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Future of Popular Geopolitics: Croatia, Affective Nationalism and the World Cup

<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/10/30/future-of-popular-geopolitics-croatia-affective-nationalism-and-the-world-cup/>

MAŠAKOLANOVIĆ, OCT 30 2018

At this year's World Cup, the Croatian national team made it to the finals, in which they played the French national team and walked away with the silver medal. A small country from south-eastern Europe with just 4 million inhabitants and without a representative national football stadium of its own achieved a 'historical success', as it was described by the Croatian mainstream media at the peak of the football euphoria. The whole nation – it seemed – stared in wonder at the footballers, admiring how incredibly dedicated they were to the game. Croatian national team manager Zlatko Dalić labelled them 'hard-workers' of the terrain, going to comment on the victory over Russia that 'the big guys left for home and we, the workers, stayed!' Although the use of the term "workers" in this, at the first instance, was metaphorical, calling the footballers "workers" necessarily (even if inadvertently) associates the idea of the proletariat with the glamorous arena of football. Those disassociated and degraded social entities of the privatization process, the greatest losers of post-socialist societies, were back and on public display. Although the irony was not intentional, this comparison has produced bitterness only a few months after the close of the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

The Croatian boulevards where the team received a massive greeting in July are those same streets later filled with dissatisfied workers of the Uljanik shipyard. The protesters did not receive their wages during the month of July, the month when football euphoria was at its peak. But while the game lasted, the Croatian mainstream media did not discuss 'heavy' social issues, as football euphoria dominated the public space. While the World Cup lasted, the media were overwhelmed, and the euphoria was pronounced enough to ignore those issues that were beyond the frame of football. But, when the last game was played, the extent to which media discourse, popular culture, markets and politics play in constructing and mediating the 'football nation' became clear. Following Benedict Anderson, if all nations are 'imagined communities', which means entities that are carefully arranged by discourse and mediated to the multitude and considered as nations, the football nation would be a perceived imagined community par excellence in which political statements are closely tied to popular culture. We often shorten national football team names by calling them by the nation they represent, i.e. we talk about how Croatia defeated England or France triumphed over Croatia. All this makes football a fertile field for scholars of popular geopolitics and other post-disciplinary-oriented analyses. In looking at popular geopolitics as a kind of "post- language", as defined by Robert A. Saunders and Vlad Strukov in their introduction to the volume *Popular Geopolitics: Plotting an Evolving Interdiscipline*, we can use sport as a metaphor of national identity.

Considering the construction and composition of political and popular-cultural meanings in media discourse, this World Cup was interesting for several reasons. First, the 'historical success' of the Croatian national team was inspired by the rhetoric of the Croatian media during the 1998 World Cup when the national team took third place, initiating the cult of Croatian footballers as superheroes. Since then, the Croatian national team has become known in the media by the nickname 'Vatreni' (The Fiery One or The Blazers). At that time, only seven years after the young state was recognized internationally, such success meant a great deal politically. However, from a critical-analytical perspective, with the cult of 'Vatreni' also followed the era of an intensified ideologization of sport in the service of the (independent) Croatian nation and that phenomenon that has been discussed on various levels (Ozren Biti, Dražen Lalić, Aleksandar Holiga et al.).

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The elation surrounding the 2018 performance is rooted in this cult of 'Vatreni', reflecting aspects of 1998 in media discourse. Yet this is a new generation of footballers, who have been characterized as 'persistent', 'struggling', 'insatiable', 'hard-working', etc.. Importantly, the word 'shock-worker' (*udarnik*) was not used because of its ideological attachment to socialism, undesirable from the perspective of a newly-tailored European nation. Reflecting on the themes I addressed in my chapter from Saunders and Strukov's volume 'The Convenient Fiction of Geopolitics', the frame of the 'fighter' is the dominant feature of the Croatian footballer that is most suitable for further political semiotic analysis, especially when reinforced by the synthesis of popular and political culture. Namely, the word 'fight' cannot avoid reference to Croatian War of Independence in the early 1990s. The chant 'U boj, u boj, za narod svoj!' (In the battle, in the battle for our people) has been a football fan chant since 1998 in stadiums during the tense moments of matches, and its semantic link with war is used in present-day political discourse. Namely, during the annual celebration of the liberation of Croatian territories from Serbian occupation, which came less than a month after the success of the Croatian football team, Croatian President Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, compared the military and police operation called "Oluja" (The Storm) with the "storm of our football players". Thus, the 'historical success' of the national team entered a meaningful pact with the military and state's 'historical success' in the struggle for independence. At the same time, a large number of Serbian civilians were expelled from Croatia, leaving as refugees during the liberation of Croatian territory from Serbian paramilitary control. Either the composing of the music was not too far from the composing of political messages in the music from the war. Every celebration of the success of the team was accompanied by a specific soundtrack (see Catherine Baker's meticulously analysis on popular music and nationalism) that also has specific historical roots.

