

Social and political implications of football fandom in Post-Socialist Poland, Serbia and Croatia

Jakub Stepaniuk¹

Abstract

This article draws attention to the issue of social politicisation of the football fandom following empirical comparative study between Poland and counties of the former Yugoslavia, focusing primarily on Serbia and Croatia. The analysis introduces the aspect of historical legacy in the light of interconnectedness of football fans with anti-communist social movements including Polish Solidarity and (anti)-Yugoslav nationalism. In the subsequent segments, it elaborates the contemporary landscape of football fandoms by analysing some of the key conundrums. What are the reasons for hate and violence on football stadiums? Are all football communities necessarily (far)-right? What is their relationship with currently ruling elites?

Introduction

Football fans constitute an indispensable part of social landscapes in Poland and the countries of what was once Yugoslavia. Any visitor to the region will be aware of their presence in the urban space. Either in the use of widespread graffiti glorifying particular clubs or calls for eradication of the perennial opponents embedded with nationalistic, historical and politicised undertones. Football fans' activities are as variegated as politically and socially diversified, truly reflecting this particular environment. For some, they are just a rabble of violent hooligans embodying xenophobic and far-right radicalism. For others, football fans are just local patriots, directing the same level of affection towards their clubs, cities, geographical regions or even nations wholly. The present paper intends to confront some of the most hackneyed stereotypes and generalisations regarding the environments of football fans. The main reason for focusing on Poland and former Yugoslavia in particular stems from the academic knowledge available of the socio-political context of these areas as well as the interesting comparative potential regarding the post-communist past, nationalism and identity.

¹ Jakub Stepaniuk is a young researcher, student and social activist. After graduating from the University College London in summer 2021 where he studied Social Sciences of the Eastern Europe, he started his master studies in Law and Politics of the Southeast Europe at the Karl-Franzens- Universität in Graz. So far, he has lived, worked and studied in Poland, England, Serbia, Kazakhstan, Turkey and Austria. Jakub is a huge enthusiast of foreign languages, studies of identity, nationalisms, regional geopolitics and human rights.

Historical anti-communism and nationalism

The emergence of a massive football fandom in Poland between 1970 and 1980 coincided not only with the greatest successes of the Polish national team in the World Cup and Summer Olympics, but also with the establishment of renowned trade union *Solidarność* (Solidarity). On the one hand, football stadiums served as a great platform for chanting numerous anti-governmental slogans such as “once a sickle, once a hammer into a red rabble” or “on the trees, instead of leaves, communists will be hanging” (Benkowska, 2017). On the other hand, repetitive brawls between the fans of opposite, antagonistic clubs very often turned into struggles with governmental security services. In the memoirs published by a journalist Karol Gac or a priest Jarosław Wąsowicz one can read that the most politically engaged football club in the oppositionist activity was Lechia from Gdańsk, a city in northern Poland that experienced bloody massacres of workers in 1970 and where later in 1980 Solidarity was formed. During every football match fans organised the so-called “five minutes for politics” when all anti-communist expressions were preached, either verbally or written on banners (Gac, 2020). One of the most remembered matches took place when Lechia hosted the Italian *Juventus* during an international competition in 1983. The leader of Solidarity, Lech Wałęsa, who appeared on the stadium, was quickly noticed by foreign media and other fans who started chanting his surname and other pro-Solidarity slogans, the events that led to disturbed broadcasting of the match by the state national television (Wąsowicz, 2006). Additionally, many activists of the Solidarity movement who at the time were devoted supporters of Lechia later became significant politicians, including former President of the European Council Donald Tusk or current head of Polish State Television Jacek Kurski. In the subsequent years, Lechia’s experiences and Solidarity’s messages started to circulate around other Polish football fandoms.

The situation regarding the activity of football fans was slightly different in socialist Yugoslavia. Football stadiums became the area of demonstration of local national identities and political support for the new generation of politicians including Slobodan Milošević or Franjo Tuđman who established the pillars of the post-Titoist nationalism that contributed to the disintegration process of Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that football had always been the expression of nationalist and separatist movements even before the Tito’s death can be exemplified with such events as the Croatian Spring from 1971 (Tsai, 2021) or Kosovar unrests from 1968. When discussing the influence of football on socio-political life of Yugoslavia many would pinpoint the match from Spring 1990 between Dinamo Zagreb and Crvena Zvezda Belgrade, defined by some scholars as the official beginning of the civil war. The act of one Dinamo player, Zvonimir Boban, who kicked a Yugoslav policeman that intended to beat a Dinamo fan, turned into a huge symbol within Croatian national separatism, besides converting Yugoslav security services into Milošević’s political tool to transform Yugoslavia into Greater Serbia (Freiermuth, 2010). In the following years, many of the fans of Dinamo Zagreb or Hajduk Split formed in two groups namely, Bad Blue Boys and Torcida respectively joined the forces of the voluntary Croatian army. Similarly, the leader of Crvena Zvezda’s fans grouped in Delije and led by Željko Ražnatović Arkan, established well-known Serbian militias known as “Arkan’s Tigers”, accused of committing crimes against humanity in Croatia and Bosnia (Mueller, 2000).

