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### **Football Relations Between the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Kingdom of Bulgaria**

**ABSTRACT:** The political relations between the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Kingdom of Bulgaria were complex due to the multitude of unresolved issues. Such relations were also reflected in sports, especially football, which became an instrument for bringing the two nations and two dynasties together. Despite being neighboring countries, the national teams did not compete against each other until 1926. When diplomatic relations improved, football cooperation flourished; conversely, when tensions escalated, the footballing ties suffered. Ultimately, on the eve of the Second World War, it became evident that Yugoslavia and Bulgaria were aligned with opposing factions, leading to the cessation of football collaboration.

**KEYWORDS:** Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, football, sport, national teams, politics

## Introduction

Football, as the most popular sport worldwide, wields considerable influence over politics.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, political dynamics greatly impact the world of football. As Eric Hobsbawm noted, “For most of the world today, eleven young individuals on the football field embody the ‘nation’, representing the state and ‘our people’ more than politicians, the constitution, or the military do.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the football relations of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Kingdom of Bulgaria were often overshadowed by their political relations. To understand the complex political connections and their impact on football, it is crucial to begin with the establishment of the Kingdom of SHS and its interactions with neighboring Bulgaria.

### *Yugoslav-Bulgarian relations before the first mutual football matches*

The relations between the Kingdoms of SHS and Bulgaria did not start on a sound basis. They were burdened by their wartime past, primarily from the First World War. Bulgaria participated in the occupation of Serbia in 1915, where, with the agreement of the Central Powers, it took control of eastern and southern Serbia, as well as parts of Kosovo and Metohija.<sup>3</sup> Bulgarization followed, as well as terror over the population. The people resisted in the form of the Toplica Uprising, but its suppression was followed by the massacre of entire villages, where thousands of civilians were killed.<sup>4</sup>

Following the establishment of the Kingdom of Three Nations in 1918, the matter of the border with the defeated Bulgaria came to the forefront. The government of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (SHS) generally perceived Bulgaria's actions during World War I as having “adopted a traitorous attitude towards its brothers and friends,” while also acknowledging that

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Holt, „Interwar Sport and Interwar Relations: Some Conclusions”, *Sport and International Politics: The Impact of Fascism and Communism on Sport*, eds. Perre Arnaud, James Riordan (London: Routledge, 2003), 210.

<sup>2</sup> Erik Hobsbawm, *Kraj kulture: Kultura i društvo u XX veku* (Beograd: Arhipelag, 2014), 39–40.

<sup>3</sup> Андреј Митровић, *Устаничке борбе у Србији 1916–1918* (Београд: Српска књижевна задруга, 1987), 280–286.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 280–286.

Bulgaria had “committed unnecessary atrocities.”<sup>5</sup> Led by Nikola Pašić, the Yugoslav delegation at the Paris Peace Conference advocated for border adjustments to secure vital lines of communication and facilitate timely responses to any potential Bulgarian aggression. It was emphasized that, despite Bulgaria's defeat, Yugoslavia harbored no territorial ambitions but sought primarily to protect its railway networks. As a result, the Peace Treaty of Neuilly led to the cession of the towns of Strumica, Bosilegrad, and Tsaribrod to Yugoslavia, effectively securing the eastern hinterland of the Yugoslav border.<sup>6</sup>

Another stumbling block in relations with Bulgaria was the issue of Macedonia, to which Bulgaria had long-standing claims.<sup>7</sup> Bulgaria openly

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<sup>5</sup> Милан Гулић, *Југословенска држава: 1918–2006: Од Прводецембарској акцији до Мајске референдуме* (Београд: Институт за савремену историју, 2023), 61.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>7</sup> The struggle for national liberation in the Balkans during the 19th century led to the creation of several autonomous and soon independent states. However, the territory of Macedonia remained under Ottoman control until the First Balkan War. The newly formed states—Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece—considered Macedonia part of their respective spheres of interest and engaged in both propaganda and military activities to assert their claims. Following the First Balkan War, Macedonia was divided among the three countries: Vardar Macedonia was annexed by Serbia, Pirin Macedonia by Bulgaria, and Aegean Macedonia by Greece. Nevertheless, the manner of this division sparked conflict among the former allies, leading to the Second Balkan War. Even after World War I, the Macedonian region remained a contentious area due to ongoing irredentist activities. Bulgaria viewed the Macedonian question as an integral part of its national issue and acted accordingly. All three countries denied the existence of a distinct Macedonian nation. For example, Bulgarian authorities claimed that Macedonia was merely a geographical designation and that its inhabitants were ethnically Bulgarian. The affirmation of a distinct Macedonian national identity occurred especially during the communist era, and was significantly shaped by the efforts of Yugoslav communists; More in: Людмил Спасов, Пламен Павлов, *Кратка история на България*, (Кърджали: ИК „Родопи“, 2005); *Македонскијат вџпрос: Историко-политическа справка* (София: Българска академия на науките, 1968); Любомир Панайотов, К. Палешутски, Д. Мичев; *Македонскијат вџпрос и бџлгаро-југославските отношения*, (София: „Христо Ботев“, 1991); Васил Василев, *Правителството на БЗНС, ВМРО и бџлгаро-југославските отношения* (София, Българската академия на науките, 1991); Никола Жежов, *Македонското прашање во југословенско-бугарските дипломатски односи (1918–1941)* (Скопје: Филозофски факултет, 2008), 17–50; Tchavdar Marinov, Alexander Vezenkov, „Communism and Nationalism in the Balkans: Marriage of Convenience or Mutual Attraction?“, *Entangled Histories of the Balkans*, vol. II, eds. Roumen Daskalov, Diana Mishkova, (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 469–555.

supported the Macedonian separatists known as the IMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization), who engaged in acts of violence through groups called “komitas” to instigate a general uprising in the region. As a result, the Vardar Valley became a point of contention between the two neighboring countries. Bulgaria persistently sent “komitas” into the area through illegal channels, aiming to create instability and incite a potential uprising.<sup>8</sup> With support from Bulgaria, the IMRO conducted 63 assassinations of Yugoslav officials and Macedonians who opposed their policies between 1922 and 1930. This period culminated in the Skopje Trial, during which Macedonian youth were prosecuted, and their lawyer was the young Ante Pavelić.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria shared many similarities. Both countries were determined to establish and develop democratic and parliamentary institutions, but the set of aggravating circumstances, both internal and external, led them to the rise of monarchic authoritarianism. The wider crisis of parliamentarism across Europe prior to World War II affected these nations, prompting them to effectively suspend democratic governance and align with rival factions as the war approached.<sup>10</sup>

Numerous unresolved issues between the two states significantly affected their mutual relations. However, a notable improvement emerged during the tenure of Aleksandar Stamboliyski's government, which actively sought Yugoslav-Bulgarian rapprochement. This effort culminated in March 1923 with the signing of a cooperation agreement. Stamboliyski's administration was particularly marked by its decision to de-emphasize the Macedonia issue, instead focusing on Thrace, which, in turn, facilitated a thaw in relations with Yugoslavia. Unfortunately, this period of harmonious relations was short-lived, as Stamboliyski was assassinated in a plot orchestrated by supporters of Aleksandar Tsankov, the leader of right-wing organizations.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Branko Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije: 1918-1988, Knj. 1. Kraljevina Jugoslavija 1914-1941* (Beograd: Nolit, 1988), 33–34.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>10</sup> Mari-Žanin Čalić, *Jugoistočna Evropa: globalna historija* (Sarajevo: Udruženje za modernu istoriju, 2020), 364.

<sup>11</sup> Živko Avramovski, „Makedonsko pitanje u jugoslovensko-bugarskim odnosima od 1918. do 1925. godine”, u *Jugoslovensko-bugarski odnosi u XX veku. Zbornik radova*, tom I, ur. Živko Avramovski (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1980), 147–166; Борис То-манић, *Преокреји: Југославија и Бугарска у завршној фази Другој светској рати*:

### *First football contacts*

The conclusion of World War I and the subsequent division of nations into winners and losers in the Balkans perpetuated ongoing hostility among countries in the region. This animosity even affected the realm of football. In his memoir, "A Long Journey Through Football and Medicine," Mihailo Andrejević Andrejka<sup>12</sup> notes that neighboring nations were reluctant to collaborate in the sphere of football. A statement from FSJ (Fudbalski savez Jugoslavije) secretary Josip Riboli, as recounted by Andrejević, highlights that Bulgaria did not even acknowledge the letters sent from Yugoslavia.<sup>13</sup>

Persistence, along with the personal connections that Mihailo Andrejević established with Bulgarian football figures, ultimately facilitated the ini-

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1943/1944 – 1945/1946 (Београд: Институт за савремену историју, Catena mundi, 2023), 18; Милош Жикић, *Југославија и Буџарска: 1929–1941* (Београд: Институт за савремену историју, 2024), 31–42.

