

“Furia Albanica” - The Last Myth for the Preservation of Albanian National Identity

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Abstract

Myths, although social constructs, are necessary means for constructing and preserving national identities. Sports and football in particular, have shown to be one of strongest myths of national identity, and thus, of a national unity. This is true for Albanians, and in particular for the Albanians living in Kosovo, due to the process of establishing a new state identity parallel to the existing national identity. The aim of the paper is to present the specific case of Kosovo, whereas a national football team upholds the main myth for a unified Albanian community, and the challenges brought about by Kosovo's acceptance to the UEFA, in regard to the preservation of national identity. The theoretical review will reflect upon myths, its relation with sports and football in particular, and semantics behind the notion of nation and state, as used by the Albanian language. Through the comparative method, similar examples will be presented whereas the football myth has become the strongest national pride. Lastly, through the quantitative method, selected results of a survey conducted for the author's main PhD thesis will be presented, in regard to affiliation with a national football team. The paper will reveal that a national team may and usually serves as the strongest imaginative community of what we call a nation. In cases such as Kosovo, it is actually the strongest myth, parallel to other symbols, such as the national flag, capable of mobilizing masses.

Keywords: myths, identity, Kosovo, national team, football

1. Introduction

Identity has proven to be a puzzling phenomenon for scholars of various disciplines. It has made for an interesting topic of research, to be studied by sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science, history and even semantic and linguistic science. Due to its abstract nature, the measurement of identity in individuals and communities has proven to be a highly difficult and complex task. This complexity is also attributed to the changing of identity during the course of time, and the vast array of factors that impact the sense of identity, different in each individual. National identity, on the other hand, is yet another layer of identity which is even more difficult to be sociologically measured. Due to the semantics and linguistic uncertainty in the terminology that defines what nation actually means, or if nationality is different from statehood or even citizenship, national identity still remains a field not sufficiently explored. As is the case with identity, national identity is created and preserved by relying on myths, as social constructs rooted in legends, and often through exaggeration of actual events and personalities; thus it is still fair to conclude that myths construct the identity, or at least, the perception that individuals may have on who they actually are.

Sports, and in particular football through national teams, as the paper will present, encompasses one of the leading myths of national identity. Although meant to be, perhaps, the most peaceful expression of national pride, it is often sports leading the most furious battles in the fields. The relation between nationalism and football is particularly interesting in the case of Kosovo, which at least until recently, viewed the national team of Albania as its own national team. For the Albanians in Kosovo, the discussion of nationalism, and the difference between state and nation, is perpetually a challenging one, due to the complex history and politics of the Balkans. Recently, Kosovo was accepted as a UEFA member, which means that soon, Kosovo will enter international competitions under full rights as a national team.¹ This will provide many profitable opportunities for football clubs and aspiring players, but it will also entail difficult decision-making, as to which team to choose. Many players of Kosovar origin play for the national team of Albania. More and more Albanians from Kosovo are now playing for European teams, in different leagues.

As the paper will show, the national team of Albania has served as a unifying medium for Albanians everywhere. Football matches have served as an expression of nationalism, at times where nationalism is considered a thing of the

¹ Until acceptance as UEFA member, Kosovo national team was only allowed to play friendly games, excluding states created after the breakup of former Yugoslavia, without possibility to use national symbols.

past. However, this is not exclusive to Albanians only. As the paper will present through comparison of examples in Europe and America, sports, and football in particular has been the most emotionally charged myth for nations, which has been perceived to influence even political events.²

The myth of a unified Albanian spirit and nation until recently, and especially during the qualifications for European Championship in 2016, has been stronger than the red and black two-headed flag or the national anthem. With Kosovo's acceptance in the UEFA, it will be interesting to observe whether the myth of a unified Albanianism will be challenged. The results of a survey relevant to the topic, will reveal an interesting trend in this direction.

