

Nationalism, Regionalism and Sport in Interwar Romania

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Rezumat

Naționalism, regionalism și sport în România interbelică

Sportul a fost unul dintre domeniile în care s-a manifestat rivalitatea dintre regiunile României Mari (îndeosebi dintre Transilvania și Banat, pe de o parte, și București, de cealaltă parte). Deși, dintr-un punct de vedere oficial, sportul trebuia să contribuie la „unificarea sufletului românesc“, dezacordurile politice și diferențele economice, accentuate de victoriile sau înfrângerile din teren, au generat un veritabil discurs identitar, recurent în perioada interbelică, culminând cu ideea „românizării“ sportive.

Sport ceased long time ago to be an innocent past time and turned into a favourite playground for nationalism and regionalism. The quite unwise comparison of sport with a „war of the times of peace“ made the results and records to count as victories or defeats of the nation, region, city or neighbourhood. Eric Hobsbawm considered the sportive nation as a virtual nation, represented by a handful of sportspeople and a few thousands spectators¹, melting the personal identity into the national one. As the sociologist Petre Andrei once said, the defeat or offence against one's own nation were reasons strong enough to make even those not interested in sport react².

The patterns of identity, be they national, regional, local, professional, let alone that of a „neighbourhood“, seem to be crucial in the shaping of the behaviour of all those involved in the sporting life, be they actors, spectators or self-proclaimed neutral observers. Both the growth and the decay of this kind of attitudes are certainly linked to the degree of internal equilibrium of a society. Welfare and poverty are other factors involved in this equation, yet they do not seem to be as decisive as the individual perception of belonging to a certain community, represented by a team or, sometimes, by only one sportsperson.

The bond between sport and nationalism is already an established field of study³. But what happens when the researcher deals with a peculiar situation, with a clash between nationalism and regionalism? Namely, what happens when one investigates the internal situation of a particular sportive landscape, e.g. interwar Romania? Does the researcher cope with a monolithic identitarian pattern, or with a clash between national and various regional identities? The Romanian interwar sport was dominated

¹ Hobsbawm 1997, p. 140.

² Andrei [1940?], p. 35.

³ Armstrong-Giulianotti (eds.) 1999; Hadas 2000; Malz-Rohdewald-Wiederkehr (eds.) 2007.

by two recurrent debates, which I would call the „Roumanisation“ and the „supremacy“ debate. The one that counts here is yet the second, but I shall also point out a few characteristics of the other one as well.

One would be tempted to consider the association between sport and nationalism/regionalism in Romania as a characteristic of the last two, perhaps three decades. There are too many examples to list all of them here and anyway they do not make the point of interest of this study. A study of regional identity and identitarian motivated extreme behaviours as well as one of the roles of media and Internet in their manifestations should be carried in the future. Most of these examples of extremely manifested national/regional/neighbourhood identity come from the field of football. They are not necessarily linked to verbal and physical violence, but the recent emergence of hooliganism may entitle the assumption that the entire Romanian society has to deal with newly imported ways to manifest certain identitarian traits.

Even if the bursts of well-organised violence are somewhat recent and became a common unfortunate by-product of the Romanian sporting life, a return to the roots of modern sport is revelatory in respect to the influence of nationalism and regionalism. There was by far less verbal and physical violence in the 1920s and 1930s. Sport was a quite new discovery for the society but not less than today an excellent mirror for it. Due to this novelty, sport was still much more considered a necessity for a society with a troubled relationship with the body culture, rather than a popular show.

The analysis of the discourse and actions of the rulers of the sporting life reveals sentiments and ideas purely linked to nationalism and regionalism. It should not be a total surprise, that this kind of attitudes generated a long conflict between the sport officials from the Old Kingdom and the former Austro-Hungarian provinces, especially Transylvania and Banat. This sportive conflict mirrored the political¹ and cultural² disputes between the representatives of the capital and of the new provinces.

