



## POLITICAL INTERFERENCE IN THE SPORT ASSOCIATIONS IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

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### Abstract

The goal of this paper is to explain the existence and the level of political interference in the activities and programmes of the sport associations in the countries of the Western Balkans. The influence of the politics into the activities of the sport associations is usually negative and it is misused for political purposes. Politics destroys the sport spirit and demotivates young people to work on their sport career, instrumentalizing them for political interests. The political interference into the sport associations is very evident in the countries of the so-called Western Balkans and it hampers on the Eurointegration processes of the candidate and potential candidate countries.

The main conclusions which we want to draw from this paper, is to prove that there is a high level of political interference in the work and activities of the sport associations in the countries of the Western Balkans, but also to try to find adequate solutions for a reduction or marginalization of these interference.

**Key words:** interference, sport, politics, Balkans

### Introduction

Symbiosis between sport, politics, business and media is an immanent part of the society. The level of interference of these elements determines the level of the development of the sports in one country. However, different parts of the world and Europe have different situations in the sport, regarding sport culture, finances and development. Western Balkans is a political and geographical area which comprises Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina and Kosovo. Political, economic, cultural, educational and sport situation in these countries is different from the others, more developed parts of Europe. We can not say that political and business interference is absent in the Western Europe countries (Italy is appropriate example for a mix of politics, media and sport), but still, it is on an acceptable level and it generates some damages for the sport, but does not destroy it.

The research objective of this paper is to show the influence and interference of the politics in the work of the sport associations, especially in the countries of the Western Balkans. In this way, we can scan the real situation regarding the functioning of the sport associations in these countries, but also suggest concrete measures how to reduce and marginalise this interference, or how to direct it in a favour of the sport associations and sportists.

### Research hypothesis

We can make three general hypothesis which will be researched in this paper: If the political interference is infiltrated in the sport associations, the sport results will be on a lower level; If sportists are involved in politics, their influence of the young people will be negative; If the sport associations are

financially independent, the political interference in their work will be marginalised.

### Research methods

Using the comparative method, we will show the political interference in the sport associations in each of these countries, and then we can draw general conclusions. We will use the analytical and syntetical method to describe and analyze the documents, legal acts and articles which show us how are these relations regulated, but also disrespected.

### Content

There are various types of elements that hamper the development of the sport in the countries of the Western Balkans. Some of them are connected with the commercialisation of the sport. It can be manifested in several ways: privatisation of television rights by certain media; concentration of wealth in certain clubs and leagues; club ownership by unscrupulous capital owners; match-fixing and corruption scandals; wage inflation on the players market; black market for tickets; doping; bankruptcy of European clubs and clubs from the countries of the Western Balkans; money laundry; internet piracy and ambush marketing; trafficking and exploitation of young players from Africa and South America; an uncontrolled "player agent industry"; underinvestment in the training of the young players; illegal betting and internet gambling outside tax control; hooliganism, racism and xenophobia among supporters, sexual offences and insecurity at the stadiums; etc. E.Henning, 2008)

The subject which has come to be identified under the heading "Sport and politics" is a vast and complicated one. In trying to gain a better

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understanding of the subject there may be many useful approaches, but perhaps it is the best to start with a familiar slogan “keep politics out of sport”, which is the battle-cry for one side of a common dispute. This is easy and nice to say, but unfortunately, very hard to implement in practice.

The political exploitation of the global sports spectacle and cultural and economic ramifications of its staging have been critical indices of the intensifying globalization of both media and sport. Sports events celebrating the body and physical culture have long been driven by political and ideological motives, from the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome to the societies of early modern Europe, in more modern Western societies as well as less developed and non-Western ones. This is never more so than when such events purport to be spheres of neutrality and embodiments of universalist and idealist principles. Spectacles have been justified on the basis of their potential to realize shared, global modes of identity and interdependence, making real the sense of a global civil society. Understanding this form of spectacle, and the extent to which its claimed goals have been met or compromised, contributes to an understanding of the sources of ethnocentrism, and to debates concerning the possibility of a cultural cosmopolitanism combining rivalry, respect, and reciprocal understanding. Analyzing the global sports spectacle is a way of reviewing the contribution of international sport to the globalization process generally, and to processes and initiatives of global inclusion and exclusion.

