

# Uses and Abuses of Nationalism in Contemporary Croatian Football

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The paper argues that in the contemporary world, politics and football, especially professional football, are closely connected. This interplay is often expressed through a strong presence of nationalism, both as ideology and political practice in the social fields where football and politics overlap. Since Croatia gained its independence, it has been among the countries where many protagonists of the most popular sport and politics are linked by a strong bond. That bond is strongly marked by various shapes of nationalism, from collective perception of the national team as an ideal symbol of the young nation and frequent overstatements of its connection with the nation made by many sympathizers and protagonists of football in Croatia, to chauvinist and politically extremist behaviour of one part of the fans. The essential research question is what the prevalent causes and patterns of use and abuse of nationalism in contemporary Croatian football are. The paper displays the results based on the triangulation of various research methods, particularly the ones that lead to relevant data on the complex and diverse (objective, subjective, and constructed) experience of nationalism among the organized fans in Croatia, to observing and participating, talking with fan club members, to exploring media production and political communication pertinent to this topic.

*Keywords:* Football, Nationalisms, Chauvinism, Fans

## Introduction

On 17 July 2018, around 500,000 people gathered in Jelačić Square, Zagreb's main square and the surrounding streets (*Slobodna Dalmacija*, 2018). The reason for this gathering was to celebrate the fact that Croatia's national football team had just won the second place at the World Cup in Russia. Never before and never since in Croatia, the country with a population of 4,284,889,<sup>1</sup> have so many people gathered in one place. Similar celebrations were held in other Croatian cities: Split, Zadar, Varaždin, and even smaller towns (Donji Miholjac, Omiš, etc.). These facts evince a huge popularity and social power of football in Croatia and its impact on wider social events.

This was not the first time that footballers were given a heroes' welcome after a big competition. *Vatreni* (*the Fiery*, the nickname of the Croatian national football team) won the third place at the 1998 World Cup in France and on their arrival, a huge public celebration was organized in Zagreb. Furthermore, welcome home ceremonies were organized for some other Croatian sports champions, such as skier Janica Kostelić after winning four medals at the Salt Lake City Olympics in 2002, the handball team after winning a gold medal at

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<sup>1</sup> According to the 2011 census. However, there has been an exodus caused by the economic crisis. The census that was scheduled to take place in 2021 was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

the 2003 World Championships, and tennis players who won the Davis Cup in 2005 and 2018. On these occasions Zagreb's main square and other squares all around Croatia were crowded with people, as witnessed by one of the authors of this paper.<sup>2</sup> These successes and the accompanying celebrations are perceived by the public as extremely important for the young nation, which is only a little over 30 years old, and which has certainly been affirmed through sports, especially football. In this context, Croats intensively express their national belonging through sports. Nevertheless, it turns out that there is actually a fine line between patriotism and nationalism, the latter one being most openly expressed by sports fan groups. Nationalism has had a socially integrative role in Croatia, and, at the same time, a disintegrative role for Croatia's image in the world. The fan subculture is well developed in Croatia. The leading football fan groups are Torcida (gathering fans of the football club Hajduk, Split), which is the oldest organized group in this area, and Bad Blue Boys (gathering fans of the football club Dinamo, Zagreb).

There is no real need to prove that sport and all sport actors have an important role in modern society and that they are capable of arousing great interest among the general public, which makes this subject matter interesting to scientists as well. It was first addressed by sociological and other scientific thought in the world (but also in Croatia, primarily thanks to Srđan Vrcan) in the last century.

Football has in many ways become much more than an authentic folk game and entertainment. Sometimes indirectly and covertly, and sometimes directly, it turns out to be interesting to party politics, as well as to state politics. There are close links between politics and, especially, professional football. This connection is often expressed in terms of a strong presence of nationalism, both as an ideology and as political practice. Football has been the scene of many nationalist outbursts in Croatia over the last decade. The interplay between the most popular sport and politics is very intense. This interplay is largely marked by various forms of nationalist expression, ranging from a collective perception of the Croatian national football team as one of the most important symbols of the young state and overemphasis on the connection between sport and nation, to behaviour of some fans whose messages reflect chauvinism and political extremism. National teams are a particularly strong catalyst of the social value of patriotism, i.e., of its expression, as well as temporary social homogenization (Lalić, 2018, p. 75).

In this paper, we question the relationship between football and politics in Croatia, with the thesis that football exerts politically and socially useful, that is, integrating effects, as well as disintegrating effects for the Republic of Croatia and its citizens. Furthermore, we use the thesis that the background of the abuse of nationalism is not only related to political and social circumstances, but also to the specifics of football and the functioning of the Croatian Football Association (HNS). We also use the following research questions: "What are uses and abuses of nationalism in football determined by?" and "What forms of abuse can be identified?"

### Theoretical Framework

The elaboration of our theoretical framework revolves around the two key concepts: *nationalism* and *football*.

The concept of *nationalism* is most closely related to some other related concepts that were developed in political science, sociology, and other social sciences. At this point, we briefly present particularly important terms and concepts that are relevant to the issue of the relationship of members of a particular national group to

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<sup>2</sup> The same author took active part in organising the welcome celebration for Croatia's Davis Cup team in 2018 in virtue of the executive director of the Croatian Tennis Association.

the nation itself or the nation-state. First of all, the term in question is *patriotism*, which, in our understanding, denotes a strong emotional and other attachment of individuals and groups to the people to which they belong and therefore to its pertinent community. This kind of bond is in fact an expression of the social value of a nation that conceptually orients crowds of people and directs their behaviour. This guiding idea is in many countries a very important component of a broader value system and is generally marked by conservative beliefs and understandings.

Patriotism and nationalism are closely linked, yet not identical. It is crucial to note that many expressions of patriotism do not in reality amount to nationalism, which can be conceptualized primarily as an overheated, intense expression of attachment to the nation. As such, nationalism refers to emphasizing the guiding idea of the nation in the overall value system of an individual or group. Expressed in this form, the value of the nation leads to a greater or lesser diminution of the importance of other social values: nationalism is for nationalists, in a way, the key guide to their beliefs and reasoning, thus modelling their behaviour as well. As the leading Croatian sociologist Josip Županov noted, the value orientation based on such an understanding of the nation is on the one hand collectivist in the sense that it is marked by an emphasis on “we consciousness” and related group solidarity; on the other hand, this orientation is marked by a kind of (quasi) transcendent attachment to the nation, which, according to nationalists, is often above reality, i.e., not subject to criteria of facts (Županov, 2002, pp. 86-87).

