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Football and authoritarianism in twentieth century Romania: between propaganda and subversion

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What was the relationship of Romanian football to authoritarianism (1938–1989)? Was it only a propaganda tool or did it also provide room for freedom of expression in the stadiums?

Political instrumentalization of football started in Romania as early as the 1930s. Romanian authoritarianism, under all its historical forms, perceived football as a valuable tool, both for internal propaganda and as an international image carrier. From King Carol II to Nicolae Ceaușescu, Romanian dictators seized its potential to mobilize people, and integrated it in their political plans. Both King Carol II and Nicolae Ceaușescu had connections to the sport through their immediate circle. They instrumentalized football to project the image of a unified nation in awe with its leaders and identified minorities as a hazard to their designs.

Under communism, football was a social control mechanism, providing entertainment for the masses and meant to channel energy and let down pressure. Football reflected the society: corruption was widespread, the military clubs had the upper hand on those linked to civil authorities. The pooling of the best players in the military clubs allowed for noteworthy international results in the 1980s, when Romania took the reverse path of re-Stalinization while Eastern Europe under Soviet influence was undergoing reforms. The sports performances fuelled the theory of the Romanian social model’s superiority to the decadent West.

Some supporters’ groups in late Communism dared to criticize the tight grip of power on football and its corrupt practices.

Keywords: Romania, Eastern Europe, history, football, dictatorship, Communism, Iron Guard, racism, minorities, corruption, Ceaușescu

What was the Romanian football’s relationship to authoritarianism throughout the twentieth century? Was it a mere propaganda tool or did it provide a space for freedom of expression? This paper aims to address these two questions.

Political transition in Romania

Romania was ruled by authoritarian regimes for more than half of the twentieth century; it went successively from royal dictatorship to a military/fascist rule and afterwards to Soviet occupation and communism. In February 1938, King Carol II suppressed all political parties and instated his royal dictatorship; there would be no more elections, freedom of the press, or independent judges. In September 1940, the monarch was forced to abdicate and General Ion Antonescu took the helm with the support of the Iron Guard – a far-right movement and political party who had, at that time, the backing of Nazi Germany. Antonescu was deposed on 23 August 1944 by King Michael I. However, the country immediately became part of the Soviet unofficial protectorate and, in December 1947, it formally became a communist republic. The communist regime ended on 22 December 1989, with Nicolae Ceaușescu’s flight. He had concentrated all powers in his hands as the President of the Republic and General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party.
Football in Romania: early days

Football began to be played in Transylvania around the turn of the twentieth century, at a time when the Western province was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It then spread into the other Romanian provinces. The first team was set up in 1904 in Bucharest and the first championship was organized between 1909 and 1910. In interwar Romania, the Romanian Football Association (the Union of Football Clubs Association) was established in 1919. In 1929, the Association became the Romanian Football Federation, a name kept until today. The Romanian national team played and won its first international match against Yugoslavia, in June 1922, in Belgrade. In less than a decade, football became the most popular sport in the country and, as such, a political stake.

In the wake of neighbouring states in Central Europe, with Hungary, Austria, and Italy leading the way, football became a professional sport in Romania as well. The national team took part in the first three World Cups – Uruguay in 1930, Italy in 1934, and France in 1938, albeit it did not manage to go beyond the first round. Thanks to these international tournaments, football gained a nationwide audience and the players became widely popular. The daily Gazeta sporturilor (1924), an all-sports journal, extensively covered football developments since its early days, although boxing, cycling, and horse racing had the lion’s share in its eight pages.

Football and politics: inter-war years

It was the first World Cup that turned Romanian football into a political matter. King Carol II, the crown prince who had renounced his rights to the throne in December 1925 in order to pursue a romantic liaison abroad, had just returned from exile and replaced the regency presiding over his infant son Michael. In his first weeks as a constitutional monarch, he is thought to have facilitated Romania’s attendance of the tournament, which for that prime edition was invitational. His efforts have allegedly included pressuring the employers of the national team players to grant their employees leave so that they could travel to South America. In so doing, Carol II sought to capitalize on the public frenzy for football, which already drew audiences in the thousands, and to exploit the sport’s potential as a propaganda tool. It was by no means the first time he associated his image with football. On 14 September 1924, the first issue of Gazeta sporturilor had announced, on its front page, the crown prince’s presence at the first match in Romania between a Romanian club, Triumf Bucharest, and a Bulgarian one, Sparta Sofia.