In order to describe the possible forms of interference of politics in sport, it is first necessary to describe sport clearly. Sport is physical activity in which the pursuit of excellence, and the agonistic principle are the guiding rules. The activity is competitive and success is dependent on effort within a set of abilities specified by the rules, which also are designed to create equality of opportunity. Sport endeavour demands sacrifice, dedication and training. Winning is taken as a sign of excellence provided that certain conditions are fulfilled: the competitors must be worthy, the rules must be obeyed and the victory must not be due to chance. The basic purpose of the sportist is to do his/her best, achieve his/her potential which develops by training. The way he/she approaches this personal limit is by trying to be the best among people with a similar purpose. Striving to win among like minded people is a mechanism which is the most likely means to bring the sportist near to his/her limit. Politics can be said to interfere with sports when non-sport factors arising from the exercise of power between groups adversely affects the pursuit of excellence. Usually this interference is the result of governments using some part of the sport system for non-sport objectives on their own. It seems that there are two central ways in which the political use of sport significantly interferes with the sport endeavour: winning as a sign of excellence is

compromised, and there is a loss of disinterestedness. (J.P. Robert, 2009)

Some of the relationships among politics and sport which are explored in the literature are: using the sport as a tool for diplomatic recognition; vehicle of ideology and propaganda; focus for publicity; source of prestige; release of aggressive tendencies; development of mutual understanding; means of protest; development of conflict-aggression; political education; development of national consciousness, moral; unification; social control; government funding for sport; politicians as fans, sportists; tool for gaining favour; etc. (J.P. Robert, 2009)

It seems that the separation of sport and politics is by no means logically impossible, one could not be very confident of any significant change in practice. Probably, there are three main obstacles for this. The first one is financial cost. The huge cost of staging international sportists' contest and the materialism of sportists make almost inevitable that there will be need to be vested interests, including those of governments. It is much easier for governments to devote money to something of national significance. The second obstacle is the international organization of sport, based on nation-states, rather than a transnational organization. The third obstacle are the media, in whose interests it is that there be as many spectators as possible. While nationalism remains the simplest way of promoting interest and conflict, there is little hope for any significant change.

Also, we can say that there is certain interaction between sport and international politics, i.e. international relations. The political and cultural dimensions of sport are widely recognized and international sport is generally accepted as contributing to the dynamics of international relations. It follows that the changing characteristics of sport will reflect something of the general developments in international relations. Ongoing debates of concerning the implications of globalization, the significance of international non-governmental organizations on policy making, the effect of transnational movements on sovereignty and changing relationship between identity and place, are some of the issues which can be considered through the prism of the international sports environment. Studies of sport and politics have traditionally presented a number of developing functions of sport as vehicles through which political objectives might be realized. Many of the scientists which explore the sport and the relations of the sport with politics, say that sport can be often used as a political tool, and that the modern sports movement may, in itself, be ideologically loaded. They also claim that international sport needs the interest and support of politicians, but not their interference. Unfortunately, these scientific attitudes could represent only a “nice peace of paper”, especially in the less developed areas of the world, as it is the Western Balkans. These theoretical “guidelines” are very hard to be implemented, because of several

reasons. First, if politicians support some sport activities, it means that they have some interests on it. They never give “blanco support” on sports, i.e. they expect feedback from their support. Otherwise, they can give only a declarative support, which in reality is not very concrete, useful and touchable for the sportists. They usually do that for publicity, and not because they sincerely want to. Second, they often misuse the sportists, by involving them in some political or government campaigns, with an intention to collect political points and to ring some votes on their account, which is due to the glory of the sportist. Third, politicians help some sportists, using their power, by providing them finances for traveling abroad, participating in international competitions, etc.

The movement of sport up the domestic and international political agenda has created the conditions whereby national sport organizations can potentially play a more pro-active role in policy-making and implementation. Yet examples of this actually happening appear limited. If the pluralist perspective is an accurate interpretation of the international environment, the sports historian should be able to trace an increasing number of instances where such organizations are actively engaged in international politics. Certainly, sport organizations are consulted on a range of politically sensitive issues, such as drug misuse and the liaison with the associations on the issue of sport violence. Their influence outside a narrow range of issues is, however, at best marginal. While accepting that the increasing influence of international sports organizations may, in certain limited contexts, be a reality, and that business interests allied to sport may also exert significant influence in the international environment, the primacy of the state-centred political interests has been illustrated many times. One of these examples is the controversy surrounding the awarding of the 2002 Winter Games to Salt Lake City. The scandal surrounding the alleged corruption had implications not only for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) membership, but also for the Organizing Committee for the Games. Considering such experiences from a realist perspective would not necessarily deny the influence of sport organizations in certain limited contexts. However, in terms of the so-called “international system”, the state as a unitary actor and the interests of the state remain dominant. (A. Beacom, 2009)

