ‘them the truth, [tell] them who suffered’, the captain of the Croatian water polo team, Dubravko Šimenc, explained after a quarter-final encounter at the 1996 Olympic Games and dedicated the ‘victory to Vukovar, to anyone who endured and suffered’.⁷¹

The biggest national spectacle, ‘the game that wins the war’,⁷² took place in the autumn of 1999, when the two countries met in a qualification tie for the 2000 UEFA European Football Championships. Since football was considered the ‘national sport’ in both Croatia and Yugoslavia, the encounter was defined as the most prestigious and meaningful thus far. The game was additionally charged since the victor would go on to participate in the tournament. Only a year earlier, Tudjman confidently declared that his team would win this game because ‘we have a team that knows that we are fighting for Croatia, against Yugoslavia, for one’s homeland’s reputation [while] the Yugoslav team will not be able to feature such homogeneity’.⁷³ The game was staged as a huge ‘national spectacle’, with patriotic musical acts being performed hours before the game had started. In the stadium, a huge, penalty-area-wide Croatian flag with a ‘Vukovar ‘91’ insignia was unfurled and wounded war veterans were ‘presented’ to the crowd as the heroes whose fight had made it possible for everyone to be there, ‘reminding’ the audience and the players of what was at stake. Although ending in a draw, the result meant that Yugoslavia progressed to the European Championships. The charged atmosphere, orchestrated and induced from above as to serve for electoral purposes at a time when HDZ’s political dominance was already eroding, suggested that the game should have become an ‘instantaneous myth’ demonstrating an execution of ultimate superiority over the former enemy. However, it turned into a symbolic end for Tudjman with him and numerous members of his *nomenklatura* watching their downfall. ‘If we lose, Tudjman will never be president again’,⁷⁴ a young spectator said in an interview before the game and was to be proven correct. Two months later, in December 1999, Tudjman died from cancer only a few weeks before the scheduled presidential elections. In January 2000, a centre-left coalition government was elected and set out to change Croatia’s political system by reducing presidential powers, introducing economic reforms to combat nepotism and corruption, and pursuing better cooperation with European institutions.

Politics of symbols and resistance

Croatian independence brought with it a fundamental revision of historical, political and social identities organized from above, with the state rigidly ‘nationalizing’⁷⁵ public and symbolic space and eradicating previous Yugoslav symbols (flag, anthem, street names, monuments, etc.). As sport was ascribed the function of a powerful symbolic signifier, it was not spared these changes. While the removal of the Yugoslav’s five-point star from their club’s emblem by *Hajduk Split* players during the 1990 Australia summer tour was an entirely deliberate and proactive choice, echoed positively as a patriotic gesture, Tudjman’s decision to rename *Dinamo Zagreb* sparked a heated protest accompanied by unexpected and unfavourable repercussions. The president had identified the club’s name as not sufficiently ‘national’, handicapped by Yugoslav and socialist symbolic connotations and therefore could not be integrated in the newly established ethno-national narrative. A name change was propounded which saw the new club’s name as a combination of two pre-WWII Zagreb clubs (*HAŠK (Hrvatski Akademski Sportski Klub)*

and *Građanski*) signalling a return to pre-Communist culture and a clear break from Yugoslav sporting tradition. Two years later, the name was changed again, this time from *HASK Građanski* to *Croatia Zagreb*, tying the club unambiguously to the nation-building project.⁷⁶ Although underlining the invaluable role *Dinamo* had played throughout the communist rule in guarding the ‘national essence’ at a time when the expression of any patriotic feelings was punishable, club officials insisted that an alien and artificial name had been forced upon them. There is a ‘Dinamo in Moscow, Kiev, Minsk, Tbilisi, Bucharest, Dresden, Tirana and Pančevo. But not in Zagreb’,⁷⁷ Tudjman declared and made it clear that ‘his’ club cannot hold a name which stands for ‘Stalinism, Bolshevism or repression’.⁷⁸

