

# Sports Law, Policy & Diplomacy Journal



Vol. 4 / No. 1 (2026)





**UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA, FACULTY OF LAW**  
**Institute of Sports Law, Sports Policies and Sports Diplomacy &**  
**Jean Monnet Chair in EU Sports Law, Policy & Diplomacy**

in partnership with



***Sports Law, Policy & Diplomacy Journal***

**ISSN (Online) 2975-6235**

**UDC 3:796**

**DOI <https://doi.org/10.30925/slpdj>**

**Vol. 4**

**No. 1**

**Rijeka, 2026**



**Co-funded by  
the European Union**

## SPORTS, GENDER, AND DIPLOMACY IN SOCIALIST YUGOSLAVIA

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UDC 305-055.2:796]  
795-055.2(497.1)  
DOI <https://doi.org/10.30925/slpdj.4.1.1>  
*Received on January 7, 2026*  
*Accepted on February 10, 2026*  
Preliminary communication



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### Abstract

This article examines the intersection of gender, power, and sport in socialist Yugoslavia from the post-Second World War period through the emergence of self-management, a transformative era across political, social, and cultural spheres. By situating sport within broader ideological, institutional, and diplomatic frameworks, the article highlights how it functioned both as a tool for nation-building and as a site of gendered inequality. Despite formal claims of inclusivity, women's participation remained constrained, reflecting persistent patriarchal structures in athletic and societal domains. The underrepresentation of women in sport corresponded to their marginalization in diplomatic arenas, as sporting success was leveraged to project Yugoslavia's international prestige and influence. Drawing on historical institutionalism, this paper illustrates how Yugoslavia's sport governance structures reproduced gender hierarchies, while also illuminating the socio-political contradictions of socialist modernization. The study integrates structural, cultural, psychological, and policy-related factors to provide an understanding of women's constrained roles in Yugoslav sport and diplomacy.

**Keywords:** Sports, Women, Gender, Diplomacy, Yugoslavia, Socialism.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sport in socialist Yugoslavia, although initially adapted from Soviet models and primarily focused on mass participation, evolved into much more than a leisure activity. It became a crucial instrument of political, social, and cultural engineering. From the immediate postwar period to the rise of self-management, sport served multiple purposes. The Soviet-imported *physical education* programme was implemented with rigor from the outset, guided by three primary objectives established by the Party: first, to improve the health and physical strength of young people, thereby enhancing their productivity; second, to train cadres responsible for promoting sporting practices in villages and cities; and third, to showcase what was termed “ceremonial-propaganda,” employing mass sport in political parades and other public displays to build national identity, reinforce unity, and cultivate the idealized “Homo Yugoslavicus.”<sup>1</sup>

The Party also sought to shape notions of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality through its sport policies. Insufficiently explored remains how both formal institutions and informal social practices conditioned behavior and reproduced social hierarchies within and through sport. This paper adopts a framework that considers not only formal rules but also the informal norms, customs, and expectations that influenced participation, leadership, and representation. It addresses the following questions: How did structural and institutional arrangements within Yugoslav sport reproduce gendered hierarchies, and to what extent did cultural and ideological norms define which sports were considered “appropriate” for women? By integrating these structural, cultural, and psychological dimensions, the paper situates women’s experiences in sport within broader political, social, and international contexts, highlighting both opportunities and persistent constraints.

In order to locate the intersectoriality of these dimensions, it is important to observe institutional dynamics and women’s involvement in governing bodies and decision-making processes from a historical perspective.<sup>2</sup> Historical institutionalism provides a framework to better grasp the interplay between formal regulatory mechanisms and institutional regimes and informal practices as products of wider political processes vis-à-vis the representation and participation of women as stakeholders.<sup>3</sup> Central to the research questions is how the established sport ecosystem has affected the position of women. To respond to this inquiry, it is necessary to examine how the governing structure of the sport ecosystem has evolved over time and the role of stakeholders in changing or sustaining this ecosystem. Therefore, this paper aims to locate the involvement of women within the Yugoslav sport diplomacy landmark, taking into account the organizational structure and how prior developments and decisions led to the formation of institutions that have been sustained over time by reproducing gendered hierarchies.<sup>4</sup> Driven primarily by political constellations and public service culture, institutions are products of social interactions that can be both formal and

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- 1 Todor Bulja, “Zadaci i forme fiskulturne aktivnosti na pruzi,” *Omladinska pruga*, no. 27 (November 7, 1946): 16
  - 2 Marko Begović, “Athletes in Socialist Yugoslavia, 1945–1992,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 38, no. 10-11 (2021): 1109–1121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2021.1973442>.
  - 3 Russell Hoye and Graham Cuskelly, “Board Power and Performance Within Voluntary Sport Organizations,” *European Sport Management Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (2003), 103–119, <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184740308721943>.
  - 4 Marko Begović, Mariann Bardocz-Bencsik, Carole A. Oglesby and Tamás Dóczy. “The Impact of Political Pressures on Sport and Athletes in Montenegro.” *Sport in Society* 24, no.7 (2021): 1200–1216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2020.1738393>.

informal. Institutionalization is shaped by power structure relations and rules adopted under the state monopoly.<sup>5</sup>

The historiographic methodology will be employed, which includes collecting and analyzing archival data primarily from the state archives across the former Yugoslavia. This data includes policy documents, analysis, interviews, and summarizing existing research. The methodological analysis follows a qualitative, theory-driven approach, following evidence in line with presented institutional regimes. The focus is on structural, cultural, psychological, economic, and diplomatic dimensions. This approach will enable a better understanding of how gender hierarchies were produced and occasionally challenged within the Yugoslav sport system.

