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SPORT AS AN INSTRUMENT OF YUGOSLAV NATIONAL POLICY IN MACEDONIA 1918–1941

Nation-building activities are usually inspired by two-way nationalism. The first type is of a separatist variety, where the aim is to establish a new nation free from an existing empire or multinational state. Secondly, the nation-building process seeks to create a nation-state by bringing together disparate regions, tribes, and other social or political formations.¹ In the Balkans of the early twentieth century, the first-mentioned type of nationalism was ongoing. Years of neglecting ethnic identities, cultural attributions and other identity markers under Ottoman rule, brought about ethnic nationalism as a form of political struggle for freedom and power between dominant and marginalised groups.

The creation of Yugoslavia in 1918 was a turning-point. One of the most pressing missions of the newly-founded state was to integrate an heterogeneous and inert population, to reduce differences and forge a single identity. In this project, sport was a significant social institution which generated solidarity and unity, and a means by which people could identify themselves with the nation-state. It was already known that sport had been successfully used to symbolise the prowess of the nation.² The unaffected aspiration of the Yugoslav authorities was to develop a youth devoted to their country and nation. This was to be achieved through systematic and permanent education, of which an important part was physical education. Nonetheless, it appeared that they were not aware that civic or ethnic identities and passions could develop through sport.³ The key issue was how to deal with nationally undefined young people; Macedonians, the

¹ ALAN BAIRNER, *Sport, Nationalism, and Globalization. European and North American Perspectives*, New York 2001, p. 4.

² DILWIN PORTER/ADRIAN SMITH, *Sport and National Identity in the Post-War World*, London 2004, p. 24; see also: *Sporting Nationalisms. Identity, Immigration and Assimilation*, ed. by MIKE CRONIN/DAVID MAYALL, London 1998.

³ JOSEPH MAGUIRE, *Sport Worlds. A Sociological Perspective*, Champaign 2002, p. 144.

example on which this chapter draws, were not among the other constitutionally acknowledged nationalities (Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, etc.).

In contrast to the endeavour of Yugoslavs to make a united state of South Slavs, and their subsequent attempt at 'Yugoslavisation', one could make a comparison with the American concept of nation-building, with its melting pot, ethnicity problems, assimilation processes, and cultural pluralism.⁴ It is hard to draw a simple parallel between the Americanisation and 'Yugoslavisation' processes. Similarly, French or British 'ethnic' or 'popular' nationalism differed from older forms of patriotism, or the 'state-led nation-building' that was developing in Yugoslavia. Within such a national policy sport was intended to promote the idea of the unitary national state.⁵

The history of sport is a barely explored theme in Yugoslav historiography (with a few exceptions). Therefore, it is necessary to emphasise each significant aspect of correlation between national policy and sport. It is also essential to discuss how sport was involved in the educational concept, as well as to demonstrate the particular actions of the Yugoslav government. Special attention has to be paid to the militarisation of physical education, as well as to the propagation of mass sports. By surveying these phenomena, we can not only anticipate how different ethnic or religious groups (especially forbidden Macedonian nationality) fitted into official integration plans, but also reveal the visible intentions of the state and weigh the success or failure of its policy. Before attempting to do this, the political and ethnic confusion of that period needs to be explained in a short preface. The rest of the chapter is composed of three thematic parts. In the first chapter we expose the most obvious government's interference in sports by means of a widespread quasi-athletic organisation called 'Sokoli' (the Falcons). As that form of national integration was inevitably failing, the Yugoslav authorities decided to make physical education obligatory, which is elaborated in the second chapter of this chapter. The third part is an attempt to depict the development of both team and individual sports in Macedonia under very complicated national and political circumstances.

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⁴ ANETTE R. HOFMANN, 'E Pluribus Unum'? Zur Rolle des Sports im amerikanischen Nation-building Prozess, in: *Sportwissenschaft* 34 (2004) 1, pp. 33-49.

⁵ RICHARD HOLT, *Contrasting Nationalism. Sport, Militarism and the Unitary State in Britain and France before 1914*, in: *Tribal Identities. Nationalism, Europe, Sport*, ed. by JAMES A. MANGAN, London 1996, pp. 39-54, p. 39. Holt pointed out how did sport embody the differing traditions of centralism and federalism in France and Britain.