Just as a consideration of international theories can assist in an understanding of the significance of sport in contemporary society, so too an investigation of developments in international sport can provide valuable insights into the nature of international society. The activities of politicians and diplomats in relation to international sport reflect the general characteristics of diplomacy and international politics in the post-Cold War era. A consideration of the evolution of international sport institutions can provide insights for international relations theorists

concerned with understanding a political environment, which can no longer be comprehended in terms of the traditional state-centric paradigms. As a reflection of cultural development generally, the values and beliefs of key sports administrators and organizations they represent can reflect wider historical developments in political thinking. Theorists focusing on diplomacy argue that a transformation of diplomatic practice has taken place, which has been the dissipation of diplomatic activity a cross much wider range of activities.

The institutional relationship between the sportists and politicians are the government bodies or other organizational units connected with sport activities. This is case with some ministries or agencies for sport and physical education in the countries from the Western Balkans (it is also case in other countries in Europe), where top sportists are part of the executive boards and other decision-making structures. But, from other side, these relationships can generate corruption and misuse of the sportists. As we have said before, there should be clear limits between sport and politics, because if they are completely mixed, then the real goals and sense of the sport are lost, and sport becomes automatically “political servant”. The dependence of the sport from politics, especially government policies, come out at that moment when the government finances the most of the sport activities, i.e. when the financial liquidity of the sport associations is almost “zero”. The solution for these anomalies will be achievement of more financially independent sport associations, granting non-conditional financial help from the government, cooperation with other non-governmental and non-profit organizations and associations, and keeping away the young sportists from politics.

The interference of the politics in sports can be seen in other aspect, too. There are many sport scandals which are directly or indirectly connected with politics. These scandals, are, unfortunately, very often in the countries of the Western Balkans, and most of them don't get appropriate solution in courts or other relevant institutions. In the following text, we will try to give some adequate examples from several countries of the Western Balkans, which can explain the real situation of the sports collectives in this area of Europe.

Serbian police is probing a major corruption scandal with suspected mob links that involves top first division football clubs. As part of the investigation, police arrested the secretary general of top Belgrade club Red Star, Zoran Damjanovic. Inspectors are reported to have been checking Red Star's books for several days after its fans seriously injured and beat a plainclothes policeman Nebojsa Trajkovic at a football match, which was termed attempted murder. Three fans have been arrested in connection with the incident. Matches are alleged to have been rigged, and millions of euros from the transfers of top players to have been illegally creamed

off. The new report points to links between top football officials and organized crime. At the center of the scandal is former Red Star president Dragan Stojkovic Piksi, who was forced to resign. The media said the investigation has revealed that Piksi and Damjanovic may have engineered the incident to create trouble for new Red Star president Toplica Spasojevic and his team. Piksi, one of the most popular football stars in the former Yugoslavia, had played 85 matches for the national team and afterwards continued his career in France and Japan. He has been accused by fans and sports commentators of selling top players to foreign clubs, using underworld figures as go-betweens and of sharing with them part of the transfer money. After resigning as a Red Star president, Piksi said he could no longer take the pressure and return to Japan as a coach. Serbian football has been marginalized at the European level, since the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. But Red Star is reportedly not the only "black sheep" in the Serbian soccer fold. Red Star's top rival, Partizan, is next in line for the probe, but also some top officials of the Serbian football Association. Top people of leading clubs and the Football Association are involved in money laundering, tax evasion and even white slavery. <http://www.adnkronos.com/AKI/English/Sport/?id=1.0.1643855029>, 2010)

Imagine a country where football clubs have not legally registered their players, where the national football federation has ordered thousand of jerseys and shorts with false PUMA trade marks and top official in the federation has obtained his job with a false university degree. We can confirm that this country is a Western Balkan one, and it is Macedonia. A website dedicated to inform football fans and journalists with professionally researched news in English about South-Eastern European football – reported what a team of inspectors from the government's labour inspection body found out when they visited the 12 teams in the Macedonian first league. Seven out of the 12 clubs did not have a single player registered as a professional player, although all players in the Macedonian first league are playing professionally. The players are instead playing illegally, they do not have contracts and the clubs are not paying social insurance for them. According to the website, the Football Federation of Macedonia (FFM) has given up taking action against the clubs because to be effective they would have to close down almost all of the clubs. The website also have picked up a story from the Macedonian daily sports paper "Makedonski sport" which could reveal that the FFM had ordered 4500 football kits with false PUMA trade marks from a sports equipment factory in Prilep. Part of the equipment has already been distributed among youth training centres in Macedonia. PUMA is the official sponsor of the Macedonian national football teams, but the company has nevertheless taken out a lawsuit against the FFM after receiving samples of the false