Despite such an emphasis on the nation in the overall value system, nationalism does not have to be marked by hatred towards other peoples and their members. Such hatred, often marked by verbal and physical violence, is termed *chauvinism*. In a word, all chauvinists are nationalists in some way, but it is not justified to equate nationalists entirely with chauvinists. The proportion of chauvinists among nationalists actually depends on political, economic, and other social circumstances: in situations of peace, political stability, and economic prosperity, only a minority of those who strongly emphasize their attachment to the nation express chauvinist views and behaviours. The same can be said in general for the political extremism associated with patriotism, which in Croatia, and in other countries that emerged after the break-up of the former Yugoslav federation, is predominantly right-wing in terms of politics and ideology.

Therefore, we do not approach nationalism as a social value that necessarily has negative, that is, socially disintegrating and detrimental effects. In the first place, whether there will be a crossing of the border that separates pronounced love for one's nation and homeland from hatred towards others depends on the characteristics of the social context. Nationalism can also be viewed as an ideology. According to Kedourie (1966), nationalism is a doctrine “according to which humanity is naturally divided into nations, nations are known according to certain identifiable characteristics, and the only legitimate kind of rule is self-government” (p. 28). Breuilly (1993) argues that nationalism should not be viewed as an irrational ideology, but as a “specifically modern form of politics that can only be understood in relation to the way the modern state has developed” (p. 401). Moreover, it should be taken into account that nationalism in the today's changing world is predominantly related to identity and pertinent policies. “Nationalism no longer appeals to ideology but to identity [...]this of course does not mean that ideology has come to an end, but that it has fragmented into a politics of identity: ideology is being refracted through identity” (Delanty, 1996, ch. 2.3). In his exhaustive study of nationalism, Malešević (2006) claims the following: “Identity is not something tangible or visible: you cannot touch, smell, taste or see it. Yet many claim that its presence is so prevalent today that almost everything has become a matter of identity” (p. 13).

Like some other authors (Ravlić, 2003, p. 200), we believe that nationalism in the modern world, i.e., from the last decade to the present day, has actually been more than anything else—a separate ideology. However, it is a kind of “thin” ideology which is rather limited in explaining politics and society. Despite its limitation in terms of ideas, this ideology is very strong and socially influential. Nationalism, understood as an influential social value or as an ideology, can have and has many social effects in many countries. On the one hand, it has a particularly positive effect on communities endangered by war and other conflicts, as well as by economic and social crises. The socially homogenizing effect of nationalism is especially present, as it was evidenced in Croatia in the 1990s, during the process of nation-state forming.

On the other hand, warnings about socially harmful effects of nationalism are often present in professional literature. Some authors describe *nationalism* as *patriotism*'s invidious evil twin, defining the former as “a perception of national superiority and an orientation toward national dominance” and the latter as “a deeply felt affective attachment to the nation” (Kosterman & Feschbach, 1989, p. 271). Gellner (1986) emphasizes that the nationalist imperative of the convergence of national and state borders in some situations “necessarily involves the exchange or expulsion of the population, more or less violent assimilation, and sometimes liquidation, to achieve that close relationship between state and culture (sic!)” (p. 101). R. Macdonald believes that “nationalism is a diabolical power that has blindly struck highly cultured peoples and made them fall into the bondage of dictators and allowed them to be tainted by horribly bloody deeds committed in their name” (according to Hertz, 1964, p. 252). C. C. O'Brien estimates that nationalism is “the most effective machine for mobilizing hatred and destruction that the world has ever known” (according to O'Leary, 1997, p. 221). Prominent German sociologist Ulrich Beck warns that “the road to the nation-state is paved with repression. His law is: either-or. This means outward exclusion, the construction of aliens, the image of the enemy and their removal (killing) in (threatening) wars; inward forced assimilation, expulsion, suppression of the culture and life of ‘deviant’ groups that do not adhere to the ‘mother’ language of identity” (Vrcan, 2003, p. 16).

National community means identity, and identity means the absence of something that is different, so there is no motivation for reflection, for criticism, or for experimentation (Bauman, 2001, p. 115). Whenever the affirmation and domination of identity policies with state-building pretensions begins, not only is it known that there will be hard social exclusion, but it is almost known in advance and a priori who will be excluded (Vrcan, 2006, p. 170). Prominent Croatian sociologist Srđan Vrcan notices that, in some situations, modern nationalisms and social and political actors who are inspired by modern nationalism to achieve and legitimize their current and specific political goals consciously and intentionally revive some atavisms and hatreds. They employ them by using completely modern means and techniques of communication and recycle them in order to use all those traditional resources of meaning and symbolism that they need now and here, primarily because of their political mobilization and legitimization potentials (Vrcan, 2006, p. 45).

If the notion of the nation as an “imaginary community” is founded (Anderson, 1983), then one's intense attachment to the nation is in a way imaginary, that is, unrelated to the real life world. According to Benedict Anderson, the nation is imaginary for other reasons, among other things, because most members of that community, who are otherwise culturally and socially unequal, are never seen or heard. However, the situation of a football match in a stadium filled with tens of thousands or even nearly a hundred thousand people singing the national anthem “as one” and otherwise ardently expressing their patriotism denies, in a sense, such an understanding: many members of fan groups, fan tribes, and smaller groups that make up that audience know each other and mostly express a similar or the same value system. However, it should be noted that most of

those present at the stadium do not know each other, and at the stadium, they mostly behave in accordance with the established fan ritual, and in some situations a political ritual that is much more constructed than spontaneous.

Needless to say, nationalism has been particularly strong in and about football for a long time, namely since the World Cups held before World War II. The most popular sport in most countries of the world is often marked by nationalism. Various actors in this sport, ranging from players, through sports journalists to members of the audience, express their overheated attachment to the nation, which is especially present when there are national team matches. It is particularly pronounced in international competitions, but it can be manifested on the occasion of national championship matches. The presence of nationalism in football has various characteristics and pertinent effects. These effects can be positive for society and contribute to its integration, but also negative in the sense that they weaken the social glue and lead to tensions and conflicts in the country concerning the country's relationship with international actors.

