The politics of visiting supporters’ exclusion from 2013 football matches between Croatia and Serbia

Goran Pavel Šantek
Tibor Komar
University of Zagreb
Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

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(WORKING PAPER)

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1. Introduction

In this presentation/paper we will introduce an anthropological analysis of football matches between Croatia and Serbia played as part of FIFA 2014 World Cup Qualifiers. We regarded these games as an interesting object of research not only for the long time rivalry between the two nations but also to see if things have moved on almost 20 years after the end of war. Another idea was to see in which manner will the media present these events - as opposed to „real“ feeling of being there at the spot. In cooperation with our colleagues from Serbia we agreed to exchange visits to games so we can get a sort of an outsider/insider perspective regarding both games. The one thing that actually inspired the subject of this paper happened just few weeks before the first game was to be played – the two FAs reached an agreement that there will be no visiting supporters allowed at either of these games and this decision was based on “a fact that both games are considered as high-risk and the banning the visitors to come is the best possible mean of prevention”. Naturally, this decision has put our initial idea of research in peril and raised even more questions. As for the competition meaning of these games, in March 2013 both countries had still considerable chances to qualify for the 2014 World Cup. As other contenders in the group - Scotland, Wales and Macedonia have already mainly lost all chances to qualify, the fight for the top two spots was left to Belgium, Croatia and Serbia. We considered this detail important in the context of our research as we initially supposed that the atmosphere around the games would be significantly different if the games had no real sporting importance. However, events developing the way they did gave us a wider area to pay attention to.
2. Theories and concepts

2.1 Popular culture

If modernity is an era marked strongly with popular culture, as discussed in many social studies (Nachbar), then sport is one of the most prominent aspects of popular culture (Boyle). We will primarily talk here about football that like "no other form of popular culture engenders [...] huge and participatory passion among its devotees" (Giulianotti 1999). The studies have already been carried out about importance of football for popular culture of Croatia and Serbia (Brentin 2013). We have to acknowledge that, as Vrcan (cf. 2003) explains, today the so-called "national spirit" (Volksgeist) is shaped and reflected largely through football and football scene. In addition to that, sometimes the football, as a form of a folk culture, performs also as a social system of early warning that announces the advent of turmoil which is prepared somewhere in the depths of social being, behind the scenes of official society and culture. We can also consider football as a live generator and liquid bonding material of certain social identities that bring the fullness of life and consistency to institutional arrangements and ideological formations. Put simply, the football translates them from the social-systemic and structural facts to the facts of everyday life (Vrcan 2003). As an important element of popular culture and the world’s most popular sport football is omnipresent in Croatian and Serbian society. Media representations of football events (not just the important ones) are significant and they only reflect the status of the game in everyday discourse, especially among the male part of the population. The popularity of the game and the number of improvised and real football fields have enabled considerably more of playing, watching and enjoying football. Daily presence and vicinity of the game have created bonds with the team from the street, neighborhood, school, company, city, region or nation, and in today's post-modern times even with a team from another city, region, state and even nation (examples are contemporary popularity of Barcelona and the Brazilian national team in South Eastern Europe). Anyhow, football is an important identity framework for a part of population and clubs are important symbols of a city or a region. It is just in terms of identity importance, symbolic potential and thus a means of distinction from the others where we can find one of the basic reasons for the popularity of football.
2.2 Football has the potential to explain some fundamentals about culture and society in these two countries

If we consider culture and society two twin ideas it is impossible to analyze one without the other. Given that the society is determined by culture and vice versa, it is obvious that we can extract many notions about researched society by analyzing different aspects of sport as a strongly present cultural phenomenon. Bateson speaks (cf. 1972) of football giving us a kind of a cultural map which enhances our understanding of a society while Giulianotti (cf. 1999) observes the same in the case of culture: "the game's valued characteristics tells us something fundamental about the cultures in which it is performed". The research potential of football in understanding the Croatian and Serbian society has already been exposed in a number of sociological studies in course of a last decade, here we can name only a few of the recent ones that discuss the ties between football, politics and society (Đorđević 2009, Brentin 2013, Sindbaek 2013).

