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The Serbian Identity of FK Crvena zvezda (FC Red Star Belgrade) in the Socialist Era: Perspectives from Memoirs and Biographies*

Abstract: The article argues that the Crvena zvezda Football Club (FC Red Star Belgrade) maintained both Serbian and pan-Serbian identity during the socialist era (1945–1991), based on primary sources such as memoirs, and biographies. With no Serbian dynasty or state, and the Serbian Orthodox Church marginalized, FK Crvena zvezda became a unifying factor for the Serbian people in socialist Yugoslavia.

Keywords: FK Crvena zvezda (FC Red Star), Belgrade, Serbia, Serbdom, Yugoslavia, football, identity

On the occasion of FK Crvena zvezda's 80th anniversary (1945–2025)

According to journalist Aleksandar Apostolovski's biography of Crvena Zvezda player Dušan Savić, the club had a strong Serbian identity even during the socialist era.¹ Savić emphasized Crvena zvezda's significance to Serbs across Yugoslavia during his 1970s and 1980s career, insisting his biography in Serbian be published exclusively in Cyrillic.² This aligns perfectly with cur-

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1 Aleksandar Apostolovski, *Дуле Савић*, (Београд: Вихор, 2022), 359.

2 At the same time, Branka Bešević Gajić directed a biographical sports documentary *Dule Savić: A u Londonu muk* (City Grupa, 2023, 77 minutes). Additionally, Dušan Savić published a photo monograph of postcards that the legendary FK Crvena zvezda

rent concept of the Sports Association Crvena zvezda (SD Crvena zvezda), introduced by the general secretary Zoran Avramović, that Crvena zvezda supporters should use Cyrillic alphabet.³

The Serbian identity of Crvena zvezda is deeply entrenched in its historical legacy. The club's association with Serbdom can be traced back to its establishment in 1945, and as Crvena zvezda approaches its 80th anniversary in 2025, this identity remains significant and even crucial. A variety of sources, including memoirs, biographies, and recollections from contemporaries in Yugoslavia, Serbia, and Croatia, corroborate the club's Serbian character during the socialist era. These accounts, provided by statesmen, military generals, communist officials, politicians, club founders, football players, priests, writers, journalists, and scholars, collectively reveal that Crvena zvezda was intrinsically Serbian, albeit veiled under communist nomenclature and symbols.

*From SK Velika Srbija (Greater Serbia)
to FK Crvena Zvezda (Red Star)*

In 1906, the Srpski mač Sports Association of Belgrade, whose name translates to “Serbian Sword”, established a football division, adopting the colors red, blue, and white. However, due to internal disagreements, a faction of Srpski mač players broke away in 1911 to form the Belgrade Sport Club (BSK), which chose blue or blue-and-white as its official colors. BSK quickly emerged as the most popular football club in Belgrade. In 1913, a new football club, SK Velika Srbija (Sports Club Greater Serbia), was founded, its name commemorating the Kingdom of Serbia’s victories in the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), which resulted in the liberation and unification of Old Serbia and Southern Serbia with the Kingdom of Serbia. After the First World War and the formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (SHS) in 1918, both BSK and SK Velika Srbija resumed their activities in 1919, with the latter renaming itself SK Yugoslavia and adopting red and white as its official colors.⁴

In the Kingdom of SHS/Yugoslavia football league,⁵ from 1923 to 1941, Belgrade football clubs faced competition from Zagreb, including HŠK

captain Dragan Džajić, at the height of his career, sent from around the world to his young neighbors, Dušan and his twin brother, Dragan Savić.: *Цајине разгледнице*, ур. Душан Савић, (Београд: Д. Савић, 2003).

3 „Ја сам звездаш, ћирилицом пишем”, *Sd-crvenazvezda.net*, 1. 11. 2022.

4 Данило Стојановић, *Чика Дачине успомене*, (Београд: СД Црвена звезда, 1953), 28–70.

5 See: Љубомир Вукадиновић, *Вечити ривали*, (Београд: Књижара „Иван Гундулић”, 1943).

Građanski (1. HŠK Građanski), HŠK Konkordija, and HAŠK, as well as Hajduk from Split.

