

Complicating the Relationship Between Sport and National Identity: The Case of Post-Socialist Slovenia

Mojca Doupona Topič
University of Ljubljana

Jay Coakley
University of Chichester

Sociology of sport knowledge on national identity is grounded in research that focuses primarily on long established nation-states with widely known histories. The relationship between sport and national identity in postsocialist/Soviet/colonial nations that have gained independence or sovereignty since 1990 has seldom been studied. This paper examines the role of sports in the formation of national identity in postsocialist Slovenia, a nation-state that gained independence in 1990. Our analysis focuses on the recent context in which the current but fluid relationship between sport and Slovenian national identity exists. Using Slovenia as a case study we identify seven factors that may moderate the effectiveness of sports as sites for establishing and maintaining national identity and making successful global identity claims in the twenty-first century. We conclude that these factors should be taken into account to more fully understand the sport-national identity relationship today, especially in new and developing nations.

En sociologie du sport, les connaissances sur l'identité nationale sont fondées sur la recherche centrée sur les états établis depuis longtemps qui ont une histoire bien connue. La relation entre le sport et l'identité nationale dans les nations post socialistes/soviétiques/coloniales qui ont obtenu l'indépendance ou la souveraineté depuis 1990 a fait l'objet de peu d'études. Cet article examine le rôle du sport dans la formation de l'identité nationale en Slovénie postsocialiste, un état-nation qui a obtenu l'indépendance en 1990. Notre analyse est centrée sur le contexte récent des relations fluides entre le sport et l'identité nationale slovène. En utilisant la Slovénie dans notre étude de cas, nous identifions sept facteurs qui peuvent modérer l'efficacité des sports comme sites pour établir et maintenir l'identité nationale ainsi que pour permettre la réussite de revendications identitaires mondiales au XXI^e siècle. Nous concluons que ces facteurs devraient être pris en compte pour une meilleure compréhension de la relation entre le sport et l'identité nationale aujourd'hui et ce, particulièrement au sein des nations jeunes et en développement.

Traditionally, national identification has been inspired by the stories told by notable artists, writers, and historians. As national stories are increasingly told through popular culture and the media, some people turn to sports, sport events, sport venues, and athletes as representations of the nation and national values. Sport stories may glorify chauvinism and inspire xenophobia, but they regularly spark an awareness of nation and provide occasions for public discussion that creates at least temporary unity among citizens, feelings of pride, and opportunities to assert and seek affirmation of national identity claims on broader geopolitical stages (Bairner, 2001, 2009; Bartoluci & Perasović, 2009; Fox, 2006; Hogan, 2003; Kotnik, 2007; Lechner, 2007; Maguire, 1999; Maguire et al., 2009; Merkel, 2008; Poulton, 2004; Rowe, 2003; Sato, 2005; Shobe, 2008; Starc, 2005; Tuck, 2003a).

In some nations, competing stories of the nation precipitate policy debates over state funding priorities: should funds go to the arts and education *or* to sports and sport programs believed by some decision makers to represent the nation and capture the attention of citizens and noncitizens alike? This debate now occurs in the Republic of Slovenia where policy makers must weigh the relative efficacy of various strategies to represent the nation for its citizens and people worldwide (Bednarik & Šugman, 2001). Of course, the challenge of prioritizing strategies to build and extend national identity is not unique to Slovenia. But as a small postsocialist nation—just over two million inhabitants with land area the size of New Jersey or Wales—Slovenia faces these challenges from a relatively unique historical, economic, and political position.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the relationship between sport and national identity in Slovenia primarily after independence in 1991—a time during which it has sought full recognition as a sovereign nation along with membership and participation in global economic, political, and social relations. As we used sociology of sport knowledge to understand and explain the sport-national identity relationship in Slovenia, we noted that much of what we know is based on research that predates the twenty-first century and focuses primarily on established and relatively well known nations in Western Europe. Given relatively significant global changes since 1991, we were concerned that Slovenia and other postsocialist/Soviet/colonial nations that gained sovereignty after 1990 continue to make decisions about national identity projects in new national and global contexts that have not been thoroughly investigated.

After a review of conceptual issues related to sport-national identity relationships, we use Slovenia as a case study for identifying factors that may moderate the extent to which sport can be used to effectively create and sustain national identity and make successful global identity claims in the current postsocialist era. This case study also is relevant to other recently constituted and developing nations because many of them dedicate or plan to dedicate public resources to “sport” with the expectation that this will foster national identity among citizens/residents and effectively assert national identity claims worldwide at the same time that it delivers a host of positive developmental benefits.