The starting point of this paper is the assumption expressed by George Plagino that sport should contribute to the so-called „unification of the Romanian soul“³. What actually surprises is not the affirmation itself, but the year by which it was made: 1940, almost two decades after the so-called „sportive unification“ from 1921. A closer look reveals the fact that the above-cited discourse of the president of the Union of Sporting Federations was not just a rhetorical exercise. Quite soon after the Union of 1918, the centralizing tendencies of the Old Kingdom clashed with the autonomy intentions of the Transylvanians. The field of sport was not an exception. The discourse of the representatives of the both sides borrowed political and nationalistic arguments and thus overcame the proper field of sport. My aim is to investigate these arguments and to establish whether they could be considered expressions of national and/or regional identities. Due to the issue of the access to the primary sources, I was able to investigate mostly the points of view and the ideas expressed by representatives of Bucharest and of the Old Kingdom.

¹ *Nedreptăţirea Ardealului*, 1921, p. 1; *Supremaţia morală a Partidului Naţional*, 1922, p. 1; *Regionalismul nostru şi exclusivismul vechiului Regat*, 1924, p. 1; *Regat şi provincii*, 1922, p. 1; Leontescu 1929, p. 1.

² Livezeanu 1998.

³ *Anuarul sporturilor pe 1939-1940*, p. 104.

In the 1920s, sport seemed to flourish in the Old Kingdom and in Basarabia. Newspapers reported constantly on the foundation of new associations and clubs nation-wide, as well as about small regional or local competitions. The failure of these initiatives generated critics against the local and national authorities, held as passive and conservative. Another alleged cause of the malfunction of sport in Moldova, Oltenia, Dobrogea and Basarabia was the constant progress of the Transylvanian sports life. The representatives of the above mentioned regions began to demand the supportive intervention of the state authorities, considering those and themselves too as responsible for the well being of the whole Romanian nation¹.

A main argument brought by these local sportive personalities was the significant number of non-Romanian (e.g. Hungarian, German or Jewish) sportsmen and officials from the former Austro-Hungarian provinces. In an era when war and nation were terms commonly and constantly used, sport was advocated as the best mean to prepare the men for military training and women to keep their families robust. Speaking about body culture as a benefit for the nation, the adherents of sport, otherwise a quite contested phenomenon², were trying to maintain the public opinion attentive and to gain its support. It was also a way to contest the Transylvanian supremacy and to encourage local initiatives in the regions where sport was not yet developed. Economical difficulties and conservative mentalities were later considered the factors to generate the failure of such initiatives.

From this point of view, Bucharest, which was already before the First World War the core of the sportive movement from the Old Kingdom³, was rather an exception. The capital city remained the sole competitor for Transylvania and Banat, in the field of sports. This situation lasted until the end of the interwar decades. This rivalry was partially shaped by the political disagreements between „centre“ and „provinces“. The economical crisis from 1929 deepened both the split between Bucharest, Transylvania and Banat, on one side, and the other provinces, on the other side, and the competition between the main actors. Following the crisis, in the 1930s, more money was invested in Bucharest's sport⁴. Authors like Camil Petrescu, a well-known football fan and writer, tried to persuade the public that any new discipline brought in Romania had first to convince Bucharest, the city with the largest, yet not very connoisseur, public⁵. By the same time, professionalism was finally accepted and finally legalised and Transylvanian football players began to move to Bucharest. In the field of football there was a real power shift, but Transylvania remained dominant in most of the other disciplines⁶.

Officially unified in 1921, the Romanian sportive movement was far from being homogenous. Although scarcely available, the statistical data show, that at the end of the interwar decades 51% of the total amount of sporting clubs and associations were located in Transylvania, Banat and Bucovina. The Old Kingdom gathered 23% of the

¹ Melamet 1923, p. 2; Rex-Ball 1927, p. 3.

² Popa 2004.

³ Costescu 1932, p. 6.

⁴ Sitaru 1937, p. 1; Dumbravu 1940, p. 8.

⁵ Petrescu 1937, p. 8.

⁶ Boerescu 1935, p. 6.

total, but Bucharest alone reached 22% from this nation-wide chart. Entire Basarabia could claim no more than 4%, and this was only due to the development of Chisinau. The domination of the former Austro-Hungarian provinces is even more obvious if taking into the consideration the 21 most „sportive“ urban settlements of „Greater Romania“. Bucharest was placed first, however followed by Cluj, Timisoara, Arad, Oradea, Brasov, Constanta, Cernauti, Ploiesti, Targu Mures, Braila, Iasi, Sibiu, Galati, Sighet, Baia Mare, Chisinau, Craiova, Petrosani, Campina, Satu Mare¹. These figures confirm the fact that the interwar decades meant, also in the field of sport, a thorough competition between Bucharest and Transylvania. The rest of the country acted as a minor competitor and no other city or region, with the notable exception of another former Habsburg possession, Cernauti, could actually act as an „arbitrator“.

