The Paradoxes of Politicisation: football supporters in Croatia

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Abstract

In this paper we explore the political engagements of football supporters, principally in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. In addition to serving a political role as military recruiting grounds and having a strong connection with Croatian nationalism before and during the wars of the Yugoslav succession, such groups also offered a critique of Tuđman's authoritarianism during the nineties and of crony capitalism today. The first half of the paper offers an historical sociological overview of fans' political engagements from the nineties to the present day. The second half of the paper takes a more anthropological approach in considering the situation at present, drawing on conversations and participant observation with *White Angels Zagreb (WAZ)*, a fan supporter group associated with Zagreb's 'second team', NK Zagreb. WAZ subscribes to an antifascist and direct democratic political platform which sometimes brings it into conflict with other supporters' groups, such as Dinamo Zagreb's *Bad Blue Boys (BBB)* as well as the club's management. We examine and compare WAZ's descriptions of and attitudes towards NK Zagreb's chairman Dražen Medić with the BBB's attitudes towards Dinamo Zagreb's chairman Zdravko Mamić, both figures who symbolise crony capitalism. A theme linking the two sections concerns how the category of being a football fanatic creates a particular set of commitments and solidarities which intersect with the stated political commitments of the various fan groups' members. This common situation of being - from the fans' perspective - a lover of football, creates particular kinds of spontaneous solidarities and ruptures within and between groups and the club management, in response to various events and in the face of dominant media depictions of football supporters as hooligans.

Introduction

The idea that football is tightly connected to national identity and nationalism is not new: several aspects of the game - the competitiveness; focus on physical strength, idealisation of the body, the associations clubs make with fixed geographical identities and the often deep sense of emotional connection - make the link an easy one to make. The connections between football and nationalism, and sociological studies of nationalism in the Balkan context more generally have, however, been the predominant focus over the past two decades by sociologists, activists and Western Media reporting on the recent wars, tackling themes such as football clubs' use of history (Sindbæk 2013), particular violent incidents as a key to understanding the escalation of war, such as the clash at Maksimir Stadium in May 1990 (Mihajlovic 1997; Đorđević 2012), the enrolment of and control of sports' associations by Tuđman's government in Croatia (Brentin 2013), as well as critical analyses of media representations of football fans as hooligans (Obradović 2007) and constructions of masculinity amongst Bad Blue Boys in Melbourne, Australia (Hughson 2000). Whilst much of this body of scholarship has drawn important conclusions, we wish to focus in this article on *positive* kinds of engagement, which fans in Zagreb have initiated from the nineties to the present day. These include critiques by the fan association (*navijačka udruga*) associated with GNK Dinamo Bad Blue Boys (hereon BBB) of Franjo Tuđman's authoritarianism to recent participatory and direct democratic initiatives which fan groups in Zagreb have initiated.

The first half of the paper offers an historical sociological overview of fans' political engagements from the nineties to the present day. The second half of the paper takes a more anthropological approach in considering the situation at present, drawing on conversations and participant observation with *White Angels Zagreb (WAZ)*, a fan supporter group associated with another Zagreb based team, NK Zagreb. WAZ subscribes to an antifascist and direct democratic political platform which sometimes brings it into conflict with other supporters' groups, such as Dinamo Zagreb's *Bad Blue Boys (BBB)* as well as the club's management. We examine and compare WAZ's descriptions of and attitudes towards NK Zagreb's chairman Dražen Medić with the BBB's attitudes towards Dinamo Zagreb's executive vice-chairman Zdravko Mamić, both figures who symbolise crony capitalism. We begin with a small amount of background information concerning the clubs and the economic organisation of football in Croatia.

The organisation of football in Croatia (1990s – present)

The vast majority of football clubs in Croatia today are organised as citizens' associations (*udruge građana*), governed by the Croatian Football Federation (*Hrvatski nogometni savez*).¹ Up until Croatia's EU accession, which took place on 1 July 2013, professional football clubs received funding from the state and local state budget.² This is now technically illegal, although the youth divisions of some football clubs are still permitted to receive funds from the city council budgets (*Grad Zagreb*). Furthermore, when discussing this issue with fans associated with the *Zajedno za dinamo* initiative³, they argued that the management of GNK Dinamo would continue to receive large amounts of funds from the city council budget.

The other main source of income for clubs at present is through selling players – income from ticket sales and marketing and television deals is negligible.⁴ Players often move from lower ranking clubs, such as NK Zagreb and clubs from the lower divisions up to GNK Dinamo or Hajduk, before being sold on the international market. Owners and managers of clubs have often also benefitted, directly or indirectly, as players' agents from the transfer fees which they helped to negotiate. New EU regulations are likely to demand more transparency concerning club finances, one issue which football fans in Europe have called for extensively. From the perspective of many fans, a number of significant problems remain concerning financing, as the WAZ fanzine describes:

On the surface, from a supporter's perspective, citizens' associations provide the best model for managing a football club. However, in Croatia, throughout the twenty year history of the HNL (Croatian Football League)⁵, it has become clear that this model has been most often chosen in order to hide streams of money, to avoid paying taxes etc. Aspects such as transparency, the real participation of citizens, openness, the principle of voting on the basis of the “one member, one vote” rule, have been completely ignored by those in charge of the clubs, for two basic reasons: the silencing of illegal practices by legislators and the inadequate level of organisation and educational level of fans regarding their civil rights.⁶