According to historian Dejan Zec, football clubs in the Kingdom of SHS/Yugoslavia became national (ethnic) symbols. Successes of BSK, SK Yugoslavia, Soko (Belgrade), Vojvodina (Novi Sad), and Slavija (Sarajevo) were seen as Serbian victories, while triumphs of Građanski, Konkordia, HAŠK, Hajduk, and SAŠK (Sarajevo) were viewed as Croatian successes. In the 1930s, Serbs from Croatia, Slavonia, and Dalmatia began supporting Belgrade clubs BSK and Yugoslavia due to rising Croatian nationalism at Građanski Zagreb matches.⁶ During the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia, SK Yugoslavia had to change its name to SK 1913.

In 1945, Yugoslav communists disbanded the Belgrade clubs BSK and SK 1913 (SK Yugoslavia), as well as their Zagreb rivals Građanski, Konkordija, and HAŠK, all of which had been champions in the Kingdom of SHS/Yugoslavia. These clubs were condemned for playing football in occupied Serbia and the Independent State of Croatia (NDH). Hajduk from Split was the only champion from that era to remain in socialist Yugoslavia, having disbanded in 1941 to avoid competing in the Italian league, and was not restored in the Independent State of Croatia despite several attempts.⁷ Instead of defunct clubs, new ones were founded to align with the new state ideology: Crvena zvezda and Partizan in Belgrade, and Dinamo in Zagreb.

The Crvena zvezda Football Club belonged to the Crvena zvezda Youth Gymnastics Association, which was founded in Belgrade on March 4, 1945, by the Unified League of Anti-Fascist Youth of Serbia (USAOS). Basketball player Srđa Kalember reveals that a few Crvena zvezda founders discussed restoring BSK or SK Yugoslavia. It was debated at the preliminary meeting in liberated Belgrade in late 1944, but it was rejected in favor of the name Crvena zvezda.⁸ Crvena zvezda, which translates to Red Star in English, derives its name and emblem—a red five-pointed star—as symbols of communism.

Football was the most popular sport in Yugoslavia, and FK Crvena zvezda rose to prominence by establishing connections with BSK and SK Yugoslavia. Ljubiša Sekulić, one of Crvena zvezda's founders, believed that Partizan's reliance on Zagreb-based stars and lack of local players led to a weak

6 Dejan Zec, „Кратак осврт на појаву фудбалских навијача у Краљевини СХС/Југославији”, *Гласник Етнографског института САНУ* 2/2016, 232–233.

7 „Nakon što je Hajduk odbio 1941. igrati u talijanskoj ligi, proglašen je nezakonitim”, *Večernji list*, 30. 5. 2018.

8 TV series *Bili smo prvaci sveta*, second episode (2/24), (Beograd: Radio-televizija Srbije, 2014).

identification among Belgrade fans. Vlastimir Purić, a member of Crvena zvezda's early management, credited the club's success to the integration of players from the two pre-war clubs, which helped the club gain the support of BSK and SK Yugoslavia's fan bases.⁹

Crvena zvezda inherited both the "Avala" stadium from SK Yugoslavia and its red and white colors, fostering a public perception of a direct continuity with SK Yugoslavia. The first official publication on FK Crvena zvezda, released in 1952, confirms that the club's players were drawn in equal measure from BSK and SK Yugoslavia.¹⁰ Rajko Mitić, a former BSK player and captain of Crvena zvezda, married at the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1953,¹¹ which was a rare occurrence under the stringent communist era.¹² Mile Kos, editor-in-chief of Partizan's newspaper *Partizanov vesnik*, considers the founding of Crvena zvezda as just a poorly hidden extension of the traditions of the esteemed pre-war clubs BSK and Yugoslavia, which had been banned.¹³

Based on the history of clubs, footballers, and fan identity, FK Crvena zvezda origins can be traced along two lines. The first began with the founding of Srpski mač in 1906 and its branch BSK in 1911, while the second started with SK Velika Srbija in 1913, which became SK Yugoslavia in 1919 and was renamed SK 1913 in 1941. This lineage highlights the Serbian connection in FK Crvena zvezda, rooted in ethnic, popular and civic traditions, and even among influential Serbian communists, the club was seen as a symbol of Serbia and Serbian identity.

Crvena zvezda as a "hub for Serbian nationalists", Croatian nationalism and Tuđman's involvement with JSD Partizan

According to Serbian historian and communist revolutionary Vladimir Dedijer, the Government of the People's Republic of Serbia, he names it the "Serbian government", secretly aided Crvena zvezda during the late 1940s and early 1950s, in violation of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia's directive that football clubs should not re-

9 Documentary movie *75 Zvezdinih godina – Osnivanje kluba*, (Beograd: Crvena zvezda marketing, 2020).

10 *300 utakmica Crvene zvezde*, ur. Велибор Тоболар, (Београд: ФК Црвена звезда, 1952), 14–34.

