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‘OUR TEAM’? ETHNIC PREJUDICES AND FOOTBALL IN INTERWAR ROMANIA

1. Introduction

This paper analyses an unsuccessful decision taken in March 1935 following tempestuous discussions by the Romanian Football Association. Despite the opposition of the members of the committee charged with the selection of the players for the national team, the majority of the officials were in favour of the ‘Rumanisation’ of the representative squad by introducing the so-called ‘8+3 formula’¹ or the ‘Numerus Valachicus’². This meant that the national side was supposed to include eight ethnic Romanian players and three Romanian citizens of other ethnic origin. Nonetheless, the historian who takes the time to consider the ethnic background of the players selected in the national football team will be certainly surprised by the predominance of Hungarian, German or Jewish names prior to and after 1935.³

A deeper investigation proves that this decision to consider the ethnic origin of a player as a criterion for selection, rather than technique and skills, was not an isolated one. It was preceded and followed by long debates, which actually mirror the internal problems of the interwar Romanian state and society.

As it is certain that sport reflects the life of a society, during the decades between the two world wars sporting life developed into an indicator of ideas, conflicts and solutions existing in Romanian society, including the tense relations between the ethnic majority and minorities. Studying the

¹ Comitetul Federal s-a întâlnit aseară [The Federal Committee Met Yesterday Evening], in: *Gazeta Sporturilor* [The Sports’ Gazette], 1 April 1935, pp. 1, 3; Consiliul Federal de sâmbătă seară [The Federal Committee of Saturday Evening], in: *Curentul* [The Stream], 2 April 1935, p. 2.

² Einzug des ‘Numerus Valachicus’ beim Fußball, in: *Sport-Anzeiger. Die Deutsche Turn- und Sportzeitung Rumäniens*, 8 April 1935, p. 4.

³ www.frf.ro/Echipanat.pdf (official site of the Romanian Football Federation, last accessed: 23 December 2005).

opinions for and against the decision of the Football Association as such does not bring much for the research of sport, as there was never a gap between official or unofficial theories and the reality on football fields. The international representation of Romania in sport by ethnic minorities brought a recurrent debate in the interwar period.⁴ Football officials were hesitant to make a decisive move and public opinion was divided. Given this fact, my thesis is that the replacement of ethnic minorities by ethnic Romanians should be studied as a theory linked to the general discussion about society and less as a coherent strategy limited to the politics of sport. Therefore, before investigating the origins and the consequences of the 1935 decision, I would like to clarify first the political and ideological background of interwar Romania, usually referred to as ‘Greater Romania’, and the issue of regionalism in sports, linked to internal political disagreements.

2. ‘Greater Romania’

The use of the concept ‘Greater Romania’, designating the state formed in 1918 as an outcome of the disintegration of the neighbouring Habsburg and Russian Empires and dismembered in 1940, in favour of the Soviet Union, Hungary and Bulgaria, nowadays produces in public opinion and in some professional historical circles nostalgia for a golden age of political power, economic growth and cultural effervesce,⁵ but a keen historical analysis reveals the complicated and the sometimes unpleasant and unacknowledged aspects of Romanian history from 1918 to 1940. Romanian historiography in past decades considered the emergence of the Romanian national state in 1918 as the completion of a necessary historical process.⁶ This point of view was not by any means new: its origins can be traced in the ideas expressed before and after the First World War amongst the Romanian cultural and political elite, but only under the communist regime did the

⁴ On national, ethnic and social representation through football see ERIC J. HOBBSBAWM, *Națiuni și naționalism din 1780 până în prezent. Program, mit, realitate* [Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality], Chișinău 1997, pp. 139-140; *Football Cultures and Identities*, ed. by GARY ARMSTRONG/RICHARD GIULIANOTTI, Basingstoke 1999; MIKLÓS HADAS, *Football and Social Identity. The Case of Hungary in the Twentieth Century*, in: *The Sports Historian* 20 (2000) 2, pp. 43-66.

⁵ BOGDAN MURGESCU, *The Economic Performance of Interwar Romania. Golden Age Myth and Statistical Evidence*, in: *Jahrbücher für Geschichte und Kultur Südosteuropas* 6 (2004), pp. 43-64.