2. Methodology

The methodology of the paper consists of a combination of qualitative methods, namely observation, theoretical review and comparative approach, which draw on both primary and secondary data. Observation as a method is mainly used due to the fact that significant changes relevant to the context of the paper, have taken place during the drafting process. As the study of identity is also within the scope of sociology and anthropology, simple and participant observation as an ethnographic method have been used to monitor the changing behavior of group under study, within a set period of time. During observation, data was collected through full participation as an observer, but also as a participant as an observer and observer as participant, (Mathews and Ross, 2010, pg. 259). In addition to group behavior observation, the content of media reporting on the topic and the expression of behavior on social media networks, were also observed simultaneously, within a period of nine months (from October 2015 to May 2016). Through observation, the frequency of expression of affiliation with the national team of Albania was noted, along with the expression of affiliation with the national team of Kosovo, after UEFA membership. In addition, display of national symbols and size of crowds gathering to watch football matches with Albania's national team playing were observed, and conversations with participants noted the reasons behind the emotion and significance of the match. The observation method is complemented by a theoretical review, which is used for explanatory purposes, in presenting main theories on myth, identity, national identity, and nationalism, as key concepts of the paper. In addition to these two methods, the comparative approach used provides similar examples where sports and nationalism are closely linked, not only in the Balkans, but also in Europe and in U.S.A, which are otherwise considered as advanced democracies and globalized societies. Specific examples include Scotland, Spain, Germany and the U.S.A. in particular during specific political events.

In bringing back the focus on the case of Kosovo, the quantitative method is also used in this paper, with a presentation of partial data from a survey conducted for the author's PhD thesis research on identity crisis between national and state identity in Kosovo. The quantitative survey is conducted with a simple random sample of 763 respondents, as a representative sample of the Kosovo Albanian population in Kosovo, based on the data from the Kosovo Census 2011³. Questions of the survey were developed using a combined typology of multiple choice questions, scaled responses based on the Likert Scale, (Mathews and Ross, 2010) and also questions based on the Moreno methodology, (Moreno, 2006).

The Kosovo case is a specific case of an identity crisis, whereas nationality and statehood are not congruent, and where independence is not necessarily the ultimate goal of an ideology. However, the paper is a modest contribution to the discussion of identity crisis, from a sports perspective, in particular football, taking into account the recent events of Kosovo being recognized as a member of UEFA.

3. How important are myths for a national identity?

Identity in general is an abstract notion, rooted deeply into the psychology of each individual. Or, as Maloouf (1998) rightly defines it as "the genes of the soul", (pg. 16). Due to its abstract nature, interdisciplinary approaches have embarked upon the study of this phenomena, which is often multi-layered and changes over time. Therefore, Bloch concludes that "men are sons of time, rather of their fathers", (Maloouf, 1998, pg. 95). National identity, on the other hand, due to many factors that aid its construction, is even more complex for studying purposes. Therefore, disciplines ranging from sociology, ethno-psychology, political science, anthropology etc., have aimed to define at least factors that impact the creation and also preservation of the national identity. If one was to sum up all these factors or even markers

² In 1970, a football match between El Salvador and Honduras was a trigger for a brief war known as Football War, <http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/battleswars1900s/p/footballwar.htm>.

³ Population according to ethnicity, gender and residence, Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2011, retrieved at: [file:///C:/Users/Rrezarta.Reka/Downloads/Popullsia%20Sipas%20Gjinise%20Etnicitetit%20Dhe%20Vendbanimit\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Rrezarta.Reka/Downloads/Popullsia%20Sipas%20Gjinise%20Etnicitetit%20Dhe%20Vendbanimit).pdf);

to which identity reacts, than myths would surely come to mind.

According to Schopflin, (2002), "myth is a particular set of ideas with a moral content told as a narrative by a community about itself", (pg. 22). Furthermore, the author regards myths as of great significance for organizing history, so the "community could make sense of it", (pg. 22). What is most important, Schopflin, while never ceasing to acknowledge the fiction behind myths, concludes that if the society were to constantly question the purposiveness of myths, than the community would fall apart, (Shopflin, *Ibid*). Renan, (1992) on the other hand, goes back to the abstract of nation, saying that "a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle", (pg. 10). Myths are of existential importance to the nation, as they deliver the values, the honor and the greatness of a nation in the eyes of the national. As Connor, (1994) defines the myth of common descent, he also states that quite often it is not what factually is, but what one, thinks, or perceives is the truth. When discussing about what nation is or may be, Smith, (2013) considers that there are two defining aspects: the territorial one, i.e., the perceived idea of the people for the given territory, whether rightly or wrongly given to them, and the nation, as a "community of myth, memory and symbol".

