

ТМ	Г. XXXV	Бр. 4	Стр. 1543-1558	Ниш	октобар - децембар	2011.
----	---------	-------	----------------	-----	--------------------	-------

УДК 323.11+79(497.11 Димитровград)

Стручни рад

Примљено: 28. 7. 2011.

James Dawson
University College London
Department of Political Science
London
Vladan Petrović
University of Niš
Faculty of Mechanical Engineering

SPORTING PRACTICES AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN DIMITROVGRAD *

Summary

This article is based on the results of a short-term exploratory study concerning practices of sporting participation and consumption among high school students in Dimitrovgrad, an ethnically-mixed border municipality in Eastern Serbia that has historically been contested with neighbouring Bulgaria. The study is founded upon the theoretical assumption that sport may be an effective tool for national cohesion. The results of the investigation suggest that young people in the area are currently more positively oriented to Serbian rather than Bulgarian elite sporting teams. However, the investigation concerning sporting participation reveals a more complicated picture in which a lack of investment in the local sporting infrastructure leads local physical education teachers and their students to look across the border to Bulgaria for sporting competition. This may have important implications concerning the development of national identities that are revealed to be far from fixed and permanent.

Key words: sport, identity, Dimitrovgrad, Serbia, Bulgarians

james.dawson@ucl.ac.uk, wladanp@gmail.com

* Fieldwork and personnel costs (for Mr. Petrovic) relating to this publication were covered by the project *Sustainability of the identity of Serbs and national minorities in the border municipalities of Eastern and Southeastern Serbia* (179013), conducted at the University of Niš – Faculty of Mechanical engineering, and supported by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia. The research of Mr. Dawson in Serbia is supported by an ESRC (UK Research Council) stipend.

*SPORTING PRACTICES AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN
DIMITROVGRAD, SERBIA*

From the efforts of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to promote 'Brotherhood and Unity' through its representative sporting teams to the more recent interventions of the President Tudjmann of Croatia in the 1990s, the political entrepreneurs of the former Yugoslav have long recognised the power of sport to unite and divide. The authors take this basic assumption, now widely accepted among scholars, of the relationship between sporting practices and national identity as the theoretical basis for a limited investigation into these related phenomena in an ethnically-mixed border town in Eastern Serbia that has historically been contested with Bulgaria. This short-term field study thus represents an experimental collaboration between the academic fields of nationalism studies and physical education. The data on which the article is based are primarily collected through a survey among high school students concerning national identification, the consumption of elite sport and participation in sport. This quantitative data is supported by qualitative inquiry concerning the integration of the municipality of Dimitrovgrad into the sporting infrastructure of the Republic of Serbia. The study was then repeated in the city of Nis in order to allow for some limited comparisons to be made with a locality that might reasonably be expected to enjoy fuller integration within the Serbian sporting infrastructure.

The preliminary findings shed light upon local practices and consumption of sport in a way that could help to guide future investigations into the relationship between sport and identity in the area. The first and most fundamental finding is that practices of national belonging in Dimitrovgrad - including but not confined to sporting allegiances - appear to be malleable, particularly among those designated as national minorities. Encouragingly for the Serbian authorities, the sporting allegiances of those identifying with all ethnic categories in Dimitrovgrad are more generally given to Serbian than Bulgarian teams. Nevertheless, with regards to opportunities for sporting participation, it is clear that Dimitrovgrad could be better integrated into the Serbian sporting infrastructure. The tentative conclusions offered here suggest that, in the light of the opportunities available to them, the majority of students featured in the study are likely to become increasingly socialised into patterns of sporting consumption oriented towards the Bulgarian sphere as they progress through their education.

*LITERATURE REVIEW**Sport as a Form of Everyday Nationalism*

Political entrepreneurs and scholars alike have long recognised sport as one of the key channels through which states are able to create and reinforce positive identification with the ‘nation’ among their citizens. Most scholarly analyses of the role of sport in the construction of national identity rest upon the notion that the division of the world into ‘nations’ is neither natural nor inevitable so that, where national consciousness exists, it follows that it has once been constructed (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983). Michael Billig (1995) extended this argument into the present, arguing that this sense of belonging must be continually ‘flagged’ and reinforced on an everyday basis in order to persist. Thus, argues Billig, nationalism is present not only in the occasional fiery speeches of political entrepreneurs but also in many ‘banal’ forms such as the unwaved flags hanging outside public buildings and the implied national community of the ‘we’ in newspaper leader columns. Within this category of banal nationalism, Billig devoted much of his text to national displays in sport, even confessing that, in spite of his role as an analyst, he was powerless to prevent himself from feeling a surge of pride when athletes from his British homeland ‘ran faster or jumped higher’ (Billig 1995¹). Billig was not the first prominent scholar of nationalism to have recognised the power of sport in service of the nation, with Eric Hobsbawm having earlier made the point that the ‘imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people’ (Hobsbawm 1991, 143, cited in Fox & Miller Idriss 2008, 547).