The ambivalence of the relationship between nationalism and football is in fact an expression of the complex interrelationship of this sport and politics in its entirety. Vrcan (2003) identifies four traits of football in general, and it is in these traits that the connection between this sport and politics mainly rests: "The first trait is the socially homogenizing potential of football. The second one is its socially divisive and antagonizing potential, the third one is its capability of generating and restoring tension, while the fourth one is its exceptional mobilization potential" (p. 134). According to the founder of sociology and political science of sports in the former Yugoslavia, football is used as an effective means of achieving broad value and social consensus, especially in situations where not even a minimum of such unanimity can be achieved in a direct political way (Vrcan, 1990). In several such cases, football functioned as an instrument of legitimizing political institutions and state power, especially in circumstances of intensified political conflicts and economic and social crises.

On the other hand, it has been evidenced in several situations that football is a powerful tool for systematically excluding others and explicitly opposing them. It is evident that the ease with which football manages to create opposed and conflicted groups in modern society is rather rare. Vrcan (2003, p. 255) justifiably concludes that nothing connects people of different social and cultural profiles more strongly and unquestionably than football. Therefore, there is nothing that creates real fellowship and converts individuals into brothers faster and stronger than football does (Vrcan, 2003, p. 255).

It is in football, the most popular sport in the world, as well as in the events related to it, that the most important constellations of politics and society in a particular country are expressed. Furthermore, society, in some situations and aspects, can be seen as a metaphor for football (Harrison, 1988, p. 265). In other words, certain patterns of political and other behaviour that were first developed in football, subsequently occur in society as well. Expressing nationalism in football is predominantly dependent on broader political and social actors and circumstances. Yet, in return, the latter are also influenced by the internal state of football.

Thus, Giulianotti and Armstrong (1998, pp. 270-276) point out that in exacerbated social crises, political instrumentalization of football becomes more intense.

The phenomenon of nationalism as a socially integrating and disintegrating phenomenon is conditioned exogenously, but also endogenously. In circumstances of social crises, the unnatural embrace of football and politics is stronger and more painful for society in its entirety. The problems of Croatian football and presence of nationalism have a complex conditionality and are causally related to the changes in the country's political

and social context: the country's independence in difficult conditions of war and postwar hardship, authoritarian tendencies that were expressed in the 1990s despite the introduction of pluralist democracy, traumas of the process of transition, economic/social crises, and the like. In addition, they are conditioned by causes directly related to the way of organizing and functioning of this sport in Croatia in new circumstances, which, due to a weak normative regulation of this area of social life, was determined by a most harmful—for (that) sport and society as a whole—combination of political (clientelist, crony) and neoliberal capitalism, of the “wild” type (Lalić, 2018, p. 113).

For more than a third of a century, Croatia's citizens have been constantly exposed to blows of various crises. As a result of this exposure, among other reasons, these and other forms of political abuse of football and sports are more frequent and serious than in many other countries.

The difficulties of Croatian football in the last decade of the last century were mostly marked, and even conditioned by politics. The pressure of Milošević's policy on Croatia and other former Yugoslav republics in the late 1980s, and the lack of an appropriate Croatian response, created and intensified a sense of helplessness and anger among Croats. In the first free, multi-party election held in 1990, the HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union), which fiercely defended the endangered state integrity of Croatia, won a landslide victory (Goldstein, 2013, p. 418). The war in this area began on 25 June 1991, when Croatia and Slovenia passed a constitutional decision on sovereignty and independence, and the JNA (Yugoslav People's Army) launched a war operation to protect the federation's borders. The five-day war in Slovenia was a prelude to a much wider armed conflict in Croatia and, subsequently, in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Goldstein, 2013, p. 438). War operations in Croatia lasted until August 1995, when the Croatian Army successfully pulled off the military operation code named “Oluja” (Eng. *Storm*).

After the war, Croatian fans were exposed to the authoritative pressure exerted by the first president, Franjo Tuđman. When his activities in the area of football are analyzed, presence of various (primarily nationalist) interventions in top sport can be confirmed (Bartoluci, 2013). Franjo Tuđman did not distinguish between sports, especially football, and politics. For example, at the club assembly held on 25 June 1991, by order of Franjo Tuđman, who was emotionally and even over heatedly connected to the national team and the football club Dinamo, the name “Dinamo” was changed to “HAŠK-Građanski”. Two years later it was changed to “Croatia”. The first change was undertaken following intense efforts to abolish the communist legacy: the second one was induced by typically nationalist expectations of the general identification of football sympathizers and the general public with a club bearing that name. People in power did not want to, nor did they succeed, and perhaps could not understand that the abolition of Dinamo entailed the abolishment of the Bad Blu Boys (BBB)—a basic label and determinant of their fan identity. Furthermore, members of Torcida, Armada, Kohorta, and other fan tribes were dissatisfied with the name “Croatia” because such a name meant that the Zagreb club was more nationally and politically orthodox, and, as a consequence, most certainly privileged. The return of the name “Dinamo” took place on 14 February 2000, only after Tuđman's death.

In the first years of the new millennium, there was undeniable progress in both social and economic terms. Proof of this is the opening of accession negotiations for EU membership, which began in 2006, as well as the invitation to become a full member of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) in 2008 (Goldstein, 2013, pp. 502-506).

However, Croatia was not quite ready to face the great world crisis in 2008. What is more, Prime Minister Ivo Sanader had long claimed that there was no crisis in Croatia at all, and all this was reflected in the

escalation of fan violence. Some matches, especially those between Dinamo and Hajduk, turned into real battlefields. Many members of fan groups used violence as a way to express their inner anger and frustration. Some members of fan groups justified their antisocial behaviour with social apathy and lack of prospects (Goldstein, 2013, p. 508).

Croatia, led by Zoran Milanovic, the left-wing prime minister, joined the European Union on 1 July 2013. Almost in parallel, political conflicts were growing within the country, and old, World War II conflicts and relations between partisans and Ustashas in society were being revived. Football fans, inclined towards the right-wing option in the period from 2013 to 2016, drew attention both home and abroad to Croatia through a series of nationalist excesses.