However, the president failed to anticipate possible objections to a second politically motivated name change in two years and was quickly confronted with vehement opposition from the club’s most influential fan group, the *BBB*. Formed in 1986, the group had constructed its fan identity on the basis of Croatian nationalism and anti-communism during the late 1980s eliminating any socialist or pro-Yugoslav connotation in the process.⁷⁹ *BBB*’s fierce hostility towards the ‘sport Frankenstein’,⁸⁰ was exhibited through protest actions directly targeting Tudjman.⁸¹ The president, not used to criticism, launched an acrimonious political campaign which included branding the *BBB* as ‘foreign agents’, ‘anti-Croatian’, ‘alcoholics’, ‘drug-addicts’ or ‘Yugonostalgics’,⁸² demonizing their behaviour and blatant exposure to police harassment and persecution. With their ‘Croatianess’ questioned and denied, they felt betrayed – having been among the first to volunteer for the *Homeland War* and having openly expressed support⁸³ for the HDZ before it came to power – and not prepared to back off from their demands for the return of their *Dinamo*. Back in the early stages of the war, the Croatian army forces admitted a considerable number of volunteers who were recruited from the country’s biggest football fan clubs (i.e. *BBB*, *Torcida* and *Armada*). In the aftermath of the war, some football clubs installed commemorative monuments in front of their stadia remembering ‘their’ dead and pledging their allegiance to the ‘homeland’. In front of *Maksimir* stadium, the monument erected by the *BBB* in 1994 is dedicated ‘to all Dinamo fans for whom the war started on 13 May 1990 and ended by laying their lives on the altar of the Croatian homeland’.⁸⁴ Formulated as a specific counter-narrative to authoritarian politics, the *BBB* protest eventually grew into a serious challenge to the dominant definition of ‘Croatianess’ propagated by the Tudjman regime and remained a troublesome spot until the president’s death. After the general elections in 2000, the club was immediately renamed *Dinamo Zagreb* again.

Conclusion

Throughout the first decade of Croatian independence, athletes perpetually suggested that competing on the nation’s behalf was ‘more’⁸⁵ than ‘just sport’. It was their ‘duty’ as ‘Croats’ to fight a ‘lofty battle for Croatia’,⁸⁶ it was their way of fighting for independence and their way of participating in building national identity and promoting a certain image of Croatia, which would be free of stereotypes and fears of a repeating past. With the country’s first president, Franjo Tudjman – often portrayed as a unique embodiment of ‘statesman, historian, warrior, and sportsman’⁸⁷ – trying to conceptualize and foster a ‘state-building sport’ (*državotvorni sport*) which would support the dominant state narratives, sport adopted the function of a key symbol for creating a distinctive Croatian nationhood. It was the athletes’ responsibility to represent a ‘true manifestation and incorporation of almost all positive attributes attached to Croats’ and to be ‘recognised by their original and true Croatianess’.⁸⁸

Apart from the *Dinamo Zagreb* name dispute, symbolizing ‘the total colonization of the social reality by the systemic ideological and symbolic contents’⁸⁹ and its failure to impose its own interpretation upon all parts of society, the Croatian sports field would remain a potent vehicle for expressing dominant conceptions of nationhood and inducing political homogeneity. The criminalizing feud against the *BBB* has to be seen as part of what Chip Gangnon called political ‘strategies of demobilization’⁹⁰ which enabled the government to deprive ideological alternatives from challenging the state’s symbolic space and power or to articulate truly challenging oppositional narratives. Ultimately sport-related narratives should pervasively assist the country’s political elite in perpetuating a particular ideological goal: to meld and totalize the idea of the ‘birth of Croatian statehood from the heroic and defensive *Homeland War*’ with Tudjman’s persona and the HDZ as his infrastructural apparatus. The construction of such a constitutive myth was of paramount importance to secure political legitimacy and to label any opposition as potentially devastating for Croatian national sovereignty. Recalling Rogers Brubaker’s conception of nationalism as a product of ‘political fields’,⁹¹ sport was used as a political communicator linking it to the symbolic power of the state and enabling political elites to exploit the social field as a powerful signifier of national identity.