From 1930 to 1940, political interference in Romanian football bore a name: General Gabriel (Gavrilă) Marinescu (1886–1940). As a close associate to the King, Marinescu helped Carol in the 1930 coup and was right afterwards appointed Prefect for the Bucharest Police, a position he held until 1939, when he became the Minister of the Interior. Nicknamed ‘The Emperor’, Marinescu used his proximity to the monarch and the resources of the law enforcement agencies to control football. When, in January 1936, Carol’s enforcer decided to take the reins of the Venus Bucharest football club, the lawyer Alexandru Elădescu, who had built, in 1931, a 15,000-seat arena at his own expense, had no choice but to share power. From 1920 to 1940, Venus won a record tally of 8 league titles with Marinescu as President (in 1937, 1939, and 1940).

Foreign players and coaches, including from Barcelona FC, were brought in against huge investment costs to cement Marinescu’s ascendancy and to allow the club to prevail over the equally ambitious Ripensia Timișoara.

Notwithstanding all the financial and political support received during the inter-war years, Venus and hence Marinescu did not manage to win Romania’s Cup. The route to this competition’s trophy was constantly barred by Rapid Bucharest, the immensely popular rail workers’ football club. As Rapid lacked the much-needed high level connections and the associated financial resources, they had to wait until 1967 for their maiden league title. This was not the case with the Cup, where the one-match format favoured the underdogs. In May 1938, Rapid defeated Venus 2–1 in the Cup semi-final. Following the victory party, Rapid’s four best players were arrested by the
police. To have them released from custody, the winners' president had to ask for the match to be replayed on grounds of arbitral partiality. The Federation, of which Marinescu had been the vice-president since March 1936, promptly granted the rematch. Rapid won 4–2 and Marinescu had himself nominated the honorary president of the Nemesis. In January 1939, Marinescu took over the presidency of the Romanian Football Federation by another manoeuvre. In order to call a general assembly, he compelled seven clubs to elect him as a honorary or executive president. In this capacity, in October of the same year, he would personally approve the national squad for the match against Hungary in Bucharest.

Marinescu's downfall was however quick; having fallen out of the king's favour in November 1939, the general was stripped of all powers but for the presidency of the Football Federation. When Carol abdicated, his confidant tried to flee the country, but he was caught by the Antonescu – Iron Guard government and sent behind bars. His savage retaliations against Iron Guard members in 1939, who had been shot without trial after their assassination of Prime Minister Armand Călinescu, brought about his end. In the night of 26 to 27 November 1940, while in Jilava prison, Marinescu was executed by the Legionary Movement death squads, along with several other politicians. The Football Federation was subsequently disbanded and replaced by a Football Directorate that would be headed by the Guardist Vică Negulescu until April 1941.

**Transition to authoritarian regime: the years of World War II**

The Legionnaire Movement spent less than five months in power. Having rebelled against General Ion Antonescu, the attempted mutiny was crushed by the Army and the Movement was dissolved between 21 and 23 January 1941. Still, in 1941, in the last national football championship to be organized before the end of the war, Unirea Tricolor Bucharest, a club with a legionnaire background, won the cup. Relegated from the top flight in the spring of 1940, Unirea Tricolor was integrated in the first division by Marinescu himself on 17 August of the same year as a 'purely Romanian' team. Racial laws had been passed in that month of August 1940 and 16 clubs, 400 players, and 150 referees with Jewish background had been excluded from Romanian football. Such political measures enabled Unirea Tricolor to obtain their unique trophy in 1941. Ironically, it was Rapid – the underdog football club, who achieved the most important international performance in the interwar period. In 1940, the team qualified for the final of the Central European Cup which was to be played against Ferencváros Budapest. The outbreak of World War II would however prevent the game to be ever played.

Romanian football mirrors the country's transition from a democracy with corrupt practices (until 1938) to an authoritarian regime that grew closer by the day to German and Italian dictatorships (1938–1940). It was already before the brief fascist rule over Romanian football that racist laws came into force in the field of football too, as Jews were excluded from the sport in August and Antonescu only came in September 1940.

