Football and War in Former Yugoslavia. Serbia and Croatia Two Decades After the Break-up

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Abstract: This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork which consisted of attending the World Cup qualifying match between national teams of Croatia and Serbia, held in Zagreb in March 2013. The aim of this research is to analyse the presence of narratives referring to relations between Croatia and Serbia, two decades after the war. More specifically, this analysis focuses on the narratives about „normalization“ of the relations between the two countries, through the collected ethnographic data, as well as on media reports about the match in both countries. Considering the symbolic significance which the matches between the two national teams used to have, and still do, the aim of this paper is to point out the mechanisms through which the discourses of “normalization” are created, through the written and spoken word, and, more intriguingly, through what is passed over in silence.

As Jean-Paul Sartre once observed, “In football, everything is complicated by the presence of the opposite team.” Applied to the situation in Yugoslavia at the end of the 1980s, football was very complicated indeed.

During that period, football stadia across the country became breeding grounds for nationalist conflicts, especially between football fans from Serbia and Croatia. Yugoslavia, at that point, was facing deep internal crises, economic as well as political, while interethnic tensions between the constituent nations were driving the country further towards what seemed like an inevitable dissolution.

Like most of Western Europe during the 1980s, Yugoslavia had serious problems to do with hooliganism and football violence. While in Britain, Margaret Thatcher was cracking down on the so called “slum game played in slum stadiums watched by slum people”, the roots of football related violence in Yugoslavia were of a different nature.

Newly formed fan groups, created mostly during that decade, very soon changed their focus from regular football rivalry to national issues. Chants of ethnic hatred echoed around stadia – more incredible if one considers that overt displays of nationalism were a still a crime in Yugoslavia. The stadium became the “national vanguard”, a voice amplifier for nationalist rhetoric, creating a vast space for manipulation within the beautiful game.

Things came to a head at the club game between Dynamo Zagreb vs. Red Star Belgrade on 13 May 1990. The venue was Maksimir stadium in Zagreb and the riots began before the match had even kicked off. The game was never finished, and it’s a miracle it was even started. The riots set off a chain of events which heavily influenced the on-going crisis in Yugoslavia on a political as well as symbolic level.

The match between Dynamo and Red Star was played two weeks after the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), under the leadership of Franjo Tuđman, won the first free parliamentary elections in Croatia. The HDZ’s ultra-nationalistic program, complementary to that of the successors of the Communist Party under Slobodan
Milošević, did not inspire hope for a peaceful solution to the Yugoslav crisis. In this respect, the actions of the two fan groups – Red Star’s Delijes and Dynamo’s Bad Blue Boys – was not the least bit surprising. (Mihailović 1997, Mills 2009, Sack and Suster 2000)

The war of course did not begin at Maksimir, but the epilogue of this never ended game wasn’t just a massive fight between the supporters and the police, but also some important political machinations, most notably Croatian police evicting the Serbian managerial staff from the stadium. The riots on Maksimir stadium just accelerated the on-going process of disintegration, while football - thanks to the phrase “The war started at Maksimir”, which was coined and heavily exploited immediately after the match - became an inevitable symbolic factor in explanations of the Yugoslav crisis. (Đorđević 2012)

Football encounters between Serbian and Croatian clubs and national teams after the disintegration of Yugoslavia didn’t occur very often, not until 1997, when the match between Partizan Belgrade and Croatia Zagreb (today known as Dinamo) took place in the qualifying round for European Champions League. After that, in 1999, Yugoslavia (consisting of Serbia and Montenegro) was drawn with Croatia in the same group in EURO 2000 qualifications. Croatian side, after a huge success in the recent World Cup held in France in 1998, was expected to win the matches, but after a dramatic match in Zagreb finished with 2:2 draw, Yugoslavia eventually went to EURO. Both matches raised tensions in the public sphere in both countries, but major incidents were avoided thanks to the ban on visiting fans in the effort to avoid potential clashes at the stadium. However, both games were played in the shadow of the recently ended war, so jingoistic articles in local newspaper and hate speech on the stadiums were integral as well as expected part of the atmosphere before and after the matches, particularly bearing in mind the symbolic significance of football in the break-up of Yugoslavia, and, until then, almost mythical character of the never ended match at Maksimir in 1990. (Sindbæk 2013, Đorđević 2012). At that point, relations between two countries were officially at a low level, considering that nationalist regimes led by Slobodan Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman were still in power.

The fall of Milosevic’s regime in Serbia in 2000, as well as the turning point in Croatian government’s politics after the death of president Tudjman, led to official warming in the relations between two republics of former Yugoslavia, but the references to the recent war past and ethnic intolerance were still, if not dominating, than prominent in public and private narratives in Serbia and Croatia (Đerić 2008).

