

Football Politics in Central Eastern Europe: A Symptom of Growing Anti-Europeanism and Anti-Globalization?

Roland Benedikter and Dariusz Wojtaszyn

Willy Brand Centre for German and European Studies, University of Wrocław-Breslau

Abstract

There is a discourse in Europe's current academic and political debate about growing Anti-Europeanism linked to Anti-Globalization in the Central Eastern European (CEE) region. Football culture in the European Union's East, particularly Poland, is perceived as symptom of such trend. Many of the local fan groups, although belonging to very different ideological and social stripes, conceive their actions more often than hooligans in other European nations as openly political – i.e. mainly as a form of resistance. "Resistance against the system" – including both the national, the European and the global "systems" – is their unifying bond. In most cases, resistance against one of these systems means to automatically oppose the other two too. To understand this particular embedment of football as a contextual political factor in the public sphere of Central Eastern Europe, which is causing domestic turmoil and negative perceptions in other European nations and worldwide, one has to understand the political, social and cultural role of rope's most popular sport in the former "Eastern Bloc" during the 45 communist years 1945-1990.

Policy Recommendations

- The EU should put more attention into documenting and studying the specific contextual political sphere of its current "problem region" Central Eastern Europe, characterized by anti-European developments such as authoritarianism and a deeply split society. Contextual political factors have been neglected by the EU since the accession of the CEE, i.e. the former nations of the "Eastern block" in 2004, but can serve as seismographs for deeper cultural problems and unsolved social issues.
- The EU should implement specialized task forces in close cooperation with the Polish and other CEE governments to address the phenomena related with the proto-politics of football. Such cooperation could both become a new bonding factor between the

EU and Poland, and at the same time serve as an important, yet still widely missing part of historical elaboration and maturation.

- Among other origins, the phenomena connected with football “resistance culture” are rooted in Western Poland’s (the former eastern territory of Germany’s) violent history, particularly during WWII and its aftermaths. Football in these areas which after WWII were allotted to Poland as a result of the nation’s forced shift to the West, with Poland’s eastern part lost to Russia, is in good part the expression of a problematic territorial self-imaginary. It tends to style “the loser” to be the “true hero”, and identifies aspects of Nazi culture with “resistance”. While such paradoxical identification is undertaken mainly by right-wing fan groups and not by the broader public, it is part of the popularization of historic memory that has been under-addressed by both CEE and European policy, thus partly causing current divisions.
- The EU member states should undertake joint comparative research of different football cultures and involve all hooligan groups willing to take part in it, including actively trying to get on board rightist and leftist extremist groups too.

Introduction

On February 16, 2017, peaceful fans of Dutch football side Ajax Amsterdam were attacked in the context of a Europa League semi-final match by Polish hooligans identifying themselves with the Polish capital’s club [Legia Warsaw](#). Many observers read the event not as “normal” hooliganism. It was rather perceived as a “political” anti-EU statement in accordance with the around 40% of Polish voters who, in an increasingly split society and in a populist and partly authoritarian political atmosphere, seem to feel that both European unification and globalization are venturing down the wrong path for Poland.

Such interpretation did not come by chance. The incident stood in a long line of similar events mixing sport with political statements. When Polish football hooligans in November 2015 during a premier league match between the clubs Slask Wroclaw (German: Breslau) and Lech Poznan (German: Posen) in Lower Silesia (German: Niederschlesien) unfolded a huge banner against Islamic migration to Europe stating “let us stand in defense of Christianity”, international observers saw this as another sign of growing anti-Europeanism in Central Eastern Europe, i.e. in the countries formerly belonging to the communist “Eastern Bloc”. The banner was an open statement against Germany’s “welcome culture” issued by chancellor Angela Merkel at the numerical peak of the European refugee and migration crisis. U.S. right-wing news corporation “Breitbart” of U.S. presidential adviser Steve Bannon immediately jumped on the train and jubileed: “[Just a week after Poland voted to kick out every left-wing member of it’s national parliament, ordinary Poles have again shown the spirit which led them to elect the national conservative Law and Justice \(PiS\) party](#)”. “Breitbart”, itself a right-wing and partly extremist “news platform” that contributed to the surprising election of billionaire Donald Trump to U.S. president in November 2016, thus used European football politics for propaganda in the U.S. election campaign and underscored the ideological and political nature of the act nevertheless not sanctioned by Polish authorities. The preceding victories of the *PiS* party in Poland’s parliamentary (Sejm) elections on 25 October 2015 with 38 percent ([5.7 million votes](#)) and

of the nationalist and Anti-European *Fidesz* in Hungary in 2014 with 45 percent ([2.3 million votes](#)) were indeed quoted as a direct reference by the hooligans.