- <sup>12</sup> Mihailo Andrejević (1898–1989) was born in Požarevac and completed his high school education in Belgrade. After World War I, he pursued medical studies in Vienna, graduating in 1925. Alongside his involvement with the Football Association, he practiced as a doctor specializing in internal medicine. In 1949, he began teaching at the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade, initially as an assistant professor and later as an associate professor. Andrejević made significant contributions to the medical field, notably being the first to apply radioisotopes in the treatment of leukemia. He also pioneered the kidney hemodialysis program in Serbia and became the first Serbian endoscopist. In his youth, Andrejević enjoyed a distinguished football career, playing for Mačva Šabac and BSK, and he represented the Yugoslav national team 50 times. He held leadership roles in the BSK club and the Football Association of Yugoslavia from 1930 to 1984, serving as the organization's president from 1937 to 1941. In 1947, he founded the Sports Medicine Section within the Serbian Medical Society, where he also assumed the presidency. His contributions extended to FIFA, where he served on the Supervisory Board, as vice president of the Organizing Committee for the World Championships (1970–1974), and as head of the FIFA Health Commission, among other roles. In 1982, Andrejević was honored as a lifetime honorary member of FIFA, and two years later, he received its highest award, the Golden Order. Mihailo Andrejević passed away in Belgrade at the age of 91; Срећко Недиљковић, Милојко Тубић, „Андрејевић Михаило”, *Српска енциклопедија*, том 1, А–Бео, (Нови Сад: Матица српска, Београд: САНУ, Завод за уџбенике, 2010), 214; Дејан Зеџ, „Мемоарска литература као извор за проучавање српског и југословенског фудбала: анализа мемоара Данила Стојановића, Михаила Андрејевића и Јована Ружића”, *Токови историје*, бр. 2 (2012): 283–287.

- <sup>13</sup> Mihailo Andrejević, *Dugo putovanje kroz fudbal i medicinu: (doživljaji, sećanja, uspomene) u slici i reči* (Gornji Milanovac: Dečije novine, 1989), 57.

tial football interactions. In October 1925, a visit from BSK (Belgrade Sports Club) to Sofia was organized, with the recently graduated doctor, Andrejka, accompanying the team.<sup>14</sup> It is important to notice that he participated as a volunteer in World War I, and in 1915 was captured and interned in Bulgarian camps. During his time there, football and his language skills afforded him better treatment compared to other inmates, and he was even valued as a skilled player by various Bulgarian teams, including Levski, Slavia, and FK 13. Consequently, he formed strong connections with numerous Bulgarian footballers and officials, several of whom later became influential figures in the Bulgarian Football Union. When it comes to the BSK tour in Bulgaria, it can be said that it was successful. BSK played two matches on October 16 and 18, 1925. In the first match, BSK triumphed over FK 13 with a score of 6:3, while the second match ended in a draw against Levski.<sup>15</sup>

The second match revealed that the Belgrade Sports Club delegation had much grander ambitions than merely securing away victories. A notable instance was the annulment of a goal by Blagoje Moša Marijanović, who had recently transferred from SK Yugoslavia to BSK that year. After taking a penalty, he was allowed to rectify his earlier miss and took a second shot. Although the Bulgarian goalkeeper was able to save the penalty, he could not prevent Marijanović's follow-up attempt from striking the goal. Regrettably, due to a misunderstanding of football regulations, the referee annulled the goal. Representatives from BSK, including Andrejka, chose not to escalate tensions by insisting on the recognition of the goal, and instead agreed to a draw.<sup>16</sup> After some time, they requested FIFA to provide an interpretation and clarification of the rules to the referee of the match. This approach highlighted their commitment to creating an atmosphere suitable for future collaboration, rather than concen-

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<sup>14</sup> Зоран Антоновић, „Између лопте и стетоскопа: прича о др Михајлу Андрејевићу”, у *800 година српске медицине: зборник радова Трећеј научної скупштини 800 година српске медицине*, ур. Брана Димитријевић (Београд: Српско лекарско друштво, 2012), 155–160.

<sup>15</sup> Club football between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria developed its own distinct trajectory during the interwar period. Unfortunately, this dynamic lies beyond the scope of the present study. Instead, the focus will be placed on the matches between the national teams, as these encounters more directly reflected and were shaped by the political tensions and diplomatic relations between the two countries; *Ibid*, 155–160.

<sup>16</sup> Михајло Тодић, *110 година фудбала у Србији (110 Years Football in Serbia)* (Београд: Фудбалски савез Србије, 2006), 115.

trating solely on the match's outcome. The delegation's diplomatic efforts proved fruitful, resulting in an agreement for the first official match between the two national teams to be held in Zagreb on May 30, 1926. Given the deep-seated wounds and the numerous atrocities committed against the Serbian population by Bulgaria during the war, Belgrade was never considered a potential venue. Thus, Zagreb emerged as the ideal choice for the match.<sup>17</sup>

### *First matches of national teams*

By January 1926, political circumstances in Bulgaria had improved somewhat with the ascension of Andrei Lyapchev, who advocated for a more moderate policy while maintaining steadfast support for the IMRO. His leadership successfully garnered the backing of London and Rome, helping to lift Bulgaria from the isolation it had faced in the aftermath of World War I.<sup>18</sup> Lyapchev's administration focused its efforts on Bulgarians living abroad, which inevitably created tensions with Yugoslavia. However, a faction within the government, known as Burov–Tsankov, sought to foster a rapprochement with its western neighbor. Foreign Minister Atanas Burov notably stated that the cornerstone of Bulgarian foreign policy was reconciliation with Yugoslavia and expressed optimism that Bulgaria would soon reach a satisfactory resolution with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. He even asserted that the issue of Macedonia had been resolved “for all time.”<sup>19</sup> While the actions of the Bulgarian government did not always align with these declarations, such statements reflected a sincere effort to improve bilateral relations.<sup>20</sup>

The inaugural match between the national teams of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria took place as a friendly encounter, reflecting the political climate between the two nations at that time. Hosted in Zagreb on May 30, 1926, the match drew an audience of approximately 6,000 spectators. Bulgarian players were warmly welcomed by representatives from the Football Association of Yugoslavia, and before kickoff, the national anthems of both countries were played, with fans standing in respect during the performance. Bulgaria initi-

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 115.

<sup>18</sup> Иван Ристић, „Између старих и нових изазова – Бугарска у политици Краљевина СХС 1926. године”, *Токови историје*, бр. 2 (2013): 79–94.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 79–94.

ally took the lead, finishing the first half 1-0. A pivotal moment arose in the second half when Yugoslavia made a substitution: Stevan Luburić was replaced by Slavin Cindrić,<sup>21</sup> who went on to score three remarkable goals, propelling Yugoslavia to a commanding 3-1 victory.<sup>22</sup> To avoid any potential backlash from the local population, particularly among Serbians, the match received limited media coverage. It seemed that Nikola Pašić's remark—that at least two decades would be required for Serbian-Bulgarian reconciliation—guided the sports editors of the time.<sup>23</sup>

The highly anticipated return friendly match took place the following year on May 15, 1927, in Sofia. A crowd of 18,000 eager home fans filled the stadium, creating an electric atmosphere. Yugoslavia demonstrated its skill and teamwork, decisively defeating the Bulgarian national team with a score of 2-0. Blagoje Marjanović stood out as the star of the match, scoring both goals and cementing his team's victory. On a diplomatic side, the event was attended by a representative of the King's government, several generals, and numerous officers and diplomats. As in the previous match, the occasion began with the singing of the national anthems, which the fans greeted with a passionate standing ovation. Overall, the newspaper *Politika* reported that the spectators were “not biased” and the game conducted in a spirit of fair play.<sup>24</sup> In essence, the significant interest of the audience, their impartiality, and the friendly attitude displayed towards the opposing team, along with a game free from major violations, provided a solid foundation for the continued development of sports cooperation.

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<sup>21</sup> In this match, Slavin Cindrić (1901–1942) made history as the first player on the Yugoslav national team to score a hat-trick (three goals in one game) in just eight minutes. Born in Timișoara, which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy at the time, Cindrić had a football career that spanned from 1920 to 1930. He played for three of the largest clubs in Zagreb: Konkordija, Građanski, and HAŠK. During his career, he made five appearances for the national team, including participating in the first Yugoslav international match against Czechoslovakia at the Antwerp Olympics in 1920. Cindrić passed away in Zagreb from pneumonia; „Cindrić Slavin”, Fudbalska reprezentacija Srbije, datum pristupa 18. 8. 2025, <https://www.representacija.rs/cindric-slavin/>

<sup>22</sup> „Спорт”, *Време*, 31. 5. 1926, 9.

<sup>23</sup> „С.Х.С–Бугарска 3:1”, *Време*, 31. 5. 1926, 4; „България–Югославия 3:1”, *Спортъ*, 6. 6. 1926, 4; Gligor Popi, *Jugoslovensko-rumunski odnosi 1918–1941* (Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet, Institut za istoriju, 1984), 65.