equipment. The third scandal has made it into the international media spotlight as it has involved UEFA and FIFA. The story began when police in Macedonia decided to investigate persistent rumours in Macedonian media, that the secretary general of the FFM had forged a university diploma in order to obtain his post. The police closed down and searched the FFM offices and questioned some of its managers for hours at the Ministry of Internal affairs. A week later UEFA and FIFA wrote the Macedonian Minister of Internal affairs complaining that Macedonia had violated the principles of autonomy that applies throughout the sports movement. but the Macedonian Ministry for Internal affairs maintains that the police was acting in accordance with its legal authorisation to combat corruption. It sees no reason for complaint when state institutions to perform the job they are set up to do. <http://www.playthegame.org/news/detailed/scandal-upon-scandal-in-macedonian-football-1428.html>, 2010)

New scandal with the Macedonian football federation, through this time the culprit is not the teams involved, but Bulgarian UEFA referee, Anton Genov. There was information circling throughout Europe that online betting shops have lost millions of euros on Macedonia vs Canada friendly match played in november 2009. Macedonia won 3:0, and all European and Asian betting shops had Macedonia as a favourite. UEFA is not disputing the result, rather according to the relevant sources they are looking at the four penalties, particularly the ones awarded to Canada, and number of goals. From having watched the match, UEFA may be onto something as both penalties awarded to Canada were non-existent, borderline ridiculous. The two times Canada managed to reach the Macedonian penalty box, they came away with penalties. It seems certain now Bulgarian referee Anton Genov was set to whistle four penalties, no matter what. <http://macedoniaonline.eu/content/view/10636/2/>, 2010)

A member of the Croatia Football Association Executive Committee and Hajduk Split sports director Igor Stimac earned himself a month-long suspension after reports of his hitting a linesman during halftime at Hajduk's league game at Rijeka. Most media, included the sports daily "Sportske Novosti", reported Stimac insulted, threatened and slapped the linesman Miroslav Jedvaj on the face because he was angry at his calls during the first half of the game. Stimac, the fiercely temperamental former Croatia central defender, is no stranger to controversy: He was banned for six games by UEFA in 2001 because of his part in another tunnel brawl after a Hajduk-Mallorca Champions League qualifier. Later that year he was indicted for allegedly beating up a bar owner in Split, but the trial is still in progress in the notoriously slow Croatian legal system. While the press fervently appealed for a harsh punishment for Stimac in the

Rijeka affair, the usually meek Football Association suspended him provisionally for a month pending investigation. Amidst the speculations on the length of the ban to be passed on the temperamental Hajduk official, in an extraordinary turn of events the linesman changed his story. Contrary to the wording of the official game sheet signed by the referee, Jedvaj now claimed that Stimac in fact did not hit him, but only unintentionally grazed his face while gesticulating. No decision about sanctions against Stimac was taken because of the contradictions between the statements of some participants and the official game sheets. This reminded many of the Football Association's indulgent stance when dinamo Zagreb's vicepresident Zdravko Mamic, himself Stimac's colleague in the FA Executive Committee, recently claimed that his club has "worked" with the referees in the past. Elsewhere such statements would have sparked off a thorough investigation, but not so in Croatia. <http://www.soccerphile.com/soccerphile/news/balkans-soccer/yugoslavia.html>, 2010)

In spite of this "minor bugs", the Croatian football league is an established competition, unlike the fledgling championship of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The scandal involving a mistaken player's identity in the team sheet caused FC Sarajevo to accuse the Football Association of corruption and seek the intervention of the United Nations. The motive for the outburst was the decision of the Competition Committee to award the game between Borac and reigning champions Leotar to the visitors by 3:0, because Borac had fielded a player not listed in the team sheet. Having lost the game by 2:0, Leotar appealed after discovering that the home side had used Milorad Babic instead of Milos Babic, the player mistakenly announced in the official documents. The Committee's decision to award the game to Leotar indirectly hurt the capital's giants Sarajevo and Zeljeznicar, who were lagging behind Leotar in the race for a spot in the UEFA cup. Borac on the other hand threatened to pull out of the competition if the original result was not reinstated by the Appeals Committee. As is customary in the Balkans, the loudest guy often wins and the pressure again paid off: the decision to award the win to Leotar was overturned and the points were given back to Borac, thus cutting the reigning champs' lead over the Sarajevo rivals to a mere two points with eight rounds to go. <http://www.soccerphile.com/soccerphile/news/balkans-soccer/yugoslavia.html>, 2010)