From 1941 to 1944, the league was suspended and only war cups and tournaments could be played. After 1944 and during the Soviet occupation, the political control over football only became tighter. Professionalism, a remnant of capitalism, was officially prohibited in 1948 and all players and coaches had to turn amateurs. Previously dominant teams, such as Chinezul, Ripensia, Venus, and Carmen, were disbanded or gradually disappeared by way of forced mergers. The Communist authorities set up new clubs on a Soviet model. In June 1947, the Army established its club ASA (afterwards CCA and, from 1961 onwards, Steaua) and the newborn was granted Carmen Bucharest's place in the first division. One year later, the Ministry of Interior created its own football structure in the top league: Dinamo. The club originated from the unlikely union between Ciocanul, the flag-bearer of the Bucharest Jewish community, and Unirea Tricolor, the fascist one-time champion. These two teams won a combined total of 27 championships until 1990 (14 – Steaua, 13 – Dinamo). This portfolio was facilitated by a variety of means, ranging from preferential fund allocations, conscription of the best or most promising
players, criminal prosecution, match-fixing, bribery, blackmail or setting up a black network of ‘friendly’ teams and corrupt referees.

**Football under communist authoritarianism**

Transfers were prohibited from 1948 to 1953; the only exception was for military service purposes. This led to a monopoly of the Army and Interior football clubs over the best players whom they recruited by the hundreds to weaken any potential opposition. As early as March 1953, a meeting of the propaganda section of the Party’s Central Committee addressed football abuses, such as open conflicts and brawls between Army and Interior officers in the stands, terror tactics, intimidation and bribing of referees, and unfair attitude of military clubs towards the union clubs (particularly those of miners and oilmen). Ceaușescu, as a Deputy Defence Minister and Chief of the Army’s High Political Directorate, was openly criticized for unhealthy practices in football. The transfer ban was lifted, and the satellite clubs of Steaua and Dinamo were dissolved.

The entire structure of the Communist-camp football was a political masquerade. Football players in Romania, as in the Soviet Union, Bulgaria Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and Poland, acted as professional athletes in disguise. They were officially employed as officers, miners, workers, etc. in order not to belie the Party thesis of amateur sport. Nevertheless, they were full-time athletes.

Sports were part of the Communist propaganda system. The Soviet Union and their satellite countries invested heavily in sports infrastructure and performance-enhancing medication after WWII. Medals at the Olympics or World Championships served the Party’s argument in favour of the Communist society superiority over its Western capitalist counterpart. As amateurism was the rule at the Olympics and professionals were not allowed to compete, full-time state-sponsored Eastern athletes had a distinct advantage over their Western amateur rivals until the fall of communism. As football had been a professional sport since the end of the nineteenth century and FIFA welcomed professionals to the World Cup beginning with the first edition, communist national teams and clubs enjoyed much less of a success internationally. Given the worldwide popularity of football, all communist states strove to create conditions for their domestic football teams to perform at an international level, on a par with Western and South American professionals.

In the Romanian Popular Republic, the political importance of football as an international image carrier was already emphasized in the 1953 Central Committee meeting referred to above, which was convened to discuss the sport’s unsatisfactory course. Comrade General Dumitru Petrescu, a veteran communist and Finance minister who had been involved in securing ASA’s spot in the first league in 1947, was adamant: ‘By losing international games, we also lose politically. It might be asserted that football, despite all the favourable conditions created for its development, does not rise to the height of the international prestige of our Republic.’

Romania was a totalitarian state and, as football was part of the public sphere, all clubs were placed under the Party’s control. They were branches of government agencies (Defence: Steaua, ASA Târgu Mureș; Interior: Dinamo, Victoria București; Transports – railroads: Rapid, CFR Cluj), of higher education institutions (Universitatea Craiova, Sportul Studențesc, Politehnica Timișoara, Politehnica Iași, ‘U’ Cluj), unions (mining, heavy industry: Jiul Petroșani, FC Baia Mare) and industrial facilities (UTA Arad, Corvinul Hunedoara, Oțelul Galați). Local and/or central authorities were involved in the clubs’ management, including in the transfers of players on a competitive basis, which often resulted in shadow influence struggles.

