

FOOTBALL AS A MEDIUM FOR (TRANSNATIONAL) INTEGRATION OF THE ROMANI PEOPLE

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Southeastern Europe is home to numerous Romani communities, each distinctive in their own way depending on their country of origin and the time of immigration, language, customs, religion etc. Based on multi-sited ethnographic research (in the Republic of Croatia, the Republic of Slovenia and the Republic of Serbia), this paper discusses the role of football (professional, amateur and recreational) in the integration of the Roma people. Considering the size and diversity of Romani communities, research results show that football, as the most popular sport, enables easier social integration into the ethnic community on the local and transnational levels. Various football activities (minority football camps, tournaments) are initiated and organized by the Roma community itself. Although the Roma people legally enjoy full civil rights, football serves as a means to reduce discrimination, inequalities, poverty and social exclusion. In order for young Roma to train in clubs, they have to attend school regularly, which results in economic integration. This research also contributes to the creation of public integration policies which are implemented by the very minority and immigrant communities working transnationally.

Keywords: Romani people, football, social and economic integration, transnational integration

INTRODUCTION¹

Southeastern Europe is home to numerous Romani communities, each distinctive in their own way depending on their country of origin and time of immigration, language,

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customs, religion etc., (Fraser 1992; Liégeois 2007; Stauber and Vago 2007; Magazzini and Piemontese 2019; Catala-Oltra et al. 2021). The Roma are a stateless people, a European minority,² a “transnational minority” and “global citizens” (Sardelić 2019). Since they are the most socially disadvantaged group, in the past two decades, the European Union and its member states have implemented various policies, initiatives and activities to improve Roma social status, while at the same time protecting their ethnic identity and integration. Of special interest are the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015)³ and the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, which were the topic of numerous reports, reviews and analyses (Curcic et al. 2014; Matache 2017; Voiculescu 2017; Andor 2018; Ciulinaru 2018; Iusmen 2018; Catala-Oltra et al. 2021). Scholarly papers on Roma integration often focus on social integration (Voiculescu 2017; Acton 2018), education (Zachos 2006; Cretan and Turnock 2008; Messing 2008; Horvai 2010), labor market integration (O Higgins 2012; Dincă and Lucheş 2018), integration and representation (Ram 2014), analysis of correlations between racism and employability (Maeso 2015); as well as analyze stereotypes arising from cultural patterns of Roma (Maksimović and Osmanović 2017). Although Roma legally enjoy all civil rights, they do not consider themselves integrated even in their own countries of birth (Rajković Iveta 2019). They are cited as an example of “citizenship margins” (Sardelić 2019; see Ciulinaru 2018); they are often perceived as “the Other” and singled out in migration studies (Fekete 2014; Tervonen and Enache 2017; Magazzini and Piemontese 2019).

Today certain groups of Roma have a sedentary lifestyle, but numerous Roma continue to lead a nomadic way of life, and we can therefore observe them as a migratory mosaic community or communities whose makeup constantly changes with regard to their places of origin and the time of immigration into an area (Stauber and Vago 2007; Ram 2014; Magazzini and Piemontese 2019). All this creates barriers among Roma as people/members of a community even when they live in one location, but on the other hand, this kind of lifestyle boosts numerous translocal and transnational migration networks among the Romani communities that include both the native and the immigrant population (Tervonen and Enache 2017). Studies have analyzed the “relation between immigrants’ transnational activities and ties to the country of origin, on the one hand, and ‘integration’ in the receiving country, on the ‘other’” (Mügge 2016: 110). This paper goes beyond such analyses and focuses on transnational activities and the Roma who were born and live in various states (no matter whether they are migrant or not). By using a transnational research paradigm (Glick-Schiller et al. 1992; Faist 2010), the goal is to investigate transnational sociocultural activities and practices of Roma (individual footballers, Romani football associations) in creating transnational networks, activities and building cohesion of Romani communi-

² In 1993, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted Recommendation 1203 where Roma are recognized as a true European minority group.