Image 1: Mural: Śląsk Wrocław, football club in Wrocław (German: Breslau), Poland

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Football as politics

More examples abound. In January 2014, Polish prosecutors decided that “Auschwitz” chants during a Polish league game between [Lech Poznan and Widzew Lodz](#) on September 29, 2013 stating “Move on, Jews! Your home is at Auschwitz! Send you to the gas (chamber)!” was ruled not anti-Semitic and thus not prosecuted by the Polish authorities. [Clashes](#) between rival Russian and Polish football fans in the Polish capital Warsaw on Russia’s “national day” in June 2012 during the European Football Championship (Euro 2012) in Poland and Ukraine mirrored strong nationalist sentiment and historical rancor on both sides. Domestic matches between [Polish sides](#) too are more often than usual in the rest of Europe loaded with “war” rhetoric and “guerrilla” acts of strong ideological flavor.

As a consequence, statements of Polish football “fans” are over-proportionally interpreted as political statements also in the nation itself. Football stadiums in Poland are considered even by parts of the local population to function as enclaves of community activities, and as places where social discontent is manifested. Many stadiums have long become a venue for the conflict between

perceived classes from the opposite ends of the social spectrum: between "those who are the beneficiaries of the great sociocultural transformation in Poland and those left on the margin". In addition, there seems to be a pending conflict between the interpretational use of the imageries of winners and losers of WWII, which are incorrectly and in a paradoxical simplification tied to narratives of alleged elites of globalization and Europe against the local "man from the street". Paradoxically, many right-wing Polish hooligans from the lower classes while identifying with the Polish "heroes" who fought against the Nazis (to the West, Germany) and the Stalinists (to the East, Russia), ultimately becoming the "winners" of the war, use to exploit symbols of the losers of WWII, i.e. Nazi culture and symbolism to express their perceived systemic and fundamental "otherness".

They *symbolically* identify with symbols and narratives of the losers of the "great war" of which Poland was one of the nations which suffered the most, in order to state their estrangement with the Polish, the European Union and the global development. The result is a mixture of historically contradictory identifications and symbols.



Image 2: Motor Lublin's and Slask Wrocław's (Poland) murals with themes from WWII. The identification is with the "cursed soldiers" (Polish: "żołnierze wyklęci"), a variety of Polish resistance movements formed during the stages of World War II. These clandestine organizations continued their armed struggle after the victory over Nazi Germany in 1945 later against the new Stalinist government of Poland well into the 1950s.

(c) Dariusz Wojtaszyn, 2017

For these disillusioned stripes of the population, institutional politics as such, independent of ideological sidings, has become a "no-go" which they substitute with football as politics. There were too many precedents in the "proto"-political field of Polish football culture in the past years that one could believe otherwise. The backgrounds are too complex to search for simple explanations.

Fact is on the one hand that football rivalry is part of the contemporary imaginary of globalizing European societies, which in order to reduce complexity is partly falling back into the classical “Us versus Them” mentality. Football is also an important part of the ongoing [creation of popular mythology](#) which has been increasingly replacing civil religion and national (i.e. mostly confrontational and victory-versus-trauma-oriented) historical myths in most European nations. On the other hand, football may be even something more important in Central Eastern Europe than in the rest of the continent – e.g. a social indicator of political and social psychology perhaps to a higher and more direct degree than in other parts of the EU. Why?