National Identity: A Multi-Dimensional Concept

In this study, we define *national identity* as a shared sense of nation-hood grounded in the images and stories associated with an identifiable nation-state or longstanding

ethnic population. Within a nation-state or ethnic population, national identity exists to the extent that citizens/members learn these images and stories and use them to (a) express their connection with the larger collectivity, and (b) identify others as part of *or* external to that collectivity—that is, the “we” and “they” identities associated with nations (Maguire et al., 2009). In relationships with “outsiders,” national identity exists to the extent that these images and stories are acknowledged and reaffirmed by others as legitimate representations of the nation-state or ethnic population.

This definition distinguishes national identity from nationality because it implies knowledge and commitment rather than simple assignment to or citizen-by-birth in a nation-state (Bairner, 2003). It also assumes that national identities are forged through social interaction and therefore are fluid, multidimensional, and contested. In this sense, national identity, like other identities, is not so much possessed as it is achieved and granted through relational processes of presentation, affirmation, and continuing reaffirmation.

The processes of establishing, presenting, and receiving affirmation of national identity is especially challenging when accompanied by shifting political status and boundaries and large scale population movements, such as those caused by wars, natural disasters, oppression, and the ebb and flow of state-based and regional economic opportunities (Sekulić, 2004). Additional challenges are created by generally uncontrollable global flows of popular culture and social networks that frequently transcend national boundaries and blur national and ethnic heritage. Further confounding national identity formation is that a sense of nationhood is often grounded in shared territory and citizenship on the one hand, and/or perceived common descent and heritage on the other (Bairner, 2003; Hunter, 2003; Sekulić, 2004). All of these challenges are faced by Slovenia as sport is used to foster national identity formation and affirmation.

In nation-states where political boundaries have been stable over multiple generations, national identity is associated with a sense of belonging and a history of generational citizenship. But in regions of the world characterized by shifting political boundaries and changing nation-state designations, it is necessary to distinguish civic, state-based forms of national identification from those that are ethnic and ancestral (Smith, 1991). *Civic national identity* is grounded in a defined territory, a community of laws and institutions, a generally unified political will, stated rights for citizens, and webs of traditions and practices that constitute a formal community or society. *Ethnic national identity*, on the other hand, is grounded in perceived common descent so that people are seen as unified primarily by “blood” to the point that the nation is defined in primordial terms that transcend political boundaries, even when they may be linked with a particular landscape or territory. Civic identification is organized around a subjective connection with and commitment to normative codes that merge a nation’s values, practices, traditions, and institutional or constitutional arrangements. Ethnic identification is organized around fixed and essentialized reference points, such as nature or divine intent, so that individuals and a collectivity in which they claim membership is unalterably linked to ancestry and biological heritage (Eisenstadt & Giesen, 1995).

Distinguishing these two forms of national identity is useful when considering the identificational reference points for people in Slovenia today. On the one hand, national identity among Slovene people is an aspect of self grounded in knowledge of generally shared values, beliefs, traditions, and social practices, such as a

consistent emphasis on hard work, diligence, discipline, productivity, and moral virtue—collectively perceived as a core of Slovene national character. On the other hand, national identity also is an aspect of self grounded in longstanding awareness of shared Slovene ancestry and common descent. In either case, national identity becomes an authentic aspect of personal and social identity only when shared national narratives become personally meaningful and used as a basis for socially defining self and others in everyday life (Kelman, 1997).

The process of learning that underlies national identity is often initiated through the stories that present and perpetuate civic and/or ethnic codes that establish a nation's uniqueness, enduring qualities, basic values, reputation, and its trajectory in the world at large. Through the life course, people extend, personalize, and revise their national identities as they connect themselves to stories told across multiple institutional spheres, including family, religion, politics, education, science, economics, and sport (Andrews, 2007; Tilly, 2002). In Slovenia, a nation that has long experienced shifting territorial boundaries and changing political alignments, connecting to these stories is seen as a crucial feature of national solvency as well as identity.

Because national identity is a population's definitional sense of itself, most scholars describe it as an expression of an individual's connection to the collectivity, a connection popularly believed to reinforce social solidarity, political loyalty, and a sense of "we-ness" that fuels cooperation as well as a sense of purpose and power in the pursuit of national goals (Smith, 1991). Although research has raised doubts about the existence and permanence of these often taken-for-granted correlates of national identity (Amavilah, 2009; Lechner, 2007; Van Hilvoorde, Elling, & Stokvis, 2010), many people assume that national identity is necessary in constituting a nation and enabling its institutions to effectively support and represent its people in relations with other recognized collectivities (Rorty, 1999). For example, there is an official Government Office for Slovenes Abroad, which among other things, encourages and supports activities and associations that foster maintenance of national identity. This type of "identity work" (Lechner, 2007), which occurs across multiple institutional spheres, provides clarity of identificational reference points in Slovene history and culture.

