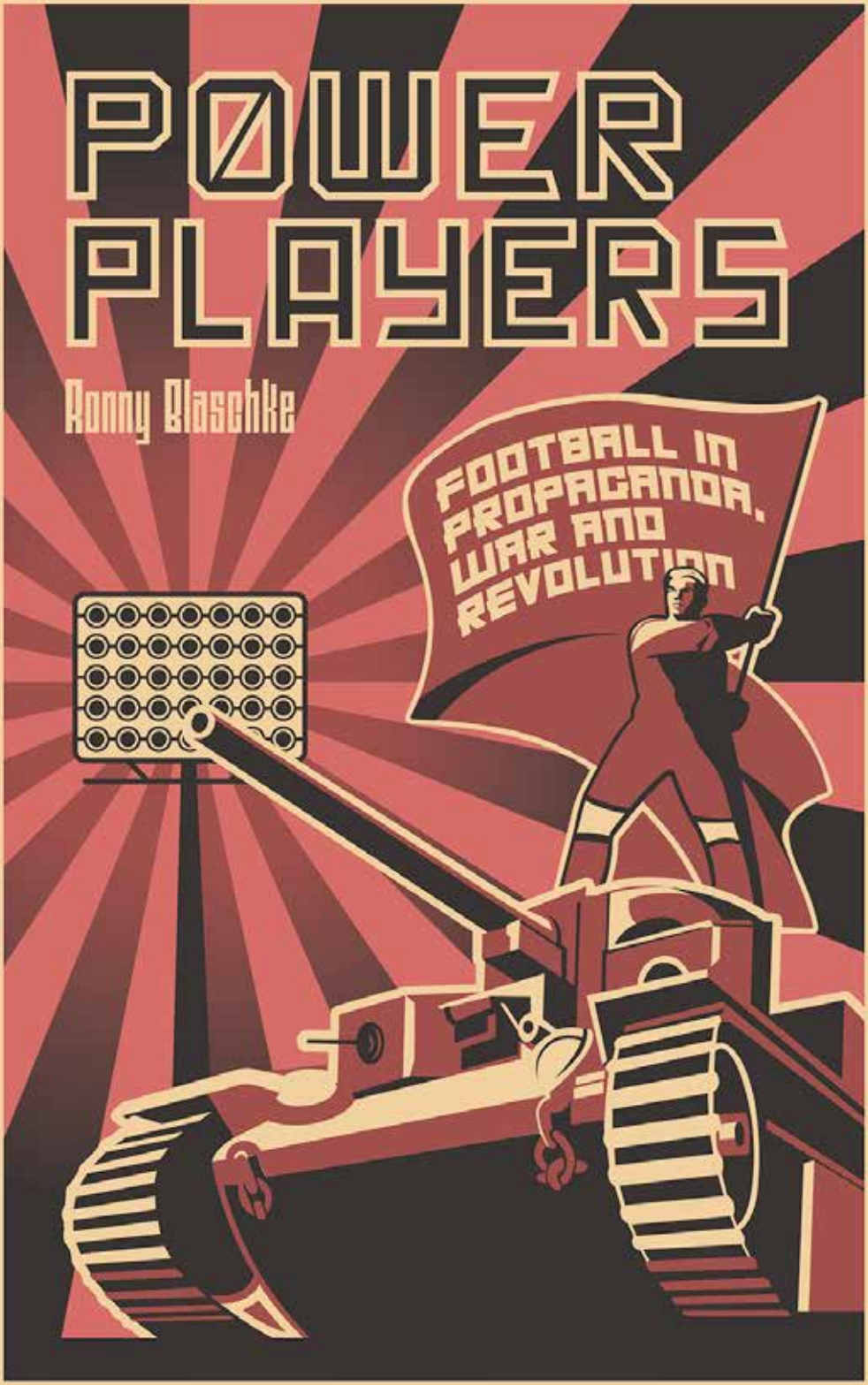
POWER PLAYERS

Ronny Blaschke



POWER PLAYERS

FOOTBALL IN PROPAGANDA, WAR AND REVOLUTION

Ronny Blaschke

pitch

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Snipers Behind the Stands

In the multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia, nationalism was officially forbidden, but it broke out in the football stands. Hooligans from Serbia and Croatia went to war as volunteers, and in Sarajevo, Bosnia, a stadium was right on the front line. Today, many fans play down the crimes. Whether with chants, choreographed images created by fans, or a drone above the pitch: football accompanies the ethnic and religious search for identity. And sometimes, as in Kosovo, it helps build a new nation.

THERE IS not much room to pose on the tank: the queue gets longer and longer. Children wait excitedly, fathers hold their mobile phone cameras ready. The tank looks freshly cleaned, the front is painted with stripes in red and white, and in between is the logo of Red Star Belgrade, Serbia's most famous club. It is late summer of 2019. Behind the tank, Belgrade stretches to the horizon, the almost 80m-high Church of Saint Sava juts out from the sea of houses. Children climb onto the tank, laughing, jumping and waving red scarves. Some fathers make sure that the Serbian Orthodox Church is also visible in the photos. Then they move on to the fan shop or the snack bar, there is not much time left before kick-off.

In the neighbouring country to the west, Croatia, the tank is viewed with less composure. This T55 is said to have been

in service in Vukovar in the early 1990s. The city in eastern Croatia was an important location during the Yugoslav wars between Serbs and Croats. Vukovar was largely destroyed by Serb units, hundreds of people fell victim to executions. Red Star Belgrade nevertheless calls the tank an 'attraction'. Photos of the club were shared thousands of times on social media. The tank is to remain next to the stadium for a few years; the city administration and football associations see no problem with it 'as long as there is no shooting'.

In the Croatian capital, fans of Dinamo Zagreb do not want to put up with this. In August 2019, they position a tractor next to their stadium 'Maksimir' for a short time. That, too, is a symbol: during the war, many Serbs from Croatian villages had fled across the border on tractors. Families, circles of friends and whole communities broke up.

The Western Balkans had evolved over centuries into a patchwork of ethnicities, denominations and traditions. In the second half of the 20th century, socialist Yugoslavia was considered the most diverse state in Europe, with six republics and four religions, with four languages and two alphabets. But from the 1980s onwards, economic crises, tensions and nationalism led to a growing longing for 'ethnically pure' individual states. Around 140,000 people died in the wars of disintegration in the 1990s, and more than four million fled or were displaced.

Seven states emerged from Yugoslavia's legacy: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo. There are still conflicts over territories, ideologies and national consciousness, also over religions and historical interpretations. The populations face each other in a complex relationship: the Serbs, predominantly Christian Orthodox; the Croats, the majority of whom are Catholic; the Muslim Bosniaks; and the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. Football particularly illustrates the search for identity.

Through provocations between fans and players, through hostile banners and graffiti in the stadium, even through riots and the glorification of crimes. Football as part of the war – in the Balkans this is no exaggeration.

Hundreds of hooligans joined a paramilitary force

Anyone walking through the Serbian capital Belgrade quickly comes across markings made by football fans. Graffiti and stickers on house walls, bridges, street signs. Either in black and white by the supporters of the Partizan club. Or in red and white, the fans of *Crvena Zvezda*, Red Star. They are martial motifs showing hooded men ready to fight. There are also dates that recall club successes and historical events in Serbian history, many dating back centuries, others only three decades. Near the Red Star stadium, a plaque is dedicated to the victims of the Yugoslav wars, next to an Orthodox cross and the club logo.

