

SOCIO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND AND THE HISTORICAL-CULTURAL PHENOMENON OF FC CRVENA ZVEZDA 1990/91 EUROPEAN CUP TRIUMPH

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ABSTRACT

The victory of Crvena Zvezda (widely known internationally as FC Red Star) in the 1990/91 European Cup represents an unparalleled and landmark achievement in the history of Yugoslav and Eastern European sport. This victory was not merely an athletic accomplishment; it carried profound socio-political and cultural implications for Serbia and the broader Yugoslav federation. In a

moment when rising nationalist currents inflamed hostilities among the region's peoples, Zvezda's triumph represented one of the rare instances in which diverse communities found a fleeting point of unity. The analysis employs a qualitative research design based on secondary sources (newspapers, books, academic publications) and relies on an interdisciplinary framework that combines sociological, political, and cultural analysis. Findings indicate that studies of sport in conflict-affected societies can deepen understanding of identity formation and social cohesion. Through qualitative content and critical discourse analysis, the study traces the socio-political context and historical-cultural dynamics that shaped Zvezda's 1991 European Cup victory. Integrating historical-cultural and socio-political perspectives, the paper argues that this victory functioned not only as a sporting achievement but also as a political and symbolic event. The research explores how these dimensions influenced Yugoslav society, the trajectory of the club, its supporters, and broader public reactions, clarifying the enduring impact of football on collective identity and social cohesion in the Balkans. Its legacy continues to influence perceptions of national identity and collective memory in the region, emphasising football's role as a medium for both social cohesion and historical reflection. Focused on 1990/1991 and based on secondary sources, the study elevates Zvezda's European triumph to a defining symbol of collective identity at the threshold of Yugoslavia's dissolution - a legacy still echoing through the Balkans' social and cultural consciousness.

Keywords: Crvena Zvezda, European Cup, Football, Politics, Dissolution of Yugoslavia.

INTRODUCTION

The late 20th century witnessed profound political unrest in Yugoslavia, culminating in its eventual disintegration. In the years preceding the Yugoslav war, the political situation across the federation became increasingly volatile. Nationalist rhetoric and the deliberate fuelling of ethnic tensions created an atmosphere of growing mistrust among different republics and communities. Within this context, football emerged as an important arena for constructing national identity and became a symbolic extension of broader political rivalries. Crvena Zvezda was composed of players of various national backgrounds, whose collective pursuit of success personified an ideal of coexistence that sharply contrasted the political fragmentation around them. This multiethnic composition stood as a powerful emblem of coexistence and cohesion, amplifying the symbolic weight of the team's success in an era dominated by nationalist polarisation. The 1990/91 European Cup triumph had enormous significance for the identity and morale of people across Yugoslavia. This study examines the socio-political background and historical-cultural phenomenon surrounding Zvezda's victory, investigating football's complex entanglement with politics, culture, and identity in the final phase of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The early 1990s brought rapid transformations in football, alongside technological and media changes that reshaped the sport globally. Yet Zvezda's 1991 triumph endures not only as a landmark of Serbian sporting history but also as one of the most symbolically charged moments in the socio-political history of late Yugoslavia. Occurring amid profound political and economic crises, marked by inflation, rising unemployment, and the fragmentation of federal authority, the victory provided many citizens with a temporary emotional respite and a rare moment of collective pride. It momentarily diverted public attention from mounting divisions and deepening anxieties. However, the meaning of Crvena Zvezda's triumph extended far beyond sport [1]. The victory sparked mass celebrations across the country and