11 Бранислав Р. Јоцић, *Рајков пут до победе*, (Београд: Б. Р. Јоцић, 2009), 294.

12 Personal archive, photo from church wedding in my possession.

13 „Заборавање 32 године историје”, *Мојacrvenazvezda.net*, 3. 2. 2012.

ceive state funds.¹⁴ Franjo Tuđman noted that Crvena zvezda was clearly structured as a Serbian football club in the 1950s. He observed that “Krcun Penezić, the head of the Serbian Udba [secret service], was fervently promoting Crvena zvezda as a focal point for Serbian nationalists, despite it being under communist control”.¹⁵ Prominent journalist Bogdan Tirnanić suggests that Serbian traditions were preserved under communist rule also with the slogan: “If you can’t celebrate your family patron saint, at least support Crvena zvezda”.¹⁶

Partizan Belgrade, the Gymnastics Association at the Yugoslav Army Central Dome, was established on October 4, 1945.¹⁷ Since the club no longer had the resources to recruit football players from former Belgrade teams, FK Partizan brought in some renowned players who had previously played for the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) national team.¹⁸ To attract football players to FK Partizan, the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) offered material incentives, being wealthier than its competitors. The JNA enticed talented players by promoting them, hiring them as sports officials, and providing them with apartments. Players from other clubs were recruited into the army and required to join Partizan. Svetozar Vukmanović Tempo, Partizan’s founder and head of the Political Administration of the JNA General Staff, noted that the football audience refused to acknowledge Partizan’s advantages.¹⁹

The political administration of the JNA interpreted the strong chanting of Crvena zvezda supporters against Partizan, in the 1947/48 season – when Crvena zvezda center forward Jovan Jezerkić was mobilized – as indication that the youth has hostile attitude towards the army and communist partisans from the Second World War. The youngsters argued that FK Partizan and partisans could not be equated. According to Svetozar Vukmanović Tempo, the JNA did not mobilize Crvena zvezda captain Rajko Mitić to prevent more animosity towards the army among youths.²⁰ Vladimir Dediđer noted that transferring Mitić by force from Crvena zvezda to Partizan would create a “political issue” and lead to new “demonstrations”, as it already happened in Jezerkić’s case.²¹

14 Владимир Дедиђер, *Изгубљена битка Ј. В. Стаљина*, (Сарајево: Свјетлост; Просвета; Ослобођење, 1969), 221–222.

15 Darko Hudelist, *Tuđman*, (Zagreb: Profil International, 2004), 216.

16 Bogdan Tirnanić, *Beograd za početnike*, (Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 2006), 13–16.

17 *ФК Партизан 1945–2017*, ур. Милован Јоличић, (Београд: М. Јоличић, 2023), 8.

18 „Beogradski Partizan proslavili su reprezentativci ‘endehazije’”, *Dnevno.hr*, 11. 2. 2014.

19 Svetozar Vukmanović Tempo, *Revolucija koja teče*, t. 2, (Beograd: Komunist, 1971), 28.

20 *Ibid*, 28–29.

21 Дедиђер, *Изгубљена битка*, 219.

While Crvena zvezda and Partizan were engaged in political competition in Belgrade, observers in Croatia noted that football had increasingly become a platform for the expression of nationalism and chauvinism. On December 19, 1950, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Croatia discussed a report by a three-member party commission on “negative phenomena in sports”. The commission highlighted the spread of propaganda advocating for the creation of a “sports front in Croatia against sports in Serbia” as a means to protect Croatia from the “hegemonic efforts of Belgrade”. The report further noted that a growing number of Communist Party officials were assuming management roles in football clubs, prioritizing the interests of the clubs over those of the Party, and that sports administrators in Croatia increasingly viewed Belgrade associations and athletes as responsible for various issues.²²