It was mainly the politician Slobodan Milošević who fuelled Serbian nationalism in the late 1980s and drove the disintegration of Yugoslavia with his war rhetoric. At that time, more than a quarter of the eight million ethnic Serbs lived outside their own constituent republic: 1.4 million in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 580,000 in Croatia, 200,000 in Kosovo. Milošević and his followers wanted all Serbs to be united in one state. They grumbled about economic problems and emphasised the contrasts between the ethnic groups. This went down well with many Serbs. Their incomes were worth only half as much as in 1980. Unemployment grew, foreign debts increased, the exchange of goods between the republics declined. In spring 1990, nine out of ten Yugoslavs rated the relationship between the population groups as bad or very bad.

During that time, fan groups developed into an influential subculture, especially in Belgrade. ‘In socialist Yugoslavia,

nationalism was officially forbidden, but it burst out in the stadium,' says Krsto Lazarević, who worked as a correspondent in Belgrade and contributes to a podcast about the Balkans. From the 1980s onwards, members of the mafia gathered in the stands of Red Star, violent men who were involved in robberies, protection rackets and murders. Among them: Željko Ražnatović, known as Arkan, who had several convictions. With his companions Ražnatović was allowed to distribute Red Star merchandise, and he also took over the leadership of Delije, the most important fan association.

In a report for the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the publicist Krsto Lazarević analyses the political connections of the Serbian football fans. For example, Željko Ražnatović brought the nationalist supporters into line with Milošević in collusion with the secret service. Moreover, in October 1990 he founded the Serbian Volunteer Guard, a paramilitary force that hundreds of hooligans joined. Their nickname: 'Arkan's Tiger'. Ražnatović went to war for the dream of a Greater Serbian Empire, first against Croatian, then against Bosnian units. Murders, rapes, expulsions: Ražnatović and his fighters committed war crimes. 'He kidnapped patients from a hospital in Vukovar and had them killed,' reports Krsto Lazarević.

Red Star became a symbol of Serbianism. When the club won the 1991 European Champion Clubs' Cup in Bari, Italy, its fans barely waved Yugoslav flags. In the winning photo, eight players showed the Serbian salute, two outstretched fingers and a thumb. At home games in the following months, Red Star supporters also celebrated the war, some mercenaries displaying street signs from destroyed Vukovar in the stands.

The Dayton Agreement in the US state of Ohio put the 1995 war between Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia to rest. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, based in The Hague, was soon to indict 161 people for serious

crimes, but there was also talk of 15,000 to 20,000 supporters in the police, military or administration.

Many perpetrators were able to escape prosecution. Željko Ražnatović rose to become a heroic figure. His marriage to the singer Svetlana Veličković, called Ceca, was broadcasted on Serbian television in 1995. A year later, Ražnatović bought the Belgrade club FK Obilić, named after a Serbian knight from the 14th century. Even with criminal dealings, Ražnatović led the club to the championship in 1998 in an already severely shrunken Yugoslavia. Because of an international arrest warrant, he avoided away matches in European competitions. In 2000, Ražnatović was shot dead in a Belgrade hotel lobby. Had he become too powerful for politicians, because of his knowledge? The exact background is still unclear today.

According to Krsto Lazarević, playing down war crimes is part of Serbian fan culture. An example is provided by former General Ratko Mladić, who was responsible for expulsions of non-Serbs from Bosnia-Herzegovina and for the Srebrenica massacre in July 1995, in which 8,200 Bosnian men and youths were murdered. Mladić was only arrested in 2011 and sentenced to life imprisonment for genocide in 2017. Many Serbs, however, see Mladić as a defender of their culture. After his conviction, ultras from Red Star Belgrade chanted his name. Fans of rivals Partizan thanked Mladić's mother. Players from a club in Novi Sad in northern Serbia wore white T-shirts with Mladić's portrait.

Brutal volunteers for dirty work

For centuries, the Western Balkans were under the influence of great powers: Austria-Hungary in the north, the Ottoman Empire in the south and the Russian Empire in the east. In the Red Star Belgrade Museum, religious motifs stand out alongside trophies, medals and triumphal images. There are paintings, figures and coats of arms of the Serbian Orthodox Church

in Cyrillic script. After the suppression of the denominations in socialist Yugoslavia, Orthodoxy experienced a revival in the past decade and a half. It is not the only development that connects the country with Russia, says former Belgrade correspondent Krsto Lazarević: 'An attachment to Moscow is an important feature of Serbian nationalism.'

In the Red Star stadium, Gazprom's blue signage is omnipresent. Before the home match against Zenit Saint Petersburg in 2011, folklore groups in Serbian and Russian costumes performed and guest of honour Vladimir Putin was cheered. Volunteers from Serbia also signed up for the war for the eastern part of Ukraine from 2014. During their 2014 championship celebration, Red Star fans displayed a flag of the self-proclaimed 'Donetsk People's Republic', the eastern Ukrainian city had been occupied by pro-Russian separatists. At another match, they displayed a banner in Russian: 'Older brother, tell me if I'm imagining things or if our mother is finally waking up. Hail Russia, Ukraine and Serbia.' After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, Red Star ultras chanted: 'Russia, Russia.'

Filip Vulović doesn't care for this kind of football, yet he has to deal with it. The student is one of the organisers of Belgrade Pride, a series of events organised by the LGBTIQ+ community with workshops, concerts and a street parade that takes place annually in September. On a Sunday morning, he gives a tour of the group's information centre, which is located near Belgrade's pedestrian zone. Between brochures, posters and activists' photos, timelines inform about the history of their movement. Vulović moves to the left to the beginning and points to the image of a man covered in blood. 'Belgrade was in a state of emergency,' he says. 'Hate and violence everywhere, that left deep wounds for us.'

Vulović is speaking of Belgrade Pride 2010. For weeks, hooligans, right-wing extremist politicians and representatives

of the Orthodox Church had stirred up opposition to it. Patriarch Irinej, the head of the church, compared homosexuals to 'child molesters', priests called for protest. On the day of the procession, around 6,000 hooligans from all parts of the country poured into downtown Belgrade. They attacked LGBTIQ+ participants and police officers, 150 people were injured, the damage ran into millions. 'The city looked like a war zone, the police were completely overwhelmed and took many of our participants to a forest area,' says Vulović. 'I was going through puberty at the time and gradually found out that I liked men. That experience set us back a lot.' In the years that followed, the Serbian government banned the Pride parade, ostensibly to protect its participants.

Mirjana Jevtović sees it differently. For almost 20 years, the investigative journalist has been observing Belgrade's football fans for the TV magazine *Insajder*. 'For some politicians, hooligans do the dirty work in the streets,' she says. 'The riots at Pride 2010 made the government look very bad. There was a lot of criticism from the opposition.' Representatives of the opposition at the time are now in power in Serbia: Aleksandar Vučić of the so-called Progress Party became defence minister in 2012, prime minister in 2014 and president in 2017. Vučić often emphasised his former affiliation with Delije, the fans' association of Red Star. Since 2014, the Belgrade Pride parade has been allowed again: with thousands of police officers – and without incident.

Insajder is one of the few media in Serbia that independently reports on the crimes of the hooligans, on homicides, human trafficking, drug sales. This has consequences: fans of Partizan Belgrade stabbed an inflatable doll at a home match, which was supposed to represent editorial staff member Brankica Stanković, accompanied by the cry: 'You will end up like Ćuruvija.' The journalist Slavko Ćuruvija had been shot in front of his house in 1999. Brankica Stanković received police

protection, but she continued to do research, for example on hooligans who rose to become entrepreneurs and security guards and who prevented protests against the government in the stands. 'Unfortunately, our research rarely has consequences,' says Mirjana Jevtović, and lists who comes and goes at Red Star Belgrade: policemen, lawyers, civil servants. The work of *Insajder* doesn't really produce changes in behaviour because civil servants and other important people are so influential at Red Star. Football is a symptom of corruption and the concentration of power under President Aleksandar Vučić. Since 2012, Serbia has been a candidate for membership of the European Union, but is a timely admission realistic? Mirjana Jevtović is sceptical, also because of the poor relations with neighbouring states.