In parallel with the political democratization of the country at the beginning of the 21st century, there was an increasingly authoritative and non-transparent leadership of the HNS, where Zdravko Mamić, the informal head of Dinamo, gradually took over all power. It was precisely the clientelist behaviour in the HNS that greatly influenced the manifestations of fan groups, and even the BBB, who opposed the leadership of their club despite the fact that Dinamo had won the Croatian champion title for eleven years in a row.

Apart from clientelism, an important condition for the progress of football in Croatia, there was also the acceptance of positive trends in the development of this sport in leading football countries, i.e., the construction of comfortable stadiums and football camps, since almost nothing had been invested in the existing infrastructures in the last thirty years (Lalić, 2010, p. 32). The economic sustainability of Croatian football and clubs is based on the principle of forming and, subsequently, selling players. This mainly refers to the most successful club, Dinamo, which in 20 years earned more than 135 million euros from the sale of players (Bajo & Primorac, 2016, p. 4). It is through transfers that players themselves are provided with the prospect of social mobility, and permanent security of life, which is also a motive for young people to enter football.

While Croatian clubs differ significantly in terms of structure of income from Western European ones, the sports audience has similar characteristics. An individual who has failed to acquire status and identity in the workplace may turn to football microculture as it provides him with opportunities to gain personal importance, prestige, and status (Marsh, 1982, p. 250). In the stands, and thus in Croatian football in general, organized fans who politically provoke the official culture, among other things, to direct the attention (of other actors, the media, the public) to them and their groups are the most prominent. In doing so, they seek to strengthen group identity and internal homogeneity, highlight their superiority over rival groups, and make their group famous in public. Besides, individuals who lead singing and chanting and prepare banners and send extreme right-wing messages in other ways, actually reinforce personal affirmation within the group, which is for some of them—especially those facing serious difficulties and obstacles in education, work careers, and other life activities—the only affirmation they can achieve at all (Lalić, 2015, p. 161).

Fans are the focus of the general public during any conflict. However, according to the subcultural theory of ritualized aggression, it is not aimed at seriously injuring rival fans, but at their ritual humiliation, and this aggro in the stands is very typical of ritual crowd conflicts that can be seen in many other areas of our society and around the world (Marsh, 1978, p. 30). Conflicts between fan groups most often break out when these groups—as “we-groups”—try to represent the local identity more strongly, as opposed to the rival “they-group” and its local identity, or when fair play on the field is rather seriously disrupted. In these and similar situations, football serves only as a pretext for a kind of “war game”, in which rival fans are perceived as “conquerors”, and at the same time the same fan group wants to “conquer” the rival group’s territory (Lalić, 2011, p. 43).

In the light of the foregoing, it is evident that the abuse of nationalism in football, and the conflict between politics and fans are complex phenomena that cannot be approached in a one-sided fashion.

### **Methodology**

The methodological approach is made of various research methods, applied by one of the authors in his 30-year exploration of the connection between football and politics in Croatia, and exposed in his monograph about that connection through history and today (Lalić, 2018). The prevailing method is ethnographic, along with the historical method and the interview.

Since the early twentieth century, ethnographic fieldwork has been central to anthropology. Indeed, such work, usually in a society very different from one's own, assumed the character of a rite of passage required for entry to the "tribe" of anthropologists. It usually involved living with a group of people for extended periods, often over the course of a year or more, in order to document and interpret their distinctive way of life, and the beliefs and values integral to it (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, p. 2). A study of history offers a valuable perspective with which to view our present circumstances. It provides a backdrop from which to determine what is novel in the current situation and which factors serve to distinguish the present situation from any others in the past. History helps one understand the sources of contemporary problems, how they arose, and how their characteristics unfolded through time. It also identifies the solutions that worked in the past and those that did not (Mason, McKenney, & Copeland, 1997, p. 307).

In this paper, the method of in-depth interviews is used. The basic determinant of an in-depth interview is a heuristic approach, i.e., the search for new knowledge or the development of ideas and research hypotheses that seek to understand the way people view a particular problem (Milas, 2005, p. 586).

Sociology of sport is a rather developed discipline in Croatia. The work of the doyen Srđan Vrcan is almost paradigmatic, and what followed Vićan's activity are important research projects, works, and books by Dražen Lalić, Benjamin Perasović, Ozren Biti, Marko Mustapić, Zoran Žugić, Furio Radin, Ivan Magdalenić, Zoran Žugić, Damir Pilić, and Hrvoje Prnjak (Perasović & Bartoluci, 2007, p. 111).

The paper covers the period from 1990 to the present and contains only a small part of the data collected during many years of extensive research, primarily by one of the authors, Dražen Lalić, as well as his long-term monitoring of fan subculture in this area. This discussion follows the suggestion of Luis Althusser on the great heuristic potential of researching extreme cases, as well as the practice of the so-called opinions in extremes. They make it easier and faster to discover what is at work in other so-called normal circumstances, but which generally remains latent and emerges in a crisis situation, sometimes in a form of a sort of social, political, and cultural avalanches that, once triggered, erase everything in front of them and change almost overnight the entire social, political, and ideological landscape (Vrcan, 2003, p. 35).