Before discussing a series of examples regarding what one may call the politics of sport and thus analysing the non-sportive arguments thrown into this recurrent debate over sportive supremacy, I shall point out towards the differences between the sportive landscapes of the different Romanian provinces. Industrialisation and modernisation were the main causes of the development of sport in Romania. Yet, the impact of these major processes upon sports life was different in Transylvania and in the Old Kingdom. A careful analyse the origins of modern sport suggests that the future debates and conflicts may have found a cause in a to some extent different understanding of the body culture. Still, as I shall point out, one cannot talk about completely different origins of sport in the Old Kingdom and the former Austro-Hungarian provinces.

The development of the industrialized work turned free time into a major asset. Toy factories, dancing places, Sunday train-trips, even pornography² – all these characteristics of the modern times emerged as constituents of a life stile strongly inspired by the consumerism of the upper classes³. The influential sociological theory of Thorstein Veblen, that of a so-called „leisure class“ serving as raw model for the masses which can only develop a „vicarious conspicuous consumption“⁴, dates back to the at least apparently flourishing beginning of the 20th Century. At that time, sport was just a minor way to spend free time. Doing exercises, competing or simply watching others performing was slowly growing to a common behaviour both of the upper and of the lower classes. But it was not until after the First World War, that sport exploded as a social, cultural and political phenomenon. The roots of this major change lay in the appearance of the spectator sport before the „Great War“ as well as in the joy of living of the masses in the post-war decades⁵, motivated first by the traumas of the war and then by those of the world economical crisis.

Transylvania and Banat fit, at least in comparison with the rest of the Greater Romania, quite good into the above shortly described profile. Football as workers' sport, held by Eric Hobsbawm as an „invented tradition“ and a Western and Central

¹ I have calculated all these figures on the basis of the list of clubs and associations provided by *Anuarul sporturilor pe 1939-1940*, pp. 281-311.

² Stearns 2001, pp. 48-49.

³ Burke 1995, pp. 17-18.

⁴ Veblen 1958, p. 60.

⁵ Eisenberg 2002, pp. 76, 78.

European attribute¹, found there a proper ground. Besides, the Transylvanian working unions did not participate in the national strike from 1920 and due to this non-implication they could later use in their favour the new legislation of work. The regulations regarding the total amount of working hours, weekly and bank holidays turned into an advantage for the sport associations be they founded before or after 1918, either by the working unions themselves or with the support of industrial enterprises and commercial companies². It should thus not be surprising, that professionalism occurred in Transylvania as a consequence of the growth of sport in the industrialised cities. As the Romanian laws initially forbade it, sportsmen, or better said, football players, most of them descendants from modest families of workers, fled for Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary³, where professional sport was not regarded as a disgrace.

Racial theories found – and unofficially still find – an excellent playground in the field of sport. Writing about the dominance of clubs and sportspeople from Banat in the all-Romanian sport, Ovidiu Comșia, a publicly declared adherent of eugenics, claimed that the mixture of populations particular to that region should have been a firm ground to explain this dominance. The decisive argument of Comșia's thesis was that Europe was then dominated by sportspeople from Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary⁴. Obviously, Comșia mistook by holding genetics as more important than the economical, social and cultural features of the former political entity, which was the Habsburg Empire. This explanation, like all his other demonstrations on race and sport (actually, on national biology and psychology), were accepted at that time, and they should be treated as features of a mentality and not as reasonable arguments.