unintentionally reduced tensions among various ethnic groups, at least for a brief moment. As early signs of nationalism and separatism intensified, the success of a shared sports team illustrated the potential of collective symbols to foster temporary unity within an increasingly fractured society. The event also reflected deeper cultural currents of an era. In socialist Yugoslavia, sport (especially football) was not merely a pastime but an integral part of social and cultural life. Zvezda's success echoed broader cultural transformations, including the expansion of popular culture, entertainment, and youth movements. The club became a symbol not only of sporting prestige but also of freedom, aspiration, and cultural vitality - mirroring the evolving social landscape of the late Yugoslav period.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of the socio-political and cultural significance of Crvena Zvezda's 1991 European Cup triumph requires a theoretically grounded approach that situates football within broader processes of identity construction, nationalism, and symbolic production. In this sense, sport is not treated as an autonomous or isolated domain, but rather as a socially embedded field in which political meanings are produced, negotiated, and contested. Within the framework of the sociology of sport - sport represents a structured social institution that both reflects and reproduces dominant social relations, ideologies, and power configurations. Football, as the most socially pervasive sport in Europe, occupies a particularly significant role in shaping collective identities and mediating social tensions. In societies undergoing crisis, such as late socialist Yugoslavia, sport may function as a symbolic arena in which broader societal conflicts are condensed and expressed in emotionally intensified forms. The relationship between nationalism and sport has emerged as an inexhaustible field of inquiry across the social sciences and humanities, particularly over the past two decades. Following the collapse of communism and the profound reconfiguration of the global geopolitical landscape, sport has increasingly assumed the role of a symbolic

instrument through which newly formed nation-states seek to assert and legitimise themselves within the international arena. In this context, sport becomes not merely a site of competition, but a medium of political visibility and identity construction. From the perspective of the sociology of sport, sport cannot be understood as an autonomous sphere, but rather as a socially embedded practice shaped by the wider structures and dynamics of the society in which it unfolds. Consequently, analytical attention must be directed beyond its surface manifestations toward its deeper social meanings, which are embedded within broader political, cultural, and historical processes [2].

This perspective is further developed through the work of Srđan Vrcan [3], who conceptualises football in the Yugoslav context as a site of national mobilisation and political articulation. Vrcan's analysis of the late Yugoslav period emphasises the transformation of football stadiums into spaces of symbolic conflict, where competing national narratives were not only expressed but actively constructed. In this sense, football did not merely mirror political processes; it actively participated in their production, particularly through the ritual practices, chants, and visual symbols of supporters, as well as through media representations of sporting events. Complementing this approach highlights the role of sport as a medium of symbolic identification, through which collective emotions such as pride, belonging, and solidarity are articulated. In periods of social fragmentation, these symbolic mechanisms gain heightened importance, as they provide individuals with frameworks for interpreting rapidly changing political realities. Football clubs, in this context, may function as carriers of collective identity, embodying both historical continuity and contemporary political aspirations. Building upon these theoretical foundations, this study adopts an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates insights from cultural sociology, nationalism studies, and discourse analysis. Central to this approach is the understanding that meaning is not inherent in events themselves, but is constructed through discursive practices. Therefore, the triumph of

Crvena Zvezda in 1991 is analysed not only as a historical event, but as a discursively mediated phenomenon, whose significance emerged through competing interpretations articulated by different social actors. In line with this, the study draws upon the principles of critical discourse analysis, particularly the notion that language serves as a key mechanism in the production of social reality. Discourses are understood here as structured systems of meaning through which events are framed, interpreted, and legitimised. Through this multi-layered discursive framework, the study aims to capture the dynamic and contested nature of meaning-making processes surrounding Zvezda's victory. Rather than assuming a singular or unified interpretation, the analysis recognises that the event functioned simultaneously as a symbol of Yugoslav unity, a marker of emerging Serbian national identity, and a site of political contestation across the region.

Finally, the concept of collective identity serves as a central analytical category in this study. Collective identity is understood as a socially constructed and historically contingent phenomenon, shaped through shared narratives, symbols, and emotional investments. In the context of late Yugoslavia, where institutional and political structures were rapidly disintegrating, football provided one of the few remaining spaces in which a sense of collective belonging could be temporarily sustained or reconfigured. In this regard, Crvena Zvezda's 1991 triumph can be interpreted as a moment of symbolic condensation, in which multiple and often contradictory meanings were compressed into a single event. It represented, at once, a vestige of Yugoslav unity, an affirmation of Serbian identity, and a reflection of broader geopolitical transformations in Europe at the end of the Cold War. The theoretical framework outlined above enables a systematic analysis of these overlapping dimensions, positioning the triumph not merely as a historical episode, but as a complex socio-political and cultural phenomenon embedded in the processes of identity formation and discursive struggle.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative interpretivist research design, employing a historically bounded case study approach to examine the socio-political and cultural significance of Crvena Zvezda's triumph in the 1991 European Cup. The primary objective is to analyse how this sporting achievement acquired political, cultural, and symbolic meanings during the period of systemic crisis and political disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Given the historical and interpretive nature of the study, the analysis acknowledges the researcher's positionality and the inherently constructed character of historical narratives. The research is grounded in an interdisciplinary analytical framework that integrates historical-cultural analysis with socio-political analysis. Historical-cultural analysis was employed to reconstruct the political, institutional, and social context of late socialist Yugoslavia, with particular attention to the rise of nationalist politics, the role of state and media institutions, and the historical development and institutional positioning of Zvezda within Yugoslav football. A detailed chronological reconstruction of socio-political events surrounding Zvezda's campaign toward the European Cup final was undertaken in order to establish the temporal and structural conditions within which the triumph unfolded.

