

Where football means so much more; Kosovo and its search for state recognition through sports diplomacy



Rosanne Mulder

S1268228

S1268228@vuw.leidenuniv.nl

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Leiden University

Thesis supervisor: Dr. Mari Nakamura

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1. Introduction

What unites people and countries, is used for building and maintaining international relations and creates the sense of a nation all together? There are many and perhaps endless possible answers to this question, but sport and football in particular sport might not be a response that immediate comes to mind. Nevertheless, the relation between sport and international politics has slowly been gaining scholarly attention in the recent decades. Research on sports and international politics (a.o. Arnaud & Riordan, 1998; Keys, 2013) and how sport mega-events can be used for nation branding and image leveraging (a.o. Grix, 2012; Knott, Fyall & Jones, 2015) has shown that sport and international relations are ultimately linked. Research into the means of and instrumentalities for executing this link between sport and IR however, has been minimal. Murray & Pigman (2014) conducted research on sports diplomacy, but they emphasise that there is a need for more research into this concept. Murray (2012) supports this and calls for more discussion and research on the subjects of diplomacy and sports. Subsequently, Murray (2017) argues that there is a lack of theory-into-practise work with sports diplomacy and that there needs to be more attention for the actual practise and implementation of sports diplomacy (p. 844). The practise of sports diplomacy is interesting because sport is something people relate and hold on to. International relations might be something that is unclear and far away for many citizens, but it is actually very much intertwined in everyday lives. The FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar has received much criticism because of the violation of human rights in the country and since the tensions between Ukraine and Russia, there has been no sport games between these countries. Sport is also used/experienced as a catalysator for nationalism, causing for tensions in Taiwan for example (Chiang, 2020). Similar tensions exist between Serbia and Kosovo. Serbia, amongst other countries, does not recognise the independence of the former Serbian province and managed to block Kosovo from joining football associations FIFA and UEFA until 2016. The population in Kosovo consists of a majority of Kosovar Albanians and amongst other minority groups, a small minority of Kosovar Serbs (8%). In May 2020, sixteen-year-old Ilija Ivic accepted the invitation to play for Kosovo's U-19 football team. Since then, the Kosovar Serb has been under attack by the Serbian press, who are accusing him of betraying Serbia by representing Albanian-majority Kosovo (Radosavljevic, 2020.) According to political analyst Nexhmedin Spahiu, Belgrade wants to prevent that Ivic becomes a symbol for normalizing the relations

between the ethnic groups in Kosovo (“Football: Serbian teenager [] Kosovo U-19 squad, 2020). Not only the Serbian press focused on this young football talent, then Kosovo’s Prime Minister Albin Kurti called teenager ‘a victim of segregation’ on social media and even the US embassy tweeted about the situation, calling Ivic an inspiration for the young people in Kosovo. The widespread involvement of politicians and other political actors in this situation show how linked international relations and sports are.

Kissoudi (2008) states in his research on sport politics and international relations that “it is believed that sporting victories by a national team improve and reinforce the image of the competing state and display the superiority of its political regime” (Kissoudi, 2008, p. 1690). Journalist James Montague, who has been covering sport in the Balkan region, emphasized how sports and international relations intersect. “I think it was [U.S. Diplomat Henry] Kissinger that said: “To be a country, you need an army, a currency and a national soccer team’ (Kirner, 2017)”. Montague furthermore argues that sports has done more than anything else in the recent years for Kosovo in terms of state building (Kirner, 2017). After Majlinda Kelmindi won the first and only golden medal ever for Kosovo at the 2016 Olympics, Deputy foreign minister Petrit Selimi even stated: “Majlinda is a better ambassador than me and all the other diplomates combined” (in: Delauny, 2016). Thus, sport can be a useful mean to gain international (state) recognition. Research on sports, diplomacy and state recognition in Kosovo is minimal. Research upon the international challenges of Kosovo is mainly focused on the international peacekeeping mission by the UN (Harland, 2010; Murphy, 2005) the process towards and after their unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 (Perritt, 2009; Weller, 2009) and more recently, their current contested statehood. Noutcheva (2020) writes about the role of the EU in this process and Ryan Gauthier focussed on the role of international organisations in the recognizing process of Kosovo (2018). The research into sport and Kosovo that has been conducted is merely general (Chopra, 2016) or rather of a descriptive nature (Brentin & Tregoures, 2016).

This thesis aims to fill the existing gap on the practise of sports diplomacy as acknowledged by Stuart (2017) and the gap on research into sports diplomacy in Kosovo and what role this plays in gaining international state recognition.

