
Civility, Locality and Loyalty: Football and Croatian Identity in Bosnia-Herzegovina¹

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In what follows the trilogy of People, Place, and Performance in the contemporary post-conflict milieu of Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) is considered. The nation of BiH began in the mid-1990s arising out of the ruins of the Yugoslav War (1991-95). The conflict officially ended with the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) of November 1995. The DPA divided a specific region of the former Yugoslavia (BiH) into two Entities; the Serb Republika Srpska — where Orthodox Serbs constitute the majority of the population — and the BiH Federation — an uneasy co-existence of 10 cantons, three of them with a clear Croat majority, five with a Bosniak (Muslim Bosnians) majority, and two ethnically mixed. Political power is concentrated at this level, each group is — ideally — governed by their own ethnicity. Sports play a major socio-political role in post-conflict BiH. The specific case analysed here is the link between the practice of football to political identity processes and to how they develop in a given urban context; specifically, an urban context that in itself is a symbol of national and ethnic identity. Central to the ethnographic narrative that follows is a group of football fans who support a club founded in 1948 named NK Široki Brijeg Nogometni klub (SBNK)² that represents the 29,000 strong Herzegovinian-Croat town of Široki Brijeg (Wide Hills; SB) which is the cultural and administrative headquarters of the Western-Herzegovina Canton. The football club acts as a vehicle for and offers narratives around Croatian ethno-political nationalism. The club and its fans are the most publicly articulate citizens of a town long considered a bulwark of a national identity; some 99% of its citizens claim Croat-Catholic citizenship. An emic narrative informs this analysis which examines that we might best term the ‘Croat Question’ in post-conflict BiH. Issues of Croat-perceived injustice, discrimination, and political autonomy dominate the political narratives of contemporary Herzegovinian-Croat identity. How this came to be is presented and how such a situation is sustained and considered. The notion of cultural and social borders and the trust that may be placed in football for state formation are issues integral to the analysis.

Keywords: Post-Conflict, politics, urbanity, Široki Brijeg, football.

The Dividends of Peace

The fall of East European Communism in the late 1980s early 1990s brought new state formations and political challenges. Within a year of the Communist regime that had sustained it for some 45 years collapsing Yugoslavia descended into civil war. Four years of conflict followed before Bosnia-Herzegovina (henceforth, BiH) was established as an independent political entity. This new entity not only faced economic challenges with the passage from socialism to capitalism but had also to face the further challenge of developing a democracy that went beyond the historical ethnic divides of the region and embraced a common sense of citizenship (see contributions in Pardo and Prato eds 2011). Today BiH is sustained by a complex state system based on power-sharing between the country’s three constituent people: Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats (on power-sharing, see, e.g., Weingrod 2011). In this arrangement there are *de facto* three separate armies, police forces, postal services and a national government defined by an eight monthly rotating Presidential council. Such a political structure attempts to provide for stability and equality. Despite its best intentions, the Dayton Peace Agreement (henceforth, DPA) inadvertently reinforced a sense of ethno-nationalism and clan loyalties with

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² *Nogometni klub* stands for Football Club.

citizens persisting, then and now, to define their co-national neighbour of different ethnicities as ‘others’ and in some cases enemies.

The citizens of Široki Brijeg (henceforth, SB) did not receive the post-conflict political solution they sought and have lived with resentment ever since. Most hoped that in the immediate post-war years the town would be annexed within the borders of neighbouring Croatia. Others agitated for an Independent Croatia-Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia (HRHB) wherein either the town of SB or the city of Mostar some 30 km away would be the capital. A minority wanted to remain inside the borders of BiH but in their own Croat political entity in areas where Croats were the majority. There was no pleasing everyone. In the 25 years of existence since the DPA, citizens of SB have articulated their resentments but also got on with their lives. Some have prospered and some have accommodated. Such that by 2019 the scale of desire for political change had altered; most would prefer to remain in BiH but under their own political entity. Such a solution seemed more feasible through international agreements (Grbavac 2015). Few of the constituent people of BiH consider the political system they live under effective in providing for any sense of ethnic-related equality. How the DPA might be revised to produce ethno-political stability and governmental efficiency remains a big question amongst many others.

Questions and Debates

In newly formed post-Yugoslav states civil rights, political structures, and school curriculums are still negotiated in multi-ethnic regions (Sedmak 2011). What is known as the Croat Question defines this analysis. Simplified, a debate has been smouldering for decades in BiH as to whether BiH Croats have been short-changed of power as both of the country’s two governmental entities is dominated by Serbs or Bosniaks (KAS 2014). Being the smallest of the three principal ethnic groups, Croats are out-voted in parliament and at Federation level. A further sense of Croat injustice occurs when Croat Children who attend school in Eastern or Central BiH are forced to study the curriculum of the dominant majority — usually Bosniak — and in their language (Lanhan 2016). In response Bosniak nationalists argue that the Croats have sufficient representation in parliament for a Croat demographic of about 550,000 (BHAS 2013). Serbs do not see the Croat Question as their problem but are willing to form party coalition with Croat politicians to obstruct what they both commonly refer to as Bosnian-Muslim political hegemony. Amongst the major concern for Croats is that they believe they are being — subtlety — assimilated into Bosniak culture. They thus seek to have their voice heard — literally. The DPA guaranteed freedom of the press and political expression but critics argue that this right is not always respected (CPJ 1997). Whilst the Western-Herzegovina canton has their own tabloids and media, Croats who live there feel they are left without a state media outlet unlike Serbs and Bosniaks. Not allowed their own language state-owned TV station, Bosnian-Herzegovinian Croats consider this as an attempt to eliminate the Croatian language (Hromadžić 2015).³