## 2. SPORT, SOCIETY, AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN YUGOSLAVIA

As a global phenomenon, sport assumes varied meanings across national contexts and has played a significant role in processes of women's emancipation.<sup>6</sup> Within the domain of sports, where identity is closely intertwined with both individual and collective narratives, gender occupies a fundamental role. Much like identity constructions inform policies in ethnic conflicts, gender functions as a key framework guiding strategies, norms, and power relations within sport. Masculinity and femininity, as socially constructed concepts, regulate all aspects of life, including sports. Consequently, sport has functioned as a social space in which conventional assumptions and stereotypical perceptions of women were continuously constructed and reinforced.<sup>7</sup> The perception of men and women as opposing categories and expecting them to adhere to prescribed gender roles resulted in the systematic exclusion of women from sporting participation.<sup>8</sup>

In socialist Yugoslavia, sport enjoyed widespread popularity, serving as both a reflection of the wider social dynamics of the era and a lens through which the everyday experiences of its citizens were shaped. In the immediate post-Second World War era, sport and sport activities occupied a central position in the construction of Yugoslavia's physical culture and the institutionalization of its leisure practices. Sports were mainly divided into amateur and professional levels. Professional sports were organized through clubs and associations, with registered athletes competing at various levels. These athletes represented their clubs or the nation, but their role extended beyond competition as their performances also entertained the public and helped bring people together. In this way, professional sports combined athletic achievement with social and cultural engagement. On the other hand, amateur sports were organized in a completely different manner.<sup>9</sup>

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5 Ibid, 4. For exercising variety of pressures see Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Institutional Fields", *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 2 (1948): 147-160, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2095101>.

6 Barbara L. Drinkwater, ed., *Women in Sport* (Oxford: Blackwell Science, 2000).

7 Ilse Hartmann-Tews, and Gertrud Pfister, *Sport and Women: Social Issues in International Perspective* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

8 Anita Muzek, "Olympics: Equality Instead of Medals: Media Coverage of Female Olympic Athletes in Yugoslavia and Croatian Media during Four Summer Olympic Games over a Period of 40 Years" (Master thesis, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, 2018), 20, <https://unipub.uni-graz.at/obvugrhs/content/titleinfo/2816420/full.pdf>.

9 Igor Stanić, "Sport za svakoga. Sportske aktivnosti radničke klase u Hrvatskoj od 1945. do početka 1960-ih," *Historijski Zbornik* 69, no. 1 (2016): 121-140, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/176648>.

The Yugoslav communist movement was deeply rooted in what it often termed as “bourgeois sport,”<sup>10</sup> drawing upon existing organizational structures, cultural practices, and athletic models that predated the socialist state. In the Soviet Union, physical culture and sport were imagined to be national, serving the main goal of enhancing defensive skills, health, discipline, collective belonging, and integration of different nations into the Soviet state.<sup>11</sup> Rather than rejecting pre-war sporting traditions outright, the Yugoslav Party selectively adapted and reinterpreted them to fit its ideological project. The early stages of building socialism in Yugoslavia were not limited to legal or institutional reforms but involved actively mobilizing the population around the ideological vision of the state. Central to this process was cultivating loyalty to the ruling party, which functioned as the main conduit for implementing socialist policy. Established forms of physical culture provided a foundation for constructing a new socialist citizenship and collective identity. Namely, the first step in building socialism was attracting people to its ideology and the party that represented it.<sup>12</sup> By promoting sporting activities and investing in athletic infrastructure, the government aimed to instill a sense of pride and unity among citizens, thereby garnering support for their political ideologies.

During the 1950s and 1960s, a deliberate political initiative was undertaken to cultivate and institutionalize the concept of the ‘Yugoslav youth’ as a cohesive social and ideological category. The state aimed to promote and support the “general physical development and culture of the masses, both urban workers and rural populations, through the activities of communes, enterprises, and schools.” Commonly referred to as *fizička kultura* (physical culture), this concept was framed as a way of life, reflecting the regime’s strategy to regulate and shape citizens’ leisure activities, encouraging participation in sports after school or work. Its significance was formalized in the 1963 constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia,<sup>13</sup> which explicitly defined the role of physical culture in everyday life.