Sport and National Identity in Sociology of Sport Research

Scholars in the sociology of sport have noted that sports, more than most other activities and spheres of social life, provide occasions for the public expression of national values, beliefs, pride, collective unity, and identity (Allison, 2004; Blain, Boyle & O'Donnell, 1993; Cho, 2009; Cronin, 1999; Hobsbawm, 1983; Hogan, 2003, 2009; Hunter, 2003; Kovač, Starc & Doupona Topič 2005; Levermore, 2004; Maguire, 1999; Maguire & Burrows, 2005; Maguire et al., 2009; Maguire & Tuck, 2005; Manzenreiter, 2006; Miller, Lawrence & McKay, 2001; Polley, 2004; Porter & Smith, 2004; Starc, 2005; Tomlinson & Young, 2006; Xu, 2006). Represented through media coverage, sports in many regions of the world now join religion, work, and community as popular sites for the public expression of national identities. For example, international sport events are used to highlight national symbols and

present athletes and teams as representatives of nation-states. Victorious athletes use national flags to express their identification with nation, and spectators use events and victories as occasions for proclaiming national affiliation and pride (Cho, 2009; King, 2003; Kösebalaban, 2004; Maguire et al., 2009; Maguire & Poulton, 1999; Poulton, 2004; Rowe, 2003; Tuck, 2003b).

Studies of sport and national identity often examine issues of social integration, nation building, and citizenship/membership, especially in cases where socially diverse societies have used sport in the hope of transcending rival or conflicting identities—at least temporarily (Bairner, 2003, 2005; Cronin, 1999; Hallinan & Judd, 2007; McCrone & Bechhofer, 2008). Similarly, scholars have explored the ways that celebrity athletes are appropriated and used to represent the nation in ways that reveal cultural priorities and prejudices, privilege particular interests, or expand the reach of citizenship (Barrer, 2007; Archetti, 2001; Armstrong & Hognestad, 2003; Bruce & Hallinan, 2001; Carrington, 2001; Jackson, 2001; Lee, Jackson, & Lee, 2007; Maynard, 2009; Nalapat & Parker, 2005; Wong & Trumper, 2002). Others have investigated the ways that opposing groups use sports to assert ideas about national identity, or the ways that sports reveal cultural chauvinism and intensify deep-rooted divisions in geographical regions or established nation-states (Archetti, 1999; Bairner, 2001; 2003; 2004; Bradley, 2002; Parry & Malcolm, 2004; Sack & Suster, 2000; Sugden & Bairner, 1999; Tuck, 2003b; Vanreusel, Renson & Tolleneer, 1999; Vrcan, 2002).

Overall, the relationship between national identity and sport has attracted considerable research attention in the sociology of sport. However, with a few exceptions (including Bale & Cronin, 2003; Billig, 1995; Chappell, 2007; Hunter, 2003), most of the sport and national identity research focuses on the British Isles and longstanding European nations where identities are contested and competing, especially in connection with rugby and football (Maguire, 2005). These nations generally have relatively long and well known histories in which sport activities were institutionalized at a time when select nations vied with each other for regional and global power during an era of industrial expansion and when centralized print media provided a dominant narrative about sport and the nation.

Guided primarily by figurational theory (Maguire, 2005) and critical cultural studies (Miller, Lawrence, & McKay, 2001), and utilizing archival data as contained in print and electronic media, this research has expanded our understanding of the ways that athletes, teams, and sports are linked with national habitus, habitus codes, national status and pride, patriotism, sectarianism, collective emotions, the flow of global capital, global and national power relations, and glocal social dynamics. The intent of this article is neither to critique this literature nor prioritize theoretical approaches (for example, figurational/process-sociology versus critical cultural studies), but rather to extend this literature both in terms of empirical studies and theorizing to take into account more contemporary factors that may complicate or disrupt the sport-national identity relationship, especially as it exists in postsocialist/Soviet/colonial and developing nations. As part of this task it is necessary to extend our understanding of nation-states that have emerged over the past few decades as a result of shifting political boundaries or acquired national sovereignty. The existence of these nation-states on geopolitical maps does not mean that they are characterized by integrated or widely shared national identities, nor does it mean that they are widely recognized as independent nation-states by people around the world.