Reasons for being radical in the 21st century

After the fall of communism and the end of Yugoslav wars, both being the key drivers for establishment of extreme football environments, many would wonder the reasons for football fans' radicalisation as in the 1970-80 periods. Some sociologists would mention the following phenomena. Firstly, many governments from the 2007-2016 period including the Polish Civic Platform, Social Democratic Party of Croatia or Serbian Democratic Party are responsible for the so-called crisis of community and fall of the social trust to authorities evoked by neoliberal and clientelist economic reforms (Zagórski & Santana, 2021). Absence of a valid post-communist lustration allowed political opponents to accuse liberal politicians of having deep connections with the communists, thus, as understood in plain language, they represented the anti-national communism. Secondly, liberals were also held responsible for neglecting the national sphere of education, especially with a definition of national identity that led to the emergence of an identity crisis. This oversight was similarly intercepted by the conservative opposition and then instrumentalised for building electoral support. Other factors would also include a general disappointment stemming from an awaited sense of belonging to the EU or the imagined "West", seen in massive migrations from Poland, economic stagnation in Croatia or the continuous dream of Serbian integration with the EU. Hence, football environments welcomed a fertile ground for recruiting new members feeling discriminated against by the liberal economic system that seeks collective recognition in a community representing an explicit identity and a strong internal cohesion.

Nationalism, far-right, xenophobia and their limitations

Some political analysts would classify extreme nationalists, neo-fascists and football fans under the same ideological category. A common social portrayal of people attending football stadiums nowadays is quite consistent. The perception of an ordinary football fan in the former Yugoslavia or Poland is a person harbouring nationalistic, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-communist, anti-LGBT beliefs well integrated in a strict hierarchy underpinned by violent masculinity and religious values (Bobrowicz & Nowak, 2021). Speaking empirically, there are plenty of examples easily available thanks to their exposure within the media. Groups of organised fans between football clubs in Poland insult each other with direct references to the Jews and the Holocaust (Image 1). Graffitis adorning presumably every Polish city portray a radical interpretation of history emphasised by the fact that football fans are the most faithful and devoted patriots to the "truth". Celebrations of Croatian football successes during the 2018 World Cup in Russia were constantly intertwined with slogans referring to Second World War Croatian fascist movement Ustaša, articulated by nationalist singer Marko Perković "Thompson" (Vladislavljevic, 2018). In Serbia, football fans representing Crvena Zvezda's Delije, Partizan's Grobari or Vojvodina's Firma conduct many demonstrations during national and international matches claiming 1999 NATO's air strikes barbarism and calling Kosovo as part of the "heart of Serbia". In countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina or Northern Macedonia, football fandoms are essential in expressing ethnic

divisions and separatism as in the case of Croatian Zrinjski from Mostar or Albanian Shkëndija from Tetovo.²



Image 1. Graffiti Stating, "Best away match of Cracovia: a tour to Auschwitz"³

Are all the fans from the region purely nationalistic then? Despite examples, there are some exceptions to this rule. Firstly, there are some minor clubs whose fans would openly admit to represent socialist, egalitarian, anti-homophobic or anti-fascist ideology including Croatian NK Zagreb and RNK Split, Bosnian Velež Mostar or a former part of Polonia Warsaw fans affiliated with local Antifa (Jurković, 2018). Secondly, anti-Semitic or racist slogans directed at players and fans of other teams are quickly jettisoned when such players with a potentially “daring” origin join their own clubs. Examples of the aforementioned trend are, for example, the fans of Hajduk Split, who in 2005 displayed a racist banner aimed at Dinamo Zagreb’s Black players including Chago, Etto and Da Silva as belonging to the “Dinamo Zoo”, later celebrated the successes of their own Black stars (Lisec, 2015). Fans of Wisła Kraków who are the authors of the anti-Semitic graffiti from Image 1 mocking their greatest rivals later celebrated goals scored by one of their most notable stars, Maor Melikson, coming originally from Israel (Bratkowski, 2011). It is still unclear who the author of recent graffiti in Łódź is but in reaction to waves of anti-Semitic inscriptions between fans of local Widzew and ŁKS the new ones banteringly resemble a quarrel between toddlers⁴ (Burska, 2019). Finally, as demonstrated in the research conducted by Dražen Lalić, many

² Shkëndija fans from a match against Milan with a banner "This land has been always a component of Great Albania" Intv Albania, 18.08.2017, Milan-Shkëndija, "Ballistët" arrijnë në "San Siro", <https://www.intv.al/milan-shkendija-ballistet-arrijne-ne-san-siro-34768>

