

A YOUNG ATHLETE AND THE CHALLENGES OF NATIONAL IDENTITY: THE CASE OF JAKOV FAK

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Review paper

Abstract

Jakov Fak is a highly successful Croatian/Slovene athlete. When he won a bronze medal for Croatia in 2009, his sport (biathlon) was almost completely unknown to the Croatian public. However, he later appeared in media headlines when he announced his transfer to Slovenia in order to gain better training conditions. In addition to the other challenges in his life (training, hard work, competitions, living space, quality of life, family, etc.), he faced specific challenges regarding his ethnic/national identification. In Croatia (as in many other post-socialist countries), ethnic/national identity is a very important social issue. The case of Jakov Fak is interesting from a sociological perspective because it allows us to observe how individual, sports-related choices brought questions of national (ethnic) identification to the general public, and laid a heavy burden on the shoulders of a young athlete. What should you do when your own country calls you a traitor if you decide to join another country's team? The issues of training and finding ways to attain success in sports are also closely linked with questions of media attention and national/ethnic discourse in this case as well. This paper deals with the case of Jakov Fak, who made his choices despite having to face challenges unusual for a young athlete.

Key words: Jakov Fak, young athlete, biathlon, national identity

Introduction

It is well known that sport in the sociological sense has been and remains a reflection of events on the social scene at large, allowing it to serve as a tool for the understanding and analysis of society as a whole (Perasović & Bartoluci, 2007). Numerous examples show the irreplaceable role of sport and sporting successes in the construction and shaping of national identity, especially in post-socialist societies (Bartoluci, 2013). Through the sporting successes of national heroes, individuals attain identity and feelings of pride, success, and power they lack in their everyday lives, giving them a status they would never have managed to attain through their own efforts. Anthony D. Smith (1991, p. 160-1) says that perhaps the most important of function of national identity is "to provide a satisfying answer to the problem of personal oblivion. Identification with the 'nation' in a secular era is the surest way to surmount the finality of death and ensure a measure of personal immortality." The history of Croatian sport provides a large number of examples of the labelling of athletes who changed their citizenship (or considered doing so) and began competing for another nation-state, either out of mainly economic reasons or to attain better training conditions. Some of these cases went "under the radar" of the general public, and most discussions evaluating the decision to change citizenship only took place after the athlete in question attained significant sporting success. This was the case with Mirna Jukić, a swimmer of Croatian descent who had competed for Austria for years. Ten years ago, swimmer Duje Draganja garnered public attention when he announced that he was going to swim for Qatar.

Under public pressure and through the work of the Croatian Olympic Committee and the private sector, funds were made available to ensure he remain in Croatia. Cases of athletes who took Croatian citizenship to compete for Croatia should also be mentioned, such as footballer Eduardo da Silva or basketball player Dontaye Draper. All of these examples show the complexity of issues of national identity and the need for more sociological analysis of its connection with pro-level sports. The issue of ethnic/national identity is used regularly in political instrumentalisation, and antagonism between nations gradually moves from the political sphere to the world of sports. The case of Jakov Fak, a Croatian biathlete, was also labelled as being of national significance and entered the limelight in 2009 after he won a bronze medal at the World Championship in South Korea. At this time, stories began appearing concerning his potentially exchanging his Croatian citizenship for Slovenian citizenship. Less than a year before winning his first medal at the World Biathlon Championship, he began training with the Slovenian team, led by Slovenian coach Uroš Velepec. An internal agreement existed between the federations that Jakov Fak would begin competing for Slovenia after the end of the 2010 Olympic cycle. It must be noted that training conditions for the biathlon in Croatia were inadequate at the time, and that international competitions in the biathlon are of key importance as no club teams exist, making international competitions the only opportunity for biathletes to compete. What makes this case sociologically interesting is the fact that a nearly unknown sport became well-known to the public almost overnight