Slovenia and other nations that have acquired independence and sovereignty in the postsocialist/Soviet/colonial eras, face special challenges in establishing national identities among citizens and making successful national identity claims in the realm of global relations (Barrer, 2007). Sociologist Frank Lechner (2007) suggests that the urgency of this identity work is greatest in nations and ethnic populations where there is a history of changing political boundaries, a need to have a counterpoint to globalization, or a significant influx of immigrants from diverse national or ethnic backgrounds. He notes that sports can provide one of many possible answers to the “who-are-we question” (p. 109), which many people see as important in newer nations entering the realm of global relations at the same time that nation-building is an important goal. For example, as Slovenia seeks to promote a positive image of the nation-state to its citizens and the rest of the world, sports have been identified as useful sites for establishing, presenting, and eliciting reaffirmation of national identity.

Using Sports to Promote National Identity: Challenges in Post-Socialist Slovenia

Previous research has established that there was a clear historical link between sports and national identity in Slovenia (Doupona Topič & Kovač, 2005; Kotnik, 2007; Stankovič 2004; Starc, 2005, 2006; Šugman, 1997; Volčič 2005, 2007). For example, in his ethnography Kotnik notes that, “alpine skiing, with its natural sceneries, amateurish background, sporting events, media attention and national heroes, is one of the main sports arenas in which the Slovenian nation-imagining, nationalism and national identity have been exercised throughout the twentieth century” (2007, 56). This was especially true during the years of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY; 1943–1991), because certain individual sports, notably ski jumping and Nordic and Alpine skiing, were used to explicitly distinguish the ethnic and civic identities of Slovenes from those of populations in the republics of Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro (Starc, 2005, 2006).

Although Slovene athletes participated and occasionally excelled on Yugoslavian national basketball, hockey, handball, and football/soccer teams, identificational tensions between Slovenia and the other republics were especially strong. Whereas skiing was seen by Slovenes as the embodiment of their individualist predispositions as well as their innate talents and self-discipline, ‘collective’ (that is, ‘team’) sports were seen as the domain of the southern Balkans where people, according to the beliefs of many Slovenes, lacked the self-discipline and genetic disposition to excel at individual sports (Stankovič, 2004; Starc, 2005). This distinction and the use of skiing to mark the uniqueness and moral superiority of Slovenes relative to people in the other Yugoslav republics was characteristic from the 1970s through the late 1990s (Kotnik, 2007; Starc, 2005).

However, the multitude of changes that have occurred subsequent to Slovene independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, led us to raise critical questions about the persistence and strength of the previously positive link between sports and national identity as Slovenia enters the twenty-first century in a context of recent and relatively unique national and global realities. The transition from being a

republic in socialist Yugoslavia to participating in global political and corporate capitalist economic relationships as an autonomous but emerging democracy has also been accompanied by shifts in the meanings given to sports. Additionally, Slovenia's history as a nation-state spans less than 20 years and is unfamiliar to people worldwide. With a population of just over 2 million, it ranks among the world's smallest nations, and with its recent (2004) entry into the European Union, it has undergone significant changes that have potentially dramatic implications for identificational opportunities and priorities.

To further complicate the sport-national identity relationship, recent trends and global changes have altered the contexts in which meanings given to sports are used to create and nurture national identity among Slovenes and present national identity claims on a global stage. Again, this changing context is relevant to postsocialist/Soviet/colonial and developing nations where sport is now being used as part of a larger national identity promotional strategy. To identify new and potentially influential factors, we consulted a wide range of sources by respected scholars doing work on recent Slovenian history (Cox, 2009; Ramet & Fink-Hafner, 2006; Rizman, 2006), global economic changes and the current economic crisis (Aronica & Ramdoo, 2006; Krugman, 2009; Stiglitz, 2010), and social trends related to globalization (M. Andrews, 2007; Castells, 2009; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007; Levermore & Budd, 2004; Levermore & Milward, 2007; Porter & Smith, 2004; Poster, 2001; Seebauer, Helus & Koliadis, 2004). From these sources and others, we prioritized factors that are most likely to influence the current relationship between sport and national identity in Slovenia and similar nations. We did not try to be exhaustive as we identified the following factors:

- Global politics and economics have become increasingly interdependent and organized around neoliberal ideology.
- New communications technologies provide unprecedented access to vastly expanded global sport content available through multiple and new media.
- Increased free trade and global flows of diverse cultural products are now marketed worldwide, especially to young people who are more likely than older peers to look beyond national boundaries for identificational reference points.
- Skepticism about nationalism and about the expression of nationalist fervor is relatively common among postsocialist youth.
- Many nations are competing with each other for recognition, economic growth, and political power as they use sports for national identity purposes.
- The recent global economic crisis has strained national budgets and created popular demands for more accountability and transparency among policy makers.