### **Research**

Many people in the world got to know Croatia through great Croatian athletes, such as skier Janica Kostelić, basketball players Dražen Petrović, Dino Rađa, and Toni Kukoč, tennis player Goran Ivanišević and others. In his analysis of Croatia's image and identity, communicologist Božo Skoko (2004) places special emphasis on the importance of Davor Šuker (he was the top scorer of the 1998 World Cup), Luka Modrić (the best football player in the world in 2018), and some other footballers, and, of course, the national team which is informally dubbed "Vatreni" (*The Fiery*). In this sense, Skoko (2004) points to the success of the Croatian



national football team at the 1998 World Cup in France in particular: “The final competitions, including the semifinals, were watched by millions of people who had never heard of Croatia before” (p. 283). Skoko’s analyses and those by other experts on national image and identity in the last three years included also a huge success of the Croatian national team when Croatia won the second place at the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

However, apart from individual athletes, sport came to the limelight of foreign researchers through the issue of fan conflicts in this area. Even renowned researchers, like Richard Mills (2018) approached the topic of sport by addressing the topic of conflicts of football fans prior to the breakup of the former Yugoslavia in 1990. Back then, fan wars were not just “conquest” of foreign territory. They already had a completely different connotation. The historic clash of fan groups took place on 13 May 1990, when a match between Dinamo and Crvena Zvezda (*Red Star*) from Belgrade was to be played at the Maksimir Stadium in Zagreb. However, on the eve of the match, there was a conflict between different actors (numerous members of the Bad Blue Boys and Delije fan groups, the then Zagreb militia and fans and officials of the two clubs, and there was even a physical confrontation between the footballer Zvone Boban and the militia on the stadium turf, etc.). Probably in a clearer way than anything else, this clash showed that interethnic and political frictions before the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, primarily between the two largest nations and their political leaders, could not be overcome peacefully. And more than that, it showed that living together in the same country was no longer possible because there could no longer be supporters of clubs from Croatia and Serbia in the stands of one single stadium in the same game (Lalić, 2018, p. 164). James Montague (2008) labelled the unplayed match between Dinamo and Red Star of 1990, one of the five games that “changed the world”.

The strong influence of that match is also shown by the collection of papers by six Serbian scientists who analyzed hate speech in the print media of Serbia from 1987 to 1991, titled *The War Began on Maksimir*. The title was taken from the paper written by Srećko Mihailović (1997) that was published in this collection. This paper addresses the issue of fans and sports (Mihailović, 1997, pp. 77-124). However, the authors of this paper believe that the war did not begin on 13 May 1990 at the stadium in Zagreb, but that peace ended at the Maksimir stadium that day. The play on words in the name of Maksimir is also paradoxical, a combination of the words “Maxi” (Cro. *maksi*) and “peace” (Cro. *mir*), whereas, in the end, that football stadium was actually a harbinger of war. In reality, the war started a little less than a year after the unplayed match Dinamo-Red Star. More precisely, the armed conflict broke out on “Bloody Easter”, i.e., on 31 March 1991, when the Croatian police officer Josip Jović lost his life, as one of the first victims of the war (Lalić, 2018, p. 164). It occurred even before the official proclamation of the Republic of Croatia’s independence and its international recognition.

### Uses

Another football event from the early 1990s had a strong political connotation and was a strong homogenizing factor in Croatia. It is the match between Croatia and the USA, which was played on 17 October 1990. On the eve of the war, it was not easy to organize such a match. Croatia had not yet declared its independence, so the duel was organized in secret (Perdec Augustić, 2015). It was marked by a strong unity in the stands—the unity of the largest fan groups of Croatia, that is, the Bad Blue Boys (Dinamo fans from Zagreb) and Torcida (Hajduk fans from Split), but also the unity with politics. “As soon as we arrived at the stadium, we were all fascinated by the atmosphere. When we came out onto the pitch, there was an eruption! After we heard the crowd shouting ‘Croatia, Croatia’, which lasted a few minutes, we were blown away. People chanted

at our every shot towards the goal. There was no chance that we would not take off after the first referee's whistle", said Aljoša Asanović in the book *Vatrenilakat* (Perdec Augustić, 2015). However, the idyll did not last long, as the first major conflicts between BBB and Torcida took place in 1992, and conflicts between various football actors (fan groups, BBB, Dinamo management, etc.) soon intensified. The same occurred between some of these actors and certain political actors, primarily between the BBB and the President of the Republic of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman, and the state authorities (Lalić, 2018, pp. 172-173).

In pre-war times, some basic military organization and training had been practiced by Delije members well before the first shots were fired. Militant fans became hardcore volunteers, elevated to the status of national heroes. At the same time, the hardcore Croatian fans, carried away by patriotism, particularly the BBB from Zagreb and the Torcida from Split, organised their fighting mobs into political assault squads on the streets and squares of Croatian cities. They were among the first to join the military units of the emerging Croatian army. In the first phases of the war the fans' symbolism was used by soldiers on both sides of the conflict. The first armed clashes were frequently described by those participants as a direct continuation of the clashes between Croatian and Serbian fan groups. Therefore, there should be nothing surprising in the fact that monuments were later erected in Croatian football stadiums in memory of their fallen comrades (Vrcan & Lalić, 1999, p. 177). While Croatian fan groups exclusively fought and defended their own country, and some of them and their homes, Serbian volunteers, led by the leader of Delije and war criminal Željko Ražnatović Arkan, fought in the territory of Croatia, and later of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Virtually since the establishment of the sovereign and independent Republic of Croatia, the official performances of the national team have been marked by a strong sense of belonging to the young nation. Accompanied by fans' enthusiasm and great media attention, they were a strong propaganda trump card of the HDZ regime in the first decade of independent Croatia (Lalić, 2018). The ruling elite particularly wanted to derive direct political benefit from the third place at the 1998 FIFA World Cup in France (Goldstein, 2013). "Today, it is truly honourable and proud to be a Croat. This result is the fruit of the Croatian struggle for freedom and independence", said Franjo Tuđman after the national team had won the bronze (Karin, 2015, p. 50). Tuđman and his assistants often demanded and received unquestioning obedience from the leadership of the national team, but also from the management of Dinamo, as well as from most football players (Lalić, 2018). Tuđman attended the quarterfinal match against Germany in Lyon, sitting in the ceremonial box, next to him—German Chancellor Helmut Kohl: "Now the whole world will talk a little differently and a little nicer about Croatia and Croatian sport. We must express our immeasurable gratitude to all of you, led by the coach", said Tuđman back then (Sportskarevija, 2017). Tuđman attended all other matches until the end of the World Cup.