1.1 Historical and social context

Kosovo unilaterally declared itself an independent state from Serbia on February 17. They marked this moment as the “independence that brings to an end the process of Yugoslavia’s violent dissolution”(Kosovo Declaration of Independence, 2008). Serbia maintains their claim over Kosovo’s lands and does not recognise Kosovo as an independent state. The UN does not recognize Kosovo as an independent state as well. At least 100 other countries did recognized Kosovo after their declaration, amongst them many EU-countries and the United States. However, Tarifa & Lucas (2007) acknowledge that Kosovo’s independence might strengthen existing calls from separatists movements for independence within Europe, but argue that Kosovo’s situation is unique and very different from other separatists movements in the Basque and Catalan regions and Turkish Cyprus. Because of these existing separatists movements, Spain has not acknowledged Kosovo up until now.

Ultimately, Kosovo aims to become a member of the European Union. But before they would be considered a candidate country, Kosovo has to be acknowledged as an independent state by all EU-member states. Normalizing relations with candidate EU-member Serbia is important in this process, such as showing the international society that their independent status is something irreversible.

The research question of this thesis is therefore the following: In what way has sports diplomacy contributed to gaining international state recognition in the case of Kosovo? By answering this question, the aim is to deepen the research on the relationship between sports diplomacy and state recognition in Kosovo. As Kosovo’s Deputy Foreign Minister Petrit Selimi told VICE Sports in 2014; *“Football is not about politics, but it can influence politics. [] Having a national football team, being recognized as a country by Facebook or having a national song at Eurovision Song Contest are very important markers of national identity”* (Kerr, 2014)..

1.2 Outline

This thesis will use a form of qualitative content analysis to analyse the extend of contribution of sports diplomacy to the international recognition process of Kosovo, namely summative content analysis. By using this methodology, fifteen primary sources in which sport, Kosovo and politics are central, were analysed. The analysis showed a connection between certain references and choice of words about sport and the search for recognition within Kosovo.

This thesis proceeds as follows. The literature review displays literature on sports diplomacy, state recognition and sport in former Yugoslavia. The minimal research and literature on Kosovo, sports diplomacy and state recognition justify this research. Next, the theoretical framework around summative content analysis and the data collection is explained. Subsequently, the thesis examines to what extent sports diplomacy contributes to state recognition by analysing primary sources via summative content analysis. In the final part, the findings are presented in a broader context and conclusions about the analysis are drawn.

2. Literature review

2.1 Sports diplomacy

Traditional diplomacy as defined by Bull (1977) is “the conduct of relations between sovereign states with standing in world politics by official agents and by peaceful means” (Bull, 1977, p. 156). Murray (2012) adds that where foreign policy concerns a state’s ends, the practise of diplomacy is the means to achieve them (p. 578). Sports can be such a mean to achieve certain goals or to improve certain international relations. Whereas diplomacy used to be a static concept which was practised by the elite (Murray, p. 579), this changed after the Cold War. The focus shifted toward public diplomacy and new diplomatic actors that started to participate such as NGO’s and influential celebrities. Murray (2012) considers sports diplomacy as part of the wide umbrella of public diplomacy; *“it involves representative and diplomatic activities undertaken by sports people on behalf of and in conjunction with their governments.”*(Murray, p. 581)

Kobierecki (2017) refers to sports diplomacy as “a means to achieve diplomatic or foreign policy goals. One of these objectives is to influence the international image of a country...” (Kobierecki, 131) Murray & Pigman (2014) distinguish two categories of sports diplomacy in their study. The first category, traditional sports diplomacy, consists of cases where governments consciously employ international sport as an instrument of diplomacy. In these cases, sports is used as a dialogue between states and to intensify certain diplomatic messages. This form of sports diplomacy is also used to cool tensions between states. Many other researchers hold a similar view of sports diplomacy being a mean to improve relations between states, like Saxena (2011) and Cashmore (2000). However, the second category Murray & Pigman discuss is international-sports-as-diplomacy (also; non-traditional sports

diplomacy) which consists of communication, negotiation and diplomatic representation between non-state actors. This includes international sport organisations like FIFA and UEFA. These institutions play a big part in the road to international recognition for Kosovo, as research by Gauthier (2018) has shown as well. His research on the role of international sport organisations and the recognition of Kosovo is discussed under *Kosovo* in this literature review.

As for this research, sports diplomacy is considered a means for diplomacy to strengthen and influence a country's image, as defined by Kobierecki (2017).