In 1950, a commission reported that “enemy elements” were exploiting Hajduk officials Ante Jurjević and Jure Bilić, both Communist Party members, against Crvena zvezda and the Belgrade press, leading to a recommendation for their resignation. Despite this, a significant nationalist outburst occurred after Dinamo’s 1:0 victory over Crvena zvezda in Zagreb on December 9, 1951. Celebrating fans chanted “Zagreb–Split–Sarajevo–Zemun”, alluding to the borders of the WWII-era Independent State of Croatia. Consequently, 46 Dinamo Zagreb fans were arrested, with court proceedings initiated against nine.²³

In addition to Communist Party officials, members of various Yugoslav secret services also ascended to prominent positions within football clubs.²⁴ Aleksandar Ranković, the leader of Yugoslav secret service Udba was a Partizan supporter²⁵ and one of the club's founders.²⁶ Alongside the visible intolerance toward Crvena zvezda, Croatian stadiums at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s also echoed nationalist slogans against Partizan.²⁷ However, conditions over Partizan became even more difficult in the following decade.

In 1952, JNA Colonel Franjo Tuđman led the Partizan Tennis Club and, the following year, was elected to the management of the Partizan Sports Association, eventually becoming its secretary in 1954. By 1958, Tuđman had become president of the Partizan Sports Association. During this time,

22 Višnjić, *Vreme sporta i rasonode. Titina Hrvatska i njeni Srbi 1951–1971*, (Zagreb: SKD „Prosvjeta“, 2017), 47–48.

23 *Ibid*, 48–51.

24 *Ibid*, 48.

25 Vukmanović Tempo, *Revolucija koja teče*, 29.

26 ФК Партизан 1945–2017, 8.

27 Višnjić, *Vreme sporta i rasonode*, 47.

the State Security Administration for Belgrade, led by Životije Srba Savić and aligned with Ranković, sought to take over FK Partizan. As reported by Darko Hudelist, JNA Commander Ivan Gošnjak, who also served as State Secretary for National Defense Affairs of the FNR of Yugoslavia, instructed Tuđman to restore order within the club and prevent Savić from gaining control. In response, Tuđman appointed Colonel-General Martin Dasović, a key figure in Gošnjak's administration, as president of FK Partizan.²⁸

Tuđman's two major interventions centered on Partizan's identity, started with the change from red, or red-blue jerseys. He insisted that the new jerseys should not reflect the colors of the Yugoslav tricolor (blue-white-red) and stated that he wanted no association with Crvena zvezda, including in the club colors. Consequently, as president of SD Partizan in 1958, he mandated black and white colors for the club. Tuđman emphasized the most important factor was to ensure that Partizan's jersey color must not be ideologically connected to the forces associated with Crvena zvezda. According to FK Partizan captain Stjepan Bobek, the black and white colors were chosen by him, Franjo Tuđman and Artur Takač, one of the club's founders. Bobek said to Hudelist that the current black and white stripes of Partizan were most fittingly attributed to the three Croats and three individuals from Zagreb: "Takač, Francek, and myself".²⁹

The second intervention occurred during the SD Partizan Assembly in 1960, where it was decided to rename SD Partizan (the Sports Association Partizan) into JSD Partizan (the Yugoslav Sports Association Partizan). Tuđman explained that this change was necessary to prevent Partizan "from losing its all-Yugoslav and also a Croatian identity, and fall under the control of Greater Serbian-oriented forces within the republic's and local bodies of the Serbian security service".³⁰ At the end of 1960, Tuđman was promoted to general, and in the summer of 1961, he had left Belgrade and his role as president of JSD Partizan to return to Zagreb, where he founded the Institute for the History of the Croatian Labor Movement.³¹

According to Hudelist, Tuđman's efforts to shape Partizan's identity aligned with his shift from Titoist to Croatian nationalist.³² He focused on preventing Partizan from adopting a Serbian identity, while Crvena zvezda al-

28 Darko Hudelist, *Tuđman*, 209–213.

29 *Ibid*, 215–217.

30 *Ibid*, 217–218.

31 *Ibid*, 271.

32 *Ibid*, 215.

ready had a Serbian identity at the time. Tuđman emphasized Partizan's supposed Croatian identity, linking it obviously to the first generation of players brought from Croatia. His manipulation of Partizan's identity was strategic. Thus, SD Partizan was essentially the first casualty of Tuđman's Croatian nationalism which in 1991 led to break-up of the socialist Yugoslavia.