This theoretical consensus concerning the centrality of sport to the modern nation is complemented by a growing number of empirical studies. In fact, there already exists a varied literature dealing with the social importance of sport in the former Yugoslav context. Sack & Suster (2000) address the use that the incipient Croatian state of Franjo Tudjman made of football in the service of a national community conceived of in narrow ethnic terms. More recently, Nielsen (2010) follows in the footsteps of many Serbian sociologists led by Kokovic (1990, 2000) in addressing the social importance of football hooliganism in Serbia. What unites these texts and the theoretical points addressed in the preceding paragraph is, however, a sociological emphasis on the consumers of elite sport, who figure in these studies as the audiences of televised spectacles and, of course, fans and hooligans.

¹ The authors thank Dario Brentin (personal communication) for bringing this passage to our attention.

The relationship between national identity and participation in sports is, therefore, rather less developed in the literature. In a rare study, Gasser & Levinson (2004) advocate the potential of sporting participation for national cohesion with reference to a laudable multi-ethnic children's football initiative in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the authors note that competitive sports clubs, which are often selected from and consumed by distinct communities, can often serve to strengthen rather than break down divisions. The authors of this article share the conviction of Gasser & Levinson concerning the sociological power of sport both to unite and divide. Nevertheless, this broad area of inquiry remains conspicuously under-researched. Concretely, we submit that more research is needed concerning the training opportunities given to young people (who may or may not aspire to be the elite national athletes of the future) and the integration of these young people in what we refer to here as a national sporting infrastructure. This term is here used to refer to all of the following: the provision of teaching expertise, access to facilities and to annual competitions and regional leagues within a given state. We argue that this aspect of sport has particular sociological importance in a region that provides several recent instances of elite athletes choosing to compete in the colours of perceived ethnic kin rather than the state of their birth², thus providing highly visible icons for the use of those political actors who choose to represent the nation in narrow ethnic terms. However, the modern history of the region also demonstrates that sport has been an equally powerful tool for those seeking to celebrate ethnic diversity under the rubric of the multi-ethnic Yugoslav state nationalism of 'Brotherhood and Unity'. For example, Vjekoslav Perica's fascinating study reveals how the sporting authorities of the previous Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia actually emphasised the ethnically diverse composition of its representative basketball teams, and even benefited in sporting terms from the particular Yugoslav brand of nationalism that fostered a strong sense of togetherness among the athletes (Perica 2001). In the context of contemporary Serbia, whose lands are called home by hundreds of thousands of people identifying with the ethnic categories of Bulgarian, Hungarian, Bosniak and Albanian, the potential for national cohesion of a broad and inclusive sports infrastructure should not be underestimated.

² An exhaustive list of such sports people would take up several pages. For the sake of illustration, an abridged list limited only to footballers in the 1990s would include such sporting personalities as Mario Stanic, a Bosnian-born Croatian representative, Sinisa Mihajlovic, a Croatian-born Serbian representative and Savo Milosevic, a Bosnian-born Serbian representative.

THE STUDY

Fieldsites and Data

Dimitrovgrad is a classic historically-contested ethnic borderland of the kind that would be likely to provide varied data concerning national and sporting allegiances. The municipality is a sparsely populated slither of land (less than 12,000 inhabitants in just under 500km squared) in the Serbian county of Pirot, which borders Bulgaria to the east. Under its former name of Tsaribrod, the territory changed hands several times in post-Ottoman history, being ruled by Bulgaria prior to the Treaty of Neuilly in 1920, then by the Kingdom of Yugoslavia from 1921-1941, occupied by the then Axis power of Bulgaria from 1941-1944 and finally incorporated into Tito's Yugoslavia after the Second World War. It was at this point that the town and municipality was re-named in honour of the then Communist Party leader of Bulgaria, Georgi Dimitrov, who acquiesced to this transfer of territory to Tito's Yugoslavia. These changes have historically provoked resistance, notably spawning the Internal Western Outland Revolutionary Organisation which was active in Tsaribrod and other formerly Bulgarian territories ceded to Yugoslavia in the interwar period. Unlike other ethnically-mixed borderlands in the former Yugoslavia, however, there has been little to suggest any possible return to armed hostilities in the post-socialist period. In spite of this, the 'Bulgarian-populated' areas of Dimitrovgrad (and Bosilegrad further south) have periodically figured in the rhetoric and actions of nationalist politicians across the border in Bulgaria recent years. According to the last national census of 2002, 49.68% of the population declared as Bulgarians, 25.58% as Serbs, 4.08% as Yugoslavs and 20.66% as Other/Undeclared. According to the latest available figures (2009), the average income of employed persons in Dimitrovgrad stands at around 240 euros/month, considerably below the national average of around 310/euros/month³.