Apart from the matches of the national team, Franjo Tuđman often attended the matches of Croatia (the name of Dinamo in that period). One of the authors of this paper personally witnessed when a protected column of vehicles under sirens rushed through Zagreb towards the Maksimir Stadium to see the match of the then Croatia against Cibalia from Vinkovci, which was attended by fewer than 1,000 spectators. Tuđman appointed Zlatko Čanžuga, the head of the Zagreb HDZ, at the head of the then Croatia (his desire to change the name of the club from Dinamo to Croatia to encourage national feeling among fans not only from Zagreb, but also from the whole country). The scandals and clashes between Dinamo and Čanžuga fans strongly marked that period. The biggest turbulences were related to the change of the club's name. In that conflict, Čanžuga was in fact an extension of Franjo Tuđman's hand, that is, of the attitudes and action of the powerful man according to whom

football must be not more than a servant of the (ruling) ideology and politics. Such an approach was largely adopted by other politicians who held leading positions in Croatian football in the 1990s, such as Branko Mikša, former Minister of Economy and Mayor of Zagreb, who was president of the HNS in 1997 and 1998 (Lalić, 2018, p. 180).

At the beginning of 2000, only after Tuđman's death, the name Dinamo was restored, but after a title of national champion at the beginning, a result crisis followed. In season 2004/2005, the club actually fought only for survival in the league. From season 2005/2006, a remarkable turnaround occurred: Dinamo, led by manager Zdravko Mamić, who formally held various positions, yet all that time was the leading man not only of that club but of all Croatian football, won eleven titles in a row. With the dominance of Dinamo in Croatian football, there was a weakening of domestic professional football, a sport burdened with many difficulties and conflicts, and it was precisely the rise of Dinamo's leading figure to be the cause of many conflicts. In that period, strong clientelism emerged and it has marked Croatian football to this day.

Zdravko Mamić, like many footballers and football mediators, supported the HDZ and Ivo Sanader in the 2007 parliamentary election, and even paid for an advertisement thanking the then Prime Minister (Sinovčić, 2007). After that, Mamić was a "faithful soldier" of the HDZ. The large "motivational" rally (as they called it) of the HDZ that was held at the Dražen Petrović Hall in 2013 had its master of ceremonies: Dinamo's executive president Zdravko Mamić. Furthermore, Mamić generously financed the 2015 presidential campaign of Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and organized a celebration of her birthday (Alač, 2021). The statement of a young Torcida member to one of the authors of the paper speaks volumes about the attitude of fans towards Mamić: "Fuck the country where politicians bow to Mamić and in which Dinamo is always the champion." As Mamić's position was strengthening, the leading people of the association NašHajduk and Torcida had weaker and weaker arguments in convincing Torcida members and other supporters of the club that one should never resort to violence and that everything could be resolved peacefully.

While most footballers regularly supported primarily the HDZ, Zvonimir Boban, who was the captain of the football team that won the third place at the 1998 World Cup in France, in a conversation with writer and columnist Miljenko Jergović, clearly announced that he would support Zoran Milanović, i.e., the left-wing SDP (Social Democratic Party) in the 2015 election (Jergović, 2015). Boban was known for his conservative views and therefore his support for the left was a real surprise.

The great (popular) cultural potential of football and its popularity among the general public can be used and is often used by political actors in their communication with a view to increasing the acceptance of their option by the general public, and sometimes by people who are not (seemingly or really) supportive of their option (Lalić, 2018). When politicians attend important football matches, their popularity can be further strengthened. In fact, such a way of spontaneous or—probably more often—constructed behaviour has been more pronounced before various elections, for a little more than a third of a century (Lalić, 2018).

Croatian politicians used the 2018 World Cup in Russia really extensively for their promotion. The then President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović used the excellent results and the national team's second place in the World Cup, not only for the promotion within Croatia, but also for her promotion in the world. When Croatia reached the final, Grabar-Kitarović posted a photo of herself wearing a red jacket and a red Croatian checkerboard scarf on Facebook, but nowhere in the photos were there any of the footballers who actually reached the final. She also posted: "My people, IT IS POSSIBLE!!!! Well done FIERY! Well done, all the fans! CROATIA IS IN THE FIIIIINAAAAAL!!!" This is very different from the usual "stiff" political

statements. Moreover, Grabar-Kitarović went to the players' locker room after the game, and, after that, literally took over the show at the cup and medal award ceremony. The President hugged the players one by one and behaved in a rather unusual manner when communicating with French President Emmanuel Macron. In short, the President did an incredible PR, hence the fact that on the day of the World Cup final, 25 percent more media content was published about Grabar-Kitarović than about Luka Modrić (Večernji list, 2018). While Croats on social media mostly joked about their president, the comments left by foreigners were quite the opposite. For example, some of them wrote that they would immediately change all their politicians for Kolinda. "I wish I was born in Croatia, I love you Kolinda," one social media user wrote. "Do you see the President of Croatia, can she become the President of Colombia? Our country needs people like her, not these puppets who don't know how to run the country. We love you, Kolinda," a fan named Maria from Colombia wrote. "My holiday crush, Kolinda, Croatian president," another social media user wrote. Some would change her for Macron (Index.hr, 2018a).

Prime Minister Andrej Plenković also used the World Cup for his promotion and chaired a Government meeting wearing a national team jersey, which was worn by all ministers as well. He took the opportunity and announced: "I believe that in the future we must find solutions, when I see this stadium in Moscow, for a national football stadium in Croatia. When, if not now? I think the national team deserves it. In this way, we will send a message to football players, especially young people, to continue playing sports." (Index.hr, 2018b). It is worth noting that three years have passed since then, but the idea has not yet started to be realized.

### Abuses

The already mentioned head of Dinamo and the ruler of Croatian football, Zdravko Mamić, often goes a step further than extending mere support for right-wing political options. Thus, on 15 March 2013, he had a chauvinistic outburst on the radio when he stated that Željko Jovanović (the then Minister of Education, ethnically Serbian) "has blood cells in him that hate everything Croatian, a man who is a Serb who has never in his life worked in science, education, sports, except that ... he was a weightlifter, he holds the ministerial position in the most important department in the country", and he added that "blood gushes from his eyes and that his smile is not natural because, when he smiles, one can see only his fangs, teeth ready for slaughter" (Net.hr, 2017). The first-instance verdict established that Mamić's statement violated Jovanović's dignity on the basis of ethnic origin and thus Mamić committed discrimination by harassment. The verdict stated that Mamić's assertions were discriminatory because they implied that Croatian citizens who are ethnically Serbs should not hold a position of minister due to their ethnicity (Tomičić, 2017).