After the Balkan Wars and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the traditional Serbian connections with Macedonia and Kosovo, which were established in the Middle Ages, gained legal status. During the first Balkan War of 1912 Serbia took control over Vardar Macedonia, while Greece occupied Aegean Macedonia. At the same time, Bulgaria gained Pirin Macedonia in the south-west of historic Macedonia. Until the territorial reorganisation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1929 (when it was renamed Yugoslavia), Macedonia and Kosovo were officially parts of the province of South Serbia.⁶ Between 1929 and 1941 these areas came into the Yugoslav territorial subdivision of Vardarska Banovina which was named after the Vardar River.

Interwar Macedonia was a melting pot, a region of mixed nationalities and confessions. Within it were: Macedonians, Serbs, Bulgarians, Albanians, Turks, Jews, Aromuns, Greeks, Gypsies and so on. The confessional structure of the province indicates that Orthodox Christians made 50 per cent of total population, until the Muslim share was 48.2 per cent. According to the 1921 Census, which was exclusively based on a mother-tongue principle, in 'Southern Serbia' there were 878,625 'Serbs or Croats', 416,977 Albanians, 148,019 Turks, 9,585 Aromuns and so on. Macedonians, as well as their native language were constitutionally unrecognised.⁷ Some additional estimates put the numbers of Macedonians (Macedonian Slavs) at around 600,000, with nearly 280,000 Serbs and Bulgarians in Macedonia between the two World Wars.⁸

In addition to the ethnic confusion, Macedonia was encumbered by a strong feudal heritage in both the economy and culture, and seriously damaged by guerilla warfare in its borderland. Under such circumstances, the unstable Yugoslav government was not able to carry out its solemn promise of prompt modernisation. The Yugoslav authorities neglected cultural and educational activities in this disputed territory, instrumentalising them rather as a suitable means for achieving the desired national cohesion. Serbian language education was compulsory in all schools, and the Macedonian Orthodox community was placed under the

⁶ VLADAN JOVANOVIĆ, *Jugoslovenska država i Južna Srbija 1918-1929*. Makedonija, Sandžak, Kosovo i Metohija u Kraljevini SHS, Beograd 2002, pp. 7-9. The South Serbia province (1918-1929) comprised sixteen counties of Macedonia, Kosovo, Metohija, Sanjak of Novi Pazar, and eastern parts of Montenegro.

⁷ Definitivni rezultati popisa stanovništva od 31. januara 1921, Sarajevo 1932, pp. 86-122.

⁸ BRANKO PETRANOVIĆ, *Istorija Jugoslavije 1918-1988*, vol. 1, Beograd 1988, p. 32; LAZAR SOKOLOV, *Promene u strukturi stanovništva NR Makedonije 1921-1953. godine kao odraz ekonomskog razvoja*, Skopje 1962, pp. 31, 82.

jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1920.⁹ In the eyes of foreigners, it seemed that the Yugoslav aim was to denationalise the several hundred thousand Bulgarians and Macedonians within its boundaries, and to mould them into Serbs (since Macedonian nationality was not recognised at that time).¹⁰ According a much-cited simplification, Slavic Macedonians were ‘neither Serb nor Bulgar, but something between’.¹¹

The Serbian political elite considered the liberation of Macedonia from Ottoman rule and its incorporation into Serbia (1912) and Yugoslavia (1918) a reconquista of long-lost territory. Bulgarian and Greek pretensions towards Macedonia made it the scene of constant struggle, torn by national, religious and political passions. The integral Yugoslav ideology was made official in 1929 and endured until 1934 when the Yugoslav king Alexander was murdered in Marseilles. During the years of the Regency (1934-1941) the authorities began to decentralise the country and to abandon Alexander’s brand of Yugoslavism. Dejan Djokić has noted that Serbian sacrifices in the First World War were turned into one of the main founding myths of the Yugoslav state: ‘The 1389 Kosovo battle – around which the key Serbian myth developed – was celebrated as a pan-Yugoslav myth, as well as anniversaries of the two Serbian uprisings against the Ottomans of the early 19th century. However, most non-Serbs were unable to identify themselves with the Serbian national mythology and perhaps the lack of a common Yugoslav national mythology was the crucial reason why integral Yugoslavism ultimately failed.’¹²

During the 1920s, physical education became a battlefield for conflicting various ideologies and national programmes.¹³ The militarisation of physical education was a sort of compensation for the restrictions and limitations proclaimed by the Paris Peace Conference and the Geneva Conference on Disarmament. At that time, sport was already treated as a means of preparing young men for military service in the most developed parts of Europe (in France and Britain, for instance).¹⁴ So, the Yugoslav authorities estab-

⁹ HUGH POULTON, Macedonians and Albanians as Yugoslavs, in: *Yugoslavism. Histories of a Failed Idea 1918-1992*, ed. by DEJAN DJOKIĆ, London 2003, pp. 115-135, p. 117.