A pillar for national identity in Croatia

Travelling from country to country in the Balkans, one quickly notices how deeply rooted the antipathy between the people still is in many places. This is not always openly expressed in conversations. And the symbolism is also subtle and enigmatic: in historical museums, in devotional objects or at memorial sites, for example in Zagreb. The footballing centre of the Croatian capital is the Maksimir, Dinamo's stadium. The outer facade of the west stand is decorated with a painting that can be seen from 100m away. On it is a general on horseback with a blue flag, next to it the club logo, with Catholic church towers in the background, then 50m further on is a commemorative plaque. The motif shows soldiers with rifles, surrounded by angry fans in the stadium, supplemented by an inscription: 'For all Dinamo fans, for whom the war began on 13 May 1990 in Maksimir and ended with the dedication of their lives on the altar of their homeland Croatia.'

The plaque was donated by the Bad Blue Boys, the most influential fan group at Dinamo, founded in 1986, named after

the US movie *Bad Boys* starring Sean Penn. Like many other groups, the Bad Blue Boys carried their national consciousness into the stadium, encouraging the break-up of Yugoslavia, with banners, chants and violence. They supported the election campaign of former officer Franjo Tuđman. His anti-Yugoslav party, the Croatian Democratic Union, or HDZ, won the first free parliamentary election in Croatia in April 1990. A few days later, on 13 May, Dinamo Zagreb was to meet Red Star Belgrade in Maksimir. For the US broadcaster CNN, it was soon one of 'five football matches that changed the world'.

Hours before the game, hate chants and brawls broke out in the city. At the stadium, opposing groups of fans broke through fences, threw stones and destroyed seats. The driving force behind the Delije was Željko Ražnatović, known as Arkan. Supporters stormed the pitch, several players took refuge in the dressing rooms, but Zvonimir Boban stayed outside for a time, the then 21-year-old Dinamo player kicking a policeman who had previously beaten a Croatian fan. 'For many Croats, Boban's kick was a symbolic rebellion against Yugoslav institutions, which were often dominated by Serbs,' says Dario Brentin, who researches nationalism in football at the Centre for South-East European Studies at the University of Graz. 'In the formation of the Croatian nation, 13 May 1990 is considered a fundamental pillar. Regularly, actions commemorate this modern myth.'

Many Serbian media described the riots as a plot by the new Croatian government to further weaken the multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia. Franjo Tuđman, Croatia's first democratically elected president, also argued in football for 'upright Croatianism' and against Serbia's 'aggressive aspirations to great power'. He said that 'after the war, a nation would be recognised primarily in sport'.

On 3 June 1990, the Yugoslav national team played a match against the Netherlands in Zagreb. The Croatian spectators

whistled down the Yugoslavian anthem. Three months later, fans of the southern Croatian club Hajduk Split stormed the pitch at a home match against Partizan Belgrade and burned a Yugoslav flag.

As the second constituent republic after Slovenia, Croatia declared its independence from Yugoslavia in June 1991. The Yugoslav People's Army, which was dominated by Serbia, opposed this, with paramilitary support, and four years of war between Croats and Serbs followed. During this time, Franjo Tuđman's entourage formed the nostalgic attitude that Croatian culture had been better before socialist Yugoslavia. Between 1941 and 1945, the fascist movement had been in power in the 'Independent State of Croatia', with the acquiescence of the National Socialists. This 'Ustasha' government had strived for an ethnically homogeneous Greater Croatia. It banned Serbian associations, dissolved mixed marriages and suppressed the Serbian-Cyrillic alphabet from public life. Half a million Serbs, Jews and Roma fell victim to its policy of extermination.

After the Second World War, the Croatian independence movement in Yugoslavia was suppressed. From exile, it called for protests against the communist regime. Many nationalists in the 1990s linked their resistance against Belgrade to the 'steadfastness' of the Ustasha. Franjo Tuđman played down their murderous actions. Symbols that had long been banned came back into fashion, such as the red and white chequerboard pattern in the Croatian coat of arms, which is said to have its origins in the 15th century but was cultivated above all by the Ustasha. Street names were dedicated to the Croatian freedom movement.

Croatia withdrew its football clubs from the Yugoslav league and built its own national team. As a sign against the communist past, the authoritarian ruler Franjo Tuđman had the Zagreb club Dinamo renamed Croatia. At a speech to fans he said: 'Whoever sings for Dinamo is an agent from

Belgrade.' Only after his death would the name change be reversed. While Croatian armed forces were fighting Serbian troops in the early 1990s, sport established itself as a pillar for a national identity in Croatia, according to analysis by researcher Dario Brentin, naming leading figures of the time: NBA basketball player Dražen Petrović, tennis player Goran Ivanišević, handball player Ivano Balić.

After the pushback of the Yugoslav army and the Dayton Agreement in 1995, growing nationalism favoured the trivialisation of fascism. For example, Davor Šuker, then a striker for Real Madrid and later president of the Croatian Football Association till 2021, posed in 1996 in front of the grave of Ante Pavelić, once the leader of the Ustasha. In 1998, at the World Cup, the joy over the Croatian team's third place was mixed with hostility towards Serbia among many fans. Franjo Tuđman had himself been filmed and photographed with the players several times in France.

Ultras present coats of arms and flags of militias

And what is the social climate like more than 20 years later? A Saturday afternoon on the eastern outskirts of Zagreb. In the wood-panelled clubhouse of NK Čulinec, people are discussing top level football over soup and beer, while 'small' football takes place between family homes. The guests are the self-governing amateur club NK Zagreb 041, whose members got to know each other in the environment of the professional club NK Zagreb; in their ultra group 'White Angels' they positioned themselves against discrimination with banners, chants and concerts. They were met with hostility, were in conflict with the presidium – at some point they had enough and in 2014 they founded their own club.

One of the driving forces among the 150 members of Zagreb 041 is Filip. He stands behind the bench with his friends and encourages the players. Again and again he turns

around and looks at the surrounding houses, bushes and cars. 'We stay in the group and pay attention when people we don't know show up,' Filip says. 'We have been attacked several times, since then my wife and child rarely come to the games.' Once, masked hooligans from the Bad Blue Boys attacked them with batons and pepper spray, another time they provoked them with a banner: 'Refugees Not Welcome'. Zagreb 041 has been campaigning for refugees for a long time.

Filip's family comes from Dalmatia, from the south of Croatia, so he also looks with interest from afar at Hajduk Split, the country's second big club. On his mobile phone, Filip shows videos of choreographies (visual displays created by fans holding up pieces of card to create a huge picture) and chants. Torcida, the largest fan group at Hajduk, often takes up historical events, mostly around 5 August, the 'Victory Day'. At the beginning of August 1995, Croatian units had recaptured occupied Serb territories. In August 2019, Torcida depicted the destruction of a Serbian tank in an elaborate choreography, accompanied by billows of smoke and rapturous applause in the stadium. Other groups also display coats of arms and flags of militias that had fought against Serbs.

In the anthology *Back at the Stadium Crime Scene*, German sociologist Holger Raschke uses numerous examples to explain how football in Croatia creates publicity for political content: in April 2011, Croatian General Ante Gotovina was sentenced to 24 years in prison for war crimes against Serbs at the International Criminal Court and a few days later, players wore T-shirts with Gotovina's likeness at a first division match between HNK Šibenik and NK Zadar. In 2012, Gotovina was acquitted on appeal, and the Torcida group celebrated this in Split with a large choreography. Then in 2013, after Croatia's accession to the EU, a minority law in Vukovar required the additional inscription of official signs in Serbian Cyrillic. The

Hajduk Split team ran onto the pitch with a banner: 'For a Croatian Vukovar'.

