

Sports and social cohesion: The case of the Western Balkans

Marko Begović*¹ 

¹ Faculty of Business Administration and Social Sciences, Molde University College, Molde, Norway

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to introduce the broader readership sports dynamics within the Western Balkans from a different perspective. Authors have been keen to explore a number of different topics, mostly associated with the post-conflict period, however, limited data is available on the character of civic participation and social cohesion in and through the sports ecosystem. This paper reflects on the background of the development of sports-related institutional regimes and appropriate organizational structure. The historical aspect is of particular interest as it is necessary to comprehend the changing context, structure, and composition of organized sports along with opportunities for civic participation. Further, the internal dynamics within the sports ecosystem will be presented as part of the socio-political realm.

Keywords

Western Balkans, civic participation, social cohesion, sports ecosystem

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Introduction

It is nothing new or innovative to state that sports is a social phenomenon with the potential to promote civic engagement, build social capital, and foster social cohesion within respective communities. Here, the focus will be on the intersection of sports and civic participation, as it specifically reflects a complex and multifaceted relationship. Civic participation represents a component or a tool of social cohesion. Sports proved to serve as a platform for various types of

engagements as part of civic participation and can have both positive and negative effects on social cohesion. Former, sports can act as a platform for engaging individuals and groups toward promoting or building social cohesion by engaging in different community-based activities (Perks, 2007). However, civic participation alone does not inherently lead to benefits associated with social cohesion. As for the negative aspect, due to the domination of non-sportive objectives and power dynamics, the sports ecosystem can constitute an exclusive structure stimulating socio-political

inequalities. Buser et al. (2022, p.1) defined a sports ecosystem as a "complex network of relationships which is affected by a variety of economic, political, ecological, technological, and social dynamics." The variety of actors, from the public (e.g. government) including school sports, to not-for-profit (e.g. National Sports Federations) to the commercial sector establish relationships that result in the creation of a sports ecosystem (Buser et al., 2022).

The spectator violence, emergence of hooliganism, and articulation of politically dissonant voices in the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia represent an illustrative example (Perasović, 1995). Here civic participation was limited to a particular ethnicity and equally polarizing contributing to the country's disintegration and confirming the vulnerability of countries in transition (Brentin, 2016; Vrcan, 2003). That said, in the war-torn region of former Yugoslavia (now called Western Balkans including Albania), nationalism and polarization dominated and directed major developmental trends for decades. This practice remained intact as in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina or the re-emergence of nationalism in Serbia "Srpski svet" (Bieber, 2018b; Biserko, 2022).

Civic participation refers to the active engagement of individuals in the socio-political realm. This participation varies from engagement in political processes to community development. Building on the main focus of this paper, the central topic interest is to present institutional interaction between different stakeholders with plural capacities, resources, and skills that reflect the composition and dynamics of the sports-related ecosystem within a particular region (Putnam, 1993, 2000).

Literature review

In the last forty years, the concept of social cohesion has played an important role at the macro level, referring to policy context aimed at reducing inequalities, community building, and limiting polarization (Spaaij, 2013). At the meso and micro levels, social cohesion refers to networks established through family or differ-

ent formal and informal groups (Jenson, 2010; Spaaij, 2013). Historically, sports have been an important facet of many public interventions as they can bridge the gap among heterogeneous groups (Council of Europe, 2021). In that sense, the power of sports is attributed to community building keeping in mind the health, educational, and broader societal values that sports represent. The policy process through shared competencies and joint responsibilities involves both the public sector and sports movements using sports to create a more inclusive and active society (Skille & Säfvenbom, 2011; Straume et al., 2025). These interventions as part of foreign policy efforts, often unfold as part of international cooperation and aid programs (Hasselgård & Straume, 2015).

Depending on the political system, the public sector plays a key coordinating role in enabling necessary material and non-material conditions for policy interventions, while the sports movement is tasked to deliver services of public interest. This interplay is conditioned with the exercised governance model, as it includes different stakeholders within the established policy network. The relationship of actors is not a linear process and depends on the level of pluralism and distribution of power. More importantly, it is shaped by governmentalization and politicization that directs outputs of sports and/or non-sporting objectives (Straume et al., 2025). In liberal democracies sports-related public policies are developed reflecting the sport as a tool for social cohesion playing an important role in empowering disadvantaged individuals and groups, supporting integration efforts, and economic development (Levermore, 2008; Rommetvedt, 2013; Spaaij, 2012).