The state’s most celebrated sports were football and basketball, with athletes elevated as embodiments of national pride and placed at the center of public admiration and ideological narratives. Their sporting successes were mobilized to reinforce collective identity and unity within Yugoslavia’s diverse social fabric. In this sense, sport functioned as a key instrument of cultural policy, contributing to the construction of the idealized “new Yugoslav body.” As Bryan Turner’s concept of the “somatic society” suggests—one in which the body becomes a central site of political and cultural meaning—<sup>14</sup>this bodily ideal was inherently gendered, privileging male athleticism and thereby reinforcing the exclusion of women from the most visible and symbolically powerful sporting arenas. As Simic wrote, this model of the ideal body later became a central feature of the conceptualized ‘new Yugoslav man,’ intended to serve as the cornerstone of the broader Yugoslav community.<sup>15</sup>

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10 Dario Brentin and Dejan Zec, “From the Concept of the Communist ‘New Man’ to Nationalist Hooliganism: Research Perspectives on Sport in Socialist Yugoslavia”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 34, no. 9 (2017): 713–728, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2017.1413871>.

11 Ivan Simić, “Gender Policies and Amateur Sports in Early Yugoslav Socialism,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 34, no. 9 (2017): 848–861, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2017.1402762>.

12 Nikola Mijatov, *Sport u službi socijalizma: Jugoslovensko iskustvo 1945–1953* (PhD diss., Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, 2019).

13 Ustav Socijalističke Federativne Republike Jugoslavije, 1963, available at <http://mojustav.rs/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Ustav-SFRJ-iz-1963.pdf> (accessed December 20, 2025).

14 Mike Featherstone and Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society* (London: Sage, 1984), 1–6.

15 Ivan Simic, *Soviet Influences on Postwar Yugoslav Gender Policies* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-58111-1>.

Tito highlighted sport as one of the methods to engage youth in his 1937 article “*SKOJ on a New Path*.” From this perspective, the 1945 session of the Central Committee represents the final implementation of that idea, which dates back to the revolutionary years of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.<sup>16</sup> Hundreds of sporting clubs and associations were created throughout the country, with sporting events such as football or boxing matches attracting huge crowds. Some of the popular sporting clubs, such as BSK and Jugoslavija from Belgrade, Građanski and HAŠK from Zagreb and Hajduk from Split, became pillars of local, regional, and even national cultural and political identification.<sup>17</sup> Professional, or “elite,” sport gradually became a central focus in Yugoslavia, attracting increasing political attention and social significance. The Yugoslav Association for Physical Training framed physical education as the systematic cultivation of bodily activity, while sport more broadly was understood as a pervasive social practice deeply embedded in the daily lives of men, women, and children across both urban and rural areas. Professional sport, in particular, gained considerable political prominence in the 1970s and became even more significant during the 1980s.

Even though the Soviet leadership chose to avoid international sporting events, viewing them as capitalist and exploitative, and instead promoted a “proletarian” model of sport focused on collectivism and mass participation (with the Party in 1925 recognizing competition as a healthy habit), Yugoslav communists adopted and adapted Soviet ideas more rapidly than any other Eastern European country.<sup>18</sup> They blended these ideas with local traditions, a process that began during the early stages of the Second World War. Notably, Yugoslav communists organized sporting events within the first months of their uprising, with partisan men and women taking part in them.<sup>19</sup>

The communist founders of the second Yugoslav state appreciated sports as an effective political tool.<sup>20</sup> Yugoslav sport had played a significant role in the formation and strengthening of Yugoslav identity internally, while also aiming to function as a promotional and diplomatic tool in the international sporting arena. The statecraft believed that excelling in sports, especially achieving success in major international sporting events, was a powerful channel to promote a political system and social values.<sup>21</sup> In fact, some of the priorities set up by the newly formed ideologically rigid Fiskulturni Obred Jugoslavije (FOJ)<sup>22</sup> in 1945 were that sport should contribute to the reconciliation and the building of ‘Brotherhood and Unity’

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[org/10.1007/978-3-319-94382-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94382-4).

- 16 Josip Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela*, tom treći, mart 1935 – novembar 1937 (Beograd: Izdavački centar “Komunist”, 1983), 81–82, <https://www.pisi.co.rs/h-content/uploads/2020/02/02-Josip-Broz-Tito-Sabrana-djela-Tom-tre-i-mart-1935-novembar-1937.-pisi.pdf>.
- 17 Dejan Zec, “The Origin of Soccer in Serbia”, *Serbian Studies: Journal of the North American Society for Serbian Studies* 24, no. 1 (2010): 137-159, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ser.2012.0014>.
- 18 Ivan Simić, “Gender Policies and Amateur Sports in Early Yugoslav Socialism,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 34, no. 9 (2017): 848–861. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2017.1402762>.
- 19 Vladimir Dedijer, *Dnevnik: 1941–1944*, vol. 1/1, *Sabrana djela Vladimira Dedijera* (Rijeka; Zagreb: Liburnija; Mladost, 1981), 147.
- 20 Vjekoslav Perica, “United We Stand, Divided We Fall”, *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*, 272-275, in Vjekoslav Perica, *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States* (New York, 2002; online edn, Oxford Academic, 2003).
- 21 Andrei Antonie, Marko Begović, Simona Petracovschi, “Sport policy in Romania”, *Sports Law, Policy & Diplomacy Journal* 2, no. 2 (2024): 17–35. <https://doi.org/10.30925/slpoj.2.2.2>.
- 22 Daut Jasanica, “Četrdeset godina Saveza za fizičku kulturu Jugoslavije,” *Povijest sporta*, no. 66 (October–December 1985).