⁶ GHEORGHE PLATON ET AL., *Cum s-a înfăptuit România modernă. O perspectivă asupra strategiei dezvoltării* [How Modern Romania Was Created. A Perspective on the Strategy of Development], Jassy 1993, p. 314.

obsessive forging of the unity of the people around the communist party of Romania turn into a political command for the historiography. What one could call the ‘politically correctness’ of the era, the national unity of the second half of the 20th century, which aimed to describe an uniform society controlled by a providential leader,⁷ was supposed to have taken root in modern and, in the most aberrant contributions, even medieval or antique Romanian history. Even if after 1990 Romanian historiography began a hesitant process of cleansing itself of political instrumentalisation, a re-analysis of the results of previous research projects linked to the Western European trends,⁸ shows that there are still subject matters waiting for an open debate. The interwar conflicts between historical provinces and the project of the ‘Rumanisation’ of Romania are among these issues, acknowledged in professional circles but approached more willingly by historians working in the Western world.⁹

The political core of ‘Greater Romania’ was the so-called ‘Old Kingdom’, a state created in 1859 by the union of the mediaeval principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia. Ever since this first national state was created, the task set for future generations was to ‘complete’ it by adding all the other neighbouring territories inhabited by Romanians, especially the then Habsburg province of Transylvania. The proper moment occurred at the end of the First World War, when the two empires collapsed. The gap between the romantic paragon and the real existence of the all-Romanian nation state was actually never carried out. If the Old Kingdom was dominant in political matters, the newly acquired former Habsburg territories of Transylvania, Banat and Bucovina were more industrialised and urbanised, their population had a higher degree of literacy, whilst Bessarabia, a Russian province since 1812, was the poorest region of the country. The main mission of the state authorities was to integrate these four different legisla-

⁷ LUCIAN BOIA, *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească* [History and Myth in the Romanian Conscience], 2nd ed., Bucharest 2000, p. 210.

⁸ BOGDAN MURGESCU, The Romanian Historiography in the 1990’s, in: *Romanian Journal of Political Science* 3 (2003) 1, pp. 32-60 (www.ciaonet.org/frame/oljourfrm.html, last accessed: 2 December 2005).

⁹ IRINA LIVEZEANU, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania. Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930*, Cornell 1995, translated into Romanian as: *Cultură și naționalism în România Mare, 1918-1930*, Bucharest 1998; MARIANA HAUSLEITNER, *Die Rumänisierung der Bukowina. Die Durchsetzung des nationalstaatlichen Anspruchs Großrumäniens 1918-1944*, München 2001; DIETMAR MÜLLER, *Staatsbürger auf Widerruf. Juden und Muslime als Alteritätspartner im rumänischen und serbischen Nationscode. Ethnonationale Staatsbürgerschaftskonzeptionen 1878-1941*, Wiesbaden 2005.

tive,¹⁰ economic and educational systems. Thus its entire existence was in fact a quest for equilibrium and for a synthesis capable of satisfying all the political, cultural and ideological trends. In the long and fruitful quarrels between the Transylvanians and the Wallachians or between the ‘old generation’ and the so-called ‘youngsters’ led by the future historian of religions Mircea Eliade, one finds both the most productive moments of the Romanian cultural history and unfortunately the seeds of the right-wing extremism.

Obviously the more delicate problem of the Romanian political and cultural elite during the interwar period was the confrontation with an unfamiliar phenomenon for the Old Kingdom: the existence of important and well-organised ethnic minorities, the former ruling Hungarian, German, Ruthenian or Jewish elites, who had to cope, after the loss of their position as ‘ruling nations’ with a completely new regime. The strategy chosen by the national-liberal ruling political elite was to shape the entire political, cultural and economical life of the former Austro-Hungarian or Russian provinces according to the French inspired and highly centralised model of the Old Kingdom. The keyword of the official policy of the state became the ‘Rumanisation’ of the new provinces, which became more pressing during the 1930s, when Prince Carol returned from exile to claim the crown of his son and reigned in Romania until September 1940.