'In the Balkans, there is no differentiated remembrance of the Yugoslav wars,' says Zagreb columnist and blogger Juraj Vrdoljak, who has been reporting on social factors in sport for more than ten years. 'In Croatia, the memory of the Ustasha crimes is mostly denied.' Graffiti of swastikas and Ustasha symbols is emblazoned with football references on house walls, bridges and even school buildings, sometimes in combination with Catholic motifs such as the Vatican flag. 'The historical background for nationalism is not sufficiently addressed in society,' Vrdoljak finds. 'And prominent examples contribute to normalisation.'

After the Croatian team qualified for the 2014 World Cup, defender Josip Šimunić showed the Ustasha salute and shouted 'Za dom spremni' ('For the homeland') with the fans in Zagreb. Many media criticised Šimunić – several fan groups showed solidarity with him. Awareness of the problem was also limited in 2018: the Croatian team came second in the World Cup in Russia, and Marko Perković, founder of the right-wing rock band Thompson, was present on the open-top team bus at the welcome party in Zagreb. His band has been popular with many fans and players for years, but in some European countries they are banned from performing.

Clubs with communist symbolism founded all over the country

Croats and Serbs: the relationship of tension is centuries old and shaped different political systems, especially in the 20th century. Between the two world wars, Serbs assumed a privileged position in the new Kingdom of Yugoslavia, writes Marie-Janine Calic, an expert on south-east Europe at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, in her book *History of Yugoslavia*. Among the 656 ministers of the

short-lived governments were 452 Serbs and 137 Croats. Yugoslavia's first national football team, on the other hand, was founded in Zagreb in 1919, and most of the players had Croatian roots. 'Football illustrated a political dispute of principle,' explains British historian Richard Mills. 'Some officials called for centralisation in Belgrade, others wanted more autonomy for the regions.' In 1929, the football federation was moved to Belgrade. As a result, Croatian players boycotted the Yugoslav national team, which is why the squad for the first World Cup in Uruguay in 1930 featured almost exclusively Serbs.

After the Second World War, the partisan fighter Josip Broz, known as Tito, established a communist one-party state, according to the Basic Law a 'community of equal peoples'. Every person was a citizen of Yugoslavia and one of its constituent republics. Tito had critics removed and banned intellectuals from their professions, but he did not act as brutally as Josef Stalin in the Soviet Union. In addition to cultural clubs, reading societies or music groups, football was supposed to spread Tito's motto: 'Brotherhood and unity'. Clubs with communist symbolism were founded all over the country: Red Star, Partizan and Proletar, also Slobodan (in English free), and Napredak, (progress). 'Many clubs with clear ethnic backgrounds were banned,' says Richard Mills, author of the book *The Politics of Football in Yugoslavia*. 'That's how the communists wanted to stop tensions between population groups early on.'

But there were exceptions like Hajduk Split, founded in 1911. The southern Croatian port city of Split had been occupied by Italian troops in 1941. Hajduk refused to play in the Italian league and joined the Yugoslav partisans as an army team in 1944. After the war, the communists wanted to transfer Hajduk to Belgrade as a showcase club, but the club refused. After Hajduk won the Yugoslav championship in

1950, students in Split formed the Torcida fan group. Before a match they disturbed the night's rest of the visiting team Red Star Belgrade with whistles. Some members were charged, and out of concern for Croatian nationalism, the regime pushed Torcida underground.

In the 1950s, the Yugoslav economy had one of the highest growth rates in the world, with industrial production increasing by 14 per cent annually until 1960. More than five million people moved to the cities for work, and a tourist industry developed on the coasts. The figurehead Tito allowed freedom of travel and strikes to a certain extent. 'In the factories, workers were given more influence, and football clubs also allowed their players more freedom of choice,' reports Richards Mills of the University of East Anglia in Norwich.

The multi-ethnic national team carried Yugoslav ideas out into the world. It won silver three times and gold once at the Olympics between 1948 and 1960, plus fourth place at the 1962 World Cup and lost in two European Championship finals in 1960 and 1968. The big clubs were welcome guests at international tournaments. In 1964, 73 per cent of the Yugoslav population described relations between the republics as good.

But the upswing ended in the 1970s. Unemployment, national debt and social inequality between the regions grew. In 1975, Slovenia was seven times richer than Kosovo. 'Socialist ideology lost concrete meaning,' writes Calic. More and more people turned away from the multi-ethnic state and cultivated ethnic traditions with traditional costumes, folk songs and monuments. According to Calic, the loss of old certainties led to a 'revival of religions'. And these developments were to accelerate rapidly after 4 May 1980: during the match between Hajduk Split and Red Star Belgrade, the stadium announcer proclaimed Tito's death.

In the following decade, ethnic tensions culminated in demonstrations, riots and violence, including around the

football clubs. The Yugoslavian national team continued to be among the European leaders, winning bronze at the 1984 Olympics. Since its foundation in 1919, most of the national players had come from Serbia and Croatia, but at the 1990 World Cup in Italy, shortly before the wars of disintegration, Yugoslavia had one of the most ethnically diverse teams in its history. There were five players from Bosnia and Herzegovina, two from Montenegro, two from Macedonia and one from Slovenia, and Yugoslavia reached the quarter-finals, where they lost to Argentina.

In autumn 1990, the Yugoslavian national team was one of the best in the world. They won their first qualifying matches for the 1992 European Championships against Northern Ireland, Austria and Denmark. 'The best players have always met in sports schools, as youths,' says Dario Brentin, a social scientist who studies football in the Balkans. 'The players met regularly in the Yugoslav league, because they were not allowed to move abroad for a long time. So, friendships developed in which national origin and identity didn't really matter.' Players like Robert Prosinečki, Darko Pančev, Davor Šuker or Predrag Mijatović believed they belonged to a 'golden generation'. In 1987 they had won the World Youth Championship in Chile. And now, at the 1992 European Championship in Sweden, they wanted to complete their development with the perfect result, with the title.

The national coach was Ivica Osim, born and raised in Sarajevo, the political and cultural centre of Bosnia. The European scholar Ivan Korić quoted Osim in an essay for the journal *East-West. European Perspectives* with the following words: 'The Yugoslav journalists criticised me terribly. They always wanted to see the players from their constituent republic in the team. I got into trouble with the public and with the journalists because of that. But I followed my own line. It never mattered to me which republic someone came from.

Once I said to the journalists: "I don't care where the players come from. Only the best will play. And if I have to, I will also play with 11 Kosovo Albanians. They belong to us, too. And if they are the best, they will play." With that I had made it clear that I would not let myself be pressured. But Yugoslavia was practically destroyed even before the World Cup in Italy. It was a broken state.'

In October 1991, Osim travelled with the Yugoslavian squad to his home town Sarajevo for a friendly match, the occasion being the 70th birthday of his former club, FK Željezničar, (Locomotive in English). At that time, Slovenia and Croatia had already declared their independence. In Sarajevo, people still seemed to have hope: before the game, players released peace doves. In the stands, 20,000 spectators cheered their already diminished national team. Bosnia and Herzegovina was the only Yugoslav republic in which there was no clear majority for a single ethnic group within the population. And this was also evident in Sarajevo in 1991: of the 530,000 inhabitants, 49 per cent were Muslims, 30 per cent Serbs, seven per cent Croats. No community in the area was ethnically homogeneous, mixed marriages were a matter of course.

A fan tried to save a woman and was shot

However, after a referendum in March 1992, the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina also declared itself independent. The Bosnian Serbs did not want to accept this and they formed the Serbian Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, later Republika Srpska. In that charged atmosphere, FK Željezničar was to host the club Rad Belgrade in Sarajevo. On the same day, Serb forces from the remaining Yugoslav army occupied a police academy near the stadium. They fired indiscriminately at civilians, including at the stadium. Players and fans managed to get to safety.