among the peoples of Yugoslavia.<sup>23</sup> It also stated that sport should improve the working ability and defensive capacity of the nation,<sup>24</sup> and fourthly that sport should affirm the positive achievements of the Yugoslav socialist transformation, especially by successfully participating in international sporting competitions.<sup>25</sup>

These objectives positioned sport far beyond a simple leisure activity and did not affect all citizens equally. The emphasis on constructing a Yugoslav “New Man” was not accidental but reflected the profoundly gendered assumptions integrated within socialist modernization. Although Yugoslav socialism formally promoted gender equality, the ideological and institutional structures of physical culture remained predominantly oriented toward male bodies, male athletic models, and traditionally masculine ideals such as strength, discipline, endurance, and public visibility. Sport became a stage on which the virtues of the socialist citizen were performed, and these virtues were overwhelmingly coded as masculine.

However, this newly created and modeled “body” was not eroticized, neither in the Soviet Union nor in its Yugoslav imagination. It was rather presented as a machine, as a tool to drive industrialization, requiring discipline and refinement, with the Party serving as the guiding intellect behind.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the ideological foundations and practical organization of sport in Yugoslavia generated a distinctly gendered problem, reflected in the ambivalent and often marginal position of women in the sporting sphere. Despite efforts to promote accessibility and availability of sports for all, women continued to face marginalization and exclusion from active participation and leadership roles within the sporting domain. In order to present a better understanding of the persistence and evolution of the role of gender in sport governance and its interplay with diplomacy, historical institutionalism as a theoretical framework will be employed.

Party authorities actively translated ideological expectations into practice by selecting individuals who conformed to prescribed physical ideals. Priority was given to young people perceived as strong, disciplined, and proportionate—often from rural backgrounds—with minimum height requirements set at 170 cm for men and 160 cm for women. These selected bodies were then mobilized in mass parades and public performances, where sport was transformed into a visual and symbolic instrument of political communication.<sup>27</sup> Such practices did not merely regulate physical participation but also shaped psychological dimensions of engagement, particularly for women. By institutionalizing narrow bodily norms and publicly valorizing specific physiques, the state influenced women’s motivation, self-concept, and sense of belonging in sport, reinforcing perceptions of who was deemed “fit” or “appropriate” for athletic participation and possibly discouraging those who did not align with these ideals from sustained involvement.

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23 Dejan Zec, Miloš Paunović, “Football’s Positive Influence on Integration in Diverse Societies: The Case Study of Yugoslavia,” *Soccer & Society* 16, no. 2–3 (2015): 236–237, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2014.961387>.

24 Miloš Nišavić, “Mere za razvitak sportova i učvršćivanje sportskih odbora” [Measures for the Development and Strengthening of Sport Associations], in *IV Plenum Centralnog odbora Fiskulturnog saveza Jugoslavije* [IV Plenum of the Central Committee of the Physical Culture Committee of Yugoslavia] (Belgrade: FISAJ, 1947), 27–31.

25 Miroslav Kreačić, *Sport u Jugoslaviji* [Sport in Yugoslavia] (Belgrade: Jugoslovenska knjiga, 1950), 102–104.

26 Ivan Simić, *Soviet Influences on Postwar Yugoslav Gender Policies* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94382-4>.

27 Alfred Rem, “Sportsko-medicinska zapažanja na takmičarima partizanskog marša,” *Fiskultura*, no. 3–4 (1948): 164–176.

As indicated, the article builds on new institutionalism, concretely historical institutionalism, with the aim to explain the evolution of gender relations within the Yugoslav sport ecosystem and its capacity to shape diplomatic practices. Within the rules and customs that were evolving within the shifting nature of socialist practices in Yugoslavia, path dependencies reflected continuity and institutional predictability with the reproduction of elites through self-reinforcing mechanisms. The tectonic shifts between 1948 and 1953 represent a crucial moment not only for the consolidation of physical culture as a key sport concept, but rather as a key moment that integrated institutional arrangements and related expectations. The transition from a centralized Soviet approach to self-management as a sort of social experiment didn't change the prioritization of mass participation and the creation of Homo Yugoslavicus that would mark the ideological shift from Homo Sovieticus.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, institutional arrangements were reconstructed to nurture more decentralized governing bodies and decision-making processes.<sup>29</sup> The Tito-Stalin split, the creation of the Non-Alignment Movement, followed by the adoption of the Yugoslav Constitution that set up a normative foundation for gender equality. However, these formal regulatory regimes didn't override informal norms and customs, as institutional arrangements go beyond formal structures and remain key in shaping sport-related issues. That said, the central question here is how gendered hierarchies evolved within shifting political systems, especially as sport became a main battleground for internal dynamics as a product of unfinished or never-ending constitutional and socio-political reforms.<sup>30</sup> This is particularly why Yugoslavia represents a complex platform where sport, politics, and identity politics collided, whereas the politicization of the socio-political realm remained a joint determinant.