Socio-political analysis conceptualised football as a cultural field in which processes of identity formation, collective emotion, and symbolic representation are articulated and contested. This perspective guided the examination of supporter culture, rituals, visual symbols, and performative practices associated with the victory, as well as the interpretative frameworks through which political elites, media institutions, and public commentators framed the event and attributed meaning to it. The study relies exclusively on secondary data sources selected on the basis of theoretical relevance, analytical reliability, and contextual proximity to the event. These sources include:

- Print media archives (*Politika*, *Večernje novosti*, *Borba*, *Sportski žurnal*, and *Zvezdina revija*) published between

October 1990 and June 1991, encompassing pre-final reporting, immediate post-final reactions, and early retrospective interpretations;

- Peer-reviewed academic literature addressing the dissolution of Yugoslavia, nationalism, football culture, and political symbolism;
- Selected monographs focusing on Yugoslav political history and the socio-political role of football in the region.

Data analysis was conducted through qualitative content analysis, employing a coding framework informed both deductively by established theories of nationalism, collective identity, and cultural sociology of sport, and inductively by recurring themes emerging from the data, including symbolic language and patterns of emotional framing such as pride, unity, and anxiety. Coding was conducted iteratively, with categories refined through repeated engagement with the data. In addition, critical discourse analysis was applied to examine narrative structures, framing strategies, and the discursive authority of key actors. This approach enabled an exploration of how Zvezda's sporting success was mobilised to produce, reinforce, or contest political meanings during a period of profound social and political transformation.

The corpus of analysis was constructed through a purposive selection of sources, including print media, academic literature, and monographs relevant to the period between October 1990 and June 1991. Rather than aiming for exhaustive coverage of all available materials, the selection was guided by criteria of thematic relevance, discursive influence, and temporal proximity to key events. The analytical framework was structured around several core categories: (1) representations of sporting success, (2) narratives of Yugoslav unity, (3) articulations of Serbian national identity, (4) processes of political instrumentalisation, (5) media framing strategies, and (6) elements of collective memory. These categories were developed through a combination of theoretical grounding and inductive coding.

The results were derived through an iterative process of qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis, in which recurring patterns, narrative structures, and symbolic meanings were identified, compared, and interpreted within their broader socio-political context.

RESULTS

The 1980s in Yugoslavia were marked as a turning point, mostly characterised by rising nationalism and ethnic tensions. The death of Josip Broz Tito in 1980 left a power vacuum, which in turn led to increased regionalism, nationalism and the eventual outbreak of war in the early 1990s. Understanding this historical background is crucial for contextualising Zvezda's success within a narrative of national pride and resilience. Against its socio-political backdrop, Zvezda's 1991 European Cup triumph constituted a distinct historical and cultural phenomenon. After Steaua Bucharest's victory in 1986, this was only the second (and ultimately the last) time that a club from Eastern Europe captured the most prestigious trophy in European football. It demonstrated convincingly that football in Eastern Europe was not inherently inferior to its Western counterpart, despite Western leagues possessing incomparably greater financial resources and far more developed institutional infrastructures for player development. Zvezda eventually triumphed in a nervous penalty shootout, as the Macedonian Darko Pančev scored the decisive penalty, in this way, Yugoslav football's finest hour came less than a month before the state fell apart. The triumph of Zvezda in the 1991 European Cup can be understood as a historical-cultural phenomenon for several interrelated reasons. First, the victory of a Yugoslav club in Europe's premier club competition represented an extraordinary success for the entirety of Yugoslavia, which at that moment was already engulfed in profound political and economic turmoil. Second, Zvezda's triumph bore special significance for the Serbian people, who were facing severe uncertainty amid the rise of nationalism and the imminent wars in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The victory unified Serbs across