2.3 Football has great symbolic and identity related significance for Croats and Serbs

From the mid-19th century sport and nation are almost inseparable. Modern sport has actually emerged from the wave of Western "invented traditions" that can be very closely linked with the process of national identity at the time of the creation of nation-states (Habsbawn 1993.) A large amount of scientific literature in various disciplines confirms that the relationship between sport and nation is a very lively two-way street - sport helps shape national identity and on the other hand, national cultures played the part in shaping today's sport. This area of research is actually a very complex bundle of layers, each of which can be explored as a special phenomenon – politics, identity, popular culture, media, economy and neoliberal capitalism are all simultaneously and inextricably linked to the concept of sport. On the other hand, a characteristic of every man (in varying degrees) is to compete and play, usually through organized sporting activities by social or
governmental institutions, which all have very distinctive characteristics of a community, and except recreational, have the function of confirming identity. Slavko Kulić says that "...sport is the most authentic expression of an identity because it is based on a natural, anthropological power which is, besides health and freedom – elementary human quality". In the Croatian scientific space not much work has been devoted to ethnological/anthropological studies of sport. Some anthropological studies of sport emphasized the most ubiquitous nature of sport and the idea that sport is actually culturally conditioned category along with material objects, customs and ideologies transmitted through the imagined cultural boundaries (Sands, 1999). Moreover, sport has always been a very convenient framework for strengthening national mythology as shown in the examples of many other countries. Football, as the world's most popular sport, excels in this area and distinctly shows identification force and symbolic significance at the national level, especially in the events involving the senior national team of their own country (for example, World Cup or European Championship Qualification in football). It should be noted that the establishment of football and its expansion through the world occurred at the time of the creation of nation-states (the late 19th and early 20th century), so the beginning of a modern football gives the possibility to serve as a symbolic medium of identity of the new nation that just craves for such phenomena. Modern roots that connect nation and football are quite firm and their manifestation in cases of Croatia and Serbia is close to observations in countries of similar political situation (the creation of new nations, or the destruction of the existing). Football thus suits perfectly a need of a new nation to unite different people in an "imagined community" (Anderson 1990). The importance of football for Croatia may be in the fact that the nation in formation in the 1990s needed the symbols of identity, the notion that links people and creates a sense of unity. And just as the symbols of Croatian identity were being created, its national football team started achieving good results, peaking at third place in the World Cup of 1998 which produced a national euphoria and celebrations in the streets and squares across the country. The beautiful game accompanied with plenty of good results became an important part of the collective and state symbolism. This is probably due to the fact that the process of national creation and the rise of the national team became intertwined along the way. But if this is the case and if the national team is considered important in Croatia as well as in Serbia (in both countries the cult of the national team has been gradually built or at least it tried), this opens up the question: if a country can be in a premodern, modern and postmodern stage of football (cf. Giulianotti 1999), where are then Croatia and Serbia? Are they modern societies, because at that time the nation is very important, and so are the
rivalries between them, or do they belong to societies that are aspiring to be postmodern (if postmodern societies can exist in the world still made up of nation-states?). What does all of this tells about Croatia and Serbia? In any case, we can conclude by quoting Giulianotti (1999): "Football's cultural centrality in most societies means that football carries a heavy political and symbolic significance, to the extent that the game can contribute fundamentally to the social actions, practical philosophies and cultural identities of many, many people".

2.4 Considering all things said it has to be noted that specific interest for all Croatia-Serbia matches stems from their syntactic importance (cf. Giulianotti 1999). Namely, one of the reasons for football’s social importance is that it enables strong differentiation of Us vs. Others. As two teams represent various cultural, social, geographical and other identities, every match has the potential to become culturally strongest expression of existent social oppositions. This is notably visible in a case like this where opposing teams’ states were (formally or informally) in a state of war twenty years ago. It has been emphasized from the beginning of the social studies of sport (cf. Heinilä 1966) that the strongest feelings about their own and other groups are created mainly in team sports competitions. The existing ethno-nationalistic tensions are easily expressed through matches and teams that, on the other hand, establish their own cultural identities through rivalry and opposition (cf. Giulianotti 1999). To what extent these findings can be applied to study games played between Croatia and Serbia can be seen as well through existing notions that the beginning of the war in former Yugoslavia has started by big fan riots in Zagreb on May 13 1990 at the never completed match between Croatian club Dinamo Zagreb and Serbian club Red Star Belgrade (Lalic and Biti 2008). Also, the creation of national myths is an area of research that should not be neglected. As Bairner elaborates, when we are confronted by myths about national sporting traditions, it is important that we recognize that the myths are not bad simply by virtue of their being myths. Naturally, it is up to us to examine the precise ways in which these myths are used and with what ramifications.