¹⁰ *Chicago Tribune*, 29 November 1929, [s. p.]; *Globe-Toronto*, 21 March 1930, [s. p.].

¹¹ *The New York Times*, 30 July 1940, [s. p.].

¹² DEJAN DJOKIĆ, (Dis)integrating Yugoslavia: King Alexander and Interwar Yugoslavism, in: *Yugoslavism*, ed. by IDEM, pp. 136-156, p. 151.

¹³ NIKOLA ŽUTIĆ, Sokol Kraljevine Jugoslavije i rimokatolička crkva 1929-1934, in: *Zbornik Matice srpske za istoriju* 42 (1990), pp. 57-86, p. 64.

¹⁴ HOLT, p. 39.

lished the Ministry of Physical Education in order to increase indirectly the defensive capability of the country. Their interference in physical education and sport was particularly noticeable from 1929-1935.¹⁵

1. 'Sokoli' – The Falcons in Action

The most obvious conjuncture of sport and politics was the creation of an organisation called 'Sokoli' (Falcons). The falcon, the freedom-loving bird after which the movement was named, became a symbol of liberation, which Tyrš tried to exploit in order to develop not only the body, but also the mind of the underprivileged Czech people in the Habsburg Monarchy. Serbian teachers introduced this movement to Macedonia in 1908, although the region was still under Ottoman rule.¹⁶ The first regular Sokol organisation in Macedonia was established by Serbs in 1914.¹⁷

From 1918, the Yugoslav king Alexander was behind the Falcons seeing in them a suitable device for his national integration plans. He considered them a 'knightly organisation' which had to heal political life. Their attitude towards national question ('One nation, one state, one falcon movement') fitted into his efforts to create an integrated society and impose national Unity. Even Yugoslav freemasons sponsored the Falcons, because their goals were allegedly the same (from their point of view).¹⁸ According to its statute, the Falcons were supposed to build up physically wholesome, strong and nationally conscious citizens of Yugoslavia. For this reason, they also had to organise lectures, competitions, summer vacations, excursions, jamborees and so on. Since the Ministry of Physical Education was found in 1929, their meetings were usually supervised by police commissaries, to the annoyance of senior members of the Falcons.¹⁹

Gym teachers were instructors in the organisation, which was steeped in historical symbolism and pan-Slavism. In spite of voluntary nature of the enrollment in the Falcons (on the record), the authorities tried to impose it

¹⁵ NIKOLA ŽUTIĆ, Sokoli. Ideologija u fizičkoj kulturi Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1929-1941, Beograd 1991, pp. 37-42, 63-64.

¹⁶ DRAGAN CVETKOVIĆ, Sokoli i sokolski sletovi, Beograd 1998, pp. 34-35.

¹⁷ WOLFGANG KESSLER, Der Sokol in den jugoslawischen Gebieten, in: Die slawische Sokolbewegung. Beiträge zur Geschichte von Sport und Nationalismus in Osteuropa, ed. by DIETHELM BLECKING, Dortmund 1991, pp. 198-218, p. 217.

¹⁸ PETRANOVIĆ, p. 182; NADEŽDA JOVANOVIĆ, Politički sukobi u Jugoslaviji 1925-1928, Beograd 1974, p. 161.

¹⁹ Archives of Yugoslavia-Belgrade (AY), collection 71, file 3, unit 8 (Short: AY, 71-3-8).

among teachers and schoolchildren as much as possible. It was especially conspicuous in ethnical composite areas, near the borderland. The Falcons' pan-Slavic tendency was incompatible with the national spirit of the non-Slavic minorities.²⁰ Thus their pilgrimage to the Field of Kosovo in 1939 for the celebration of the 550th anniversary of the battle of Kosovo, appeared exclusive and irritating to some. The persistent efforts of this rigid urban organisation to expand its influence in the countryside were fruitless because of the particular ethnic and topographical structure of rural settlements.²¹ The Falcons maintained their international communications (with jamborees in Prague, Sofia and other Slavic capitals), and at the end of 1931 there were more than 10,000 members in Macedonia practicing track and field. The first jamboree with international guests was held in Skopje in September 1928.²² In 1939, the Skopje district included over 40 societies, the real estate of which was on the increase. At the same time, the whole area of Vardarska Banovina had only 13,490 members. It was a small number in comparison with the persistent and strong the state propaganda.²³ Military methods obviously did not attract more potential members.²⁴

