

"Football in Southeastern Europe: From Homogenization to Reconciliation", London, 11.11.2013: workshop review

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Dario Brentin

“Football in Southeastern Europe: From Homogenization to Reconciliation”, London, 11.11.2013

Workshop review

Despite the vast and diverse scholarship dealing with the political, social and cultural aspects of post-Yugoslav democratic transition, the social field of sport has thus far remained a largely peripheral topic in international research. However, during the late summer of 2013, the publication of a special issue of the journal *Sport in Society* entitled ‘Football in Southeastern Europe: From Ethnic Homogenization to Reconciliation’ made a small step towards bridging this intriguing scholarly gap by offering diverse insights into the interconnection of sport and identity construction since Yugoslavia’s dissolution. As a follow-up to this publication, a launch event/workshop was organised at University College London – School of Slavonic and East European Studies conceptualised as a promotional event for the topic of (post-)Yugoslav sport.

This event should underline the significance of this under-researched aspect of Southeast European Studies as well as intensify the debate among scholars, students and interested public in British academia/and beyond. The large interest in the event resulted with more than 40 people engaging in an afternoon-long debate on sport and its interconnection with social issues in post-Yugoslav societies. It is, however, noteworthy that the workshop was able to accommodate numerous senior researchers as participants arriving from all over the UK (e.g. University of Manchester, University of Brighton, University of Cambridge, Brunel University, Queen Mary’s University, SOAS, a.o.). For the organisers this illustrates the interest in and significance of the topic as well as the need for this long-neglected academic debate to begin.

Introducing the workshop, the special issues’ editor John HUGHSON (University of Central Lancashire) and Dario BRENTIN (University College London) noted that this special issue should be seen as a ‘first of its kind’ publication, focusing on sport and its social, political and cultural implications in Southeast Europe with such wide breadth. The organisers furthermore expressed their hopes that this publication, as well as the workshop, will have a triggering effect for future research in the United Kingdom and beyond. Hughson took the opportunity to officially announce the news that Routledge had accepted his proposal to publish the special issue in book format. The book will certainly ensure the further and wider dissemination of these ideas, and also make it more generally accessible for students and the interested public. The edited volume is scheduled for publication in spring/summer 2014.

Christian NIELSEN (University of Aarhus) opened the workshop with a fascinating presentation examining the Serbian state’s reluctant struggle with football-related violence and political extremism. The fact that the leading Serbian broadsheet newspaper *Politika* had devoted their entire Sunday supplement to football hooliganism only the day before illustrates impressively how pressing these issues are in Serbia today. His overall analysis focused on the Gay Pride Parades in Serbia since 2009, which have become an annual

contested event pitting progressive and pro-European forces against a 'patriotic' coalition of extreme nationalist organisations, including associations of football hooligans as well as the Serbian Orthodox Church. Although there are signs that the political will to confront extremism inside and outside stadiums is slowly materializing, Nielsen nonetheless described the state's reaction to threats and acts of violence against proponents of Gay Pride as hesitant, ambiguous and inconclusive. The second presentation by Tamara PAVASOVIĆ-TROŠT (University of Ljubljana/Graz) complemented Nielsen's research by offering an insight into reader comments in various Serbian media outlets in response to the violent events surrounding the Gay Pride Parades in Belgrade. Her presentation hence set out to explore the overlap between football hooliganism and the extreme-right movement, but additionally captured the reactions of everyday people to the activities of these groups' participants. Pavasović-Trošt concluded that although many citizens in Serbia might be disillusioned with the current economic and political situation in the country and share the grievances of the hooligans, the number of those who consider violence an acceptable means of realizing social change remains relatively low. Richard MILLS (University of East Anglia) took the whole workshop twenty years back in time with his presentation focusing on the newly emerging states of Republika Srpska and Republika Srpska Krajina, the Serb-held territories in the Yugoslav republics of Bosnia and Hercegovina and Croatia, respectively. Describing the devastating effects of the outbreak of war in Croatia in 1991, and its subsequent appearance across Bosnia and Hercegovina in the following year, Mills pointed out that the game continued to be an important aspect of everyday life throughout the region. His presentation illustrated the ways football continued to serve as an important morale-boosting activity, providing soldiers with a distraction from the front but also serving a higher cause by assisting in the creation of ethnically homogenous states via the ritual engagement in league and cup competitions.

In terms of covered countries and periods, the second panel was more eclectic in its composition. Starting off, Tea SINDBÆK (University of Copenhagen) examined the role of Croatia's leading football club, *Dinamo Zagreb*, in the negotiation of history as a crucial element of national and other identities in 1990s Croatia as well as the early twenty-first century. Emphasizing *Dinamo's* role as a national and political symbol, Sindbæk illustrated how history and identities were being represented and used in *Dinamo's* club magazine and in tabloid comments as well as how these discourse interacted with and challenged national narratives. She was followed by Falma FSHAZI (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris) whose presentation dealt with contestation, political intervention and violent conflicts in Albanian football. Looking at contemporary Albania as well as the early days of its national football championships in 1930s, Fshazi questioned the 'reappearance' of contested winners and violent confrontations in football matches by examining the continuity and change in the relationship between state and sport. Focusing on the struggle for power between centre and localities, she concluded that the radical changes in social conditions and the transition from one form of society to another have not radically changed the form of power struggles within football, and have thus not immunized public institutions from being used for the profit of groups in power. These tensions, according to Fshazi should be understood as an illustration of the unsuccessfulness of central attempts at disempowering and subordinating localities. Last but not least, Davide STERCHELE's paper

(Leeds Metropolitan University) initiated a debate about ethnic tensions in post-Dayton Bosnian football and its role as both a 'fertile land' and a 'mined field' for peace-building and the reconciliation process. Drawing on rich ethnographic experience, his presentation highlighted the consequences of inter-ethnic competition in the united Bosnian football league, both in terms of the re-integration of the Bosnian population, on the one hand, and the possible exacerbation of ethnic tensions on the other. However, Sterchele concluded that the reunification of the Bosnian football's landscape should also be understood as a social field that helps to demonstrate how ethnicity is instrumentally used by the post-war elites in order to exploit the common good of football for their private enrichment.

The workshop closed with the conclusion that the afternoon's presentations had offered an insight into the diversity of methodological/theoretical and topical approaches from a number of different disciplines, whilst also starkly revealing the lack of up-to-date scholarship and research. The participants each agreed that other important questions, e.g. gender, Yugoslav nationalism and sport, the effects of globalization on Southeast European sport, post-Yugoslav regional leagues, etc. are yet to be researched; a void that should be tackled sooner rather than later.