<sup>24</sup> „Југославија – Бугарска 2:0”, *Политика*, 16.05.1927, 8.



Friendly matches opened up a space for action, Yugoslav political representatives soon shifted their focus to Bulgaria. In June 1927, Antun Korošec, the envoy of the king's government, visited Sofia and received a warm welcome. With the mediation of Czechoslovakia, efforts were made to improve relations between the two countries and put them on a sound basis. However, the momentum of Yugoslav-Bulgarian rapprochement came to a sudden halt, thanks to a series of violent actions from the IMRO, which were backed by Italy.<sup>25</sup>

### *Football cooperation during the 1930s*

Between 1929 and 1933, tensions in diplomatic relations escalated. The Bulgarian government intensified its focus on issues concerning minorities, particularly the Macedonian question, and brought this matter to the attention of the League of Nations.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, a significant incident further strained relations: after King Alexander introduced a dictatorship in January 1929, numerous opposition figures fled the country, including Ante Pavelić, who found refuge in Sofia. The Bulgarian press welcomed him warmly, which provoked outrage in Belgrade. This situation fostered a closer alliance between the Ustashe and the IMRO, ultimately leading to the assassination of King Alexander in Marseilles in 1934.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the tense atmosphere, negotiations between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria persisted. In February 1930, agreements were signed that addressed numerous outstanding issues between the two countries. A notable point of contention was the matter of dual ownership, pertaining to individuals who owned properties in both Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. The agreement effectively

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<sup>25</sup> Иван Ристић, „Бугарска у југословенској политици 1927. године у светлу појачане италијанске акције на Балкану”, *Архив*, бр. 1–2 (2014): 79–94.

<sup>26</sup> Срђан Мићић, „Мала Антанта и питање мањина пред Друштвом народа 1927–1934. године”, *Od Moravy k Moravě III: Z historie česko-srbských vztahů*, eds. Václav Štěpánek, Ladislav Hladký (Brno: Matice moravská, Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 2017), 323–350.

<sup>27</sup> Between the end of World War I and 1934, IMRO conducted 476 terrorist actions. These actions primarily involved communist intrusions, kidnappings, assassinations, and bombings. As a result of these attacks, 185 members of the Yugoslav army and gendarmerie were either killed or wounded, while civilian casualties totaled 253. During the same period, Yugoslav authorities killed, wounded, or captured 268 members of IMRO while responding to these actions; Димитар Тасић, „Војно-политичка акција „македонствујушчих” у Краљевини СХС/Југославији 1919–1934. године”, *Архив*, бр. 3 (2002): 100–102.

resolved this concern, paving the way for the enhancement of bilateral relations. However, the IMRO remained active, carrying out several terrorist attacks that year, which resulted in the deaths of police officers and civilians. Belgrade urged Sofia to take decisive action against the rebels, but effective measures were not taken. Consequently, Yugoslav diplomacy assessed the recent agreements and the warming of relations as insincere and significantly tightened its policy towards Bulgaria.<sup>28</sup> In addition to undermining the rapprochement process, the Yugoslav authorities took measures to suppress terrorist activities. One such measure was the development of a plan to invade southwestern Bulgaria and eradicate the IMRO. By early 1933, this plan was nearing its final stages of preparation. However, in May, the Yugoslav military leadership opted to suspend further preparations and the eventual execution of the plan.<sup>29</sup>

During this period, the Yugoslav Football Association experienced significant changes. Following King Alexander's establishment of his regime on January 6, 1929, the political focus shifted toward centralism and unitarism. As part of this transformation, many key state institutions moved to the capital, leading to the relocation of the Yugoslav Football Association's headquarters from Zagreb to Belgrade. This move was also accompanied by a change in leadership, with Jan Šafarik, a Belgrade architect and president of the Belgrade Football Sub-Association, being appointed as the head of the association by acclamation.<sup>30</sup> To commemorate this pivotal transition, Mihailo Andrejević, the association's secretary for external affairs, sought to organize a friendly match and reached out to the Bulgarian Football Association. He traveled to Sofia but encountered significant resistance from his Bulgarian counterparts.<sup>31</sup> The vice-president of the Bulgarian Federation Dimitar Ivanov<sup>32</sup> was particularly opposed, asserting that Yugoslav football was at a far superior level and that Bulgarian players would likely suffer em-

<sup>28</sup> Жиких, *Југославија и Бугарска: 1929–1941*, 43–123.

<sup>29</sup> More in: Miloš Žikić, „Jugoslovenski plan za upad u jugozapadnu Bugarsku i likvidiranje IMRO (1930–1939)”, *Istorija 20. veka*, br. 1 (2024): 87–104.

<sup>30</sup> Davor Kovačić, „Centralizam i unitarizam u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji kroz državne institucije – primer premeštanja Jugoslovenskog nogometnog saveza (JNS) iz Zagreba u Beograd”, u *Jugoslavija između ujedinjenja i razlaza*, ur. Bojan Dimitrijević, Hrvoje Čapo (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2022), 65–78.

<sup>31</sup> Andrejević, *Dugo putovanje kroz fudbal i medicinu*, 63.

<sup>32</sup> In his memoirs, Andrejević refers to him as “Dmitar Mitke Ivanov”; Ibid.

barrassment. Prominent Bulgarian opera singer<sup>33</sup> and board member Stefan Makedonski supported this view, emphasizing the considerable difference in player quality between the two nations. After persistent persuasion, however, the Bulgarian football officials relented, allowing the Bulgarian national team to play a friendly match in Belgrade.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, the relocation of the federation from Zagreb to Belgrade sparked dissent among Croats within the Yugoslav Federation. As a result, Croatian players declined to participate in the national team, effectively leading to the formation of what was essentially a “first Serbian national team” that squared off against the Bulgarians.<sup>35</sup>

This notable football event occurred in Belgrade on April 13, 1930, when the national teams of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria clashed in a friendly match at the Belgrade Stadium, attracting an audience of 8,000 fans. The Yugoslav team showcased their superiority throughout the match, ultimately securing a decisive 6-1 victory.<sup>36</sup> This outcome underscored the concerns of Bulgarian football officials, vividly illustrating the significant disparity between Yugoslav and Bulgarian football. In the aftermath, Nikifor Lazarov, speaking on behalf of the Bulgarian national team, remarked, “The Yugoslavs played better and deserved the victory. Their best players were the right winger, right midfielder, and left back. As for us, only the goalkeeper could take satisfaction; the rest of the team had not trained adequately. The referee officiated excellently.”<sup>37</sup>

The match itself was attended by diplomatic representatives of Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia, while the Minister of Foreign Affairs was present on the Yugoslav side. The entire match had a festive character: the military orchestra set a special tone, and the upper class of

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<sup>33</sup> In his memoirs, Andrejević had mistaken Stefan Makedonski's profession stating that he is an “theatre actor”; Ibid, 63.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Vladimir Stanković, *Nezaboravnih 100: istorija fudbalske reprezentacije Jugoslavije/Srbije kroz 100 najznačajnijih utakmica u periodu 1919–2019* (Beograd: Fudbalski savez Srbije, 2019), 22–23.

<sup>36</sup> „Југославија необично ефикасним форвардом побеђује Бугарску са 6:1 (2:1)”, *Време*, 14. 4. 1930, 9.

<sup>37</sup> „Репрезентација Србије туче репрезентацију Бугарске са 6:1 (2:1)”, *Политика*, 14. 4. 1930, 8.

Belgrade gathered in elegant “spring toilets” in a Modenese style. Both the players and spectators stood in silence to honor the national anthems.<sup>38</sup> Prior to the match, the Yugoslav Football Federation unveiled a beautifully crafted silver cup to commemorate the inaugural sports meeting between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. In a gesture of goodwill, a representative from the Bulgarian National Sports Federation presented a silver cup adorned with the Bulgarian tricolor to the representative of the JNS.<sup>39</sup> The press wrote that the Belgrade athletes had prepared “a beautiful and warm welcome for their brothers from Bulgaria”. Interestingly, during the banquet following the match, players from both national teams joined together to sing Yugoslav-Bulgarian songs.<sup>40</sup>

It is important to highlight that the match coincided with the enthronement of Patriarch Barnabas. On this occasion, the patriarch extended special greetings to Bulgarian Metropolitan Pavel and Archimandrite Sophrony, both of whom were honored with the Order of Saint Sava. He underscored that Saint Sava symbolizes “the pledge of unity between Serbs and Bulgarians.”<sup>41</sup> On this basis, April 13, 1930, can be seen as a significant day for the propagation of the policy of Yugoslav-Bulgarian rapprochement among the people. The Church, along with a popular sport like football, served as a significant political instrument on that day. This influence was reflected in the writings of the Yugoslav and Bulgarian press over the following days that emphasized the friendship of two nations.<sup>42</sup>

In the following months, football cooperation flourished. A visit by football club Vojvodina to Sofia was scheduled for May, along with a match between the national teams as part of the Balkan Cup set for June. On May 4th and 6th, Vojvodina faced AS 23 and Slavia in Sofia, achieving a notable victory against AS 23 with a score of 2-1.<sup>43</sup> However, tensions arising from the

<sup>38</sup> „Југославија необично ефикасним форвардом побеђује Бугарску са 6:1 (2:1)”, *Време*, 14. 4. 1930, 9.