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Notes

1. Sack and Suster, ‘Soccer and Croatian Nationalism’, 307.
2. See Sack and Suster, ‘Soccer and Croatian Nationalism’; Vrcan, *Nogomet, politika, nasilje*, 79–137; Dolić, ‘Die Fußballnationalmannschaft als’; Bellamy, *Formation of Croatian National Identity*, 112–21; Džihić, ‘Fußball am Balkan’; Biti, ‘Vatreni – hrvatski nogometni proizvod’; Pezo, ‘Sport i hrvatski identitet’.
3. Perica, ‘United They Stood’, 267; see also Nielsen, ‘Goalposts of Transition’, 88; Bartoluci, ‘Sport, nacionalni identitet i nacionalizam’, 86.
4. The ‘Croatian War for Independence’ was fought by forces loyal to the newly elected government of Croatia and the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA), operating with local Serb forces from the *Krajina* region and Eastern Slavonia, from 1991 and ended with the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in the summer of 1995. The presidential ‘Tudjmanist’ narrative insisted on referring to the conflict as the *Homeland War* (*Domovinski rat*). Due to its ideological and political connotation, the term will be used in *italics*. For a detailed analysis of the conflict, see Magaš and Žanić, *War in Croatia*, 1–131.
5. Sjøberg, ‘Croatia Since 1989’, 31; see also Goldstein, *Croatia*, 257–63.
6. See Jović and Lamont, ‘Introduction – Croatia after Tuđman’; Uzelak, ‘Franjo Tuđman’s Nationalist Ideology’; Winland, ‘Ten Years Later’; Malešević, *Ideology, Legitimacy and the New State*, 223–72.
7. ‘Tuđman se u sport upletao više nego Tito’ [Tuđman interfered in sport more than Tito], *Slobodna Dalmacija*, October 14, 2007; ‘Sport i Politika u Balkanskim Društvima’ [Sport and Politics in Balkan Societies], *AIM Press*, October 7, 2001.
8. ‘Od rupca do himne’ [From rag to anthem], *Hrvatski Obzor*, April 24, 1995.
9. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; see Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 119–25; Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture*, 78–84; Fox and Miller-Idriss, ‘Everyday Nationhood’.
10. MacClancy, *Sport, Identity and Ethnicity*, 4 (emphasis in original).
11. Fox, ‘Consuming the Nation’, 226.
12. Bellamy, *Formation of Croatian National Identity*, 113.
13. Hargreaves, ‘Olympism and Nationalism’, 128.
14. Hoberman, ‘Sport and Ideology’, 16.