3. Romanian Sport as Romanian Football?

The inequalities between the provinces of ‘Greater Romania’ are easy to trace in the sporting landscape. There was not a pan-Romanian organisation similar to the Slavic ‘Sokol’ movement; hence, sporting life had no base for unification after 1918. The absence of such an organisation (the Transylvanians claimed that the Hungarian authorities did not want to repeat the mistake of the Austrian tolerance for the ‘Sokols’¹¹) explains to a certain extent the difficulties met by the Romanian Federation of Sporting Societies, based since 1912 in Bucharest, in extending its control over the Carpathians. The conflict could be described in the beginning as an admin-

¹⁰ N. N. PETRAȘCU, *Evoluția politică a României în ultimii 20 de ani (1918-1938)* [The Political Evolution of Romania in the past 20 Years (1918-1938)], Bucharest 1939, p. 58.

¹¹ LIVIU IUGA, *Începuturile sportului românesc în Ardeal* [The Beginnings of the Romanian Sport in Transylvania], in: *Gazeta sporturilor*, 30 January 1925, p. 1; I. DABI-CIU, *Cum a început sportul românesc în Arad? Un scurt istoric* [How Romanian Sport in Arad Began. A Short History], in: *Gazeta antirevizionistă* [The Antirevisionist Gazette], 28 October 1934, p. 15.

istrative one, as it started from the simple right to organise competitions and confirm champions and records.¹²

The most complete statistical data I could find for the interwar decades were published by the Romanian Union of Sports Federations in 1938-1940. They show dominance of the former Austro-Hungarian provinces within the Romanian sport, as 51 per cent of the total number of clubs and associations were located in those provinces, while 23 per cent were registered in the Old Kingdom, 22 per cent in the capital Bucharest and only 4 per cent in Bessarabia.¹³

On the sporting stage of interwar Romania there were two major actors competing: Transylvania and Bucharest. Their rivalry shaped the history of the Romanian sport. The quite normal envy of sports enthusiasts from Bucharest and the Old Kingdom for the national and international results of their Transylvanian fellows could not hide the admiration for their stance towards sport itself. The critics were not unfamiliar with the diffusion of sports in all social strata of Transylvania, while in the south of the Carpathians for a long while the practice of certain disciplines, such as winter sports, was perceived as a sign of wealth and snobbery.¹⁴ The different economic evolution justifies to a certain extent the different evolution of sport in Transylvania and Bucharest. As a consequence of the general strike of 1920, the Transylvanian unions became the core of the Romanian labour movement. New legislation in the field of the work relations (the eight hour working day, Sundays and public holidays free from work, collective contracts etc.) eased the development of the Transylvanian sporting associations¹⁵ and allowed them to continue their traditional contacts with their former competitors from the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The preference for encounters with Hungarian, Yugoslavian or Austrian teams rather than the quite modest ones from the other Romanian provinces irritated Bucharest. The frequent visits of the Hungarian teams to Transylvania were seen as motives for chauvinist propaganda and hostile demonstrations by the public towards the Romanian state. Despite a positive appreciation of Transylvanian sporting life, the envy of the Old Kingdom turned during the

¹² GRIGORE CARACOSTEA, Cuvânt înainte [Foreword], in: *Ecoul Sportiv* [*The Sporting Echo*], 18 September 1921, pp. 1-2.

¹³ Anuarul sporturilor pe 1939-1940 [The Yearbook of Sports 1939-1940], Bucharest 1940, pp. 281-311.

¹⁴ *Rampa* [*The Downstage*], 25 December 1928, p. 19.

¹⁵ NICOLAE GHIULEA, Chestiunea muncitorească în Ardeal și Banat [The Worker's Problem in Transylvania and Banat], in: *Transilvania, Banatul, Crișana, Maramureșul 1918-1928* [Transylvania, Banat, Crisana, Maramures 1918-1928], vol. 1, Bucharest 1929, pp. 724-726; NICOLAE G. MUNTEANU, Cincizeci de ani de sport muncitoresc [Fifty Years of Workers' Sport], Bucharest 1971, pp. 20-22.