¹ <http://www.hns-cff.hr/> [accessed on 2/9/13]

² <http://www.dnevno.ba/sport/nogomet/84658-hrvatska-nema-vise-financiranja-sporta-iz-drzavnog-proracuna.html> [accessed on 17/8/13]

³ <http://www.zajednozadinamo.com/novosti.php> [accessed on 2/9/13]

⁴ <http://www.business.hr/ekonomija/kako-cemo-financirati-sport-u-eu-jos-pet-dana-do-ulaska-a-mnoga-pitanja-jos-vise-u-zraku> [accessed on 17/8/13]

⁵ Hrvatska nogometna liga

⁶ Naočigled, iz navijačkog kuta, udruga se građana čini kao najbolji model upravljanja nogometnim klubom. No u Hrvatskoj, a dvadesetogodišnja povijest HNL je to zorno pokazala, taj je model najčešće biran kako bi se prikriili putovi novca, izbjegavalo plaćanje poreznih obveza i sl. Aspekti poput transparentnosti, stvarne participacije građana, otvorenosti, načela biranja po pravilu, „jedan član, jedan glas“, od strane su klupskih moćnika potpuno ignorirani, iz dva temeljna razloga: prešutnog

In the top league, ten teams play at present, including two from Zagreb (Locomotive and GNK Dinamo). NK Zagreb were relegated at the end of the last season to the second division. Almost all teams in the top divisions have a linked fan association, many of which consider themselves as ultras.

GNK Dinamo Zagreb: a short historical sociology

Football in Yugoslavia before the bloody wars of the early 1990s had long been something of a litmus test of relations within the socialist Federation. Violent clashes between groups of supporters gained popular and media attention throughout the 1980s, at 'derby' matches between top teams both within and between the republics, notably matches involving any two of the big four teams: Dinamo from Zagreb, Hajduk from Split and Crvena Zvezda (Red Star) and Partizan from Belgrade. However, it was the events at Maksimir stadium, Zagreb during the match between Dinamo Zagreb and Crvena Zvezda on 13 May 1990 which came, to many, to symbolise the beginning of the end of the Yugoslav Federation and the inevitability of war. Sociologists such as Srđan Vrcan, however, saw the rise of nationalism as only one part of the problem, referring also to a crisis in values, subcultural marginalisation, and the increasing commercialization of football (Vrcan, 2002). It is certainly the case that the 'othering' of football supporters was frequently mapped onto wider nationalist 'othering', as a kind of instrumentalised politicisation (Mihailovic, 1997: 106) as tensions grew across the Federation.

The match took place just a few weeks after Croatia's first multi-party elections won by the nationalist HDZ led by Franjo Tuđman whose name was shouted repeatedly by the BBB fans, along with other slogans such as "Croatia all the way to Zemun" and "Serbian Gypsies" only to be retorted in kind by the *Delje* Crvena Zvezda fans chanting "Serbia all the way to Zagreb" and "We will kill Tuđman" (Mihailovic, 1997: 154). The most controversial aspect was the actions of the police. Dinamo's captain Zvonimir Boban quickly gained the status of national hero in Croatia when aiming a kick at a policeman attacking a Dinamo supporter.

Tuđman was not slow to realise the significance of the event for the nationalist cause. In June 1991, on the day Croatia declared independence, the club's name was changed to Hašk-Građanski, a return to the pre-communist era. More significantly, Tuđman was instrumental in changing the club's name to 'Croatia' (pronounced Croacia), tying the club's fate to his nation-building project (Sindbaek, 2013). President Tuđman regularly attended Croatia's matches forging close links between the team and his party HDZ. Given the fact that a significant part of Tuđman's power base was amongst the Croatian Diaspora, it is not surprising to find a parallel BBB world amongst supporters of Sydney United, gathering Australian-born men of Croatian descent (Hughson, 2000).

Tuđman's support for the name Croatia drew him increasingly into conflict with the BBB. His rejection of the name Dinamo as 'Bolshevik' did not resonate with hard core fans who, although supportive of Croatia's independence, wished to preserve the name, seeing little or no connection between Dinamo and the socialist regime, and unwilling to be mobilised as a kind of second national team. At a time when Tuđman's rule was at its strongest, and with Dinamo/Croatia fans including the BBB actively involved in military actions to secure Croatia's territory, the terraces at Maksimir, frequently rang out to chants of 'Vrati nam Dinamo' (Give us back the name Dinamo). As early as 1992, before the change of name to

Croatia, the rock band Pips, Chips and Videoclips recorded 'Dinamo ja volim' (Dinamo I love you)⁷ which quickly became the BBB fan anthem.