³ “A total of 12 European countries with significant Romani populations are taking part in the Decade of Roma Inclusion, 2005–2015 (the Decade). Each of these countries developed a Decade Action Plan with the aim of eliminating the marginalization and discrimination of Roma in the areas of housing, health care, employment and education” (Curcic et al. 2014: 257).

ties despite state borders, within and outside of the European Union. I focus here on the sociocultural dimension of transnationalism (Mügge 2016: 118), especially the role of amateur sports matches between diverse Romani communities with special emphasis on knowledge of the Romani language/s. I start with theoretical concepts of *border studies* (Agier 2016; Wilson and Donan 2016; Arrighi and Stjepanović 2019), and analyze the role of football activities of Roma in erasing/crossing boundaries (of Romani communities, the majority population, international and state institutions); in moving and affirming boundaries: physical boundaries (state, EU), symbolic boundaries (social/cultural) in relation to the majority and minority population but also among Romani communities.

Ultimately, the main goal is to study integration via (transnational) football activities. My Romani interlocutors are nationals of the counties where they live. They are politically and legally integrated (Penninx 2004), but despite this, and like most Roma, they consider themselves as the most marginalized minority community. They are often exposed to discrimination and racism, and members of the majority population maintain social distance from them (Iusmen 2018; Petre 2021; Hellgren and Zapata-Barrero 2022). Since the integration process is extremely complex, in this paper I examine (only) the role of football in social cohesion and integration (Nieswand 2008). I am interested in determining whether football can lessen ethnic separatism and abolish boundaries among parallel communities and societies (*ibid.*). I examine the extent to which playing football influences upward social mobility (which requires education), which eventually leads to easier access to the labor market and the socio-economic dimension of integration (Esser 2001: 16, as cited in Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas 2016: 13). In migration studies this has been recognized as the so-called plural model of integration – into immigrant (ethnic) community, and into the receiving society (Stepick and Stepick 2010; Vermeulen 2010). Integration programs are most frequently devised by members of the receiving society; this paper is different in that it analyzes how Roma themselves conduct integration of the members of Romani communities.

Research from the last decade deals with the role of sports in integration and socialization (Seippel 2019), in social change and social inclusion (Ekholm 2018); in community integration between the minority and the majority populations (Hassan and Telford 2014); in the integration of refugees and migrants (Kataria and De Martini Ugolotti 2022); the importance of cultural capital created through sports and physical activity in integration as a two-way process of change and adaptation (Smith, Spaaij and McDonald 2019) etc. As the most widespread and popular sport, the role of football is unique. The relationship between integration and football is complex (De Martini Ugolotti and Caudwell 2021). Authors focus on the role of football in the integration of refugees into receiving countries, the integration of immigrants and their children; sometimes they focus on members of religious immigrant communities, with particular emphasis on Muslims in Europe (on the conceptualization of integration and sports, cf. Jurković and Spaaij 2022: 637–638). All studies deal with the integration of immigrants/newcomers into the host societies, while this paper fills this gap by examining the role of football in the integration of full-rights

citizens and the societal division “coming from persisting social and economic inequalities” (De Martini Ugolotti and Caudwell 2021: 2).

METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on qualitative ethnological and cultural anthropological field research (Silverman 2016). I conducted multi-sited ethnographic research (Marcus 1995) on several locations in Croatia (Zagreb, Bjelovar, Čakovec, Sisak), Serbia (Beograd, Leskovac) and Slovenia (Pušča, Murska Sobota), from March 2019 until May 2022. Based on such an approach, this paper surpasses the limits of methodological nationalism (Martins 1974, as cited in Chernilo 2007). For this study, I used the method of observation (Boccagni and Schrooten 2018) in five national minority football camps (the first was held in 2014, and so far, 20 took place in total). The two-day camps were organized in different cities. They were organized by the World Roma Organization with the financial support of the Croatian Football Federation and UEFA (Union of European Football Associations), Foundation for Children.⁴ Around 100 children (ages 8–15) members of national minorities, Croatian majority population and children with physical disabilities participate in these camps. Children train with licensed coaches and play matches in mixed groups. The goal is for the children to work as a team. I also conducted the study at events (football tournaments, round tables) on the occasion of the International Romani Day in various Croatian towns and villages.⁵ At the tournaments I followed, different groups consisting of teams of Roma, asylum seekers, homeless persons, deaf-mute persons, journalists and police officers played. In several of the games the referees were women, while all the players were adult men. I focused the observation protocol on the interaction between the various communities and individuals. Conferences and round tables were held after the camps and tournaments, where Romani representatives from Slovenia and Serbia gave talks. The emphasis was on shared problems and on the importance of networking. Besides observation and ethnographic notetaking during camps and conferences, I also used the method of rapid ethnographic assessment (Sangaramoorthy and Kroegeer 2020: 3–4). I gathered basic data, collected contact information from potential respondents from different states and locales, whom I later contacted and with whom I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the aim of obtaining material on their lived experiences. I carried out semi-structured interviews with Roma who live in Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia. Some of them emigrated from Bosnia and Herzegovina during Yugoslavia. With the breakup of Yugoslavia, the declarations of independence and the formation of the new states – the Republic of Slovenia, the Republic of Croatia, etc. – these internal migrations became international migrations. Migrations were certainly hindered by the

⁴ See more: <https://hns-cff.hr/info/vijesti/?cid=141andpg=1>.