Still, Romanian football underperformed in comparison to that played in other communist countries, let alone that of Western Europe. The national team managed to qualify twice for the World Cup: Mexico 1970 and Italy 1990 (the qualifying process was over before Ceaușescu’s fall in December 1989). They also qualified once for the Euro Championship (France 1984). Conversely,
the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia won World Cup and/or European medals while Bulgaria featured five times in the World Cup final tournaments.

The football boom in the 1980s and Ceaușescu’s national-communism

The Romanian football boom commenced in the 1980s, when Steaua won the Champions’ Cup in 1986 against FC Barcelona, in Spain, a unique feat for a team behind the Iron Curtain. The team went on winning against Dynamo Kiev in the European Supercup in 1987. The Bucharest side confirmed its value with another Champions’ Cup final in 1989 and a semi-final in 1988. Universitatea Craiova and Dinamo Bucharest had also already gone as far as the semi-finals in the 1982–1983 UEFA Cup and the 1983–1984 Champions’ Cup, respectively.

The 1980s marked, at the same time, Romania’s gradual international isolation. The country severed ties with the West, which Ceaușescu had built in his early years in power and reduced the level of cooperation with other communist states. While the USSR under Mikhail Gorbachev was taking the path of reforms, Romania kept the distance in order to complete the process of re-stalinization. Political power was more concentrated than ever in the hands of a small circle around Ceaușescu. The dictator’s cult of personality was fuelled by a propaganda machine which emphasized the major role that Bucharest was supposed to be playing in international relations. In earnest, Romania was turning into a pariah state.

Against this background, sports, in general, and football, in particular, played an increasingly important part in the national-communist narrative. The economic situation gradually deteriorated; daily life in Romania meant fighting for food and coping with frequent power shortages. Success in sports was a powerful derivative substitute for comfort. Ironically, however, Romanians saw less and less football on TV in the 1980s. Ceaușescu drastically cut the broadcasts in a grand savings plan which allowed the country to pay off its foreign debt ahead of schedule, at the price of starving the population.

When Romania broke the unity of the Warsaw Pact by attending the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, Ceaușescu played the sports card to remind a growingly distrustful West of his independence from Moscow, which had been the cornerstone of his foreign policy. The savings plan might have however cost Romanian football an Olympic medal. The Olympic team finished second in the qualifying group for Los Angeles, trailing Yugoslavia but ahead of Italy and The Netherlands. Yet, as three other qualified teams (USSR, East Germany and Czechoslovakia) boycotted the Games, the organizers invited Romania to enter the tournament. Ceaușescu weighed the medal prospects against the costs of sending a 30-men team in the USA and turned down the offer. Italy gladly seized the opportunity and made it through to the third place final against Yugoslavia. As Romania had faced both teams in the qualifiers, there was ground to assume that they could have fared at least as well as the squadra azzura.

In addition to its propaganda functions, football was a means to control society. Entertainment was scarce in the 1980s; restaurants closed at 10 p.m., shops were empty, and the TV programme was reduced to only one channel broadcast for two hours per day. Romanian society was increasingly inhibited, repression was ubiquitous and so was fear. Football fans were mostly men, with a higher potential for violence, so their energy was channelled through this safety valve.

How close was Ceaușescu to football? If we bear in mind that already in the 1950s he had been supervising the Army club, the answer should not come as a shock. The dictator and his family were extremely involved in national football. His elder son Valentin was the unofficial patron of Steaua Bucharest between 1985 and 1989. This allowed Steaua to preside over an unchecked dominion. They could recruit any player in the country and the referees granted them all support needed to win. These circumstances led to an unprecedented streak of 104 league matches without a defeat between 1986 and 1989. If needed, the games could last as long as it took for Steaua to score and win, as it happened on 25 September 1988 in Oradea, against FC Bihor (2–3 with the decider in the
In the 1988 Cup final against the arch-rival Dinamo, the referee disallowed a last-minute Steaua goal for offside, so the game should have gone to extra-time. In protest, Valentin Ceaușescu had his team leave the stadium. On the field, the trophy was awarded to Dinamo, but the decision was subsequently overruled by the Federation; the late goal was counted as valid and the Cup was eventually awarded to Steaua.