It is precisely this perception of what may be, that has driven individuals and communities to believe in the greatness of their nation and hence seek freedom, independence and self-determination. The example of a Ukrainian dissident illustrates best how strong the myth of national greatness is. While in prison, the Ukrainian dissident writes: "I know all men are equal. Reason tells me so. But at the same time, I know that my nation is unique. My heart tells me so", (Connor, 1993, pg. 203). History has been made by people who have stood ready to lay their lives for principles close to their hearts. In the discussion about nationalism being primordial and primitive, scholars advise that nationalistic sentiments should be considered non-rational as opposed to irrational.

In situations of crisis, and in particular of national identity crisis, nations rely on myths, as a source to draw strength for their efforts or to reaffirm its unity and greatness. In today's world of globalization, tendencies for rather diluted national identities and striving for a citizen of the globe, myths are becoming harder to find. Flag-waving and exhibition of other national symbols are saved for special national holidays. However, although dormant, nationalism reappears from time to time: fortunately, not in the battlefields, but in the most mundane events and locations: football matches and stadiums.

4. Semantics and Nationalism in Kosovo: A bit of history and language

Semantics and terminology only add to the already complex study of national identity and nationalism, as its most disreputable expression. In the 1939, Study of Nationalism undertaken by the Royal Institute of International Affairs, it was clearly noted that "among other difficulties which impede the study of 'nationalism', that of language holds a leading place", (Connor, 1994, pg. 91). Kosovo is not exclusive to this uncertainty. For example, in Western Europe, adjectives such as *ethnic*, *national*, *ethno-national*, *regional*, *linguistic*, may have a completely other meaning from the same adjectives, if compared to another country, (Coakley, 2011). Even in Germany, *Volksgruppe* means the people as a whole; however, there are still other sub-qualifications such as *Voxkszugehorigkeit* or *Nationalitat*, and *Staatsangehorigkeit* which mean national, respectively, political nationality, (Wolff, 2003).

The qualification of different ethnicities based on this terminology has reflected on different ethnic groups in former Yugoslavia, inevitably impacting their legal status and shaping their political future. Based on the territorial organization, former Yugoslavia consisted of six republics and two autonomous provinces. The population of the six Republics was generally referred to as the *narod*, (the people), while the population of the two autonomous provinces was referred to as *narodnosti* -term referring to a group which despite being the majority in the province, still lacked the attributes of the majority of the Yugoslav nation, (Yugoslav Constitution, 1974). The Albanians in Kosovo, however, have always referred to themselves as Albanians, as an ethnic group, as nation, inseparable from the national identity of Albanians in Albania or elsewhere. This identity was expressed with the same red and black flag, joint history, a sense of belonging, and around the same Albanian myths of Skanderbeg as the ultimate unifying symbol of the Albanians. Even the last war in 1999, was fought with and for, the same national identity. The oath of a KLA fighter, among others, stated that the fight will go on, until national unification (K. Danaj, personal communication, July, 2015). Despite efforts to instill a Yugoslav identity, the majority of Albanians, had not suffered Renan's "collective amnesia", (Billig, 1995, pg. 38).

After the war in 1999, and especially after the declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008, a new state identity was necessary. From a post-war image, Kosovo had to build a state image, which would be branded and ready to be presented as such internationally. In addition to the flag and national anthem, which was voted by the Parliament, but not the people, the formation of state sports federations was the next step. While other Republics from the former Yugoslav territories had congruent nations and states, which continued the same after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and their independence, the case of Kosovo proved to be completely different. In contrast to Croatia and Slovenia, after the

declaration of independence, Kosovo adopted a constitution which is exclusively based on citizenry and not on any specific ethnic group, despite the fact that 90% of the population in Kosovo is of Albanian ethnicity, (Kosovo Constitution).