1920s away from regionalism and towards nationalism. The first important sports journal from Bucharest pleaded openly with the ethnic minorities (mostly Hungarians), while underlining the goodwill of the majority and the necessity of strengthening the 'Romanian race'.¹⁶

The internal rivalry between Bucharest and Transylvania was extended to a symbolic fight. Surprisingly, it was Bucharest, which represented the new, as it stood for the aspirations of the recently created state. The main allegation of the sportsmen from the capital city against their Transylvanian fellow countrymen was that they were not eager to transform radically the existing sporting clubs into centres of 'Rumanisation', in imitation of the official state policy.

While sport in the former Habsburg provinces had a larger social basis due to the greater development of industry, the sporting life of the Old Kingdom was at the beginning of the 1920s concentrated amongst the upper echelons of Bucharest society, which was always eager to replicate Western fashions. The first football clubs, for instance, were created at the beginning of the 20th Century along the lines of those founded by English and German workers from the oil and textile industries.¹⁷ Some of these clubs included Romanian nationality as an admission requirement and thus became the first to advocate the late romantic idea of creating a national sport.¹⁸

According to the data made available by each sporting Federation, at most 120,000 persons in a population of about 18,000,000 were professional or registered amateur sportspersons. Given that the Football Federation of Romania claimed to have 70,000 players enlisted,¹⁹ and that the remaining 20 sporting disciplines were kept alive by at most 50,000 enthusiasts, the overwhelming interest of the public and of sports and state officials for football should not be a surprise. The dominance of football is more obvious if the amount of information published in the sports pages of the daily newspapers and the sport journals is taken into account as a significant criterion for the measurement of the interest of the public. Some sports publications used to suspend deliberately their activities when the football season ended during winter.²⁰ Journals and magazines dedicated to

¹⁶ O. NEGEL, *Chestiunea naționalităților în sport* [The Problem of Nationalities in Sports], in: *Ecoul Sportiv*, 29 January 1922, p. 1.

¹⁷ ION PUIU DUMITRESCU, *Începuturi sportive bucureștene* [The Beginnings of Sports in Bucharest], Bucharest 1975, p. 72.

¹⁸ Clubul Sportiv 'Colțea' 1913-1923 [The 'Colțea' Sporting Club 1913-1923], Bucharest 1923, p. 5.

¹⁹ *Anuarul sporturilor pe 1939-1940*, p. 120.

²⁰ *Sport-Anzeiger*, 17 December 1934, p. 4.

theatre, arts and cinema began to extend the amount of information about sport in general and football in particular. The only other disciplines, which could claim a better treatment, were the exclusive horse races (but these were more like an exclusive Bucharest business) and boxing. Despite the small number of sportspeople (by this term I mean those taking part in official competitions, which excludes those for whom sport was simply recreation²¹) and the opposition of those who claimed that sport is vulgar and educationally inappropriate,²² the interest of the public grew. From being a curious pastime of foreigners, sport, and especially football turned into a matter of national importance and has remained as such until the present. If in the early 1920s the clubs were desperately hoping to attract a few supporters, in less than 20 years sporting events had more spectators than any other cultural activity.

The real impact of the Transylvanian football is understandable if one considers the international appearances of the Romanian national team from 1922 to 1940. Until the late 1930s, the majority of the drafted players came from Transylvanian clubs. The presence of the players born or playing in the Capital City was quite exceptional, although the matches at home took place normally in Bucharest.²³ This apparently unimportant piece of information proves once more that the conflict between the strongly centralised patterns proposed by the representatives of the Old Kingdom in opposition to the more flexible views of the new provinces was reflected in sporting life. One of the most important points of the 'Rumanisation' project was to increase gradually the percentage of the Romanian populations in the cities and towns of Transylvania, Banat and Bucovina, predominantly inhabited by ethnic minorities.²⁴ The Football Association shared this distrust of the urban population from the new provinces and, instead of playing in front of a better-informed public, preferred to focus on the education of Bucharest fans and on raising the level of the central clubs in order to create a counterweight for the Transylvanian teams.

²¹ MIRCEA ELIADE, *Memorii 1907-1960* [Memories 1907-1960], Bucharest 1997, p. 230; PETRU COMARNESCU, *Jurnal 1931-1937* [Diary 1931-1937], Jassy 1994, p. 50.