These factors combined with factors related to Slovenia's current challenges were distilled into a set of seven factors, listed and explained below, to put the sport-national identity relationship into a larger and more immediate social context and point in time. Collectively, these seven factors highlight the unique challenges faced by Slovenia today as sports are used as part of a strategy to nurture and extend national identity. The factors also alert us to critical questions about the

direct applicability of previous research findings as we seek to understand identificational dynamics in these nations. Of course, the factors are neither exhaustive nor relevant to the same degree in all postsocialist/Soviet/colonial and developing nations. They are presented as evidence that there are important moderating and intervening variables worthy of inclusion when studying or theorizing the sport-national identity relationship in light of twenty-first century social, political, and economic realities.

Factor 1. Recent Sovereignty and Brief History as a Nation-State. Critical cultural studies scholar, Zala Volčič points out that “Slovenians were considered by many historians to be one of the ‘non-historic’ nations of the Austrian Empire, partly because they had no ‘real history’ as an independent sovereign nation state” (2005, p. 298). In this sense, Slovenia lacks a longstanding civic basis for creating and sustaining national identity. It was only in the midnineteenth century that Slovenes differentiated themselves from other Slavic nations, and during the early twentieth century, they were part of larger systems of control, including the Austrian and Austro-Hungarian empires; the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes; and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The interwar period saw parts of Slovene territory occupied by Germany, Italy, and Hungary, and from 1943 until 1991, Slovenia was a republic in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

When this history is unknown, people outside of Slovenia find it difficult to connect Slovene athletes and teams with Slovenia as a nation in either civic or ethnic terms. In addition, little is known about the extent to which sport spectators worldwide seek this information after seeing or hearing about Slovene athletes and teams, although we suspect this occurs very rarely, if at all. Therefore, in the absence of informed commentary or carefully produced media coverage highlighting Slovene history and current conditions, it is doubtful that many people around the world become meaningfully aware of Slovenia as a result of its sponsorship of elite athletes and national teams.

Furthermore, Slovenes have long defined themselves in ethnic terms and this confounds the meaning of national identity for citizens and noncitizens alike (Sekulić, 2004). Expressing and preserving an ethnic sense of nationhood through language, cultural practices, extended family relationships, and a deeply held belief in the identifiability of a Slovene line of descent may have internal identificational cache, but most people and organizations today define nations in civic rather than ethnic terms and are unlikely to acknowledge the ethnic dimensions of Slovene national identity. At present, we lack information about the influence of sports on the formation of national identity during this transition to a nation-state organized around civic codes.

Finally, most previous studies have focused on long-established nations with histories and traditions that are relatively well known worldwide and with sporting traditions that are generally perceived in terms of international relationships; and there is reason to suggest that the relationship between national identity and sport under these conditions differs from the relationship in relatively new or developing nations (Van den Dool, 2009).

Factor 2. Formation of the European Union and Promotion of Pan-European Identity. Although national consciousness among Slovenes increased significantly with concerted efforts to gain independence in 1991, the goal of

achieving membership in the European Union, which was achieved 1 May 2004, focused the attention of many Slovenes on the values and perspectives of powerful Western European nations. This change, combined with the EU's explicit use of sports to promote a pan-European identity among people in EU nations and to have others recognize that identity (King, 2003; Levermore, 2004; Levermore and Millward, 2007) constitutes a factor that possibly confounds the process and meaning of national identity formation in Slovenia.

Although the EU has achieved only limited success in using sports to inspire a pan-European identity, increasing cross-national social and economic relationships have given more legitimacy to such sport-based strategies (Andrews, 2007; Bairner, 2001; Barrer, 2007; King, 2003; Levermore & Millward, 2007; Sassatelli, 2010). Tracking such change in a particular nation is a methodological challenge, but it cannot be discounted as a factor that possibly moderates the success of sport-based identity work in Slovenia and other new nations in Eastern Europe in particular (Lechner, 2007; Levermore & Millward, 2007). Unlike other nations where national identity was clearly linked with sports well before membership in the EU, Slovenia's efforts to use sports as sites for making successful regional and global identity claims are occurring at a time when the emphasis on pan-European identity is likely to complicate or even obscure the interests of a relatively small nation that has lacked a noticeable historical presence in established fixtures and championships (Pedersen, 2008).

Factor 3. Being Late to the Game and Marginalized in the Power Structures of Global and European Sport Organizations. Slovenia and other new and developing nations are entering the global sport scene at a time when sport structures, sponsorship patterns, and media coverage are organized around the histories, current interests, and resources of well-established, powerful nations and the global corporations headquartered there (Andrews & Ritzer, 2007; Houlihan, 2009). In this sense, Slovenia joins global sport late in the game, because its sport priorities, policies and organizations must conform to the models developed in other nations.