With the aim of providing a useful benchmark for comparison, the city of Nis was selected as a secondary fieldsite. Nis is the largest city in Southeastern Serbia and the third largest city in Serbia as a whole with a population some 255,000 people. In terms of ethnic identity, the people of Nis, with the exception of a large and only partially integrated Roma population, overwhelmingly declare as Serbs, and this majority category accounts for the overwhelming majority of those holding political power in the town. It is, therefore, a very different kind of place from the peripheral border municipality of Dimitrovgrad. However, it is argued that Nis provides a more useful point of reference than, for example, a similarly

³ All Economic statistics presented here according to Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Data on 'Employment and Wages' by municipality for 2009. Accessed at webrzs.stat.gov.rs/axd/en/ on 25/06/2011.

peripheral border town with a large Serb majority. While no town can be said to be typical, the economic and social situation of Nis (average wage: 270 euros/month) is at least closer to the national average, standing between the poles of impoverished rural areas of the South and the prosperous metropolis of Belgrade. Furthermore, the assumed integration of Nis into the Serbian sporting infrastructure may be used to highlight the possibilities available to all citizens of Serbia, provided that policy-makers are willing to at least match the level of investment in Serbia's poorest large city.

The data of the study revolves around two surveys taken among high school students in each of the fieldsites during May/June 2011. The surveys were administered by entering all available class groups on the selected days and may thus be considered convenience samples. Due to the fact that the survey was collected at the end of the academic year, the oldest (4th grade) students had already graduated, so the samples in both cases are comprised of grades 1 through 3, roughly approximating to 15 to 18 year olds. The roughly equivalent samples collected at each fieldsite represent a significant proportion of the entire population of the target group in Dimitrovgrad municipality (n=129) and just a small sample of high school pupils in the large city of Nis (n=148), which obviously has many schools not included in the study. Because of the small samples, the authors assert that the findings should be considered as indicative rather than definitive⁴. The Dimitrovgrad survey was carried out first and included students from the academic high school ('gimnazija') and the technical school (specializing in tourism) whose lessons were held simultaneously in the same building – the only working high school building serving Dimitrovgrad town and its outlying villages. All available class groups were included, including those who had opted to study in Serbian as a primary language of instruction (95 respondents) and those who studied in Bulgarian (a minority of just 34 respondents). Faced with a much greater number of available schools in Nis, we selected one academic high school ('gimnazija') and one technical school (specializing in electrical engineering) based on their proximity to one another, reasoning that it would similarly provide a sample of more and less academically-oriented students from the same catchment area (as happens in Dimitrovgrad). Again, all available class groups were included in the survey. In addition qualitative data was collected so that we might be able to competently interpret the survey results. As the same is true of the reader, it is with the findings of the qualitative aspects of the project that we begin our data presentation.

⁴ Gagnon (2004) uses a similar formulation to describe his response to survey data in general.

Identity and the Sporting Landscape in Dimitrovgrad

This section presents data from a handful of semi-structured interviews conducted in Dimitrovgrad between 31st May and 2nd June 2011 that were aimed at providing some of the context in which the results of the surveys findings concerning sporting practices and national identity might be understood. Specifically, this means taking into account the oral queries and responses of those students who completed the survey questionnaires in the presence of the authors as well as a number of semi-structured interviews with physical education teachers, senior members of staff and municipal administrators. As the authors are interested in sporting infrastructure, this ‘qualitative’ portion of the study also included an inspection of the available sporting facilities and inquiries concerning specifics of competition and sporting opportunities for young people. The process was repeated in Nis between 16th and 17th June 2011.