Members of these associations were privileged with many facilities: they had free (railway) transportation, shorter military service, and finally, their associations were released from many taxes. The defensive training of the members was directly linked to the Yugoslav Ministry of the Army, because both active and reserve officers took part in instruction (shooting, orientation, preparations for a gas attack and so on). Moreover, the Ministry of the Army not only began supplying the Falcons with guns, ammunition and gas masks, but also put its own shooting-ranges at their disposal. Military medals usually honoured the best shots among the Falcons, and all members had to learn from the textbook entitled *Required Knowledge for Those Who Want to Serve Part-Time in the Army*. Even the military factory

²⁰ ZORAN JANJETOVIĆ, *Deca careva, pastorčad kraljeva. Nacionalne manjine u Jugoslaviji 1918-1941*, Beograd 2005, pp. 316-317.

²¹ HRVOJE MACANOVIĆ, *Sport-Sokolstvo*, Zagreb 1933, p. 30.

²² CVETKOVIĆ, p. 35.

²³ Godišnji izveštaj o radu sokolske župe Skoplje u toku radne 1939. godine, Skoplje s. a., pp. 11, 85, 111.

²⁴ VOJO KUŠEVSKI, *Pregled na pojavata i razvitokot na sokolstvoto vo Vardarska Makedonija*, in: *Prilozi za istorijata na fizičkata kultura na Makedonija 1* (1975), pp. 51-65. During the late 1930s, the Falcons district of Skopje was managed by Colonel Ivan Branovački. Kuševski asserts that Falcon movement in Macedonia was narrow and nationalistic, and a part of more widespread Serbian propaganda.

in Kragujevac started to produce small caliber rifles for their stores.²⁵ The increase in the Falcon movement was followed by reductions in military service. Judges, civil servants, military commanders and doctors were prevalent among their senior members.²⁶

Macedonian Muslims obediently took part in the organisation, although they were often exposed to confessional abuse. During a Falcons lecture in Ohrid in January 1939, which was entitled 'The role of the national poetry of the South in creating the Serbian thought and manliness', a few members openly assaulted Turkish attendants, abusing their confession. Actually, they were declaiming a Serbian epos in which the Muslim religion is mocked. After the Yugoslav Ministry of Physical Education required the local authorities to punish the offenders, participants started to apologise themselves with the excuse that their lecture was misunderstood. In February 1939, the Islamic Religious Community repeated that the Ohrid incident could seriously threaten national cohesion.²⁷

However, national incidents often took place among the Christians. On July 24th 1935, the governor of Vardar Macedonia reported to the Yugoslav Prime Minister that Yugoslav Falcons from Macedonia, which were special guests of the Bulgarian sports union 'Yunak' (Hero), behaved as Bulgarians at the Youth Sports Convention in Sofia. They were exposed to systematic agitation by Macedonian activists, who had taken up positions all round the railway station, loudly shouting: 'You are not Serbs. You are Bulgarians. There is no peace in your parts, no freedom, you are not equal, you are under slavery!'²⁸ Some of the Yugoslav Falcons (particularly from Kumanovo and Prilep) were applauding, even singing the Bulgarian national anthem and dynastic song. In spite of the presence of their superiors, they threw away their 'Sokol' badges and replaced them with the badges of the Bulgarian 'Yunak'. Furthermore, on parting at the station, when the train started, the Falcons shouted Bulgarian salute 'Hurrah!', instead of the Yugoslav formal greeting 'Zdravo!' The governor concluded in his report that Yugoslav authorities were not sufficiently rooted in Macedonia, and for that reason, serious attention had to be paid 'to the national transformation of these people'.²⁹ Unlike his report, most Yugoslav newspapers wrote

²⁵ AY, 71-15-44, Document from 25 July 1940; Jugoslovenski sokolski kalendar za 1929. godinu, Ljubljana 1928, pp. 34-38, 117-119.

²⁶ AY, 71-3-8, Document from 24 February 1938.

²⁷ Ibid., Document from 25 February 1939.