In addition, it is important to recognize other factors, such as, (a) the current power structures of international sport federations are comprised primarily of representatives from nations with long records of participation, (b) the visibility and status of various sports have been established without Slovene influence, and (c) media programming plus the dominant narratives in media coverage have been and continue to be influenced by corporate sponsors with interests unrelated to Slovene sporting traditions and culture. As a case in point, when the Slovene men's national football team defeated the Russian national team in late-2009 to qualify for the 2010 World Cup, much of the global media coverage focused on the failure of the Russian football program and highlighted in passing that all members of the Slovenian team played professionally outside of Slovenia. In the process, Slovenia itself was generally ignored.

It is likely that Slovene national pride and identification increased, at least temporarily, as a result of the victory over the Russian team and the Slovenian team qualifying for the 2010 World Cup, but this pride and identification may have been moderated by the fact that every member of the Slovenian team played for clubs located in other nations. Relatedly, there is little chance of any Slovene

football club joining the ranks of major European clubs at a time when their financial investments run to hundreds of millions of Euros. Even longstanding clubs in other nations now find it futile to compete with the wealthy clubs that account for a major share of football revenues, sponsorships, and fans worldwide. With the current organization of global football, achieving the status, visibility, and support required to nurture national identity and make successful identity claims globally may be more fantasy than a realistic possibility.

Given the organization, power relations, and established sponsorship and media practices in twenty-first century sport, Slovenes have relatively few occasions during which national pride and identification can be inspired by sport. This also is the case in nearly all postsocialist/Soviet/colonial and developing nations.

Factor 4. Expanded Global Flows of Cultural Products and Competing Sources of Identity for Young People. Like young people in most European nations today, young Slovenes are more likely than their older counterparts to be wary of traditional forms of national identification that have at times been expressed as xenophobia. They also place a higher value on social inclusion and identify more closely with forms of global popular culture (Bauer & Tibori, 2002; Beasley, Bulbeck & McCarthy, 2009; Ezell, Seeleib-Kaiser & Tiryakian, 2003; Perényi, 2010). This means that when they integrate sports into their lives, they don't automatically or exclusively identify with Slovene athletes and teams or with the nation-state in ethnic or traditional civic terms.

Young people may experience national pride and other emotions when Slovene athletes and teams are successful, but they also have many opportunities to access, embrace and identify with athletes and teams worldwide, and to become interested in many sports unrelated to their national history and traditions. Research also shows that when exposed to global forms of popular culture, young people are drawn to images and individuals considered to be "cool" and physically attractive, regardless of nation of origin (Beasley, Bulbeck, & McCarthy, 2009). This means that a young person in Slovenia today is just as likely to support and identify with Manchester United and the Premier League in England as with NK Olimpija Ljubljana, and the Prva Liga (Slovenian First League, formed in 1991); and they may prefer to follow Brazilian footballer Kaká and Portuguese star Ronaldo rather than Valter Birsa and Milivoje Novakovič. Or they may prefer to identify with athletes in a wide range of 'alternative/emerging/new' sports among whom nation of origin is irrelevant or unknown.

In addition, when national athletes achieve excellence on a global stage today, corporations often appropriate and use them to represent their products worldwide. In the process, the persona and achievements of a national athlete are often severed from his or her national affiliation and linked to a commercial brand through extensive and cleverly produced commercial ads (Koh & Kim, 2010).

Research is needed to identify the extent to which global cultural flows influence identity formation, because the range of "sport vision" available to young people in Slovenia and other nations today is much greater than it was in nations studied in past research, and there are new ways to represent athletes and teams that sever or defuse their connection with a particular nation.

Factor 5. Increased Access to a Wide Range of Global Sport Media Programming. Slovenia, like many nations in Eastern Europe, is media saturated.

In less than two decades, satellite and cable technology has changed the media landscape. Whereas past media sport programming focused on Slovenia and Yugoslavia generally, opportunities now exist to consume media sports that originate in many nations worldwide. This presents people in Slovenia with new and diverse opportunities to view and gain knowledge of sports, teams, and athletes, as noted when discussing Factor 4.