The first point to make is that many of those identifiable to Serbs outside the local area as ‘Bulgarians’ owing to surnames ending in –ov/-ev⁵ actually identify as *Shopi*. While *Shop* people and culture are referred to in much notable 20th Century ethnographic work on the lands around and to the west of Sofia (Cvijic 1918; Sanders 1949), the notion of a *Shop* ‘ethnic’ or ‘national’ group is a controversial issue because it is usually afforded the status of a regional identity in Bulgaria where ‘shopska salad’, for example, is considered a Bulgarian national dish. Furthermore, some representatives of the ‘Bulgarian’ community in Serbia claim that Milosevic-era statecraft is behind the current trend for those in Eastern Serbia to declare as *Shopi* first and foremost⁶. At present, the *Shop* category is not currently recognized as an ethnic or national minority by either the Serbian or Bulgarian governments. Nevertheless, the responses of local young people to our survey data collection confirm that a significant minority of local people in Dimitrovgrad argue that their *Shop* identity and use of the *shopski* language/dialect makes them distinct from both Serbs and Bulgarians. At the same time, another significant proportion of locals think of their *Shop* identity as subordinate to a Bulgarian national identity. As was confirmed by public employees on opposing sides of this

⁵ Unlike in the Republic of Bulgaria, female surnames do not carry an –a suffix after the –ov/-ev due to Serbian law. This is a matter of some consternation for some local people.

⁶ At a roundtable discussion entitled ‘National Minorities in Serbia’ held in Novi Sad during the 8th and 9th September 2000 and organized by, among other groups, the Serbian branch of the Helsinki Commission for Human Rights, a delegate representing the Bulgarian minority, Ivan Nikolov asked whether Bulgarians were due to ‘disappear from the ethnic map in Serbia’ due to Serbian government-sponsored efforts to raise ‘Shop’ awareness. Accessed at pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00005017/01/Helsinki%20Files%204.doc on 25/06/2011.

debate, those identifying as both Bulgarians and *Shopi* (corresponding to 'Bulgarian', 'Other' and even 'Yugoslav' on the 2002 census) tend to see themselves as one single community while its members often disagree about what the national identity of that community is.

There was no such variety among ethnicity identity preferences among the students in Nis. Of 148 respondents, 142 (96%) declared a Serb ethnic identity. In the experience of the authors, this question provoked no debate or confusion as the survey data was collected in the classrooms of the Nis schools.

Concerning the sporting landscape in Dimitrovgrad, our interviews revealed that young people are linked to the sporting infrastructures in Serbia and Bulgaria in qualitatively different ways. As the vast majority of the pupils' time is spent in the local area, it is in Serbia that most of their sports education takes place. This involves at least some training in the disciplines of football, volleyball and basketball although the extent of this training is limited by the generally poor quality of the concrete outdoor courts and pitches and the lack of heated gymnasiums which would allow for a full winter programme. The nearest swimming pool is roughly 20km away in Pirot. There is, however, the opportunity for pupils to take part in a cross-country running event that is organised twice a year. Theoretically, the students at the schools in our study are eligible to compete in regional and national team sports competitions, but we were told that the schools in Dimitrovgrad were not particularly active in entering those competitions. One reason for this might be that these same students are invited to take part in well-organised school sports competitions covering several disciplines in Bulgaria on an annual basis. Specifically, these invitations are extended to schools in areas with significant Bulgarian populations from outside the territory of Bulgaria.

Unsurprisingly, this general picture compares unfavourably with equivalent schools in Nis. Competitive inter-school sports proceed year-round on pitches and courts that are generally constructed from appropriate materials (artificial grass for football, etc.). Apart from football, basketball, and volleyball, there are ample opportunities to compete in table tennis, handball, gymnastics, chess and several varieties of traditional and modern dance. Heated gymnasiums are plentiful and Nis has some of the best swimming facilities in the wider region. Schools are sometimes able to employ several physical education professionals, which sometimes allows teachers to focus their efforts upon disciplines in which they specialise. For the last several years, commercial sponsors have often been sought to provide funding for participation in external tournaments. In fact, some teachers claimed that the situation was actually better until the 1980s when all necessary funding came from the state. University students in Nis are generally still able to take part in national and even pan-Yugoslav tournaments.