Historical implications

First of all, football in Central Eastern Europe serves as a collecting basin for the contradictions in former communist societies. It does so particularly for those groups removed from collective consciousness and the public sphere during the communist era and its aftermaths, for example for [Nazi hooliganism](#) in a deeply Catholic country - Poland - that was turned upside down and eventually became communist due to the Nazi aggression. The coexistence of official removal and factual insistence and tolerance of “non-presentable groups” has a long tradition stemming from the communist years. No wonder, then, that after years of attempts to ban groups ranging from the right to the extremist right, and in general to regulate the political dimension of football in Poland, the outcome in our days is rather disillusioning, as experts stated in view of openly anti-migration and anti-Islamic fan statements in June 2016:

“Through anti-Muslim banners, songs and street protests, the hostile attitude towards refugees is clearly visible in almost all fan groups. ‘Most ultras are reinforcing the national conservative climate,’ says Rafal Pankowski, a Polish professor and expert on extremism. [‘Unfortunately there is almost no protest against it in football. So the overall picture does not look as bright as we had hoped it would years ago’](#)”.

Poland is not the only country where sport and in particular football, a kind of “war game” with strong elements of strategy, including issues of justice versus injustice and of luck and accident, construct a highly visible level of symbolic representation of social (and to some extent political) psychology. Communism made it an ideology-charged element of daily life particularly after WWII. On account of its growing social potential and its at the same time universal-archaic character, communist politics in Central Eastern Europe developed a close connection with the sport early on. Communism, in its universalistic and at the same time monolithic approach, conceived the area of football as a kind of politics lived through special means. This concept of football led to a “culturalisation” where most [currents and movements](#) within the communist party tried to arrange it as an instrument for their diverging internal interests.

In short, the qualities of football such as solidarity, team spirit, “never-give-up”-approach, “us-versus-them”-mentality with easy identification with one of two sides, often mirroring the capitalism against communism dualism, and “faithful until the end”-oaths were useful for the communist political rulers. The usefulness of the public imaginary connected with football was recognized relatively fast in the former Eastern Bloc and integrated into the programming of political plans. In general, sport like every mythology served as a stabilizing element of the political and social system according to the mechanism “the medium is the message”, i.e. independent of the specific results of the game. Thus football was, for the purpose of the communist regimes throughout the Eastern bloc, including the former Soviet Union, supposed to receive a special treatment within domestic policy. Particularly the

use of the Stalinist sport-paradigm (1927-1953 and partly until 1968) led to the habit that the role of sport was centered on the mobilization of the masses, which were supposed to strengthen the political system and generate a social behavior suitable to the ideas of the rulers. Football offered the possibility to promote the model of patriotism and national identity, which was desired by the communist state otherwise in notorious shortage of competitive civil religion proposals and continuously threatened by the attractiveness of the Western economic and social model.

Football, as one of the most popular European sport disciplines which causes extremely strong emotions, was particularly suitable to realize [the political aims of the communist party](#). This is why the governmental authorities tried to use football to stimulate the identification process of the citizens with the state regardless of their respective ideological views. Hence, the propaganda potential of football matches in Europe's former Eastern bloc was high for the regimes, so that they tried to control this area of life quite strictly, and with greater effort than most parts of "high" culture. In communist Poland, the public staging of football matches played an essential role. They were supposed to represent the successful politics of communist parties and the communist symbioses of politics and society. In the view of many, during the following decline of communism which in essence started as early as in the late 1970s football imaginaries became the only persuasive offer for the affirmation and development of the communist's bloc „different“ identity.

Increasing independence and self-organization of “subversive” fan culture

Yet paradoxically, the more the official communist ideology declined in the artificially created football worlds of the communist's states, there were increasingly many and broader spaces in which fan culture developed independently – i.e. without control mechanisms by state security and often against the principles of the communist's state. One reason is that the communist regimes needed football and conceded it more and more space. Step by step, football, stadium life and supporter environment became oases of a kind of “freedom of expression” within a repressive society, guaranteeing a “parallel” socio-political life unbound by state authorities particularly to the younger citizens of rebellious stance. As a consequence, starting in the 1970s and 1980s, many activities of the football spectators became unacceptable for the communist political elite. Over the whole terminal phase of communism until 1989, communist politicians pursued the activities of the fans with particular restlessness und suspicion, trying desperately to get a grip back onto them.