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1: Dinamo Zagreb, following the will of the late Croatian president Franjo Tudjman, was forced to change the name firstly in HASK Gradjanski, and after that in Croatia, as its former name Dinamo was considered as a part of communist legacy. This change led to very serious revolt among Dinamo fans, ending in a very interesting political battle within the football milieu (see Vrcan 2002, Brentin 2013).
symbolic significance which the matches between the two national teams used to have, and still do, the aim of this paper is to point out the mechanisms through which the discourses of “normalization” are created, through the written and spoken word, and, more intriguingly, through what is passed over in silence.

The game of the century

The public interest in the match between Croatia and Serbia began from the very moment after the draw for the qualifying matches for World Cup 2014 in Brazil. The sport press was occasionally full of articles announcing the game, with the main focus on the rivalry between the two coaches of the national teams, Serbian Siniša Mihajlović, and Igor Štimac on the Croatian side, whose personal history was largely marked by a conflict between them just before the break-up of Yugoslavia, which most probably had an ethnic dimension. Similarly, newspapers often evoked the most striking detail from a match between the two national teams held in 1999, when Yugoslav player Zoran Mirković, in quite a bizarre way², clashed with Croatian defender Robert Jarni, being expelled immediately, but, in spite of that, Yugoslavia, achieving a goal, and qualified for EURO 2000, while Croatians didn’t.

The metaphoric reduction of the match between the two national squads to two almost legendary clashes indicated the tensions under which the game was going to be played. In that sense, as the match was getting closer, the media forged ever more narratives about “the historical game”, which, certainly, would not be decisive only for the participation in the World Cup finals. Only few days before the match, one could read the articles in which, for instance, Croatian player Domagoj Vida, warms up while listening to the notorious song Čavoglave³, presented by controversial singer Marko Perković Thompson⁴. (24 sata, 19 March 2013.) At the same time, the Serbian media strongly condemned this kind of media narratives. Thus, the tabloid Kurir, in the article titled “He sets fire: Štimac is expecting Serbia with Thopmson”, asks if Croatian coach “is preparing for a war or a football match” (the Kurir, 20.03.2013.). On the other hand, the Belgrade daily Blic warns that “problem occurs when someone’s personal attitude, like Vida’s, is being presented to the public as something totally normal. Without any comment, this kind of attitude becomes socially acceptable. And when “chasing the mob”, which is a part of one verse, becomes socially acceptable, the horrible things can happen” (Blic, 20 March 2013).

Just before the match, however, tensions were suddenly brought down, mostly through emphasizing the new, friendly relation between the two old foes, coaches Štimac and Mihajlović. The media have broadly reported about their sudden warm relationship, exchanging gifts and words full of mutual respect. Fair support for the national team on the stadium was promoted, and media from both countries reported on (in some other context a rather unusual) press conference where president of Croatian Football Association Davor Šuker, coach Štimac, and Croatian Prime minister Zoran Milanović took part. Talking about the forthcoming match, he stressed: “It is on us to prove and present ourselves as responsible hosts and a

² Lying on the ground after being fouled, Mirkovic grabbed Jarni by his testicles incurring a red card.
³ In this particular song, the singer calls for extermination of Serbs, while Ustashe symbols are regularly used.
⁴ Thompson is a highly controversial Croatian singer, whose repertoire is often connected with the pro-Nazi Ustashe movement, which was in power in Croatia during WW 2. In this particular song, the singer calls for extermination of Serbs, while Ustashe symbols are regularly used.
civilized country. On this occasion, I call on everyone who will be on the stadium to back up Croatia by supporting, and not with hatred towards the opponents, and if anyone hears anything which insults their Croatian civic and civilized identity, their answer should be singing or booing". (the Večernji list, 21 March 2013.) Also, a large scale of media coverage was focused on security measures, stressing the huge number of police officers securing the event, as well as the fact that potential supporters of the Serbian national team would banned from entering the stadium, facing a penalty of one month in jail. The titles in the Croatian media on the very day of the match like “Let’s be proud”, “Let Lijepa nasa⁵ thunder!”, “To the battle, coolheaded”, “Let our hearts lead us to victory” or “Victory will lead you directly into the legend”, show high tension following “the match of the generation”, but calls for fair support at the same time insist that “times have been changed”, and that there is no place for usual expression of hatred. The media in Belgrade also announce the match in a relatively calm tone. Thus, the daily Politika in one title simply states: “Tonight is the big derby: Croatia – Serbia”, while Belgrade based internet portal B92.net stresses the story about Croatian president Ivo Josipović and former Serbian colleague Boris Tadić watching the game together in Zagreb. Only the tabloid newspapers, like Kurir, tried to stir up tension, with titles like “To the battle, heroes!”