<sup>39</sup> „Репрезентација Србије туче репрезентацију Бугарске са 6:1 (2:1)”, *Политика*, 14. 4. 1930, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Милош Жикић, „Југословенско-бугарски односи 1929–1941” (Докторска дисертација, Универзитет у Београду, Филозофски факултет, Одељење за историју, 2023), 433.

<sup>41</sup> „Патријарх Варнава поздравља Бугарског митрополита Павла”, *Време*, 14. 4. 1930, 7.

<sup>42</sup> „Југословия бие България”, *Спортъ*, 20. 4. 1930, 1–2.

<sup>43</sup> „Войводина победи А. С. 23 съ 2:1”, *Спортъ*, 11. 5. 1930. 1.

relocation of the headquarters and the ongoing disputes between Serbs and Croats led to the postponement of the Balkan Cup match.<sup>44</sup>

At the same time, issues emerged within the Bulgarian Football Union, prompting Andrejević to return to Sofia to clarify the circumstances. However, representatives of the Bulgarian Union determined that the matter regarding the cup match fell within the jurisdiction of the Cup Committee, leading to a request for an extraordinary meeting of this body. Fortunately, the issue was resolved, and a new date was agreed upon following a letter from Riboli, the Secretary of the Cup Committee and Yugoslav delegate. In this letter, he requested that the BFS refrain from insisting on convening an extraordinary meeting, suggesting instead that it be held on the same day as the match between Bulgaria and Romania in Sofia on June 29. However, that date was ultimately postponed due to Yugoslavia's participation in the inaugural World Cup in Montevideo.<sup>45</sup>

The return friendly match has been also rescheduled from June 8 to June 15 at the request of the JNS.<sup>46</sup> The reason was that the opening of the First All-Sokol Meeting in Belgrade had already been agreed upon at the first date, which lasted until June 30 and was an event that brought together tens of thousands of participants from the country and abroad (Czechoslovakia, Poland, America, Russia, etc.) and tens of thousands of spectators.<sup>47</sup>

The return match between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia took place on June 15, 1930, in Sofia, drawing an audience of approximately 15,000 fans. The final score was a 2:2 draw. The match also had a festive character; the national anthems were played at the very beginning, and diplomatic representatives of

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<sup>44</sup> The increasing popularity of football in the Balkans ultimately led to the establishment of this competition among Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece, designed to strengthen ties among these nations. A total of six Balkan Cups were held during the interwar period, each reflecting a distinct political context. More about Balkan Cup in the interwar period in: Nemanja Mitrović, Nikola Mijatov, „The Balkan Football Cup as an Instrument of Political Rapprochement in the Balkans (1929–1936)”, *Journal of Balkan Studies*, no. 2 (2025): 279–308.

<sup>45</sup> „Ще се разреши ли напоследок въпросът съ Югославия”, *Спортът*, 20. 4. 1930. 1.

<sup>46</sup> „Югославия—България: ще се играе на 15 юний”, *Спортът*, 18. 5. 1930, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Јована Караулић, „Соколски слетови у Краљевини Југославији на примеру Свесоколског слета у Београду 1930. Године”, у *Ко је соко њај је југословен; То Ве а Falcon is to Ве а Yugoslav*, ур. Љиљана Гавриловић (Београд: Музеј историје Југославије, 2016), 83–85.

both countries were present among the spectators.<sup>48</sup> The players and spectators were greeted by President Ivanov representing the Bulgarian Federation, as well as Vice President Stojanović on behalf of the Yugoslav Football Federation. Additionally, the event served a preparatory purpose, marking the final match for the Yugoslav team selected to compete in the World Cup in Uruguay. Just six days after this match, the Yugoslavian national team departed from Marseille to participate in the inaugural World Cup.<sup>49</sup>

The first match between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria following the Montevideo occurred as part of the I Balkan Cup, which lasted from 1929 to 1931. This competition was perceived as a way to improve public sentiment and promote cultural, economic, and political rapprochement, which is why high-ranking officials, including diplomats and members of royal families, often attended these matches.<sup>50</sup>

The Balkan Cup statute, drafted by JNS, was adopted at the Bucharest meeting on May 9, 1929, defining the competition as amateur. Each of the four participants was required to play two games against each of their opponents. While this format reduced the burden on clubs by minimizing player absences, it risks diminishing interest in the competition. Organizers soon recognized this issue and switched to a single-point system for future cups, allowing tournaments to be held annually in one of the participants' capitals, typically lasting about a week. Cup matches featured various events and followed a specific protocol, including ceremonial openings, parades, receptions, and tours of cultural landmarks. Visiting football players received attention similar to that of official delegations, often meeting with state representatives. The close relationship between politics and football proved mutually advantageous, with football acting as a political tool while receiving strong government backing.<sup>51</sup> This synergy resulted in increased investment in the

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<sup>48</sup> „Југославија – Бугарска 2:2”, *Политика*, 16.06.1930, 8.

<sup>49</sup> „Југославија–България 2:1”, *Спортъ*, 18. 5. 1930, 1

<sup>50</sup> Penelope Kissoudi, *The Balkan Games and Balkan Politics in the Interwar Years 1929–1939* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 10–11; Vasa Stojković, *Beli orlovi 1920–1941* (Beograd: FSJ, 1999), 65–66.

<sup>51</sup> „Балкански куп, почетак утакмица и избор судија”, *Време*, 17. 5. 1929, 7; „Cupa Balcanică”, *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 18. 4. 1929, 4; Nemanja Mitrović, Nikola Mijatov, „Football Between Politics, Royal Families and Sport: Yugoslav-Romanian Football Relations 1922–1941”, *Istorija 20. veka*, br. 1 (2025): 37–58.

sport, encompassing stadium construction and match organization. The Romanian newspaper *Gazeta Sporturilor* noted that the Balkan Cup marked the beginning of a new era for Balkan football and regional cooperation. Moreover, it proved to be beneficial for the Yugoslav-Bulgarian rapprochement.<sup>52</sup>

The first match within the framework of the Balkan Cup between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria took place in Sofia on November 16, 1930, where the Yugoslav team achieved a decisive 3:0 victory. This win elevated Yugoslavia from the bottom of the table to the second position, trailing only Romania, which held the lead.<sup>53</sup> Up to that point, Yugoslavia had played matches within the Balkan Cup against Romania and Greece, both of which ended in defeat. Bulgaria, on the other hand, had played a single match against Romania on October 12, 1930, at the Slavia Stadium in Sofia. This match marked the 17th international appearance of the Bulgarian national team and, more importantly, its first official victory. As such, it held particular significance for Bulgarian supporters and was celebrated as a major milestone in the country's football history.<sup>54</sup>

In the upcoming match, the Bulgarian football team visited Belgrade, where they faced off at the SK Yugoslavia stadium in front of approximately 10,000 spectators. The Yugoslav team celebrated a narrow victory with a score of 1:0, which earned them first place in the table. Among the politicians who attended the match were Boško Jeftić, Minister of the Palace, Ninko Perić, President of the State Council, Bulgarian Chargé d'Affaires Sojilov, and a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Brana Popović.<sup>55</sup> The consul of the Republic of Turkey, as well as representatives from the Romanian and Greek embassies, were also in attendance.<sup>56</sup> According to the Bulgarian newspaper *Sport*, there was tremendous interest in the match within Sofia, resulting in a crowd that clogged the area around Hugo's radio station, eagerly awaiting updates from Belgrade. This strong enthusiasm and the desire to en-

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<sup>52</sup> Mitrović, Mijatov, „The Balkan Football Cup”, 301.

<sup>53</sup> „Победа у Софији: Југославија – Бугарска 3:0 (2:0)”, *Полиџика*, 17. 11. 1930, 9.

<sup>54</sup> Антон Антонов–Тонич, Климент Симеонов, Георги Томов, *Футболен алманах 1954* (София: Физкултура, 1955), 8.

<sup>55</sup> „Тешка победа југословенске репрезентације над Бугарском 1:0 (1:0)”, *Полиџика*, 20. 4. 1931, 8.

