

A Goal at a Time: Sports and Kosovo's Statehood

Written by Rakshit Chopra

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RAKSHIT CHOPRA, SEP 27 2016

The discourse on sports being a conduit for nationalist pride has amply matured since the days of Orwell, who called serious sports 'war minus the shooting'. Adjudging from the nation-builder's viewpoint, nonetheless, sporting activities do bear fruitful utility. Sports – especially when played in a team – help transcend the barriers of socio-economic disparities, facilitate mutual interaction, and expedite the process of national mobilization and unison. Moreover – and, unfortunately, to many a dictator's delight – they uphold the ideal of a hero that can inspire an entire society's morale even in the bitterest of times. Ace sports-persons are, thus, often bestowed the status of demigods amongst citizens. When they go out and succeed at the global stage, their achievements under the national banner not only strengthen the social fabric, but also embolden the nation's international reputation. States, today, unsurprisingly include sports in their public diplomacy apparatuses.

People with a sense of belonging to a particular region – from an entire country to a suburb – often identify with a local sporting team, passionately wedding their selves with the team's progress and the team with their community consciousness. This, however, allows a sport to act not just as an emblem of what Michael Billig famously captured as every-day 'banal nationalism', but also as a vent for more politically conscious identity-based nationalism. In such cases, sports become platforms for aspirations of self-determination and political assertion. A recent case in point has been that of Kosovo.

Kosovo is no stranger to ethnic convulsion and conflict. The ongoing strife for the former Yugoslavian nation's independence has remained a symbol of the region's ethnic fault lines. An autonomous region in the Balkans, it is locked between the Albania, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia of today. While ethnic Albanians constitute 92% of its population, Serbs account for 4% and mainly inhabit Kosovo's north. Yet, a revanchist Serbia still considers it as an integral part of its sovereign domain. Albania, on the other hand, owing to its long-standing feud with Serbia, firmly supports the Kosovar bid for permanent statehood. The continuing rift is a testament to the futility of the controversial, unauthorized NATO intervention of 1999 during the Kosovo War.

More recently, the sports gains of the scarred nation have caught the world's attention. On May 13, 2016, the members of FIFA, global football's apex governing body, voted decisively (141 for and 23 against) to induct Kosovo as its 210th member country. A week prior, Kosovo was officially inducted into UEFA, European football's top regulator. In the process, Kosovo became the first non-UN member country to be admitted into UEFA, and in process, attained a fillip for its claims of being a legitimate nation. 'Europe is too small for our great talents,' thundered Kosovar Prime Minister Hashim Thaci in response to Kosovo's celebrated entry into FIFA. 'During our 25-year isolation, we have provided national teams around the world with many of our talents. Starting from today, they will have a place on the Kosovo team,' he concluded.

Thaci's claims were not unfounded. Kosovo's membership of FIFA effectively implied that the largely unrecognized nation was eligible, amongst the most prominent national teams around it, for the FIFA World Cup qualifiers. On September 5, Kosovo drew its first ever international football match against Finland in Helsinki. The stadium, packed with fans, gave every attending Kosovar the opportunity to raise their blue-and-gold banners high. Twenty-three year old Kosovar midfielder Valon Berisha – who was cleared for the field mere hours before the match – scored his nation's maiden international goal via penalty, which instantly made way for Kosovo's inclusion in international football databases and debates. Football fans the world over are now keen to locate the minute autonomous region

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on the world map and browse the Internet for Berisha's blooming on-field statistics.

A month earlier, Kosovo became the newest nation to form part of the international Olympic movement, after managing a formal recognition from the International Olympic Committee in 2014. Kosovar Olympian Majlinda Kelmendi led an 8-member delegation through the opening ceremony of the XXXI Olympic Games at Rio de Janeiro on August 5. Two days later, she went on to become the first athlete in Kosovar history to win an Olympic medal by claiming the gold for 52-kilogram Women's Judo. At the 2012 London Olympics, she was compelled to participate under the Albanian flag due to the Olympic Committee's non-recognition of Kosovo's independence. This time, thanks to the gold, her team finished 54th on the medal's tally, far ahead of some of the world's largest nations. Kelmendi embraced a jubilant hero's welcome upon her return to Pristina, as thousands united on the streets to celebrate her feat. The Kosovar government, despite being one of Europe's poorest, has rewarded her 100,000 euros. In Kelmendi, thus, generations of Kosovars – and a keen government – have found a citable idol.

The Thaci administration has already made its intention clear of utilizing such sporting achievements for national mobilization and international advancement of the Kosovar identity. 'Your example pushes us to officially work to support leading sportspersons even more, who represent Kosovo sport with dignity in the international arena,' the Prime Minister told Kelmendi while felicitating her at his office. Citing her as an exemplar of the national potential 'not just in sport, but in culture and other fields,' he thanked her for ensuring 'that the Kosovo anthem was heard' at a world capital.

Kosovo's bid for autonomy and self-determination has had an arduous three-decade history. The systematic suppression of ethnic Albanians Kosovars was a cornerstone of Yugoslavian supremo Josip Broz Tito's discriminatory policies. The sweeping 1989 amendment of the Serbian constitution, which trampled upon the autonomy of the provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina, proved to be an underlying spark for the Bosnian War which tore Yugoslavia. After the Dayton Agreement ended the war in 1995, the Serb forces of the recently indicted Radovan Karadzic continued the marauding of Kosovo's Albanians, leading to the rise of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), the Kosovo War, the infamous NATO intervention, and ultimately, the UN-mandated postwar occupation of the region. Almost a decade since Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008, the West – led by the US, the UK, and France – fails to rally behind Kosovo's separate existence. Meanwhile, Russia, a long-time Serbian ally, dangles its veto over the Kosovar bid for UN recognition.

Given such a troubled and obscure political existence, the average Kosovar has seized every available opportunity to express his/her national loyalty. Battling the everyday struggles of a lagging economy, it is the next football goal or the next gold medal that Kosovo greatly relies on for the dissemination of its political voice. Thus, it would not be surprising if sports become the most viable soft power / propaganda instrument of the perceived Balkan minnow.

About the author:

Rakshit Chopra is a Senior Editor on *Follow Your Sport*. A New Delhi-based sports journalist who explores the interplays between sports and politics, he was previously a Feature Writer and Editor for *The Hard Tackle*.