all Yugoslav republics and offered a rare moment of collective hope, while Zvezda's players (of diverse national backgrounds) emerged as symbols of unity and pride. The triumph also testified to the rich footballing history and tradition of the Balkans, elements often neglected or underestimated in Western European football discourse. In essence, Zvezda's victory stands as a historical and cultural phenomenon because of its complexity and its multilayered symbolic meanings, both at the time of the event and in subsequent decades. Its impact extended far beyond sport, influencing wider social and cultural dynamics and disrupting long-established interpretative frameworks. Globally, the victory unfolded at a transformative moment in world history. The Cold War had ended, the Berlin Wall had fallen (leading to the reunification of East and West Germany) and the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia opened new political horizons in Europe. In this context, Zvezda's triumph was often read as a grand symbolic victory of Eastern over Western European football, and by extension, a metaphorical victory of the Eastern block over the Western one. Additionally, the triumph triggered historical-cultural reverberations. Zvezda, long associated with socialist Yugoslavia, stood at the threshold of a new era. The European Cup victory thus marked the end of one epoch and the beginning of another - for the club, state, and perhaps even for football itself. In a period marked by accelerating political disintegration and the imminent outbreak of civil war in Yugoslavia, Crvena Zvezda embarked on its historic journey toward the European Champion Clubs' Cup final. The campaign began on September 19, 1990, when Zvezda hosted Grasshopper Club Zürich at Marakana Stadium and drew 1:1 after a weak performance. In the two weeks preceding the return leg in Zurich on October 3, several destabilising events unfolded across Yugoslavia. On September 26, the Hajduk-Partizan match in Split was interrupted by Torcida supporters, who burned the SFRY flag. On September 27, protests erupted in Glina, Petrinja, and Dvor na Uni, where citizens blocked roads and demanded protection from the Yugoslav People's Army

(JNA) against Croatian police actions. On September 28, Serbia adopted a new Constitution, redefining itself as a civic republic and abolishing the statehood attributes of its provinces, while also changing its name to the Republic of Serbia. On September 30, the Serbian National Council initiated the process of Serbian political and territorial autonomy within Croatia. Against this backdrop, Zvezda delivered a commanding performance in Zurich on October 3, winning 4:1. In the round of sixteen against Glasgow Rangers, two crucial developments occurred prior to the first leg in Belgrade on October 24. On October 13, large quantities of weapons entered Yugoslavia through the Goričan-Letenye border crossing, destined for the HDZ and Croatian police. On October 19, the JNA Counterintelligence Service secretly recorded Martin Špegelj outlining plans for armed confrontation with Serbs and the JNA, as well as illegal arms distribution. Zvezda then convincingly defeated Rangers 3:0 at Marakana, before drawing 1:1 at Ibrox Park on November 7, securing a quarterfinal place. During the winter of 1990, Yugoslavia's political crisis deepened. On December 8th, Serbia held multi-party elections, decisively won by the Socialist Party of Serbia, with Slobodan Milošević elected president. Between December 13th and 21st, a sequence of municipal and regional decisions led to the proclamation of the Serbian Autonomous Region of Krajina (SAO Krajina). On December 22nd, Croatia adopted its „Christmas Constitution“, redefining itself as a national state of the Croatian people and stripping Serbs of constituent status. Slovenia declared sovereignty on December 23rd, and on December 26th Serbia withdrew federal foreign currency reserves, effectively collapsing the SFRY's monetary system. In January 1991, the SFRY Presidency ordered the disarmament of paramilitary formations on January 9th, a decision rejected by Croatia and Slovenia. On January 12th, CIA agents arrived via Italy, traveling through Sarajevo, Ljubljana, and Zagreb. On January 25th, Television Belgrade broadcast the Špegelj tapes, exposing illegal Croatian arming; that same day, intelligence associate Zvonko