The contradictory politicisation of the BBB, erecting a monument to BBB volunteers killed "at the altar of the Croatian homeland" (Sindbaek, 2013: 1017) and yet scathing of the name change of the club, is worth exploring in more detail. At the time, the relationship between BBB and sections of the club's management was at its strongest, culminating in BBB's being allowed to move from the rather bleak South stand to the somewhat better North stand in 1991. Sindbaek's discussion of the controversy as largely a result of generational differences between BBB and nationalist politicians is only part of the story, although it is certainly the case that the dispute, more than anything, reflected competing memories:

"While for Tuđman and others, the communist past implicated by the name Dinamo was undesirable and unworthy of commemoration, for BBB it was a period of brave exploits made both by themselves and the club, despite regime opposition, and certainly worth remembering. The BBB's view on the club and its name was shared by a large part of Zagreb's youth for whom the name Zagreb had nothing to do with support for Yugoslavia or socialism, but rather with the club as a symbol for Zagreb and Croatian football" (Sindbaek, 2013: 1018).

The BBB opposition to the name change certainly had a spillover effect when Tuđman's allies conspired to remove the Zagreb radio franchise from Radio 101 in late 1996 which led to mass protests in Zagreb in which BBB played a significant role. Tuđman, diagnosed with cancer, increasingly turned on 'enemies within' and developed a whole series of conspiracy theories regarding the existence of a concerted attempt to restore Yugoslavia. Importantly, as Vrcan argued (2002) what began as a "difference of opinion", became "a case of public dissent" and ended "in a radical conflict with very important political implications" (Vrcan, 2002: 62). He argues that this was the "first expropriation" of the club from BBB, led not by private capital, which would at least have to bear financial risks, but by a political elite used to having their top-down strictures being obeyed unquestioningly. In the process, despite the nationalism of BBB, a key component of the nationalist ideology, that everyone in the nation wants the same thing, was shattered. Pointing to the important role the conflict played in reconstructing political identities in Croatia, this was less 'non-political' than a kind of 'subpolitics' or the elaboration of a kind of autonomous radical politics which could not be contained by the new elites.

In February 2000, less than two months after Tuđman's death and the loss of power by HDZ, Dinamo Chairman Zlatko Čanjug, a close ally of Tuđman's, agreed to change the name of the club back to Dinamo Zagreb, even suggesting that this was one of the last wishes of the dying President. The 2011 change to Građanski Nogometni Klub (GNK) Dinamo could be seen as another attempt to reconnect the club with its pre-communist history but we suggest is more a rather crude attempt to pretend that the club is owned by members/citizens and an attempt to illustrate that Dinamo is as old as clubs such as HNK Hajduk Split who celebrated their centenary anniversary that year. In reality, over the last decade, Dinamo, as many other Croatian clubs, have become leitmotifs for a form of crony capitalism in which the first wave of privatisation winners is expanded through "insider interests, extreme clientelism, non-market based financial sector allocation, and a close link of the state and the government with entrepreneurs and the financial sector" (Bičanić, no date; 1; cf. also Stubbs and Zrinščak, 2012). Throughout, BBB have combined a resurgent right-wing ideology with a popular distrust of the new elites, again showing the paradoxical nature of the politicisation of Croatian football whereas, as we see below, Zajedno za Dinamo purges the position, to an extent, of its right-wing ideology in pursuit of broader based change.

Contemporary initiatives: *Zajedno za dinamo* and *Vratit ćemo Zagreb*

⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMubISl2zzo>

Zajedno za Dinamo is a campaign which aims to build a more accountable Dinamo, responsive to its fans. It emerged in reaction to concerns many fans had that the current key manager, partly hiding behind his position as Executive Vice President since 2003, Zdravko Mamić, was using the club for his private business and that he was extracting money from the club and using it for money laundering. In an interview with one of the founding members, Tomislav Marinović, who now works on the PR side of the initiative, he described the aim behind the initiative as follows:

We wanted to change public awareness about what is going on in Dinamo and we started to do a series of media events where we presented our model, where we presented what is wrong in Dinamo and we gained wide public attention and wide public support and we even had some contacts with people from politics, people in the Ministry to whom we proposed what should change in the law, so we filed several lawsuits to the state attorney ... and we also publicly announced that Zdravko Mamić has private contracts with some players, also that he is a member of the club and by law he is in conflict of interest and shouldn't be doing what he does.

The initiative quickly gained popularity, both amongst the ultras group BBB and amongst a much wider base of Dinamo fans. Whilst the initiative was largely organised by members, or ex-members of BBB, the decision was made to detach itself from BBB and make its own separate decisions in order to attract a much wider base of supporters. It currently has a facebook group numbering over 18,000 followers and a website, which states the objectives of the initiative as follows:

Zajedno za Dinamo (Together for Dinamo) is a civil (građanska) initiative which wishes to bring together all those people for whom Dinamo is in their hearts, who wish to get actively involved working for the well-being of the club. The initiative is led by the idea of uniting all fans with the aim of achieving the best results possible for Dinamo. We understand this as meaning the transparent and legal work of all management bodies of FC Dinamo, expert and competent leadership, the promotion of positive values, a struggle against violence which accompanies football matches, the education of a young growing mass of fans and the wholehearted and unreserved support for players who wear the sacred blue kit.⁸

Besides the political aims of the group, they advocate a variety of other activities, including educating young fans and organising humanitarian actions, notably “*Plavo srce za djecu Vukovara*” (Blue heart for the children of Vukovar), where funds were raised for a nursery in Vukovar in collaboration with a sailing group, and an association of Vukovar war veterans based in Zagreb.⁹ Such humanitarian actions illustrate the link with Croatian nationalist ideology to which the vast majority of the BBB subscribe, yet a commitment to strong nationalist positions is not a prerequisite of participation in the *Zajedno za Dinamo* initiative – indeed many members of the leftist WAZ commented positively on ZZZD.