<sup>56</sup> „Југославија са муком савлађује одличан тим Бугарске са 1:0 (1:0) и избија на 1 место у Балканском купу”, *Време*, 20. 4. 1931, 9.

hance football relations were echoed in the remarks of Bulgarian coach Otto Feist, who stated that football serves as a powerful means of fostering closeness between two nations, suggesting that political aspirations were deeply rooted within this sport.<sup>57</sup>

However, political currents in Sofia negatively influenced this contribution stemming from football connections. In the first half of the year, a government crisis emerged, culminating in the June elections, where Prime Minister Andrei Lyapchev lost his position of power.<sup>58</sup> The new government of Aleksandar Malinov also declared itself in favor of cooperation with Yugoslavia. However, its actions, tolerance of the IMRO organization, and its terrorist actions on Yugoslav territory aroused suspicion in Belgrade. The increased number of border incidents during September and October 1931 was a kind of overture to what would soon happen in Sofia.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the prevailing bad political climate, football continued to be played. In terms of results, there was a turnaround during the match played on October 4, 1931, in Sofia as part of the unofficial Balkan Cup. This tournament was organized before the I Balkan Cup had been completed, and it

<sup>57</sup> „Југославия–България 1:0”, *Спортъ*, 22. 4. 1931, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Andrey Lyapchev (1866–1933) assumed the position of Prime Minister in 1926, replacing Aleksandar Tsankov, one of the key organizers of the coup against Aleksandar Stamboliyski, Bulgaria's Prime Minister from 1919 to 1923. Following the coup, Stamboliyski was captured and brutally killed by members of the IMRO, primarily due to his renunciation of Bulgarian national interests in Macedonia and his signing of the Treaty of Niš with Yugoslavia on March 23, 1923, in which the Bulgarian government committed to suppressing IMRO's activities. Lyapchev was among those who condemned the coup. However, unlike Tsankov, who sought to improve relations with Yugoslavia, Lyapchev oriented Bulgaria's foreign policy toward Italy and tacitly supported IMRO's operations. One of the central goals of his foreign policy was the peaceful revision of borders. His declarative commitment to good relations with Yugoslavia yielded some results until 1930, despite ongoing anti-Yugoslav propaganda and terrorist actions carried out by IMRO. Nevertheless, the petition submitted to the League of Nations concerning the status of Bulgarians in Yugoslavia, along with terrorist attacks in Kočani, Pirot, and other locations, led Belgrade to adopt a firm stance toward Sofia, that position persisted until the autumn of 1933. More in: Войн Божинов, *Андрей Ляпчев* (София: Кама, 2006); Димитър Косев, *Външната политика на България при Управлението на Андрей Ляпчев 1926–1931* (София: Издателство на БАН „Проф. Марин Дринов”, 1995)

<sup>59</sup> Коста Павловић, *Дневник 1930–1932*, прир. Срђан Мићић, Наташа Милићевић, (Београд: Историјски архив Београда, Институт за новију историју Србије, 2020), 285–287.



did not feature regular participants. Only Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Turkey took part in the tournament, and all games were played in Stadion Slavia in Sofia between September 30 and October 4, 1931. After a streak of victories, the Yugoslav national team faced its first defeat at the hands of Turkey on October 2. Just two days later, they suffered another loss to Bulgaria, despite holding a 2:0 lead at halftime, ultimately losing the match 3:2. The match was watched by about 15,000 fans, including the Yugoslav envoy Vukčević, as well as Prince Kiril and the entire diplomatic corps from the Bulgarian side. The atmosphere at the match was heated: the audience greeted the goals of the Bulgarian national team with cheers, and after the equalizer with 2:2, the stadium roared: "Hurray, hurray, forward, boys!".<sup>60</sup> The winning goal of Bulgaria was greeted with "hilarious noise and shouting". As captured by the newspaper *Politika*, "Fifteen thousand spectators were on their feet, shouting at the top of their lungs, tossing hats and sticks, creating an undulating sea of excitement throughout the stadium."<sup>61</sup>

In November 1931, an incident in Sofia significantly strained bilateral relations between the two countries. As is customary on the anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Neuilly on November 27, demonstrations erupted in the Bulgarian capital. This time, however, the demonstrators targeted the Yugoslav embassy, pelting it with stones and attempting to storm the building. They also desecrated the Yugoslav flag. Throughout this turmoil, the police response was notably mild, with only correspondent Velimir Krivošić present in the embassy, who, along with his staff, organized a defense of the building.<sup>62</sup> This event was the beginning of a broad anti-Yugoslav campaign, and the Mikhailovsky IMRO newspaper *Sloboda ili smrt* went so far as to characterize the Yugoslav Embassy as a hotbed of espionage and provocation that deserved "not only to be hit with a single stone, but to be razed to the ground, wiped off the face of the earth."<sup>63</sup> Thus, the next year, 1932, brought a major anti-Yugoslav campaign, both in Bulgaria and on the territory of Yugoslavia. Once again, the Yugoslav embassy in Sofia became a target; however, this ti-

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<sup>60</sup> „Балканијада у Софији: Бугарска – Југославија 3:2 (0:2)”, *Време*, 5. 10. 1931, 8.

<sup>61</sup> „Бугарска је победила Југославију са 3:2 (0:2)”, *Политика*, 5. 10. 1931, 8.

<sup>62</sup> Жикић, *Југославија и Бугарска: 1929–1941*, 133–134.

<sup>63</sup> *Извештаји Министарства иностраних послова Краљевине Југославије за 1932. годину*, књ. 3, прир. Нада Петровић (Београд: Архив Србије и Црне Горе, 2008), 14.

me, the police took decisive action to prevent the mob from approaching the building. The campaign was also accompanied by IMRO activities, primarily in the form of planting bombs and terrorist attacks on Yugoslav territory.<sup>64</sup>

However, football cooperation continued with the organization of the II Balkan Cup, held in Belgrade from June 26 to July 3, 1932, utilizing a single-point system. During this competition, the national teams of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria faced each other at the SK Yugoslavia stadium, drawing an audience of around 6,000 spectators. This match ultimately determined the Cup winner, with Bulgaria emerging victorious by a score of 3:2, thwarting Yugoslavia's hopes of claiming the Balkan Cup trophy on home soil. Following the ceremony, the Bulgarian national team celebrated and took the trophy to Sofia.<sup>65</sup> This represented arguably the greatest achievement of Bulgarian football during the interwar period. Despite considerable efforts, Bulgarian football struggled to transcend its regional boundaries. This is evidenced by the fact that, between 1924 and 1944, the Bulgarian national team recorded only four victories outside the Balkan Cup – against Yugoslavia, Turkey, Greece, and Lithuania. Notably, none of these wins came against Western or Central European teams such as France, Italy, Hungary, or Austria.<sup>66</sup> It was also during this period that Bulgaria suffered the most severe defeat in its football history: a 13–0 loss to Spain in 1933. Such a result was a serious blow to the confidence of the Bulgarian footballers, who, after their triumph in Belgrade, believed they could compete with teams of a higher caliber. Although they tried to justify the defeat with various excuses — such as the long journey, lack of proper equipment, rainy weather, and even the one offered by Ivan Mоканов: “There were so many beautiful women in the stands, you didn’t know whether to look at them or at the ball” — the fact remains that the match against Portugal was canceled as a result. Following this, the Bulgarian Football Federation avoided scheduling games outside the Balkan region for quite some time.<sup>67</sup>

The year 1933 was a turning point in Yugoslav-Bulgarian relations. Intolerance reached its peak at the end of 1932, but both sides subsequently

<sup>64</sup> Жижић, *Југославија и Бујарска: 1929–1941*, 137–138.

<sup>65</sup> „Бугари су тукли Југословенску репрезентацију 3:2 (2:0)”, *Полиџика*, 1. 7. 1932.

<sup>66</sup> Лъчезар Аврамов, Р. Олянов и др, *Петдесет години футбол в България* (София: Медицина и физкултура, 1960), 21–22.

<sup>67</sup> Огнян Калинов, Наньо Нанев, *110 години ПФК „Черно море Варна”, първа част* (Варна: Издателство МС, 2019), 248.

made efforts to improve their interactions. This resulted in a rapprochement between the two Orthodox churches as well as their respective governments. Notably, in December 1933, the Bulgarian royal couple and Prime Minister Nikola Mushanov made an official visit to Yugoslavia.<sup>68</sup> Throughout the year, the football teams of the two nations only faced each other in the Balkan Cup.