³ TPI, Dziennik, 04.03.2009, Raport FARE: Polska symbolem piłkarskiego antysemityzmu, Taken by Photographer LK for unofficial fan page of Cracovia Fans http://terazpasy.pl/Publicystyka/artykuly_prasowe/raport_fare_polska_symbolem_piłkarskiego_antysemityzmu

⁴ Graffiti Stating, "ŁKS thinks that "in vitro" is a name of pizzeria", Mariusz Bielski, 16.09.2020, ŁKS myśli, że in vitro to pizzeria, a Widzew, że Żabka to zoologiczny. Derby na łódzkich murach,

football fans actually support economic egalitarian reforms and oppose the richest class of local oligarchs and international banks, therefore not putting them straightforward on the alleged right-wing ideology (Lalić, 2015).

Violence and football fandom

Presumably, one of the most negative effects impairing the image of football fandom concerns the common use of violence. That assertion refers to two various points. The first one is organised by the hooligan groups in a form of earlier settled setups for a given equal number of participants from two rival clubs in a specific place and time. Sometimes these events occur in public spaces such as highways or parks which can turn out as a life threat to other people. The second type regards the uncontrolled use of violence which often transcends any affiliation with the original football club and is demonstrated, for instance, with such events as direct assaults on equality parades as the one in 2010 in Belgrade or in 2019 in Białystok. The other facet of public violence refers to mock lynchings effectuated with symbolic demonstrations during matches. They might range from mild examples such as the banner of Lechia Gdańsk fans denouncing the affiliation of Donald Tusk with their club up to more radical ones, including the Legia Warsaw fans' hanging on gallows of the two liberal journalists Monika Olejnik and Tomasz Lis or the public stabbing of a sex doll by the fans of Partizan Belgrade in 2009 representing Brankica Stanković⁵, a B92 journalist who published a series of reports showing evidences of connections between football fans and organised crime groups (Rusovac, 2010).

Politicisation of football fans and their relations with current governments

It is interesting to see a dramatic shift of relations between football fans and their governments after conservative parties assumed power in post-2015 Poland, Croatia and Serbia. Even though academic sources connected to this topic are insufficient or non-existent, there are plenty of investigative reports claiming an allegedly deep cooperation between Aleksandar Vučić and football hooligan groups. According to KRIK's journalist, Vesna Radojević, one of the events where such cooperation was utilised for political means was the dispelling of 2020 protests where Partizan Belgrade fans' group Janjičari attacked police forces that led to the arrest of many peaceful protesters where media reported oppositionist demonstrations as aggressive and dangerous (Radojević, 2020). Moreover, the ongoing scandal around the criminal organisation responsible for numerous assassinations and drug smuggling led by Veljko Belivuk demonstrates a series of connections between Partizan fans and governmental environment (Higgins, 2021).

In recent years, the current governing party in Poland, Law and Justice, notoriously attempted to get support from football fans on the basis of their numerous antagonisms with previous liberal governments. A very interesting phenomenon emerged on the wave of anti-abortionist protests in

<http://www.2x45.info/aktualnosci/64162/lks-mysli-ze-in-vitro-to-pizzeria-a-widzew-ze-zabka-to-zoologiczny-derby-na-lodzkich-murach/>

⁵ Partizan fans with a sex doll imitating Stanković and a canvas of Car Dušan, medieval ruler of Serbia, Javni Servis.net, 24.07.2020, <https://javniservis.net/dnevnik/vujosevic-i-huligani-upotreba-tolerancija-i-osuda/>

autumn 2020 in Poland that divided football environments. After Kaczyński's appeal towards football fans to defend churches from radical left, some of the fans established paramilitary divisions patrolling key cathedrals throughout the whole country whereas the others joined women strikes calling for anti-governmental actions evinced with such radical events as an assault by Arka Gdynia fans on regional Law and Justice offices. Interestingly enough, such a cooperation on the security scale between football fans and church institutions is also present in Kosovo where vulnerable Orthodox monasteries are protected from organised football militias.

Conclusion

The present paper outlined empirical implications of anti-statism and nationalism represented by football fandom in Poland and former Yugoslavia on social and political life. To sum up, there are three key conclusions to take from this analysis. Firstly, historical and nationalistic undertones of these environments, scopes of violence or use of public lynchings are highly complementary when it comes to Polish and ex-Yugoslav contexts. Secondly, despite the vocal minority of football fans arouse many connotations between football environments and far-right radicalisms, there are some limitations and exceptions to this rule. Thirdly, the governments of the analysed countries attempted to utilise the anti-liberal sentiments of football fans by seeking to get their political support which turned out only as partially successful as the Polish case demonstrated.

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