Presentation of Survey Data

The questionnaires distributed in Dimitrovgrad were printed in the Serbian language on one side and Bulgarian language on the other allowing respondents to choose, whereas the Nis questionnaires were printed only in Serbian. At first glance, the data from the Dimitrovgrad schools appears to contradict the predominance of Bulgarian identification in the official census of 2002. Considering that all available students from all streams were surveyed, it is surprising to note that the largest single category of ethnic identification was 'Serb' (60). Only 42 declared as 'Bulgarian', with 19 choosing 'Mixed/ Other'. Owing to the fact that our interview data suggests that these respondents tends to see themselves as a single community that happens to disagree about its name, we have decided to pool the 61 responses in the Bulgarian and Mixed/Other categories in our analyses (see Tables following this article). The authors accept that this approach is problematic as it plays down the importance of the distinction between the identity categories of Bulgarian and *Shop* which are clearly very significant for many of our informants. However, much theoretical literature on the construction of identity suggests that 'ethnicity is more often experienced in terms of degree' (Eriksen 1993) rather than as a binary 'either/or' category. Thus accepting that all survey/census approaches to ethnicity necessarily denote a flattening of complexity of identity in the experience of informants, we believe that our analytical pooling of these categories represents a justifiable attempt to capture a spectrum of minority non-Serb responses⁷. This amalgamation of identity categories will henceforth be referred to under the politically-neutral 'Minority' label. The students from the Nis schools have not been stratified by ethnicity owing to the overwhelming majority of Serbs (96%) in the sample

Concerning languages spoken at home (Table 1), 73% of Serbs claimed to speak Serbian, while 17% spoke Bulgarian and Serbian and 10% chose 'Other'. The significant proportion of Serbs speaking other languages apart from Serbian at home probably indicates that some young people whose relatives declare as Bulgarian or *Shop* are now choosing to declare a Serb ethnic identity. This may possibly help to explain the disparity between the fact that Bulgarians remain the largest group among the sample of all ages in the 2002 census and the fact that Serbs are the largest group in our sample taken from the only high schools in the municipality. Of the Minority students, 48% claimed to speak both Bulgarian

⁷ However, the responses of the 4 students identifying as 'Roma' have not been pooled into this 'Minority' category as the authors felt that that identity is distinct from *Shop*/Bulgarian. A further 2 students who did not fill in this question have also been omitted from the results.

and Serbian, 28% 'Other', 21% just Serbian and only 3% just Bulgarian. As we might reasonably consider the 'other' category to denote the *shop* dialect/language, it is possible to conclude that only a minority of local young people actively identify with standard Bulgarian language.

Table 1 Which language(s) do you speak at home?*

Ethnicity (Location)	Serbian (Percentage/ Count)	Bulgarian	Serbian and Bulgarian	Other
Serb n=60 (Dimitrovgrad)	73.3%/ 44	0%/ 0	16.7%/ 10	10%/ 6
Minority n=61 (Dimitrovgrad)	21.3%/ 13	3.3%/ 2	47.5%/ 29	27.9%/ 17

*Question not included in questionnaire distributed in Nis.

Concerning sporting allegiances (Table 2), the answers of all students in Dimitrovgrad were more oriented towards elite teams from Serbia rather than Bulgaria. For example, 66% of Serbs and 56% of Minorities claim to support a football/sports team from Serbia, mostly in fact, from Belgrade⁸. In both cases, most of the remainder is accounted for by support for teams from Western Europe/North America and Other/No Interest. Only 8% of Minorities and a single individual identifying as Serb claimed to support a Bulgarian sports team. The Nis students predictably showed an even stronger orientation to sports teams within Serbia (78%), again mostly directed towards teams from Belgrade⁹. The remaining 22% is entirely accounted for by the Western Europe/North America and Other/No Interest categories.

Table 2 If you support a football or sports team, where is it based?

Ethnicity (Location)	Local area/ Nis (Percentage/ Count)	Belgrade	Elsewhere in Serbia	Bulgaria	Western Europe/ North America	Other/ No Interest
Serb n=60 (Dimitrovgrad)	11.7%/ 7	51.7%/ 31	3.3%/ 2	1.7%/ 1	10%/ 6	21.7%/ 13
Minority n=61 (Dimitrovgrad)	21.3%/ 13	29.5%/ 18	4.9%/ 3	8.1%/ 5	24.6%/ 15	11.5%/ 7
All n=148 (Nis)	16.9%/ 25	58.1%/ 86	3.4%/ 5	0%/ 0	6.1%/ 9	15.5%/ 23

⁸ The specific figures quoted are an amalgamation of the three Serbian categories on the questionnaire, 'The Local Area or Nis', 'Belgrade', and 'Elsewhere in Serbia'.