⁸ *Zajedno Za Dinamo* je građanska inicijativa kojom se želi okupiti sve ljude kojima je Dinamo u srcu i koji se aktivno žele uključiti u rad za dobrobit kluba. Inicijativa se vodi idejom ujedinjenja svih navijača s ciljem ostvarenja što boljih rezultata našeg Dinama. Pod tim podrazumijevamo transparentan i legalan rad svih upravljačkih tijela NK Dinamo, stručno i kompetentno vodstvo, promicanje pozitivnih vrijednosti, borbu protiv nasilja koje prati nogometne utakmice, educiranje mladih naraštaja navijača te svesrdnu i bezrezervnu podršku igračima koji nose sveti modri dres.

Zajedno za Dinamo advocates participative democracy, based on the socio model of club ownership, looking for inspiration to teams in the German Bundesliga and Spanish La Liga. Such a model is not necessarily against privatisation, although it is critical of the neo-liberal model:

The socios model can include privatisation. I will give you the example of Bayern. Bayern Munich is in its nature, in its roots, socios, but members of Bayern, they also founded Bayern Ltd and they have decided to sell 49% of their shares to *Deutsche Telecom*, so basically you now have a club which is an association, a socios, where members can decide about the board and on the other hand it is also commercialised because 49% of the shares of Bayern Ltd is owned by a private company, not the majority, only 49%, so there is a way to combine those two models, but basically we would like to have a 100% socios model where members of the club would pay let's say annually 100 euros and where they could choose the board of the club and members of the club's assembly and where they could have insight into the club's business.

Nevertheless, neo-liberal models which focus on fans as consumers were viewed as stopping many working class fans from affording ticket prices, which Tomislav referred to as 'McDonalds supporters', and which the UK premiership typified to the most extreme degree. He was particularly critical of UEFA, political correctness (it's OK to hiss and boo, it demonstrates passion, but that passion must have borders). The campaign was also willing to engage with the government and legal system, to work with lawyers to seek changes to the Croatian constitution etc. The campaign is one of a number of participative democratic projects in Zagreb, the most recent of which is *Za Grad*, a loose activist initiative which gained significant support as an alternative to 'politics as usual' in recent Zagreb elections. At an extreme of participative democracy is self-organisation, whereby groups seek to completely organise by themselves, disregarding state procedures. Given the radical left ultra-positioning of WAZ, was their campaign more radically positioned than ZZD and if so, how?

The White Angels Fanzine states the initiative as follows:

FC Zagreb today is a club, or rather an association which ordinary citizens cannot join. To make things even more tragicomic, fans who try to join don't get any kind of explanation regarding why membership isn't possible. The association's statute isn't available to view, although all statutes validated by town institutions which are like this, we hope, completely legal. The idea for the initiative „*Vratit ćemo Zagreb*“ was born on the terraces of the Kranjčevićev stadium, through contact between the White Angels and other loyal Zagreb supporters. The essence of the initiative is contained in its name „Give us back Zagreb“, which denotes the requirement that this sports collective with a hundred year long tradition once again becomes a club for its fans, a club for all Zagrebians, a club for the local community and a club towards which town dwellers feel positive emotions. The basic idea is the uniting and self-organising of Zagreb fans of all ages, groups, beliefs and attitudes, coming from the desire to participate actively in creating a better future for the football club which we all love, and which as the years go by loses out more and more, both in terms of results/league position and in terms of identity confusion.¹⁰

¹⁰ NK Zagreb danas, klub je odnosno udruga u koju se običan građanin ne može učlaniti. Da stvar bude još tragikomičnija, navijačima koji se u njega pokušaju učlaniti ne daje se nikakvo objašnjenje zašto učlanjenje nije moguće. Statut udruge nije moguće dobiti na uvid, iako su svi statuti ovjereni od strane gradskih institucija te su kao takvi, valjda, potpuno legalni.

Ideja za inicijativu „Vratit ćemo Zagreb“ rodila se na tribini stadiona u Kranjčevićevoj, u kontaktima između Bijelih anđela i ostalih vjernih Zagrebovih navijača. Bit inicijative sadržana je u njenom imenu: „Vratit ćemo Zagreb“ označava potrebu da ovaj sportski kolektiv sa stogodišnjom tradicijom ponovno postane klub svojih navijača, klub svih Zagrepčana, klub lokalne zajednice i klub prema kojem građani njeguju lijepe emocije. Njena je osnovna ideja ujedinjavanje i samoorganiziranje Zagrebovih navijača

The group has an official platform and position regarding Dražen Medić, NK Zagreb's Chairman, consisting of a campaign, *Vratit ćemo Zagreb*, as well as a series of chants, and banners calling for Medić's resignation. Medić is viewed as representing the incursion of clientelistic and business interests in football. For example, his son, Lovro Medić, has pride of place in the football team and Medić is understood as having close links to the town mayor, Bandić, in a parallel with the situation regarding Zdravko Mamić in Dinamo whose brother Zoran, a former captain, has the position of Sporting Director, remaining a fixture whatever changes of coach occur. Nevertheless, a comparison with ZZD can only be made in terms of political discourse, for ZZD is a large scale campaign which has fought for several years to remove Mamić from GNK Dinamo, whilst VCZ has a facebook page and has organised a small number of low key meetings. This difference was visible when the two groups were contacted – ZZD had a media spokesperson who replied to my (AH) mail within 24 hours and arranged to meet.