One of the biggest nationalist scandals in sports in Croatia took place on 19 November 2013, after the return match of additional qualifications for the World Cup in Brazil. Croatia played against Iceland. It qualified for the World Cup with a 2-0 victory at Maksimir (HINA, 2013). The stopper of the Croatian national team, Joe Šimunić took the official microphone after the game and started chanting the salute "For the Homeland!", and most of the 23,000 spectators at the stadium answered with "Ready!" Šimunić was punished by a ban on playing in 13 matches and thus ingloriously ended his international football career (Lalić, 2015, p. 145). Šimunić was born on 18 February 1978 in Australia, as a child of emigrants from central Bosnia. He played for the Croatian national football team at two World Cups and three Euros and made more than a hundred appearances for the national team. "I am happy and proud to have grown up in Australia and to have their mentality. However, I am proud of my Croatian origin", said Joe Šimunić (Gojčeta, 2013). He became one

of the heroes of the diaspora, whose members easily identify with Šimunić and his worldview. “I always wanted to do that and I don't care if someone punishes me,” said Joe Šimunić (24sata, 2013) immediately after the game and chanting the controversial Ustasha salute “For the Homeland Ready”. After sharp attacks, Šimunić tried to explain his move at Maksimir: “I deny any political context of my statement which was guided exclusively by my love for my people and homeland, and not by hatred and destruction. I have repeatedly pointed out that I was born and brought up in the countries of Western democracies, and that any form of exclusivity or national intolerance is alien to me and is not part of my value system”, said Šimunić.

Joe Šimunić tried to challenge his suspension in court, but lost in all instances, including the highest one. Šimunić tried to overturn the verdict at the European Court of Human Rights, which refused to discuss the lawsuit, arguing that “as a well-known footballer and idol to many fans, he had to be aware of the possible negative impact of this act on audience behaviour and refrain from it” (Lukić, 2019).

In this case, the public's attention was much more focused on the football star Šimunić, than on the evidently inappropriate and socially harmful extremist behaviour of a large number of fans who are mostly rather young (Lalić, 2015, p. 145). The question arises as to whether today's members of fan groups and other young fans in Croatia as individuals are predominantly extreme right-wingers. It cannot be answered validly and completely by an analysis that remains at the collective level of expression of the examined phenomenon. With a view to providing a valid answer to the question posed, the research approach of methodological individualism can be useful. French sociologist Raymond Boudon (2012, pp. 114-115) argues that the paradigm associated with this approach “establishes that the causes of social phenomena reside in individual behaviours, that these behaviours arise from personal and impersonal reasons whose reality can in principle be verified, and that the participation of two factors parametrically determined by the context”, i.e., that social phenomena are “collective effects created by a combination of rational individual actions”, and can be positive, negative, or neutral, desired or undesirable, and the like. Young fans as individuals certainly do not belong exclusively or mostly to the (extreme and other) political right.

Apart from non-partisan and politically disinterested members of the Torcida, Bad Blue Boys, Armada, and Kohorta and other fan groups met by one of the authors, there are also leftists, regionalists, and liberals, along with a large number of those who consider themselves right-wing. A 27-year-old member of Torcida, a waiter by profession, told the author the following: “I am a leftist, but I sing nationalist and extremist songs with others because I do not want to stand out from Torcida and because we like to provoke politicians and other powerful guys.” Furthermore, many young fans as individuals are of mixed political orientation, given that they consider themselves right-wing in some respects and left-wing in others. “I am a right-winger because of my patriotism and because I fought for the Croatian state, and a left-winger because I do not tolerate banks, thieves in suits and exploiters,” claims the unemployed 43-year-old veteran of Torcida. A 30-year-old BBB veteran said that he was bothered by members of the group being called right-wing extremists in public, because he believes that showing love for one's homeland is not the same as belonging to the right, which is always on the side of the rich.

Despite initial announcements (the promise of former Minister of Education, Science and Sports Željko Jovanović to “drain the football swamp” has been betrayed several times), the administration of Prime Minister Zoran Milanović failed to contribute to suppressing the great difficulties of the most popular sport in our country. This issue was analyzed by one of the authors of this paper in a professional text (Lalić, 2012).

The Croatian Football Association punished the national team member very lightly. Immediately after the end of his playing career, Šimunić became the assistant coach of the national team, which is certainly one of the indicators of the real political mood (of the leadership) of the HNS, as well as the attitude of the leading people of that Association towards the Ustasha salute. In the last few years, mostly because of this affair, Šimunić has become a kind of star of the extreme political right in Croatia (Lalić, 2018, p. 223).

The nationalist salute “For the Homeland Ready”, which is unfortunately and wrongly considered to be patriotic by some Croatian citizens, was in the centre of attention at another match of the Croatian national team, the one with Norway on 28 March 2015. It was again the key reason why the following qualifying match for Euro 2016, Croatia-Italy, was held on 12 June 2015—without the audience. The decision was made by the UEFA disciplinary commission, which cited the racist behaviour of fans and the use of pyrotechnics at Maksimir as an explanation for such a decision. It was about chanting “For the Homeland Ready” and six firecrackers, as reported by HNS (Gol.hr, 2015).

The match against Italy without spectators was played in Split. However, television cameras soon showed that a swastika had been drawn on part of the lawn. During the halftime break of the match, the employees in charge of the maintenance of the stadium went out onto the field and tried to repair the damage. It was soon established that the lawn had been treated with a chemical days before, so that the grass would turn yellow, but in a way that it could not be seen in daylight (Index.hr, 2015).

The Government of the Republic of Croatia, still headed by Zoran Milanović, strongly condemned the display of the Nazi symbol: “The Government expresses great dissatisfaction with the negligence of the match organizer who failed to do everything necessary to prevent such an incident. The police are already taking measures to find the perpetrator” (Vlašić, 2015).

Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, who had just before that act defeated Ivo Josipović in the election, thus becoming the President of the Republic of Croatia (Tportal, 2015), also condemned this hooligan and shameful act of Croatian fans. “I strongly condemn the appearance of the swastika on the lawn at last night's match between the national teams of Croatia and Italy in Split. Croatia has the best and most loyal fans, but also a very serious problem with hooligans whose goal is to denigrate not only Croatian football, but also the Croatian state” (Vlašić, 2015).