2.5 The role of supporters in football – changes
It is necessary to mention that the paper will further discuss the position of fans in modern football and the official attitude towards the fans at matches played in Zagreb and Belgrade. Here the question will be asked to what extent the supporters in these two countries are of the "constitutional nationalism" type (cf. Giulianotti 1999) - they support the country only when the results are good, or are they "hard core" (ibid.) supporters who are committed to rooting for the national team no matter what. We will be also interested in the relationship of national team fans towards their other "football" identities. For example, those who mostly identify with their local club, which is a potentially complex relationship, we can occasionally find involved in internal fan disputes based on support for different domestic clubs. Anyhow, the authors' view is that the behavior of fans, as well as behavior towards fans, says a lot about society, and points to changes it is going through (Taylor 1971).

3. Methodology

The main research method used was classical ethnographic technique of participant observation and the focal point of the research were matches between Croatia and Serbia played on March 22 2013 in Zagreb, and on June 9 2013 in Belgrade. The authors attended both matches accompanied by colleagues Bojan Žikić from the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology, University of Belgrade and Ivan Đorđević from the Ethnographic Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. The acts of our presence at the matches, an unavoidable interaction with the audience, commenting on the events, raising bags in colors provided by organizers etc., made the aspect of participation prevail over the one that made us merely detached observers. But this part of the research also carried some issues that will be presented later. As an addition to participant observation informal conversations, interviews and open discourse analysis of the media were carried out.

4. Researching the games

4.1 Croatia – Serbia 2:0, Maksimir Stadium, Zagreb, Croatia, March 22 2013, 18h, attendance 35,722 (full capacity of stadium)

During initial preparations the desire to anthropologically research football games as significant contemporary cultural phenomena was gradually directed towards researching
football supporters and their status in today's sport. Namely, the idea was to start an experimental anthropological field study of two football games in conjunction with fellow researchers from Belgrade. This participant observation study, in this form, had a goal to use polivocality, to expand and enrich the research position by multiplying views to the subject - the view from within our own community is probably most complete but at the same time self-limiting. It was agreed that the Belgrade colleagues Bojan Žikić and Ivan Đorđević would come to Zagreb game and the authors of this paper would reciprocate six months later. Problems have emerged due to the inclusion of researching Others - if we consider football games as meetings between Us and the Others. Specifically, by decisions of Croatian Football Association (HNS) and Serbian Football Association (FSS), it was decided that visiting supporters will be denied access to each other's matches in the qualification rounds of the 2014 World Cup in Brasil. This decision is anthropologically significant because it shows the real order behind the imaginary one, the reality behind the imaginary situation. In spite of cordial messages sent from two FA delegations after meeting the Croatian president before the game in Zagreb and Serbian president on the eve of the match in Belgrade, in spite of declarative showing of great mutual respect at the highest level, in spite of the words of FSS president Tomislav Karadžić that relations of the two football associations could easily be a role model for other spheres of social life and help build better relationships (cf. HRT, March 22, 2013) - "the two FA’s have agreed that during both matches there will be no visiting supporters, and if an intruder appears in Maksimir, security guards will be ready to react" (Dasović 2013). The difficulty that arose immediately after that decision, and we didn’t know how the organizers planned to resolve it at the time, was how to define or identify the “visiting” supporter. In the modern world of multiple identities and country borders that do not coincide with the boundaries of ethnic or any other borders, the interpretation of the organizers that "the right of purchasing tickets will only have citizens of the Republic of Croatia by leaving personal data" (Dasović 2013) meant little given the fact that there exists a significant minority of Croats in Serbia and vice versa. At the same time, showing its elitist side, FA’s did not consistently denied access to “all” visiting supporters. Access to both matches was easily granted to 150 "officials" of the visiting football association, although Croatian FA, for example, has less than 30 employees altogether. In Croatia, ticket purchasing was organized via Internet and in 24 stores of TISAKmedia center, limiting one person to buying up to 4 tickets. The buyer would be identified by personal ID, and if he planned to buy more than one ticket he had to register all of visitor’s names and identification documents numbers (ID cards or passport). As the demand for
tickets in Croatia was exceptional – they were sold in less than 13 hours (see Index: 2013) - in reality only a third (12,000) were available to general public so for ordinary citizens it was almost impossible to buy them. We attended the game only due to the kind response of the Croatian Football Federation (especially Secretary-General Vladimir Iveta and the Tickets Office) to our letter, which made possible for us to buy the tickets for us and even for our colleagues from Belgrade. How serious was the Croatian police approach to carrying out the “no visiting supporters” decision was revealed immediately after Serbian researchers registered at their Zagreb hotel. Hotels, inns and other rental places were instructed by police to immediately inform them if someone from Serbia registers at their reception. The author of this paper was contacted within an hour of Belgrade colleagues’ arrival to hotel and was kindly asked to account the purpose of their visit. After explaining that they indeed have come to attend the game (for scientific research purposes) and already held tickets to their names, sending relevant documentation to police by email was their last request. After that, we and our friends from Serbia were even offered the official police escort to the game which we all kindly declined. Next evening, game day, the four of us had no problems entering the stadium as entrance control checked only for tickets and standard search for unauthorized items.