²⁸ Macedonia. Documents and Material, ed. by VOIN BOZHINOV/L. PANAYOTOV, Sofia 1978, pp. 850-851.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 851-852.

about the magnificent welcome and 7,000 red (Yugoslav) shirts overwhelming streets of Sofia.³⁰

In the late 1930s, even Yugoslav Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović opposed the Falcons, labeling them a bureaucratic, dogmatic and obsolete organisation. He used to say that Yugoslav youth was looking for some sports to develop competitive spirit, instead of amusement. Therefore, considering the people which were 'liable to degeneration', sport had to serve the 'racial strengthening of the Yugoslav nation', as he said.³¹ In fact, the Falcons anti-Germanism was entirely at variance with the course of his foreign policy. Moreover, the head of the Roman Catholic Church in Yugoslavia began accusing them of atheism, although his attempts sounded like a desperate effort to divide the Slovenes and Croats from the Serbs.³² In any case, as the Falcon gymnasts took part successfully in the Olympic Games in Paris, the Yugoslav Sport Associations tried to absorb them. The Falcons were ready to enrich their programme with ski-sports and swimming.³³ During the Prague jamboree in 1938, the Yugoslav Falcons were successful, but none of them came from Macedonia. At the world championships in athletics from 1922-1930, the Yugoslav medal winners were from Croatia and Slovenia, namely those who were avoiding similar government organisations.³⁴ In other words, membership of the Falcons was not a guarantee of success in international competitions.

Macedonian historians had to admit that the Falcons had left behind some positive effects and a valuable inheritance (by sowing the seed of mass physical education, developing female emancipation and promoting community-health and hygiene). On the other hand, they asserted that the movement was a medium for drawing Macedonian youth away from political life and a prelude to political denationalisation and national assimilation. Another remark was related to the fact that sport was furthering only talented individuals, whereas the Falcons offered opportunity to everyone.³⁵

³⁰ *Nedeljne ilustracije*, 27 August 1939, p. 4.

³¹ PETRANOVIĆ, pp. 288-289.

³² *South Slav Herald*, 1 February 1933, pp. 3-5.

³³ MACANOVIĆ, pp. 40-45.

³⁴ AY, 71-15-44, 7 May 1938; Sokol. List prednjaštva sokola Kraljevine Jugoslavije, Ljubljana 1938, p. 281.

³⁵ KUŠEVSKI, pp. 62-65; MACANOVIĆ, p. 67.

2. Mandatory Physical Education (MPE)

Some sport societies propagated sobriety and self-denial, but, off the record, they were keeping down the spread of communism.³⁶ According to some malicious remarks, the authorities did not expect results from the old generation, but they felt that they could influence the rising generations. They gave licence to debauchery, drunkenness and gambling on purpose, in order to corrupt youth. Macedonian émigré organisations bewailed the 'Serbian oppressive policy of assimilation' in their frequent petitions to the League of Nations.³⁷ Meanwhile, the Yugoslav government considered it an obligation to pupils to train them physically, beginning in 1934. Such coercive physical training was to serve the government's aim of mixing different ethnic and religious groups into a unified Yugoslav nation. The new policy of real Yugoslavism found the MPE more appropriate than the Falcons.³⁸

In fact, as statistics showed, the effect of the Falcons movement was negligible (only three per cent of the total population were included in Yugoslav Falcons Associations), and so the authorities decided to make physical education obligatory.³⁹ Social and national integration obviously failed, and the main obstacle was found in inaccessibility of rural areas. Regardless of the fact that the Falcons was officially open to each class, confession and nationality, much of population kept out of it, that is they could not be coerced by state propaganda. This formed the decisive impulse for the Yugoslav authorities to rationalise their other approaches.

Physical education was made mandatory by a law passed in February 1934, but until January 1938 it was hindered by many factors (lack of teachers, low finances, political boycotting and transportation problems in dispersed mountain villages). Superintendence was entrusted to the Minister of Physical Education whose assistants were municipal authorities. After the enactment, they were charged with drawing up the lists of school children who were obliged to take part in the MPE courses, but also with punishing undisciplined members along with their parents. In addition, the law appointed a formal person to act as a link between the Falcons and MPE. Each village school had to form its own Falcons troop in order to

³⁶ Stenografske beleške Narodne skupštine Kraljevine SHS, 37th session, 6 March 1928, p. 299. By the way, health conditions in Macedonia were marked with overall undernourishment and widespread malaria. Almost 80 per cent of Macedonian peasants did not use any soap, and 74 per cent of death was caused by 'unknown disease'.

³⁷ BOZHINOV/PANAYOTOV, pp. 781, 790, 791, 838.

³⁸ PETRANOVIĆ, pp. 289-90.

³⁹ ŽUTIĆ, Sokoli, p. 56.

speed up the implementation of the newly established educational pattern. Thus, the authorities expected to reach Macedonian peasant youth, and to begin their education 'in a pure Yugoslav spirit'.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the voluntary nature of the Falcons suddenly disappeared.