³ A privately-run TV station named Radiotelevision of Herzeg-Bosnia was launched in July 2019. This is a newly established Croat-language TV station in Bosnia-Herzegovina, funded also with money from

The Croat Question therefore causes endless debates about governmental (il)legitimacy and provides for a concomitant sense of grievance (Pardo and Prato 2019, Pardo 2000). Political status is thus not just ‘political’ but is linked to notions of both sustenance and existence. This produces rhetoric around simple solutions from those Croats who consider political autonomy as the only way to boost their economy and reduce unemployment. The issue also has repercussions for debates around football. Incidents of both crowd disorder and disputed penalty kicks are mediated primarily via the voice of a Bosniak dominated sport media and in the eyes of the SB citizens Bosniak (and Serbian) opinions prevail over that of the Croats. Vehemence towards such grievances has gradations; some are more Croat than others. The citizens of SB consider themselves exemplars of their people.

Siege and Resistance

Historical antecedents make the citizens of SB consider themselves Quintessential Croats. This is collectively defined via public celebrations of Catholicism and ethno-political nationalism and by the more individualised celebration of being considered a capable and self-sufficient people. Catholicism was formally established among Croats in 925 under the Papacy of John X who conferred the title of King on the Croat Tomislav. Believing they are a people derived from modern-day Poland who migrated to the Adriatic coast and merged with the Illyrians, the Croats are in their own estimation Slavs but Westernized Catholic ones who work with the Latin *Gaj* alphabet and thus different from Orthodox Serbs with their Eastern Cyrillic alphabet.

Croat populations have long evidenced resistance to the perceived other. Before the foundation of SB and following their arrival in the 15th century the Ottomans attempted to convert locals of the region to Islam usually with violence but also utilising economic sanctions via tax on farms and restrictions on property ownership. Some Croat-Catholics revolted with weapons; others preferred peaceful disobedience. By the end of the Ottoman epoch, which lasted from the 15th to the 19th century, most inhabitants of the region had retained their Catholic faith (Anscombe 2014). Such resistance was accelerated in 1846 when members of the Franciscan Order placed the first stone for the construction of the town’s Monastery. Since this epoch, the town has become an important regional centre for the Catholic Church and a site of pilgrimage for Catholics world-wide. During the times of the Ottoman Empire, the Turks kept a small garrison in the area and allowed the churches to function — but often prevented the construction of bell towers in order to limit the literal and audible appeal of Christianity. The Ottoman governance left the area in and around contemporary SB in grinding poverty, famine and misery. This made for a tough — if resentful — people.

In the late 19th century the town fell under the administration of the Habsburgs Austro-Hungarian Empire. This regime helped promote the building of churches and other infrastructure. Despite this and in order to combat insurrections of Croat nationalists, the Empire tried in various ways to convince the Croats that they were part of a broad provincial Slavic-*bošnjaštvo* identity. The pursuit of ethnic homogeneity was attempted in part by the

the Government of the Republic of Croatia. The TV station is designed to broadcast news focused on Croat interests and it attempts to reach all the areas where ethnic Croats are the majority.

organization of cultural events funded by Vienna. These, however, only resulted in an accentuation of Croat traditions around food, clothing, language, music and religious practices. Nothing changed the Croats.

The early 20th Century saw a progressive increase in the sense of Croatian nationalism. The aspiration of many was to include SB in the borders of a Croatian Independent State with Zagreb as the capital. Further political turmoil confirmed this resolve. The collapse of the Hapsburgs Empire in 1918 saw the town of Široki Brijeg come under the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. In 1939, the Croats attained some independence with the autonomous Banovina of Croatia. In 1941 the Independent State of Croatia appeared a *de facto* puppet state of the Nazis. It was in this time that the original Škripari (Cave Dwellers) collective came to prominence (see later).

The town continued to resist various enemies in the 20th century, notably the Communists in the 1940s and both the Serbian and Bosniaks armies in the Yugoslav conflict. During the latter conflict, SB saw little violence; the most traumatic event was an aerial bombing in 1992 from the Serbian-led Yugoslav Air force. Shortly after this event the HVO (Croatian Defence Council) militia was founded to defend the Croatian demographics in BiH. The militia was funded with the monies provided mostly by the Croat political party known as the HDZ-BiH (Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina) to protect Croats in BiH. SB supporters celebrate the actions of the HVO when displaying its flags during football fixtures against clubs considered Bosniaks. The SBNK club President and some of the Board were once part of the HVO.