Begović (2023) indicated that sport in the Western Balkans is dominated by particular, often politically exposed groups or individuals rather than focusing on non-sportive objectives. That being said, the interest in the specific context (Western Balkans) goes with the fact that the region is unresearched, especially in social perspectives of sport as scientization is a dominant academic interest (Begović, 2020; Kustec-Lipicer & Maksuti, 2010). Secondly, this region is still consid-

ering a transitional society with a weak public sector with mimics the sport movement (Begović, 2021, 2022). Particularly, the composition of stakeholders is predictable as the socio-political realm is rather static with clientelist-based structures in place. Therefore, presenting and discussing major trends within the region contributes to the wider academic interest in specific Western Balkans historical, cultural, social, political, and economic contexts aimed at understanding composition and dynamics that influence civic participation.

Recently, there have been attempts to understand how these dynamics affected, broader societal development (Brentin, 2014, 2016; Flere & Klanjšek, 2017; Garamvölgyi et al., 2021). Also, under the theme “With sport to social cohesion – actors for conflict and cooperation”, a number of articles were published focusing primarily on spectator violence, ultras, and gender inequality (Bartoluci & Mustapić, 2020). Still, the research venue vis-à-vis the sport and social cohesion in policy-making within the Western Balkans has not been conducted yet. This latter in particular related to the integration and civic participation in a policy context. According to Bernard (1999), social cohesion stands as a rather quasi-concept, largely ambiguous tackling a broad spectrum of inequalities. Building up on Putnam’s (2000) view on the relationship structure among community actors, the historical context in the Western Balkans represents a crucial starting point to understand the level of facilitation of social cohesion through sport. The policy-making and policy prioritization vary greatly and depend largely on the national/regional socio-political realm including tradition, culture, economic dimension, and social diversity. Reflecting on the existing regional literature social cohesion is researched as the integration process or inclusion and articulation through different forms, often fans and ultras (Bartoluci & Mustapić, 2020). Sports in the Western Balkans have been often used for national identification and homogenization, especially during transition periods reflecting regional political stalemate (Bartoluci & Mustapić, 2020). According to Vrcan (2003), the transition era was marked by intensified

spectator violence based on ethnic and religious tensions. Bartolucci underlined that policy-making in sports has been equally shaped by nationalist tendencies and needs to be better than our neighbors (Bartoluci & Mustapić, 2020). The politicization of sports as a joint determinant of the region particularly relied on using the importance of sports for particular political goals. As discussed, spectators or fan groups reflected ethnic and religious animosities contributing to the wider divisions and polarizations (Perasović, 1995 in Bartoluci & Mustapić, 2020).

In addition, early policy arrangements in former Yugoslavia and later within emerging countries reflected the social value of sport and sports contributing to nation (and community) building. The concept of physical culture that includes physical education, sports recreation, and high-performance sports (and sports medicine) set the foundation for civic participation through sport (Nikolić, 1993). Initially, the policies were constructed around brotherhood and unity as the main liberation and post-WWII rebuilding drivers (Begović, 2021). Further, sport during socialist and contemporary settings is placed as a cohesive policy tool often serving to non-sporting and particular political goals (Begović, 2023; Brentin, 2016).

Theoretical considerations

According to Schofer & Longhofer (2011), it is people with specific interests, capacities, resources, and skills within a particular environment that form civic organizations. The quality of these initiatives differs both from the effective and plural public sector and socio-economic dynamics within the complexity of the political context. To understand the development of sport movement, civic participation, and use of sport for social cohesion, the school of new institutionalism seems to be the most appropriate one. According to Thelen (2010), this school is associated with historical-based institutional, sociological, and rational choice institutionalism. Particularly, the focus is on the role of political institutions in shaping an institutional environment that facilitates the level of civic engagement

(DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Parrish, 2003; Weingast, 1996). Here, the new institutionalism is concerned with both formal and informal rules and structures, locating the major actors and their evolution over time having in mind political omnipresence. The importance of this approach lies in the fact that in the Western Balkans institutions and systems as the sum of the former are shaped by political constellations, whereas when it comes to formal ones are followed by bureaucratic structure and appropriate legislative framework (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003; Shepsle & Weingast, 1983). The composition of stakeholders and institutional arrangements as part of political processes are often subjected to a number of pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Wenkai, 2013). These pressures are threefold: *coercive*, when the political monopoly rests on the use of power; *mimetic*, when organizations tend to mimic the dominant political structure; *normative*, generally accepted norms to be enforced by organizations. However, these processes occur as part of social interactions within formal and/or informal environments with the key process defined as institutionalization (Weinberger, 1995). According to Lawrence et al. (2001), institutionalization represents the process of influence directed through power structure relations, where normative framework with rules in place for institutions to be implemented (Baptista, 2009; March & Olsen, 1983). That said, the level of implementation greatly depends on the socio-political realm on the one hand, and the operational environment within the organization includes coordination and cooperation along with the capacity for the establishment and enforcement of rules (Bolfíková et al., 2012). Consequently, the evaluation of institutions in the context of the Western Balkans presupposes the continuation of political dominance within identity and ideology maintaining stability despite internal/external pressures toward democratization processes with little or no rearrangements of involved actors or stakeholders (March & Olsen, 1998; Schimmelfennig, 2010).

Early development of the sports ecosystem in the Western Balkans suggests an attempt to follow the

Soviet system with the concept of physical culture as a decision to override sport as a resemblance of capitalist relations. The orientation toward more inclusive and part of the overall culture, positions physical culture on the pedestal of political priority due to its capacity to attract large masses (Jašanica, 1985). Although the concept of mass sport dominated, the political structure realized very early on the potential of high-performance sport, especially in the period of the Yugoslav attempt to develop its own political system departing from the rigid Soviet system. Therefore, the concept of physical culture should be observed as part of the overall shift balancing between the East and the West with Yugoslavia initiating the establishment of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) (Begović, 2021). However, the one-party system and the dominance of the communist party (KPJ/SKJ) remained intact. This was secured firstly through several social actors, carefully established and governed by the communist party, such as youth organizations or workers' councils (Lampe, 2000). Thus, the system secured centralist and interventionist efforts around key themes: youth entertainment, reconciliation among ethnicity and ideology, and transformation of the society of sport (Brentin & Zec, 2017). Around these themes, the sport-related institutions and organizations are shaped, especially in terms of civic engagement. With this sort of generalization, the sports ecosystem tends to facilitate rather a political agenda of discussed social actors around the SKJ.

Specifically, the status of physical persons, such as athletes, in society and within the sports ecosystem, as part of governing bodies and decision-making processes will be examined through the framework of contemporary institutionalism. Historical institutionalism will be employed to understand organizational structure and its dynamics across developmental phases of the sports ecosystem in the Western Balkans. How the institutional environment evolved and power-structure relation that jointly formulates sport-related institutions and policies to accommodate heterogeneity of actors. The level of political influence is a joint dominator across different phases, where at the begin-

ning SKJ constructed a socio-political realm, reshaped by the national branches after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. That said, the transition in the 1990s didn't facilitate democratization processes. Quite contrary, it led to a number of deviations such as nationalism, civil war and capture state, as a broader spectrum, while more specifically, sports environment pressure on sports organizations and athletes to conform with political objectives (Begović et al., 2020). Sports didn't deviate from any other social domain, quite the contrary, sports were often utilized for political objectives and with influence to shape society.

The use of high-performance sports and athletes is widespread across the region (Brentin, 2014, 2016; Hristić & Mustapić, 2015; Kovačić, 2020). Within these continuous pressures on athletes, normative and coercive are employed mostly to create and maintain mimicking sport-related organizations (Begović, 2021; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These sports organizations are formed and maintained following the socio-political realm and securing legitimacy from political structures. One should be aware these practices are not unique to the Western Balkans, as centralized and excluding decision-making processes symbolized former communist countries such as Hungary and Romania (Antonie et al., 2024; Garamvölgyi et al., 2021). Despite, the transitional pathway of these countries differed greatly from the Western Balkans, especially in terms of integration processes, the challenges associated with the role of the sport remain present referring to the "same system but new regime" (Molnar & Dóczi, 2020, p. 18). Following the dissolution of communism in Hungary, the governmental involvement was limited until socio-political consolidation. This consolidation from the 2000s marked the positioning of sport as an activity of strategic importance intensive governmentalization and substantial political involvement (Molnar & Dóczi, 2020). Perhaps Albania a country within the Western Balkans contexts or even with post-communist countries, especially during the mid-twentieth century departs from other countries, as sports have been neglected during the Enver Hoxha rule. This didn't dramatically change during the 1990s,

however, in the 21st century, Albania undertook major changes including privatization. This didn't bypass sports, and this activity became rather a product not an activity of public interest per se resulting in limiting participation and activities aimed at involved broader population (Velija, 2020).