15. Hoberman, 'Sport and Ideology'; Houlihan, *Sport and International Politics*; Bairner, *Sport, Nationalism and Globalization*; Cronin and Mayall, *Sporting Nationalisms*.
16. 'Jezik nogometa danas je jači od diplomatskog' [The language of football today is louder than the diplomatic one], *Vjesnik*, July 9, 1998.
17. Pezo, 'Sport i hrvatski identitet', 145.
18. 'Nitko nije bolji od Čire' [Nobody is better than Čiro], *Večernji list*, July 14, 1998.
19. See 'Predsjednik mi pomaže sastaviti momčad' [The president helps me to pick the team], *Globus*, May 7, 1993; 'Zabranio sam igračima da daju sedmi gol' [I forbade the players to score the seventh goal], *Nacional*, November 24, 1995.
20. 'Po naredbi Tuđmana tajna služba SZUP lažirala je završnicu nogometnog prvenstva Hrvatske' [Under the command of Tuđman the secret service SZUP faked the end of the Croatian football championship], *Nacional*, June 2, 1999.
21. Prnjak, *Bad Blue Boys*, 58.
22. Vrcan, *Sport i nasilje danas u nas i druge*, 22–3.
23. 'Ne nogometu mržnje i rata!' [No to football of hate and war!], *Sportske Novosti*, May 14, 1990.
24. 'Boban i BBB obranili Maksimir od Arkana i Delija' [Boban and BBB defended Maksimir against Arkan and Delije], *Jutarnji list*, May 13, 2010; 'Rat je počeo na Maksimiru' [The war started at Maksimir], *Kurir*, May 13, 2010.
25. 'Probudilo se nešto divlje' [Something wild awoke], *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, May 20, 1990; 'Maksimirski krug pakla' [The Maksimir circle of hell], *Sport Magazine*, May 17, 1990; for a detailed description on the riots' course, see Mihailović, 'Rat je počeo 13. maja 1990'.
26. 'Zlo se trebalo spriječiti' [The evil had to be prevented], *Vjesnik*, May 15, 1990; 'Tko je odgovoran?' [Who is responsible?], *Sportske Novosti*, May 15, 1990.
27. 'Derbi mržnje' [Derby of hate], *Borba*, May 14, 1990; 'Masovna tuča na stadionu u Zagrebu' [Mass fight at the stadium in Zagreb], *Politika*, May 14, 1990.
28. 'Lopta u službi nacije' ['The ball in service of the nation'], *Vjesnik*, May 15, 1990.
29. Vrcan, *Nogomet, politika, nasilje*, 85. For other seminal work on the politization of (post-)Yugoslav football supporters in the late 1980s/early 1990s, see also Čolović, *Politics of Symbol in Serbia*, 259–87; Lalić, *Torcida*; Fanuko et al., *Zagrebački nogometni navijači*.
30. "'Njihova I naša" milicija' ["Their and our" police], *Vjesnik*, May 15, 1990; 'Čija je to milicija bila?' [Whose police was that?], *Sport Magazine*, May 17, 1990.
31. See 'Zvonimir Boban – od nacionalnog mita do studenta povijesti' [Zvonimir Boban – from national myth to history student], *Globus*, November 19, 1999.
32. See 'Zar je Frank iz Surinama draži od Dejana iz Titograda?' [Is Frank from Surinam really more likable than Dejan from Titograd?], *Sportske Novosti*, June 6, 1990.
33. 'Prekid na Poljudu' [Abort at Poljud], *Vjesnik*, September 27, 1990; 'Prebrzo zaboravljamo' [We forget too quickly], *Vjesnik*, September 28, 1990.
34. 'Stranka narančastih jakna' [The orange jacket party], *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, September 20, 1990.
35. Lalić, 'Bad Blue Boys i Torcida', 51; see also Lalić, *Torcida*, 197–212.
36. 'Više od sporta' [More than sport], *Vjesnik*, August 27, 1990; see also "'Jugoslavenski" autogol' ["Yugoslav" own goal], *Večernji list*, August 12, 1990; on the political use of 'Balkanist' discourse in post-socialist Croatia, see Razsa and Lindstrom, 'Balkan is Beautiful'.
37. Hall, 'Question of Cultural Identity', 293.
38. 'Usamljeni kraci' [Lonely spikes], *Vjesnik*, August 29, 1990.
39. 'Otvoreno Evropsko prvenstvo u atletici' [European athletics championships are opened], *Vjesnik*, August 28, 1990.
40. Rihtman-Auguštin, 'Monument in the Main City Square', 188.
41. 'Znak međunarodnog priznanja' [A sign of international recognition], *Večernji list*, October 18, 1990.
42. 'Nepokoreni duh hrvatskog naroda' [The unsubmitive spirit of the Croatian people], *Večernji list*, October 17, 1990; 'Trijumf povijesnog pamćenja naroda' [A triumph of people's historical memory], *Vjesnik*, October 17, 1990.
43. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power*, 88–9.
44. See 'Srce u Zagrebu – noge u Sevilli' [Heart in Zagreb – legs in Sevilla], *Globus*, October 25, 1991; 'Volim Hrvatsku' [I love Croatia], *Večernji list*, August 30, 1991; 'Kukoč i Rađa ambasadori Hrvatske!' [Kukoč i Rađa ambassadors of Croatia], *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, September 15, 1991.