To a lesser extend than in the Old Kingdom, modernization and national identity played an important role in the evolution of Transylvanian sport too. During the interwar decades, some authors tried to stress upon the fact, that the Hungarian state authorities were not eager to repeat the mistake of their Austrian counterparts, to tolerant with the Slavic „Sokol“ Gymnastic Movement⁵. Another argument of the weak presence of the Romanian sporting clubs and associations was the economical and professional structure of the Romanian population from the Habsburg Empire, namely its fragile urban presence⁶. These authors did not deny the existence of Romanians in sport⁷, but underlined its fragility in comparison with that of the Germans and the Hungarians. As a matter of fact, only the outbreak of the First World War prevented the establishment of a Romanian union of sporting clubs in Transylvania⁸. Its nucleon was supposed to be the „Transylvanian Sporting Society“, established in Cluj in 1897 and transformed into a Romanian organisation. In 1919, the society was turned into a sports club called „Victoria“, lead by the former Austro-Hungarian army officer Silviu de Herbay. And that was not the only example. The

¹ Hobsbawm 1997, pp. 139-140.

² Lupu-Kostaki 1922, p. 16; Ghiulea 1929, pp. 724-726; Munteanu 1971, pp. 20-22.

³ Jaune 1924, p. 1.

⁴ Comșia 1938, p. 85.

⁵ Dabiciu 1934, p. 15.

⁶ Manuilă 1925, p. 1.

⁷ Bodea 2004, p. 25.

⁸ *Un apel al Societății Sportive Șoimii*, 1919, p. 3.

„Petru Maior Society“, created by the Romanian students from Budapest, also included some physical culture activities in its programs¹. Other Romanian associations were based in Sibiu, Arad and Orastie.

Although a few encounters took place before 1914, I did not identify any deep connections between the Romanian sporting clubs from Transylvania and those from the Old Kingdom. I also did not meet any reference to such relations in the interwar primary sources. This fact leads to the idea, that after the war, the sportspeople from the „old“ and „new“ provinces faced the challenge of organising their field of activity under completely new circumstances. This also meant, that they searched for models outside the field of sport. In the end, the points of view expressed by the representatives of the Old Kingdom prevailed.

In the Old Kingdom, the first national union of sporting clubs was founded in 1912, after a French model. It is true this was due to the fact, that most of the sportsmen were young people who returned from studies from France. But, on the other hand, there were simply too few associations and most of them were based in Bucharest, so it was rather useless to establish federations for each sportive branch. The Federation of Romanian Sporting Societies (F.S.S.R.) was patronised by the crown prince Ferdinand, even if his son, the future king Carol II, was the most involved member of the royal family into the Federation's regular activities. F.S.S.R. aimed high, but the war interrupted its entire activity².

Given the reduced number of sportive associations, events and competitions, the study of F.S.S.R. is rather interesting from the point of view of the rhetoric used by its founders and leaders. The Federation's prominent members held themselves as responsible for the propagation of sport into the masses. They acknowledged their aristocratic origin and considered, that their knowledge on sport and body culture should be spread from the peak of the society to its bottoms. The main argument used was that of the military strength of the nation. The men were supposed to be able to fight a war at any time, while women had to take care of the health of the generations to come. In a way, the supporters of eugenics, like Iuliu Hațieganu and Iuliu Moldovan, advocated, two decades later, comparable ideas.

It would be still wrong to consider that all the development of the pre-First World War sport in the Old Kingdom was caused just by a particular form of the modernising tendencies. Teams consisting of English and German workers and engineers, most of them employed in the oil and textile industry in Bucharest and Ploiesti, competed in small competitions³. Most likely, the founding act of the first pre-F.S.S.R. association of clubs was written in English, German and Romanian⁴ especially for them. The first team that described herself as a „national squad“, the „Romania“ that played against „Turkey“ in 1914, was formed, just like the opponent, from Englishmen and Germans⁵.

¹ Ghibu-Todan 1970, p. 30; Bodea 2004, pp. 53-54.

² Cesianu 1921, p. 1; Caracostea 1922, p. 1; Boerescu 1931, p. 307.

³ Flamaropol 1986, p. 13.

⁴ Dumitrescu 1975, p. 72.

⁵ *D. Chambers primul inaintaş centru al „naționalei“ române a scris F.R.F.A., 1939, p. 12.*

Under the impact of these teams arose the first Romanian clubs. One of them, named „Coltea“, after the district where most of its founders lived, decided even to admit only ethnic Romanians, in order to disseminate body culture amongst the majority¹.