Yet Valentin was not the only Ceaușescu on (and off) the pitch. His younger brother Nicu, the Party's First Secretary for Sibiu County from 1987 to 1989, pushed the local team Inter to the first league in 1988. Other members of the Ceaușescu clan put their weight behind FC Olt Scornicești, the team from the tiny rural birthplace of the supreme leader. The club rose in no time to the first league. En route to the second division, they won a match 18–0 to make sure the goal difference played to their advantage against another team with the same number of points.11 A 25,000-seat stadium was built in Scornicești, though the local population never exceeded 15,000 people. FC Olt Scornicești and Victoria București, another artificial team set up by the Militia (communist police), were dissolved following the December 1989 change of regime and the league resumed after the winter break with only 16 teams at the top level.

The best international results of Romanian club football were obtained by virtue of a very corrupt and authoritarian system, in which the nation’s best players were pooled in the Army and Securitate (secret police) teams. The control of the press was so strict that even the sports daily Sportul made its front page on 8 May 1986, the day following the Champions’ Cup final, on the 65th anniversary of the Romanian Communist Party, with a portrait of Nicolae Ceaușescu and a festive poem. Only at the bottom of the page, in capital letters, it read: 'Steaua won the European Champions’ Cup!' A few days later, Ceaușescu decorated the winners and allegedly advised them to train harder so that they would not need a penalty shoot-out to win the following time. His speech, published by the Party daily Scânteia on 13 May 1986, read: 'This is a victory for the Romanian football and, in general, for the Romanian sports movement, which in the years of the socialist transformation has strongly developed and to which our party, our state have given a huge support.'

The fight for supremacy in Romanian football entailed a behind-the-scene confrontation between the arcanae of power in Romania. Dinamo had set up a network of clubs to help it subdue Steaua. At the end of the 1980s, the league was divided into the Dinamo Cooperative (Dinamo, Victoria București, Flacăra Moreni, Corvinul Hunedoara) and a smaller Steaua network (Steaua, FC Olt Scornicești, ASA Târgu Mureș), which nonetheless prevailed through direct interventions by the Ceaușescus. Dinamo however found another way to gain international recognition.12 Their strikers Dudu Georgescu (1974–1975 and 1976–1977), Rodion Cămătaru (1986–1987) and even midfielder Dorin Mateuț (1988–1989) won the European Golden Shoe awarded to the most prolific season scorer in any European league. The means to achieve this award was match-fixing and, in 1990, Cămătaru had his trophy withdrawn. Romanian clubs’ corrupt practices and state interference were no strangers to the suspension of the European Golden Shoe between 1991 and 1996. When it was resumed, the rules were changed and so far only players from Western leagues have won the award since 1997.

The 1940 Romanianization of football returned under Ceaușescu’s national-communism, only this time it was not about the Jews but about the Hungarians. They were not excluded from football, but their names were altered to sound more Romanian, particularly in the case of those playing in the national team or in the military teams. Thus, the defender Lajos Szatmári was renamed Ludovic Sâtmâreanu as early as the 1960s. László Bölöni, the first Romanian to get 100 caps and captain of Steaua in the Sevilla 1986 final, became Ladislau Bölöni. József Vígh played for Steaua and the national team as Iosif Vigu. In the late 1980s, when Militia team Victoria Bucharest rose to the status of a third force in the Romanian league, two Hungarian-minority players received a new identity upon transfer. This is because Victoria players were employed as Militia officers and Hungarian-Romanians could no longer be hired by the police.13 As such, Sandor Kulcsar turned...
into Alexandru Culcear, by mere transliteration, while Ernest Székely received a new identity card as Dan Daniel.

Hungarian minority players were not the only ones, however, to have their names transformed; Gheorghe Ceaușilă was enlisted for years as C. Gheorghe, because his last name could have been picked up as mockery of the supreme leader.14 Ironically, Steaua’s coach in 1986 was Emeric Jenei and the captain for the Sevilla final was László Bölöni who are both Hungarians; the defence was led by Miodrag Belodedici, an ethnic Serb, and the hero of the shoot-out was the goalkeeper Helmuth Duckadam, an ethnic German, who saved all four attempts by Barcelona players.

Any sports achievement was instrumentalized by the regime’s propaganda system. When Romania qualified for the World Cup 1990, in November 1989, the players had to send Ceaușescu a cable, published by the press, thanking him for the inspiration he provided on the pitch. It was not an exception, but the rule.