Due to space limitations in this paper the focus will be put on supporters’ behavior and expression, narrowed to things related only to our own and the opponent’s team. Beginning with the visual expressions it should be noted that the oddity of this match was in a fact that, with aforementioned exceptions, it was the lack of visiting team supporters that made the usual scenery of football matches incomplete in a way. The only ones present, Croatian supporters, expressed their affiliation by wearing Croatian distinctive red/white squared dress shirts, cloaking the Croatian flags, scarves, hats and other outfits with national characteristics, and a lot less with face painting. Banners often expressed local origin, sometimes even the local club's own supporters' group. One of the dominant banners was labeled Vukovar, the name of Croatian city that was practically annihilated by Yugoslav/Serbian Army in 1991 during the Croatian struggle for independence. Political messages were more or less reduced to a photo of Ante Gotovina, the Croatian general and one of the iconic figures of the War of Independence, who was initially sentenced to a long prison time at The Hague International Court for his role in the war, but acquitted later in 2012. Not many messages related directly to Serbia were observed at the stadium. Most notable verbal expressions were those of whistling to Serbian anthem and applauding to
Croatian, loud chanting of “Vukovar” and the inappropriate shouts and songs – from the “light” version of, loosely translated as "He who doesn’t jump must be an Easter Orthodox" to a true expression of verbal aggression "Kill the Serb". No matter how ugly it may sound, this kind of expression has unfortunately became a standard among many supporter groups in Croatia, especially at the club matches of regional level where it is common to hear sport fans from Zagreb shouting "Kill the Donkey", a derogatory name for people from coastal Dalmatia, and to hear in Split "Kill the Purger" as a derogatory name for people from Zagreb. Near the end of the game while the score was already 2:0, the Croatian supporters even found time for irony and chanted to Serbian Manager Mihajlović (who was born in Vukovar) that he must be an Ustasha, a member of the Quisling government army in Croatia during the World War II. The only observed sort of physical violence during the match was burning a torch on the eastern stand, which a security guard threw away awkwardly thereby igniting one of the fans’ banner. The conclusion may be that if football fans demonstrate the power of national identification in one country, then the Croats and Croatian fans in general can be considered to have a fairly developed sense of national identification and nation (cf. Giulianotti 1999).

4.2 Serbia-Croatia 1:1, Red Star Belgrade Stadium, Serbia, September 6, 2013, 20.45h, attendance 30.000 (53.000 full capacity)

(Detailed analysis of this game will be given at the conference)

5. Discussion

Some of the questions we will try to answer in our paper are: What status do fans have in contemporary football? Do FAs care about supporter’s citizen rights, should they care and what are they allowed to do? How can actions like this influence fan identity, self-perception and the perception of others? What is institution’s (FAs, police, governments) real perception of supporters? Is the prevention of coming of visiting supporters an outdated idea? What does that tell us about this two FAs? And what does that tell us about
the functioning of FAs in financially integrated world?

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