²² BOGDAN POPA, Sport et éducation physique dans la Roumanie d'entre-deux-guerres: oui ou non, in: *Études Balkaniques. Recherches interdisciplinaires sur les mondes hellénique et balkanique* 11 (2004), pp. 197-211, pp. 207-209.

²³ www.frf.ro/echipanat.pdf (official listing of the matches of the national team, last accessed: 24 December 2005).

²⁴ CEZAR PETRESCU, *Românizarea oraşelor* [The Rumanisation of the Cities], in: *Curentul*, 24 January 1929, p. 1.

4. 'May the Pitch Be a Symbolic Motherland...' ²⁵ 'Rumanisation': Debates, Facts and Results

The 1924 Olympics in Paris marked a turn in the 'Rumanisation' discussion. Apart from the 1919 Pershing Games, the 1924 Olympiad was the first major international appearance for Romania after the First World War. Even before the start of the Games, the opinion that only ethnic Romanians should be sent to Paris could be heard.²⁶ The ethnicity thesis was dropped in favour of the hypothesis that the best possible team would bring better results. The Romanian squad was supposed to play in the first eliminatory round against the Netherlands. The crushing 0-6 defeat was not necessarily a surprise, given that between 1922 and 1925 Romania won only one international game out of ten played. Only two players out of 11 (all from Transylvanian clubs) were considered 'pure' Romanians and this fact ignited public opinion. The 1924 moment was recalled whenever the idea of the 'Rumanisation' of football was debated. The defenders of ethnicity argued that this would end claims that Romania was represented by a 'Hungarian team from the confiscated territories'.²⁷

The events of 1924 can be partially reconstructed on the basis of the accounts of the different players involved. The team's captain, Aurel Guga, had claimed later that his ethnic minority players (mostly of Hungarian origin) had voluntarily sabotaged the match because they had a disagreement with another ethnic Romanian player. The solution he suggested was to ban non-Romanian players from any club and national team.²⁸ The version of the story told by the striker Adalbert Ströck seemed more accurate, given that the 1924 experience is still today considered a model of poor team management.²⁹ Ströck, whose brother Stefan (the team's goalkeeper) was one of the players accused, pointed his finger at the irresponsibility of the managers and officials and claimed that the defeat was not a

²⁵ ION DIMITRESCU, Spre Graal [To the Graal], in: *Ibid.*, 5 June 1933, p. 1.

²⁶ GRIGORE CARACOSTEA, Selecționarea [The Selection], in: *Ecoul Sportiv*, 29 March 1924, p. 1.

²⁷ SAȘA SEVEREANU, Turneurile Chinezelui [The Tournaments of Chinezul] in: *Comedia. Teatru, muzică, sport, film* [The Comedy. Theatre, Music, Sport, Film], 17 October 1927, p. 5.

²⁸ De vorbă cu un fost 'as' al football-ului românesc [Discussion with a Former 'Ace' of the Romanian Football], in: *Sportul Național* [National Sport], 8 July 1935, p. 3.

²⁹ IOAN CHIRILĂ, Un veac de fotbal românesc [A Century of Romanian Football], in: *Secolul 20* [The 20th Century] (1998), pp. 146-173, 397-400.

sign of chauvinist behaviour on the part of the players.³⁰ A few years later, Adalbert Ströck (born in a Transylvanian town in a mixed German-Hungarian family) went to play professional football in Budapest for the Hungarian national side.³¹

An incident which occurred at an international game in 1932 marked a second wave of press campaigns for the exclusion of non-Romanians, e.g. of the Hungarian players.³² After a hard defeat on home ground to Poland, the goalkeeper Istvan Czinczer was accused of deliberately poor play, motivated by personal vengeance after he was accused of insulting Romania and the Romanians.³³ The violent manner was perhaps appropriate for a press campaign, but for the contemporary researcher it could be interpreted as an example both of nationalism and regionalism, characteristic of the 'Old Kingdom's' inexperience with diversity.