However, President Grabar-Kitarović soon supported the thesis from the right political spectrum that it was a conspiracy and that it was in the interest of someone from the then SDP government to denigrate their own state: “It is not about any fascist elements, but about someone who did it on purpose, precisely in order to create an image in the world of how fascism, Nazism and right-wing thoughts are growing in Croatia,” said the President (Express, 2019).

Foreign media intensively covered the events in Split. The BBC, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post* and DW reported in detail on the events on their pages.

Despite various insinuations, the case eventually went into statute of limitations, because four years had passed since the incident, and that amounted exactly, according to the provisions of the Misdemeanor Law, to the deadline for the absolute statute of limitations for misdemeanor prosecution. That is, the final verdict which would have been the only one to break the statute of limitations, was not rendered until 10 June 2020 (Express, 2019).

The Croatian Football Association earned the largest penalty in its history so far for the swastika on the Poljud stadium. UEFA's fine was one hundred thousand euros, the Croatian national team was deprived of a point in qualifications and two matches had to be played without the audience (Express, 2019).

Another nationalist excess occurred on 25 March 2016 during the Croatia-Israel match. At the friendly match in Osijek, the salute “For the Homeland Ready!” and chauvinistic shouts “Come on, ustashas!” could be clearly heard from the stands, and Croatian media reported that high-ranking guests and participants in the match acted as if they had not heard it. The media noted that this was another in a series of similar scandals, but that instead of condemnation, only praise could be heard for the great atmosphere created by just over 10,000 fans, who cheered for the Croatian national team in extremely unfavourable weather conditions (Al Jazeera, 2016). The media also pointed out that high-ranking state officials, primarily Prime Minister Tihomir Orešković and Minister of Science, Education and Sports Predrag Šustar, as well as the president of the Croatian Football Association (HNS) Davor Šuker, witnessed the whole event. However, as *24sata* wrote, no one reacted to the chanting of “For the Homelan!” from one part of the stadium and responding by “Ready!” from another part of the stadium, which could be heard live.

Apart from national team matches, abuse of nationalism, nationalist and chauvinistic outbursts occur regularly in matches of the highest rank of domestic competition, the First Croatian Football League (HNL). As part of the “Direct Prevention of Fan Violence” project, HHO observers followed the matches in 24 rounds of the HNL league in the 2016/2017 season. Their report was startling. At the Hajduk-Rijeka match, Hajduk fans shouted the following chauvinistic slogans during the match: “Kill, kill a Serb”, “And people of Zagreb, of Rijeka, with fists and legs, bottles and laths, all for our Hajduk”, “Nasty Rijeka, stinking city, I will kill half of your Armada, itchy Rijeka, you are full of Serbs, don’t worry, Rijeka, there are more willows”, “there is of course”, “For the Homeland Ready”, and the Armada adds “Dalmatian pussies”, and “... fuck you, fuck, Split, Rijeka is the champion”. During the match, Torcida also set fire to the state flag of Serbia, and a banner written in Cyrillic was displayed. “A small boat sails the sea”, the text of a song sung by Serbian Chetniks during the World War II, as a sign of aspiration for a greater Serbia and access to the Adriatic Sea, followed by another banner with the message “Planes are paid by the club, buses by the county, and your ships and your cheek by the Rijeka mosque?!” (Starešinčić, 2017). At the same time, during the same round, at the Dinamo-Split match, the BBB members chanted “Mamić Gypsy, leave our sacred club”, after that they sang “That day will come, the drug addict will fuck off ...”, and then again “Mamić, you Gypsy, leave our sacred club” at the 22nd minute. Several banners with Zdravko Mamić’s head crossed were also displayed (Starešinčić, 2017). In almost every important match of the domestic football championship, chauvinist slogans can be heard, which has almost become a ritual of fan groups.

A year later, at the already mentioned spectacular heroes’ welcome ceremony in Zagreb for winning the second place at the World Cup in Russia in 2018, a factor of almost frenetic unification of the nation was manifested, yet there was a disintegrating nationalist factor as well. A disputable episode regarded the fact that the controversial singer and political activist of the radical right option, Marko Perković Thompson was in the bus that transported players and the leadership of the national team from the airport to Zagreb’s main square (Al Jazeera, 2018). Part of the audience approved of Thompson’s appearance and singing when welcoming the silver footballers, but the other part was of the opinion that the singer spoiled the fantastic atmosphere with a selfish gesture and self-promotion and burdened the event with nationalist charge.

The direct audience of the Croatian national team, when there is an opportunity to gather (if there are no penalties that make the stands empty at matches), at Maksimir or some other stadiums, has lately been composed of right-wing and non-political fans. Yet, due to their disinterest in politics and other reasons, members of the latter category do not disturb extremist chanting and singing (Lalić, 2011, p. 203).

## Conclusion

The paper confirmed the initial thesis that football has socio-political and socially integrating role, but it also exerts disintegrating effects for the Republic of Croatia and its citizens. Spectacular heroes' welcome ceremonies organized for sports champions and frantic cheering unite the people and the young nation, but nationalist, chauvinistic excesses at matches clearly disintegrate the people. Although it can be considered that the abuse of nationalism is related to political and social circumstances, the paper showed that in Croatia there are specifics of football that are related to the functioning of the Croatian Football Association and that cause excesses in stadiums, which confirms the initial thesis. Some of nationalist outbursts in stadiums are actually provocations by fan groups that arose as a direct response to the clientelist way of running the main football organization in Croatia. Certain forms of nationalist outbursts are constantly repeated, most often as chanting of the controversial salute "For the Homeland Ready" in stadiums, which is associated with the Ustasha regime from the World War II. Nationalist incidents can also be seen as a form of fan revolt against politicians who do not take any steps to change the situation within the HNS. Young fans, who form the core of fan groups, shout the salute "For the Homeland Ready", that is, they express extreme right-wing views, although some of them do not share the same views in life but simply follow the masses, i.e., adhere to fan rituals. It should certainly be taken into account that Croatia is a young state, created amid various conflicts, so the feelings of belonging to the nation are all the more intense.

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