

## USING SOCCER CLUB FANS FOR POLITICAL PURPOSES: CASE SERBIA

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Original scientific paper

### Abstract

The goal of the research was to determine if the various political and parapolitical groups and organizations are taking advantage of football club fans in Republic of Serbia for political purposes. The research was conducted during football Championships in Serbia (2011 and 2012 year) using interviewing technique-survey, on a sample of 268 fans. The results unambiguously indicate that fans were participating in public meetings of non-sports character, such as riots which have political background.

**Key words:** sport, fan groups, violence, ideology, politics.

### Introduction

Influences of political and economic interest groups that use sport for their own particular interests have always been intertwined with sport. Using sport, especially soccer, in totalitarian regimes is described in sociological literature (Merkel, 1999; Vrcan 2002). However, the connection between sport and politics is present in democratic societies too. Therefore, it would be completely erroneous to claim that fan violence is a sort of "outlet" of totalitarian regimes, given that it is equally present in modern democracies (Treadwell and Garland 2011). Relationship between politics and soccer is also mentioned in literature as a cause of war between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969, but that is an overstatement. (Sack and Suster 2000; Božović, 2006).

Instead of being a substitute for war, sport often becomes "a trigger and an arena" in which each side seeks revenge for the insults and atrocities or confirmation of victory" (Bodin et al., 2007). The practice of using fans for political purposes is evident in present-day Serbia too. "Over the past two decades, there was not a single important political public gathering on the territory of Belgrade without fans involved (Misić and Kešetović, 2012). Certain political structures use this practice to incite conflicts or to express covert political messages, the public disclosure of which would have adverse consequences or would degrade the position of a political party.

In addition to close ties with the club management, Serbian fan group leaders have rich criminal records and are deeply involved in the sphere of violent and organised crime, which creates a specific symbiosis of the worlds of politics, sports and crime (Simonović et al., 2014). Finally, it is a widespread position according to which the so-called ideology of right-winged extremism is one of the most important grounds for actions of Serbian fans (Đorić, 2010; Mijalković and Amidžić, 2012), so we wanted to confirm that in our survey.

It should be emphasised that using soccer fan groups to achieve nationalist, separatist and political goals is not only a Balkan phenomenon. The problem is also described in Spain, Italy, Germany, Argentina (Spaaij, 2008).

### Methods

The study aims to determine whether and in what ways soccer club fans in Serbia are used for political purposes. In this regard, we set up the hypothesis as follows: Leaders of fan groups are linked with the centres of political power that instruct their actions so that fans participate in political and the so-called patriotic public gatherings or promote ideological-political and homophobic messages at sporting events, whereby in both cases there would be certain amount of violence.

The survey was conducted by means of the *polling* technique. A questionnaire containing 33 questions was used as a tool, on a sample of 268 fans, from three soccer fan groups supporting Belgrade-based clubs Red Star, Partizan and Rad. The fans were surveyed in typical situations of conducting fan rituals at the stadiums of those clubs.

This scope and structure of the sample of respondents were representative, as 268 fans make up about 10% of the total number of registered violent and potentially violent fans (in Belgrade, there are about 3,000 such fans (Otašević, 2010).

Standard IBM SPSS Advanced Statistics 20.0. software package was used for automated statistical analysis of those data. The process of data processing involved the use of available statistical techniques with regard to the type of information from the questionnaire.

This includes descriptive statistics, chi-square test and determining correlation between variables via coefficients of contingency.

**Results**

Fan groups are characterised by a high heterogeneity in age structure, their age spanning from 12 to 61, i.e., within the range of 49 years. As many as 95% of fans belong to the interval from 22.71 to 24.04, and the average age of respondents is 23.38 (± 5.31).

Asked about the status in the fan group, 19 (7.09%) of the total number of respondents, identified themselves as fan leaders, 102 (38.06%) said they were core fan group members and 109 (40.67%) that they were members – supporters and 38 (14.18%) gave no response to the question on their status.

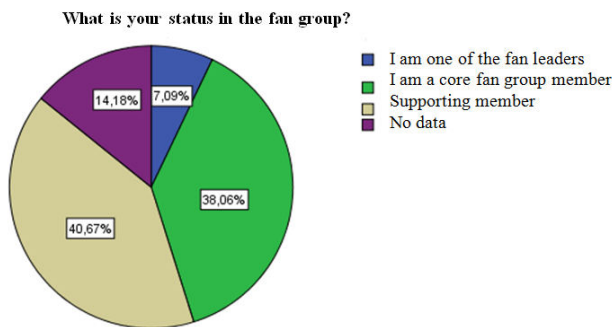


Figure 1. Status of fans in a fan group

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When asked if they participate in sports riots, somewhat less than half of respondents (126 or 47.01%) claim never to have participated in riots, while nearly the same number were involved in riots several times (70 or 26.12%) of them, or participate always (68 or 25.37%), and (4 or 1.49%) respondents did not give an answer.