– Jakov’s medal at the World Championship was Croatia’s first-ever medal in the biathlon. Likewise, the issue of Jakov Fak transferring from the Croatian team to the Slovenian team became an issue of “national” importance. In addition to the other challenges in his life (training, hard work, competitions, living space, quality of life, family, etc.), Jakov Fak faced specific challenges regarding his ethnic/national identification. In this case, we can observe how individual, sports-related choices brought questions of national (ethnic) identification to the general public, and laid a heavy burden on the shoulders of a young athlete. The aim of this research is to answer three questions: (a) how do Croatian and Slovenian print media perceive Jakov Fak as a young athlete; (b) which challenges and dilemmas did he have to face in his sports career, and; (c) were these challenges related to issues of ethnic and civic nationalism?

Materials and Methods

This paper deals with different media interpretations of this case in two countries, Croatia and Slovenia. Different qualitative methods were used – an interview with Jakov Fak, as well as content and discourse analysis of print media and documents. The analysis was performed on all texts concerning this topic published in three high-circulation Croatian daily newspapers – *Jutarnji list*, *Večernji list*, and *Sportske novosti* – and three high-circulation Slovenian daily newspapers – *Dnevnik*, *Delo*, and *Ekipa* – three days before tournaments, during tournaments, and three days after tournaments. We analysed two sporting events – the 2009 World Biathlon Championship and the 2010 Winter Olympics. We also analysed articles published in the digital editions of these newspapers during the summer of 2010.

Results

At the time of the 2009 World Biathlon Championship in South Korea, both Jakov himself and biathlon as a sport were completely unknown and unrecognized by the Croatian public and media. At this same time, the situation in Slovenia differed significantly. Slovenians are usually known as a skiing nation, so the biathlon has a completely different status in Slovenia. For example, the day before the race in which he would win the bronze medal, the Croatian media did not write about the biathlon or about this race. The biathlon in Croatia is a “small” sport, and is almost entirely unknown to the public – by a small sport, we mean here that no biathlon course exists in Croatia, and thus there are no appropriate conditions for biathlon training. The Croatian Biathlon Federation exists, but its work in the sports scene has not brought any significant results. The Croatian biathlon gradually began to lose its anonymity after Fak’s first medal in international competition, but the media’s interest was to die out quickly.

Concerning this issue, Jakov stated: *I felt as if most people didn’t really understand how hard it was, and I was hurt by the fact that my medal received a lot of attention, but only for a week, after which everything went back to how it used to be* (Beluhan, 2010a). He explained the lack of interest in the biathlon among both the sports community and the general public as follows: *Athletes usually joke that fame in less important sports lasts as long as the flowers you get at the awards ceremony. So, when the flowers die a week later, your presence in the media dies too, and you simply find yourself back on the margins.* (personal communication, October 20, 2016). After his sporting successes, media reports of Jakov’s transfer to Slovenia became a more common topic in both the Croatian and Slovenian media. This transfer meant a change of citizenship (nationality). Overnight, this previously unknown sport became recognized by the public, and switching from the Croatian team to the Slovenian was an issue of “national” significance. Robert Kontak, the secretary general of the Croatian Biathlon Federation, said: “I am angry that the media constantly mentions Slovenia alongside Fak’s name. Rubbish. They’ll pronounce him a Slovenian in the end” (Dominković, 2009, p. 20).