In contrast to ZZD, which seeks to *manage* the commercialisation of football and give the fans a voice in official discussions, VCZ and the White Angels are against privatisation per se, from an anti-capitalist, radical left positioning advocating direct democratic governance – although the positioning is sometimes more ambiguous amongst the membership. A spokesperson for the campaign, Robert¹¹, when asked this question directly, responded:

The initiative is against any form of club privatisation. We are of the opinion that football clubs shouldn't be private toys for rich individuals which they use as a means of extracting profit or laundering money, rather they ought to be organised from below, which means that fans, through assemblies, participate in the work and the making of decisions at the club. By this means we could make sure that clubs really belong to their fans, that fans are an integral part of the club and that they are held responsible to the local community/neighbourhood/town from which they come.¹²

One key specificity to VCZ is the focus on 'loss of identity', associated with Medić's rebranding of the club. A club identity, part of which included a logo and club colours, were viewed as important. Comparisons were made with other, similar situations, such as the Cardiff City takeover.¹³

All football fans are powerfully connected with the symbols associated with their club and the history which those symbols represent. For this reason they are very sensitive regarding any kind of playing around with these symbols. The beginning of the conflict took place in the moment when Medić decided to 'rebrand' the club, which resulted in the removal of the historical crest of NK Zagreb and the introduction of

svih dobi, skupina, uvjerenja i stavova, proizašla iz želje da se aktivno sudjeluje u kreiranju bolje budućnosti nogometnog kluba koji svi mi volimo, a koji se s godinama sve više gubi, kako u rezultatskoj prosječnosti, tako i u identitetskoj zbrci.

¹¹ I use pseudonyms throughout for the members of WAZ.

¹² Inicijativa se protivi bilo kakvom obliku privatizacije kluba. Smatramo da nogometni klubovi ne bi trebali biti privatne igračke bogatih pojedinaca kojima služe samo za izvlačenje profita ili pranje novca, već da trebaju biti organizirani odozdo, što znači da navijači preko skupština sudjeluju u radu i donošenja odluka u klubu. Na taj način bi se osiguralo da klubovi zaista pripadaju svojim navijačima i da su integralni dio i odgovorni zajednici/kvartu/gradu iz kojeg proizlaze.

¹³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/teams/cardiff-city/9313398/Cardiff-City-confirm-kit-colour-change-from-blue-to-red.html>

new club colours, as a result of which many fans lost the feeling of connection with their old club and so they stopped coming to football matches.¹⁴

The issue of the importance of a club identity, in GNK Dinamo's case, the name, whilst in NK Zagreb's case, the strip, links the two and places fans' struggles in what fans referred to as the 'supporters' world' (*navijački svijet*). We now move to consider in more detail what this means in terms of solidarities, from a fan perspective.

Fan solidarities: positioning selves and others

In the previous section, the history and key elements of the political discourses surrounding *Zajedno za Dinamo* and *Vratit ćemo Zagreb* were discussed. What is missing in the above analysis is gaining a sense of the everyday meanings which fans placed on themselves and others; how they understood what they were doing, what going to football matches entailed and how particular feelings of connection, belonging and oppositions emerged through fan practices and engagements. The following observations are made on the basis of fieldwork conducted with WAZ, combined with knowledge of the Zagreb context and of the activities of certain other fan associations. Two terms frequently encountered were the terms **navijački svijet** (the *supporters' world*) and **ultras kultura** (*ultras culture*). As these terms underpin fans' commitments and consequently their actions, it is worth elaborating on them in more detail before moving on to consider their engagements.

First and foremost, the supporters' world was characterised by a love and passion for following and/or playing football. Members of WAZ who positioned themselves as from this world were people who had followed football, and often NK Zagreb, for many years and who were both extremely knowledgeable (regarding fixtures, details of matches, players etc.) and passionate about NK Zagreb and football in general. They also had an extensive knowledge of football in other countries, especially throughout Europe, and knew details surrounding many UK Premier League and lower UK division teams.

Overlapping with the supporters' world was 'ultras culture', which consisted of the various ultras groups; a constellation of cultural references, political orientations and shared concerns. For example, films representing fan cultures such as *The Firm*, *Football Factory* and various insignia resonating with different political currents - ultras could be left or right wing in their orientation - ranging from red stars and pictures of Che Guevara to Celtic crosses and swastikas, were adopted. Such political references referred to both globally recognisable insignia and more local references – such as right wing ultras' celebration of the *Oluja* military action in 1995, or the use of icons associated with Zagreb such as the *Zagi* squirrel mascot from the final World Student Games held in Zagreb in 1988, remembered nostalgically as a shop window for both the city and, amongst left wing groupings such as WAZ, as one of the final international events held in Socialist Yugoslavia.