During the III Balkan Cup, the Yugoslav team delivered a commanding performance. The match, held in Bucharest on June 7, 1933, ended with a decisive 4-0 victory for Yugoslavia over Bulgaria, highlighted by three goals from Mirko Kokotović, who played for Građanski in Zagreb at the time. The game took place in rainy conditions on a very slippery pitch, which proved challenging for the Bulgarian national team. The severity of the defeat prompted Bulgaria to temporarily ban its national team from participating in international matches.<sup>69</sup> Fortunately, a victory over Greece in the same tournament, just a few days later, somewhat mitigated the fallout from the earlier loss. Eight months later, the Bulgarian national team faced off in a friendly match in Athens. Despite this, various caricatures failed to uplift the disheartened Bulgarian audience. For instance, the Bulgarian newspaper *Sport* depicted the defeat in a caricature likening it to Napoleon's loss at Waterloo.<sup>70</sup>

The year 1934 ushered in a favorable political climate. A significant shift occurred in Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations during the brief tenure of Kimon Georgiev, whose government lasted from May 1934 to January 1935. This period was particularly notable as Bulgaria chose not to assert its claims over Macedonia. Remarkably, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) did not receive support from Sofia for an entire year.<sup>71</sup> These actions taken by the Bulgarian government positively influenced relations with Yugoslavia, a change that was eventually reflected in the realm of football, evidenced by the playing of two friendly matches and one competition within the Balkan Cup between the two nations.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Жижић, *Југославија и Бугарска: 1929–1941*, 220–252.

<sup>69</sup> „Југославија – Бугарска 4:0 (2:0)”, „Бугарска влада забрањује даљи наступ репрезентацији у иностранству”, *Политика*, 8. 6. 1933, 9–10.

<sup>70</sup> „България незаслужено губи срещу Югославия 4:0”, *Спортът*, 8. 6. 1933, 1.

<sup>71</sup> More in: Войн Божинов, *Управлението на деветнадесетомайците (19 май 1934 – 22 януари 1935 година)* (София: ИК „Арка”, 2017)

<sup>72</sup> Гулић, *Југословенска држава: 1918–2006*, 69.

The first friendly match took place in Sofia, where Yugoslavia emerged victorious with a 2:1 scoreline in front of a crowd of 10,000 home fans. This match held significant political importance, as it was attended by Gruev, an advisor to the Bulgarian king, along with several government ministers. On the Yugoslav side, the minister at the Bulgarian court, Cincar-Marković, was present, accompanied by an entire delegation.<sup>73</sup>

Simultaneously, a match was held in Belgrade, where the B teams of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia faced off. Despite the use of “substitutions”, the encounter attracted considerable attention from the local populace, as it marked the first international football match of the year. Supported by enthusiastic home fans, the Yugoslav team celebrated a victory, defeating Bulgaria with a score of 2:1.<sup>74</sup> Both Yugoslav and Bulgarian newspapers were filled with coverage of the matches. Often, entire front pages of sports publications were dedicated to Yugoslav-Bulgarian football collaboration. An article in Bulgarian Sport highlighted the political undertones of this rivalry. At this juncture, the concept of rapprochement had firmly taken root among the populace, with expressions of sentiment such as: “We want to see their (Yugoslav) strong team again and to witness their friendship, which is being reinforced through sport.” This event held particular significance for Bulgarian football, as it marked the first instance in which the Bulgarian National Sports Federation (BNSF) organized two matches on the same day—the A national team played at home, while the B national team competed away. Additionally, it was the inaugural international match for the Bulgarian B team. The primary aim of the BNSF was not only to achieve victories, although they were certainly appreciated, but to evaluate the quality of domestic football. Considering that Yugoslavia was viewed as a nation with a well-established football culture, it provided Bulgaria with an ideal opponent to accomplish its objectives in its neighboring country. The narrow defeat and commendable performance ultimately paved the way for the agreement to hold another friendly match.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> „И у Београду и у Софији Југославија је победила Бугарску с 2:1”, *Политика*, 19. 3. 1934.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> „България и Югославия ще се срещнатъ въ първия международенъ мачъ за 1934. год.”, *Спортъ*, 16. 3. 1934, 1–3; „България изгуби срещу Югославия съ 2:1”, „Нашия националенъ Б тим губи срещу Югославия съ 2:1”, *Спортъ*, 19. 3. 1934, 1–4.

The subsequent friendly match took place around ten days later, highlighting the remarkably close political and sporting ties between the two countries. On this occasion, Yugoslavia served as the host, but Bulgaria triumphed with a score of 3-2. Although ticket prices were relatively high, ranging from 15 to 40 dinars, the local response was enthusiastic; columns of pedestrians and vehicles made their way to the BSK stadium throughout the day. By the time the final whistle blew to signal the start of the match, the stadium was at full capacity, with approximately 7,000 fans in attendance.<sup>76</sup> Notably, the audience greeted the visiting team with warm applause, and the atmosphere remained incredibly friendly throughout the event.<sup>77</sup>

Similar to the previous friendly match, the B teams of the national squads clashed simultaneously, this time in Sofia. The Yugoslav second team demonstrated good performance, ultimately securing a 1:0 victory over the Bulgarians. Notably, there was considerable interest in Sofia for the B team match, with over 10,000 local supporters in attendance at the A.S. club stadium. Regardless of the lost game, the Bulgarians remained optimistic, believing that the future of their football was in the capable hands of the B team.<sup>78</sup>

*The assassination of King Alexander  
and its consequences for football relations*

The favorable atmosphere in Yugoslav-Bulgarian relations, which developed during Kimon Georgiev's administration, prompted King Alexander to return the visit of the Bulgarian monarch from 1933 in September 1934. The visit to Sofia went smoothly and significantly enhanced relations between the two neighboring countries.<sup>79</sup> As King Alexander and King Boris found common ground, Alexander continued his journey to France, where he was scheduled to meet with Minister of Foreign Affairs Louis Barthou. This meeting occurred in Marseille, where the Ustashe and IMRO took advantage of the situation to successfully assassinate the Yugoslav king on October 9,

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<sup>76</sup> „Пораз прве гарнитуре у Београду, победа друге у Софији”, *Полиџика*, 2. 4. 1934, 8.

<sup>77</sup> „Пораз нашег државног тима у коме је било пет центарфора”, *Време*, 2. 4. 1934, 9.

<sup>78</sup> „Пораз прве гарнитуре у Београду, победа друге у Софији”, *Полиџика*, 2. 4. 1934, 10; „На два фронта – една ценна победа”, *Спортс*, 2. 4. 1934, 1.

<sup>79</sup> Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije: 1918–1988*, 162–163.

1934.<sup>80</sup> The assassination was a profound shock, not only to the Yugoslav people but also to the Bulgarians and their government at that time. The news triggered widespread dismay in Bulgaria, leading King Boris to suspend all public entertainment in Sofia and declare a three-day mourning period for the military and state institutions on October 12. This gesture of solidarity, along with the cooperation of the Bulgarian police, an outpouring of condolence telegrams, and numerous newspaper articles mourning the tragedy, fostered the impression that the assassination would not derail the positive trajectory of bilateral relations. However, beneath the surface of these public displays of commitment to strengthening ties, Bulgarian politicians were left to ponder whether the decision to withdraw support for the IMRO had been wise and whether, in light of the new circumstances, a reassessment of their policy toward Yugoslavia was warranted.<sup>81</sup>

Just two months after the assassination, on December 25, a match was arranged between the national teams as part of the IV Balkan Cup, hosted in Athens. The match showcased a thrilling display of football, concluding with Yugoslavia securing a victory with a score of 4:3. Newspaper reports described a fiercely contested game, with Bulgarian players approaching the match with a “life or death” mentality. They pushed relentlessly, often targeting the Yugoslav players directly. Notably, all three goals conceded by the Yugoslav national team came from corner kicks. Approximately 10,000 fans attended the match, with a majority supporting Yugoslavia, while several hundred Bulgarian supporters traveled to Athens to cheer for their team. These Bulgarian fans distinguished themselves with their modern approach, akin to contemporary supporter groups. As reported by *Politika* at the time, “Several hundred Bulgarian fans journeyed from Sofia and occupied a section of the stands, energetically rallying for their players to the beat of a conductor.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Бранислав Глигоријевић, *Краљ Александар Карађорђевић у европској полицији* (Београд: Завод за уџбенике и наставна средства, 2002), 300–307; „Убили су нам краља наши народни и државни непријатељи”, *Правда*, 11. 10. 1934, 1–2.

<sup>81</sup> Živko Avramovski, *Balkanska antanta: (1934–1940)* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1986), 173; Жикић, *Југославија и Бугарска 1929–1941*, 309–311; „Бугарски изасланици о наставку курса пријатељства између Бугарске и Југославије”, *Правда*, 21. 10. 1934, 6.

<sup>82</sup> „У оштрој и узбудљивој игри Југословени туку Бугаре у Атини са 4:3”, *Полиџика*, 26. 12. 1934.

The match was prominently featured in Bulgarian newspapers, which deemed it a crucial contest that could significantly influence Bulgaria's chances of winning the cup.<sup>83</sup> Following the game, the newspapers remarked that "Sofia, and indeed the whole of Bulgaria, do not remember showing so much interest in a single sporting event".<sup>84</sup> The audience's interest was primarily driven by the match's importance for securing the cup, as well as the anticipation that the team, having invested considerable effort, would deliver a performance unlike anything previously witnessed in Bulgaria. One indicator of this heightened interest was the placement of scoreboards in numerous cafes and restaurants, where key information was displayed, often updated through a phone. Additionally, large crowds gathered outside post offices in nearly every corner of Bulgaria.<sup>85</sup>



„Днесъ цела България съ трепетъ очаква, Мача България–Югославия въ Атина”,  
*Спортъ*, 25. 12. 1934, 1.