45. Škaro, *Velikani hrvatskog sporta*, 65.
46. 'Prpić and Ivanišević Feel the Tug of War of Their Homeland', *New York Times*, November 1, 1991.
47. 'Smeš je moje oružje' [The smash is my weapon], *Sportske Novosti*, December 31, 1993 and January 1, 1994; see also 'I sportaši – hrvatski ambasadori' [Athletes are also Croatian ambassadors], *Večernji list*, September 16, 1991; Tudjman referred to the ambivalent position the international community had taken towards the recognition of Croatia (and Slovenia) as an independent state in the early stages of the conflict due to fears of a chain reaction in other republics.
48. 'Moj meč protiv srpske propagande' [My match against Serbian propaganda], *Globus*, February 28, 1992.
49. 'Pod hrvatskim barjakom na OI' [Beneath the Croatian flag to the OG], *Večernji list*, January 16, 1992.
50. Bellamy, *Formation of Croatian National Identity*, 113.
51. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.
52. 'Cijela je Hrvatska uz nogometaše' [All of Croatia is with the football players], *Večernji list*, July 5, 1998; 'Tuđman zaslužio Lyon i Paris' [Tudjman deserved Lyon and Paris], *Večernji list*, July 11, 1998; 'Veličanstvena hrvatska pobjeda' [Glorious Croatian victory], *Vjesnik*, July 12, 1998.
53. 'Za uspjeh hrvatskog nogometa najzaslužniji su predsjednik Franjo Tuđman i HDZ!' [President Franjo Tuđman and the HDZ are the most creditable for the success of Croatian football], *Globus*, February 5, 1999.
54. 'Ponosni smo na naš narod' [We are proud of our people], *Večernji list*, July 13, 1998.
55. 'Svijetu smo se nadmetnuli pobjedama' [We inflicted ourselves on the world with victories], *Večernji list*, July 13, 1998.
56. 'Hrvatska u slavlju!' [Croatia in celebration], *Jutarnji list*, July 2, 1998; see also 'Eksplozija radosti i veselja' [Explosion of joy and happiness], *Jutarnji list*, July 4, 1998.
57. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 212; see also the notion of 'spontaneous communitas' in Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 132–6.
58. 'Svjetski licemjeri su u uspjehu hrvatskih nogometaša pridali tobožnji nacionalizam' [The world's hypocrites have attached a fictional nationalism to the Croatian footballer's success], *Vjesnik*, July 14, 1998.
59. 'Čemu može poslužiti nogometno čudo?' [What can the football miracle be useful for?], *Vjesnik*, July 16, 1998.
60. 'Afrodizijak za politiku' [Aphrodisiac for politics], *Hrvatski Obzor*, July 18, 1998; 'Blaževićev nogometni lijek za Tuđmanovu vlast' [Blažević's football cure for Tudjman's authority], *Nacional*, July 8, 1998; 'Pustoš između rata i sporta' [The solitude between war and sport], *Jutarnji list*, July 13, 1998.
61. The operations 'Storm' (*Oluja*) and 'Flash' (*Blijesak*) were military actions carried out by the Croatian Army in the summer of 1995 with the goal to regain control over parts of Croatia claimed by the separatist Serb minority from 1991 onwards. Prior to, during and in the aftermath of the operations, a majority of the ethnic Serbs fled the country.
62. See Jović, 'Croatia and the European Union', 88–92.
63. 'Afrodizijak za politiku' [Aphrodisiac for politics], *Hrvatski Obzor*, July 18, 1998; 'Skandalozna podvala britanskoj javnosti' [Scandalous devilment to the British public], *Hrvatski Obzor*, July 11, 1998.
64. 'Svjetski licemjeri su u uspjehu hrvatskih nogometaša pridali tobožnji nacionalizam' [The world's hypocrites have attached a fictional nationalism to the Croatian footballer's success], *Vjesnik*, July 14, 1998.
65. See Uzelak, 'Franjo Tuđman's Nationalist Ideology'; Razsa and Lindstrom, 'Balkan is Beautiful'.
66. 'Dostojanstvo važnije od rezultata' [Dignity is more important than the result], *Večernji list*, July 3, 1997.
67. Škaro, *Velikani hrvatskog sporta*, 160; see also 'Hrvatska je bila Croatia' [Croatia was Croatia], *Vjesnik*, July 31, 1997.
68. 'Nakon "Bljeska" – "Oluja"!' [After "Flash" – "Storm"!], *Večernji list*, March 3, 1996; 'Vaterpolski Bljesak i rukometna Oluja' [Water polo flash and handball storm], *Hrvatski Obzor*, March 18, 1996; 'Plava oluja od pet bljesaka' [A blue storm of five flashes], *Večernji list*, July 31, 1997.