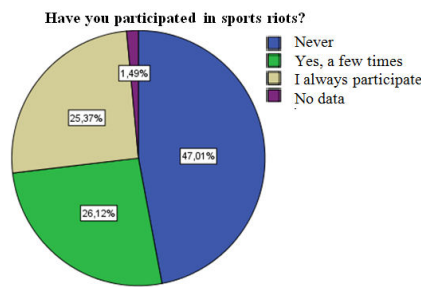


Figure 2. Participation in sports riots

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When asked about their involvement in other than sporting public gatherings and which ones, respondents were given a multiple-choice option. They could circle all kinds of events in which they participated, so the percentages were calculated in relation to the type of the gathering and not in relation to the number of respondents.

Almost one-third (30.11%) of the total number of responses refer to the rallies against the Gay Pride parade, 19.06% to patriotic rallies, 16.57% to rallies of political parties, 2.49% to strikes, 9.12%

to “something else”, while slightly more than a fifth of responses (22.65%) testifies of non-participation in gatherings that are not related to soccer.

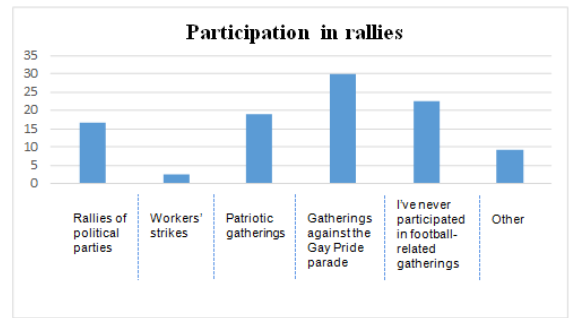


Figure 3. Distribution of respondents according to the frequency of fans in relation to participation in rallies

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Variable participation in other events than sporting public events was associated with the status of the respondents in the fan group. The results showed that 18 (94.7%) of respondents who identified themselves as fan leaders participated in other than sporting events (only one of the outspoken leaders of the fans did not answer this question).

If we look at core fans, it can be noted that 98 (or 96.1%) of the total of 102 of them participated in other public gatherings unrelated to soccer. Finally, 86 out of 109 respondents who are members – supporters (or 78.9%) took part in other events than sporting public gatherings. The question was not answered by 5.5% of the total number of respondents.

Based on the presented results, it can be concluded that the majority of fans (85.44%) participates in other than sporting events, and that this tendency is even more present when it comes to fan leaders and core fans (95.87%). Participation in other events than sporting events statistically significantly correlates with the status of fan leaders and core fans ( $C=0.480$ ;  $\chi^2=58,322$ ;  $df=2$ ;  $p=0,000$ ; also:  $C=0.480$ ;  $\chi^2=58.321$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p=0.000$ ), the marital status of parents –  $C=0.170$ ;  $\chi^2=6.438$ ;  $df=2$ ;  $p=0.040$ ; (children of divorced parents participate more often), as well as habits that involve consumption of drugs and/or alcohol ( $C=0.365$ ;  $\chi^2=33,358$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p=0.000$ ) and so on (Table 1). The situation is similar when it comes to the participation in rallies organised by political parties.

Participation in patriotic gatherings is associated with the place of birth –  $C=0.193$ ;  $\chi^2=8.150$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p=0.004$  (respondents from Belgrade are more present at patriotic gatherings than other respondents), consumption of drugs and/or alcohol ( $C=0.288$ ;  $\chi^2=19.626$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p=0.000$ ), as well as the status in the fan group ( $C=0.204$ ;  $\chi^2=8.454$ ;  $df=2$ ;  $p=0.015$ ; also:  $C=0.171$ ;  $\chi^2=5.859$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p=0.016$ ) (Table 2).

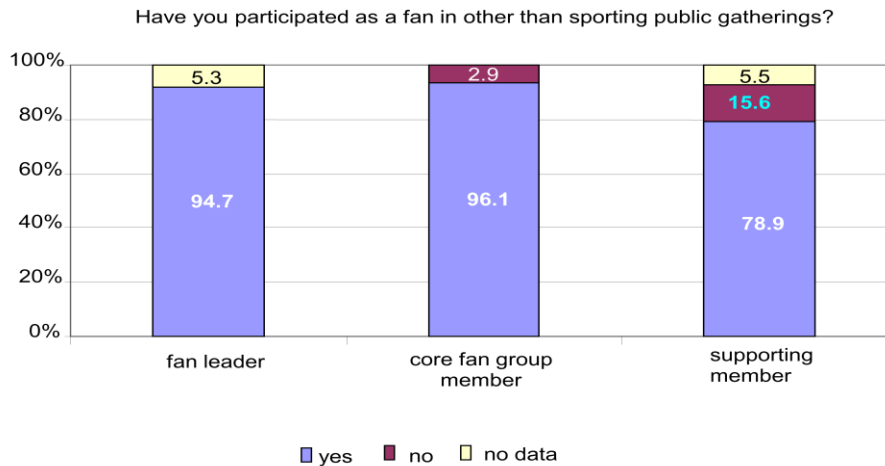


Figure 4. Participation in other than sporting public gatherings by the status of fans