In countries in which the communist state power tried to control all areas of the life of citizens and to supervise every move of the individual, in principle all social activities had to be registered and had to receive suitable permission from the authorities to exercise their mandate. This is why the increasing self-organization of the football spectators in “resistance”-oriented groups was not satisfactory to the ruling classes, but instead considered as increasingly dangerous. In turn, the supporters of single clubs since the beginning of the 1970s founded their own, autonomous, independent and informal fan clubs which were formed according to the pattern of Western fan clubs. This resulted in occasionally autonomous sub-districts. The overall main spirit of such communist-

born football culture became “resistance” against a system – the communist one – which was increasingly perceived as anti-creative, repressive and inhuman.



Image 3: Mural: SFC Opava (Czech Republic)

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Hooligans and political provocation

Interestingly, with regard to Central Eastern Europe one could already observe the first system-critical - and thus virtually anti-communist - activities of football followers as early as during the 1940s and 1950s. They mirrored and collected the refusal which many local communities felt towards the new communist system and its principles and rules imposed mainly by WWII-winning Russia to the Central Eastern European states. The authoritarian decisions of the authorities in turn strengthened the anti-systemic affiliation of local communities identified in the imaginary tied to their respective football club and caused protests which often had a political character. At a later time, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, football supporters in the “real socialism” nations used to openly provoke the security and order organs or single communist politicians with songs and slogans. The identification of part of the hooligans with Nazi- or right-wing ideology and imagery can be explained by the will to manifest the “opposite” of communism. Thus the recall of Nazi symbolism, as connected with the “the losers will be the winners” logics. The antipathy towards “governmental” clubs, often associated with the military and privileged by the communist elites, was reflected in slanderous sayings, chants and speaking choirs, which became seismographs of public sentiment against the regime. The clubs ridiculed and [despised](#) were in many associated with the odious police/militia and security services (NKWD and KGB) - such as [Dynamo Moscow](#) in Russia - or more directly with the military, such as [Legia Warsaw](#) in Poland. In the German Democratic Republic (GDR), it was mainly the police which controlled “official” football clubs in connection with the security service (Stasi) – such as in the case of Dynamo Berlin. In Yugoslavia – such as with Partizan Belgrade and in Hungary – such as with

[Honved Budapest](#) - it was mainly the military. The aversion against these clubs by parts of the public was interpreted by worrying communist politicians as signs of increasingly critical positions towards the state and its authorities, but also perceived as a “clear and present danger” to the socialist idea as such.

Thus, the original idea of communism to pocket football for its own purposes over time was turned upside down. The basic attitude which had developed: “Resistance against the system” evolved. From something specific, i.e. anti-communist, it became something general: an attitude in principle directed against every existing system. And this is what we see at work today.

