

BiH: from great players to a winning team

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Although I'm extremely bad at football, both as an Italian and as an observer of political developments I have come with time to pay increasing attention to the links between football and society. Many analysts consider sports a reliable indicator of national character and a whole stream of research has developed specifically on football in the Balkans. Social scientists have focused both on the role of hooligans in mobilizing violence in the '90s as well as on the connections between football and national dynamics in the dissolution of Yugoslavia. An Italian journalist even wrote a book about it (Gigi Riva, *L'ultimo rigore di Faruk*, on the penalty missed by Faruk Hadžibegić, the Sarajevese captain of the Yugoslavian National Team, against Argentina at the Italia90 World Cup's quarter-finals).

Watching the last international games between the BiH National Team and Italy, the Netherlands, and in particular against Northern Ireland in the unlucky play-offs of Euro2020, I could not help drawing some parallels with BiH politics. How is it possible, I wondered, that a team with such remarkable players, coveted by powerful clubs in the best European leagues, cannot create a true winning spirit?

The question also applies to the relations between BiH and its diaspora. Players like Dzeko, Pjanic, Krunic and Lulic (just to mention those who succeeded in Italy in recent years) are examples of the best and brightest leaving the country, finding success abroad. This is good both for them and for the image of BiH, but how come that once they are back home, the same people cannot be as successful? What is lacking here? This paradox also shows the risks of EU integration without internal reforms: if BiH entered the EU tomorrow all the best players would leave automatically, but then who would invest in the new generations? This reasoning can be applied to schools, entrepreneurs and universities as well...

If there is one lesson football can give, is that a team is something more than its „constituent players“. A team is something more than the 11 persons in the field, the trainer and the bench. A successful team is first of all a group of people with the confidence to succeed and to learn from their mistakes and to generate the willingness to keep trying again.

This unifying role, no doubt, falls with the trainer and, in the case of countries, on national leaders. BiH is clearly a multicentric society, with multiple traditions, that can flourish only when the leaders agree to make a difference for the benefit of all. No team can win only with a good defence, or with only a couple of formidable strikers, or just with a strong midfield. A winning team needs harmony in each side of the field, the players must trust each other and serve each other. This is the defining role of leadership: to allow those who follow you to take out the best of themselves to the benefit of the entire group. Individual excellence is good, but if it is not helped by good team spirit it is worth nothing.

We all know that this requires good spirits, ability to listen and negotiate and, most of all, vision. The road is clear: BiH has the right talents, a big heart, bright young generations and important tournaments to play in. It is up to the leaders to mobilize this energy towards the common good, which is the only way to ensure the wellbeing of every single member and citizen.

Dividing is always easier than uniting and in the short term those who divide even appear to be strong figures. However, after a short while this brings about bad results for everybody and most of all to their own people.

At the next elections BiH leaders and citizens have a choice: whether to support a common goal of growth and confidence, which is as necessary as ever in times of pandemics and economic recession, or to cheat themselves saying „we are the best no matter what, even if the national team loses“.

I do hope BiH politicians and voters will choose to be true leaders to offer all their sons new victories, the only ones that can create the pride of being together and invite new endeavours from promising new generations.