FK Crvena zvezda and the gathering of Serbs during the Croatian Spring (Maspok)

Considering the context, it is unsurprising that Serbs in socialist Yugoslavia rallied around Crvena zvezda. With no Serbian dynasty or Serbian state and the Serbian Orthodox Church marginalized, FK Crvena zvezda became the unifying force for the Serbian people. This was particularly evident during the Maspok movement in Croatia (1970–1971), when Serbs felt especially threatened.

Politologist Čedomir Višnjić, an ethnic Serb from Zagreb, titled his book on Serbo-Croatian relations during Croatia's socialist period (1951–1971) after the Radio Belgrade program "Vreme sporta i razonode" ("Time for Sports and Leisure"), which broadcasted First Yugoslav Football League matches. Višnjić observes that Serbs in Croatia did not prefer the Radio Zagreb show "A sada sport i glazba" ("And Now Sports and Music"), which aired simultaneously. He emphasizes that Serbs in Croatia maintained their Serbian identity through support for Crvena zvezda, listening to Radio Belgrade, and viewing Television Belgrade programs.³³

Višnjić contends that by the mid-1960s, FK Crvena zvezda had amassed significant socio-political influence at both the federal and, particularly, the Serbian level. He asserts that the club was "in safe political hands" even after the death of Slobodan Penezić Krcun in a car accident in 1964. Simultaneously, Višnjić notes the absence of influential Crvena zvezda supporters within the leadership of socialist Croatia.³⁴

On September 23, 1970, a first league match between Hajduk and OFK Beograd was interrupted in the second half with the score at 2:2 when the referee was struck by a stone from Hajduk's eastern stand. On October 6, 1970, the Football Association of Yugoslavia (FSJ) officially recorded the match as a 3:0 victory for OFK Belgrade, prompting two days of riots in Split. Hajduk's fans demanded the club withdraw from the league, vandalizing cars with Bel-

33 „U Beogradu promovisana knjiga *Vreme sporta i razonode: Titina Hrvatska i njeni Srbi 1951–1971*”, Banija.rs, 27. 12. 2017.

34 Višnjić, *Vreme sporta i razonode*, 231, 244–245.

grade plates and attacking kiosks owned by Belgrade press company “Borba”. Facing intense pressure, the Yugoslav First Football League Association overturned the decision on October 20, 1970, restoring the match result to 2:2, despite 40 minutes still to be played.³⁵

On November 8, 1970, Crvena zvezda visited Split, drawing significant attention from the Yugoslav public due to concerns about possible riots. A local taxi driver noted that, in addition to the national holidays of Labor Day (May 1), Soldier's Day (July 4), and Republic Day (November 29), Split celebrated a fourth holiday when Crvena zvezda comes to town, calling it a “fiesta”. The city was decorated with Hajduk flags and Croatian tricolors of red, white, and blue, but the match proceeded without any disruption. Despite the peaceful nature of the event, Belgrade magazine *Ilustrovana politika* interviewed some Hajduk fans who denied that previous riots were connected to Croatian chauvinism.³⁶

However, in 1971 four Hajduk fans posed for a photo with the Hajduk flag near the Avala tower in Belgrade, replacing the communist red star symbol of Hajduk in the central field of the crest with a Croatian checkerboard shield. Around that crest they added a laurel wreath, each leaf resembling the Latin letter U as a symbol of Ustasha movement, and included a ribbon stating “1911–1971”.³⁷ Around the same time, in April 1971, Belgrade political magazine *NIN* published a photograph of Crvena zvezda fans from Dalmatia who boldly traveled to Split during the Maspok to support their team against Hajduk. Their Cyrillic banners, featuring the Crvena zvezda crests, read “You are a pride of Kninska Krajina” and “Always with you, supporters from Benkovac”.³⁸

Serbian Archpriest-Stavrophor Dejan Dejanović witnessed that during Maspok, the Bishop of the Diocese of Upper Karlovac Simeon Zloković, instructed his priests in Croatia to promote among the faithful of the Serbian Orthodox Church support for Crvena zvezda and encourage reading the Belgrade daily newspaper *Politika*.³⁹ To symbolize this affiliation, there were ex-

35 „Nezadovoljni navijači Hajduka su prevrnuli tri automobila beogradskih registracija, a jednoga bacili u more”, *Dalmatinski portal*, 23. 9. 2022.

36 „Ко су то хајдуковци”, *Илустрована политика*, 17. 11. 1970.