Expert on sports diplomacy Murray (2012) wonders if the benefits outweigh the dangers in mixing diplomacy & sport. In the article, he lists several reasons why states are attracted to utilizing sport as form of diplomacy. The magic of sport, the peaceful thought, the global appeal of it, the low costs & risks of using sport in diplomacy and the fact that sport represents honourable values that appeal to governments are among the benefits of mixing diplomacy and sport. The seventh and last reason listed is ability of sport to restore contact between estranged states. The Ping-Pong diplomacy between China and the US is one of the best examples and also more recently the cricket-diplomacy between Pakistan and India proved to be a successful example of two hostile states attempting to improve the bilateral relations (Murray, 2012). This could be the case between Kosovo and Serbia as well. Nevertheless, the dangers of mixing sport and diplomacy include that it can also amplify the distance between people and nations, by encouraging nationalism through flag-waving and national anthem.

Furthermore, sports ultimately revolves around winning, which sometimes even leads to riots. George Orwell famously stated that 'sport is war minus the shooting' and unfortunately the comparison between war and sport is more often made. Ivan Colovic (2004) for example, wrote about football, hooligans and war in former Yugoslavia. This does not correlates with the process of diplomacy, which involves peaceful maintaining and building relations between states.

Lastly, Murray mentions another problem with the term sport-diplomacy; it is at risk over being over-hyphenated. Cricket-diplomacy might sound catchy to a journalist, but does not fully comprehend the meaning of the term. Nikos Lekakis (2019) endorses this statement and argues that the template sports-diplomacy has often been to popularized or stretched in its meaning and ideas. In his review of relevant literature on soft power – sports diplomacy he

also argues that there is a problem with linking these two terms. According to Nye's definition of public diplomacy, sports diplomacy converts soft power resources (as sport, culture etc.) into soft power. Therefore, soft power is a product of sports-diplomacy. This makes it two completely different things to measure, which is often attempted by scholars (p. 4). Lekakis criticizes Brentin and Tregoures (2016) on misusing 'the soft power of sport' in their research upon Kosovo's search for international recognition. Lekakis argues that this is theoretical incorrect, since applying for a membership to international sports organisations is not an act of soft power on itself (Lekakis, 2019).

The article of Freeman (2012) strengthens the point of Lekakis that soft power is often misused or stretched. Freeman focusses on 'swaggering' in sport and using it as soft power. Whereas he pays a lot of attention to describing 'swaggering', he does not make a convincing link with soft power. He provides many examples that prove his point of sports swaggering, but does not conduct research into why this is considered soft power, while he uses the concept in his title. This thesis explicitly focused on the concept of sports diplomacy as a tool for diplomacy to strengthen Kosovo's search for state recognition and not soft power of Kosovo.

2.2 International state recognition

The definition of international state recognition as used in this thesis comes together as follows. According to the Routledge Book of State Recognition; *"International recognition plays a vital role in the political, security, legal, economic, and sociocultural development of states. It enables states protection under international law, access to multilateral bodies, and the possibility to develop diplomatic and trade relations with other states. It enhances human mobility, cultural exchange, and social development. Most importantly, it nourishes state identity, self-regard, and ontological security, which are crucial for the normal functioning society"* (Visoka, Doyle, & Newman, 2020, 2).

Thus, the importance of international recognition is clearly stated, but defining state recognition proves to be more difficult for international scholars. The precise criteria that entities need to meet to achieve statehood have been subject of scholarly debates for decades.

"[...] there is no single and unitary definition of state recognition, precisely because there is wide epistemic dissident of what actually recognition means, who is entitled to it, and how it can be practised" (Visoka et al, 2020, p. 5).

Even though the definition of this term remains contested, the Montevideo Convention of 1933 has in practise become the instrument that embodies the conditions of statehood. Therefore, the four criteria, possession of a permanent population; occupation of a clearly defined territory; effective government exercising control over that territory; and the capacity to enter into international relations with other states, are often used to define whether an entity could classify as a state (Newman, 2020). Where the Montevideo Criteria were useful during and after times of decolonization, states nowadays are almost always formed by the partition from an already existing state. Even though Kosovo gained as certain amount of sovereignty while being part of Serbia during the Yugoslav times, it is considered that Kosovo is parting from the existing state of Serbia. This creates the tension between the right on territorial integrity and the right of self-determination (Gauthier, 2018).