### 3. GENDER, EMANCIPATION, AND SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS

Socialist Yugoslavia was very progressive when it came to women's issues. In the struggle for emancipation, sport was seen as a tool for women's empowerment, following the example set by the USSR.<sup>31</sup> To ensure women's more active participation in the new state, a specific organization was established: the Anti-Fascist Women's Front. In the spirit of the socialist revolution, Yugoslav women began their emancipation process vigorously. With the constitution of 1946, modeled after the Soviet system, women were granted the right to vote and to be elected. The new socialist government of Yugoslavia firmly believed in women's rights and the significant role women could play in the new socialist state.<sup>32</sup> However, while the new constitution enacted reforms that formally benefited women, it failed to address the patriarchal structures that still dominated Yugoslav households and the public sphere.<sup>33</sup>

28 Marko Begović, "Pathway in Developing Sport Ecosystem in Small States," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 42, no. 12–13 (2025): 1492–1509, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2025.2529356>.

29 Marko Begović, "Athletes in Socialist Yugoslavia, 1945–1992," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 38, no. 10–11 (July 24, 2021): 1109–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2021.1973442>.

30 Marko Begović, "Introduction: The History of Sport in the Balkans from the Sokol Movement to Physical Culture," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 42, no. 9 (2025): 933–936, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2025.2575591>.

31 Nikola Mijatov and Sandra S. Radenović, "The Position of Women in Yugoslav and Serbian Sport: Idea, Reality and (Dis)Continuity," 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2298/SOC2103570M>.

32 Ibid.

33 Chiara Bonfiglioli, "Becoming Citizens: The Politics of Women's Emancipation in Socialist Yugoslavia," CITSEE Story, accessed at <http://www.citsee.eu/citsee-story/becoming-citizens-politics-women's-emancipation-socialist-yugoslavia>.

Sport also served as a vehicle for women's social emancipation, following the Soviet approach to physical culture. By the late 1920s, moderate physical activity was considered beneficial for women's endurance, physical development, and emotional well-being. The recommended sports were mostly individual, and women were explicitly discouraged from competing with men or pursuing sports as a vocation, reinforcing the belief that sport should strengthen women's bodies without challenging gender hierarchies. It was emphasized that a woman's involvement in sport must never be an end in itself, but always a means to an end. A woman should never attempt to match a man in sport, nor should she pursue sport as a vocation or strive for records. A woman should only engage in sport to the extent that it serves to strengthen her physical qualities. [...] In general, a woman should first consult a doctor before dedicating herself to any sport. [...] Demanding more from sport is harmful to a woman.<sup>34</sup>

Even though sport was formally open to both sexes, "experts" argued that women, being guided by their emotions, should not seriously compete with men in sports, as those who did risk becoming —mannish.<sup>35</sup> Initially, the sport accessible to women was Sokolstvo, which primarily involved performing calisthenic exercises. Gradually, women began to participate in other activities such as swimming, horseback riding, and athletics.<sup>36</sup>

Despite formal encouragement for women to engage in some sports, their participation was limited to socially sanctioned activities. Certain sports, such as football and wrestling, were discouraged for women by Soviet authors who argued that these sports could be harmful to women's reproductive health.<sup>37</sup> Medical experts of the time echoed this view, asserting that football is harmful to the female body and does not suit the spiritual and physical nature of women. Contemporary authorities emphasized that their aim was not to protect women from rough tackles, injuries, or disappointments on the field, but to safeguard their reproductive function. These bodily policies are thus closely intertwined with sport, shaping both access and limitations and reflecting prevailing beliefs about femininity, appropriate activities, and reproductive health.

Incorporating young women into sporting competitions served as an important measure of success for the Party's gender policies and victory over the traditional practices of peasant women.<sup>38</sup> Muslim women were particularly targeted, with articles describing young women who excelled in sports while also being productive workers. However, the constraints of a patriarchal society were not only imposed from the outside; often, women who had experienced oppression enforced these constraints themselves and oppressed, insisted on them and then passed them down to their descendants.<sup>39</sup> Even when the conditions for engaging in sport were met, there was a lack of motivation among women. Furthermore, in the regions of Eastern Serbia and Vojvodina, it was observed that women considered it "shameful to engage in physical education." In rural areas, the attitude went even further, with

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34 *Zena i sport, Pravda* (Beograd), January 6, 1928, 14.

35 Stipica Grgić, "Kratka povijest ženskoga nogometa u Hrvatskoj/Jugoslaviji u međuratnom razdoblju," *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 50, no. 3 (2018): 557–580, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/213734>.