There is an example from the Albanian past which shows the implications of the general political conditions on the sport activities. Around decade ago, all football matches had been postponed indefinitely until the country's interior ministry could guarantee a security, after a wave of unrest over a pyramid savings scheme scandal. The Albanian football federation secretary-general, Eduard Dervishi, said first division

club officials had decided to postpone further matches until peace had returned to the Balkan state. Sports event were halted a month ago when violent protests sparked by the collapse of pyramid savings schemes swept the country. Some protesters have lost their life savings in the investment swindle. <http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football-rouxshell-in-troyes-1270673.html>, 2010)

These examples are related to football scandals in some of the countries of the Western Balkans. Still, other sports are also vulnerable to scandals, corruption, illegal activities, etc. but, because of lack of space, we have decided to present you the cases for the sport, in which there is the highest frequency for scandals, the football. Besides the above mentioned countries from the Western Balkans, also, sport federations and associations in Montenegro and Kosovo are faced with many problems, anomalies in the functioning, etc. Using the analogy method, we can note that there is complete reflexion of the "mentality and way of functioning" of the sport associations and federations from Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, with those from Montenegro and Kosovo.

It is useful to note that the role of the politics and the state should be more active in investigating the illegal activities connected with sport associations. The fault of the politicians is in their passiveness, especially when some huge sport scandals will come out in public. Relevant ministries, sport agencies, but also police and courts should be more effective and efficient in doing their job. Only in this way the criminal activities where the sport associations are involved can be cleared and the people who are responsible for those activities will be punished appropriately and will be put away from sportists who do not have the blame for that.

Sure, there are some cases where the politics is actively involved in the sport scandals. But, more as a "support" for the sportists and managers involved in them, than as a protagonist. However, no matter whether politicians are explicitly participating in the sport scandals, or implicitly tolerate them, they help the "sport mafia" to make extra profit, but also take from that profit for themselves.

### Conclusions

"In healthy body, healthy spirit", should be the motto for all sportists, no matter which sport are they playing, or which confession, nationality or race they are, whether they are professionals or amateurs, well or bad paid, juniors or veterans. But, unfortunately, in every society, sport is "contaminated" with politics, less or more. If the state is more developed, the chances for political interference in the sport are smaller, or if they arise, there will be punished by the courts, or condemned by the society.

We can conclude that the countries from the Western Balkans are one of the European "black

spots”, regarding the interference of the politics into sports. The relationships between sports, politics, bussiness and media is so strong, that they almost act like “one body”. No matter what is the form of interaction, it is sure that it devastates the society and demotivates the development of the sport. Implications can be very serious, especially for the young people who want to be engaged in some sport. Regardless of the level of political influence on sport, the results are the same: lost enthusiasm, faith and interest in sport.

Sport associations in the countries of the Western Balkans often serve as an instrument for implicit drafting of a latent political agenda. This is due to the reason that sport is a very important part of the society, i.e. represents one of its cariatids and has much influence on the opinion of the people. Politicians are misusing this situation and are instrumentalizing the sport associations, for achieving their goals. In some cases, sport associations are aware of these manipulations, but they accept them, in other cases they are opponing them, but in some of the case they are not aware of this influence at all.

With the research made in this paper, we confirmed that if the political interference is infiltrated in the sport associations, the sport results are on a lowere level, i.e. sometimes they do not exist at all. Also, we saw that when sportists are involved in politics, they have a bad influence on the young people, i.e. they demotivate them to play sports by heart, but only for money. Finally, we concluded that if the financial independence of the sport associations is bigger, than the political interference is marginalised, because in that way the autonomy of decision-making is bigger and the political influence is not fruitful.

The activities that have to be taken are: increasing the awareness of the sport associations about the potential danger of being manipulated by

politicians, selection of independent officials in the associations, only by its members and institutional bodies, creating a self-sustainable associations, which do not have the need of financial grants and dotations from the government, or other political entities, escaping the political offers for the top sportists, which are directed by the politicians, etc.

As a final conclusion, we can note that total separation of the sport and politics is a “mission impossible”. Western Balkans is an area where the political interference is present not only in sport, but in every single part of the society. So, the measures that can be taken in real, are reducing the level of political influence and interference in sport, increasing the level of financial independence of the sport associations by enacting appropriate laws and by-laws regarding sport, establishing independent funds, etc.), and keeping distance by the top sportists from politicians, political parties, and government institutions and bodies.

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