The 1932 campaign reveals a point of view ignored by the adherents of the gradual or radical 'Rumanisation': the human feelings of the players. In their defence rose the shy voice of the president of the Football Association, the moderate Aurel Leucuția. A few days before the kick-off of the 1933 Bucharest Balkan Cup, he addressed an open letter to the public, expressing his trust that the 'Rumanisation' would be a process of pure sporting and not political selection. Leucuția, whose successors were more keen to focus on real political issues, ended by appealing to the understanding of the public, because 'the players are normal people, with different moods, in good or bad shape, some optimistic, some pessimistic'.³⁴

Although the 'Rumanisation' discussions began before the 1924 Olympiad, and despite various attempts, an official decision was taken only 11

³⁰ Cum am devenit stea. Cariera lui Strök Albi, povestită de el însuși [How Did I Become a Star. The Career of Ströck Albi as Told by Himself], in: *Rampa*, 23 September 1928, p. 3.

³¹ MIHAI IONESCU/MIRCEA TUDORAN, Fotbal de la A la Z. Fotbalul românesc de-a lungul anilor [Football from A to Z. The Romanian Football Along the Years], Bucharest 1984, p. 401.

³² ION DIMITRESCU, Elita țării sau pleava Ardealului? Mai pot fi tolerați mercenarii maghiari în echipa națională? [Motherland's Elite or Transylvanian Husk? May the Hungarian Mercenaries Still Be Tolerated in The National Team], in: *Curentul*, 21 October 1932, p. 6.

³³ ION DIMITRESCU, Sub domnia regelui restaurator... Huiduiți-i!!!... Culorile naționale românești pângărite de un nemernic [In the Age of the Restoring King... Hoot Them!... The Romanian National Colours Sooted by a Bustard], in: *Ibid.*, 4 October 1932, p. 2.

³⁴ DR. AUREL LEUCUȚIA, Un apel în vederea Balcaniadei [An Appeal before the Balkan Cup], in: *Rampa*, 3 June 1933, p. 2; ION DIMITRESCU, A sportban nacionalismus!... Și d. Leucuția s-a convertit la românizarea echipei!... [In sport is nationalism! Mr. Leucuția Converted to Rumanisation], in: *Curentul*, 2 June 1933, p. 6. The malicious header in Hungarian must be highlighted.

years after. In the meanwhile, Bucharest football strengthened its position towards the Transylvanian one, while the other regions were still unable to compete against the two rivals.

The football Balkan Cup in Athens of 1934 – played from December 1934 until January 1935 – announced the above-mentioned decision taken by the Romanian Football Association in March of the same year. Romania went to Athens in the position of trophy holder, as the 1933 Bucharest edition was won in an enthusiastic manner, but ended the tournament in a disastrous third place out of four participants (Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania and Greece). A few months later, at the Balkan Cup in Sofia, the ‘8+3 formula’ was formally used for the first time with Romania ending in last place. If the defeat against Yugoslavia and even the draw against Greece were tolerable, the match lost to Bulgaria provoked the fury of public opinion. The match was compared with the 1916 battle of Turtucaia, when the Bulgarian army humiliated the Romanian one.³⁵

This humiliation widened the division between adherents of the ethnicity criterion and those of the criterion of individual value. The title chosen by a journalist from Bucharest points to the unreasonable political decision of the Football Association. ‘Between 8-3 and 8-2’ (the goal-average of the team) stood the best Romanian player of the competition, Augustin Juhasz, of Hungarian origin and drafted from an allegedly chauvinist club (Athletic Club Oradea).³⁶ Most importantly, the series of defeats in the Balkan Cup diminished Romania’s chances of joining the highly prestigious Central European Cup and becoming a desirable partner for the best national teams from Europe. In the last Balkan Cup of the interwar years, Romania won the competition again on home ground without making use of the ‘8+3 formula’. The decision was never officially revised and the ‘Rumanisation’ of the national football squad remained a recurrent topic, which seemed to come to a decisive stage only at the end of the 1930s, when King Carol II decided to play the card of nationalism.

If the nationalistic discourse was maintained, the compromise solution found by the Football Association was to try a gradual transformation instead of a radical one. The idea had to be put into practice by the creation

³⁵ Turtucaia sportului românesc [Romanian’s Sport Turtucaia], in: *Sportul Național [National Sport]*, 25 June 1935, p. 1.