⁵ See more: <https://hns-cff.hr/news/23958/delegacija-hns-a-uvelicala-proslavu-obljetnice-51-svjetskog-dana-roma/>.

creation of European Union borders, when Slovenia and Croatia became its members (unlike the other states, former Yugoslav republics, which are still not EU members). I used semi-structured interviews to interview nine former footballers who are coaches and/or Romani citizen association leaders today (three in Slovenia, four in Croatia, and two in Serbia).⁶ All of them actively work on involving Romani children in football and promote integration via football clubs and camps. Through non-structured interviews, I collected information from nineteen Romani footballers. In addition to this, I was allowed access to the entire archive of several Romani football associations from Croatia; in each case the president was also an interlocutor.⁷ I met the president of a Romani association before I started my research. He introduced me to other Romani interlocutors. Even though I was the only woman (except for a woman journalist) at most of the events, the respondents were open towards me, and their trust increased with each of my attendances at their activities. My presence was considered support for their activities.

In this paper I used only part of the ethnographic qualitative material. By applying “the basic method of qualitative analysis” (Braun and Clarke 2006: 4), I identified (inductively, bottom-up), selected (according to thematic keys/codes), structured and analyzed the collected data into themes/descriptive categories: Roma or the Boundaries of Romani Communities, Football in the Function of Integration and Integration, and Transnational Processes or Overcoming and Erasing Boundaries.

ROMA OR THE BOUNDARIES OF ROMANI COMMUNITIES

Roma have been migrating into the researched countries since the 14th century from the areas of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, including a large wave from Romania via Hungary (in the 19th century). During the 20th century (the period of Yugoslavia), a large wave of Romani migration occurred from Kosovo and Macedonia towards Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and from there towards Croatia and Slovenia. Today various Romani communities live in the researched countries: Koritari, Kalderashi, Bajashi, Lovari, Gurbeti, Chergari, Kaloperi, Kanjari, Arlije and others, which is confirmed by my respondents as well as by reference materials (Stauber and Vago 2007; Liégeois 2007). My interlocutors point out that new migrations to Romani settlements continue to this day, with great differences between the migration waves, and that the role of football is important for community cohesion:

[Roma] from different cultures arrive in this area, there are a lot of problems among them, it's not all perfect. [...] where I live [...] there is a Romani settlement [...] [name

⁶ The interviews are in the author's archive. The narratives are anonymous. As agreed with the interlocutors, I will mark their narratives with a role (coach, activist, footballer), the nearest city and state. The research has been conducted according to the ethical code of the Croatian Ethnological Society.

⁷ When using the documents from that Archive, I will mark it Archive, document title and date.

of] street, and there are 3,500 Roma there, and now here come Roma from Romania and from Serbia and this is no longer the same culture. They learned to live one kind of lifestyle; you live another [...] football connects them. No way [laughter]; when they come to us, they all have to be the same. They know what to do with the ball, there are no conflicts here like in the settlement. (coach, Slavonski Brod, Croatia)

Roma adopt traits of the locality in which they spend longer/the longest periods of time. They belong to different religions (predominantly Islam, Catholic and Orthodox), which my interlocutors list as the points of greatest divergence, and which are also reflected in their customary practices. Culturological differences, especially value norms among the Romani communities are based on traditional culture and differences in mentality (my interlocutors stress “tribal mentality” that they connect to the tendency to fight and strong patriarchy).⁸ Even though I never posed the question, my interlocutors justified themselves claiming that they no longer practiced bad customs, listing as an example underage arranged marriages that are practiced, as they explained, by Muslim Roma, contemporary migrants from Kosovo, Macedonia and southern Serbia.

Within the family, Roma predominantly speak the Romani language. From reference literature we learn that this means one of several dialects of the Romani language (*romani čhib, romané/s/*), *ljimba d' bjaš* (one of Romanian dialects) (*vlax-dijalekti*) but also Albanian, Romanian, etc. (Liégeois 2007: 45–59).