Ostojić was killed in Borovo Naselje, while Macedonia declared independence. Throughout February 1991, parallel processes of dissociation accelerated. Declarations on Serbian rights and sovereignty were adopted on February 16th (Donji Lapac) and February 26th (Osijek), while Croatia formally suspended federal laws on February 20th and initiated procedures for Yugoslavia's dissolution on February 21st. Bosnia and Herzegovina debated independence on February 26th, without Serbian participation. On February 28th, SAO Krajina adopted a resolution on dissociation from Croatia. The crisis escalated into open violence in March 1991. Armed clashes occurred in Pakrac on March 1st. Amid this instability, Crvena Zvezda defeated Dynamo Dresden 3:0 at Marakana on March 6th, before mass anti-government demonstrations shook Belgrade on March 9th, resulting in two deaths and dozens injured. Further key events followed: the arming of Croats in Bogdanovci on March 10th, the failed attempt to introduce a state of emergency on March 12th, and amendments redefining SAO Krajina on March 18th. On March 20th, Crvena Zvezda advanced to the semifinals after the Dresden return leg was abandoned and awarded 3:0 in its favour. The Plitvice Lakes incident [4] on March 31st, preceded by earlier tensions in Pakrac and the occupation of the national park on March 29th, marked the first fatal clash of the emerging war. Croatian police operations ordered by Prime Minister Josip Manolić resulted in two deaths (one on each side) an event remembered by Serbs as „Bloody Easter“. The JNA intervened shortly thereafter. On April 1st, SAO Krajina's Executive Council declared unification with Serbia, and on April 2nd, proceedings began against Martin Špegelj, who fled to Austria. Despite escalating violence, Zvezda achieved a historic 2:1 victory over Bayern Munich in the first semifinal leg on April 10th. Political and ethnic tensions continued to intensify: Serbian-owned businesses in Vukovar were bombed beginning April 15th, while Crvena Zvezda secured its place in the European Cup final after a dramatic 2:2 draw with Bayern at Marakana on April 24th. In the final weeks before Bari, Yugoslavia descended further

into chaos. SAO Krajina's Assembly was constituted on April 30th. Killings occurred on May 1st in Polača and Bršadin. On May 2nd, clashes in Borovo Selo, the anti-Serb pogrom in Zadar, and the founding of the Patriotic League in Sarajevo marked decisive steps toward war. A referendum in SAO Krajina followed on May 12th. Croatia held an independence referendum on May 19th, the same day SAO Krajina adopted its Constitutional Law in Knin. Thus, Zvezda reached the European Cup final on May 29th, 1991, while the state in which that triumph was forged stood on the brink of irreversible collapse. Crvena Zvezda's triumph in Bari in 1991, in a certain way, marks the end of analogue football and of the raw emotions and passion tied to the game itself. Over the next three decades, it would assume the contours of a designer drug and ultimately become a navigational religion in the hands of large multinational corporations [5]. From a sociological perspective, the 1991 European Cup victory of Zvezda can, and indeed must be interpreted as far more than a sporting achievement. Zvezda's triumph represents one of the greatest achievements in Yugoslav football [6]. Major football events often shape collective identity, articulate national emotions, and provide symbolic resources for communities in crisis [7]. Zvezda's success on the international stage thus carried a broader socio-political resonance at a moment when Yugoslavia was entering its final and most turbulent historical chapter [8]. The Serbian identity of Zvezda is deeply entrenched in its historical legacy [9]. Zvezda's triumph in the 1991 European Cup carries political significance in the context of Yugoslavia's dissolution and the onset of regional conflicts: The motivational leitmotif, captured in just a few sentences by the legendary Zvezda general secretary Vladimir Cvetković, a man without whom this unforgettable Zvezda generation would never have been formed, still echoes today, vividly encapsulating the contemporary moment: Yugoslavia has collapsed. Serbia is in chaos. This is not a match for a trophy; this is not a game for a cup. This is a match for the people [10]. The triumph strengthened a sense of national belonging and collective pride among the