36 Ibid.

37 James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

38 Milan Segedinac, "Na pruzi smo postali fiskulturnici," *Borba na Omladinskoj pruzi*, no. 27 (1947): 10.

39 Nikola Mijatov, *Sport u službi socijalizma: Jugoslovensko iskustvo 1945–1953* (Beograd: Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, 2019), 130.

participation in sports being considered inappropriate for the upbringing of women.<sup>40</sup>

These patterns are reflected in participation statistics: women in sport were significantly lower in rural areas, such as Macedonia (9%) and the Kotor area in Montenegro (11%).<sup>41</sup> Additionally, the opportunity for elite female athletes in Yugoslavia between 1945 and 1953 to be engaged in leadership positions was missed. During this period, women's representation in leadership positions within Yugoslav sports organizations was extremely limited. Across a range of federations, the proportion of women leaders rarely exceeded 10%, with some exceptions: the Gymnastics Federation had 29% female officials, the Athletics Federation had 17%, and the Football and Mountaineering Federations had 9% each. Most other sports, including swimming, basketball, boxing, weightlifting, volleyball, rowing, tennis, and equestrian sports, had no women in leadership roles at all. Overall, women constituted only 4% of all officials across these organizations, highlighting the highly gendered and male-dominated nature of sports governance during this period.<sup>42</sup>

The limited representation of women in both participation and leadership reflected broader societal priorities and the constrained focus of institutions such as the Antifascist Women's Front (AFZ), which did not recognize the significance of sport in the struggle. In their educational efforts, they focused on literacy, which was justified by the reality of Yugoslavia at that time. Even when the cultural-educational "uplifting of women" expanded to include cinemas, theaters, exhibitions, and other activities, sports were not mentioned.<sup>43</sup> This also reflects the rural societal context, where physical labor dominated daily life, and any other physical activity was often equated with work. Secondly, when women did participate in sport, their roles were subordinate, and key positions were reserved for men, a direct result of traditional views on women's roles that were typical of rural communities. The persistence of heteronormative ideologies compounded these challenges, as it was difficult for young women to continue participating in amateur sport after finishing school and entering employment, while also managing domestic responsibilities.<sup>44</sup> In other words, socialist constructions of masculinity never encompassed domestic labor, leaving women with a dual burden that constrained their engagement in physical culture.<sup>45</sup>

The tension between opportunity and restriction can be seen in the early development of women's football. The first women's football teams began to emerge in the territory of present-day Croatia in 1937-1938, with HŠK Zagreb establishing its women's football team at the end of 1937. Furthermore, the Yugoslav Women's Football Federation (JŽLNS) was formally established on June 14, 1938, initiated by HŠK Zagreb. However, the Federation faced criticism on two fronts: first, men temporarily led the organization, sparking debates in

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40 AS, RZS 1945-1982, Okružni odbor FISAS-a, Piroć, "Izveštaj sekretarijata o godišnjem radu, 1946"; "Godišnja skupština Pokrajinskog odbora Fiskulturnog saveza Vojvodine, 1946."

41 Physical Culture Committee, *Report for Macedonia and Montenegro, 1948*.

42 Ibid

43 AJ, Fond 141, Antifašistički front žena (AFŽ), f. 1, *I Kongres AFŽ Jugoslavije*, Beograd, 1945; f. 3, *Izveštaj Izvršnog odbora Centralnog odbora AFŽ Jugoslavije Trećem kongresu AFŽ Jugoslavije*; f. 5, *Izveštaj o radu ženske organizacije uoči IV Kongresa AFŽ*.

44 Ivan Simić, "Gender Policies and Amateur Sports in Early Yugoslav Socialism," 848-861.

45 Angela Ocepek, "Položaj radne žene u vreme izgradnje socijalizma. Referat na IV Kongresu Antifašistične fronte žena Slovenije," November 15, 1952, Collection 141, Antifašistični front žena (AFŽ), box 36, Archives of Yugoslavia.

the press with some arguing that women should lead their own sports associations; second, broader societal and medical critiques emerged, warning that women engaging in physically demanding sports—especially team sports—could harm their health, development, or fertility. This case illustrates how gendered norms and bodily policies shaped both participation and leadership in women's sports during this period, reflecting the gendered hierarchy in sports leadership and the prevailing concerns about women's physical activity at that time.<sup>46</sup> These gendered norms extended beyond the sporting arena, permeating Yugoslav representation and diplomacy, where they constrained women's roles, reinforced male-dominated hierarchies, and shaped the expectations and opportunities available to female athletes in the country's international engagements.

#### 4. SPORT AS DIPLOMACY AND A POLITICAL INSTRUMENT

Communist Yugoslavia emerged from World War II, aligned with the Soviet Union. In 1948, however, she was expelled from the Soviet bloc for refusing to accept Stalin's dictates. Since that time, her foreign policy has had one central objective: to maintain a middle position between the extremes of isolation and subjugation in the international arena.<sup>47</sup> Yugoslavia employed sports diplomacy not as an ad hoc activity, but as a strategic orientation resulting from the Tito-Stalin split and ideological repositioning. At a critical juncture, Yugoslavia adjusted its geopolitical goals and restructured its foreign policy towards non-alignment.<sup>48</sup> Internally, the sport ecosystem as an institution experienced more nominal changes. This led to the reproduction of bureaucracy to sustain new diplomatic functions focusing on international representation and event organization, marking the coexistence of institutional arrangements and the need for organizational adaptation. The balancing between mass sport participation and high-performance was rather limited, as sporting success was linked to state prestige and ideological superiority.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, it resulted in the form of path dependency, through carefully selected leadership and resource allocation, followed by symbolic narrative as part of the broader project of Yugoslav political identity. Therefore, high-performance sport was used not only as an internal political instrument, but more strategically as statecraft within diplomatic efforts implementing foreign policy priorities.