69. 'Plavi, plavi, vi ste dečki pravi' [Blues, Blues, you're real guys], *Večernji List*, July 21, 1997; 'Igrali i za Vukovar' [Also played for Vukovar], *Večernji List*, July 31, 1997.
70. See Kardov, 'Remember Vukovar', 81–2.
71. 'Sanjali i ostvariji pobjedu' [Dreamt and gained victory], *Večernji list*, July 28, 1996.
72. 'Utakmica kojom se dobiva rat' [The game that wins the war], *Vjesnik*, October 5, 1999.
73. 'Svjetski licemjeri su u uspjehu hrvatskih nogometaša pridali tobožnji nacionalizam' [The world's hypocrites have attached a fictional nationalism to the Croatian footballer's success], *Vjesnik*, July 14, 1998.
74. 'Navijači "ginuli" za karte' [Fans "died" for tickets], *Jutarnji list*, October 10, 1999.
75. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 83–4.
76. 'Ne "bedastom imenu s istoka"!' [No to the "stupid name from the East"!], *Sport Magazine*, June 7, 1990; 'Skandal u Maksimiru' [Scandal at Maskimir], *Globus*, January 8, 1993; while the first name change had relative support from the public, the second name change in 1993 was implemented against the will of a majority of fans and the public in general who perceived the second name change in two years as a purely political interference without any relation to sporting matter.
77. 'Tuđmanova zdravica za najveću pobjedu Croatije' [Tudjman's toast for Croatia's biggest victory], *Vjesnik*, August 1, 1997.
78. 'Dinamo = HAŠK Građanski', *Vjesnik*, February 17, 1991.
79. See Fanuko et al., *Zagrebački nogometni navijači*; See Vrcan, 'Curious Drama of the President', 63–4.
80. 'Vratite nam Dinamo!' [Give us Dinamo back!], *Večernji list*, February 27, 1992.
81. Graffiti claiming that 'if there is freedom and democracy, it would be Dinamo and not Croatia' or chants demanding to 'change Dejan's name, not Dinamo's' ('Dejan' was Tudjman's grandson's name which is perceived as a 'Serbian name', while the 'Croatian' equivalent is 'Dean') and mocking the president: 'there is this weird man, Franjo Tudjman is his name, before every sleep, he changes Dinamo's name'.
82. 'Sretan ti 10. Rođendan!' [Happy 10. Birthday Dinamo!], *Slobodna Dalmacija*, February 14, 2010.
83. That is, through chants and banners expressing political support for Tudjman and his party: 'BBB for HDZ' or 'HDZ Hajduk Dinamo Zajedno' [HDZ Hajduk Dinamo Unified]; see Prnjak, *Bad Blue Boys*, 60.
84. See 'Ovjekovječiti uspomenu' [Eternalize the memory], *Večernji list*, September 9, 1994.
85. 'Više od sporta' [More than sport], *Vjesnik*, August 27, 1990; 'Više od igre' [More than a game], *Večernji list*, February 19, 1992; 'Hrvatske pobjede više od nogometa' [Croatian victories more than football], *Hrvatski Obzor*, July 11, 1998.
86. Šimleša, *Športske bitke za Hrvatsku* [Sport battles for Croatia], 4.
87. 'Smeš je moje oružje' ['The smash is my weapon'], *Sportske Novosti*, December 31, 1993 and January 1, 1994.
88. Vrcan, *Nogomet, politika, nasilje*, 20.
89. Vrcan, 'Curious Drama of the President', 63; see also Babić, *Etonacionalizam i rat u Hrvatskoj*, 68–70.
90. Gagnon, *Myth of Ethnic War*, xv, 176–7.
91. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 17.

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