Eight years after the declaration of independence, Kosovo has become a brand indeed. Through numerous costly campaigns, Kosovo's affiliation with Europe and Western values, have been the highlights of every poster, governmental speech and campaigns (see Kosovo Young Europeans⁴). In addition, numerous sports memberships have been achieved in European federations, and medals won on behalf of Kosovo, by the famous "brand", judoist Majlinda Kelmendi⁵ Sports in Kosovo have become the promoting drivers of a new identity: both internally and externally. Patriotism, as a loyalty to the state, is slowly but surely replacing nationalism, as the loyalty to the nation.

5. Furia Albanica - The Last Myth for the Preservation of Albanian Identity

Since 3 May, 2016, Kosovo is officially a member of UEFA, (The Guardian, 2016). This has been perceived as one of the greatest successes of the new state towards international affirmation of sports, which will also create greater opportunities for new aspiring sportsmen and sportswomen, for the international football market. On the other hand, this membership also carries a lot of national pride, and in particular state pride for Kosovo, since now, the identifying colors will be presented in stadiums outside Kosovo. Up until this membership, the national identity was expressed by rooting for the Albanian national team, especially with the last qualification for the European Championship 2016. While sporting nationalism is highly emotive, it can sometimes also lead to difficulties, especially in multi-ethnic states, whereas one national team may be comprised of players with different ethnic backgrounds. While this may not be necessarily a problem in Europe, in the Balkans, there may be divisions within the different ethnic groups in a state. For example, would Albanians in Kosovo still support a national team which has both Albanian and Serb players from Kosovo? The national team of Former Republic of Macedonia has Macedonian and Albanian players, however, there are very few Albanians fans cheering for the national team.

As for most nations, sports is undoubtedly not just a cultural activity, but also a highly political one as well. In particular for the Albanians in Kosovo, who until recently, lacked their own nation state. As Mandela once stated, "sports had become the glue holding the nation together", (Sports Historian, in Jarvie and Reid, 1999). This glue was the same glue holding together Albanians everywhere, especially, before Kosovo's membership in UEFA. And the power of this glue was best seen on October 2014, in the historical football match, for European Championship 2016 qualifications, between Albania and Serbia (The Guardian, 2014), and then again, in October 2016. It was a historical match, which in addition to the general pressures of Euro qualifications, was intensely electrified due to the fact that it was a football match between the Albanian and Serbian national teams. For someone outside the Balkans this would not be sensational at all, or at least not more sensational than any other common football match between national teams in Europe. However, for those slightly familiar with the historical and political context of the Balkans, such a match should not have been allowed to begin with, similar to the example of the match between Armenia and Turkey. It seemed that political calculations that a football match would be the best way to bridge, at least somewhat, animosities between the two nations, proved to be wrong. The exact opposite occurred in the first qualification match in Belgrade, where not only fans (who were not allowed to be present at the stadium), but the whole Albanian nation was mobilized to support the team. Symbols, such as flags, shirts with the faces of members of the team and two headed eagle were on display, and a new song was composed to represent this Albanian national unity. The myth of the national team once again preserved the strong national identity. For the Albanians in Kosovo, the football match of the national Albanian team, serves as an interruption of the normal routines, to leave way for a collective remembrance of the nation, as Billig, (1995) would conclude. The national football team seemed more real than a unified country of millions.

A similar occurrence was observed in Spain, in the '20-ies, a period when the Spanish were experiencing growing of socialism as a new ideology and were also facing military coups against the Kingdom. It was in these years that the Spanish Football Federation had sent their national team to the Olympics in Antwerp. Chronicles of the time would report a furious, courageous game, whereas the players' will to win was unyielding. The myth of a ferocious Spanish football had thus transcended beyond reality, into the general national myth, to continue to Francoist Spain of the 70-ies. "Furia Espanola", (Quiroga, 2013), was now closely associated with the ferocious, courageous and unyielding Spanish nation. Even FC Barcelona is more than football. During the Francoist regime, the Catalans who are now seeking independence, would only express their anger and dissatisfaction against the dictatorship, in the football stadium, quite similar to the fans