Western Balkans context

For the purpose of this research, the term the Western Balkans will be defined. It is not historical or geographical, rather it is a political term established at the end of 1990s. After the Dayton Agreement, to accelerate the integration toward the EU, the Western Balkan has been defined as a political platform including ex-Yugoslav countries plus Albania. As indicated by van Meurs (2000), the term aligned with the EU strategy opening the integration perspective for non-EU members located in the Balkans. It was during the Austrian Presidency that this approach was officially adopted at the Summit in Zagreb foreseeing individual country's performance as an indicator for the EU accession (Council of the European Union, 2000). While Croatia managed to become an EU member in 2013, for other countries, the EU perspective is still unclear. The rationale behind these uncertainties lies in the fact that within most of the candidate countries, transition processes from one-party socialism toward multiparty democratic and liberal capitalism stalled (Lavrič & Bieber, 2021). In particular, the transitioning processes resulted in a number of deviations ranging from illiberal democracies (Zakaria, 1997), and state capture (Hellman et al., 2000) to stabilitocracy, authoritarianism, or hybrid regimes (Csaky, 2020; Diamond, 2002; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Pavlović, 2016). As for the research interest, until recently the focus has been on post-conflict, state capture, populism, and politicization (Begović, 2023; Begović et al., 2020; Džankić & Keil, 2017; Hellman et al., 2000; Jenne & Bieber, 2014; Keil, 2013). Besides political turmoil, the transition produced structural and long-term challenges for economies within emerging countries, where any effort toward liberating the market led to several corruptive practices (Bieber, 2018b; Gligorov et al., 1999;

Uvalic, 2003). These corruptive practices are often part of the politicization of the public domain starting from the public sector and widening its monopoly over commercial and not-for-profit sectors. As a consequence of this consistent socio-political and economic instability, countries of the Western Balkans are still experiencing depopulation due to emigration fluxes, especially with skilled and youth leaving in one direction. Altogether, the combination of political pressures with little or no democratic practices, led to unsuccessful reforms, especially in the public sector while, dominant political structures maintained a socio-political monopoly fueling divisions over ethnic and religious differences (Anelić, 2020; Kapidžić, 2020).

Development of sport movement in the Western Balkans

Following the end of WWII, the early development of sport was shaped under strong political control as part of the revolutionary movement and building unity among war-torn societies with internal frictions (Brentin & Zec, 2017; Lampe, 2000). The system was conceptually mimicking the Soviet sport system, however, due to the Cominform and Yugoslav attempt for its own path, in the late 1940s within the concept of physical culture and "Homo Yugoslovenicus" (Brentin & Zec, 2017; SFKJ, 1948). Thus, major political actors including the Yugoslav military (JNA) and the League of Socialist Youth of Yugoslavia (SSOJ) laid down controlled, politically instructive sport-related institutional arrangements (Begović, 2021). That said, for the monolithic and centralized Soviet-based system, the institutional rearrangement marked the introduction of self-management socialism that included the transfer of power from the state to society (Whitehorn, 1978). The core of these changes aimed to enhance and empower workers to the introduction of workers' councils as core units to enable representation in decision-making processes. Jakovljevic (2016), summarized that self-management represented a combination of state bureaucracy as part of the Soviet model legacy, self-management governance with the establishment

of workers' councils and market socialism. At the political level, Yugoslavia consisted of six republics and two provinces as administrative units exercising a significant level of autonomy. Nevertheless, all the reforms were carefully directed by the decentralized units of the SKJ at the republic and provincial levels. The sports was no different, as was heavily influenced by the SKJ and associated actors, namely SSOJ. On the one hand, this stimulated a broadening base as the sports system was focused on sports for all concepts, while on the other hand, the sports ecosystem was under constant reforms. The rationale behind the latter lay in the interplay between the state-bureaucratic and self-managerial concept of governance. The first institutional outputs of these reforms marked the creation of the Physical Education Committee of Yugoslavia with administrative units formed within each republic. However, the lack of institutional coordination between the central and sub-national sectors led to unstructured and unconsolidated policy-making, while the sports movement operated in a rather unregulated regime. With these institutional deficiencies, the formation of republics' self-management interest societies (SIZ) as an institutional amalgam from constitutional changes, aimed specifically to address the lack of representation and participation of all sports stakeholders. Further, as self-management relied on decentralization the lowest local units (municipalities) were encouraged to form SIZ to enable broad participation. The policy structure shifted from state (vertical) to federal and sub-national level (vertical) governance with a formally inclusive approach for athletes stimulating the bottom-top approach (Begović, 2022). In parallel, the concept of physical culture under the SKJ was based on amateurism focusing on school sports and sports recreation as a base for high-performance sports aimed at maintaining beyond sporting objectives. These objectives were carefully planned under the SKJ priorities. Nevertheless, the professionalization of sport that was first successfully camouflaged within SKJ republics' branches, derogated main structural principles including representation and implementation of good governance principles adopted in 1978 (Begović, 2021). The principles to enable more