Serbian soldiers drew a siege ring around Sarajevo, quickly occupying more than 70 per cent of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ivica Osim, who had successfully led the Yugoslav national team through qualification for the 1992 European Championship in Sweden, had not heard from his family for some time. Even before Yugoslavia's exclusion from the tournament, he resigned as national coach. 'This is the only thing I can do for this city. To make you remember that I was born in Sarajevo,' Osim said at a press conference.

Without their popular coach, the shrunken Yugoslavian team continued their journey to Sweden. Their hotel in the coastal town of Ystad was close to a camp for Balkan refugees. The Swedish police feared protests against the team, so they moved their camp to Leksand in central Sweden. On 30 May 1992, 11 days before the start of the Euros, the United Nations passed Resolution 757, which dealt with sanctions against Yugoslavia in areas such as trade, diplomacy and culture. The following day, the Yugoslavian team was excluded from the European Championship. The team had to stay in Sweden for a few more days because of travel restrictions. They were also barred from qualifying for the 1994 World Cup and the 1996 European Championship.

Ivica Osim's thoughts had long since turned to his home town of Sarajevo. 'The Grbavica district around the Željezničar stadium became a war zone,' says Bosnian journalist Danijal Hadžović, who has been covering politics and football for ten years. 'The front line ran right through the neighbourhood.' Serbian snipers posted themselves on surrounding high-rises and shot people trying to get water and food. The majority Muslim Bosnians, also called Bosniaks, fired back from the other side. Jerky film footage shows parts of the stadium going up in flames. Soldiers entrenched themselves behind the clubhouse, the lawn resembling a crater. 'Those who left their homes risked their

lives,' says Hadžović. 'There was no thought of a normal life with free time.'

Nevertheless, some youngsters in Sarajevo did not want to be deprived of their hobby, recalls coaching icon Osim in an interview with the Austrian magazine *Ballesterer*: 'The young children could at most play in a safe hall or in the house. But when they played outside, it often happened that they were shot at from above. There were many deaths. That was the cruellest thing you could imagine. Children were in school and went out to play, and then they were shot.' In total, around 100,000 people were killed in the Bosnian war between 1992 and 1995, and more than 11,000 during the almost four-year siege in Sarajevo.

Even today, the traces of the war are still present in the Grbavica district: walls of houses with bullet holes, shattered window panes, crumbling plaster. On the other hand, the stadium of FK Željezničar, a club founded by railway workers in 1921, is brand new. A plaque on the west stand commemorates the victims of the war. It was donated by the ultra group Maniacs. Many fans identify with commemorative campaigns, explained political scientist Alexander Mennicke in his bachelor's thesis. The ultras sing the praises of their battered neighbourhood at every home game and sometimes present fighting soldiers in choreographies. They gather on the anniversaries of the Srebrenica genocide and organise memorial tournaments for Dževad Džilda, a leader of the fans who tried to save a woman who had been shot in 1992, but was killed by a sniper.

There is no longer any question of an ethnically mixed society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, comments south-east Europe researcher Marie-Janine Calic. After the Dayton Agreement in 1995, the state remained within its pre-war borders, but was separated into two entities. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, ruled by Muslims and Croats,

received 51 per cent of the territory and thus a symbolic majority. The Serb-dominated Republika Srpska was awarded 49 per cent. During the war, 2.2 million people fled or were displaced in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Today, the vast majority of municipalities have population majorities of over 90 per cent. Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats live separately. In Sarajevo, half of the population was Muslim in 1991; now it is more than 80 per cent.

Nevertheless, Dženan Đipa wants to emphasise what unites society, not what divides it. In the Football Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Đipa is responsible for social projects, for girls' tournaments, health care and the school league. He suggested a café on the edge of the Old Ottoman bazaar district in Sarajevo as a place for the interview; nearby are mosques, a Catholic cathedral, an Orthodox church and a synagogue. 'We are a small country,' Đipa says. 'If we want to be successful in business, culture or football, we have to work together.' But what he then tells us about the history of Bosnian football rather suggests that there are not many idealists like him.

The social division after the war also carried over to the game. Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats initially held their own championships, but at the beginning of this millennium, after long negotiations, they came together in a professional league. The establishment of a national team was overshadowed by discussions about ethnic backgrounds. Sergej Barbarez, for example, played successfully in the Bundesliga, among others for Borussia Dortmund and Hamburger SV, but he initially declined invitations to international matches from his home country Bosnia and Herzegovina. The reason: his Croatian-born mother was threatened by nationalists in his native town of Mostar. In 2007, 13 players boycotted the Bosnian national team; in their opinion, the football association placed more emphasis on the nationalities of the players than on their sporting talents.

The conflict line runs through the football of Mostar

As the geographical centre of the western Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been claimed by Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs for generations. These conflicts resulted in what is probably one of the most complicated political systems in the world. In order to meet all demands, the country is divided into 14 sub-regions, with 14 regional governments and 14 parliaments. The highest state presidency consists of a Bosniak, a Croat and a Serb representative, and the presidency changes every eight months. The cost of this apparatus is estimated at £6bn annually. However, the gross domestic product is less than £16bn and the unemployment rate is around 30 per cent.

According to UEFA rules, the Bosnia and Herzegovina Football Association may only have one president. Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs sit on its board with five representatives each. Will there be tensions? Dženan Đipa, a member of the association's staff, does not want to reveal any internal details. Only this much: the national team plays home games in Zenica or Sarajevo, cities with a Muslim majority. An appearance in Banja Luka, the capital of the Serbian-majority Republika Srpska, seems unrealistic for the time being. 'We should pay more attention to the youth, who have nothing to do with the war,' says Đipa, showing photos on his mobile phone of successful sports festivals. 'Football can promote cohesion; religion doesn't matter on the pitch.' Đipa travels across the country with his projects. It is not so much the children he has to talk gently to, but rather their parents. The mood between the cities can be very different.

Sometimes the conflict line runs right through a city, for example in Mostar in Herzegovina, a region in the south-west of the country, not far from the border with Croatia. Mostar illustrates the complexity of the Bosnian war: at first, Muslims and Croats fought there together against Serbs. Soon Croat

nationalists wanted Herzegovina to join their 'Croat mother state' and the Croats turned against their allies. In hours of shelling, they also destroyed Mostar's landmark, the Stari Most, an arched bridge from the 16th century. After the war, the ethnic division of the city solidified: almost exclusively Catholic Croats live in the western half, Muslim Bosniaks in the eastern half.

The landmark, the Stari Most, was renovated and reopened in 2004, and since then tourism numbers have been growing steadily. 'For our guests, the segregation in the city is not really visible, there are no walls, everyone can move freely,' says Esmer Meškić, who grew up in the eastern part. During the war, his father belonged to a Bosniak unit. As a small child he was interned in a Croatian camp for a few weeks, with his mother and grandparents. After the war, he went to a class with only Muslim pupils. At 16, he joined the ultras of Velež Mostar. The workers' club, founded in 1922 and named after a hill, had been a symbol of the multi-ethnic urban society for decades and was honoured by Yugoslav President Tito; even today, the Red Star is part of the club's emblem. 'Before the war, Velež fans lived all over the city, but that is no longer the case,' says Esmer Meškić. 'As a young ultra, I thought carefully about when to go to the western half of the city. Some streets and bars I avoided.' Things are slowly getting better, he adds, but there is still no talk of a relaxed coexistence.