⁹ Amalgamation of three Serbian categories.

The data concerning the reactions to national representative teams (Table 3) tells a similar story, with both sub-sets of Dimitrovgrad students more inclined to cheer for Serbian teams. Unsurprisingly, 85% of Serbs would cheer for the Serbian national team in the event of a match with the Bulgarian national team, with the balance accounted for by 'no preference' (5%), 'no interest' (8%) and a single individual claiming to support Bulgaria. The picture among Minority students is more mixed, with Serbia once again the most popular choice at 46%, but the 30% who would support Bulgaria represents a significant minority. The Nis students were nearly unanimously behind the Serbian team (95%) with the small remainder being accounted for by neutrals and the uninterested.

Table 3 Who would you support in the event of a football (or sports) match between Serbia and Bulgaria/ Any Other Team of Your Choice**?*

Ethnicity (Location)	For Serbia (Percentage/Count)	For Bulgaria/Any Other Team	No Preference	No Interest
Serb n=60 (Dimitrovgrad)	85%/ 51	1.7%/ 1	5%/ 3	8.3%/ 5
Minority n=61 (Dimitrovgrad)	45.9%/ 28	29.5% /18	13.1%/ 8	11.5%/ 7
All n=148 (Nis)	95.3%/ 141	0%/0	1.4%/ 2	3.4%/ 5

*On Dimitrovgrad questionnaire.

** On Nis questionnaire.

It is harder to discern patterns from the survey concerning participation in sports (Table 4). Serbs and Minorities have relatively similar overall levels of sports participation, with around three-quarters of both groups claiming to play sports more than rarely. It is perhaps significant that a greater amount of Serbs (22%) claim to play sports competitively in relation to Minorities (15%). The sports participation levels for students in Nis seem to reflect the qualitative data indicating the greater opportunities available there, with 26% of students playing sports competitively¹⁰.

¹⁰ For Nis and Dimitrovgrad students, the figures given here represent a pooling of the responses of those claiming to play 'competitive amateur sports' and 'professional/semi-pro'.

Table 4 How would you describe your level of sports participation?

Ethnicity (Location)	I don't play sports (Percentage/ Count)	I rarely participate	I play sports recreationa lly	I take part in competitive amateur sports	I play professiona lly/ semi- pro
Serb n=60 (Dimitrovgrad)	11.7%/ 7	16.7%/ 10	51.7%/ 31	8.3%/ 5	13.3%/ 8
Minority n=61 (Dimitrovgrad)	6.6%/ 4	18%/ 11	60.7%/ 37	8.1%/ 5	6.6%/ 4
All n=148 (Nis)	11.5%/ 17	7.4%/ 11	54.7%/ 81	12.8%/ 19	13.5%/ 20

The deliberations of the students concerning where they will continue their studies at university level may or may not be significantly influenced by perceived opportunities concerning sports for most students, as significant proportions of both Serbs and Minorities claimed that they would consider moving to find better sporting opportunities (see Table 5). However, the preferred university destination of the students (Table 6) will almost certainly determine the future sphere of sporting participation of the students. It turns out that Bulgaria is a highly attractive university destination for many students including Serbs in Dimitrovgrad. While a majority of Serbs wish to attend university in Serbia (63%)¹¹, a significant minority intend to cross the border into Bulgaria to continue their studies (30%). These figures are almost reversed concerning Minority students, with a full 72% hoping to attend university in Bulgaria and just 25% looking to do so in Serbia. A narrow majority of all students in Dimitrovgrad therefore hope to continue their studies in Bulgaria. This presents a sharp contrast with Nis, where 78% want to study in Serbia and most of the remainder want to head outside the region.

Table 5 Would you consider moving in order to have access to better sporting opportunities?

Ethnicity (Location)	Yes, definitely (Percentage/ Count)	Probably	Possibly/ Maybe	Probably not	Definitely not
Serb n=60 (Dimitrovgrad)	18.3%/ 11	25%/ 15	23.3%/ 14	18.3%/ 11	15%/ 9
Minority n=61 (Dimitrovgrad)	31.1%/ 19	11.5%/ 7	49.2%/ 30	6.6%/ 4	1.6%/ 1
All n=148 (Nis)	20.3%/ 30	18.9%/ 28	35.8%/ 53	12.8%/ 19	12.2%/ 18

¹¹ This figure represents a pooling of responses concerning the three available Serbian categories.

Table 6 If you intend to continue your studies at university, where do you want to go?