I was interested in finding out which language they use to communicate when arranging domestic and international matches and I received a whole range of answers, from various Romani languages (older Romani, in their late 50s and older), and mixtures of Croatian-Serbian-Bosnian and Slovene, to English (interlocutors in their 20s and 30s):

Our Romani language is one and only, universal, so [...] there are differences but [...] a Romani person from the Czech Republic, Serbia, Japan understand each other in the Romani language [...] (activist, Beograd, Serbia)

Oh well, in different ways. If nothing works, then in English [laughter]. Some [Romani] you cannot understand [...] some I can understand [...] you can't catch it all [...] but when there's [...] something serious then we use English, but then with someone a bit better educated [who goes with them as a translator, A/N],⁹ otherwise we communicate using gestures [laughter]. (coach, Slavonski Brod, Croatia)

To my questions in Croatian, they answered in a mixture of Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian and Slovene languages, even inserting Romani words into the same sentence. Due to their poor education, they do not know which language/s they speak, as is confirmed by this example of a group conversation with several footballers (from Čakovec, Croatia):

Footballer: When we're at home (and in the village) we speak a bit of Bajashi, a bit of Romanian, each speaks his own, and when we're out, then we behave, speak Croatian.

⁸ On the importance of traditional culture in the lives of Roma, cf. Maksimović and Osmanović 2017.

⁹ A/N, Author's note.

How did you speak when you were in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Footballer: This language, Romanian... we are speaking Romanian now, right.

You and me? [even though we are speaking Croatian A/N]

Footballer: Yes.

Footballer 2: [...] in Croatia, for example, we and Romani in Slavonski Brod, Zagreb and Sisak, we don't understand each other [the informant pointed to his fellow players, different groups of two to three Romani, standing a few meters away from us waiting for the match to begin, A/N].

When the match began all the players ran onto the field and played for the same Croatian Romani National Team. In the half-time and after the match they socialized and had lunch together speaking in a mixture of Slavic and Romani languages. The makeup of the Romani National team changes from match to match because each time the organizer invites several players from three to four different towns. Through observation I learned that communication among them increases from warm-up, through half-time, and is best in the after-match gatherings.

FOOTBALL IN THE FUNCTION OF INTEGRATION

In the researched countries, Roma most frequently live in segregated and dislocated localities (Štambuk 2005), which also contributes to social distancing and advanced marginality visible through social-spatial exclusion and suppression to the periphery of certain social groups, on the basis of race and class differences (Wacaquant 2008: 6). Life on the margin and spatial segregation result in fewer possibilities for contact and interaction among various communities, a more limited range of activities available, and in this case sports activities, poorer infrastructure. Romani often leave school early and their rate of permanent or temporary unemployment is extremely high (O Higgins 2012). In this paper, I investigate whether playing football affects their regular education and later employment, economic and social dimension of integration (Esser 2001: 16, as cited in Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas 2016: 13) and upward social mobility. The results show that football plays a major role in this respect, and that it requires working with children. The interlocutor who has been leading the Romani Football Academy "Little Barcelona" for twelve years in Croatia said:

[...] I control this, I go to their schools, they have to attend classes regularly, they have to have good grades to be allowed to work, train [...] They can't come and only do the sport, then later hang out in the street and I don't know what [...] they have to learn something, socialize with other children. That is the basic condition for them to train and later have a job. But you know how it is with them. The problem are the parents [...] they have five, six children and now he comes from school and he tells him: "Tomorrow you can't go to school or play a match, you have to go to the market and sell something!" Well, we have turned this around, made a parent-coach meeting, that this can't happen, that the child is required by law to go to school. (coach, Slavonski Brod, Croatia)

The results show that a significant number of boys/youths in the studied countries are primarily supported by those fathers who love or have played football in their youth. Fathers and brothers of seven coaches and activists also played football. They emphasize that family support is the most important, as is visible in the quote:

Football is everything to me. I have been in football, since I was 8, all my life, and now I play, I coach [...] 24 hours a day I am in football. After my family, football is everything to me [...] my son plays, I [...] with my deceased father, I played football. (coach, Bjelovar, Croatia)

Football is certainly the most popular sport, so identification with and adoption of top players' nicknames is quite noticeable (*Pele, Didi, Ronaldo*). Before the match footballers introduce themselves with a nickname as well, and during the interview the others addressed them exclusively by their nicknames. For those who did not have a nickname, when addressing them they would use their first names, preceded by the word "brother". Many of my footballer interlocutors, were of ages ranging from their 20s to their 40s, with vocational qualifications for waiters, drivers, salesmen. After ending their football careers, or because they did not sign a professional contract, individual interlocutors turned to coaching careers or founded Romani associations.