For almost 20 years, Velež Mostar had played its home games on the western side in the Bijeli Brijeg stadium, which translates as White Hill. But with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Velež lost its home ground to HŠK Zrinjski Mostar in 1992. The club with Croatian roots had been founded in 1905 and banned by the communists in 1945 because of its national symbolism and links to the fascist Ustasha. After its re-foundation, Zrinjski won the championship in Bosnia and Herzegovina six times. However, many ultras would rather

cheer for their club in an enlarged Croatian league. The streets around Bijeli Brijeg in the western part of Mostar are marked with their graffiti, including martial motifs, swastikas and symbols of the Ustasha. 'Fans of Zrinjski have celebrated the destruction of our historic bridge,' says Esmer Meškić. 'For us, this is a great provocation.'

But the hostilities can have even worse consequences, as Alexander Mennicke has worked out in his bachelor's thesis on national identity in Bosnian football. In it, the political scientist focuses on the small town of Široki Brijeg, located 20km west of Mostar and inhabited almost exclusively by Croats. 'People feel they belong to the Croatian nation and propagate the Croatian republic on Bosnian soil – Herceg-Bosna, a term that has appeared again and again since the beginning of the 20th century,' writes Mennicke. Referring to the local first division football team NK Široki Brijeg, he says, 'What makes it special is that only Catholics are allowed to play football at the club.' In one choreography, the ultras from Široki Brijeg recalled 'Operation Storm', in which Croatian units drove out Serbian troops in 1995. In another, they presented European Cup opponents Beşiktaş Istanbul with a crusader with the words: 'Bulwark of Christendom.'

Things often escalated when Široki Brijeg met clubs with predominantly Muslim supporters, as happened on 4 October 2009 at the home match against FK Sarajevo. Ultras threw stones and fought. In the chaos, a Croat allegedly grabbed a policeman's gun and shot Vedran Puljić, a fan of FK Sarajevo. The perpetrator was arrested, but managed to flee hours later and make his way to Zagreb, where he does not have to fear extradition. 'The wounded fans from Sarajevo came to us in Mostar,' says Meškić, a supporter of Velež Mostar. 'We offered them places to sleep and food, and that strengthened our ties.' To this day, the death of Vedran Puljić has not been properly solved.

Meškić recounts his memories in Mostar in a café near the renovated arched bridge; as tourism manager, he often leads groups through the alleys of the old town. He looks over to the Museum of War and Genocide, a place of remembrance with harrowing pictures and videos about the genocide in Srebrenica. 'Every country in the Balkans has its own historiography,' says Meskić. 'But we have to teach our children the objective truth. And that can be found at the International Criminal Court.' Many of his friends and acquaintances have moved to western Europe for better jobs, but he wants to stay. 'I cannot hate every Croat. Crimes are committed by individuals, not whole populations.'

In Kosovo football gives a bit of hope

On my research trip through the western Balkans, optimists always stand out, decision-makers with constructive, progressive ideas, and so it is in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. 'We want normality without hate. We want to look forward,' says Eroll Salihu, secretary general of the Kosovo Football Federation since 2006. 'But it is made very difficult for us.'

Kosovo had played a special role in socialist Yugoslavia, with a population majority of ethnic Albanians and a Serbian minority. Dictator Tito refused Kosovo the status of a constituent republic, but granted it more autonomy in 1974. The majority Muslim Kosovo Albanians remained underrepresented in leadership positions. Mixed marriages between Albanian and Serbian Kosovars were rare. In the 1970s, Kosovo's per capita income was only 38 per cent of the Yugoslav average. In education, medicine and industry, there was a gap to republics such as Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia. Many Kosovars felt culturally connected to the western neighbouring state of Albania anyway.

'We did not want to be second-class citizens. In football we could show who we are,' says Salihu. In the office of the

football association, a narrow corridor leads to Salihu's office; on the walls hang historical pictures, including a team photo of Pristina FC. Salihu was a talented youth player when the oppression of Kosovo Albanians increased in the early 1980s after Tito's death. The Serb-dominated police cracked down on Kosovars, and ethnic Albanians in the Yugoslav army fell victim to a series of murders. Gradually, protest sentiment grew among Kosovars. At a 1983 Pristina FC match in Belgrade, visiting fans chanted 'E-Ho! E-Ho!', a show of respect for Enver Hoxha, the dictator of Albania. The police intervened in the stadium and the Yugoslav leadership demanded an official apology.

Salihu goes into raptures when he thinks of Pristina's home games, between 1982 and 1988 in the first Yugoslav league, often in front of more than 30,000 spectators. 'Wins against the Belgrade clubs made us forget our worries for a while,' says Salihu. The Yugoslav parliament took back Kosovo's autonomy in 1990, Serbian President Slobodan Milošević had Albanians forced out of state offices. Their school system was severely restricted, many of their parties and associations were banned.

Numerous Albanians built up underground structures in education and health care. Salihu was in his mid-20s at the time and at the peak of his athletic performance. He was one of the first players to demand the secession of Kosovar clubs from the Yugoslavian game. In the new Kosovar league, Salihu scored the first goal, on 13 September 1991. But independence was closely watched by the Serbian police, Salihu repeatedly received threats and was interrogated. In his book *Kosovo Football: From Slavery to Freedom*, sports journalist Xhavit Kajtazi describes the parallel structures in Kosovar football in the 1990s, including secretly organised tournaments with smuggled balls from abroad. A photo in the book shows players having to wash in a river.

Soon afterwards, the UÇK, the 'Kosovo Liberation Army', appeared and attacked Serb targets. Hundreds of thousands of Kosovars left their homeland. Eroll Salihu moved to Germany, played for the regional league team Wilhelmshaven and obtained his coaching licence. He had to watch on the news as the tensions led to the Kosovo war in 1998, between the Serb-dominated Yugoslav army and the UÇK. The first ever NATO combat mission led to the withdrawal of Yugoslav troops in June 1999. More than 13,000 people died.

Within a few weeks of the war, 80 per cent of Kosovar refugees returned home. Salihu, whose house in Pristina had been destroyed, also wanted to help with the reconstruction. 'In the beginning it was very difficult to build structures in football,' he says. 'We were isolated internationally.' The Kosovar league lacked sponsors and spectators. The national team, which had already been founded in 1993, rarely found opponents for matches. And that was not to change any time soon, even after Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. To this day, 115 of the 193 UN member states recognise the Republic of Kosovo – but for the Serbian government, it remains a breakaway province of its own territory.

With a handful of staff, Salihu campaigned with FIFA and UEFA for the recognition of the Kosovo Football Association. From 2014 onwards, FIFA allowed the Kosovan national team to play official friendly matches, but without the national flag and anthem. The team celebrated its premiere with a home match against Haiti in Mitrovica, in the north of the country. Many Serbs saw this as a provocation, because the city is divided: the population living north of the Ibar river is almost exclusively Serbian. However, the stadium in Mitrovica was the only one in the country that met a minimum standard (incidentally, it is named after Adem Jashari, a co-founder of the UÇK). Classes were suspended for the match in the Albanian-dominated southern half of

Mitrovica. Some fans burned a Serbian flag. Even today, NATO soldiers are stationed in Mitrovica to prevent clashes between the ethnic groups.

Kosovo has been independent since 2008, but is still not a member of the United Nations. To properly establish itself in the international community, the government is seeking admission to global organisations. Kosovo is a member of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank Group and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, but not of the cultural association UNESCO or the police network Interpol. The Kosovars celebrated their admission to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2014 as a breakthrough. Their jubilation was great when judoka Majlinda Kelmendi won the first gold medal for the young state in Rio 2016. The excitement was even greater in May 2016 when their football federation became the 55th member of UEFA and the 210th member of FIFA. Salihu proudly displays the framed admission certificates in his office, his correspondence with the associations fills entire folders: 'There was no argument to keep us out for so long. But now we want to make the most of our chance.' He sits candle-straight in his chair.