After the first reports of his transfer from the Croatian team to the Slovenian team, Jakov was labelled by some of the Croatian media, while the Slovenian media “cheered” for his transfer to Slovenia. This was not the first case of the labelling of a Croatian athlete who changed his citizenship to ensure better sports training conditions. The biathlon, which had been completely unknown to the Croatian media a few months prior, had suddenly become a political issue. This issue of “national importance” – rather, the politicisation of the case – was to intensify during the 2010 Olympic Games in Vancouver, where Jakov won a bronze medal. The analysis of the discourse in media writings shows the complexity of the situation in which this young athlete found himself as he was competing for one state but training in another. Both the Croatians and the Slovenians wanted to place him under their flag. Despite the support of the Slovenian media and mostly affirmative reports on his successes, it was apparent that the people in charge of the Slovenian biathlon were categorically insisting he change teams, because otherwise, as trainer Velepec stated, Jakov “wouldn’t have anywhere to train!” (Hebar & Brajdić, 2010). To date, more than 100 foreign athletes have taken Slovenian citizenship, such as Britta Bilač, Marija Šestak, and well-known track and field sprinter Merlene Ottey. Before the Olympics, Jakov stated that he did not want Slovenian citizenship, but rather that he wanted to raise the biathlon in Croatia to a higher level (Ne želim slovensko državljanstvo, već biatlon u Hrvatskoj na višoj razini, 2010), later saying: “I’m definitely not going to Slovenia. I would like to use my results to help Croatia build a biathlon course.” (Beluhan, 2010b).

An analysis of the content of media messages shows the weight of the decision to change one's citizenship. At a press conference after winning his Olympic medal, his success in his sport seemed to have been overshadowed by the issue of his transfer. By the end of the games, Jakov had not yet decided: "It is neither easy nor simple, because it is a decision that will direct my career and my life." (Beluhan, 2010c). He claimed that there was no room for politics in sports, accented that he had connected with his colleagues from the Slovenian team as a family, that they were cooperating and aspired to the same goal, and that journalists would not succeed in making a political scandal of the situation (Šimnovec, 2010). Gradually, the public discourse of the Croatian media changed. Headlines spoke of the "decent" Slovenians, who were not planning to bribe Fak with Slovenian citizenship. However, after Borut Nunar, the director of the Slovenian biathlon team, stated that an agreement had existed for months between the Croatian and Slovenian federations according to which Fak was supposed to transfer to Slovenia after the Olympics in Vancouver and begin competing for the Slovenian team immediately (Langerholz, 2010), the discourse in the Croatian media sharpened. First, the media discussed "Saving Fak in 3 steps", which consisted of: employing him in the military or police force (civil service), completing the construction of the Croatian centre in Mrkopalj, and bringing trainer Velepec to Croatia.

After this, the situation was politicised even further, citing "fears" that Fak might become "a new point in the Croatian-Slovenian controversy". The collapse of Yugoslavia and the fall of communism left many unresolved issues between Croatia and Slovenia, such as border disputes, bank savings, fishing zones, etc. In addition to these existing issues, Jakov's case became another political issue: *Oh, this is exactly what we needed. First the Zagreb branch of Ljubljana Bank, the as of yet unresolved issues surrounding the shared nuclear power plant in Krško, and then the dispute over the Ecological and Fisheries Protection Zone. Of course, there is also Sveta Gera mountain, which the Slovenians call Trdinov vrh, then Savudrija Bay which the Slovenians again have a different name for, the Bay of Piran. Yes, let us not forget Joško Joras' flower pots and Mlini, Bužin, and Skudelin villages, or the arbitration agreement and doubts as to whether it's a good thing or not... Right when you think, that's everything, there are no more points to the Croatian-Slovenian controversy, along comes Jakov Fak. And whose flag he will choose. Croatia's or Slovenia's. Who does he prefer, Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski, Croatian historian, writer, the first to speak in Croatian Parliament in the Croatian language (1843), or France Prešern, the greatest Slovenian poet?* (Bauer, 2010). We can consider this a typical example of the creation of moral panic which will not succeed in spreading, likely due to the fact that the biathlon in Croatia is a sport with a modest tradition and results.