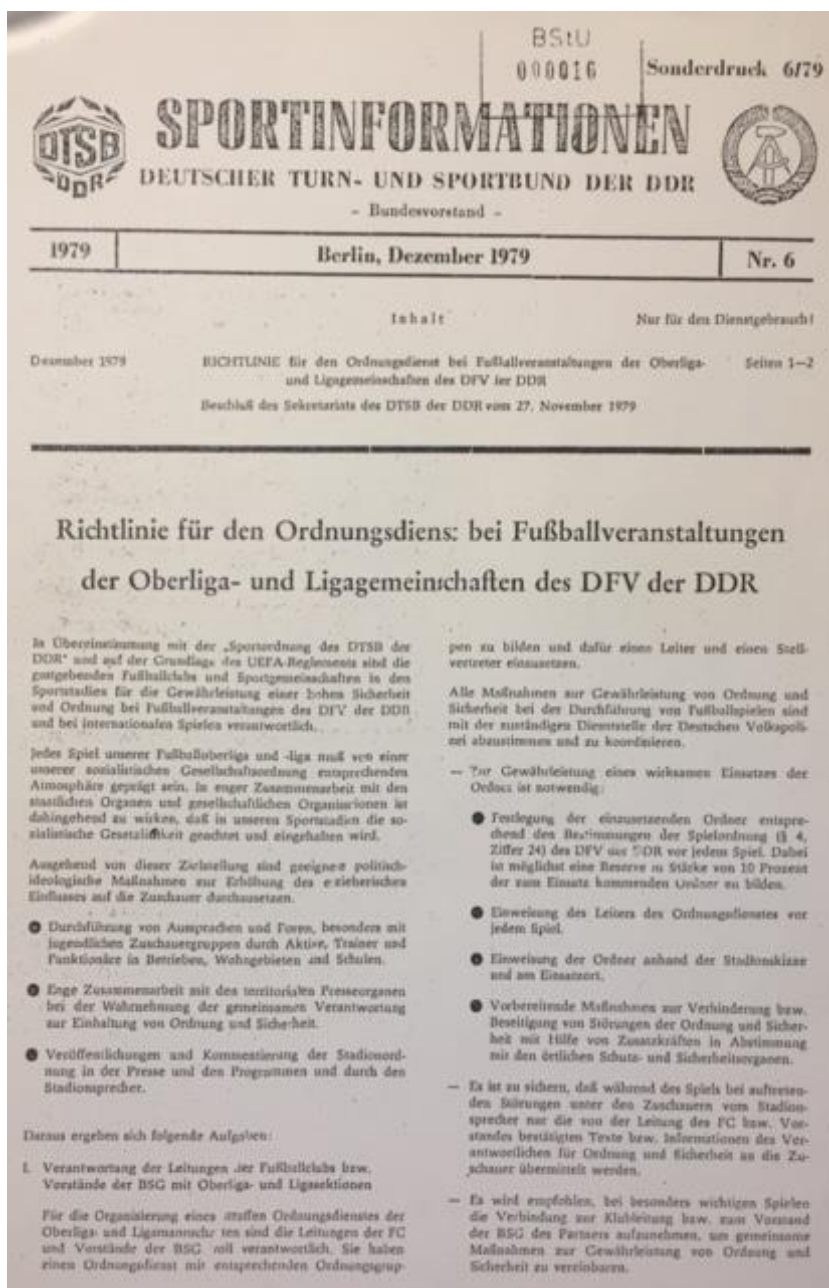


Image 4: GDR's security service (Stasi) document on football supporters (1979)

(c) Dariusz Wojtaszyn

Yet with all these changes and developments, there are many features which remained constant from the early years in the 20th century to the present. If football hooligans from Central Eastern Europe today appear to be militant or even belligerent, already the typical [“socialist” hooligan](#) was very aggressive. However the aggressiveness of communist football hooligans also had another meaning. Physical violence, exercised by unauthorized private persons, under the rule of “state socialism” was regarded as an act of anti-governmental activity and was punished severely. In the opinion of the Berlin cultural sociologist and journalist [Wolfgang Engler](#) about the former German Democratic Republic, thus one can consider the acts of violent fans as an ambiguous sort of criticism to the system, “aimed at the visage of the governing”.

Skinheads and right-wing extremism

Not only spontaneous violence belonged to the anti-systemic arsenal of the former Eastern Bloc football “fans” who wanted to manifest their anti-socialist and anti-governmental position. Since the beginning of the 1980s, many of the groups fell more and more back on slogans taken from the Nazi jargon. This trend became increasingly connected with the subculture of skinheads, which had never been elaborated critically under the communist regime which tended to blame Germany and [interpret the WWII-activities](#) of all other nations in Central Eastern Europe simply as those of “victims”.

An immanent feature of the Central Eastern European skinhead subculture since the 1980s was the use of certain elements of [Nazi and fascist ideologies](#) in football stadiums. Anti-Semitic, xenophobic and racist sayings were to be heard throughout the 1980s in GDR, Hungarian, Czechoslovak and Polish football stadiums. Until 1986 the subculture spread in all countries of the CEE region, and in many cases the skinheads dominated on the spectator’s rostrum of the majority of the first and second division teams. Openly taking up fascist ideology to derise the communist state rhetoric contradicted the anti-fascist self-image of the communist states and led to many embarrassing situations for the “socialist” rulers particularly on the international stage, for example in the framework of European championships. The leaderships reacted with hard punishment to this – in their eyes – sacrilege. Nevertheless, they could not prevent it efficiently until the end of the communist states in 1989/1991.

Only on account of the big masses in the stadiums, which provided for cover, this behavior came at comparatively poor risk for the “fans”. The communist football stadiums can be viewed as the only “oases of freedom” within the communist states, i.e. as a place where many felt able to articulate his or her own positions towards the government without fatal consequences. This is one reason why despite high fines, high financing expenditures and strict security measures by the police and the military, the political elites did not succeed in restricting or even eradicating right-wing fan culture.