37 From my personal collection.

38 „Успон и пад”, *НИН*, 25. 4. 1971. The image was wrongly described as depicting the FK Crvena zvezda stadium instead of Hajduk's old stadium, “Stari plac”.

39 My notes are based on the testimony of Serbian Orthodox priest Dejan Dejanović (1930–2016), a devoted supporter of FK Crvena zvezda, both in Belgrade and away. His other emotions were captured in the official DVD release: *Zvezdina prva titula*, (Beograd: FC Red Star Company, 2011).

amples that the Crvena zvezda crest was embroidered on a red-colored flat top of the Serbian Lika cap in Croatia, instead of the traditional Serbian cross also known as firesteels (*ocila*).⁴⁰ When it was not possible to express Serbian cross in the public, the Crvena zvezda symbols showed belonging to Serbian identity.

Serbian writer Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz recounted an event influenced by Maspok, when Serbian writers were prohibited from performing in Zadar on May 6, 1971. Consequently, the gathering was held outdoors on the same day, St. George's Day according to the Orthodox Christian calendar, in the Serbian village of Islam Grčki in the Dalmatian hinterland, before an audience of 4,000 people. Mihiz described the scene, noting that attendees descending from the mountains carried the Crvena zvezda flag in place of the Serbian flag, which was not permitted at that time.⁴¹

Serbian university professor Milo Lompar recounts the friendly match between Hajduk and Crvena zvezda on August 5, 1971, in Split, during which Hajduk fans threw various objects at the Crvena zvezda players. He reflects that what seemed confusing and unsettling to him as a child later became clear: the red and white jerseys of Crvena zvezda were perceived as symbols of the Serbian flag.⁴²

In his biography, Dušan Savić recounts the match between Hajduk and Crvena zvezda on Orthodox Christian Easter, April 10, 1977, which also marked the anniversary of establishment of the Independent State of Croatia on that day in 1941. The game carried significant symbolism. Savić recalls a Crvena zvezda fan from Knin who, during the match, leaped onto the field, knelt, crossed himself, kissed Crvena zvezda's flag, and planted it in the center. When three Hajduk fans approached him, he defended himself with the flag-pole before kneeling again in the penalty area to kiss and replant the flag. He was eventually escorted out by the militia.⁴³

Dušan Savić's biography emphasizes cities and regions beyond Serbia, such as Kninska Krajina and Herzegovina, where Serbian identity is associated with Crvena zvezda.⁴⁴ Miodrag Belodedić, a football defender for Crvena zvezda and originally from the ethnic Serbian village of Sokolovac in Romania, confirms that during his childhood in the 1970s, his village supported FK Crvena zvezda and watched Television Belgrade, while Bucharest seemed dis-

40 From my collection, a photo of the Lika cap with the Crvena zvezda crest.

41 Мило Ломпар, *Дух самопорицања*, (Нови Сад: Orpheus, 2012), 10. More detailed on the gathering in Islam Grčki: Višnjić, *Vreme sporta i rasonode*, 414–415.

42 Ломпар, *Дух самопорицања*, 7–11.

43 Апостоловски, *Дуле Савић*, 162–164.

44 *Ibid*, 167.

tant and irrelevant.⁴⁵ In the 1980s, the Crvena Zvezda stadium featured a fence adorned with large red and white flags bearing Cyrillic inscriptions of various cities and towns of Yugoslavia where Serbs were living: Knin, Benkovac, Po-dravska Slatina, Pakrac, Banjaluka, Sarajevo, Trebinje, Herceg Novi, Vukovar, Novi Sad, Belgrade, Kragujevac, Niš, Kosovska Mitrovica, Skopje, and others.⁴⁶

*The giant Serbian tricolor in Bari and the triumph
of Crvena Zvezda's Serbdom*

After Tito's death in 1980, it became common to sing Serbian patriotic songs like "Igrale se delije, nasred zemlje Srbije" ["Heroes were playing, in the middle of the Serbian country"], "Ko to kaže, ko to laže, Srbija je mala" ["Who says it, who lies, Serbia is small"], and "Oj, vojvodo Sinđeliću" ["Hey, Duke Sinđelić"] while waving the Socialist Republic of Serbia flags (red-blue-white, with red five-pointed star in center) at the Crvena zvezda stadium. By the end of the decade, Serbian tricolors without markings appeared, followed by flags featuring Serbian cross and a double-headed white eagle. Additionally, songs associated with Serbian Chetnik tradition were performed at the stadium in the late 1980s and early 1990s, despite Yugoslavia still being cheered on during Crvena zvezda matches at that time.⁴⁷

It was not contradictory for Serbs to view Yugoslavia as their country. While Crvena zvezda was considered a Serbian team in a national and ethnic context, it also functioned as a Yugoslav club in terms of state allegiance during the socialist era. However, Crvena zvezda never had a pan-Yugoslav identity, whereas Partizan was recognized by its all-Yugoslav character due to connection with the JNA.