Embodied Symbolism

Local urban architecture, religious symbols, monuments and art serve to stress the Croat identity of SB. Despite an absence of real walls, the town of SB corresponds to the notion of Medieval Citadel. The borders of the town are symbolized by Catholic Churches and statues of the Virgin Mary. The castle-shaped National Public Library is a multi-purpose space for learning built with the funds from the Croatian Government. The flags of the Croatian Republic of Herzegovina-Bosnia adorn administrative buildings. A Croatian Coat of Arms is painted on the rocks on a nearby hill to visibly symbolize Croatian heritage. Catholic crosses are positioned on top of some of the hills that overlook the town. Such symbols, whilst sacred to the Croats, act also as a reminder to the ethnic other. A Christian cross located in the town's main square commemorates the victims of both the Second World War and the 1991-1995 'Homeland War'. In another nearby square there are statues of Croatian heroes, including that of Franjo Tuđman, the first post-conflict President of Croatia.

A Herzegovinian-Croat identifies with historical symbols. The most significant is the *Šahovnica* — a checkerboard consisting of a shield shape populated with alternate white and red squares. It is the national symbol of Croatia and displayed everywhere Croats are found. The design informs the national flag and the shirt of the national football team. A Croatian also respects the *Ganga* musical genre defined by a lone singer articulating lyrics which listening others later accompany. Traditional Croatian clothing is worn during festivals, celebrations and

holidays. For women this consists generally of a long white gown with black or red waistcoats, jewellery-stones and a red head cover and cotton clothing.

Croats vote for Croat politicians. The town of SB is a fortress of the HDZ-BiH political party. Their elected members carry the grievances of Croatian nationalist rhetoric and has accomplished many practical works around pensions, sport and tourist infrastructures, enterprise investments and the promotion of Croat cultural activities. Since the end of hostilities in 1992 the project of re-creating a third Croat Political entity or a HRHB independent state has been supported most notably by nationalist politicians such as Dragan Čović, the HDZ-BiH leader who fights to give political equality to Croats (Rolandi 2018).

In the absence of independence, SB citizens enjoy a parochial pride in their post-(Yugoslav) war economic and sporting achievements. A form of both resistance and what we might best term cultural salvation is available for Croat populations via pride around income generation and sport. Football put SB back on the map. The SB citizens celebrate the fact that their club is one of the most successful in BiH, having won two national championships and three national cup finals (against Serb and Bosniak teams), and has several times participated in the UEFA Europa League. Such achievements symbolize a sporting re-birth from the times of communism. The club meanwhile celebrated its Catholic-Croat identity and for 20 years only selected players of Croat ethnicity. Some players from Africa, Eastern Europe and South America were to join later its ranks; Bosnian Muslims were never signed by the club, neither were ethnic Serbs. SB-based sports clubs have also attained international success in Basketball, Cheer-Leading, Chess and Karate (SB 2019). Masculinity is a dominant *motif* in the tasks required of football and basketball and is inseparable from wider notions of masculine credibility. The SB citizens articulate how the ideal Croat adult male is characterised by a willingness to stand up for himself, his family and the people in defence of borders. Physical strength and an industrious mentality are appreciated. Such attributes are believed to be the basis of SB being one of the Balkans most economically successful town with thriving industries in meat-packing, quarrying, metal work and aluminium production (Galić 2015).

Resistance is thus ever-available in both sporting and cultural chauvinisms. The Croatian political leadership fights to avoid any real or perceived assimilations processes by organizing Croat cultural events in central or eastern BiH (mostly music festivals) or by encouraging Croatian football clubs such as Široki Brijeg NK, Dinamo Zagreb, or Hajduk Split (the footballing vanguards of Croat identity) to organize coaching on the school campuses of central or Eastern parts of BiH. In this way children — and the adults who accompany them — are reminded of their Croat symbols, language and cultural traditions. The converse to this pride and achievement is that its citizens do not want to share the fruits of their labours with the out of town ethno-political ‘others’ ever perceived as lazy and dependent. Neither do they wish to share their passions. The practice of endogamy defines the town. Marriages and relationships are invariably intra-Catholics. Marriages between those — nominally — sharing the same

religious credentials are crucial to notions of succession⁴. The Croatian body politic is thus realised in no small degree in bodily practices.

The Cave Dwellers

The first BiH football programme was launched around 2000 albeit the leagues were initially mono-ethnic. Such a schedule signified a return of civil society. The same programme however also facilitated the hatreds of the conflict. Antagonism was manifest towards (*in absentia*) football rivals via ethnic-insults and a willingness for physical violence when those same rivals were inadvertently met on transport routes on their way to their respective fixtures (Katana and Sito-Sucic 2011). The foundation of a nationwide BiH football system whilst meant to facilitate a sense of national unity proved contentious; endless supporter conflicts and board room allegations of ethno-political-inspired corruption and match-fixing have typified the game ever since. There was some comfort to be drawn from the game. Football proved to be a functional outlet for much resentment. The time and place for such displays were scheduled; police knew when and where to be present.