Not all people who were from the supporters' world were ultras – there were people passionate about football who did not agree with some of the extreme views and/or

¹⁴ Svi nogometni navijači snažno su vezani uz klupsku simboliku i povijest koju ona predstavlja i stoga su vrlo osjetljivi na bilo kakvo poigravanje istom. Početak sukoba dogodio se upravo u trenutku kada je Medić odlučio "rebrandirati" klub što je značilo isključivo ukidanje povijesnog grba NK Zagreba i uvođenje novih klupskih boja, zbog čega su mnogi navijači izgubili osjećaj da se radi o njihovom starom klubu i prestali su posjećivati utakmice.

behaviours of those who participated in ultras culture – lighting and throwing flares on the pitch is one example. Not everyone participating in ultras groups were from the supporters' world either; some were attracted to the match day routine and group because of its politics, or for other reasons, such as the camaraderie, singing and risk taking aspects (see Finn et al 1994), group belonging, and/or simply the tradition of consuming alcoholic beverages before and often after the game. Nevertheless, those who were most involved in the ultras groups considered themselves to be from the supporters' world and, in some cases, viewed themselves as its vanguard as the following quote illustrates:

[B]eing an Ultra means having a new attitude to life (their Ultra identity), being 'extreme', having fun and being part of a separate new football fan and youth culture. Unlike other fan club activities, a person is an Ultra not only at a weekend game but also during the entire week. Everything is subordinated to football and/or the fan movement. (Pilz & Wölki-Schumacher, 2009: 6)¹⁵

The vast majority of ultras in Croatia, including the mainstream of BBB, were right wing and subscribed to a strong nationalist ideology. Whilst WAZ did not sympathise with the political stance of almost all other ultras' groups in Croatia and the region more generally, which were generally from centre to far right politically, there was still a sense that these groups were part of a common ultras' culture, and that many members were from the supporters' world. They were therefore often talked about; their choreography and symbolism were often commented upon, events in the media discussed and solidarity implied on issues where the groups had common ground, such as an increase in police identification checks – all groups shared a dislike of police, sometimes encapsulated in the phrase A.C.A.B. (All cops are bastards). Understanding such identifications and solidarities is key to understanding fan practices.

The first aspect is **political solidarity** amongst fan association members. This is grounded in shared political views. In WAZ, this was fairly flexible; members had political views ranging from anarchist to communist to social democratic. Points of common ground included antifascist, antiracist, non-homophobic and antinationalist positioning, at odds with both the dominant right-wing ultra leitmotifs of BBB and, indeed, opposed to strong authoritarian-clerical beliefs within the wider Croatian population. Whilst many members accepted and used national categories, which the sociologist Billig described as 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995), none advocated strong nationalist ideology, a finding which contrasts with Spaaij and Viñas' (2013) discussion of left wing ultras groups in Spain, where several groups advocated 'peripheral' nationalisms. They noted a similar degree of ideological flexibility amongst group members, stating that:

it should be noted that although left-wing fan groups draw on 'thick' ideologies to articulate their beliefs and legitimize their actions, we must bear in mind their often shallow ideologization, which in many cases goes no deeper than the display of symbols and paraphernalia. In that regard, it is arguably more pertinent to speak of a 'pseudo-ideology' built on image alone, lacking any coherence or depth of thought....Nonetheless, as we will show in this study, the cognitive and social functions of their ideological discourse should be taken seriously, and their appropriation of left-wing ideology is a demonstrable reality.(Spaaij i Viñas 2013, 185)

Regarding WAZ, around half the members were involved in political organisations and purported to practice, in everyday life, the values they upheld at football matches. Football

¹⁵ Pilz, Gunter A., and Wölki-Schumacher, Franciska. 'Overview of the Ultra culture phenomenon in the Council of Europe member states in 2009 '

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/sport/Source/TRV/TRV_2010_03_EN_background_doc_Prof_PILZ.pdf

match displays were focused around spectacle, but they were backed up with a range of activities off the pitch, such as organising football matches with asylum seekers, organising a series of workshops in schools and so on, suggesting a wider, left oriented cultural sensibility and engagement. By focusing on 'the ultras scene' as an object of analysis, Spaaij and Vinas pass over other forms of solidarity informing group member's actions which cross cut ideological affiliations and group membership, such as belonging to the aforementioned supporters' world, a second solidarity we might name **generalised fan solidarity**. This does not relate to following a particular team, but asserts a generalised solidarity with all other fans who follow teams and who are passionate about football. This form of solidarity is shared with others who were not committed to ultras culture, and/or who had very different political opinions. The third kind of solidarity concerned ultras culture and can be subdivided, from the perspective of the WAZ membership, into **intra-group ultras solidarity** (through being in the same ultras group; through having shared concerns and practices) and **generalised ultras solidarity**, which asserts a generalised solidarity with others involved in the ultras scene. The intra-group solidarity emerged from shared group practices, specifically the match day routine and meetings. Generalised ultras solidarity was also important as there was a recognition that other groups in the ultras scene operated under similar constraints, particularly with reference to police and other forms of surveillance, even if they had different ideological interpretations of such modes of surveillance. Irrespective of political differences, there was also recognition of certain 'shared struggles' such as comparing the 'corrupt club management' of Dinamo's Zdravko Mamić with NK Zagreb's Dražen Medić. Whilst there was a certain degree of inter-group respect, this was also accompanied on occasion by dislike and possible surveillance by other ultras groups.