⁴ Kosovo Young Europeans, the Kosovo "nation" branding campaign at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQRGHAdQjR0>;

⁵ Majlinda Kelmendi, European Judo Championship at: <http://shenja.tv/majlinda-kelmendi-shpallet-kampione-e-evropes-ne-rusi-gjakova-fiton-bronze/>;

of the football club Prishtina, comprised of mainly Albanian players, after 1981, at a time of repression, whereas during the matches, the fans would chant for freedom and independence. The popular song "Besa – Besë" (pledge of allegiance) would become a flagship song of the terraces.

Compared to other sports, it seems that football is so emotionally charged with nationalism, that Orwell, (1945) even called as the "war, minus the, shooting". For the Albanians, in a time where the notions of "Albanian" and "Kosovar", are almost inherently being referred to as mutually exclusive, a round ball becomes strongly the national "glue", as a new "vernacular" spoken by all. This "Furia Albanica", (Reka, 2015), has now become the national emblem, a synonym of unification, stronger than the all-inclusive national flag. A "Furia" which in fury, encompasses all Albanians in an "imagined community", (Anderson, 1983), perhaps the only permissible community for the Albanians. It seems as if those 90 minutes, make the idea for a unified nation as real as it can be, thanks to the "90 minute patriots" (The Herald, in Jarvie and Reidspor, 1999), in the field.

The importance of players is actually crucial to national sentiments and pride. FIFA has enforced the 6+5 rule, (FIFA Media Release), whereas each club is required to present at least six players that are eligible to play for the country's national team, with the main objective of restoring the national identity of football clubs. In the case of Kosovo and in particular, the Albanian national team, considering the recent UEFA membership, this will prove a difficult task. The Albanian national team has at least 9 players who are originally from Kosovo, as there are also a few in the national team of Switzerland. It is assumed that the dilemma now, over which team to choose, would not be a simple one to say the least. For it is not just merely choosing the most profitable club, but it is also a clear statement of identity. The player, Askhan Dejaga, a German footballer of Iranian birth, has been reported by Bildt, (The Guardian, 2007) as refusing to play in the match against Israel, because, as he was quoted: "I have more Iranian than German blood in my veins. Besides, I'm doing this out of respect. After all, my parents are Iranian."

Of all sports, football seems to be the one that is nationally charged the most. Regardless of its initial and original entertainment purpose, it seems that football has a high political impact as well. There is an observation that even elections can be highly influenced by the outcome of a football game. For example, the re-election of Helmut Kohl in 1990, was also linked to Germany's victory in that year's World Cup (Applebaum, 2002). Even Scotland, which by the way has its own team to compete in the championships, has experienced this enormous political influence of football. According to Jarvie and Reid (1999), sports results may have impacted political referendums, as in the case of the Scottish Devolution in 1979. Scotland, as they believe, would have done better in the referendum had the Scottish team done better in the World Cup in Argentina in 1978.

And for Brazil, football is an inseparable part of the national identity, just as much as national dances are. The passionate speech of President Dina Rouseff, holds it best: "We are the Land of Football because of our glorious history of five world championships and for the passion that every Brazilian dedicates to their team, to their heroes and to the Selecao, our National Team. The love of our people for football has become part of our national identity. For us, football is a celebration of life." (Kotowski, 2014)

While Europe seems to be more affected by the sporting nationalism, obviously due to the multinational states composing it, America seems not to be spared either. After the 9/11 attacks, sport events in America had been turned into shows of American nationalism and pride. There was even a surfacing of a sort of a commercial nationalism, whereas national symbols were being used on pizza boxes, to make use of the national atmosphere (Andrews, 2015) There is even a moment whereas George Bush, during his presidential term, appeared on the baseball pitch, as if saying, here I am, in the middle of the Yankee stadium, and no one will dare to hurt the nation (Andrews, 2015).