In the years immediately after the conflict, the NK Široki Brijeg football club attracted a hard-core fan gathering who named themselves the Škripari (Cave Dwellers). These football terrace combatants were originally a combination of former Croat combatants ‘war veterans’ of both the regular and irregular military units and young Croat men in their late teens who had missed front-line military action. The post-war Škripari saw in football rivalries their chance to perform the violent rituals of ethno-political conflict albeit on a lesser scale than in wartime. Congregating on match days up to 300 in number at the clubs *Pecara* stadium, the Škripari are an agglomeration (99% male) drawn at any one time from the town, the region and the Croatian diasporas of Western Europe. They have a few nominal named positions but are essentially an ego-centred quasi group rather than as a quasi-military entity. The gathering celebrates historical antecedents of both People and Place.

In such performances, the Škripari self-nominate itself and the town as *Antemurale Christianitatis* (Bastion of Christianity). This title draws on that of the same name awarded by Popes to Eastern European Nations who defended the Christian faith in the face of Islamic invaders. The Heroic is a constant theme of the Škripari; a sense of duty is integral to the political narratives. The purpose of the Škripari and their tales reflects that of the wider Croatian political project. Stories of heroic Croatian knights and the unfavourable economic position of Christians during Ottoman rule were used by Croatian nationalist political rhetoric in the 1990s to elevate the historical status of Herzegovinian-Croats and to mobilize them to fight for independence. Such a strategy was implemented most notably by Franjo Tuđman (the first President of Croatia from 1991 to 1999) and the HDZ-BiH (Saric et al. 2010). The contemporary *Škripari* also celebrate via banners Croatian nationalism and the anti-communist

⁴ The SB citizens compared themselves to Hindu groups that marry exclusively between their own groups arguing this help the town to remain “united” and trusting (Geetha, 2015). The urban identity is thus symbolized in a sense of “symbolically closed” urban community.

sentiments of the town minus — for the most part in the past decade — any displays of fascist sympathies. Their football choreographies could be seen as new forms of urban symbolism together with being a symbol of the resurgent ethno-political identity.

Naming Rights

The Škripari nomenclature is a deliberate reference to the town's one-time association with the *Ustaše* — a Croatian fascist separatist guerrilla-warfare militia consisting of volunteers that resisted the communist forces of General Josip Tito. During the Second World War years, SB was one of the headquarters of the *Ustaše* and SB a protectorate of the Axis forces of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany — forts built by the Italian Army during the war years are still evident on the hills above the town. The wartime Škripari frequently hid in the caves in the hills above SB, sporadically attacking both the Red Army forces and later Allied armed forces — hence the name. When SB became part of the Communist entity of Yugoslavia in 1946, the SB citizens paid for such actions.

When the Red Army of Tito arrived in town, some 12% of SB citizens were murdered by firing squad for their rejection of communist ideology. In subsequent decades, SB saw poor investment from the Communists. Under the regime, all displays of ethno-political nationalism and Croat Catholic identity was deliberately frustrated. At the sporting level the SB workers were forced to devolve part of their taxes to fund the Velež FK football club based in the city of Mostar some 30km away, which Tito favoured because of its Communist and multi-culturalist ethos (the club included footballers from across Yugoslavia, unlike SBNK which was composed exclusively of Croat-Catholics). In the decades of Communism, the SBNK club (in that era named FC «Mladost» *Youth*,) laboured in the lower leagues of the country's football pyramid. When the Communist regime was overthrown in the early 1990s, the nation that once was Yugoslavia reverted to the regional celebrations of ethno-political nationalism. In their new-found freedom the citizens of SB re-named their football club after the town and invested heavily in its stadium infrastructure and the coaching and playing personnel.

The military and political resistance of both Croats in general, and the role of the town in such practice, remains a source of huge pride for the contemporary Škripari. They believe they constitute the *Agora* of the town. Over the past two decades, they and other like-minded mainstream supporters in and around football fixtures have vocalized ideologies of self-determinations and resentment against both the State of BiH and the various senses of the ethnic 'other'. They believe that they are emulating the past defence of the Croats from the Ottomans when confronting Bosniak Ultras. Their banners contain displays of Medieval Knights and the symbol of the crusades and Christianity; they dismiss Bosniak Muslim rivals with the terms 'Turks'. Collectively their words and deeds remind those listening and watching that the contemporary football-related antagonism has centuries-old antecedents.

The Statue of Limitations

One fixture witnessed by one of the authors in 2014 provides an ethnographic insight into these various processes and performances. The BiH Premier League fixture and the regional derby between the NK Široki Brijeg and FK Velež in September of that year epitomizes the cultural,

ideological and religious schisms present in both the BiH football and political landscapes. The SBNK fans and club were — as ever — celebrating their Croatian-Catholic identity and the pursuit of the creation of a Croat independent state or entity inside BiH. The Velež FK club are mainly supported by Bosniaks living in the East (Bosniak dominated) side of the city of Mostar. On top of this, they were emblematic of what the Škripari considered the moribund philosophy of Socialism. The *Velež FK ultras* gather under the nomenclature of the Red Army in honour of the Yugoslav Partisans who supported Socialism and opposed the Fascist Independent State of Croatia established during World War II. By the early 21st century, this one-time multi-ethnic *ultras* group contained a Bosniak majority. These supporters sought for a Bosnia-Herzegovina under the principles of socialism. Some amongst their ranks sought to extend Bosniak political influence and destroy any ethno-political borders inside their nation.