<sup>83</sup> „Днесъ цела България съ трепетъ очаква, Мача България–Югославия въ Атина”,  
*Спортъ*, 25. 12. 1934, 1.

<sup>84</sup> „Балканската купа и мача България–Югославия”, *Спортъ*, 26. 12. 1934, 3.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 3.

What marked the games in Athens was unsportsmanlike cheering and poor behavior from those responsible for participant safety. Especially Greek fans, known for their ardor, escalated their cheering during the tournament, reflecting a desire to keep the cup in Athens. Players often injured opponents, and the home crowd applauded these violations. The key match for Greece was the match against Bulgaria on January 1, 1935, refereed by Yugoslavian referee Bora Vasiljević. Throughout the match, the audience hurled insults at the referee, throwing various objects, including stones. The situation reached a climax when a Greek policeman threatened Vasiljević with a gun. Additionally, Greek players, including goalkeeper Gramatikopoulos, displayed aggression towards the referee, attacking him on two occasions.<sup>86</sup>

The meeting of the Cup Committee, which took place on January 2nd in Athens, fostered serious discussions surrounding the competition's future. During this meeting, Konstantaras, the vice-president of the Greek Federation, was elected as the new president, with Petar Stojadinov, the secretary of the Bulgarian Federation, assuming the role of secretary. Representatives Kostić and Luchide emphasized the importance of disciplined matches, which led to decisions aimed at enhancing player safety and controlling the crowd. A ban on standing behind the goal was introduced, along with stricter penalties for player indiscipline, empowering committee members to impose penalties without prior notification from referees. The next tournament was scheduled for June in Sofia, where it was also determined that the following Cup would also take place in Sofia.<sup>87</sup>

The match between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria within the framework of the V Balkan Cup was played on June 24, 1935, in Sofia, under heavy rain, and attracted an audience of 25,000 fans. Among them were Queen Joanna and Prince Kiril, accompanied by their royal entourage, as well as distinguished government ministers.<sup>88</sup> The match concluded with a 3:3 draw. As it turns

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<sup>86</sup> Xavier Breuil, Constantin Pompiliu-Nicolae, „The Balkan Cups as a Vector of European Integration, 1929–1994”, *Sport in History*, vol. 35, iss. 4 (2015): 591–603; „Балкански куп је наш, победницима се спрема свечани дочек у Београду”, *Правда*, 3. 1. 1935, 8–9.

<sup>87</sup> „Специјалне мере за рад и дисциплину на идућим утакмицама за Балкански куп”, *Време*, 3. 1. 1935, 9.

<sup>88</sup> The match was originally scheduled for June 23; however, it was postponed by a day due to rain and a flooded pitch. Despite the match's delay, not all events on the agenda were affected. As this was the final and decisive match for the cup, a banquet and reception



out, it will be the last meeting between the two national teams within the framework of the Balkan Cup.

The match began with Yugoslavia taking an early lead of 2:0. However, just 28 minutes in, Bulgarian player Ljubomir Angelov scored a series of goals that changed the momentum of the game. The final score was sealed by Yugoslav player Đorđe Vujadinović, who found the net in the 75th minute. A draw was sufficient for Yugoslavia to secure the trophy once more, much to the disappointment of the home crowd. Although there were approximately 200 Yugoslav fans present in the stadium, the entire country closely followed the match, anxiously awaiting news of a victory or, at the very least, a draw. When the news of the cup victory reached Belgrade, it was met with jubilant cheers, particularly from the taverns where fans often gathered to receive updates.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, tensions arose as both Yugoslavia and Bulgaria boasted the same goal difference due to the tied score. The Bulgarian side was reluctant to concede defeat, contesting the decision that disallowed their first goal due to a foul. They disregarded the fact that the final coefficient favored the Yugoslav team. The situation was on the verge of escalating into an incident, prompting a strong response from the Belgrade press.<sup>90</sup>

The question of who the winner was sparked intense debate at the Cup Committee meetings, raising concerns about the future of the competition. As one cycle of the tournament came to a close, Mihailo Andrejević, the Yugoslav representative and vice-president of the Yugoslav Football Federa-

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were held at the Bulgarian king's residence. Although the match was not played and the reception could not be postponed, it proceeded without designating a winner or presenting the cup. This decision by the court, as well as reactions from sports journalists and football fans in Bulgaria, was immediately interpreted as an ill omen. The match concluded in a draw, but Yugoslavia had a superior overall goal difference, which meant the cup should have been awarded to them. Given the substantial interest surrounding the event, the newspaper *Sport* published two editions on June 24. Along with its regular morning issue, an evening edition was produced comprising two pages that primarily focused on the match report. The following issue also dedicated coverage to the match; „Мачътъ България-Югославия ще се играе днесъ”, *Спортъ*, 24. 6. 1935, 1; „България Югославия завършиха 3:3”, *Спортъ, вечерно издание*, 24. 6. 1935, 1–2.

<sup>89</sup> „После врло узбудљиве игре са Бугарском, Југославија је по други пут освојила куп”, *Полиџика*, 25. 6. 1935, 9; „Југославија је нерешеном игром са Бугарском 3:3 (2:2) одбранила Балкански куп”, *Време*, 25. 6. 1935, 7.

<sup>90</sup> Жикић, „Југословенско-бугарски односи 1929–1941”, 433; „България контестира мача съ Югославия”, *Спортъ*, 25. 6. 1935, 1.

tion, strongly advocated for Yugoslavia to host the next cup. However, this proposal was complicated by a prior agreement among other participants to hold the event in Bucharest. The Yugoslav request was not accommodated during the Cup Committee meeting, leading the Yugoslav Football Federation to withdraw from the competition.<sup>91</sup> With Yugoslavia's departure from the Balkan Cup, a vital connection that ensured at least one annual match between football players from Yugoslavia and Bulgaria was disrupted.

In 1935, in an effort to restore relations and bring Yugoslavia back into the Balkan Cup, Dimitar Ivanov, president of the BNSF and a noted advocate of friendship with Yugoslavia, traveled to Belgrade. Unfortunately, his mission was unsuccessful. Shortly after his return to Sofia, Ivanov fell ill and passed away in October 1935, which caused widespread mourning and led to the establishment of a memorial fund. In his honor, two commemorative matches between the Yugoslav and Bulgarian national teams were organized. One in Belgrade on July 12, 1936, where Yugoslavia triumphed 3-1, and another in Sofia on July 12, 1937, where Bulgaria secured a 4-0 victory. The proceeds from these matches were designated for the erection of a monument to Ivanov in Sofia. However, financial losses and low attendance hampered the initiative. The heavy defeat of Yugoslavia in Sofia prompted stricter regulations regarding permits for Yugoslav clubs to play in Bulgaria. As a result of an incident that occurred during the match between SK Yugoslavia and Slavia in Sofia on September 9, 1939, the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs recommended, and subsequently implemented, a ban on Yugoslav clubs competing in Bulgaria. This decision was driven by concerns regarding national prestige and the safety of players, particularly in light of Bulgaria's aggressive national policies that extended into sports.<sup>92</sup> Shifts in political dynamics, Yugoslavia's inclination towards competing with more developed football nations, and the aforementioned political circumstances ultimately rendered the meeting in Sofia the last encounter between the two nations during the interwar period.

<sup>91</sup> „Југославија је иступила из Балканског купа због неспортског понашања Румунског ногометног савеза”, *Време*, 26. 6. 1935, 9.

<sup>92</sup> „Југославија–Бугарска 3:1”, *Време*, 13. 7. 1936, 7; „Катастрофалан пораз југословенске репрезентације у Софији”, *Правда*, 14. 7. 1937, 10; Ivan Becić, Dejan Antić, „More than a Game – Football Matches between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria 1937–1939”, *Physical Education and Sport*, Vol. 13, No. 1/2015, 149–160.