In 1921, the leaders of the F.S.S.R. faced a whole new situation. The sportive landscape changed dramatically. Although F.S.S.R. became the official dialogue partner of the state in sports matters, it met with real difficulties when trying to expand its authority over the Carpathians. The so-called „sportive unification“ from 1921 seems to have been a rather long and challenging process². The event itself is quite little known. Even one of the event's main actors, George Costescu, who acted like one of the F.S.S.R.'s negotiators, did not write extensively about this moment in his official history of the Romanian sport³. Decades after, the administrative unification of sport, e.g. the acceptance of the rule of the Bucharest based and backed F.S.S.R. by the sportsmen from the former Habsburg provinces, was rather evoked than described⁴.

Encouraged by the centralising state policy, F.S.S.R. considered herself in the early 1920s as the sole organization entitled to rule over the all-Romanian sport. The most important characteristic of the centralization of the sporting life was to be that nation-wide organization recognised by the state as the sole official dialogue partner. F.S.S.R. aimed to become the organization, which could claim unchallenged the monopoly on the granting of all national champion titles and. In this way, F.S.S.R. targeted to control the selection of the representatives of Greater Romania for all international competitions⁵.

The attempts of the Transylvanian clubs to form an independent regional organization, lead by the same general Silviu de Herbay, failed. The representatives of the Transylvanian sport joined the central and regional sections of the Federation of Sporting Societies. Despite what we could call an administrative victory, later events and arguments suggest that a latent conflict turned into an open one.

For the contemporary observers, it was obvious that the Western-European pattern to which the organisers of the sportive life from the Old Kingdom tended was more developed in the new acquired provinces⁶. The following text is revelatory for the mixed feelings of the supporters of the centralization in sport. National and regional pride co-existed with a feeling of gratitude both for Western Europe and for the ethnic minorities from Transylvania, Banat and Bucovina: „either the contact with the great allied peoples together with whom we fought on all fronts, either the influence of the minoritarians from our Romanian provinces joined to the Motherland, today Bucharest like almost all the Romanians cities, compete in swimming pools, and in stadiums for which tens and thousands of millions are spent⁷.“

¹ *Clubul Sportiv „Coltea“ 1913-1923*, 1923, p. 5.

² Boerescu 1931, p. 308.

³ Costescu [1937], p. 142.

⁴ Ioan [1944], p. 24.

⁵ Caracostea 1921, pp. 1-2.

⁶ *Cuvânt înainte*, in *Ecoul sportiv*, nr. 1, 18 X 1921, p. 1.

⁷ Cosmin, undated, pp. 6-7.

The already mentioned weak development of the Romanian sport in Transylvania, Banat and Bucovina turned rapidly into a line of reasoning in respect to the „sportive unification“ under the control of Bucharest. Writing some eight years after this event, a journalist from Bucharest claimed, that the rule of the F.S.S.R. forged the progress of the Romanian sport in comparison to the Hungarian and German ones. He wrote: „we found the sportive movement from the other kneeled provinces under the minoritarian heel; today, we have everywhere Romanian initiatives in full growth“¹. In 1927, representatives of the Old Kingdom, lead by Sever Slătinescu, a responsible for the football team of the Romanian Army, stated openly their claims: „we ask that the natural, historical and above all the national right of our region to be the only place of selection of the sportive leaders must be recognised, as in any other field of activity Bucharest is the brain and heart of Roumanism“².

Another characteristic of the F.S.S.R. was the constant quest for help from the government. The officials of the Federation campaigned openly for financial aid, although this barely came. Paternalism could be the word to be used in describing this relation. This attitude could also be a reason for the change of meaning of the English term „supporter“, originally meaning financial sponsor of a sport club, be it a person or an institution, rather than „fan“³. The press from Bucharest openly acknowledged this other difference with those from Transylvania and Banat. The following passage expressed precisely a difference in the attitude towards body culture rather than a money problem: „I recalled the cities and smallest towns of Ardeal, where there is everywhere a sports field, a support, an encouragement. Here [in the Old Kingdom], most sports teams from the province play on inhospitable surroundings, observed by children, and taken under the protection of a well intended, provincial bourgeois and sportsman in his spare time“⁴.