The Mandatory Physical Education Law officially started to be put to practice in June 1937 as 'holiday courses' which were more successful in Serbia and Bosnia than in Macedonia, Croatia and Slovenia. Each of the nine Yugoslav regional units had its propagandist whose mission was to coordinate courses in the shooting and handling of weapons.⁴¹ Yet, it was hard to engage prospective instructors to work without any pay for their professional service. Besides, there was no municipality, except Skopje, which regularly provided funds for that purpose. Every year on the anniversary of its liberation, the city of Skopje entertained those people liable for MPE who competed in both track and field and shooting. The sports programme was usually followed by concerts and theatrical performances with an unavoidably national content.⁴²

The strong campaign against the MPE was lead by the communists who focused on 'downtrodden youth' and 'stolen Sundays'. Their boycotting activities (lectures, pamphlets, fly-sheets) appeared fruitful, notwithstanding the fact that they were politically outlawed. The holiday courses in Macedonia included 57,043 young participants in 34 districts of Vardarska Banovina, although that territorial subdivision was comprised 44 districts.⁴³

Just as the Falcons caused several national and confessional incidents, the MPE courses produced some undesirable consequences too. During a summer vacation in Vrutok on the Vardar River one boy scout shot another by accident (revolvers were included in their regular equipment!).⁴⁴ In April 1939, in a village under the Shara mountain, some Muslim children refused to remove their fezzes during the exercises. Their confessional magistrate urged Yugoslav authorities to leave the Muslim ordinance as it stood, and his intervention resulted in a compromise: Muslim schoolchildren were to put away their fezzes during the exercises, and free to wear them in the classroom. Nevertheless, in 1939 the governor himself asked

⁴⁰ AY, 71-3-7, Report on mandatory physical education.

⁴¹ ŽUTIĆ, Sokoli, p. 79. An ex-MPE participant from Skopje prided himself during his military service that he was the most skilful in his squad, owing to the experience he had acquired during some holiday courses.

⁴² AY, 71-10-25, Reports from Skopje (8 January and 7 August 1938). Such sport ceremonies were followed by Serbian national songs and stage-plays based on Serbian traditions and history.

⁴³ AY, 71-3-8, March 1939.

⁴⁴ AY, 14-194-716, p. 256, Document from Gostivar (1930).

the Ministry of Physical Education to exempt Muslims and poor tributaries from the MPE courses.⁴⁵

3. Out of the Yugoslav Championship

Sport, especially football, experienced a genuine revolution at the regional level. This game came to Macedonia from English officers stationed in Turkish garrisons (1909) and after the First World War thanks to the allied troops.⁴⁶ The first clubs in Skopje were founded by local businessmen, civil servants and priests without public support, and in spite of frequent grumbling about 'immorally dressed players'. Following the reestablishment of Serbian power in Macedonia, the club 'Miloš Vojnović' was founded (named after a Serbian medieval nobleman).⁴⁷ Many churchmen took part in the formation of sports clubs as benefactors and honorary members, for example, the Archbishop of Skopje, Josif, who became a member of the club 'Karadorđe' (which was named after the founder of the Serbian dynasty).⁴⁸

In 1920, tradesmen from Skopje founded 'FC Vardar' which was soon renamed 'Macedonia' – a provocative name in the eyes of Serbian politicians. The founders had to give it a more appropriate one, and the 'Skopje Sport Club' (SSK) was born. It was to be a leading club in the province, but by the mid-1930s, it was on the verge of financial collapse. The club management was preparing to construct a modern stadium in Skopje and bring in a prominent Austrian coach. The authorities were not concerned about the situation, leaving Macedonian football to private enterprise. The SSK's leaders usually emphasised their experience in 'national ideology promotion' among the youths who had joined the club. Generally, the names of the clubs were inspired by Serbian medieval traditions, in spite of their Macedonian identity. These were obvious allusions to the Serbian presence and the crucial part Serbia played in liberating Macedonia from the Ottoman Empire. The most resonant club names were: 'Dušan Silni' (Serbian mediaeval emperor), 'Jug' (South), 'Jugosloven' (Yugoslav), 'Šumadija' (a central region in Serbia), 'Mačva' (a region in northern Serbia), 'Bratstvo' (Brotherhood), 'Hajduk' (Brigand), 'Ognjena iskra'

⁴⁵ AY, 71-10-25, Report of the Ministry of physical education (15 August 1939).

⁴⁶ 50 godina fudbal vo Makedonija 1919-1969, Skopje 1969, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Enciklopedija Jugoslavije, vol. 3, Zagreb 1958, p. 413. The first match after the First World War was played in Skopje between a schoolboys' club and a team of British officers and soldiers.

⁴⁸ *Vardar*, 12 March 1933, p. 3.

