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# INTERVIEW WITH TIN MURADŽIJA

Rozhovor vedl Maroš Melichárek



Dr. Tin Mudražija

## **How did you „survive“ the long two-year online era of the COVID-19 pandemic concerning research, teaching, and life in general?**

When lockdowns began in early 2020, few of us imagined the long road ahead. While progress in protecting lives and livelihoods was swift, new variants and other factors have since meant that there have been times when the virus seemed to be one step ahead of every countermeasure. Despite the difficulties arising from the circumstances and limitations described above, it seems that psychologically, the greatest challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic was the uncertainty of what will happen next. There was a lot of contradictory information in the media that caused a sense of confusion and heightened the feeling of anxiety. I was no exception in this case. In my opinion, one of the most challenging and frustrating aspects of this COVID-19 pandemic lies in the financial difficulties that most of the world economies are facing as a result. These difficulties have trickled down to affect many aspects of our daily lives, and as a scientist, it is evident to see the strain it is placing on securing funds to drive research forward. I recently experienced

is currently Assistant Profesor (with “Senior Research Associate” Status) at the Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor. He is currently in the process of being promoted as Assistant Professor for Contemporary History at the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Education at the University of Primorska (Università del Litorale Koper/Capodistria).

His research is focused on cultural and political history. He is particularly interested in the history of physical education and football as a phenomenon of modern world as well as the connections between football and politics. His interdisciplinary research primarily focuses on football fans and their subculture, intertwining with Sociology and Anthropology. In addition, he is also interested in the history of everyday life and the political history of post-Ottoman area. His bibliography comprises a number of papers, international research projects, two scientific monographs and several chapters in scientific monographs.

For many years, he has been a guest columnist for the Slovenian daily newspapers *Večer* and *Delo* and *Reporter*. As an analyst, he frequently participates in various TV shows in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Poland.

this first-hand through two retracted funding opportunities. On the other hand, teaching during the pandemic has brought education to a new level. Teachers embraced the digital world and were on a mission to find the most user-friendly and content-rich tools. It also became clear that whether there is a pandemic or not, there is a strong need for programs that help students think about their goals for the future and possible career paths. How could I get my students to feel comfortable turning their cameras on instead of teaching to a little icon during a live virtual class? I learned that connecting on a personal level is a great way to engage students. I have also encountered the need to change familiar unit plans, incorporate new learning platforms, solve technological challenges, and shift my instructional goals.

**You are currently working on a book which should be called “Football as a Social Phenomenon in the Balkans”. Why do you think is this topic important?**

The modern history of the South Slavs has already attracted various political, economic, historical, sociological, and anthropological analyses, all with the shared aim of discovering the reasons for both the one-time unity and the final violent dissolution of Yugoslavia. While many social scientists are trying to find signs of ruptures within Yugoslav society and among different nationalities in the areas of high-level politics, economic attitudes, and social movements, this book takes a different approach. It follows the history of mainstream developments through their reflections in sports, primarily in football, the most popular sport. Football, politics, and war represent categories that work as one because all of them operate inside the latter’s will – the change of its form does not change its crystallized ambit.

Readers will be introduced to the various conflicts that plagued the multiethnic state and directly affected the sport: from the search for ideological unity during the Kingdom of SCS/Yugoslavia and the Tito era, to the rising growth and outbreaks of nationalist sentiment toward the end.

**Do you see any connections between sport (football, in particular) and politics/ideology in the area of former Yugoslavia nowadays?**

As the great Arrigo Sacchi once said, „football is the most important of the least important things”. When something is given such importance, it can be filled with a whole range of other things. It is not „just“ football anymore; it always represents something more than just a game. In a certain way, football can also be defined as war without arms. David Goldblatt once wrote that in football „the symbols and flags are a mask under which secret and uncontrollable identities are sometimes hiding”. This trend seems to be significantly shaping the context of the Balkans, especially in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it takes specific connotations related to feelings of revenge and the assertion of nationalist identity. The expressions, though they may sound paroxysmal and violent, embodied in such instances, can often become a bargaining tool and an exercise of power in the hands of politics. We can argue that football and politics are always connected, especially in this part of the world, and politicians use sports to emphasize differences, primarily at the political level. It is a part of a structure that never changes. In my opinion, the politics of all seven states of the former Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia) have not changed significantly since the 1990s. While they might differ officially and be in varying situations, this structural nationalism is still very present and strong, as is the connection between fans and politics, just as it was before. Even if it is not used in the same way, with the same visibility and frequency, it is still present. I believe that this type of nationalism can be a useful instrument for any kind of government, especially in moments of crisis, to divert public discontent against some external enemy, or something perceived as such.