transparency and accountability while at the same inclusive sports ecosystem adopted at the central level were bypassed on the sub-national level, branches of the SKJ exercised a significant level of autonomy contributing to the rather elitist sport governing structures. Although athletes were recognized as the heart of the sports ecosystem and subjects rather than objects of sport-related relations and institutional arrangements, the reality remained harsh as they were largely excluded from governing bodies and decision-making processes (Begović, 2019, 2021).

Structural challenges toward social cohesion

The period of the gradual disintegration of Socialist Yugoslavia corresponded with the general lack of academic engagement in understanding drivers that shape sports and related policy processes, however, with recent research inquiries it became clear that governmentalization and politicization play a major role in policy-making (Begović, 2024; Hristić & Mustapić, 2015; Jevtić, 2019; Kustec-Lipicer & Maksuti, 2010; Šuput, 2011). The major structural changes occurred between the 1980s and 1990s when the nominally one-party system was removed introducing a multiparty system. It was rather a rebranding and elite reproduction with low-level members of the SKJ branches taking over the major power. The political parties that emerged from the SKJ, combined a one-party approach with pressuring the private including the sports sector to conform with the political orientation (Begović, 2022). Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the emerging nations are still in a transitional mood, with citizens mostly leaning toward EU integration and democratization, while political structure successfully stalling this process (Begović & Garcia, 2024). Besides stalling this process, the region is experiencing wide polarization followed by emigration of skilled and youth with structural and endemic corruption widespread (European Commission, 2018; Kmezić, 2019). The vocal political change toward a multiparty system under the civic war, polarization and

dire economic conditions, centralized political power, and passivized citizens' actions. Maintaining a strong grip over all aspects of society, the political structure that succeeded the SKJ, directed major economic institutional and economic changes that resulted in the rise of socio-economic inequality. Introducing the concept of liberal economy and privatization didn't bypass sport, and the concept of physical culture was dismantled as part of a wider departure from self-management and socialism. The privatization of sports movement within nongovernmental legal status contributed to widening political influence through politically exposed persons occupying sports governing bodies and introducing a clientelist system (Begović, 2023). Consequently, sport for all, in particular school and sports recreation, was disregarded, favoring sports excellence and an elitist and exclusive approach to sports development. The rationale behind this was to use sport as an effective tool to promote non-sportive objectives and particularistic political agenda (Brentin, 2016; Hristić & Mustapić, 2015). As democratization processes were initially encouraged by the westernization under the EU integration, the EU support was primarily financial and political. This support, although conditioned by reform actions, in the case of most Western Balkans countries, didn't stimulate actual, or practical reforms (Bieber, 2018a). Moreover, corruptive practices and undemocratic systems are dominating across the Western Balkans countries with dominant political actors stimulating these negative practices (Bieber, 2018b; O'Brennan, 2014). This socio-political realm unfavored any athlete engagement beyond purely participating in organized sports events and the absence in that respect has been investigated previously (Begović, 2021). This is, of course, not an isolated case, as the pressure on athletes is omnipresent contributing to the limiting opportunities for natural persons to participate in decision-making processes. Moreover, the research found that athletes are not passive, they are rather silenced by the number of formal and informal practices and obstacles exercised as part of broader, political mimicking formation of different organizational structures. According to Komar (2015), the clientelist network facilitated the rise of informal

decision-making processes that became routine within formal institutions. Any opposing voices are perceived as unconventional and confronted by different stakeholders often by coerced media. This contributes to the unique socio-political realm and equal configuration of the sports ecosystem that limits participation to exclusive groups affiliated with dominant political structures (Begović, 2023). Thus, the sports ecosystem remained resistant to any reform with poor governance and lack of pluralism and participation in governance facilitated corruption (Begović, 2024). In addition, the lack of participation, especially from the perspective of athletes and other natural persons and individuals, has been rarely addressed, except in a few papers (Begović, 2020, 2021; Begović et al., 2020).