Finally, respondents aged 18 to 25 are somewhat more frequent participants of rallies against the Gay Pride parade ( $C=0.136$ ;  $\chi^2=4.086$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p=0.043$ ), followed by those who are unemployed ( $C=0.189$ ;  $\chi^2=7.721$ ,  $df=2$ ;  $p=0.021$ ), children of divorced parents ( $F=0.222$ ;  $\chi^2=11.286$ ;  $df=2$ ;

$p=0.004$ ), drugs and/or alcohol consumers ( $C=0.340$ ;  $\chi^2=28.367$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p=0.000$ ), as well as those respondents who have the status of leaders or core fans ( $F=0.480$ ;  $\chi^2=58.519$ ;  $df=2$ ;  $p=0.000$ ; also:  $C=0.479$ ;  $\chi^2=58.149$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p=0.000$ ) (Table 3). When asked whether political parties or certain

political structures have an impact on fans, and to what extent, more than half of the respondents (58.07%) responded that they considered that political parties or particular political structures had an impact on the leaders of fan groups, the core fan groups, and on both the leaders and the core fan groups. Less than 4% of fans felt that political parties or political structures had an impact on ordinary members and supporters, while 2.24% of the respondents considered that politics had an impact on all fans. The opinion of 28.36% of the respondents was that politics affected neither of the two.

Table 1. Correlation of participation in other than sporting events with other variables

Variables	$\chi^2$	Df	C	p
Age	.000	1	.000	1.000
Place of birth	.950	1	.067	.330
Level of education	.019	1	.009	.891
Employment status	1.185	2	.075	.553
Housing status	2.049	2	.097	.359
Standard	4.641	2	.143	.098
Marital status of parents	6.438	2	.170	.040
Marital status of respondents	1.326	2	.077	.515
Drugs and/or alcohol	33.358	1	.365	.000
Drugs	27.489	1	.335	.000
Alcohol	28.969	1	.343	.000
Manner of choosing the club	2.111	1	.103	.146
Status (three categories)	58.322	2	.480	.000
Status (two categories)	58.321	1	.480	.000

Table 2. Correlation of participation in patriotic gatherings with other variables

Variables	$\chi^2$	df	C	p
Age	.429	1	.044	.512
Place of birth	8.150	1	.193	.004
Level of education	.032	1	.012	.859
Employment status	4.611	2	.147	.100
Housing status	5.553	2	.159	.062
Standard	2.694	2	.110	.260
Marital status of parents	2.695	2	.111	.260
Marital status of respondents	4.696	2	.144	.096
Drugs and/or alcohol	19.626	1	.288	.000
Drugs	5.739	1	.161	.017
Alcohol	21.639	1	.301	.000
Manner of choosing the club	.003	1	.004	.953
Status (three categories)	8.454	2	.204	.015
Status (two categories)	5.859	1	.171	.016

Table 3. Correlation of participation in rallies against the Gay Pride parade with other variables

Variables	$\chi^2$	df	C	p
Age	4.086	1	.136	<b>.043</b>
Place of birth	.002	1	.003	.962
Level of education	1.667	1	.088	.197
Employment status	7.721	2	.189	<b>.021</b>
Housing status	2.064	2	.098	.356
Standard	5.560	2	.157	.062
Marital status of parents	11.286	2	.222	<b>.004</b>
Marital status of respondents	3.011	2	.116	.222
Drugs and/or alcohol	28.367	1	.340	<b>.000</b>
Drugs	28.230	1	.339	<b>.000</b>
Alcohol	27.843	1	.337	<b>.000</b>
Manner of choosing the club	2.489	1	.111	.115
Status (three categories)	58.519	2	.480	<b>.000</b>
Status (two categories)	58.149	1	.479	<b>.000</b>

Do you think that political parties or certain political structures have an impact on:

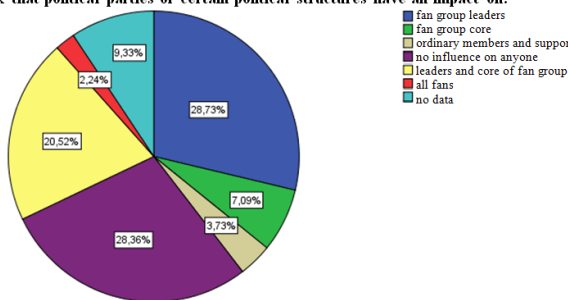


Figure 5. Impact of political parties or certain political groups and organisations on fans

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Table 4. Chi-Square tests and symmetric measures

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.476(a)	3	.009
Likelihood Ratio	11.940	3	.008
Linear-by-Linear Association	.034	1	.855
N of Valid Cases	230		

a 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 10.90.