As mentioned earlier, Ryan Gauthier (2018) wrote a highly relevant article for this research, on how participation in sport plays a role in establishing a broader, contextual conceptualization of statehood. He focusses on Kosovo and the decision of the Court of Arbitration of Sport to acknowledge Kosovo as an independent state and allow Kosovo to participate in the FIFA.

As mentioned before, defining international state recognition is challenging. According to the Routledge Book of State Recognition, Kosovo's path to independence is a rather unique one. They challenged certain legislative and international norms and found loopholes in the global system so that they would be able to participate in the international community (Visoka, 2020).

Thus, for this research, it is important not to focus on the general assumption on international state recognition but rather on the unique process and status of Kosovo.

According to Newman & Visoka (2018) membership of the United Nations is generally considered to be a sign of international state recognition, but before that, Kosovo aims to become a member of the European Union. It will then need the recognition of all EU-member states. Currently, Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain do not recognize Kosovo as an independent state. Getting these countries to recognize Kosovo to eventually become a member of the European Union is very important for Kosovo, because this would mean international recognition and support. The focus in this thesis will not be on the technicalities and legislative issues surrounding the independence process, but on in what way Kosovo is using sports diplomacy to gain international state recognition. Therefore, the focus will

primarily be on in what way sports diplomacy in Kosovo is used to gain recognition from other European countries that up until now withhold recognition.

Finally; because of the disputed status of Kosovo, it might be problematic to appropriately refer to Kosovo. Kosovo declared itself as an independent and sovereign state on 17 February 2008. It is currently recognised as an independent state by 97 out of the 193 United Nation Member States. The Netherlands is one of them. In this research therefore, Kosovo is recognized as an independent state, seeking for complete international recognition of their statehood. The definitions of the concepts sports diplomacy and international state recognition that were used in this thesis are under constant development and discussion. The definitions used in this research are therefore formed with the current knowledge.

2.3 Sports diplomacy in Former Yugoslavia

Research on sport, diplomacy and state recognition in Kosovo is minimal and scholars have merely focused on the role of sport in former Yugoslavia as a whole and in particular Balkan states.

Sport and in particular football at some point positively influenced the regional tensions mentioned before in former Yugoslavia, as analysed by Zec & Paunovic (2015). They primarily focus on the tense relation between Serbia and Croatia, which on some levels has now improved. Especially when the communist government came into power after the second world war in Yugoslavia, they used football “to create, at least in sport, a sort of common cause and common interest”(Zec & Paunovic, 2015, p. 240). The national football team of Yugoslavia is portrayed as the strongest integrative factor in Yugoslav football, which was for the most part made up of Croatian and Serbian footballers and one Kosovar player. There is however, little mentioning of the other socialist republics like Kosovo and it does not acknowledge the remaining nationalistic feelings that eventually showed to be stronger than the Yugoslav (sport) cause and interest in integration.

Another article by Zec together with Brentin (2017) starts off by describing the clash of these nationalistic feelings; the day of the Maksimir Riots which is often referred to as the day the federation’s dissolution began. They provide an overview of scholarship dealing with sport in socialist Yugoslavia and link this to its role in different political systems. Their research reveals gaps that still exist in scholarship on Yugoslav sport because of the unavailability of

appropriate sources and the reluctance of the academic community to identify sport as an important part of social life (Zec & Brentin, 2017). This call is consistent with the earlier described appeal of Murray for more research on sport in the academic world.

2.3.1 Croatia

Whereas research on sport and diplomacy has received limited attention in the academic debate, one former Yugoslav republic did receive relatively more scholarly attention on the subject of sports diplomacy, namely; Croatia.

In 2000, Sack and Suster wrote on soccer and Croatian nationalism, with the purpose of examining the role that soccer played in bolstering Croatia's efforts to gain independence after their vote to leave Yugoslavia in 1990. Then Croatian President Franjo Tudman was well aware of the link between sport and politics and used soccer games for nationalist celebration and international recognition. On October 16th 1990, Tudjman organized a friendly football match between the United States and the 'National Soccer Team of Croatia', whilst Croatia was then still part of Yugoslavia. First of all, this match gave Tudjman the opportunity to present Croatia as a new emerging nation. But equally important was the fact that the United States then had not recognized Croatia as an independent state in fear for what that would mean for other republics seeking autonomy, but they did agree to play this soccer match. This informal recognition supported Croatia's case in the near future (Sack & Suster, 2000).