³⁶ A. NOL, Între 8-3 și 8-2 [Between 8-3 and 8-2], in: *Vremea [The Time]*, 30 June 1935, p. 11.

of a B-Team, composed only of ethnic Romanian players.³⁷ In some cases, the Romanian Football Association had deliberately announced that the '8+3 Rumanisation formula' would not be used, in order to have the best team possible on field.³⁸

Voices asking for radical measures grew in number and claimed that the spectators bore much of the guilt for the indecision of the officials. The love of the crowds for such an ethnically mixed team was considered as a mistake and at the same time one of the evils brought by sport, in this case football.³⁹ Other authors made the 'Rumanisation' of all football (not only of the national team) a personal crusade. The writer Camil Petrescu, considered to be one of the founders of the modern psychological novel in Romanian literature, a passionate football supporter, was among the first to advocate the idea of reshaping the sport along nationalist lines. In an article published under a pseudonym in 1937 he declared himself satisfied to see club teams able to have almost 100 per cent Romanian line ups as a result of his personal campaign, started in 1930.⁴⁰

Writing in 1935, Virgil Economu, appointed four years later as manager of the national team, considered that 'to represent the Romanian kin through its real sons' was a major task in the context of the transfer of the conflicts between nations from the battlefields on sport tracks.⁴¹ Two years later Economu included 'Rumanisation' in a four points programme designed for the national football squad.⁴²

More reasonable voices tried to explain that the '+3' itself was a personal humiliation for each ethnic minority player, who would be openly considered 'a second hand citizen' and thus a personal offence would be extended to an entire minority. Another realistic argument was that an officially intolerant policy in the field of sport would create new tensions

³⁷ D. V. Tilea a făcut un larg expozeu al hotărârilor Comitetului Federal [Mr. V. Tilea about the decision of the F.A. Committee], in: *România [Romania]*, 4 August 1938, p. 6; România va alinia o echipă pur românească împotriva Iugoslaviei B [Romania Will Line Up a Pure Romanian Team against Yugoslavia B], in: *Ibid.*, 8 August 1938, p. 4.

³⁸ D. General Gabriel Marinescu și matchul Iugoslavia-România [General Gabriel Marinescu and the Match Yugoslavia-Romania], in: *Timpul [The Times]*, 7 July 1940, p. 12. The mentioned General was the president of the Romanian Football Association.

³⁹ NICOLAE IORGA, Nu-i recunoaștem... [We Do not Admit Them], in: *Neamul românesc [The Romanian Kin]*, 28 June 1936.

⁴⁰ N. GRAMATIC (CAMIL PETRESCU), Ca să se știe... [To Be Known], in: *Timpul*, 22 May 1937, p. 8.

⁴¹ VIRGIL ECONOMU, Fotbal. Studiu documentar și critic [Football. A Documentary and Critical Study], Bucharest 1935, p. 36.

⁴² VIRGIL ECONOMU, Odată pentru totdeauna [Once and for All], in: *Sportul Capitalei [The Sport in the Capital City]*, 11 March 1937, pp. 1, 3.

and therefore obstruct the already delicate relations between state and minorities.⁴³

Perhaps the best indicator of the vague policy of the FA was the reaction of the players itself. Apart from the allegations of deliberate match sabotage, which cannot be trusted as a completely credible source, I could not document any case of refusal to answer the call for test and official matches. The Transylvanian clubs continued to recruit players without making an issue of their nationality, whilst adopting the 'Rumanisation' discourse.⁴⁴ Actually, some of the best teams of the 1920s and 1930s were those built on the street or district teams. The case of the capital of Banat, Timișoara, the core of the Romanian football, is eloquent. Although some local amateur and professional clubs were formally created to contribute to the 'Rumanisation' of football, most players came from the poor and ethnically mixed worker districts of the city.⁴⁵ Besides the good football played, the ethnic mixture seemed to be a condition for the success of the team among fans. The local press, be it German or Romanian language, was totally supportive of the team, considering that it represented both the city and the nation and was not a political experiment.⁴⁶

In the 1960s, best-selling books of interviews with the football stars of the interwar period were published. The atmosphere depicted by the former players can be simply described as friendly, a fact confirmed by press reports of the 1930s.⁴⁷ Many of the interviewees remembered they grew up together on the playgrounds of poor city districts with their future colleagues.⁴⁸ Thus, the success of the Transylvanian clubs was not motivated only by strong financial back-up, as was the case for their Bucharest coun-

⁴³ În preajma jocului cu Cehoslovacia [Before the Match vs. Czechoslovakia], in: *Buletinul săptămânii* [The Week's Review], 11 April 1937, pp. 39-40; 'Jucători străini în echipele noastre de fotbal' [Foreign Players in Our Football Teams], in: *Ibid.*, 10 April 1938, p. 26.