In a totalitarian society like Romania, where private space was virtually annihilated, the stadiums were, to some extent, islands of freedom. The supporter groups were the only form of organization which was less controlled by the government and by the widely feared secret police, the Securitate. Some teams were considered subversive, insofar that they were prevented from winning titles or even relegated to lower divisions. This is the case of Universitatea Craiova from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, who lost several times the championship to Dinamo and to their network of influence comprising other teams, referees and officials. Moreover, in November 1987, Politehnica Timișoara beat Dinamo at home and compromised the chances of the Bucharest team to win the title. Consequently, the Dinamo network mobilized in retaliation and at the end of the season Politehnica went into the second division.15

Another example is constituted by Rapid Bucharest who was once more on the underprivileged side. Though the club had a working-class background, it was not encouraged by the Party. Romania’s first communist leader, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej (1901–1965), had been a rail worker and naturally a Rapid fan. Yet his support did not take any notable shape except for the pardon of Titus Ozon, an excellent player who had been excluded from football in 1958. One year later, Gheorghiu-Dej reintegrated him on condition that he played for Rapid.16 Another communist leader with Rapid sympathies, Gheorghe Apostol, had done the same thing for two former Carmen players, Bazil Marian and Valentin Stănescu, who were caught while attempting to flee the country.17 Rapid spent six years in the second division (1977–1983); the Giulești stadium was suspended for years. Nevertheless, the popular support did not waver. In 1983, the fans created the first supporters’ committee in Romania and they were widely known for their free speech and the daring slogans openly challenging communist authorities. In the 1978–1979 season, while in the second division, Rapid was host to FC Olt Scornicești. The fans released cats on the pitch, as Scornicești had a forward named Șoarece (Mouse) and openly mocked Ceaușescu.18 During the long period in the second division, the stands set up a dialogue, where a group asked: ‘Who sent us in Division B?’ and after a brief silence, another section loudly answered ‘Ceaușescu – PCR (Romanian Communist Party)’, the slogan one could hear at every political assembly. Later on, in the late 1980s, during a game against Steaua, Rapid supporters rose the stake with a defying chant: ‘We shall give you Damaschin/In exchange for Valentin’. Damaschin was the Rapid centre forward, and the fans identified the best Steaua asset in Valentin Ceaușescu.

In May 1987, after a draw on their home ground against Steaua, Dinamo stood in the second place, trailing their arch-rivals by nine points. With seven games to be played, the title was out of reach, so that a new goal emerged: the Golden Shoe for Rodion Cămătaru, who had already scored 23 times. In the remaining matches, Dinamo added only six more points to their tally, but scored 23 goals, out of which 21 by Cămătaru. In the last match of the season, Rapid faced Dinamo at home and prevailed 4–3.19 Cămătaru scored three and each time his goals were saluted by the Rapid fans by throwing old shoes on the pitch, in mockery of the phoney Golden Shoe. The chants illustrated the same mood: ‘Cămătaru is no shoe but overshoe’, ‘Cămătaru come and score a second one’ and even, referring to Anton Polster, the forward of Austria Vienna whom Cămătaru was helped to
overcome: ‘Toni Polster, where are you, to see the circus in Giulești?’ In 1990, Rapid fans proudly recalled: ‘Rapid supporters’ groups/We’re no members of the Party’.

The regime was doing its best to avoid the defection of football players. Each team was accompanied abroad by protection officers. Nevertheless, some internationals managed to get past the surveillance and flee communism. In 1980, former international Dan Coe (a Rapid stalwart) requested political asylum in Germany. After an interview for Radio Free Europe, in which he had been extremely critical of the communist policy, Coe was found hanging in front of his apartment in Cologne. Marcel Răducanu, an international Steaua forward, also took advantage of a match in Germany to choose freedom. He later played for Borussia Dortmund (1982–1988) and FC Zürich. As Răducanu was employed as an Army captain, he was considered a deserter and sentenced in absence to six years in prison.

In December 1988, the sweeper Miodrag Belodedici, winner of the Champions Cup with Steaua, did not come back from a two-week visit to his relatives in Serbia. The top-class player was of Serbian ethnicity and had long dreamt of playing for the Red Star Belgrade. In 1991, he won the Champions Cup with the Belgrade team. In Romania, he was sentenced in absentia to ten years in prison as a traitor. After December 1989, he was pardoned and resumed playing for Romania in 1992. The defection of Belodedici and the flight of the retired gymnastics Olympic legend Nadia Comăneci to the USA in December 1989 dealt serious blows to the international image of the regime.