He who doesn’t jump is Orthodox

And how did it actually look like in reality? Organizing this kind of fieldwork implied, in a way, bypassing the rules declared before the game, considering that tickets for the match were sold personally to the authors of this paper, noting his ID number, in this case the passport of the Republic of Serbia ⁶. The departure to Zagreb, the day before the match, was, in a way, a trip to unknown, considering the possibility of forbidding the border crossing by the Croatian border authorities, according to large scale media reports about strict controls on the state border. In reality, however, there was not any unusual control. A situation similar to that of emergency state in Croatian capital, however, was quite obvious to us, highlighted with the occurrence that took place at the hotel where we stayed. Before we checked in, the receptionist asked us if we are going to attend the game. After our confirmation, she informed us that, in cases like ours, she has an instruction to call the police. The police in fact reached our hosts, inquiring about the purpose of our visit, and after being convinced that the visit is only for scientific reasons, they said that, because of our safety potential security measures should be considered, most likely a police escort on the stadium⁷. The city landscape also indicated somewhat unusual conditions, notably the visible presence of the police forces, as well as streets and shop windows covered

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⁵ Croatian national anthem

⁶ The question of the ban on visiting fans opens many problems which, in this paper, will not be of the main interest. Still, it is important to mention that, because of the forthcoming football match, the mobility across the state border between Serbia and Croatia was in a way suspended, while the ban on attending the match according to ethnic origin represents a serious act of discrimination. Not of less importance, and also very interesting question is how to define a supporter of one national team. Is a „proper” name the criterion which defines someone as a Serbian fan, or maybe citizenship, or the place of origin? Thereby, for example, an ethnic Croat living in Serbia and having Serbian ID and citizenship, according to the criteria, would also be banned from attending the match, regardless of the fact that she is, probably, a huge fan of Croatian national team.

⁷ Luckily, it never happened, considering that any kind of escort would, in a way, make as a „moving target” on the stands of Maksimir stadium
with different symbols of the Croatian state, while on the one of the highest buildings in Zagreb a huge jersey of the national squad was prominently displayed.

This city view is far from unusual\textsuperscript{8}, before important games like this, but under the circumstances, it caused some inconvenience. In a sense, doing the fieldwork in a assumed „hostile environment“, but with the deep understanding of local context, a researcher finds himself in a quite paradoxical position, being an actor with an access to specific „cultural intimacy“of the social background, but, at the same time, also excluded by virtually being „pushed“in the undesirable identity position (in this case of being a Serb) as an example from the hotel shows clearly.

Similarly, before going to the stadium, many discussions preceded, mostly focused on the desirable behaviour on the stands (we had the tickets for the „regular“ part of stadium), including potential conversation in English, considering Serbian accent of former common Serbo-Croatian language as easily recognizable and also not very recommended within the crowd of Croatian football fans. Similarly, a sort of mimicry we had to use while performing the Croatian national anthem, holding red and white banners like the rest of the crowd, was supposed to have the function of hiding our (unwanted) ethnic identity. Reality, however, showed something completely different.

Despite the initial efforts it soon became clear that „hiding“ can’t last too long, nor did it change much. An indicative illustration is an interaction with a young Croatian fan, sitting just behind one of the authors, who immediately after the „Kill the Serb“ chant, very kindly asked for a cigarette lighter, not in the least bothered by the obviously “wrong” ethnic origin of the lighter owner. Although during and before the game various hate speech chants could be heard (“Kill the Serb”, “He who doesn’t jump is Ortodox”, “If I were a Serb, I would kill myself”), as well as chants directly referring to the war (“To the battle for your nation”, “Vukovar, Vukovar”), there was a tangible avoidance of the reference to the Ustashe movement. Rather, the crowd seemed to be more enthusiastic about derogatory commentary on the Croatian Football Association.

It could be argued that most of the slogans had a ritual function of confirming the Croatian founding myth (Kuljić 2006, Đerić 2008), whose constitutive notions are the Homeland war and conflict with Serbia during the ‘90s, the football match against the “old foe” constituting the convenient occasion for such national homogenisation. Notwithstanding the seriousness of the verbal violence in the

\textsuperscript{8}Staying in the Netherlands during World Cup 2010, one could see that there is not a single shop window without some sort of a symbol of the national team, while the streets were decorated with many orange banners or national flags. On the other hand, this kind of public manifestation of “the national spirit” is not very common in Serbia, mostly due to the fact that a large per cent of Serbian citizens didn’t accept state formations like FR Yugoslavia or Serbia and Montenegro, formed after the break-up of Yugoslavia. Accordingly, neither organized nor spontaneous display of its symbols was present. Situation didn’t change much after 2006, when Montenegro decided to leave the common state with Serbia (Đorđević 2006).