This fixture had an added resonance. The month of the game corresponded with the 18th anniversary celebrations of the founding of the *Škripari*. The wider citizenship of SB also celebrated the event including the town's Mayor who, via the municipality website, congratulated the group for their anniversary. Mayor since 2008 and also President of SBNK since 2017, the man represented the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ-BiH) — a centre-right Croatian nationalist party that has held power in SB since the end of the hostilities and the beginning of elections in 1995. The Škripari appreciated the Mayor's words whilst concomitantly expressing political agnosticism. Such a philosophy is integral to all reputable *ultras* groups. Such gathering is never short of proclamations as to how society should be, but at the same time refuse to be subordinate to any political party (Testa and Armstrong 2010). Politics of a different sort were at play on the day of the fixture.

Before the match, the *Škripari* gathered in the town centre around the statue of Gojko Šušak (1945-1998) and adorned it with flags and scarves of the SBNK football club. The town people funded the building of monuments for nationalist fighters who fought for Croatian independence during the 1990s conflict; the Škripari and indeed other football supporters celebrate those they consider Croatian heroes. This SB born Croatian nationalist politician and one-time Minister of the Defence was also a stalwart of the short-lived Croatian Republic of Herzegovina-Bosnia (HRHB) established during the years of 1992-1995. This political entity, which existed with its own army and governmental structure, included areas with a Croatian majority; notably, Central Bosnia and Herzegovina. The entity was unrecognized internationally. In 2019 the re-creation of such an entity within the borders of contemporary BiH is an aspiration of many SB citizens.

There were other political moans to be had. Some younger Škripari surrounding the statue articulated their hatred of Velež FK with reference to their link to the Red Army; they regarded its supporters as a more reprehensible football gathering than other Bosniak nationalist equivalents because they sought to impose not only Bosniak culture but also communism. Similar sentiments existed in the mind of some SB citizens at the political-administrative level albeit the majority consider the Sarajevo-based conservative Bosniak Nationalist Socialist Democratic Party (henceforth, SDP) to be more extreme than the Sarajevo-based Party of Democratic Action (henceforth, SDA). One particular concern of the SB citizens is that, if repetitively elected, the SDP would eradicate Croatian nationalists from Herzegovinian governmental institutions and impose their way of life — both cultural and economic — on

Croats. This would force Herzegovinian-Croats to migrate. The football fixture, whilst a sporting occasion, represented also an act of resistance towards any assimilation processes and was symbolic of the on-going Croatian processes of political resistance.

Articulations and Formations

Some 200 SBNK fans walked from the statue to the stadium singing songs proclaiming the club and the town. The articulations changed dimension when the visiting fans were seen in the stadium. The Red Army insulted the incoming SBNK fans by chants that sought to remind them of their towns-folks notorious past. Chants of ‘*Kill the Ustaše*’ reminded all within ear-shot of their political antipathy. Other chants reminded the Croatian listener of their precarious political position: ‘*You are part of Bosnia-Herzegovina*’. Responses were required. The Škripari collectively accused their detractors of being ‘*Cigani*’ (Gypsies who live dishonest lives in wretched conditions) asking further, ‘*How much does the wood cost this year?*’ — an articulation loaded with the sense of economic superiority around the entrepreneurial-capitalist ability that defines the citizens of SB and implicitly ridicules the SB stereotype of unemployed or low paid and lazy wood-gathering East Mostar Bosniaks. Proud of the large number of employed citizens in their town, they are contemptuous of the less enterprising. Collective sentiment was not able to curtail individual-inspired outrage. One young Škripari gave a Roman-Fascist salute towards the Red Army. Velež fans were now accusing SB citizens via their chants of the town’s residual fascist sympathies. The core Škripari in recent years has encouraged their fellows to ignore such accusations from football rivals — but exceptions always exist — hence the lone fascist salute.

On the 18th minute of the match, the Škripari unfurled a banner to represent symbolically their 18th anniversary. The dull game ended in a 2-0 victory for the hosts. The departing bus carrying the Red Army was struck by bottles thrown by younger Škripari. Afterwards fans, players and citizens gathered once again in front of the statue to drink beer and later the Škripari hanged a flag on it displaying the Croatian Coat of Arms along the World War 2 Škripari’s motto reading ‘*Under this Holy flag until Victory*’. The evening continued with songs exalting their football club and the Croat identity.



Image 1.



Image 2.

The *Gojko Šušak* statue is located in the town centre. On top (image 1) the statue is decorated with a Škripari scarf and an SBNK flag. After the match (image 2) to celebrate the victory the same statue was decorated by the supporters with the flag of the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia bearing the Škripari’s motto (Fieldwork photos by Max Maidano).