Past research on the sport-national identity relationship has often focused on times and nations where print media were the primary means of communication. Newspapers, for example, were widely used through much of the twentieth century to convert individuals and ethnic populations into national citizens. In democratic nations, leaders used print media to communicate information about the nation, and newspaper stories were the primary means through which the nation was imagined and portrayed on a daily basis (Poster, 2001). Today, however, media programming is diverse and fragmented, and the central narratives in mainstream print and electronic media coverage, including those associated with sports, are usually influenced by corporations with interests unrelated to the interests of smaller nations that do not constitute commercial markets worthy of direct attention. Therefore, Slovenia's interests are not likely to be represented in global commercial media programming directed to spectators and sponsors located in larger and wealthier nations with higher levels of consumption and greater profit potential.

As a case in point, a television viewer in Slovenia today can watch football matches involving men's teams in twenty fixtures located in other nations—all on free-to-air channels. In addition, regular broadcasts present cup matches from England, Spain, and Italy, the UEFA Champions League, UEFA Europa Cup, Copa Libertadores (South America's "Champions League"), and other major international sport events, teams, and athletes with global appeal (Ličen, 2010). This access to diverse images and narratives provides Slovenes with opportunities to identify with athletes and teams from at least 13 other nations where football traditions are stronger than they are in Slovenia. In addition to football, a range of sports unrelated to Slovene traditions and practices are regularly available for consumption and identification.

In addition, the production quality and promotional hype associated with coverage of sports events and teams that have global appeal makes them especially attractive to viewers, and this may undermine the link between sports and national identity in Slovenia and other media saturated nations where the coverage of local events, teams, and athletes cannot match the pervasiveness and produced allure of global sports coverage.

The Internet further blurs the connection between media users and the nation. Digital relationships and networks spill over political boundaries and geographical territories making the nation at least temporarily less important as a reference point for identity. Although global connectivity does not inevitably erode the foundation for national identity, it makes possible new forms of transnational identity driven by multiple and competing interests.

The possible impact of new media on the sport-national identity relationship cannot be discounted (Ličen & Doupona Topič, 2009; Volčič, 2007). The constantly emerging global media landscape creates social conditions unlike those present or assumed in connection with much of the previous literature on national identity and sports. This possibility was acknowledged by Maguire (1999) over a decade

ago, but it can no longer be ignored when explaining the sport-national identity relationship in new and developing nations.

Factor 6. Multiple Nations Simultaneously Use Sports as They Vie to Make National Identity claims. Many postsocialist/Soviet/colonial nations currently use sport to nurture and promote national identity. They are joined by developing nations where policy-makers and sport promoters take for granted that elevating the profile of national sport teams and athletes will increase national identification among citizens, support the success of global national identity claims, and bring many economic and political benefits in the process. However, when this strategy is used simultaneously by multiple nations vying for visibility, recognition, and attention, it is unwise to assume that its effectiveness corresponds to what previous studies suggest.

The impact of this moderating factor is exacerbated in a global sport context where nearly all attention and media coverage is given to teams and athletes from longstanding sporting nations with well established promotional and public relations strategies. When Slovenia joins Lithuania, Croatia, Serbia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and many developing nations in sporting contexts dominated by widely recognized and popular teams and athletes from wealthy nations, sport may not deliver expected benefits in the form of enhanced national identity. For example, when the Slovenia team played a surprisingly popular and media-grabbing U.S. team to a draw during the 2010 Men's World Cup, it was noted by many commentators that the match involved the least and most populated nations in the tournament—information that probably did not benefit Slovenia. In addition, a number of other qualifying teams were from new and developing nations seeking the same recognition and affirmation sought by Slovenia. These included South Africa (as the host nation), Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Nigeria, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile, Mexico, Serbia, Algeria, Slovakia, and North Korea—and this was only among the qualifiers for the Men's World Cup in a single quadrennium.

Again, research is needed to determine the influence of sports on national identity for new and developing nations at a time when many nations are utilizing similar strategies. Is there a point of diminishing returns, and when is it reached? Past research on the relationships between national identity and sports has usually focused on established nations at a time when they were among a relatively few nations seeking the media spotlight and worldwide attention, so these questions have not been considered. In this sense, conditions during the twenty-first century present new challenges when it comes to using sport to nurture national identity and make successful global identity claims.

Factor 7. Relatively Few Economic Resources to Fund Sport Development and Elite Sport Programs. According to 2009 estimates by the International Monetary Fund and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the per capita GDP of Slovenia is \$24,180US. This is well above other Eastern European nations (\$13,220 in Croatia, \$5,480 in Serbia, and \$8,230 in Russia), but it is only 62-percent of the average per capita GDP of Western European countries.