Ethnicity (Location)	Nis (Percentage/ Count)	Belgrade	Elsewhere in Serbia	Bulgaria	Elsewhere / Outside the Region	I do not intend to study more
Serb n=60 (Dimitrovgrad)	25%/ 15	28.3%/ 17	10%/ 6	30%/ 18	6.7%/ 4	0%/ 0
Minority n=61 (Dimitrovgrad)	11.5%/ 7	6.6%/ 4	6.6%/ 4	72.1%/ 44	3.3%/ 2	0%/ 0
All n=148 (Nis)	50%/ 74	23%/ 34	5.4%/ 8	0%/ 0	16.2%/ 24	5.4%/ 8

Discussion of Survey Results

Arguably the most interesting overall finding of the survey data presented from Dimitrovgrad concerns the general lack of disagreement between students identifying as Serbs and as Minorities. This is particularly evident with relation to sporting allegiances, where both sub-groups were more inclined to cheer for Serbian rather than Bulgarian teams. Interpreted in the light of the qualitative data collected concerning identity, it appears that this may reflect the general sense of ambiguity concerning ethnic identity itself. In the local context, Serb, *Shop* and Bulgarian identities appear to exist on a spectrum where Serb may blend into *Shop*, and *Shop* into Bulgarian (although most of the self-identifying *Shopi* we spoke to expressed a closer affinity to Bulgarian than Serbian culture). Many students hesitated before answering the question on ethnic identity, so it is unsurprising that so many of the respondents claimed to speak languages and support sports teams that do not automatically follow from their professed ethnic identity.

From the perspective of Serbian state authorities who are certainly interested in promoting national cohesion, the results are generally optimistic. All indicators of identity - from support of sports teams to language use to ethnic identification itself - present a more Serbian-oriented picture from our sample of high school students in Dimitrovgrad than recent census data - where Bulgarians comfortably outnumber Serbs - led us to expect. The fact that most students claiming Minority backgrounds were inclined to support Serbia in the event of a match with Bulgaria suggests that young people are more likely to root for and identify with the country of their birth than with the country where they are considered ethnic kin. While roughly half of the students in the sample regard themselves as non-Serbs, the tendency to actively identify against the Serbian nation in the sense of a dichotomous 'Us' and 'Them' configuration appears to be weak among local young people.

The findings concerning sporting participation are more ambiguous with regards to their implications for identity. As Gasser & Levinson (2004) note, it is hard to isolate the effect on identity construction of sporting participation from assorted other factors. Furthermore, it is even harder to quantify. However, we can observe that most of the students in the sample play sports more than rarely¹² and that a majority of them do not discount the idea of moving in order to find better opportunities to practice sport (See Table 5). Our investigation of sporting facilities and the opportunities to compete in competitions in Dimitrovgrad suggests that the local situation leaves a lot to be desired from the perspective of students. We also found out that probably the most ambitiously organized annual sports tournaments available to these students currently take place across the border in Bulgaria. In the context of national identity, it is significant to note that these tournaments are explicitly aimed at reaching out to 'Bulgarians abroad' which implies the aim of creating or maintaining a sense of national solidarity with Bulgarians in the Republic of Bulgaria. So, while the effect of integration into sporting infrastructures can be difficult to isolate for the scholar, it is certainly recognized by at least some real-world actors promoting national ideas.

By far the most significant factor concerning the future direction of identity construction and sporting integration of the students in the study is the fact that Bulgaria appears to be a more attractive university destination than Serbia. There is little evidence in the data to suggest that such preferences are dictated by sporting aspirations. More likely, there are other factors (possibly financial but certainly beyond the remit of this study) that are driving this trend. However, this clearly means that any future sporting participation of the students will take place where they study which, for a slim majority of all Dimitrovgrad students, will probably be in Bulgaria. At the same time, those students will find that supporting Serbian teams requires more effort than it did while they were based in Serbia with more ready access to Serbian media. Moreover, for a student population whose national identity orientations are apparently in a state of flux, living in Bulgaria will almost certainly mean that some students will come to view their own national identity in a different light.

