

Is sport without violence possible in Serbia?

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Any sport event will present us with a unique space for socialization. The decision whether to surrender to an orgy of violence and most primitive impulses, or simply join the triumphal atmosphere of victory is made on an individual level. In this country, due to events of 2009 (tragic death of Brice Taton) and 2010 (riots following the first Belgrade Pride), much time was spent on a – seemingly fruitless – debate on how to rein in violence. In the meantime, it is fascinating how the character of this “animal” has evolved.

Dejan Suput, Research Fellow in the Institute of Comparative Law, and an expert associate of the Belgrade Football Association, recently warned how there is a growing number of incidents occurring at matches played between youth teams, caused by parents and coaching staff. This same trend was noted back in 2008, in a research report written by Ljubica Bacanac, Nebojsa Petrovic and Nenad Manojlovic for the Ministry of Youth and Sport (MYS). Today, the symptoms of “the English disease” have been detected in basketball, handball, hockey and other arenas where they were previously unimaginable.

Presenting the initial findings from the focus group discussions, initiated by the New Policy Centre (NPC, www.cnp.rs) within the project “For sport without violence”, Djordje Vukovic from CeSID said how, no matter what, you can always expect there will be 10% of citizens (in the context of sport events, fans) who will behave anti socially. This number corresponds to another one, showing how there are 11% of individuals who perceive themselves as “most devoted”. For them, it is the media to blame for “inflating” the hooligan story out of proportion, just in order to increase their profits. Although no direct correlation can be established, several individuals who took part in the focus groups stated their belief that violence is a justified expression of dissatisfaction with the general state of society. What the research has also shown is that political orientation plays an important role. Those who are violence-prone have a conservative, deeply traditional outlook.

What do they have to say of themselves? As Vukovic pointed out, taking part in pre-arranged fights is part of the “inherited tradition” and is caused by a “flood of emotion”. Group they belong to closely resembles a “hierarchical organization” in which “leaders have a vested interest”. Their behavior is “a type of modern chivalry”, despite being “socially undesirable”. In few words, there is a “ladder” you can climb, while a sense of belonging is guaranteed: therefore, you’re indebted to the group. Finally, as true fans, they are expected to fight the system in every occasion.

Hooligans in Serbia do not differ too much from their colleagues in the West and East of Europe. They see their identity, way of life, and relationship to other groups as unique and special. They may scorn, yet have no issue with benefits of globalization: they bond with groups from other countries, create their own networks, and start resembling a “modern tribe”. One concern is that in their unforgiving fight against the system, in a context where young people have little space for political expression, hooligans might turn into desirable social models.

Focus groups and in general, research that CeSID had conducted for the NPC is important because it was the first successful attempt to encompass, in one place, a number of persons belonging to fan groups. This becomes even more important, as the Action Plan, as well as approach by Serbia's Ministry of Interior (MoI) was to exclude fans that pose a risk, and include moderate ones. Yet, despite the best efforts of the MYS and the Football Association of Serbia (FAS), modest result had been achieved.

That is why practitioners in some countries – Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands first – have turned to alternative measures in their attempt to suppress violence. They have tried to facilitate cooperation between fans and their associations (groups), the clubs and law enforcement officials. In Germany, these so-called fan-projects aim at developing cooperation and exchange of information between key stakeholders. In Belgium, young people are offered alternative ways to express themselves and develop. In the Netherlands, clubs are trying to establish relationships with violent groups and individuals, such as – among others – convicted hooligans that are later helped to integrate into society and find work. This approach is somewhat reminiscent of the demobilization and reintegration, usually practiced with soldiers of the warring parties.

The Groningen football club, with a developed fan culture has implemented the project “fan coach” where rehabilitated, formerly convicted hooligans try to influence young people who are at risk. At the same time, other (also convicted) hooligans are offered the possibility to, if they are willing to regularly report to police, may be allowed to come to the stadium again. Another, smaller club from the Netherlands, SC Cambuur Leeuwarden has developed an award winning approach where “mentors” who are young volunteers agree to be companions to convicted hooligans, helping them not to fall again under the influence of violent groups. Judging by the number of incidents, both teams' approaches have produced results.

However, alternative approaches have often been criticized by public as “too soft”. It is not easy to determine whether they have achieved the desired effect of prevention or not. Practice in the Netherlands has shown that, while certain success may be achieved with young people, on a “dedicated” or “career” hooligan projects like these can have little impact. Precisely the Dutch experience, of a developed country, a stable and rich society, high quality football competition, strict laws, effective judiciary, and so on, has shown that we must always reckon with individuals on whom no initiative or alternative approach can have an impact. For them, the violent confrontation represents an end in its own right; since they have developed the perception of their group as elite, the last one standing and not afraid of confronting law enforcement agencies within an organized society.

Numerous obstacles stand in the way of implementing these solutions in Serbia. As we noted above, it is necessary first to exclude offenders, which requires the courts and judiciary – often rated as the weakest link in state's response to violence – begin to process cases more quickly. Then, it will take considerable investment in the infrastructure of sport facilities – stadiums and indoor arenas.

In doing so, particular experiences of developed countries will not be easy to implement. For example, in Northern Ireland, the initiative to introduce a Code of Conduct came from the fans themselves. They did this because they were tired of sectarian violence that made

supporting the national team impossible. This sea change in terms of atmosphere had attracted entire families.

It is up to the clubs to consider best ways of including fans not only in management structures, but also decide whether it is possible for fans to become owners of a certain (usually fixed) share of the club. This practice, developed in Germany, guarantees club's "relationship" with its "base"; in turn, fans themselves become more interested in high quality competition, raising the security of event to a higher level, and bringing more spectators to the stands, which all results (ideally) in higher profits.

It seems, however, that the ugly image sent from Genoa finally influenced the decision makers in Serbia to devote more attention to the problem of violence in sport. In recent months, the Council for the Prevention of Violence chaired by the Prime Minister accepted the "UEFA conclusions" (a list of recommendations compiled by Council of Europe expert group) for further work to combat violence. First step towards creating a professional steward service was made through a Rulebook initiated by the MoI.

First bans on attending sport events were imposed on convicted hooligans. The National Football Information Point was formed, with police officers working in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac and Nis. Changes to the Criminal Law and Law on Criminal Procedure were announced, with the purpose of enabling the prosecutor's office to open and conduct investigations by using special investigative techniques. Taton case has shown that, when there is sufficient will, time prior to trial can be shortened.

In particular, Red Star Belgrade adopted in May 2011 the first Rulebook attempting to regulate relations between this football club and its supporters.

It is now necessary to complete cases pending in courts after years of delay, ending the debate in which acts of violence are being made irrelevant. In particular, it is important to end the conflict between the two biggest clubs – the Red Star and the Partizan – which has been going on for years, making it difficult for any action to be implemented. It is necessary to emphasize the positive examples, to help regulate the fan movement in smaller communities, and it appears that local governments – not just the Government in Belgrade – in conjunction with sport associations must take a greater share of this burden. Finally, because violence occurs after a personal decision is made within a specific, high-risk group, it is necessary to increase the effort invested in work with children. We all have to move forward, from *ad hoc* campaigns to a more systematic response to violence.