They all point out that Roma, especially children, love to play football and that they see a path to a better life through football, as is evident from the experience of a former footballer, now an association leader:

I think that the market, as far as football is concerned, is very big now, it offers big opportunities and it pays attention only to the player's talent and physical fitness [...] There is that, racism and fascism are always present, but less common. I think that these are new models that can, to a young Roma, who has talent, who is willing to follow the path of a professional footballer [...] that all this can contribute a lot [...] coaches [...] can be a big influence [...] I felt it, I had good coaches, I had people who led me to the right path and I think that that is a very good concept. (activist, Beograd, Serbia)

The results show that my respondents, for whom football became a means of income, changed their places of residence away from Romani settlements even if they were born there; however, they did not lose contact with them (which often happens when Roma are integrated into the majority society). "Successful" Roma were invited to all the events I followed, to give motivational talks. Many famous Romani footballers were pointed out as examples of those who "made it", who live from football and who are now playing for national or international football teams. All Romani football activists primarily engage in the integration of Roma, and they stress that they want Romani children to be in teams with other children, which indicates that they are aware that integration is a two-way process, and that interaction is extremely important.

When asked what it means to be successful in football, they all agree that it is great success if you can live from it. One interlocutor used himself as an example and said that as a young man he played for a village club in Austria, received a salary equal to that of a

factory worker, and that his father was given a used car to work and feed the family (Sisak, Croatia). Interlocutors stressed that some fathers expected their sons to be successful too quickly and that many talented Roma did not succeed because they were sold too quickly to a bad club.

Some interlocutors who played in clubs in different states spoke of the experience of (not) being accepted.¹⁰ Even though I did not ask the question, during my research, several respondents said that they wanted a better life for their children. They give them names used by the majority population or international names; when talking about this some even emphasized not having many children: “They tell me, what kind of Roma are you, you have only two children? But both my son and daughter have a university degree!” (activist, Zagreb, Croatia)

In the opening speeches at camps and tournaments, activists/organizers sent messages such as this one:

There is no division [...] we are all brothers [...] we fight against hatred. No to racism, no to segregation, no to discrimination! Magical (foot)ball connects the whole world! [...] in the Balkans, Europe, the whole world, we want to have equal opportunities, equal chances [...] cooperation, so that nobody divides us according to politics, culture, religion, so that this ball unites us all [...] let us be equal [...] we should all be given a ball, Ukrainians, Serbs, Muslims. This is my vision and idea of the future, so that all of us can live! (activist, Zagreb, Croatia)

This quote, like the other collected material, shows that the respondents view integration through a “prism of an inequalities–poverty–social exclusion framework, meaning that the growth of ‘being integrated’ is viewed as a gradual decrease of the value of indicators related to social exclusion and a steady rise in indicators of well-being” (Hristova and Milenkova 2021: 45). The same is also concluded by the quoted authors; namely, that football helps Roma to lower discrimination and social exclusion, and to aid in access to employment (ibid.).

Certain interlocutors play football recreationally, but nevertheless it has affected their social and economic integration:

Every boy dreams of becoming a football player. I didn’t become one, but when everything is taken into account, I played football more than I walked. Football is the most beautiful thing. When we were kids, we spent every nice day only playing football, until dark [...] Football is the most important factor in making friends [...] I was not really the school-type (laughter), but I finished it somehow, thanks to football. (waiter/footballer, Zagreb, Croatia)

After the Romani football club Black Pearls from the Zagreb surroundings was disbanded, my interlocutors continued to play football recreationally in FC Nur (whether migrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina who have lived in Zagreb for decades, refugees from the

¹⁰ The analysis of those materials goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Middle East and Africa who were given international protection in Croatia, Serbs, and he also said that there were several Catholics (not identifying their ethnicity)). He states that while roughly twenty years ago there occurred verbal conflicts, racist slurs among the players and fans of the two clubs, today they all play together and spend time together:

After the matches we go for a drink, for some food, to grab a coffee, and then: what did we do wrong, where did we make the wrong play [...] But nobody will say: "Those Gypsy mother**krs!" or something like that, no way. (footballer, Zagreb, Croatia)

This shows that even recreational football also has a role in social integration.