Serbian population, particularly at a time when the Yugoslav federation was disintegrating. More than a simple victory, it became a symbolic assertion of strength and resilience among a people who felt politically threatened and whose national interests appeared increasingly endangered. Football in Yugoslavia transcended mere sport; it was a vehicle for expressing national identity. Crvena Zvezda, founded in 1945, became emblematic of Serbian identity and pride. The club's supporters, known as the famed *Delije*, played a pivotal role in fostering a sense of community, particularly in an ethnically diverse society [11]. Zvezda played an attractive, offensively oriented style largely at odds with the defensive and increasingly decadent tactical systems prevalent in Europe at the time. Their particular brand of football inspired other clubs, while the powerful presence of their supporters became a continental phenomenon and an influential model for fan groups across the world [12]. Third, the squad itself was multiethnic, built from players originating across the Yugoslav space. This composition evoked an image, however temporary, of Yugoslav unity and cooperation at a moment when the federal project was collapsing. The triumph also signalled a cultural efflorescence of the Serbian nation at a moment when it sought to redefine its place within Europe. Zvezda embodied the culture and sporting ethos of the Serbian people, frequently associated with the passionate Balkan temperament and an unyielding fighting spirit. Moreover, the victory solidified the cultic status of football within Serbia and the broader region. Football in the SFRY during the years immediately preceding the outbreak of war (1990-1991) reflected the broader socio-political climate of the country [13]. Clubs were deeply entangled with political elites and national identities, contributing to the intensification of nationalist sentiment. At that time, the largest club in Yugoslavia was Crvena Zvezda, which embodied the symbolic core of Serbian football and was inevitably linked to Serbian political elites [14]. A significant portion of the club's supporters (*Delije*) were known for their nationalist tendencies. The socio-political dimension of the victory can be

examined on two levels: the local and the global. Locally, the triumph was significant for the Serbian political elite, which was at that time involved in the (forced) process of creating a new Serbian state. The dissolution of Yugoslavia was fully underway, and ethnic tensions were escalating. In this context, Zvezda functioned as a symbol of Serbian identity, and its European triumph was interpreted as a broader affirmation of Serbian collective strength. Nevertheless, the political dimension of Zvezda's triumph was not unanimous. While the fans celebrated, politicians attempted to use this success for their own political goals. In Croatia, as in other parts of the former Yugoslavia, Zvezda's 1991 European Cup triumph was experienced with mixed feelings. Given the tensions and political strains already emerging in the public sphere, the victory of the largest Yugoslav club provoked very different reactions. Ironically, the club simultaneously represented two mutually opposing narratives: the fading ideal of Yugoslav unity and the assertion of Serbian dominance. This duality became unmistakably visible at the final in Bari [15], where Zvezda's supporters stretched an enormous Serbian tricolour across the southern stand of Stadio San Nicola, offering a symbolic backdrop to the region's rapidly transforming political landscape. This triumph left a deep mark on the collective memory, both of supporters and of society as a whole. However, beyond its sporting dimension, this triumph also has its enduring legacy, related to the political, historical, and cultural dimensions and background. It is believed that Zvezda's triumph in the 1991 European Cup represented a legacy victory of the Serbian people, arriving at a moment when the nation was confronted with major political and social challenges. The findings can be analytically grouped into several dominant discursive patterns. First, the triumph was framed as a Yugoslav sporting success, emphasising collective pride and unity across republics. Second, it was increasingly reinterpreted as an element of Serbian national identity, particularly in the context of rising political tensions. Third, the victory became subject to processes of political instrumentalisation, as

different actors sought to appropriate its symbolic capital. Finally, it entered the domain of collective memory, where its meanings continued to evolve beyond the immediate historical moment.

DISCUSSIONS

Crvena Zvezda's 1991 triumph was perceived worldwide as a great sporting success and one of the biggest surprises and sensations in football history. This success was particularly significant because it occurred at a moment when Yugoslavia was in political crisis and at the beginning of war. Therefore, Zvezda's triumph was received as something that lifted the morale of the Serbian people at a time when they faced severe challenges. At the same time, however, there were also those who tried to politicize this success and present it as a triumph of Serbian nationalism. Nevertheless, in the global context, Zvezda was seen as a representative of Yugoslavia, not just Serbia, which signalled that sport could serve as a means to overcome national divisions. It is also important to note that Zvezda players were respected and valued worldwide for their exceptional skill and talent, regardless of their nationality. Overall, Zvezda's 1991 European Cup triumph was perceived globally primarily as a sporting achievement and as proof that football can be a space where people unite irrespective of political or national affiliation. Among the general public, Zvezda's 1991 European Cup triumph was not disputed [16]. The political backdrop of Zvezda's success, however, was far from straightforward. At that time, Serbia pursued political ambitions to preserve a unified Yugoslavia, and Zvezda's triumph was leveraged to reinforce Serbian national identity and establish a symbolic continuity between the club and the Serbian population throughout Yugoslavia [17]. The authorities in Belgrade employed the club's achievement as a political instrument to project an image of a strong and successful state, portraying the success of the multinational Zvezda as a product of character and patriotism. Conversely, Croatia was well along the path to independence, seeking international recognition [18]. Croatian media, through tendentious headlines and unprofessional