The official and unofficial celebrations of the success of the Croatian football team were marked by the patriotic song 'Mojadomovina' (My Homeland), created during the war in 1991 and sung by the Croatian group Band-Aid. But more troublesome than that song, which was composed, performed and motivated by the reality of war in the 1990's and holds peaceful but essentialist message ("there is only one truth"), was the appearance of the controversial singer Marko Perković Thompson, who also entered the public life of music during the war in the 1990s with militant messages articulated in his songs and has regularly courted controversy due to his provocative use of Ustaša symbols. Because of the appearance of the aforementioned singer on the greeting event of Croatian football players, a number of Croatian actresses and female public workers in culture have protested in social networks. Their response led the large, anonymous crowd from "the imagined community" to insult them as women and artists with chauvinistic, sexist and xenophobic offences. And such stories in the media are impossible to ignore from the perspective of the 21st century, when the 'popularity of a phenomenon is now measured in millions of likes and billions of views, not in circumstantial evidence of reviews, memoirs, and oral histories' (Saunders and Strukov, 2018: 4).

This brings us to the question of the image of the Other during the period of jubilation associated with the World Cup. Namely, via geopolitical messages conducted through popular culture, self-image (auto-image) is invariably related to the image of the Other (heteroimage). Regarding the football pitch, the biggest Other is, of course, one's opponents. Before and after the victory over England, social networks were full of iconic symbols of Britannia (such as tea, the Queen, the royal family, etc.) in parodied articulations of defeat. But, from the perspective of the game, the most traumatic Other was France, which was, in the bitterness of losing in the final, attacked with derision and insults. On their Facebook profiles, some famous Croatian public figures, such as world-renowned sportsmen Igor Štimac and Ivica Kostelić, tagged the French national flag with the flags of states from the African continent and racist allusions to the skin colour of the French national team. 'The Refugees Route', 'The First African Team to Win' and 'The Best African Team' are just some of the comments they received from their Facebook followers.

It is well known that football is the site of a particular geopolitical imagination in every nation. The World Cup, based on the Croatian Team success, was an occasion to refer to some of the features of Croatia's media memory on recent history of war and politics so that popular culture became a powerful tool in mobilizing the political affects of the nation and creating what Angharad Closs Stephens marks as the affective atmospheres of nationalism. However, I do not mean to suggest that popular culture is only a mediator of hegemonic messages. A different memory of history was expressed by the activist group Pussy Riot, who used the final match of the international spectacle to highlight injustices and repression in the host country, a (popular) geopolitical intervention that briefly short-circuited Russian President Vladimir Putin's otherwise perfect 'sport-washing' of his nation through the medium of FIFA

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(Pussy Riot's immediate cause was the anniversary of the death of the dissident poet Dimitri Prigov; however, more recently, one of the activists, Pyotr Verzilov, nearly died due to poisoning, allegedly at the hand of government supporter). Pussy Riot used the Cup to protest on behalf of free speech, unfettered imagination and creativity, while the global popularity of football helped them make it visible around the world for at least a few minutes.

About the author:

MašaKolanović is Assistant Professor in the Department for Contemporary Croatian Literature at the University of Zagreb. She is the author of numerous articles and books (both non-fiction and fiction), focusing on literature and popular culture during the Cold War and post-socialist period, including "Underground Barbie" (2008, 2012 on Croatian and German); "Worker! Rebel? Consumer... Popular Culture and Croatian Novel from Socialism till Transition" (on Croatian 2011); "Comparative Post-socialism: Slavic Experiences" (ed., 2013 on Croatian); "JAmerica: trip" (2013, on Croatian) and "The Cultural Life of Capitalism in Yugoslavia: (post)Socialism and its Other" (co-edited with D. Jelača and D. Lugarić, 2017, on English).