The authors acknowledge that soccer is used as a vehicle by newly emerging nations seeking for recognition in the international community but while they mention Bosnia Herzegovina as an example, they don't bring up Kosovo. This is understandable, keeping in mind that the article dates from 2000, when Kosovo was just recovering from the Kosovar war and under UN conduct.

Now, twenty years later, this research can be used and followed up by an analyses of the use of sport in the Kosovar search for international recognition.

More recent research on the role of soccer in Croatia is done by Sindbaek (2013) on the role of Croatia's leading football club, Dinamo Zagreb as element of national and other identities in Croatia in the 1990's and early twenty-first century. She argues that football is the most popular sport in Croatia, with a long and intense history, making it 'an obvious source of identity (p. 1010). Sack and Suster used a similar motivation for their research "given the intensity of ethnic and nationalist sentiments in the Balkans and the importance of sport

(especially soccer) in this region, the former Yugoslav Republic provides a natural laboratory for examining the intimate connections between sport, religion, ethnicity, and nationalism (p. 307).

In any case, Sindbaek conducts an extensive research on the history of Dinamo Zagreb and the involvement of Franjo Tudjman. By sketching the story of this football club using newspapers, the club magazines and certain events, the research concludes that football and this club in particular are many times (mis)used for history writing and the creation of identity.

The significant role of Franjo Tudjman in connecting football and politics stands out for Brentin as well. In the same journal as Sindbaek, he starts his article on the social roles of sport in Tudjman's Croatia (2013) with Sack & Suster's earlier mentioned assumption on sport and the former Yugoslav Republic. He states that other relevant literature has also revealed that in *"the case of post socialist Croatia, sport can be described as a unique and malleable source of social knowledge contributing greatly to the formation, establishment and conversation of emerging national identity after the country's secession from Yugoslavia in 1990-1991"* (p. 993).

Just as Sindbaek mentions, Brentin reconstructs how Croatian sport was often (mis)used as a tool to generate support for the 'national idea' of Tudjman.

After and during the *Homeland War*, President Tudjman used sport as a political communicator to strengthen the Croatian national identity and to promote a certain image of Croatia towards the international community.

These studies explicitly show that the personal interest of political leaders like Tudjman in the subject of sport is decisive in whether it is used for diplomatic relations. In the case of Kosovo, current President Thaci plays an important role in using sport for diplomatic reasons as well, by using his platform to cheer for Kosovar sport successes for example. This is later shown in the analysis.

Because of the extensive relevant literature on Croatia and sports diplomacy, a fundamental base for this research is found in this literature on sports, diplomacy and football in Croatia. Since the available literature provides not only analyses on the situation in Croatia but also focusses on former Yugoslavia, this is a first reason to rely on this relevant literature.

Secondly, Kosovo and Croatia share some significant parts of history, share ethnicities, both states went through an intense struggle for independence and state recognition and lastly;

both countries share a huge passion for football. Thirdly, Croatia is often described as ‘the success story’ of the former Yugoslavia and the Balkan. Croatia is a member of the EU since 2013 and even though this has not solved issues of unemployment, corruption and revisionism, improvements are absolutely visible. Kosovo aims to become a member of the EU and Croatia can function as an example. Since Croatia has proved to be a big player in the international football world with a third place at the World Cup in 1998 and a second place at the World Cup in 2018, the world perception of Croatia has changed. Croatia was no longer associated with war and horrible conflict, but with a wildly popular sport that unites nations and people. Cathal Kelly in Toronto Star (2012) described this feeling in Croatia on their growing international football success: “Were it not for football and war, many would know nothing of Croatia. Excelling at the former is the most effective way to make people forget about the latter”.

2.3.2 Kosovo

Research upon the international challenges of Kosovo is mainly focused on the international peacekeeping mission by the UN, the unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 and the role of the EU. As discussed earlier, Gauthier (2018) also focussed on the role of international organisations in the recognizing process of Kosovo.

He writes an convincing article about Kosovo’s quest to join the Union of European Football Association (UEFA) and what the decision of Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) as an international sporting body to accept Kosovo as an official member can mean for an entity’s claim for statehood. He argues that the concept of statehood is changing because of the CAS decision, since the Montevideo criteria and the recognition of other states played only a minor role in the decision. Independence might perhaps be something that outweighs other criteria in establishing statehood and is therefore the independent Kosovar sport bodies have played an important role in the CAS decision. In his research, Gauthier argues that independence and recognition in one area could create a virtual circle, where claims of independence in other areas might follow each other up until the point that Kosovo would officially be recognized worldwide. On the other hand, Taiwan is discussed as an example of an entity which is participating in international sport but far from international state recognition. Gauthier therefore urges the continuation of discussion between international law and sports. Overall, his research merely focusses on the judicial procedures of gaining international recognition in

sports bodies. The research presented in this thesis however focusses more on the practical ways of sports diplomacy and the more visible ways of how Kosovo is seeking international recognition.