Politics, the Law and Football Violence

Ideally the post-conflict milieu would not evidence such behaviours and attitudes. Football — like sport generally — is naively meant to transcend politics. To this end both FIFA and UEFA donated monies for football programmers to help build a new civil society (Armstrong and Maidano 2019).⁵

But we might ask who, in this fragile political context, is to police such events (however well-meaning) and via what legal processes when things go wrong? History can help us here. When football fully resumed across BiH in the 1995-1996 season, the Yugoslav political system had not left a police legacy designed to deal efficiently with riotous football fans in a democratic regime. The hard-core fans of the post-DPA were thus little concerned about exhibiting controversial nationalist sentiment due to less harsh legal consequences they knew they faced than their counterparts in Western Europe. In this milieu, in the mid-1990s Italian Military Police better known as the *Carabinieri* — acting, whilst in BiH, as peacekeeping forces — were actually employed across BiH in order to secure civic order when instructing the newly formed Bosnian-Herzegovinian Police on how to police football supporters.

The BiH police had their hands full. Even when played in ethnic isolation, football violence could occur. Until 2000 BiH football was divided in several mono-ethnic leagues. Each canton had their own police forces to deal with the violence. The police were believed to favour the local ethnicity (the one they were usually drawn from) when disorder with outsiders occurred. When football became a national entity with the creation of a multi-ethnic national league around 2000, inter-ethnic violent incidents increased. The policing of fan gatherings varied with the sense the police held of Us and Them. Disorder was endemic and displays of ethno-political nationalist sentiment prevalent and at times gratuitously offensive. Some of the immediate post-war hatred has dissipated and displays of nationalist sentiment are less frequent but have not entirely disappeared from the stadiums.

Football disorder thus became a national issue in the new millennium which, ideally, required a co-ordinate national intervention. One initiative came for the BiH Football Federation known colloquially as *Savez* (the Federation). In 2012, to alleviate football disorder, *Savez* declared henceforth that the number of those travelling must be announced to the hosting clubs at least 5 days before the fixture. Furthermore, one of those travelling was to act as the dedicated representative reachable by the police. Other initiatives implemented more frequent and more thorough body searches of fans, zero tolerance for fans under the influence of alcohol or illegal substances and demanded fans to travel with personal documentation. The first *Savez* regulation dedicated to addressing such behaviour also occurred in 2012 and saw fines imposed on clubs if their fans were found guilty of throwing pyrotechnics in the stadium, or if the banners and choreographs the clubs' *ultras* displayed contained controversial political content. This

⁵ See Collison et al. (2018) for debates around the delivery and efficacy of sport as a tool for processes for peace and development. See also the case of the 1995 South African National Rugby team in post-apartheid South Africa, which was depicted as force for inter-ethnic unification in the film *Invictus* (2009).

became a contested and politicized arena. What was considered acceptable or hate speech was often at the discretion of Savez, which in the eyes of the Croats was not politically neutral.

Democracy and the Wrong Vote

In BiH, politics is football and vice versa. The Mayor of SB supports the club with his presence in the stadium during home fixtures. However, he has little say when it comes to fixture-scheduling and match security. Neither he nor the Board of Directors has any voice on police deployment. The police work independently and for high-risk fixtures decide what numbers of personnel to deploy. Law enforcement agencies present the police bill to the club. The former SB President Z.M Jelić has been publicly critical of policing procedures, arguing that in Sarajevo the football clubs paid the police only for their policing of international fixtures. In his argument, the predominantly Bosniak city of Sarajevo thus receives de facto free policing for their clubs' Premier League fixtures. Football in its many forms thus perpetuates the sense of Croat grievance. In the eyes of the Croats, Savez mirrors the body politic of BiH. Croatians are a minority in the various Savez committees, and have less representation in Savez decision-making. Croats argue that ethnic representation to be effective and free of grievances has to be visible; crucially the national team needs to be more inclusive of Croat players.

According to SB Croats, the judiciary and the football authorities are biased. We can add to this the Presidential electoral system. The BiH Presidency serves as the head of state and is constituted by three presidents: one Bosniak, one Croat elected by the Federation and one Serb elected by Republika Srpska (Serbian Republic). The three serve a 4-year term and every 8 months the chair of Presidency rotates. The Croatian candidates — all under the flag of the HDZ-BiH — have won their seat in all Presidential Election since 1995 except in 2006, 2010 and 2018. In these three years, large numbers of Bosniaks in the Federation have casted their vote for the Croatian presidency seat. In doing so they allowed Bosniaks or non-Croats to win seats (Lakic 2018a). Presently Željko Komšić, a Bosnian-Muslim standing for the Democratic Front, is the current president for the Croat Presidency. This outcome infuriated the BiH Croat electorate who considered Komšić to be unrepresentative of Croats interests, supported as was in the main by Muslim voters. In theory the Democratic Front is supposed to be a neutral party but is regarded by the majority of Croats as pursuing Bosniaks socio-economic interests.