Politicised discourse would not become the rule in the Croatian media, despite the increasing pressure for Fak and the Croatian Biathlon Federation to make a clear statement on the issue of citizenship. In the face of this increasing pressure, Croatian Olympic Committee secretary Josip Čop, in an expression of his personal opinion on the case, stated: "Some things have no price and are not for sale. When I say this, I am thinking of citizenship." (Bauer, 2010). Duje Draganja, a swimmer who found himself in a similar situation five years earlier when he had to decide whether or not to accept a transfer to Qatar, said that the only advice he could give Fak after his experience was to "not read the newspapers and not watch television", because "where these things are in question, the media are bloodthirsty" (Jakove, ne čitaj novine, 2010). Jakov Fak himself made consistent statements as an actor in this case. Croatian newspaper *Večernji list* (Fak, 2009. za Delo: 99,9 posto nastupat ću za Sloveniju, 2009) carried his statement from Slovenian newspaper *Delo* in which he said that he knew people in Croatia would be disappointed and would view him as a "traitor", at which point it can be noted that his dilemma is related to the problem of discourse typical for ethnic nationalism – you are either with us or against us. Despite the efforts of the Croatian Olympic Committee and their success in finding a sponsor, Fak decided to compete for Slovenia in the end. The Croatian Biathlon Federation was unable to ensure him a condition he insisted on – working with Slovenian trainer Velepec. In addition to this, Croatia did not have a good sparring team for training, while the Slovenian team had everything "sorted out", in his words (Beluhan, 2010d). He would later state: *I came to a place with better conditions, I can use them to secure my livelihood, and that's what I'm doing. (...) When I see the current state of the biathlon in Croatia, I want it to get better every year, but what I see and what is reality, (...) unfortunately I don't see it moving at a speed that would be necessary to advance from 2010 onward, simply because the policies of the people who ran that federation and their ways of thinking simply weren't sufficient to the task* (personal communication, October 20, 2016). During the summer months, with the entry into the new season, the media discourse and moral panic finally began to wane. "Fak repaid the Slovenians for saving him" read one headline in *Večernji list* (Hebar, 2010). Jakov Fak's discourse as the actor in this story is founded mostly on sports motifs, not national motifs. Although he is aware of the connection between sport and national identity, as is apparent in his statement in which he accents that he was honoured to compete for Croatia and to carry the flag at the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games, the desire to ensure a better sports career was more powerful. *Večernji list* carried his statement: *I'm not to blame for this situation, I gave many warnings. It was an honour to represent my country, I even carried the flag at the opening ceremonies of the Winter Olympic Games.*

It will be hard for me, but it would have been harder and harder for me to achieve results had I stayed. And results are all that keep you going, otherwise everyone would be asking why Fak is getting so much money and not showing results. Of course, pressure exists in Slovenia as well, but I will be more sure in my results there because of my trainer (Fak: Bit će mi teško nastupati za Sloveniju, 2010). The Slovenian media cheered for Jakov and supported him even while he played for Croatia. Although Jakov beat Slovenian biathlete Klemen Bauer for the bronze medal, Bauer said that Fak is a part "of our team, we're only divided by a different flag", and that "if Jakov played for the Slovenian team, Slovenia would be a world power." (Okorn, 2010). They comment on how, after winning his bronze medal at the World Championship, the Croatians promised Fak "castles, but apparently only made of sand". *Dnevnik* later reported that his Olympic medal had lessened his chances for a transfer to Slovenia. It also carried a symbolic statement by trainer Velepec prior to Fak's departure to Vancouver, in which he said that he hoped that Fak would perform as poorly as possible at the Olympic Games because "when he's not performing, no one cares about him. When he was sick, no one took care of him." (Prestop dogovorjen, a ni mogoč, 2010). Jakov stated in the Slovenian media that "Without the Slovenians, the medal wouldn't have been possible (...) Velepec and the entire Slovenian team, including the servicer, are to thank for the medal." (Prestop dogovorjen, a ni mogoč, 2010).

Discussion and Conclusions

Twenty five years after Croatia's declaration of independence, national identity is still an important issue for the Croatian public. It is still apparent that sport represents the social changes and processes taking place in society at large. This case illustrates how individual, sports-related choices raised issues of national (ethnic) identification among the general public, as well as laying a heavy burden on the shoulders of a young athlete. Post-socialist societies still play the nationalism card whenever it is useful as a political tool. Jakov Fak is the first Croatian athlete to win a medal in a Nordic discipline.