Rakshit Chopra (2016) also mentions the importance of the recognition of Kosovo by major sport institutions like the IOC and FIFA and UEFA. With Kosovo being the first non-UN member country to be admitted into UEFA, sport could become the most viable instrument Kosovo has to fight for international recognition. Lastly, Dario Brentin & Loïc Tregoures (2016) conducted research on the role of sport in nation building in Kosovo. They describe the sport endeavours and successes that Kosovo underwent, which come forward in a more analytical way in this thesis.

But most literature concerning Kosovo is written about the Kosovar war. Kosovo is often described as a victim, a country that underwent lengthy periods of struggle, isolation and war and is now trying to gain a place in the international community. Zdravkovic-Zonta (2009) wrote an article about exploring victimage narratives in Kosovo. There are positive aspects of victimage narratives, like restorative and healing power, but negative sides are the reaffirmation of own claims, realities and remaining hate towards the “proven villains” (Zdravkovic-Zonta, p. 666). She describes the various functions of historical victimage; making sense of the present (history defines how you function nowadays), denying the other (by claiming one version of events, you are indirectly denying the other version of events) and justifying violence (a victim has ‘the right’ to revenge) (p. 678-680) and provides discourse examples.

A historical victim status is desirable, because it allows for emotional, political and symbolic resources, where the villain of the story (Serbia) is entitled to guilt and a negative (international image). Zdrakovic-Zonta argues that there is no peace and reconciliation between the Kosovar-Albanians and the Kosovar-Serbs and that “the conflict becomes conceptualized and understood as a continuous struggle of the innocent sufferers against the tyranny of the Other” (p. 679)

Respect and understanding for each other struggle is important to move on in peace.

Defining ‘the other’ is a central concept in Luci & Markovic (2009). They display the difference in media-discourse by Albanian media and Serbian media during the conflict years. For example, the death of the Ahmeti family in February 1998 was in Serbian media describes as

'civilian casualties', whereas Albanian media provided a different story and reported 'the massacre' of the Ahmeti family and named them martyrs (Luci & Markovic, 2009).

Petersen (2012) argues that it is close to impossible for Western forces and countries to understand the emotions of an ethnic conflict such as took place in Kosovo. Intervening in Kosovo and ending the war was the rational way of restoring this multi-ethnic state, but in practise this proved to be much more complicated and strong emotions, conflict and struggle remains (p. 194-195).

Lastly, Hajdari (2018) wrote an article about the role of sports and music in public diplomacy in Kosovo. Hajdari establishes, like other scholars, that there is a need for more research upon the field of public diplomacy: *"how small states should take advantage of public diplomacy and individual achievements have served to the interest of the state's image should remain an open opportunity for future researchers in this field"* (Hajdari 2018, p. 199). He also advocates that public diplomacy should be considered equally important as regular diplomacy, since it has opened *'diplomatic routes that classic diplomacy was not able to'* (p. 199).

He mentions various examples of how the state of Kosovo used sports, music and arts in the service of national interest. Since the article is fairly short, he stays on the surface of the ways sports diplomacy is used to gain international state recognition for Kosovo. This thesis will provide a more in depth analysis of these ways.

3. Methodology

3.1 Theoretical framework

As discussed before, there is still a lack of research on sports diplomacy. The literature discussed in the literature review focuses on the concept itself, as does most of the research on sports diplomacy.

Abdi, Talebpour, Fullerton, Ranjkesh & Nooghabi (2018) attempted to create a sports diplomacy model by "discovering skilful strategies for converting sports diplomacy resources into state's diplomatic outcomes" (Abdi et al, p. 366). Their model originated from taking online surveys, after which they analysed the answers using the fuzzy Delphi method (FDM). The FDM method not something that was used for my research. However, the strategies they

identify for their research are very useful for categorizing the ways sports diplomacy is used to gain international state recognition in Kosovo.

The five strategies identified by Abdi et al, *Official and Sport Diplomacy Solidarity*, *Competent Cultural Ambassadors*, *High-Performance (Best Record & Best Management)* and *Vast Media Coverage* have therefore formed the methodological basis for the analysis of this thesis. Following these strategies, fifteen examples of how these strategies are used for Kosovo to strive for their diplomatic goals are provided, three sources in each strategy.