The various solidarities described above varied from member to member depending on how involved they were in group activities, in ultras culture and in the supporters' world. These different tendencies led individuals in WAZ to position themselves in relation to both other group members and others outside of the group, including Medić and the club management.

(i) Positioning the membership

As earlier mentioned, not all members of WAZ were understood as being from the supporters' world. Within the group, people were often categorised along a continuum. At one end of the continuum were people who were from the supporters' world, whilst at the other extreme were people who were attracted to the group due to its antifascist political positioning and/or who were attracted by the prospect of joining an 'ultras' subculture, or who simply enjoyed the joking around, match day routine and social aspects of membership. Whether or not a WAZ member belonged to the supporters' world was clearly ascertained through one's approach and comments during meetings and at football matches; belonging presupposed having a wide knowledge of Croatian and European football and having, or quickly gaining, knowledge about NK Zagreb and their positioning within a wider world comprised of teams, each with their own special qualities and struggles. This knowledge was both a detailed factual knowledge and a practical knowledge which entailed in the most literal sense, having a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1990, 66).

As regards the membership for those who were not fully part of the supporters' world, other factors - specifically political positioning and the extent to which the members identified with and engaged with facets of ultras culture were important. The various positionings and inclinations of different group members were often commented on. For instance, whilst visiting a conference in Amsterdam, one of us (AH) sat outside on the grass with other two other members of the group whilst consuming wine mixed with coca cola (*bambus*). Inside a UEFA representative was giving a talk on sanctions against fans, a topic we found unsavoury and which marked us, as an ultras group, as separate from a number of other fans - 'liberals' - inside. Another member of the group, Vjeko, who was on the conference organising committee, had to stay inside for the talk however. Another group member, Filip, made the following comments.

Filip: Andy, I see you more as material for the committee than Vjeko

Andy: Why?

Filip: Because you're more from that world, than from the real supporters' world (*pravi navijački svijet*). Vjeko is [from the real supporters' world], actually he's maybe a better choice because of that.¹⁶

These statements situated a group, which included UEFA representatives and more generally committee members in pan-European fan organisations, as distanced from the 'real supporters' world'.

On a few occasions, members of the antifascist group who had no interest in football were invited, their presence was appreciated, but it was deemed not worth inviting them again as they were clearly not interested in football and had not come to view themselves as part of ultras culture. Being part of the supporters' world was seen as crucial in constituting the core of the group, whilst a wider array of activists and sympathisers circled around them. Some members who were clearly from the supporters' world were sometimes commented on negatively as they were not viewed as part of ultras culture. For instance, one member of the group, Tomislav, was particularly keen to speak whenever there were cameras present, to give statements for the media and so forth. He was also a vocal critic of other members of the group who claimed to be 'against modern football' – the name of a much wider ultras movement decrying the commercialisation of modern football, but from an ambiguous position which could be associated with anti-capitalist right and/or left wing perspectives. He argued that he liked large scale organised football tournaments because he thought the quality of the football was higher, and that these larger scale organisational structures and associations enabled this. He was imputed to be a 'liberal', which from the perspective of some group members distanced him from ultras culture, but his affection for and commitment to the club was acknowledged.

(ii) Positioning 'Others'

Besides other left and right wing ultras groups, the police and European institutions such as UEFA and FARE (*Football Against Racism in Europe*)¹⁷, an important 'other' which group members spoke about, and had a position on, was the club management, personified by Dražen Medić, who WAZ claimed even lost control and hit one of their members on one occasion.¹⁸ Like 'others' such as the police, Medić was neither part of ultras culture nor had similar political sympathies to the group. Whilst the police and Medić were viewed as outside the supporters' world, they were all the more disliked because they were interfering in it, Medić perhaps more so than the police. Actions such as seeking to change the club identity were seen as demonstrating his lack of interest in the concerns of everyday fans. He was viewed as close to the Zagreb mayor, Milan Bandić, widely seen as himself corrupt, and as symbolising the incursion of clientelistic interests and organised criminal connections in sport, and in the mismanaged process of privatisation more generally, as discussed in the earlier section.

¹⁶ Filip: Andy, ja tebe vidim više kao materija za taj odbor nego Vjeko

Andy: Zašto?

Filip: Jer si više iz te ekipe, nego iz pravog navijačkog svijeta, dobro, Vjeko je, čak i možda je bolje da to radi zbog toga.

¹⁷ See <http://www.farenet.org/> for more information.

¹⁸ <http://www.index.hr/sport/clanak/ljutiti-medic-izgubio-kontrolu-i-udario-navijaca-white-angelsi-organizirali-prosvjed/518193.aspx>

Medić was frequently compared with Dinamo's Mamić, who had most recently been in the news¹⁹ in connection with a fine the club had received from UEFA, due to a contingent of fans chanting 'Mamiću Cigane' (Mamić, Gypsy), which was allegedly racist.²⁰ This was one of several labels, including *Srbin* (Serb), *Četnik* (Chetnik) and *Peder* (Faggot) sometimes chanted by fans.²¹ Indeed, the UEFA sanctions came from the combination of 'Mamiću Cigane' and 'HNS, pederi', deemed both racist and homophobic.