In brief, Romanian authoritarianism, under all its historical forms, perceived football as a valuable tool. Football was used both for internal propaganda and as an international image carrier. From King Carol II to Nicolae Ceaușescu, Romanian dictators seized its potential to mobilize people, and integrated it in their political plans. Both King Carol II and Nicolae Ceaușescu had connections to the sport through their immediate circle (man of confidence for Carol, family for Ceaușescu). They instrumentalized football to project the image of a unified nation in awe with its leaders and identified minorities as a hazard to their designs.

The pooling of the best players in the military clubs allowed for noteworthy international results in the 1980s, when Romania’s national-communism, centred on Ceaușescu’s cult of personality, took the reverse path of re-Stalinization while Eastern Europe under Soviet influence was undergoing reforms. The sports performances, including in football, fuelled the theory of the Romanian social model’s superiority to the decadent Western world.

### Football and Romanian society

In addition, under communism, football was a social control mechanism, providing entertainment for the masses and meant to channel energy and let down pressure. Football reflected the society: corruption was widespread and the military clubs (Steaua, Dinamo, Victoria) had the upper hand on those linked to civil authorities. Everything was regulated from the top and there was little room for the intrinsic unpredictability of sports. The league tables mirrored the momentary balance of power, as high-ranking officials employed football as a tool to maximize their influence and fought each other on this ground (Army, secret police, Militia, Party) by unorthodox methods – match-fixing, corruption of referees, use of the criminal system and conscription to recruit the best players. International prestige could justify any abuse, such as the grotesque race for the Golden Shoe. The unaligned teams (Universitatea Craiova, Rapid Bucharest, Politehnica Timișoara) were kept at bay.

Football players were iconic figures in the Romanian society and their defection to the West created image problems for the regime, the more so in the 1980s when shortages and scarcity governed the Romanians’ daily life. In the meantime, the supporters’ groups remained one of the very few genuine expressions of the freedom of assembly and were less controlled by the authorities. They were an opportunity for free speech, a space for subversion. Open criticism of the system and sarcasm were the trademarks of organized fans, especially those of Rapid and Politehnica Timișoara, who illustrated a possible bottom-up alternative model to the current practices. These
teams were constantly persecuted in the last stage of Ceaușescu’s rule; Politehnica got relegated in 1988, Rapid in 1989 for the fifth time. They however provided the grounds for the beginnings of a civil society movement, albeit limited to a few exceptions in the landscape of Romanian football.

Notes

1. CHIRILĂ and IONESCU, *Un veac de fotbal românesc*, 37.
2. The story is widely alluded to, yet no credible historical source corroborates it. It was even published on the FIFA website, on 4 April 2013: https://www.fifa.com/worldcup/news/romania-football-crazy-king-2052077, link retrieved on 29 November 2018. There are some inaccuracies in the feature: only 15 players were included in the team roster, not 19.
3. POPA, “Nașul” fotbalului interbelic’.
5. POPA, ‘Povestea arestării rapidiștilor’.
6. ȘINCA, ‘Decăderea lui Gavrilă’.
7. UDREA, ‘Unirea Tricolor, campioana legionarilor!’.
8. IONESCU and TUDORAN, *Fotbal de la A la Z*, 34.
9. Ceauşescu, primul blatist al țării’.
10. Ibid.
11. GHERING, ‘Cadou pentru cel mai iubit fiu al satului: 18–0!’.
12. DELANEY, ‘The History of match-fixing’.
13. ‘Dorit de Steaua și Dinamo, ajuns la echipa Miliției!’.
14. ‘Fotbalistul căruia i s-a furat numele’.
15. ‘Timișoara are puterea să îl ierte pe Lucescu’.
16. DOMINTE, ‘Ozon, transferat de Gheorghiu-Dej!’.
17. SCURTU, *De ce susțin Rapidul?*, 15.
18. ‘Reportaj savuros!’.
19. UDREA, ‘Toni Polster, unde ești, să vezi circul din Giulești?’.
20. EPURE, ‘Sinucidere sau crimă?’.
21. DELEANU, ‘Sinucidere sau crimă?’.

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