(Fiery Sparkle), 'Odbrana' (Defence), 'Babunski' (the surname of the komitadži⁴⁹ leader Jovan Babunski), and so on. The leadership of 'FC Šumadija' (from Strumica) repeatedly had to explain their decision to name the club after the Serbian homeland as an act of respect towards their Serbian liberators.⁵⁰ In April 1936 the manager of 'FC Kumanovo' also asked Ministry of Physical Education to provide them with an appropriate playground, because, as he said, 'creating wholesome young people by physical education is actually building up stronger and more persistent sons of the fatherland.'⁵¹ In Prilep, two clubs existed: 'Macedonia' – consisting only of the Bulgarians and 'Yugoslavia' – the club of Serbian officials and officers. Since 1927, all of these clubs started to compete within the Skopje Football League. Most players were the sons of Yugoslav officials working in Macedonian towns. Unskilled football referees were initially recruited among the trade circles, with increasingly more army officers and clerks later on.⁵² Consequently, there were a lot of incidents at matches (goalkeepers with eyes poked out, players with broken legs and arms, several players became deaf, and so on).⁵³

The Southern Cup was a kind of substitute for the Macedonian absence from the Yugoslav Championship (1919-1934), where the game was promoted at friendly matches. According to the territorial organisation of the state, clubs from Macedonia had to qualify for the Serbian National League. They could reach the Yugoslav Championship only if they beat the best clubs from Belgrade. Such unfair competition system prevented any opportunity for the promotion of Macedonian clubs. Even they had succeeded in the Serbian League, on the next level they had to contest with incomparably more powerful teams from Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia. When 'FC Građanski' (Skopje) finally started to compete in the Yugoslav Championship in 1935, it gave up just after two futile rounds.⁵⁴ In other words, this inequitable competition was a reflection of political circumstances, as well as an immediate consequence of the Yugoslav

⁴⁹ Komitadži was the term for a man who belonged to the revolutionary committee (of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization). Later, komitadžis were usually identified with brigands, and political outlaws.

⁵⁰ AY, 71-24-61.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *South Slav Herald*, 17 August 1932, p. 5; 50 godini, p. 69; *Vardar*, 23 August 1934, pp. 6-7.

⁵³ Ibid. During the match between 'FC Kumanovo' and 'Skopje Sport Club' in August 1934 the visiting team was obviously discontented with the referee's decisions.

⁵⁴ 50 godini, pp. 31-36. FC Građanski came back again in 1938 when the national league was expanded.

national policy.⁵⁵ Within the Southern Cup the marginal football leagues of Skopje, Niš and Kragujevac would compete. However, matches were played on Christian holidays, whereas around one half of the Macedonian population was Muslim. In spite of the immense enthusiasm, and the fact that football clubs in Macedonia were constantly growing in number (from five clubs in 1919 to 51 clubs in 1940), most of them were cramped by exorbitant taxes.⁵⁶

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Individual sports did not take root there, although in Skopje a racecourse and two tennis playgrounds existed.⁵⁷ Skiing remained the privilege of the gendarmerie and police forces, whereas the aeronautics and parachute jumping were left, out of pragmatic necessity, to the Army. Motoring and bicycling were impossible because of deficient equipment, although rally frequently passed there in order to promote and emphasise Yugoslav unity.⁵⁸

Even reserve officers had to popularise sport, which was the third-placed priority among their other duties (national work, modernisation of the Army, popularisation of sport).⁵⁹ King Alexander favored archery and horse riding as two indispensable (defensive) activities. For this reason, after his death, the Regency supported the establishment of so-called equestrian circles. Another link between sport and politics was gliding. As a result of the fact that gliding clubs in Germany were seen as a source of high quality pilots, Yugoslav gliding was initiated in 1932.⁶⁰ The Skopje Air Club was an oasis for the best pilots in the country, because they had to serve in the air forces in a permanent crisis region. Its most famous aeroplane was named 'Kosovo', but it never became more than a tourist attraction. In the early 1920s, the club's planes were largely used in operations

⁵⁵ If they had been acknowledged as a nation, the Macedonians would probably have had their own national league, which would provide them secure permanency in the Yugoslav Championship.

⁵⁶ AY, 71-3-8, 5 July 1938; AY, 71-24-61, Requests and complaints (1936); *Vardar*, 26 February 1933, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Vođ kroz Vardarsku banovinu, Skoplje 1931, p. 13.