⁴⁴ Ripensia se reorganizează pe baze noi [Ripensia Will Be Reorganized on New Basis], in: *România*, 27 August 1939, p. 2.

⁴⁵ IOAN CHIRILĂ, Finala se joacă astăzi [The Final Will Be Played Today], Bucharest 1966, p. 90.

⁴⁶ Großer Erfolg unserer Fußballsportes, in: *Sport-Anzeiger*, 10 December 1934, p. 1; S. MAREȘ, Victorii salvatoare [Saving Victories], in: *Vremea*, 3 April 1932, p. 1.

⁴⁷ C. DEMETRIADE, La Banky, cu echipa României în preajma primului match [In Banky, with the Romanian Team before the First Match], in: *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 17 June 1935, p. 1.

⁴⁸ CRISTOFOR CRISTI ALEXIU, Ripensia. Nostalgii fotbalistice [Ripensia. Football Nostalgies], Timisoara, 1992, p. 59; GEORGE MIHALACHE, 'Il Dio' și 'diavolii' din fața porții... Amintirile lui Mircea David, fostul portar al echipei naționale de fotbal [Il Dio and the Devils of the Penalty Area... Memories of Mircea David, the Former Goalkeeper of the National Football Team], Bucharest 1979, p. 79.

terparts,⁴⁹ but lay rather in the very social structure of the province and in the peaceful coexistence of different populations.

5. Conclusions: the ‘Rumanisation’ of Football as an Incoherent Project

The creation of an all-Romanian state in 1918 did not bring the fulfilment of the process of nation building. This was as clear to the theoreticians of the interwar age⁵⁰ as it is for the researchers today.⁵¹ The unification of economic or educational systems was considered by the cultural and political elites as complete only if it was followed by the so-called ‘unification of the soul’. Sport, and particularly football, was considered, alongside with the educational system, as a proper way to invent the conscience of belonging to the Romanian nation and state.⁵²

The ambiguous attitude of the football officials and enthusiasts reflects the inconsequence of Romanian society in dealing with ethnic minorities. The obtuse cry of many commentators of the time, namely ‘let us loose with a 100 per cent Romanian (e.g. Bucharest) squad’,⁵³ illustrates the dilemmas of a society unprepared to cope with the existence of large as well as culturally and politically well-organised ethnic minorities. Twenty years after the Union of 1918, the allegations of natural born treason and malevolence towards Romania were a constant, when speaking of ethnic minority sportspersons.

The policy of the Bucharest-based and controlled Football Association can be described as dual. Mistrust of the good faith of ethnic minority players was not fake, but at the same time their position in the national squad remained unchanged. The feelings of the public were also divided. Demands for radical measures co-existed with the more rational stances, which argued that the task of sport was to create inner unity and not to foster the internal disagreements of a society.

⁴⁹ R. SITARU, *Pe oraşe conduce Bucureştiul...* [Bucharest Leads in the Top of the Sportive Cities...], in: *Sportul Capitalei*, 16 December 1937, p. 4.

⁵⁰ DIMITRIE GUSTI, *Sociologia naţiunii* [Sociology of the Nation], in: *Opere* [Works], vol. IV, Bucharest 1970, pp. 7-95.

⁵¹ IRINA LIVEZEANU, *Cultură şi naţionalism în România Mare 1918-1930* [Cultural Politics in Greater Romania 1918-1930], Bucharest 1998, p. 27.

⁵² *Anuarul sporturilor pe 1939-1940*, p. 104.

⁵³ A. NOL, *Naţionala blestemată* [The Doomed National Squad], in: *Vremea*, 3 June 1934, p. 11.