INTEGRATION AND TRANSNATIONAL PROCESSES OR OVERCOMING AND ERASING BOUNDARIES

Because my respondents played football, when Croatia and Slovenia gained independence, they founded Romani sports/football associations. After about ten years, two of my interlocutors, one from Slovenia and one from Croatia, decided to organize an international tournament; in order to achieve this, they also founded national Romani teams (following the model of the already existing Hungarian one). In accordance with the then National Roma Inclusion Strategy (within the Decade of Roma Inclusion framework (2005–2015)), which stated that the organization of sports activities was under the purview of the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, whose aim was the promotion of the development of sports activities of Romi in the Republic of Croatia and, consequently, on the international level, the informants applied for sponsorship and received it.¹¹ The first international tournament of football national teams from Slovenia, Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia was held in 2005 in Croatia. The organizer was the Romani Sports Association of Croatia. In 2006, in Zagreb, the same Association also organized the First European Roma Futsal Championship. Teams from twelve European countries played at the Championship, again sponsored by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports.¹² The same Association requested, and was granted, the patronage of the President of the Republic of Croatia for the Roma Futsal World Championship that took place in Croatia, in 2007.¹³ This Championship received written support from the President of the European Commission, and the presidents of FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association/International Association Football Federation) and UEFA. In 2009 the World Roma Organization in the Fight against Discrimination, Racism and Poverty was founded, and its president was my interlocutor, who was also the president of the Sports Association of Romani in Croatia. The association was founded with the goal of "promoting, developing and advancing of cohesion between Romani and other nations

¹¹ Archive, Ministry of Science, Education and Sports financial support, memo of 12 October, 2005.

¹² Archive, Accepting patronage, memo of 8 May, 2006.

¹³ Archive, memo of 29 August, 2007.

in the fight against discrimination, violence, racism, hooliganism, hatred and poverty”¹⁴ In October 2010, they organized the 3rd European Roma Futsal Championship.

In the meantime, the cooperation between Croatia and Slovenia was growing. My informants found a partner in Serbia who recalls: We met over social networks. [name, Croatia] contacted me [...] he is one of my greatest advisors, he gave me information [...] (activist, Beograd, Serbia)

Therefore, my interlocutors shared best practices and, in this way, created transnational social networks through virtual communications as well. Due to the Serbian team's lack of funding, Roma from Slovenia completely covered their travel expenses. The Serbian team waited the longest to obtain support from their national institutions:

It took a very long time for the institutions in Serbia to recognize us [...] In 2017, in cooperation with the Sports Association of Serbia, we formed the Roma Sports Association of Serbia, and in cooperation with them we formed the Serbian National Roma Team. (activist, Beograd, Serbia)

Since they concluded that much more substantial (financial) support can be received from international institutions, an agreement was signed among Romani from Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia at the event in Zagreb 2019, and a joint letter was sent to the president of the UEFA asking for support of shared transborder Romani football activities. UEFA also grants money to national football associations for integrational projects in marginalized communities; i.e., the national football associations of Croatia and Slovenia have financed such activities for years. Transnational cooperation and sharing best practices that help with integration and inclusion are spreading. The respondents said that there are 17 Romani national teams in Europe.

The last important international activity happened in 2021 when Romani footballers from Croatia were invited by Pope Francis to play a humanitarian match *Fratelli tutti* in Vatican between Pope Francis's team and the team called *Roma Stars and Friends*. (During the interview they told me that they are the European National Roma Team). This team also included Roma from Italy, Slovenia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Serbia and the Czech Republic who, even though they speak different languages (and practice different religions), played as one team. When asked how they formed the team and how they communicated, an interlocutor answered:

We did well, we have our friends across Europe, we know who plays and how well, so we just called them. And we mostly spoke English, some speak Romani, some Italian, and so [...] (coach, Slavonski Brod, Croatia)

When communicating, applying for sponsorships and projects, as well as for other administrative work, the Romani association leaders hire experts who are mostly not Roma.

¹⁴ Archive. Description of the association's goals. Extract from the register of Associations of the Republic of Croatia, 20 April, 2009.