For a long time, Salihu and his colleagues were on the road in European leagues, building up their national team. They visited players whose parents had left Kosovo during the war. Salihu recalls an international match between Switzerland and Albania in 2012, when nine of the 22 players had Kosovar roots, including, on the Swiss side, Xherdan Shaqiri, who played for Liverpool, and Granit Xhaka of Arsenal. Salihu wanted to prevent more players from opting to play for the teams of their second citizenship. Thus, the Kosovar circle of potential national players grew to 180 professionals. And the Kosovar national team quickly built up a good reputation: in the new UEFA Nations League, they won their group in League D, undefeated. They also impressed in the qualifiers

for EURO 2020 against Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and England. On the long away trips, sometimes more than 1,500 Kosovars were present, despite the high hurdles for obtaining a visa within Europe.

For almost two years, the Kosovar team had to play home matches in Shkodra, in the north of Albania. In 2018, the renovation of the new home ground was completed in Pristina, a few minutes' walk from the pedestrian zone. It is a functional stadium surrounded by a massive theatre building and hip bars. The Kosovar Football Association sometimes receives 100,000 ticket requests per match, but can fulfil fewer than 14,000. The stadium is named after Fadil Vokrri, the long-time president of the football association who died in 2018. Vokrri had been the only ethnic Albanian to play for the Yugoslav national team. 'We had many good players,' says Eroll Salihu. 'But on the big Yugoslav stage we had no chance. A clear discrimination.' Vokrri is one of the few Kosovars who are highly recognised in Serbia because of his former time with Partizan Belgrade.

'Football manages to do in Kosovo what politics does not: it gives the youth a bit of hope,' says journalist Eraldin Fazliu of BIRN. The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network with its 400 employees is one of the few independent and critical media networks in the western Balkans. Fazliu says that the sporting upswing of the Kosovar team has plunged many compatriots into an identity dilemma. He himself had fled to Denmark with his family as a teenager. Fazliu loved football, but he could do little with the Yugoslavian national team: 'In my youth, Kosovo had no flag and no anthem. The country was in a sad state. But we longed for belonging. So many friends and I supported the Albanian national team. We can't just wipe away that time today.'

Ninety per cent of Kosovars are ethnic Albanians. For many of them, only one nation counts, the Albanian nation. In their view, this nation also extends to those states where

Albanian minorities live: in Serbia, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia and Greece. Many ultras of Kosovar clubs have long been loyal to the Albanian national team, but with the success of the Kosovar selection, the number of Albanian flags flown by fans in their stands has decreased. But there is also trouble: players like Milot Rashica, Herolind Shala and Alban Meha had already played a few games for Albania before they switched to the newly created Kosovo national team. In the Albanian media, they were also called traitors.

The best players grew up abroad

For a long time, Western Europe showed little interest in Albanian identity, but that changed on 14 October 2014 in the EURO 2016 qualifier between Serbia and Albania. Before the match, Serbian spectators threw stones at the Albanian team's bus, protests and whistles drowned out their national anthem. 'Kill the Albanians!' Serbian fans shouted as a drone flew over the pitch with a flag in the 42nd minute. On it: the outline of 'Greater Albania', as nationalists would like to see it, plus the images of the former leaders Ismail Qemali and Isa Boletini, who had won Albania's independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912. On the pitch, Serbian defender Stefan Mitrović grabbed the flag and Albanian players charged at him. The game was abandoned.

The tensions in the days that followed are documented in a separate article on Wikipedia: a planned visit to Belgrade by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama was postponed, probably partly because his brother Olsi Rama was initially held responsible for the drone, which he later denied. In the Kosovar capital Pristina, hundreds of fans celebrated the match with a motorcade and fireworks. Flags of both countries were set alight in the border areas between Serbia and Kosovo. Even in the diaspora, for example in Vienna, men with Serbian and Albanian roots went at each other.

Many Serbs do not accept Kosovo as an independent state, but only as the historical heartland of their culture and traditions. As justification, they point to the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, where the Serbian army fought in vain against the Ottoman Empire near present-day Pristina. Fans from Belgrade often thematise the battle in their banners and slogans, writes British correspondent Jack Robinson in the online portal *Prishtina Insight*. Also, during the outbreaks of violence in 2008 after Kosovo's declaration of independence, hooligans even attacked the US embassy in Belgrade. More than six centuries after the Battle of Kosovo, about ten per cent of Kosovars are ethnic Serbs, mostly living in villages among themselves, for example near Pristina in the municipality of Gračanica, the site of an important Serbian Orthodox monastery.

Opposite the monastery, on a roundabout, there is a statue depicting Miloš Obilić. The Serbian knight is said to have killed the Ottoman Sultan Murad I during the Battle of Kosovo. In 2015, fans of Red Star Belgrade posed next to the statue. Like hundreds of times before in their stadium, they celebrated themselves as defenders of Christian Europe against 'Islamic invaders'. Several times, Red Star Belgrade played charity matches in Gračanica. On Kosovar territory, fans raised the Serbian flag and sang the Serbian anthem, reports Robinson. Some stopped in Pristina on their way home. They waved flags with the outline of 'Greater Serbia', wore T-shirts with the year 1389 and chanted: 'Kosovo is Serbia!'

'At some point the red line was crossed, we couldn't allow that anymore,' says secretary general Eroll Salihu. In 2018 and 2019, his federation banned Red Star Belgrade from playing guest matches in Serbian enclaves of Kosovo. He says: 'We want to accept Serbian players in our leagues, but they receive a lot of pressure.' Serbian employers in Gračanica are said to have threatened female footballers with dismissal if they

played against Albanians. In doing so, they were following a course set in Belgrade: nationalists and hooligans threatened Serbian Kosovars with violence if they did not vote for the Serbian List, the main Serbian party in Kosovo, in elections. Many Serbs also complain of hostility and threats from Albanians. Some sections of fans still sing the praises of the UÇK liberation army.

These are not the only problems of the 1.8 million Kosovars, more than half of whom are under 25. A third of the population lives below the poverty line, youth unemployment is over 50 per cent, and Kosovo ranks 85th in Transparency International's corruption index. Since the war, the international community has invested more than £4bn, yet industry, health care and tax administration are only just beginning. Migration remains high, and so the country depends on payments from the 800,000 Kosovars abroad.

At every home game, leading politicians meet in the stands. Some post photos with national players on social media. 'This instrumentalisation of sport is sad,' says journalist Eraldin Fazliu. 'Our best players grew up abroad after the war. We should create structures so that such talents can also grow up in our country.' Fazliu is happy that football connects young people in his country. But he also knows that sport can deepen existing rifts. Ukraine, for example, does not recognise Kosovo and in 2016, it waived its home right against Kosovo in the qualifiers for the 2018 World Cup, and instead the two teams met in Krakow, Poland. In June 2019, Ljubiša Tumbaković was fired as Montenegro's national coach. The Belgrade-born coach had refused to stand on the sidelines against Kosovo. Shortly afterwards, he was hired by Serbia as national coach. In September 2019, Kosovar police temporarily arrested eight Czech fans who apparently wanted to fly a drone at the match between Kosovo and the Czech Republic in Pristina, with the words: 'Kosovo is Serbia'.

Other states also express their rejection of Kosovo through football: the federations from Serbia, Russia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, have submitted a request to UEFA that they do not want to play against Kosovo. The Spanish government, which does not recognise Kosovo either, is taking a different approach. Before the 2022 World Cup qualifying match between Spain and Kosovo, the Ministry of Culture in Madrid specifically approached the Spanish television broadcaster RTVE to set out some 'ground rules'. The presenters and commentators then spoke of a Kosovar team, but not of a national team. And the stadium announcer announced the 'anthems for the game' without naming the countries. The reason for this is obvious: the government in Madrid does not want to accept Kosovo's independence because it fears separatist imitators in its own country, in Catalonia and especially in the Basque country.