\textsuperscript{9}Vukovar is the city in eastern Croatia, in the beginning of the ‘90s being a place where heavy battles took place. In Croatia, this town has strong symbolical meaning, being considered as a symbol against Serbian aggression.
slogans may be best understood as part of specific folklore, rather than a call to an act of violence. In the end Croatia won confirming an important segment of its supremacy over Serbia in the national imagery once again.

The next day was a day of victory celebration for the Croatian media. “Croatia smashed Serbia”, “They brought smiles back on our faces”, “That’s how you fight for Croatia” are some of the headlines stressing the importance of this event. The general narrative celebrating the national team’s victory, however, was felt to be reconciliatory, not insisting too much on who was defeated, as it was obvious. What the media did insist on was the “marvellous atmosphere at Maksimir, without a single incident” (the *Sportske novosti* 3 March 2013) and on, in the mayor of Zagreb’s words, “the face of hospitable, cultured and European Zagreb that was show”, indicating the importance of “normalisation” of the relations as well as the level of civilisation and culture of the nation that is about to become the EU Member State.

In the Serbian media, on the other hand, the predominant sentiment was disappointment at the defeat, and they also stressed the unsportsmanlike conduct of Croatian fans, most of the headlines stating that the organisation of the event was satisfactory with no incidents at the stadium.

Concluding remarks

Broadly speaking, it could be argued that the match between Croatia and Serbia cast a light on the current relations between the two countries. The media discourse observed the importance of the match beyond any doubt to be greater than the game itself, but at the same time acknowledged through the statement of public figures that it was a game that decided the qualifications for the World Cup. The focus on the firm control measures, the Prime Minister’s as well as the other actor’s role in preventing any incidents indicate that the main goal was to send a message attesting to Croatia’s eligibility for the membership in the “European family of nations” on grounds of its civilised and cultural standards. Discourses about the normalisation of the relations between Croatia and Serbia, in this sense function as an external pressure entailing the commitment to “civil conduct” on the part of the imminent EU Member State, but also a confirmation of another important element of the Croatian national myth about the “civilised, Central European nation” that is away from the Balkans and violence related to this symbolic topos (Jansen 2001, Živković 2001). A similar narrative exists in Serbia. The insistence on the normalisation of the relations is complementary to the proclaimed aims at “Euro integrations” and the intention is to show that the Balkans (that Serbia, unlike Croatia, belongs) isn’t any more a “barrel of gunpowder”, but a legitimate member of “Europe” whose values it accepts and shares.

Interestingly, the prevailing mechanism in these narratives is the strategy of self-explanatory silence. (Đerić 2008) A detailed analysis of the media texts shows the avoidance of mentioning the war and the past, and if they are addressed they are put in the bygone times. The citation such as “In the future when we talk of their era, this match with Serbia will merit a separate chapter. It is a simple fact, and the players are very aware of it. They don’t live in Denmark or Bahamas” (SN 22 March 2013)

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10 It would have certainly been different had Serbian fans been openly present.
conveys a determinate knowledge that needs no definition as it is commonly shared. Similarly, the Croatian team’s coach Štimac points “This match will mark me and my players. It is a different story now, we will forever be remembered for defeating Serbia, that’s the difference (the Jutarnji list, 19 March.2013.), likewise not finding it necessary to account for the historic importance of this match. This shared knowledge operates within the internal cultural context in which there is no need to discuss the self-explanatory categories. This kind of “cultural intimacy” is not limited to the imagined community of “Croathood”, it is shared with the “old foe”, Serbs, who have the access to the understanding of the reasons why this match is “more than a game”. Within the frame of the shared knowledge the both sides’ nationalist narratives together with mutual tolerance and support for the EU integrations that presuppose good neighbourly relations, are confirmed by not explicating that “that we don’t love each other and we know too well why”.

Another possible conclusion is that this type of nationalistic narrative at this point, twenty years after the war, still has certain influence and is still capable of mobilizing the “national spirit” to some extent. However, fieldwork in Zagreb and particularly on the stadium, clearly indicates that mobilization of this kind has very limited effect, ending in the ritual sphere, while the problems, like the situation in the Football Association, are far more important. In fact, football games like this one could help people to feel short-term joy escaping to national euphoria, but most of them, in Belgrade or Zagreb, will go to the green market tomorrow, trying to find a way to afford a decent meal. Croatian (within or without EU) and Serbian reality is, at this point, a dark semi-periphery of a deeply divided Europe in crisis. Indeed, except when Serbia and Croatia play against each other, no one watches football anymore.

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