On the eve of the war, an opportunity arose for the Bulgarian national football team to engage with Croatian players, stemming from the complex national issues within Yugoslavia. The division between Croatian and Serbian factions within the Yugoslav Football Association was becoming increasingly pronounced, culminating in a public disagreement in 1939 that mirrored the broader crisis that Yugoslavia was facing. This crisis emerged over the establishment of national football associations and the reorganization of the football league system. Croatian representatives strongly advocated for this restructuring, while their Serbian counterparts staunchly defended the continuation of the existing unified JNS.<sup>93</sup> By early July of that year, Croatian aspirations garnered support from clubs in Slovenia, particularly within the Drava Banovina. In August, the Croatian Football Association was established, followed closely by the founding of the Slovenian and Serbian Football Associations. Ultimately, the JNS was dissolved on November 1, 1939, leading to the creation of the Supreme Football Association of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia as its successor.<sup>94</sup> The responsibilities of this new association included representing the country within FIFA, overseeing the implementation of international football regulations domestically, organizing the national championship matches, and coordinating international encounters. However, the dissolution of the JNS resulted in the decentralization of football within the country. This transition led to the establishment of three largely independent federations: the Serbian Football Federation, the Slovenian Football Federation, and the Croatian Football Federation. Notably, each federation was granted the authority to schedule friendly matches with other nations. The Croatian Football Federation was the first to exercise this newly acquired right, orchestrating a match between the national team of Croatia (Banovina Hrvatska) and the Swiss national team on April 2, 1940, in Zagreb.<sup>95</sup> In an effort to further capitalize on this opportunity, the Croats promptly reached an agreement with the Bulgarian Federation to arrange a match between the national teams of the Banovina of Croatia and Bulgaria. This encounter was intended to take place in Zagreb, followed by a return fixture in Sofia in Sep-

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<sup>93</sup> *Sto godina nogometa u Hrvatskoj 1880–1980*, prir. Franjo Frntić i Dragutin Hripko, (Zagreb: Nogometni savez Hrvatske, 1983), 26.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>95</sup> „Репрезентација Хрватске победила Швајцарску 4:0”, *Политика*, 3. 4. 1940, 8.

tember 1940. However, the impending shadow of war over Europe most likely obstructed the realization of these scheduled matches.<sup>96</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The interwar football relations between the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Kingdom of Bulgaria reflected a complex interplay between sport and politics. Despite intermittent interruptions caused by rising political tensions, territorial aspirations, hostile propaganda efforts, and episodes of violence – most notably the activities of IMRO and the assassination of King Alexander – football often served as a bridge for rapprochement. Matches between the national teams, particularly within the framework of the Balkan Cup, provided a platform for symbolic gestures of goodwill, informal diplomacy, and public affirmation of cooperation. The presence of diplomats and high-ranking officials at these events underscores the political significance attributed to sporting encounters. However, the assassination of King Alexander in 1934 marked a turning point, severely straining bilateral relations and curtailing football exchanges. The subsequent polarization of Europe and the alignment of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria with opposing geopolitical blocs further deepened the divide. In total, fifteen matches were played between 1926 and 1937, with Yugoslavia winning nine, Bulgaria four, and two ending in draws. These matches, embedded within the political context of their time, illustrate how football functioned as both a mirror and a mediator of interstate relations. Ultimately, the cessation of football ties reflected the deepening divide between the two nations, as they aligned with opposing blocs on the eve of global conflict.

### SUMMARY

Complex political relationships, marked by numerous unresolved interstate issues, significantly influenced the football cooperation between the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Kingdom of Bulgaria. It took eight years after the establishment of the Kingdom of SHS for the first football match to occur

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<sup>96</sup> Димитър, Попдимитров, Ив. Куртев, Г. Мархолов, *България на футболния глобус*, (София: Медицина и физкултура, 1970), 17; Жиких, „Југословенско-бугарски односи 1929–1941“, 434.

with neighboring Bulgaria. However, as the political climate improved, football transcended these political divides, leading to a flurry of friendly matches.

After Andrei Lyapchev came to power in Bulgaria, when mutual relations had a positive trajectory, the first match between the two national teams was played in 1926. This was followed by a series of friendly matches, as well as a match within the framework of the Balkan Cup. Each match was accompanied by a diplomatic corps, and not infrequently by the highest representatives of state power, in some cases even by the monarchs themselves. It was an opportunity beyond football itself, each time two national teams met it was a step forward in building closer ties between two neighboring countries. When relations worsened, especially in the years before the Second World War, matches of the national teams were now more of a reflections of old hostilities.

Football matches within the framework of the Balkan Cup had a special dimension. During the interwar period, the Balkan Cup played a pivotal role in fostering closer ties among the Balkan nations, which can be clearly seen in the example of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. A total of seven matches were conducted within the tournament, all characterized by the singing of national anthems and attended by numerous diplomats. Many of these events were also observed by senior state officials and, in certain instances, even monarchs. These meetings at the matches were an opportunity for confidential discussions as well as informal transmission of information.

The positive trajectory of political and football relations between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria was abruptly halted by the assassination of King Alexander in Marseille in 1934. The suspected involvement of IMRO in the assassination, coupled with the organization's connections to the Bulgarian government, strained relations between the two nations. Following this event, only four additional football matches were held as part of the Balkan Cup and the Dimitar Ivanov Memorial Fund. With World War II approaching and years of sharp division in Europe between the Allies and the Axis Powers, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria had to choose sides. As political tensions intensified and the two neighboring countries took opposing sides, football activities between their national teams effectively came to a standstill. In total, fifteen matches were played during the interwar period, each marked by its political context. Out of 15 football matches, Yugoslavia triumphed 9 times and Bulgaria achieved victory 4 times. Additionally, 2 of the matches concluded in a draw.

Table No. 1: Football matches between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria 1926–1937.

	Date	Place	Type	Result Yugoslavia– Bulgaria
1.	30.05.1926.	Zagreb: HAŠK	Friendly International	3:1
2.	15.05.1927.	Sofia: Slavia	Friendly International	2:0
3.	13.04.1930.	Belgrade: BSK	Friendly International	6:1
4.	15.06.1930.	Sofia: Levski	Friendly International	2:2
5.	16.11.1930.	Sofia: Slavia	Balkan Cup	3:0
6.	19.04.1931.	Belgrade: SK Yugoslavia	Balkan Cup	1:0
7.	04.10.1931.	Sofia: Yunak	Balkan Cup	2:3
8.	30.06.1932.	Belgrade: BSK	Balkan Cup	2:3
9.	07.06.1933.	Bucharest: ONEF	Balkan Cup	4:0
10.	18.03.1934.	Sofia: A.S.	Friendly International	2:1
11.	01.04.1934.	Belgrade: BSK	Friendly International	2:3
12.	25.12.1934.	Athens: Leoforos Alexandras	Balkan Cup	4:3
13.	24.06.1935.	Sofia: Yunak	Balkan Cup	3:3
14.	12.07.1936.	Belgrade: SK Yugoslavia	Friendly (Ivanov Fund)	3:1
15.	12.07.1937.	Sofia: Yunak	Friendly (Ivanov Fund)	0:4
	Total: Yugoslavia 9 wins, Bulgaria 4 wins, Draw 2			Total goals: 36:24

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## Резиме

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### ФУДБАЛСКИ ОДНОСИ КРАЉЕВИНЕ ЈУГОСЛАВИЈЕ И КРАЉЕВИНЕ БУГАРСКЕ

АПСТРАКТ: Политички односи између Краљевине Југославије и Краљевине Бугарске били су оптерећени мноштвом нерешених питања. Такви односи су се одразили и на сферу спорта, посебно на фудбал, који је често посматран као инструмент зближавања два народа и двеју династија. Иако су граничне државе, прва утакмица националних репрезентација одиграна је тек 1926. године. У периодима када су политички односи били добри, југословенско-бугарска фудбалска сарадња је цветала, с друге стране, када су постојале тензије, фудбал је патио. Неколико година уочи Другог светског рата, све јасније се показивало да су Југославија и Бугарска политички и идеолошки на супротстављеним странама. Растуће тензије, подстакнуте различитим спољнополитичким оријентацијама и унутрашњим притисцима, одразиле су се и на спортску сферу. Као последица тога, дотадашња фудбалска сарадња постепено је замрла, а контакти су у потпуности прекинути.

КЉУЧНЕ РЕЧИ: Југославија, Бугарска, фудбал, спорт, репрезентације, политика

Фудбалски односи између Краљевине Југославије и Краљевине Бугарске директно су одражавали политичке везе тих двеју земаља. Одмах након формирања Краљевине СХС, односи са Бугарском били су оптерећени многим нерешеним питањима. Тек када је на власт у Бугарској дошла нешто помирљивија влада Андреја Љапчева, створили су се потребни услови, те је прва утакмица између репрезентација одиграна 1926. године. Након тога је уследио низ пријатељских утакмица, као и утакмица у оквиру Балканског купа. Сваки сусрет пратио је дипломатски кор, а неретко и највиши представници државне власти, у неким слу-

чајевима чак и сами монарси. Тако је фудбал коришћен као инструмент за политичко зближавање двеју суседних држава. Међутим, односи су се значајно погоршали атентатом на краља Александра 1934. године и активностима ВМРО-а, па је као резултат тога фудбалска сарадња опала у наредним годинама. Последња утакмица између националних репрезентација одиграна је 1937. године. Свеукупно, у међуратном периоду одиграно је 15 утакмица у којима је Југославија тријумфовала девет пута, Бугарска четири пута, а два пута је резултат био нерешен.