During the 1980s, the most ardent Partizan supporters began to glorify their Serb identity. As a gesture of solidarity, Crvena zvezda and Partizan fans sang "Partizan and Zvezda are two brotherly clubs" during away games in Croatia. In the final basketball playoff games between Crvena zvezda and Partizan, fans together chanted "Title to Belgrade".⁴⁸ However, the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s was signaled by the disruptions of football matches between Dinamo and Crvena zvezda in Zagreb (May 13, 1990)

45 Светлана Мијатовић, *Непоновљиви Миодраг Белодедић*, (Београд: АБЦ Глас, 1991), 35–38.

46 From my memories.

47 *Ibid.*

48 *Ibid.*

and Hajduk and Partizan in Split (September 26, 1990), foreshadowing the Yugoslav Civil War (1991–1995).

Musician and writer Nele Karajlić wrote that in the late 1980s he understood that football was an unofficial ethnic census in socialist Yugoslavia. Only then he realized why so many of his Serbian friends around Sarajevo and other regions of Bosnia-Herzegovina supported Crvena zvezda. He concluded that, for many Serbs, especially those from rural areas, Crvena zvezda was more than just a football team; it represented a deep sense of identity and served as an outlet for repressed emotions. Crvena zvezda symbolized a form of cultural connection, reflecting the significance of Orthodox Christian saints and Serbian heritage.⁴⁹

Crvena zvezda became the European football champion on May 29, 1991, by defeating Olympique de Marseille 5:3 on penalties after a 0:0 draw in Bari. Later, on December 8, 1991, Crvena zvezda became the world football champion in Tokyo with a 3:0 victory over South American champions Colo-Colo from Chile.

There is a certain symbolism in Crvena zvezda's European football champion title at the “St. Nicholas” stadium in Bari, named after Serbia's most revered Christian patron saint. Following the match, FK Crvena zvezda's general secretary, Vladimir Cvetković, declared that the triumph was dedicated to Serbia and Yugoslavia.⁵⁰ Crvena zvezda supporters traveled to Bari from Serbia, other parts of Yugoslavia and diaspora. In Bari, they unfurled a large Serbian tricolor with Serbian cross, that covered the most of Crvena zvezda's upper stand. This victory symbolized the triumph of the Crvena zvezda's Serbdom. Crvena zvezda was the most influential institution for Serbs in socialist Yugoslavia. Thus, the Crvena zvezda stadium “Rajko Mitić” serves today as a monument to Serbdom of that era.

Summary

Biographies and memoirs of contemporaries published in Yugoslavia, Serbia, and Croatia affirm FK Crvena zvezda's Serbian identity during the socialist era, as recognized by statesmen, military generals, communist officials, club founders, footballers, clergy, writers, journalists, and scholars. The evidence presented in this paper demonstrates that during socialist Yugoslavia, the Serbian essence of Crvena zvezda was concealed behind its communist

49 Nele Karajlić, *Фажронт у Сарајеву*, (Београд: Лагуна; Новости, 2014), 60–62.

50 „За Србију, за Југославију”, *Тепро*, 5. 6. 1991.