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After winning his Olympic medals, Croatian Olympic Commission president Zlatko Mateša congratulated him on winning a "historic medal for Croatia" (Beluhan, 2010e). This medal was truly "historic", both literally and figuratively. Since Jakov Fak's victory, no Croatian biathlete has achieved any significant success at big competitions. Thanks to his commitment, ambition, and persistence, Jakov Fak attained enviable sporting results for Croatia, a country in which skiing is the only socially "recognised" winter sport. Despite this, the greatest challenge in his career was the issue of which team he would compete for. Despite his clarity and consistency in his media statements, particular structures within the nation's leading sports bodies attempted to solve the dilemma of the transfer by stressing the issue of national/ethnic identity. The case of Jakov Fak did not reach the scale of moral panic, but in some ways the public was manipulated by the use of national symbolism. Jakov's trainer Uroš Velepec made a significant point when he said that the Slovenian team accepted Fak onto the national team as a gesture of good will in a moment when no one expected him to succeed, but that he feared the Croatian public would crucify him "when he only wanted to advance in the sport he was talented in." What he couldn't do in Croatia, he succeeded to do with the Slovenian team, and he continued: "If he hadn't joined us, today he would likely be working a day job, because the Croatian federation doesn't have a servicer, a course, or competition for training", that is to say, he would no longer have been able to compete in the biathlon, a sport into which he had invested much time, effort, and energy. Velepec finished his statement with the words: "This medal belongs to Croatia, and no one can take it away from you. But we did our part, and we expect him to keep up his end of the agreement" (Brajdić & Buškulić, 2010). Jakov Fak truly did fulfil his end of the agreement, and he began competing for Slovenia in the 2010/2011 season. By competing for the Slovenian biathlon team under the flag of the Republic of Slovenia, Jakov Fak did not forsake his ethnic (Croatian) identity, but he did change his citizenship in order to advance in the sport he loves, with the trainer he wanted, despite the threat of some members of the public in his home country declaring him a traitor.

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MLADI SPORTAŠ I IZAZOVI NACIONALNOG IDENTITETA: SLUČAJ JAKOVA FAKA

Sažetak

Jakov Fak je vrlo uspješan hrvatski / slovenski sportaš. Kad je 2009. osvojio brončanu medalju za Hrvatsku, njegov sport (biatlon) bio je gotovo potpuno nepoznat hrvatskoj javnosti. Međutim, kasnije se pojavio u medijskim vijestima kada je najavio svoj transfer u Sloveniju kako bi stekao bolje uvjete treninga. Pored drugih izazova u svom životu (trening, naporan rad, natjecanja, životni prostor, kvaliteta života, obitelj, itd.), sučelio se s određenim izazovima vezanim za njegovu etničku / nacionalnu identifikaciju. U Hrvatskoj (kao i u mnogim drugim postsocijalističkim zemljama), etnički / nacionalni identitet vrlo je važan društveni problem. Slučaj Jakova Faka je zanimljiv iz sociološke perspektive, jer nam omogućava promatranje kako individualni, sportski izbori donose pitanja nacionalne (etničke) identifikacije široj javnosti i postavljaju teška opterećenja na ramena mladog sportaša. Što bi trebalo učiniti kada vas vlastita zemlja zove 'izdajnik' ako se odlučite pridružiti momčadi druge zemlje? Pitanja obuke i pronalaženja načina za postizanje uspjeha u sportu također su usko povezana s pitanjima medijske pažnje i nacionalnog / etničkog diskursa u ovom slučaju. U radu se govori o slučaju Jakova Faka, koji je izvršio svoj izbor unatoč sučeljavanju s neuobičajenim izazovima za mlade sportaše.

Ključne riječi: Jakov Fak, mladi sportaš, biatlon, nacionalni identitet

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