Firstly, *Official and Sport Diplomacy Solidarity*. In order to use diplomacy in sports, the messages the diplomatic core of the country represents must be the same as the messages of the officials in sports. For example, heads of nations shaking hands and acknowledging each other during sport tournaments.

The second strategy is using *Competent Cultural Ambassadors*. This strategy consists of using sport teams and individuals to spread universal and national values, like fair play and even non-sports values as human rights.

Thirdly, the *High-Performance* strategy has two sub-strategies: *Best Records* and *Best Management*. The Best Records strategy assumes that winners (in sport) will mostly remain in people's memory, but levels of expectation play a factor as well. For example, during the Winter Olympic games people expect that Dutch athletes will win in the skating component, meaning that if another country that is less expected to win, manages to win a golden medal in skating, the appreciation for the latter country will be greater than for a 'logical' Dutch win. Best Management focusses on dealing with organizational issues of holding sporting events. Satisfaction of foreign and local people, security and logistics are examples of this strategy. South-Africa managed to brand their nation to the world after the Apartheid era by organizing the World Cup 2010 (Knott, Fyall & Jones, 2014). In Brazil on the other hand, this strategy backfired. The local population was unhappy with the organisation of two mega sport events in two years and this image is remembered by the rest of the world (Penfold, 2016).

The final strategy that Abdi et al identify is *Vast Media Coverage*. If the sports diplomacy attempts by the significant actors are globally covered by international media, the preferable outcomes of the diplomats are more effective. Furthermore, the world becomes familiar with athletes, as they become household names, which will eventually lead to normalization with the country.

In order to interpret the primary sources linked to the five strategies, another method from existing literature is needed. Next to literature focussing on the concept sports diplomacy, some literature focuses on particular cases involving sports diplomacy. When so, authors often use a descriptive method in their research. Kobierecki (2017) presents an analysis of various examples of methods of sports diplomacy used by the Norwegian authorities. Examples are sports development aid, organising sports events and supporting the performances of Norwegian athletes (p. 132). Subsequently, in his research on Ping-pong diplomacy between the U.S. and China, Kobierecki (2016) operates in the same way, describing the ways both countries used sport to ease the bilateral relation. The descriptive method is useful when one wants to describe particular events/actions over a certain time, mainly based on secondary sources. This thesis however uses primary sources, which requires a different method, like content analysis. Sindbaek (2013) analysed the role of Croatia's leading football club, Dinamo Zagreb by analysing the club magazine and tabloid comments. She also did not use discourse analysis or another form of qualitative content analysis, but did focus on how to correctly interpreted primary sources. This is something Murray (2017) aims to do as well in his article on sports diplomacy in Australia. He argues that there is a lack of theory-into-practise work with sports diplomacy and that there needs to be more attention for the actual practise and implementation of sports diplomacy (p. 844). He uses some primary and mostly secondary sources to analyse the situation in Australia and mainly focuses on the policy of the Australian government. This thesis also focuses more on the practical ways of sports diplomacy, by looking at primary (news) sources and therefore answers to Murray's call for more research in that area.

Where a descriptive method is not preferable, the method Chan & Brooke (2019) use in their research, is. They conducted a critical discourse analysis on golf diplomacy between Singapore and the United States and use conventional content analysis to analyse their data (Chan & Brooke, p. 2170).

Conventional content analysis is a form of qualitative content analysis, defined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). However, they define three approaches to qualitative content analysis, of which summative content analysis is also one of them. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) define this as a "research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns". It is

considered a flexible method to analyse text data (Cavanagh, 1997) and it pays attention to the contextual meaning of the text, next to the style of the language which is used for communication (Hsieh & Shannon, p. 1278). The context of the sources is particularly interesting and relevant for this research on sports diplomacy in Kosovo. The sources used in this analysis do not stand on their own and are very much influenced by the context. A merely quantitative analysis or conventional content analysis would therefore not suffice. The summative content analysis is therefore adapted for this particular research. Summative content analysis focusses on uncovering underlying meanings of the content or the words by identifying important and relevant keywords in the various sources. These keywords are derived from the interest of the researchers or review of literature (Hsieh & Shannon, p. 1286) and this is how the key-words for this thesis were selected as well. Meanings related to the keywords were counted for their frequency too. For this thesis, the following key-words or references to key-words were identified:

- *References to family (children, brothers/sisters, youth)*
- *References to oppression / overcoming great struggles from the Kosovar perspective (hero, strength, not giving up)*
- *Terms referring to recognition (recognition, independence, membership)*
- *Reference to country (people, Kosovo, state, nation)*
- *References to sport (types of sport, game, match)*

The key-words were identified after reading the sources and in relation with the literature discussed in the literature review. All references come forward in both the sources and in the literature, except for the reference to family. This reference was very visible in the sources and therefore included.