With the help of Alexander the Great

Wherever you go, whoever you listen to, in the Balkans it is always about symbolism, and this is also true for North Macedonia. The ultras of FC Vardar for example can bring several hundred men onto the streets in a few hours. In recent years, they have often paraded through the Macedonian capital Skopje. Organised, self-confident, loud. On their banners they express an attitude shared by many Macedonians: 'The name is our identity.'

The Republic of Macedonia broke away from Yugoslavia in 1991 and has been independent ever since. In the south, it borders a province of Greece that bears the same name. For decades, the Greek government has feared territorial claims by its neighbour. Athens has long opposed Macedonia's entry into NATO and the EU. The result: provocations, embargoes, referendums. As a compromise, a change of name came into effect 2019: Skopje is now the capital of North Macedonia. For the ultras of FC Vardar this is a nightmare.

More than two million people live in North Macedonia, in the south of the Balkans. Around 65 per cent of the population are Christian Orthodox Macedonians, a quarter are ethnic Albanians. Many of the Orthodox Macedonians stick with FC Vardar, the record-breaking champions with 11 titles since independence. 'The vast majority of football fans are nationalist,' says Macedonian sports journalist Ilcho Cvetanoski. 'The right-wing parties use this potential of football. When they need tough guys for demonstrations or security services, they bring in the ultras.'

This became clear from 2006 after a change of government. At that time, the right-wing conservative VMRO-DPMNE party emphasised the ancient meaning of the name Macedonia and drew a line to the general Alexander the Great, who died in 323 BC. The government had statues erected in the centre of Skopje. An airport and a motorway were named after Alexander the Great, the national stadium after his father Philip II. 'This redesign was meant to make the nationalist ideology visible and provoke Greece,' says Cvetanoski. The government speaks of Macedonia's historical disadvantage and goes on the offensive – with the support of the ultras.

The inferiority complex is deeply rooted: in the 19th and for a long time also in the 20th century, Macedonia was not sovereign, but was claimed by surrounding powers, by Bulgarians, Greeks and Serbs. In 1923, the first football championship was held in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and it was not until 12 years later that a team from Macedonia was allowed to play. During the Second World War, Bulgaria annexed its western neighbour Macedonia and took control of the sport there.

After the war, Macedonia was one of six republics in socialist Yugoslavia. Many football fans were interested in the top clubs of other regions, in Red Star Belgrade or Dinamo Zagreb. Macedonian teams have been represented in the

Yugoslav league in 33 of the 45 seasons. Macedonian players also moved to the top clubs. In the successful Yugoslav national team, they were considered well integrated.

Many fans were drawn to politics after Macedonia's independence. The leader of the ultra group 'Komiti', Johan Tarčulovski joined the VMRO-DPMNE party. At the age of 19, he headed a right-wing youth organisation, and soon he was part of the Macedonian president's security team. At the turn of the millennium, the conflict between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians escalated. With a paramilitary unit, Tarčulovski attacked an Albanian village in August 2001, several people died.

The International Criminal Court in The Hague sentenced Tarčulovski to several years in prison as a war criminal. After his release in 2013, he was celebrated in Skopje like a 'war hero', writes the British journalist James Montague in his book *1312: Among the Ultras*. With this support, Tarčulovski was later elected to parliament. The former ultra leader mobilised fans against rapprochement with Greece. In 2016, the Social Democrats took over the Macedonian government. Nationalists stormed the parliament at the inauguration. Tarčulovski is said to have supported them.

The new government approached Greece and removed many of the symbols that reminded us of Macedonia's ancient significance. The stadium in Skopje was renamed after a popular singer. The 'Komiti' ultras provoked protests and riots. There is speculation that the Russian investor Ivan Savvidis has supported the demonstrators financially. Savvidis owns companies, hotels and media houses in Greece. He was known as the owner of PAOK Thessaloniki, the most famous club in the Greek region of Macedonia. Until 2011, Savvidis sat in the Russian parliament for Vladimir Putin's party. Moscow does not want North Macedonia to join NATO. The ultras of PAOK Thessaloniki are also positioning themselves against their neighbour.

Since the change of the country's name to North Macedonia at the beginning of 2019, the situation has been comparatively calm. But other conflicts exist. Around 25 per cent of the population are Albanians of Muslim faith. For many of them, the Albanian nation also extends to those states where Albanian minorities live. 'Many of the Orthodox Macedonians identify strongly with the Macedonian national team, but this is less the case with the Muslims,' explains Ivan Anastasovski, a sports scientist from Skopje. But Albanians also use football as a political and cultural platform. In the city of Tetovo near Skopje, Albanians founded FC Skendija in 1979 to cultivate tradition. The Yugoslav authorities banned the club, fearing Albanian nationalism. After independence, Skendija became champions three times. The ultras call themselves 'Ballistët', in reference to an Albanian fighting organisation in World War II.

Albanian fans in North Macedonia are also pursuing their agenda. Some of them display flags of a fictitious 'Greater Albania'. With banners and chants, they support the Kosovo Albanians against the claims of ownership from Serbia. Researcher Ivan Anastasovski believes that participation in the delayed EURO 2020 (in 2021) strengthened the construction of a separate identity in Northern Macedonia. A symbol of diversity instead of disunity. Like the national team, most professional teams in North Macedonia are ethnically mixed. But there is still no diversity in the clubs' governing bodies and supporters' sections.

'We all speak the same language after all'

After a three-week tour of the western Balkans, after 25 interviews and reading books, studies and articles, many of my questions have been answered, but a number of points remain open. How and when will it be possible for the ethnic groups to reconcile? How can one talk about the war crimes that happened less than 30 years ago?

Perhaps Robert Prosinečki has an answer. The son of a Croatian father and a Serbian mother, he is the only player to have scored World Cup goals for two countries: for Yugoslavia in 1990 and for Croatia in 1998. He won the European Champions Cup with Red Star Belgrade in 1991 and returned as coach in 2010. 'Things happened in the war that we will never forget,' says Prosinečki. 'But we can't let that dominate our lives.' He played for Real Madrid during the war, calling his family and friends in Zagreb every day.

Prosinečki has worked as a coach in Turkey and Azerbaijan, and between January 2018 and November 2019 he was in charge of the Bosnia and Herzegovina national team. In the summer of 2019, he is sitting on the terrace of the training centre in Zenica, an industrial town north of Sarajevo, lighting one cigarette after another. You quickly notice that Prosinečki doesn't really want to talk about politics. 'I never had any problems because of my origin. And I don't give a shit where people come from. We work as a team for good results, because football is the best marketing in the world.'

Perhaps such an attitude would bring some serenity to everyday life, but Robert Prosinečki also had to deal with politics as coach of Bosnia and Herzegovina. One of his national players came under criticism: Ognjen Vranješ, born in Banja Luka, had the border of Republika Srpska tattooed on his upper arm in 2015. Many Bosniak fans called for his expulsion. And their calls grew stronger when Vranješ got a tattoo of Momčilo Đujić in 2018. The Serbian priest had collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War and was convicted as a war criminal.

Prosinečki prefers to talk about topics that spread hope: in 2014, the national team of Bosnia and Herzegovina played its only World Cup to date, in Brazil. In their very first match, they pressed Argentina hard, but lost 2-1. People in Serbia and Croatia paid respect to this performance.

'There is much more to come,' says Prosinečki. 'We all speak the same language after all.' Maybe there will be solidarity among neighbours again someday. Maybe even with a friendly match or two.