Sport developed alongside international relations, representing a prominent institution through which ideology was promoted and politics engaged.<sup>50</sup> Being good in sports, especially achieving success in major international sporting events, was considered a powerful channel to promote a political system and social values.<sup>51</sup> In this geopolitical context, sport became

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46 "Potrebno je da se ženski sport uputi bezuslovnoj umerenosti i individualnom izboru," *Pravda* (Belgrade), January 6, 1939, 12–13.

47 Stephen Anderson, "Yugoslavia: The Diplomacy of Balance," *Current History* 56, no. 332 (1969): 212–244, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45312059>.

48 Marko Begović, "Sports and Social Cohesion: The Case of the Western Balkans," *Current Issues in Sport Science* 10, no.1 (2025), 007, 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.36950/2025.10ciss007>.

49 Marko Begović, "Sport Governance in South-East Europe: From Socialist Self-Management to Post-Transition Politicization," in *The European Model of Sport: Myth or Reality*, ed. Borja García and Vanja Smokvina (London: Routledge, 2025), 140–152, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032665153>.

50 Đana Luša, *Sport, politika i diplomacija: analiza iz konstruktivističke perspektive* (Zagreb: Fakultet političkih znanosti, 2016), accessed December 20, 2025, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317846969\\_SPORT\\_POLITIKA\\_I\\_DIPLOMACIJA\\_ANALIZA\\_IZ\\_KONSTRUKTIVISTICKE\\_PERSPEKTIVE](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317846969_SPORT_POLITIKA_I_DIPLOMACIJA_ANALIZA_IZ_KONSTRUKTIVISTICKE_PERSPEKTIVE).

51 James Riordan, "The Impact of Communism on Sport," *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 32, no. 1 (2007): 110–115, <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.32.2007.1.110-115>.

an essential tool of Yugoslav diplomacy and soft power. Tito doubled down on using domestic institutions—like sport—to strengthen internal cohesion,<sup>52</sup> viewing sport as a strategic tool to exercise soft power and promote the country's vision of democratic socialism. Sport was used as an instrument of diplomacy both regionally and internationally. The state leveraged multiple approaches to achieve these objectives. International representation through athletes and teams was emphasized to showcase the country's social and political ideals on the global stage. Hosting major international competitions and friendly matches also served to enhance Yugoslavia's visibility, prestige, and influence in international sporting networks. Participation in, or selective boycotts of, mega sporting events, such as the Olympic Games, was employed to signal ideological stances and align with diplomatic priorities. An example of this occurred during interwar Yugoslavia, when communist activists attempted to organize a boycott of the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, leading several prominent Yugoslav sportsmen to refuse participation for ideological reasons. In a bold gesture, there was even an attempt to extinguish the Olympic flame during the relay's passage through Yugoslavia.<sup>53</sup>

Yugoslavia was a sporting powerhouse, achieving notable success across multiple disciplines. The state invested in elite performances, so unsurprisingly around 75% of the sports budget was directed towards professional athletes, leaving a mere 25% for grassroots sports.<sup>54</sup> In football, the national team was twice European runner-up (1960, 1968), the under-20 squad won the 1987 World Cup, and *Crvena zvezda* Belgrade claimed the 1991 European Cup. In men's basketball, Yugoslavia won the 1980 Olympic gold, placed second in 1988, third in 1984, and captured three World Championship titles (1970, 1978, 1990), along with additional podium finishes.<sup>55</sup> Between 1920 and 1988, Yugoslavia won a total of 87 Olympic medals, including 26 golds. Their athletes excelled in wrestling, artistic gymnastics, and boxing. Leon Stukelj, from present-day Slovenia, won six medals in gymnastics, three of them gold. He was trailed by sprint canoeist Matia Ljubek from present-day Croatia, with four medals and two golds.<sup>56</sup>

The country's athletes performed admirably, especially in basketball, handball, and football. Successes at global tournaments helped challenge stereotypes of Balkan instability and showed that a non-aligned socialist country could produce world-class talent. The medals and trophies brought home were not just personal victories—they were political capital.<sup>57</sup> Representation at high-level positions was secured, with all members representing Yugoslavia in the International Olympic Committee (IOC) being male. From Svetomir Đukić (1918–1949) and Franjo Bučar (1920–1946) to Borislav Stanković (1988–2020), no women were appointed to these positions. This exclusively male representation highlights the highly gendered nature of sports governance in Yugoslavia, reflecting broader societal norms and

52 "Sport as a Tool of Propaganda and Unity in Tito's Yugoslavia," *Tito Ville* (blog), March 26, 2025, <https://www.titoville.com/sport-as-a-tool-of-propaganda-and-unity-in-titos-yugoslavia/>.

53 Dario Brentin and Dejan Zec, "From the Concept of the Communist 'New Man' to Nationalist Hooliganism: 713–728.

54 Davor Kovačić, "Nogometni profesionalci u udruženom radu," *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 48, no. 1 (2016): 71, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/160757>.