CONCLUSION

Even though most Romani children will not become successful football players, this study has shown that football as the most popular sport is an important medium for integration into the majority society, but also for overcoming and erasing different borders. Professional, amateur or recreational activity in the same football club/attending a football camp, tournament helps in building friendships in audiences and fans, in accepting Romani football players, which all contributes to social integration, less discrimination, better social inclusion, less frequent inter-ethnic clashes. On the other hand, the hope that a child will one day become a successful footballer – which requires training – motivates children and, more importantly, their fathers (the role of the mother is shown to be irrelevant), to attend school regularly, which, in turn, affects the change of Romani practices of leaving school early. This conclusion is important because “research findings show how employment options for Roma population are dependent on the social practices, customs, and values promoted by their family and communities” (Dincă and Luceș 2018: 1). This study has shown that the Romani youth who exhibit a serious commitment towards football and wish to become professional footballers are required to attend school regularly, adopt a healthy lifestyle and socially acceptable behavior, which results in easier entry into the labor market, that is, better economic integration, social mobility and, ultimately, less discrimination and racism, as well as exiting poverty. Many authors list early school leaving as the greatest problem, in other words they see education as a solution to exit poverty, marginalization and social exclusion of Roma (Cretan and Turnock 2008; Messing 2008; Horvai 2010). On the other hand, research shows that “a key predictor of successful Roma population integration is their occupational integration” (Dincă and Luceș 2018: 1). Furthermore, this study has shown that certain Roma, former football players, work as coaches and activists in Romani associations today. Unlike other integrated Roma who, once integrated, break contact with their countrymen, here it is precisely Roma, even when they no longer live in Romani settlements, who work with other Roma and thus become mediators to integration, not only between the majority population and Romani community, but also among members of various Romani communities. Given that Romani communities are numerous, football as the most popular sport makes for an easier integration into an ethnic community on the local and transnational levels. The fact that Roma, as they say, are brothers, helps them in their integration within the Romani community/communities, within EU members (on the example of this research in Slovenia, Croatia, Italy, Hungary, Czech Republic). They use different languages in these occasions: the Romani languages (with the Roma from Hungary, Italy and Czech Republic), South-Slavic languages, while the younger generations use English. It is precisely these transnational sociocultural activities – together with the exchange of best practices and shared ideas, joint agency/requesting shared support from the European umbrella football organization (UEFA), EU institutions, national football associations etc., and even more material help such as invitations to visiting matches and covering travel expenses – that aid in social integration and inclusion into majority Western societies. This study, conducted based on

methodological transnationalism, has shown that integrational process can and should be observed outside/beyond state borders and that, even though activities are transnational, results are both national and local. It is important to examine how members of the same marginalized minority community see the process of social inclusion and integration. Although Romani informants legally enjoy full civil rights, football serves in their integration, which they explain as the lowering of discrimination, inequalities, poverty and social exclusion. During my research they were eager to present the efforts that Romani respondents are making to be accepted and considered equal. This study also contributes to creating public integration policies with its message that it is important for both government and non-government bodies, associations of minority (and marginalized) communities to promote football/sports as not only local and national, but also a transnational activity in the integration process.

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NOGOMET KAO MEDIJ ZA (TRANSNACIONALNU) INTEGRACIJU ROMA

Jugoistočna Europa dom je brojnih romskih zajednica, koje se razlikuju ovisno o zemlji porijekla, vremenu useljavanja, jeziku, običajima, religiji itd. Na temelju multilokalnog etnografskog istraživanja/u Republici Hrvatskoj, Republici Sloveniji i Republici Srbiji istražuje se uloga nogometa/profesionalnog, amaterskog i rekreativnog) u integraciji Roma. Uzimajući u obzir brojnost i raznolikost romskih zajednica, rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da nogomet, kao najpopularniji sport, omogućuje lakšu socijalnu integraciju u etničku zajednicu na lokalnoj i transnacionalnoj razini. Različite nogometne aktivnosti (manjinske nogometne kampove, turnire) osmišljavaju i provode sami Romi. Iako Romi imaju *de iure* građanska prava, nogomet im služi za smanjivanje diskriminacije, nejednakosti, siromaštva i socijalne isključenosti. Da bi mladi Romi trenirali u klubu moraju redovito pohađati školu što rezultira ekonomskom integracijom. Istraživanje doprinosi i osmišljavanju javnih integracijskih politika koje provode same manjinske i imigrantske zajednice koje djeluju transnacionalno.

Ključne riječi: Romi, nogomet, društvena i ekonomska integracija, transnacionalna integracija