With the latter in mind, the development of sports policies is influenced, shaped, and directed by the same actors that articulate the main political agenda. The inherited political influence is maintained through the contemporary dynamics with three phases, socialization, privatization, and politicization (Begović, 2022). The latter two represent continuity, while the former largely abounded during the transition period in the 1990s. Additionally, the governance of sport followed a broader socio-political realm as Šugman (1998) state-bureaucratic as centralized and self-managerial as decentralized concepts dominated by the communist party. The policy-making process was shaped by the public sector, firstly through the central level mainly, and later after the reforms through sub-national republic and provincial levels. Especially during the 1970s, the reform resulted in excessive decentralization with several public actors overlapping in terms of planning and coordinating policy efforts, while participation of athletes remained rather vocal than practical (Begović, 2021). In addition, a number of reforms introduced as part of overall institutional changes and some sport-specific, remained with a low level of implementation, contributing to the lack of coordination within the public sector (Begović, 2021; Kovačić, 2020). Nevertheless, this period emphasizes socialization with specific, targeted actions in school sports, sports recreation, and workers' sports. Regional

and local authorities played a dominant role, especially in organizing national and local activities in coordination with local sports movement as it was often the same people being engaged in public and sports organizations. This led to a number of corruptive practices, especially in football as indicated by Kovačić (2018), fueling more challenging problems, such as nationalism. The major decisions were adopted in an informal manner bypassing existing institutional regimes and formal coordination between public and sports sectors maintaining political dominance (Begović, 2023; Hoekman & Scheerder, 2021).

The countries that emerged from the dissolution of Yugoslavia share a joint institutional foundation relying on an interventionist approach and a strong presence of a dominant political structure. This presence was secured through different socio-political organizations that emerged from the former SKJ. The political presence is maintained with many politically exposed persons occupying major sports governing bodies as other institutions and organizations as part of the political spillover effect (Begović et al., 2020). However, the transition unpacked a number of differences within emerging countries closely associated with the integration processes. The ones that managed to become part of the EU have developed a more inclusive and plural governance structure. The countries that remained within the accession path are experiencing illiberal and often autocratic forms of governance. Despite the different integration paces, a joint challenge remained in the form of policies that address rather dominant political discourse and fewer forms of integrative processes through sport as part of social cohesion efforts. Moreover, the recent pandemic disclosed how institutions are fragile, especially the ones that should promote inclusive and democratic society (Begović, 2020). It resulted in the form of directed or exclusive policy networks and policy-making processes with outputs in a form that limited sports participation and articulation of athletes' voices. This is in line with the capture state where both legislative and executive branches of power are bypassed by strong political parties with power and influence concentrated outside

of the public sector (Bieber, 2018b; Hellman et al., 2000). It produced different undemocratic practices and sports movement followed this path by practicing exclusive decision-making processes within the National Sports Federations monopolizing relationships within particular sports. The lack of participation is associated with blurred accountability and transparency with a strong bureaucratic organizational structure (Begović, 2022). The reduced amateurism and inclusive governance facilitated privatization and orientation toward sports excellence. As a product, the sport development became unsustainable focusing predominantly on achieving non-sportive objectives. That said, the governing bodies and decision-making processes are politicized, and undemocratic with the presence of a number of deviations, namely corruption (Begović, 2023). The regulatory framework in the Western Balkans enables politically exposed persons to occupy major sports governing bodies and to play decisive roles in sport-related decision-making processes (Begović, 2024).

One of the main consequences, the system in place, politicized in its formation, produced a highly bureaucratized organizational structure, closed and disconnected from the athletes (Begović, 2021). This formation is structurally reduced to purely administrative processes, limiting any developmental processes. Moreover, it established a strong foundation for clientelist patron-client informal groups formed as gatekeepers of the political regime (Begović, 2023). This represents a specific form of continuation of the SKJ, however, with a formal multiparty system, but in practice rigid undemocratic system with reproduction of political elite managing broader socio-political realm. Secondly, the system rests on the polarization strategy to widen the gap and socio-economic inequality, tackling any opposing political action both internally and externally (Begović et al., 2020). The pessimism among athletes is widespread with the weak capacity to articulate or to engage in any activity aimed at opposing current power-structure relations.