Symmetric Measures

	Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal Contingency Coefficient	.218	.009
N of Valid Cases	230	

- a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.
- b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

When it comes to the type of impact, 63 (23.5%) of respondents believe that exploitation for political purposes exists; the opinion of 42 (15%) is that crime connects political actors and fans; (27 or 10.1%) of respondents believe that the impact exists, but they do not explain the nature of such impact; about half of the respondents (5136 or 0.7%) gave no answer. In addition to the fact that more than half of the respondents believe that political structures have an impact on fans, an important finding is that among different categories of fans (leaders, members and fans – supporters) there was no statistically significant difference in terms of an opinion about whether such an impact exists - C=0.079;  $\chi^2=1.332$ ; df=2; p=0.514. However, when an explanation is given about the type of impact, there is a statistically significant difference, as the leaders and core members mentioned criminal connections, while members – supporters cited the use for political purposes, or gave no answer at all - C=0.218;  $\chi^2=11.476$ ; df=3; p=0.009 (Table 4).

Discussion and conclusion

These responses are generally not surprising because of the fact that certain political parties and political structures in fighting for alleged national interests, mostly the right-winged ones, often manipulate extreme fan groups. Finally, they are members or supporters of political parties, and a significant portion of the electorate, and the fan leaders often get some protection from the criminal and legal reaction by the state or financial means for fans' activities. Extensive amounts of biased and patriotic discourse are offered in all former Yugoslav nations. (Ličen and Billings, 2013). Our results are analogous to those in Italy, according to which two-thirds of Italian ultras fans admitted they had a history of conflict outside of soccer events (Roversi and Balestri, 2000). Similar are the results of the survey of fan violence in England where "fusion of soccer violence and extremist politics" was noticed (Treadwell and Garland, 2011). Within the variables included in the analysis, the status of the leader or a core fan group member can be singled out as a factor that highly and significantly correlates with both participation in sports riots and participation in other events than sporting events -

rallies of political parties, patriotic gatherings and similar events, where rallies against the Gay Pride parade should be particularly highlighted. Combined with the so-called *machismo* and the tradition of "Serbian marriage and family" as the foundation of the extreme fans' system of values, it is manifested as expressed and open animosity towards sexual minorities, i.e., towards members of the LGBT population. Homophobia and machismo of fan hooligans are politicised by right-winged political forces. Machismo, masculinity and homophobia characterise vandals and violators in sport and out of sport around the world (for example, Earle, 2011; Treadwell and Garland 2011). Fans are generally not interested in politics to a great extent, although their answers show that they are in opposition to the dominant social values. Assertions that fans abuse sport are not true. On the contrary, they are abused by crime and political ideology and this trend can be observed in sport more easily with every day which had gone by. In Serbia, it happens that political

leaders are at the management of sports clubs although they usually have nothing to do with sports, but they hold managing positions in order to achieve their political and material goals. Sporting events are a good opportunity for them to express their political goals because of the large number of participants in those events, but also because of the presence of the sporting public and the media, and there they also have the chance to receive high pays and possibly abuse their position by means of membership in managing boards. It should be added that some politicians, sports officials, journalists and other public figures associated with sport promote violence in their public appearances, or prevent ordinary people from seeing the real nature of fan violence by their politically conditioned estimates and forecasts. Generally speaking, there is a considerable media attention dedicated to fan violence in Europe. It is given too much publicity which, according to some authors, encourages extremism (Roberts and Benjamin 2000).

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## ZLOUPOTREBA NAVIJAČA FUDBALSKIH KLUBOVA U POLITIČKE SVRHE: CASE SRBIJA

### **Sažetak**

*Cilj istraživanja bio je utvrditi da li se navijači nogometnih klubova u Republici Srbiji zloupotrebljavaju u političke svrhe od strane različitih političkih i parapolitičkih skupina i organizacija. Istraživanje je realizirano tehnikom anketiranja, upitnikom koji sadrži 33 pitanja, na uzorku od 268 navijača. Obuhvaćeni su navijači tri vodeća prvoligaška nogometna kluba u Srbiji. Rezultati istraživanja nedvosmisleno ukazuju na sudjelovanje navijača na javnim skupovima koji nisu sportskog karaktera, odnosno sudjelovanje u neredima koji imaju političku, a ne sportsku pozadinu.*

**Ključne riječi:** *sport, navijačke skupine, nasilje, ideologija, politika.*

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*Received: February 03, 2017*

*Accepted: March 20, 2017*

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