⁵⁸ Statistički godišnjak Kraljevine Jugoslavije za 1931. godinu, 3, Beograd 1934, p. 128. In the province with almost 1,700,000 inhabitants and barely 1,800 bicycles (approximately a bicycle per mill), there was no interest in this sport. Likewise, nobody from Macedonia was the member of the Yugoslav Motor Club.

⁵⁹ *Vojška i narod*, 1 July 1936, [s. p.].

⁶⁰ ŽUTIĆ, Sokoli, pp. 73-79.

near the Albanian border.⁶¹ When Skopje Gliding School constructed 12 new gliders in October 1940, it was an occasion for officials to demonstrate again their invention in naming planes. According to an old military ritual of baptising new aircraft, the most prominent Yugoslav politicians gathered at Skopje Airport in order to christen the planes. Yugoslav Prime Minister Dragiša Cvetković was called upon to name the first of 12 school planes. His choice was name 'Babuna', i.e. the mountain well-known as a komitadži hideaway. Then the Minister of Physical Education picked out the name 'Kraljević Marko' (Prince Mark) according to the oldest son of Serbian King Vukašin, who ruled in Western Macedonia in the 14th century. The Minister of the Army chose 'Obilić', the surname of a Serbian hero involved in already mentioned Battle of Kosovo, while the Third Army Commander was more 'imaginative' – his plane was simply named 'Kosovo'.⁶²

Sport was an opportune way to calm anxious people. On the eve of the Second World War, the leading Macedonian football club 'Građanski' was finally competing in the Yugoslav Championship in full swing. Their matches were broadcasted by Skopje radio station, while Greek troops were pushing forward on the Albanian front, and the Yugoslav artillery was scattering 'unidentified' airplanes above Struga. Regardless of these obvious signs of war, the newspapers' most spectacular headlines were the results of 'FC Građanski'! Even the tennis club's annual session was held in Skopje, as if nothing unusual were happening around. The tennis club chairman (who was also the leader of the ruling party in Macedonia) said: 'In the meantime, while other nations bleed, our citizens are calmly going about their own business.'⁶³

4. Conclusion

As a land of incoherent extremes, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia strived to transcend national diversity by bottling up separatists and proponents of autonomy, and by creating a new nation of loyal Yugoslavs. The whole government administration was involved in the 'Yugoslavisation' process. It seems the most engaging region was Macedonia with its vague and constitutionally unrecognised nation. Hence, the sport factor in the Yugoslav government's policy towards Macedonia was not negligible. It was a

⁶¹ *Vardar*, 1 July 1935, p. 3.

⁶² AY, 38-10-39, document from 13 October 1940.

⁶³ *Glas Juga*, 14 February 1941, p. 5.

part of broad national policy with specific and very sensitive tasks: repressing disloyalty, intrusion of Serbian national mythology and its celebration as pan-Yugoslav, as well as the promotion of an integral Yugoslav ideology among youth. The government's influence was perceptible in the unceasing intrusion of Serbian traditional names and customs, instead of the proscribed Macedonian.

At the same time, the militarisation of physical education was intended to improve the defensive capabilities of the army. Accordingly, the Falcons resembled a quasi-athletic association whose activities were converted into genuine military training. The Falcons' ideologists claimed that their organisation and sports were complementary activities, which were leading to the same goal, via two separate ways. In spite of some powerful propaganda, barely three per cent of whole Yugoslav population was involved in the Falcon organisation. Moreover, Macedonian villages remained entirely outside these activities.

Mandatory physical education was established in the mid-1930s under the same circumstances to compensate for the Falcons' inefficiency. In the Macedonian case, it was supposed to draw young Macedonians away from political life, and perhaps, to camouflage the gloom of their everyday lives. So-called holiday courses were organised in only two-thirds of all the districts of Vardarska Banovina, in spite of an established legal obligation. These efforts failed because of a prevailing common disinterest, political boycotting, and a lack of public funds. By misusing the idea of sport for the sake of national necessity, the Yugoslav government relinquished team and individual sports to private enterprise, with no public support. As the weakest clubs within the Serbian League, Macedonian football clubs were marginalised and deprived from the Yugoslav Championship.

The dissolution of unified physical education came about on the eve of the Second World War, when separatist tendencies became invigorated. Moreover, freemasons and Falcons were marked by the state officials as remnants of liberalism, which was followed by rapprochement between the Falcons and the communists. If we agree that sport can reflect many aspects of society reliably, we can conclude that the Yugoslav state was too ambitious, but out of step with its own potential. Its poor judgement as well as its immature and awkward adjustment in national policy deepened antagonism and animosity towards those very Yugoslav institutions that it had aimed to strengthen.