Lessons learned

The self-management and Sokol movement that represented key ingredients of the sports ecosystem rested early on Marxism as a philosophical orientation and Soviet fizkultura as an operational setting reflecting multiethnic and federal society (Begović, 2021). The contemporary setting, however, suggests that dynamics between actors of the sports ecosystem could be defined as centralized and bureaucratized, articulating the capacity of the same for civic participation toward social cohesion within specific non-sporting or political objectives (Begović, 2020, 2023; Brentin, 2016; Jevtić, 2019). This paper aims to stimulate discussion and follow-up research on social cohesion in and through sport within the Western Balkans. The engagement and participation of athletes are of particular interest, exploring their position within the sport ecosystem and institutional dimension within presenting a broader socio-political context through time and space. It is politics that direct processes, successfully merging the public sector and sports movement using several tools available through established patron-client relation mechanisms (Begović, 2023). The aim is to limit and sideline any discussion or coerce any individuals or groups to challenge the current constellation. In practice, reform of the public sector, as a main vehicle for wider changes, remains pending. Similar to cell membranes acting with barriers acting as selectively permeable known to the study of biology, the dominant policy actors exclude the stakeholders that do not follow the main direction (political), while transforming others to serve non-sporting or political goals (Lombard, 2014).

Moreover, socio-economic and legislative reforms with many institutional repositioning are rather vocal than practical. This didn't bypass a number of EU member states, contributing to the concept of democratic backsliding meaning that branches of power were either captured or weakened to serve particular rather than public interest (Csaky, 2020). In the countries that emerged from Yugoslavia, needed reforms were stalled, where political structures successfully combined polarization and politicization while still under

serious sanctions by the EU contributing to the concept of stabilitocracy (Pavlović, 2016). The liberalization of politics following Yugoslav dissolution didn't result in the democratized socio-political realm, quite contrary it led to endemic corruption and a sort of illiberal democracy (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Zakaria, 1997). In practice, it means formal democracy with a number of undemocratic practices resulting in weak governance of the public sector and a lack of checks and balances of branches of power (Börzel & Grimm, 2018). Bieber (2019) found that with inadequate action from the EU, the regimes in the Western Balkans consolidate stabilitocracy. These regimes managed to use transition and privatization to capture economic substance and to subdue media in creating a competitive autocratic system (Levitsky & Way, 2010). The maintenance of political power was secured combining Soviet-style rigid approach and privatization (Uzelac, 2003). This unfolded to capture a state with widespread job insecurity, dependency on public support, and degrading institutions that should be gatekeepers of the rule of law and public interest.

The distribution of public goods and resources was carefully directed within the clientelist network. In line with political monopoly, the politicized structures in sports are both vertical and hierarchical. Garamvölgyi et al. (2021), suggested that centralized and closed decision-making systems produced limited opportunities for anyone who is not part of the informal clientelist network. With these dire conditions, athletes are prevented from claiming more opportunities or even articulating problems that they are facing. Moreover, during the 1990s the transition, economic instability, and crony privatization shaped relations in sports resistant to change or reforms. The consistency of the politicization of sport with centralized and bureaucratized governing structures limits broader, inclusive, and democratic civic engagement. This is particularly evident in the continuous and silent promotion of nationalism and other radical tendencies while marginalizing the voices of athletes or limiting and controlling civic participation. That said, there is a need for comprehensive institutional reforms aimed at

engaging sport for social cohesion and integrating democratic practices in sport-related organizations.

The presented case provides important lessons for understanding the role of sports in fostering social cohesion, particularly in societies in transitions where politics dominantly shape sports governing bodies. The duality of sports as unifying and polarizing instruments has been simultaneously exercised in the Western Balkans countries coopted by political agendas. The politicization of sports undermines the potential of sports for inclusive civic participation and democratization processes of sports governance to facilitate social cohesion efforts. This case further confirms that transitional societies where divisions and polarizations dominate produce weak institutional frameworks. The future strategic interventions should engage firstly with introducing a plural policy network, depoliticization of sports governing bodies, and developing sports-related policies focusing on the integrative potential of sports, and civic engagement aimed to strengthen community building and trust among diverse communities.

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