CONCLUSION

The modest scope and small sample sizes of this study should caution that the reader should treat these findings as mere indications of the sporting and identity practices of young people in Dimitrovgrad. Never-

¹² This conclusion arises from the sum of those respondents who claimed to play sports either 'recreationally', 'competitive amateur' or 'professionally/ semi-pro'.

theless, these preliminary findings represent a useful starting point for any fuller investigation into these themes. While we found evidence that senior figures in Dimitrovgrad have different and conflicting ideas about how the national identities of young people in the area should be developed and represented, there was little evidence of firm divisions on national grounds between the high school students themselves. On the contrary, boundary-crossing is common as ‘Serbs’ see no contradiction in aspiring to study in Bulgaria and many ‘Bulgarians’ declare that they support the Serbian football team. From the perspective of the Belgrade-based Serbian authorities, this snapshot of identity and allegiances among high school students in Dimitrovgrad presents an optimistic picture. The students identifying with minority categories do not appear to be anti-Serbian to any discernable degree at all.

However, we argue that sporting participation is a powerful tool of national cohesion that is currently being underemployed by the Serbian authorities in the area. This conclusion is based less upon the survey data and more upon the concurrent qualitative inquiry. In short, it seems that the facilities and opportunities available to Dimitrovgrad students who may want to emulate the Serbian athletes they generally cheer for are largely inadequate. While the authors recognize the efforts of a small number of physical education professionals in the area, the investment in sports appears to fall far short of the national average; it is certainly risible compared to what the authors witnessed in the city of Nis. Significantly, part of this missing sports infrastructure is substituted for by nationally-conscious organizers across the border in Bulgaria. Taken together with the information that a majority of all students in Dimitrovgrad have indicated that they would prefer to go to university in Bulgaria, the authors predict that the cohort of students in the sample are unlikely to be quite so pro-Serbian in terms of their sporting allegiances – and possibly even their national identities – throughout the course of their lives.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Benedict. [1983] 2002. *Imagined communities*. London: Verso.
- Billig, Michael. 1995. *Banal nationalism*. London: SAGE.
- Cvijic, Jovan. 1918. The geographical distribution of the balkan peoples. *The Geographical Review* 5 (5).
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 1993. *Ethnicity and nationalism: Anthropological perspectives*. London: Pluto press.
- Fox, J. E., & C. Miller-Idriss. 2008. *Everyday Nationhood*. Ethnicities.
- Gagnon, V. P. 2004. *The myth of ethnic war*. Cornell University press.
- Gasser, Patrick, & Anders Levinson. 2004. Breaking the post-war ice: Open fun football schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Sport in Society* 7 (3).
- Gellner, Ernest & John Breuilly, intro. [1983] 2006. *Nations and nationalism*, 2nd edition. London: Blackwell.
- Hobsbawm, Eric J. [1990] 1993. *Nations and nationalism since 1780: Programme,*

- myth, reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- Kokovic, Dragan. 1990. *Doba nasilja i sport*. Novi Sad: Svet sporta.
- _____. 2000. *Sociologija sporta*. Beograd: Sportska akademija.
- Nielsen, Christian Axboe. 2010. The goalposts of transition: Football as a metaphor for Serbia's long journey to the rule of law. *Nationalities papers* 38 (1).
- Perica, Vjekoslav. 2001. United they stood, divided they fell: Nationalism and the Yugoslav school of basketball, 1968-2000. *Nationalities Papers* 29 (2).
- Sack, Allen L. & Zeljan Suster. 2000. Soccer and Croatian nationalism: A prelude to war. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 23 (4).
- Sanders, Irwin Taylor. 1949. *Balkan village*. Lexington: University of Kentucky press.

James Dawson, Лондон, Владан Петровић, Ниш

СПОРТСКА ПРАКСА И НАЦИОНАЛНИ ИДЕНТИТЕТ У ДИМИТРОВГРАДУ

Резиме

Овај рад је заснован на резултатима краткорочног истраживања везаног за праксу учествовања и упражњавања спортских активности међу средњошколцима у Димитровграду, етнички шареноликој пограничној општини у источној Србији која је кроз историју припадала и суседној Бугарској. Студија се темељи на теоријској претпоставци да спорт може да представља ефектно средство за националну кохезију. Резултати истраживања указују на то да су млади људи у овој области тренутно позитивније оријентисани према српским него према бугарским врхунским спортским тимовима. Међутим, истраживање везано за учествовање у спортским активностима открива сложенију слику у којој недостатак улагања у локалну спортску инфраструктуру наводи локалне наставнике физичког васпитања и њихове ђаке да спортска такмичења потраже преко границе у Бугарској. Ова чињеница може да има важне импликације за развој националних идентитета који су далеко од непроменљивих и постојаних.

Кључне речи: спорт, идентитет, Димитровград, Србија, Бугари.