reporting, attempted to undermine Zvezda's unified achievement, framing it as a consequence of political manipulation by Serbian authorities, an argument that was, in every respect, unfounded. Meanwhile, Zvezda supporters met with Serbian leaders, and certain fan groups openly expressed support for Serbian nationalists [19]. All this unfolded amid a tense political climate in Yugoslavia. Nationalist tensions between Serbs and Croats were escalating daily, and Zvezda's success was vulgarised in Croatian public discourse, amplifying existing fears and the sense of Serbian national identity and the consolidation of Serbia's position within Yugoslavia. Despite these political implications, Zvezda's victory also had positive consequences, explicitly demonstrating that Yugoslav football could remain highly competitive among Europe's elite clubs.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the triumph of Crvena Zvezda in the 1991 European Cup transcends the mere domain of sport, emerging as a phenomenon of profound political, cultural, and historical significance. Football in Yugoslavia was not merely a pastime; it was a powerful medium through which societal and political dynamics were expressed, and through which national identities were both projected and contested. Within this context, Zvezda's victory did not simply earn a trophy. It redefined the Serbian collective identity, crystallising national pride and immortalising the club as a symbol of enduring resilience and unity. The victory stands as a moment of exceptional historical gravity: it marked the pinnacle of sporting achievement while simultaneously heralding the dissolution of an era. It is an epoch whose true resonance can only be fully appreciated when transformed into a living repository of memory, a cultural and historical museum of experience that continues to shape contemporary consciousness. Analysing the period immediately preceding the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, it becomes evident that football exerted significant influence on politics, culture, and national identity. Football clubs were perceived as microcosms of nations,

representing their communities on continental and global stages, while their achievements were frequently mobilised to advance political agendas. Zvezda's triumph, therefore, assumed a powerful symbolic value for the Serbian people, epitomising collective aspiration, fortitude, and identity at a time when the fabric of Yugoslavia was unravelling. Furthermore, the Bari triumph exemplifies how football can act as a cultural and political force, reinforcing identity and unity even amid societal upheaval. It is a testament to resilience and excellence, leaving a legacy that extends beyond the pitch and endures as a symbol of shared aspiration and collective memory. Moreover, the triumph forged a profound cultural and identity-based legacy. Football remained (and remains) among the most popular and socially cohesive activities, and the success of a club like Zvezda was harnessed to strengthen confidence, pride, and a shared sense of belonging. In this sense, the victory in Bari conferred immortality upon the name and the spirit of Zvezda, embedding it within the collective consciousness of supporters worldwide, and solidifying its place as an enduring testament to the power of sport to transcend the limitations of the immediate historical moment. The triumph in Bari was not merely a sporting success, but a sociological mirror of a nation caught in a moment of profound historical transition. It demonstrates that identity is not shaped solely through collective traumas, but also through eruptions of shared pride. Zvezda's victory in 1991 functioned as a brief yet powerful reconfiguration of Serbian self-perception, a moment in which a nation once again felt visible, capable, and European. Triumph in Bari was not an escape from reality, but its temporary transcendence, and in that, its enduring sociological force resides. Ultimately, Zvezda's 1991 European Cup triumph did more than elevate a club to the summit of European football; it contributed to the symbolic articulation of Serbian collective identity, reinforced narratives of collective pride and historical significance, and left an enduring legacy across generations. It stands as an eternal emblem of excellence, resilience, and unity - a triumph that every football

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enthusiast, wherever they may be, recognises as a manifestation of the extraordinary strength and influence of the Crvena Zvezda name. It is a victory whose echoes will persist through scholarship, sports discourse, and cultural reflection, leaving an indelible imprint for decades yet to come.

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