Street protest ensued. In October 2018, in the city of Mostar, SB citizens marched with Mostar-Croats to protest against the outcome. Their banners read 'Not My President' and proclaimed the end of democracy. That a Bosnian-Muslim president had been elected was seen by Herzegovinian-Croats as paving the way for Bosniaks to decide the Croats future. The situation escalated ethno-political tension. The HDZ-BiH representative, Dragan Čović, demanded BiH Croats secede from the union with the Bosniaks and called for the establishment for a third Croat political entity. In response, Bakir Izetbegovic (of the SDA party) — the Bosniak member of the tripartite presidency — warned that this course of action could provoke a return to armed conflict and cautioned Croatian nationalists not to cross the line (Lakic 2018b). Komšić meanwhile promised he would work for a civic Bosnia-Herzegovina that thought beyond ethnic lines.

Loyalty is Local

Croats look to state agencies, the judiciary, the police and the football authorities are considered with degrees of contempt, whereby ‘the local’ takes precedence. In this context homogeneity is not guaranteed and some people are more listened than others. The Škripari are one such voice but there are competing others. The town’s ‘tribal leaders’ are enabled in a sense to influence policy and ideology. Such *tajkuni* (tycoons) are the business men who with their possessions, employment opportunities and income can determine the towns’ economic choices (Granditis 2007). Others are the former senior military figures who in the post-conflict acquired senior positions in local government. The men of such categories are quintessential Croats in serving and protecting their people. Equally revered are the town’s Franciscans who seek to project their spirituality and indeed morality on citizens. The Franciscans also — discreetly — encourage voting for the HDZ-BiH in presidential elections for the defense of Croat-ness and implicitly family values and Catholicism.

The citadel has internal borders whilst its people exhibit common cultural traits (see contributions in Barth ed. 1969). Political views in SB are often class-bound. Individuals in the Škripari and indeed SB citizens argue that the middle-class (those who owns the mean of productions, wealthy entrepreneurs, and those who earn over 1.000 BAM — Bosnia-Herzegovina Convertible Mark: about 460 British Pounds) tend to favour remaining in the state of BiH but with a yet to be defined Croat Federal entity. By contrast, the working-class (those who work for public or private company) tend to prefer the creation of a third Croat political entity and the formation of HRHB. The low-waged, parts of the working-class, the unemployed, and those who profess populist ideologies such as the war veterans and elders born before the 1970s tend to wish to be part of Croatia.

Isolation is not pursued and to this end several cultural activities are annually organized by the City Fathers — sometimes with the help of some Škripari — with the aim of attracting people from across the former Yugoslavia; such activities include running half-marathons, art expositions, music concerts and street food festivals. Implicitly, such initiatives attempt to promote cross-cultural tolerance and reflect a town attempting to promote a wider sense of civil society. Such occasions bring welcome incomes from visitors and sponsors. Episodes of ethnic violence have never been recorded around such events. The town whilst thus claiming to be a Croat fortress also opens its walls to outsiders. Money talks in such processes; the ‘others’ might not be loved or respected but they might spend much needed monies. The tolerance evident on these occasions offers some general reflection on the purpose of the Škripari.

The town representatives occasionally condemn the Škripari. When controversial banners are displayed during SBNK football matches, the Franciscan clerics have asked football club officials to prevent such behaviours — not least because the messages are not very Christian in sentiment. For some citizens, the Škripari gathering manifests gangster/mobster mentality organized around a tenuous sense of ethnic cause. Certainly, some of the business owners consider the Škripari as bad civic ambassadors. In their opinion, the insults around the SBNK fixtures and other such antagonisms cause cross-ethnic embarrassment, diminish trust between SB and entrepreneurs from elsewhere and indeed diminish business opportunities. Others know that the Škripari have the best interests of the town in their heart. Such sentiments were evident

after a 2017 incident involving the alphabet. In 2017, the Tourist Office of the SB Municipal Council decided to display street signs in the Cyrillic Alphabet to assist Serbian business visitors. Some young Škripari — and non Škripari ultra-nationalist — decided to obscure the Cyrillic lettering considering it both intrusive and synonymous with the signs displayed by the JNA (Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija, the Yugoslav Army) in this area some 25 years previously. The population was divided as to the efficacy of this action. For some, the defacing was hooliganism; others had more sympathy for ‘the boys of the town’, seeing them as a *Vox Populi* and indeed the flame carriers for Croat defence against assimilations processes.

Place and People

Place is often revealing but more frequently is obscuring. Any place is essentially unknowable or never capable of being fully comprehended. The people that populate a place change; the deepest nature of any place is not always transparent (Lopez 2019). Analysis is thus always a one moment in time photography. For the place that is SB we can state this: at this moment the central state is seen as unfair, austere and hostile and ever-ready to take what Croats built with their own hands. The state structure is questionable and democracy is perceived as limited. Governance comes to be seen as unreliable and untrustworthy and makes SB citizens prioritize the defence of their own cultural traditions and the local social structures over the national (Pardo and Prato 2011, Prato 2011).