These data show that Slovenia stands out as an economic success story, but this success must be qualified because Slovenia's population is smaller than the populations of cities such as Liverpool (England) or Houston (Texas). Statistically, this

means that Slovenia has a relatively low amount of absolute resources to develop elite sports and then use them effectively to nurture national identity and to make global identity claims in the realm of highly competitive elite global sports.

Individual Slovenes have more discretionary income than their East European peers, but the nation lacks the critical mass of resources required to develop and maintain a national sport program that regularly produces athletes and teams that can compete successfully with opponents from larger nations. Those larger nations have much greater total resources to maintain sport systems that develop and train elite athletes across a range of sports, especially the sports that receive regular and widespread media exposure. For Slovenia and similar nations, funding even two sports at this level is difficult without eliminating or seriously underfunding other sports that have greater quality of life and health benefits for the general population and the nation as a whole. For example, the Slovenian men's basketball team, reasonably successful in the past, is currently about \$1 million in debt, which raises important questions about national funding priorities and the interests of the nation. Such is the case with other national teams in Slovenia and with uncounted teams in other new and developing nations where resource allocation issues are more contentious than they are in Slovenia.

In addition, the need to fund social programs and services exacerbates political tensions related to sport funding decisions in Slovenia. The global economic crisis that began in late-2007 has magnified this issue and led at least a few decision-makers to seek evidence-based support before they endorse funding priorities based on the untested assumption that sports enhance national identity and facilitate other forms of social and economic development (Coalter, 2007).

Whereas an occasional success story in a major event such as the Olympic Games or World Cup will boost visibility, this outcome is short-lived and may disappear before any knowledge-based recognition occurs among people worldwide. In addition, these events occur only every 2–4 years, which even further limits their impact in Slovenia and similar nations today.

Conclusion

During these early years of the twenty-first century, many people continue to believe that sports are an effective means for fostering national identity and making identity claims that resonate with citizens and receive at least implicit reaffirmation at regional and global levels. At the same time, national political and economic leaders hope that boosting national identity will also enhance social and economic development.

Slovenia uses sports in this way, along with many postsocialist/Soviet/colonial and developing nations. Like people in these other nations, Slovenes tend to view sports as an effective tool in fostering national identity among citizens and making successful global identity claims. Lacking a long, official history through which recognition of their nation could be established and reaffirmed, there is both an assumption and hope that their national teams and athletes will be widely recognizable representations of who they are as a nation. Because sports evoke strong emotions and are easily understood and perceived as less contentious than other activities that might be used to establish and reaffirm national identity, they often

receive funding priority over other activities that could produce more tangible benefits for citizens and the nation.

Whereas past research supports the belief that sports are effective tools for boosting national identity and making successful global identity claims, this case study of Slovenia suggests that there is need to revisit and critically examine the “reach” and applicability of past findings before assuming that they identify all the important factors that influence the sport-national identity relationship in new and developing nations during this century. At this point, research is needed on the depth and scope of sport’s influence on both civic and ethnic forms of national identification under prevailing conditions in the twenty-first century. This would bring a fuller understanding of sport as it is being used in fifteen nations that gained sovereignty with the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991 (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldavia, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan), and eight nations formed after the dissolution of Yugoslavia (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia-Montenegro—later divided into the nations of Serbia and Montenegro. In some of these and ten other nations that gained sovereignty or had major shifts in political boundaries since 1990 (Germany, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Namibia, Eritrea, Yemen, the Marshall Islands, Palau, East Timor, and Micronesia), there are longstanding forms of ethnic national identification that cross over or come together inside new political borders.

Although each of these thirty-three nations—seventeen percent of nations worldwide—combined with uncounted developing nations, is positioned differently for using sports to establish and reaffirm national identity, we know little about the success of this strategy and its actual impact on everyday life within these nations or on their involvement and status in global relations under today’s social, economic, and political conditions.

In this analysis, we’ve noted that there are at least seven factors that may influence the relationship between national identity and sports in Slovenia. These include: (1) recent sovereignty and a brief history as a nation-state, (2) formation of the European Union and promotion of a Pan-European identity, (3) being ‘late to the game’ and marginalized in the power relations of global and European sport structures, (4) expanded global flows of cultural products and competing sources of identity, (5) increased access to a wide range of global rather than only national sport media programming, (6) multiple nations simultaneously using sports as they vie to nurture national identity and make global national identity claims, and (7) relatively limited and often declining economic resources to fund sport development and elite sport programs in addition to other services and programs.

Research is needed to examine the extent to which these and other new factors moderate or alter the relationship between national identity and sports. In addition, there is a need to identify the ways that routine, everyday sport-related discourses at this point in time serve as contexts for people to meaningfully express their sense of nationhood and increase their awareness and knowledge of other nations.

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