name and symbol, the Red Star. The historical background of pre-war Belgrade clubs, footballers, and the identity of their supporters allows for the delineation of two distinct origins for FK Crvena zvezda. The first traces back to the founding of the football club Srpski mač in 1906, continuing with its 1911 offshoot, BSK. The second originates in 1913 with the establishment of SK Velika Srbija, which was renamed SK Yugoslavia in 1919 and later rebranded as SK 1913 in 1941. In 1945, an equal number of players from SK Yugoslavia and BSK joined Crvena zvezda, reflecting the club's connection to Serbian ethnic, popular and civic traditions. Even among influential Serbian communists, FK Crvena zvezda was perceived by some as a symbol of Serbia and Serbian identity. Franjo Tuđman acknowledged that he intervened in shaping the identity of SD Partizan during the 1950s and 1960s, actively preventing elements within the Serbian establishment from taking control of FK Partizan. Tuđman aimed to prevent FK Partizan from adopting the Serbian identity that FK Crvena zvezda built in the 1950s. As a result, it is unsurprising that Serbs in socialist Yugoslavia identified strongly with FK Crvena zvezda. When there was no Serbian dynasty or state, and the Serbian Orthodox Church was marginalized, FK Crvena zvezda evolved as a unifying symbol for the Serbian people. During the Maspok period in SR Croatia (1970–1971), when the Serbian people felt particularly threatened, the red and white colors and the Red Star insignia symbolized Serbian identity in socialist Croatia, replacing the Serbian flag and reinforcing the connection to Belgrade. Similarly, Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina identified with FK Crvena zvezda. The club's European victory in Bari in 1991, marked by fans displaying a large Serbian tricolor, showed how FK Crvena zvezda elevated the Serbs' national consciousness more than any other institution, with the Crvena zvezda stadium "Rajko Mitić" becoming a monument to Serbdom during that era.

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Резиме

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СРПСКИ ИДЕНТИТЕТ ФК ЦРВЕНА ЗВЕЗДА У ДОБА
СОЦИЈАЛИЗМА: МЕМОАРСКА И БИОГРАФСКА ГРАЂА

Апстракт: Заснован на биографској и мемоарској грађи, овај рад показује како је Фудбалски клуб Црвена звезда чак и у социјалистичко време (1945–1991) изградио и задржао српски и свесрпски идентитет. У време када није било ни српске династије нити српске државе и док је Српска православна црква била на друштвеним маргинама, ФК Црвена звезда је имала интегративну улогу за српски народ у социјалистичкој Југославији.

Кључне речи: ФК Црвена звезда, Београд, Србија, српство, Југославија, фудбал, идентитет

Српски идентитет ФК Црвена звезда у социјалистичкој ери потврђују биографије и сећања савременика објављени у Југославији, Србији и Хрватској, како државника, војних генерала и комунистичких функционера, тако и оснивача клуба, фудбалера, свештеника, писаца, новинара и научника. Ти извори, представљени у овом раду, показују да је током социјалистичке Југославије иза комунистичког имена и знака Црвене звезде била прикривена њена српска суштина. Наиме, на основу историје предратних београдских клубова и фудбалера, али и идентитета навијача, могу се извући две линије генезе ФК Црвена звезда. Прва почиње 1906. године настанком фудбалског клуба Српски мач, која се од 1911. наставља његовим побочним изданком, БСК-ом. Друга траса почиње 1913. оснивањем СК Велика Србија која 1919. мења име у СК Југославија, да би 1941. клуб још једном променио име у СК 1913. Играчи СК Југославије и БСК-а су 1945. године у подједнаком броју прешли у Црвену звезду, што указује на континуитет српске народне и грађанске традиције уткан у овај клуб. Међутим, и међу утицајним српским комунистима било је оних који су Црвену звезду везивали за Србију и српски идентитет. Фрањо Туђман је због тога, према сопственом признању, на прелому педесетих и шездесетих година начинио интервенције у идентитету СД Партизан и спречио да делови српске службе преузму ФК Партизан. Туђманова намера била је да ФК Партизан тада не добије српски идентитет који је, према његовим речима, ФК Црвена звезда већ изградила то-

ком педесетих година. Стога не треба да чуди што су се Срби у социјалистичкој Југославији везивали за Црвену звезду. У време када није било ни српске династије нити српске државе, а док је Српска православна црква била на друштвеним маргинама, Црвена звезда је преузела улогу интегративног фактора за српски народ. То се јасно видело током Маспока у СР Хрватској (1970–1971), када се српски народ посебно осетио угроженим. Наиме, у то време су црвено-беле боје и грб Црвене звезде, уместо српске тробојке, служили као ознака српског идентитета у социјалистичкој Хрватској и повезаности тамошњих Срба с Београдом. На исти начин, навијањем за Црвену звезду, свој идентитет су градили и Срби у Босни и Херцеговини. Тријумф Црвене звезде у Барију 1991, када су навијачи раширили огромну српску тробојку с четири оцила, „засводио“ је Србе више него било која друга институција, док је стадион Црвене звезде „Рајко Митић“ постао споменик српству те епохе.