55 Krzysztof Krysieniel, "Sports Rivalry as an Element of Political Conflict: The Case of Post-Yugoslav States," *Studia Środkowoeuropejskie i Bałkanistyczne* XXXII (2023): 137–150, <https://doi.org/10.4467/2543733XSSB.23.008.18434>

56 Olympedia, "Yugoslavia (YUG)," accessed April 21, 2026, <https://www.olympedia.org/countries/YUG>.

57 "Sport as a Tool of Propaganda and Unity in Tito's Yugoslavia," *Tito Ville*.

institutional barriers that limited women's participation in leadership roles within both national and international sports organizations.

Yugoslavia strategically hosted a series of major international sporting events to showcase its organizational capacity and elevate its international profile. Among these were the 1970 Men's Basketball World Championship, the 1976 UEFA European Football Championship finals, and the 1979 Mediterranean Games in Split. After reviewing interviews and paraphrased statements by political officials, along with the glorification of Tito and Yugoslav policy in newspaper reports, it becomes clear that the primary political objective of the Games was to consolidate Yugoslavia's international position in the Mediterranean at a time when, despite internal political discord, Yugoslavia was the only country capable of organizing such a sporting event.<sup>58</sup> At the event, political representation was prominent, serving as an informal venue for meetings between state presidents and high-ranking dignitaries.

Yugoslavia was also the first socialist country honored with hosting the Winter Olympics.<sup>59</sup> The 1984 Winter Olympic Games in Sarajevo were widely seen as a powerful expression of shared unity, as citizens from across Yugoslavia rallied behind the national team. The nation's inaugural Winter Olympic medal, earned by alpine skier Jure Franko, was celebrated widely and symbolized collective pride and national unity. By hosting international events, Yugoslavia managed to utilize institutional conversion of sport infrastructure capacities deployed to amplify the country's global visibility, expand its ideological reach, and achieve foreign policy goals.

However, sporting events in Yugoslavia were not only sites of athletic achievement but also arenas for political manipulation. A particularly notable case was the *Crvena Zvezda* team, which was composed of athletes from multiple ethnic backgrounds, reflecting the diverse composition of the federation. Despite the team's inclusive and unifying nature, some political actors, particularly from Belgrade, sought to appropriate its sporting successes for nationalist agendas. By emphasizing selective narratives of victory, these actors framed athletic achievements in ways that reinforced particular ethnic or political identities, thereby instrumentalizing sport as a tool for political propaganda.

It can be concluded that sport has always been an integral part of state policy, being both influenced by it and, through its humane and ethical characteristics, influencing the national policy of the country.<sup>60</sup> The most direct evidence of political influence on the Mediterranean Games in Split is the statement of the then member of the Presidency of the Central Committee (CC) of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia and president of the Yugoslav Committee for the 8th Mediterranean Games, Stane Dolanc: "Today we live in a time when we must be fully aware that sport is also an integral part of politics, and that through sport – sometimes indirectly, sometimes even directly – it is possible to influence political developments."<sup>61</sup>

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58 Jasenko Zekić, "Mediterranske igre u Splitu – odrazi političke dimenzije u tiskanim medijima," *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 48, no. 1 (2016): 97–117, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/160758>.

59 Krzysztof Krzysieniel, "Sports Rivalry as an Element of Political Conflict: The Case of Post-Yugoslav States".

60 "MIS jača mir i prijateljstvo," *Vjesnik*, September 3, 1979, 11; Skataretiko, "Drug Tito i Mediteranske igre," 195–200.

61 Ibid.

The Yugoslav example served as a successful roadmap for understanding how sport could be instrumentalized as a diplomatic tool and play an important part in foreign policy. However, women remained largely excluded from the practical dimensions of sports diplomacy, which continued to be a male-dominated practice. Sport served as a powerful means through which Yugoslavia engaged internationally while simultaneously strengthening national identity. Yet, despite its diplomatic unity, sports diplomacy overwhelmingly privileged men as women's participation remained limited due to persistent social and structural barriers. Consequently, Yugoslav sports diplomacy operated within integrated gendered hierarchies, despite the nominal project image of progressive socialism and gender equality.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Since antiquity, society has been divided into a public space where free men collectively develop the political economy and receive paid employment, versus the private sphere occupied by women and slaves, associated with physical aspects of life like reproduction, shelter, and food.

<sup>62</sup> Gendered hierarchies are also observed in Yugoslav sport, rooted in long-standing societal structures that divide public and private spheres. Although socialism formally promoted women's empowerment, these norms persisted, restricting women to socially sanctioned activities and excluding them from team sports, leadership positions, and international representation. Medical discourses and societal expectations reinforced these limitations, prioritizing reproductive health over athletic achievement. Women's internalization of these norms also influenced their motivation and engagement, highlighting the psychological dimension of gendered participation. While many communists genuinely sought to advance equality, the Party's policies and ideologies reinforced idealized constructions of masculinity and femininity. These gendered norms extended into sports diplomacy, ensuring that men dominated leadership and the projection of Yugoslavia's international image. In this way, sport simultaneously reflected and reproduced societal hierarchies, constrained women's opportunities, and prepared men for leadership roles both domestically and globally.

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<sup>62</sup> Anna Snaith, Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 8–9, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-28794-5>.

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