On the other side of the Carpathians, a self-conscience of superiority could be observed. The political involvement of the most important sportive leaders helped them in the process of re-organising the F.S.S.R. In the late 1920s, the economical crisis and the remarkable rise of football made clear that a union of equal clubs would suffocate most of the other disciplines. Again, it was the national and local authorities, which were accused of not supporting sport. Liviu Iuga, better known as football manager than politician, considered that the rise of the National Peasant Party to power would mark a change in the relations between state and sport: „when these representatives of the Transylvanian politics shall have the control upon the country’s government, they will know how to listen to the needs of the Romanian sport, which lives today in misery because of the persecution of the authorities“⁵. Four years later, during the National Peasant Party’s governance, the „Law of Physical Education“ was adopted by the Parliament. In the same term of office, Iuga managed to gain the support of the Prime Minister Alexandru Vaida-Voevod against his own minister of

¹ Marincu 1929, p. 9.

² *De la Regiune*, 1927, p. 2; *Intre noi și cei de dincolo*, 1927, p. 4.

³ *Cluburile de suporteri*, 1929, p. 4; *Un mare club in Timișoara. Inițiativa funcționarilor dela primărie*, 1937, p. 4; *Municipiul Timișoara și Sportul*, 1937, p. 1.

⁴ Dumbrăveanu 1926, p. 3.

⁵ Iuga 1925, p. 1.

finance, Virgil Madgearu, whom was trying to raise the taxes gathered from sport events¹.

Before coming to the conclusions, I would like to point out briefly on the second recurrent debate. The idea of the „Roumanisation“ of sport emerged in the 1920s, but the strongest discussions and the first official measures happened only in the next decade.

The 1924 Paris Olympic Games marked the very first participation of an all-Romanian delegation at a major international event. The competitions for football, rugby, shooting and tennis saw the participation of the representatives of the new Greater Romania². Yet, the only discipline that seemed to have mattered was football. The first stage elimination from the tournament after a 0-6 versus The Netherlands was not fully unexpected. Most of the drafted players were Germans and Hungarians and this triggered the discussions for the Rumanisation of sport. There were long debates concerning the international representation of Greater Romania. Some said, that only ethnic Romanians should represent the country. Other argued that individual sportive worth and citizenship should be the only criteria for drafting the players for national squads. In the end, all the official measures were not thoroughly put into practice, despite an escalation of the debate at the end of the 1930s³. The „Rumanisation“ and the „supremacy“ debates were comparable, simultaneous, and yet different. Both represented reactions to much wider and thorough debates on how the Greater Romania should have been look like, lead by politicians and intellectuals.

In the end, may I speak about an identitarian conflict or simply about administrative quarrels and normal sportive rivalries? Undoubtedly, the discourse of the sport officials and adherents went much beyond the simple idea of sport as a suitable activity for the individuals and communities. The use of a nationalistic rhetoric is unquestionable. Even incoherent, the „Roumanisation“ process proves that the impact of nationalism on sport is deeper than the somehow normal stimulation of national pride by certain events on certain moments.

But was there indeed a conflict created and motivated by regional identities? Or does the researcher simply deal with a bunch of scattered opinions, even if many were based on an „us“ and/against „them“ discourse?

My answer is positive, as sport must not be seen as an isolated phenomenon, but as a social and cultural product. Mirror of a society confronted with sometimes completely new situations (e. g. ethnic minorities, centralisation), sport had to cope with challenges comparable with those from the political, cultural and economical life. The normal sportive rivalry was deepened by the long series of victories of the sportspeople from Transylvania and Banat. Their domination on field was turned into an argument to contest the ambition of the Old Kingdom for control, despite the poorer sportive results. Both sides used an „us“ against/or/and „them“ type of discourse, which appealed both to national and regional identity. While the representatives of the Old Kingdom justified their dominance claims using rather a set of nationalistic arguments, the „Transylvanians“ made case of their sportive

¹ *Susținătorii Sportului*, 1933, p. 1.

² Vrabie – Bucur-Ionescu – Dogaru – Popper 1975, pp. 125, 129.

³ Popa 2007, p. 203.

development and direct results. My conclusion is, that there were not particular identitarian patterns identifiable in the field of sport. Sport was rather another combat zone within the larger disagreements between the „old“ and „new“ provinces of interwar Romania.

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