**In what way is Slovenia different from other Yugoslav/Balkan countries?**

Although Slovene athletes participated and occasionally excelled in Yugoslavian national basketball, hockey, handball, and football/soccer teams, identificational tensions between Slovenia and the other republics were especially strong. Slovenes viewed skiing as the embodiment of their individualist predispositions, innate talents, and self-discipline, while they perceived “collective” (that is “team”) sports as the domain of the southern Balkans, where, according to the beliefs of many Slovenes, people lacked the self-discipline and genetic disposition to excel at individual sports. This distinction, and the use of skiing to mark the uniqueness and moral superiority of Slovenes relative to people in the other Yugoslav republics, was characteristic from the 1960s through the late 1990s. The radical devaluation of football seen in the period between the late 1960s and late 1990s, for instance, can be interpreted as a way of saving the emerging Slovenian nationalist discourse from threatening inconsistencies, and at the same time, as a way of legitimizing the existing ethnic cleavages in Slovenian society. On the other hand, while the popularity of football’s recent revival in Slovenia has obviously been triggered by the Slovenian national team’s success, its implications for interethnic relations in Slovenia are no less important. During my own studies of Slovenian national identification processes through sport, I soon realized that studying collective identification is inseparably linked to the studying of collective remembering, and that the “becoming-a-memory process” always depends on the when, where, and who. In other words, collective remembering is a contingent activity that can pass over the significance of big sporting successes or defeats and emphasize the minor ones, or do the opposite the very next moment.

**You study the history of football in Slovenia, in the broader context of former Yugoslavia – how did you end up with this kind of research?**

Throughout all my experiences, football has been one of my favorite things to do and a passion I fully enjoy. The game of football is responsible for making me who I am and has led me to many marvelous things. It has made me a stronger, more disciplined person than before, and I have gained experience on how to lead and be responsible. Most of all, I have learned how to have passion for aspects of my life and use that passion to drive me to reach my daily and life goals. I have always been very interested in the relationship between politics and sports, which was quite visible in Yugoslavia during the 1980s and 1990s, and is even stronger nowadays. Since I started working at the University of Maribor, this subject has been the one that attracted my interest the most. While writing my Ph.D. thesis, I had the opportunity to investigate the types of connections between nationalism and football, and between hooliganism and political parties, especially the far right. I soon realized that the rise of nationalism in Yugoslavia’s final years was mirrored in football stadiums throughout the former unified state, as stadiums became arenas for politicians and nationalist groups to promote their ideas. Then, I focused on studying the relationship between former Yugoslav states through narrations on football. In a way, these narrations appear better defined when you read or talk about football than about politics, especially in the context of politics after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.

**What is most interesting about the topic you study, and on the contrary, what do you perceive as the most problematic?**

In the first place, sport, especially football, became a social mirror, reflecting upcoming social changes, such as the transition from totalitarianism to democracy in the case of Yugoslavia and Slovenia. Football’s popularity makes it a reflection of society and its problems in a way that few

other institutions do. This popularity has made it a potentially strong voice for change. It seems that those who wish for football to be apolitical wish for a game that simply does not exist. By its very nature, football has particular political currents.

On the other hand, our field has also suffered in the past by not being taken seriously by many so-called „mainstream“ historians and being marginalized in sports studies, social sciences, and humanities departments. Therefore, we perhaps feel the chill winds of marginalization in the academy a little more than some of our colleagues. I always say that sport is the great-undiscovered country of the historical world. Only historians of sport like us can explain why and how this is so – and it is this that gives us a unique ability to explain the history of the world we live in today. Let us take the history of sport (football, in particular) beyond Sports History.

However, sometimes the greatest cause of all our problems is simply us. Too often, our work is singularly focused on a particular sport and lacks broader context, both in terms of other sports and the broader historiography. Just as importantly, it often lacks a comparative element, either in terms of other sports or the experiences of other countries. Too often, discussions of the development of sports are confined within national boundaries without reference to the rest of the world.

### **What are your plans for the future (we mean not only research plans)?**

I am currently writing two books (scientific monographs) that I have been working on for the past year: „When Football Meets Politics: Football and Political Culture in Yugoslavia“ and „The Balkan Wars (1912 - 1913): Events that Brought an End to the Ottoman Rule of the Balkan Peninsula.“ These books are expected to be published by the end of 2023.

Outside academia, my main goal is to experience as much of the world as possible. Despite the COVID-19 challenges that came with traveling in the last couple of years, I am excited about this year and all the travel I will have. Speaking of travel: I just got back from one of the most life-changing travel experiences I have ever had. I visited war-torn Syria. Next countries on my list are North Korea and Afghanistan.

### **Are you planning to visit the Czech Republic or Slovakia in the near future?**

Yes and yes. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I used to visit the Czech Republic literally at least once a year. I have some close friends in Prague and Plzen. However, I have not been to Slovakia for almost a decade. Everyone is telling me that Slovakia is still a hidden gem right in the heart of Europe; it is full of incredible places, which are still unspoiled and untouched. I should definitely give it a shot this summer, right?