Tomislav, from the *Zajedno za Dinamo* initiative, argued that it was not a racist chant; that it would be if fans chanted "kill gypsies" or "gypsies leave Croatia", but that this was not the case. He argued against the use of political correctness in sport, stating that such comments are often used as general insults in Croatia in a joking context and made another, subjectivist argument, that if you call someone a 'gypsy', it is up to that person how they interpret it, whether they attribute it as an insult or not. Tomislav also argued that somebody in UEFA or FARE, possibly via Zdravko Mamić, who – it was claimed – had strong connections in UEFA – had deliberately used the incident to put pressure on the BBB with it actually being in Mamić's interest to have some European matches played behind closed doors.

This argument also came up in discussions amongst WAZ members, who regularly commented on Mamić and the local footballing news. Some members were confused as to why FARE had been chasing the BBB so much recently, suggesting as Tomislav had that Mamić had connections in UEFA and FARE which he was using to put pressure on the BBB. One member of WAZ suggested we write 'Mamiću Cigane' on the White Angels website page in solidarity, arguing that the issue was topical and related to the issue with Medić on the basis of a generalised solidarity with other ultras groups. It was concluded that this would not be appropriate and that WAZ, as a group, should distance themselves from the BBB who were "a herd of uneducated cows" (*stoka neobrazovanih*), a conclusion reached by others in the conversation on the basis of following comments made on various online forums. WAZ's positioning within the ultras scene was also used as an argument, with reference made to the group's size: "given that nobody experiences us, so we don't have to experience others" (*Tak i tak niko nas ne doživljava, ne moramo ni mi druge*). Indeed, whilst encounters with other groups were rare, when they did occur they were frequently talked about, particularly when actions, such as the raising of a banner, were noticed by other groups such as the BBB – even if they were commented on negatively, as they largely were, such commentary helped legitimate a positioning within the ultras scene. On issues where there was common ground, other groups also displayed positive solidarity with WAZ. For example, at one match, a member of WAZ released a flare and the police came down heavily and arrested them. Following this incident, WAZ decided to leave the terraces for the rest of the game in protest and BBB cheered, giving them support against the police.

The relation between BBB and WAZ merits further research. For instance, during the nineties before WAZ had a leftist platform, WAZ was constituted largely of BBB, who chose to attend NK Zagreb matches for 'fun' when club and wider political repression was at its height. Additionally, on one occasion I spoke with a member of BBB who lived in the same neighbourhood (*kvart*) as me. He said that some members were aware of the activities of WAZ and that they knew some members by name, but that they had left a space for them as they understood them as supporting a Zagreb tradition, which they viewed as a positive thing as it did not come from 'outside'. However their politics was disliked and particular issues such as supporting LGBTQ rights were particularly disdained.

Conclusions

¹⁹ <http://www.sportcom.hr/sport/nogomet/dinamo/mami%C4%87u-cigane-navija%C4%8Di-dinama-misle-da-vrije%C4%91aju-mami%C4%87a-dok-uefa-upozorava-da-vrije%C4%91aju-rome.html> [accessed on 11/9/13].

²⁰ The term *Cigan* is generally viewed as pejorative and not politically correct; the term Roma is more neutral.

²¹ <http://www.croatiaweek.com/tag/maksimir-stadium/> (access on 6/8/13)

In this article we have explored various fan initiatives associated with two Zagreb based teams, GNK Dinamo and NK Zagreb. Whilst the fan initiatives have different political positionings, their struggles have several similarities which emerge from their location in what fans referred to as the supporters' world and ultras culture. Issues concerning the preservation of 'authentic' club identity are common to both BBB and WAZ, in the case of the former with reference to the name of the club, whilst with the latter, the strip. Without the widespread support of the fan base, changes to club identity clearly have a dramatic effect on attendance and fans' feeling of connection with their club. Both BBB and the initiative *Zajedno za Dinamo* are highly critical of crony capitalism in the form it has emerged in Croatia over the past few years. In the case of *Zajedno za Dinamo*, the negative emphasis is on the cronyism – in the interview Tomislav considered this a communist legacy. This initiative sought to manage commercial interests in football rather than deny any role for them. In the case of the *Vratit ćemo Zagreb* initiative, the emphasis was more firmly on the capitalism as having negative effects, calling for the removal of all private interests in football and a focus on direct democracy – a radical extension to the participative democratic approach *Zajedno za Dinamo* advocated.

Finally, having described the various fan initiatives and what was at stake in each of them, we turned to consider how different kinds of solidarities which fans experienced intersect, creating sometimes unlikely alliances and common ground between members of ultras groups which, on the surface, have radically different politics. This can be explained not only in terms of a common ultras solidarity, but also in terms of perceived membership of the 'supporters' world' – an observation which may be of use in exploring the relationships amongst ultras groups and their opponents in further anthropological studies of football.

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