This type of new nationalism in America, had helped in recuperating the American society after the horrid 9/11 attacks. And such nationalism, similar to sports nationalism, is considered the Hot Nationalism (Andrews, 2015) instead of a Cool nationalism. Coming back to the region, it was precisely the cool nationalism that Edi Rama was asking from the Albanians at the Elbasan Arena during the football match between Albania and Serbia: a cold nationalism, indifferent to the nation, in a sort of refusal to view it as a source of identity (Billig, 1995), which has undoubtedly impacted the final results of the match, a loss that will forever be remembered by national history.

6. Furia Albanica vs. Furia Kosovarica

In a survey conducted for the author's PhD research thesis in progress, on identity crisis between the national and state identity of Albanians in Kosovo, most of the questions which were developed based on the Moreno Scale (Moreno, 2006), reflected the still prevalent Albanian identity over the newfound Kosovar state identity. There was however, a note of an initial trend for a regional pride of respondents being Albanians from Kosovo. The respondents (765), were 383 men and 382 women, with most of them between the ages of 18-45, mostly from the region of Prishtina but also representing all of

other main regions in Kosovo.

The only question of the survey which comprised a sort of split between the national and state identity was the question regarding the national football team. When given a hypothetical situation, whereas the national team of Kosovo would play with the national team of Albania, the respondents had interesting responses. A 46.8% would support both teams, whereas 33.6% would support the Kosovo team, compared to a low 14.2% which would support only and exclusively the national team of Albania, as shown by the figure below.

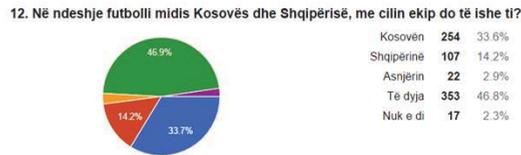


Fig. 1. Results from survey

This depicts a trend of growing identity separation between the national and state identity, through a sports perspective. Although most of the respondents would cheer for both, it is an interesting observation that when made to choose between the two teams, the regional identity, or the Kosovar state identity prevails. For sociological purposes, this is an interesting trend, as it shows that language, citizenship, territory and even religion, as main factors of constructing and preserving identity, become relative compared to football national teams. Since the respondents present a gender equal reflection, it seems that football is a strong identity factor for all citizens, regardless of gender.

7. Conclusion

National identity, although constructed on myths, is a deeply ingrained psychological sentiment that is difficult to measure. Measurement usually consists on analyzing the markers and the factors that impact the national identity of individual and communities, over the course of a period in time. In addition, language, terminology and semantics seem to have impacted the complexity, and even more so in the case of Albanians in Kosovo, considering the historical background and the recent political changes. When it comes to nationalism and sports, and in particularly football, it seems that nations, regardless whether in the Balkans, Europe or even in the U.S.A. and in Brazil, share the same national fury and sentiment for their national teams. Whether it is countries striving for independence and self-determination, or countries with established democracies, national pride is expressed in similar fashion, with the waving of flags, national insignia, songs and memorizing historical events. In a world of globalization, and in a Europe which strives to stand united, there is very little room left for the expression of nationalism. However, although mostly dormant, nationalism seems to wake up just in time for a championship or any other sort of competition. Even though sport events are international, there is nothing more national than watching two nations compete in a football stadium.

Kosovo case is even more specific. While Scotland, Ireland and Catalonia use the medium of football to express their national aspirations, Albanians use football as the prohibited "imaginative community" of a unified nation. A community which views victories as national heroic acts, and losses as an ultimate national tragedy. Despite calls for replacing hot primordial nationalism with cool nationalism, the myth of a national unifying team seem to be of existential importance to the Albanians, as the qualification matches for European Championship showed.

However, the recent membership of Kosovo in UEFA seems to have uncovered a possible identity split when it comes to choosing between the national team of Kosovo or the national team of Albania. Although both teams are equally important, a trend is emerging that the regional or state Kosovo identity will be stronger when compared to the national identity expressed in supporting the national team of Albania. This will be an interesting turn of events, whereas the competition will surpass the football stadium. Furia Albanica is endangered by an emerging Furia Kosovaria.

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