The local informs the national but the national has bigger issues than the parochial. The violence and ethno-political banners evident during matches of the Premier League were — and remain — reflective of the highly turbulent BiH situation. The country is suspended (potentially indefinitely) in a status ‘betwixt and between’ of democracy, forms of authoritarianism, and ethno-political violence. The Liberal Democracy and socio-economic revolution are forestalled. In this epoch, liminality is instrumentalized to justify ethno-nationalist parties (Van Gennepe, 1960). The SB citizens feel that liberation from economic stagnation is continuously under threat by a coterie of malevolent forces, which the ethno-political party are mandated to identify and oppose (Beresford et al. 2018).

Football as an avenue of peace-building is not trusted. Sociologist, anthropologists and political scientists who have done research in the Balkans have recognized the connection between the football ultras groups and the machinations of politicians. Aware of this, the Škripari criticize politicians for their willingness to exploit liminal situation using football disorder if needs be. In this situation, the trickster (Machiavellian politicians) enters the ‘game’. Intelligent and deceptive the trickster attempts to guide the assumed post-liminal state but their real interests is to perpetuate de facto liminal chaos and remain in power (Horvath and Thomassen 2008). Violence generated around football fixtures may at times have been generated by such ‘tricksters’, engaging criminals to inflame football disorders or by corrupting the police tasked to deal with such disorder. Football disorders creates fears. Arising out of such fears, ethno-political enclaves are reinforced; this can become a vote winner for the Machiavellian nationalist politician. Thus, in several situations ultras become pawns of the process. The Škripari recognise however that, despite their occasional public utterances of

disdain, the politicians seek them when they need electoral approval and in the event of any ethno-political insurgence consider them as one of the town's first line of defence.

Football in its Place

In the post-conflict milieu football can both mirror disenchantment and in some ways offer a way out; football appeals to the everyday citizen and provides a metaphor for a peaceful society inclusive of all shapes, sizes and mentalities. The game narrates ideas of class, nation, citizenship, gender, commerce; it facilitates networks and conviviality and establishes a sense of *communitas* (Turner 2018). It invites inquiry as to how a society can present and see itself. It is also available to celebrate some for 40 weeks a year. Whilst never innocent of political schemes, the game provides a zone in which the formal political system cannot easily permeate. It can provide a way of coping with tensions — as it mediates via its permitting of celebrations of the past — and is implicitly an arena to negotiate the present and the future. Political leaders, both local and national, cannot ignore it.

The fights and insults evident at football, whilst in part integral to football traditions the world over, are also a symbolic continuation of Yugoslav conflict. Articulations and celebrations reflect the determination of Croats to both defend and celebrate their right to exist. The club and the stadium facilitate performances of the celebration of self, resistance towards the ethnic other and *communitas* with the deceased — the stadium being the one public theatre where the dead are celebrated with noise in the chants praising their role in conflict. Football is thus Janus faced in that it can facilitate and at times places boundaries on emotion. It can by its proxy role minimize political antagonism and offer avenues for the diplomat. We might argue that football in post-conflict BiH, even with its endemic hatreds, carries the function of shock-absorber; and by its existence it might be argued to have prevented the creation of ethno-nationalist Para-militaries. For all their professed hatred articulated on match day ethnographic research reveals that individuals in the Škripari have friends in the East Side of Mostar. Some work there, others do business with Bosniaks. This indicates that the antagonism evident in football is in part banal. Other factors that create football fan resentment are beyond ethno-political strictures. The sluggish economy, long-term unemployment in several sectors has in recent years brought widespread youthful discontent. Add to this a weak state failing to exert its authority in many aspects of social life (Keil and Perry 2015) and the result has been many young men collectively creating an environment around football which is transgressive. This routinely manifests itself in what might best be termed as banal nationalism (Billing 1995) alongside episodes of what we will term recreational violence.

Revealing of the fault-lines of BiH, the game of football and the Škripari serve to reinforce urban and extra-local identities which induct debates around class, masculinity, legitimacy and ethnicity (Giulianotti 1999, Hong and Lu 2016, Pardo and Prato 2019). The game facilitates memory and senses of injustice to the extent that analysis might, following Rieff (2016), ask whether the post-conflict would benefit from less memory whatever the source. As Assmann (2019) asks, who informs as to what we are? Her answer in part relies on the standard trilogy of national narratives; that is, victim, victor and resistance fighter. But does the ensuing sense of cultural memory prioritize a People or a Place? (Sant-Cassia 2000). And,

if we cannot answer that, can we ever explain how we conceptualize memory and remembering and thus relate to others? When a people's identity — as it is with the Croats — consists of dimensions both material and transcendent might we, to follow Althusser (Poster 1974), ask whether history creates a people rather than the other way around? History and memory can be haunting; events, acts and places provide the texture and interiors for a sense of the eternal return. When meaning and memory bring with them a sense of duty (in this case resist with violence) problems occur. Does football, we need ask, exacerbate or facilitate the post-conflict healing? An enthusiasm for Football is what the constituent people of BiH shares; the game carries many seductions, but to put faith in it is risky.

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