Conclusions

Football in Central Eastern Europe - just like all over the world - must be analysed in the context of political and social changes, most of all the processes of commercialization. Anti-Europeanism partly connected to a proto-romantic, regressive and sentimental anti-commodification in Central and Eastern Europe, partly as a reaction to Westernization, is mirrored by football culture. There has

been extensive literature to show how football can explain the return of “archaic” politics. The widely converging analysis of Western thinkers such as Stanley D. Eitzen in North America, Ralf Dahrendorf in the UK or Juergen Habermas in Germany shows that sport mirrors the massification and commodification of the larger society in general. The modern structural processes of massification and commodification are contextualizing contemporary football as their expression, as much as in turn football illustrates, exemplifies and activates their inherent „resistance“ potentials against generalization at least at the symbolic level. Deviance in sport connects to these complex (and partly structurally „tragical“) processes and thus has been rightly analysed specifically from the perspective of conflict and *conflict theory*.



Image 5: Modern football stadium in Wrocław-Breslau (Poland)

(c) Dariusz Wojtaszyn, 2017

Today, the handling of the phenomenon [Modern Football](#) has become a highly economized issue where commercialization is extended to supporters. The role of traditional fans is undermined by the emergence of a new “post fandom” type of “consumer-spectator”, which does not focus on personal attachment to a specific club and does not engage actively in traditional fan activities. That has created a contradiction between the right-wing traditionalism within CEE football politics, and the modernization and internationalization of football as consumable business. Yet despite this development, most of the football clubs in the Central Eastern European region are keeping their fan groups cherishing the traditional way, and looking at football and stadium activity like in the past decades. The immanent trait of this activity continues to be political involvement. The most characteristic and effective activities of football supporters are [stadium performances](#). Performances

prepared by *Ultras* fan groups represent very often political content. In many cases, spectacular stagings continue to pursue the goal of disseminating ideologies.

As a result of its historical opposition against the communist system, the milieu of the Central Eastern football spectator continues to be dominated by anti-systemic and resistance mythologies. Today, the European Union is seen by many fan groups as a symbol of the next system imposed from above. The change of so deeply rooted habits of radical football fans remains an extremely difficult task.

What is the outlook?

Football politics in Central Eastern Europe is the symptom and expression of an anti-systemic and “resistance” ideology, which is historically rooted and spans the national, the European and ultimately the global “systems”. It mixes historically contradictory symbols and identifications into a “resistance” narrative that it publicly stages in football stadiums. The perspective is mixed. On the one hand, given the deep roots of football as a “contextual” political dimension in the CEE area, including Poland, the fight against the extremist use of football as a symbolic medium of anti-government, anti-Europeanism and anti-globalization will remain challenging. Culture and habits are hard to eradicate – which does not mean it should not be tried with more insistence and investment of means, including European Union efforts in cooperation with the national governments. Nevertheless, any such attempt will require the better elaboration of communist history in relation with the traditions of CEE football hooliganism, something that has not been undertaken sufficiently in the nations of Europe’s former Eastern bloc yet. On the other hand, while the symbolism of extremist football hooliganism is hurting the public image of Central Eastern European societies on the international stage, it may serve as a remembrance of the many still insufficiently addressed socio-historical issues plaguing the public unconscious and imaginary in Europe’s former communist nations. Football politics can serve as seismographs of public sentiment and shifts in the socio-cultural sphere. Thus, it may continue to be an indicator of systemic versus anti-systemic mechanisms at play in the European Union’s East. If Europe wants to proceed, it will have to address the deeper issues underlying such symptomatology.

Roland Benedikter is Research Professor of Multidisciplinary Political Analysis in residence at the Willy Brandt Centre for German and European Studies at the University of Wrocław, Global Futures Scholar at Eurac Research, Autonomous Province of South Tyrol Bolzano-Bozen-Bulsan (Northern Italy), and Research Affiliate at the Global Studies Division (SGS) of Stanford University. Contact: rolandbenedikter@yahoo.de.

Dariusz Wojtaszyn is Associate Professor of History at the Willy Brandt Centre for German and European Studies at the University of Wrocław, and Visiting Professor at the Department of Sport Science at the University of Vienna. Contact: wojtaszyn@wbz.uni.wroc.pl.