The counting of the key-words was manually done. This was possible because of the amount of sources. After counting the key-words, the previously discussed literature which served as starting point for this thesis was linked to the findings from the summative content analysis. In Table 1, more information on the origin of the source, the date and the context is provided. In the theoretical framework, earlier in this thesis, five categories were defined to order the primary sources according to Abdi et al; *Official and Sport Diplomacy Solidarity, Competent Cultural Ambassadors, High-Performance (Best Record & Best Management)* and *Vast Media*

Coverage. In Table 1, each source is classified under one strategy. In the analysis, the justification for the classification of the sources is provided.

In Table 2 in chapter 4, the frequency of the number of keywords per source is displayed.

Table 1. Information on sources

Title of source:	Category:	Medium:	Date:	Context:
"Rising Serbia-Kosovo Tension Damages Sporting Contacts"	<i>Official and Sport Diplomacy Solidarity</i>	Balkan Insight. Journalist Maja Zivanovic.	May 8, 2018	The worsening political relation between Kosovo and Serbia is affecting sporting events.
"Win, Lose, or Drone, Kosovo Soccer Team Eager To Focus On The Field, Not Politics "	<i>Official and Sport Diplomacy Solidarity</i>	Andy Heil in RadioFreeEurope / RadioLiberty (RFE/RL). This platform reports news from countries where a free press is banned or not fully established.	November 14, 2019	Soccer in Kosovo is often linked to politics. In spite of the Kosovo team which tries to focus on the sport alone, politicians often use sport in favour of their politics.
"Kosovo, a country where the basis of identity is sports, peace and diversity."	<i>Official and Sport Diplomacy Solidarity</i>	Website of the Republic of Kosovo. Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport.	October 23, 2018	Speech by Deputy Minister Burbuque Bakija-Deva, held at the Regional Forum on Peace and Sport in Greece.
"Rio Olympics 2016: Judo champ Kelmendi thrills Kosovo."	<i>Competent Cultural Ambassadors</i>	BBC News. Guy De Launey, Balkans Correspondent for BBC News	August 8, 2016	Majlinda Kelmendi won the first Kosovar golden medal at the Rio 2016 Olympics in women's 52kg judo.
"Now I got my own army guy?"	<i>Competent Cultural Ambassadors</i>	Written by Xherdan Shaqiri at the Players Tribune. Online platform launched by Derek Jeter. Provides content written	June 22, 2018	Swiss national soccer player Xherdan Shaqiri has Kosovar roots and writes about having multiple

		directly by international athletes.		nationalities and his personal experiences.
“The hounding of a 17-year-old boy”	Competent Cultural Ambassadors	Nevena Radosavljevic for Prishtina Insight. Digital and print magazine published by BIRN Kosovo, an independent and non-governmental organization.	February 25, 2020	Footballer Ilija Ivic, a Kosovo-Serb chose to represent Kosovo instead of Serbia. Serbian media and politics have indignantly responded to the decision of the young footballer.
“Football adventures Kosovo – The Small, New Football Nation That’s Dreaming Big”	High-Performance Best Record	YouTube channel B/R Football. Established in 2014, located in the UK. 1.33 million subscribers. The channel is a platform for all videos football related.	Published on 15 November 2019	Short documentary about Kosovo’s football team and their qualification route for UEFA 2020. British writer and journalist James Montague leads the documentary.
“For Kosovo, England Match More than Just Football”	High-Performance Best Record	Balkan Insight. Jakob Weizman.	November 15, 2019	After England suffered racists chants in football in the Balkan before, Kosovo aims to give them a warm welcome instead of racism.
“Kosovo route to world stage moved faster by sport than politics”	High-Performance Best Record	James Masters for CNN	October 6, 2016	The recent sport successes of Kosovo, like the Olympic golden medal and authorization to play the World Cup 2018 influences politics.

History description of the Kosovar National Football association & team. Description of the third, fourth and fifth period.	High-Performance Best Management	Official website of the FFK (Federata e Futbollit e Kosovës) In English: Football Federation Kosovo.	Unclear when the website was created.	Information provided by the Football Federation Kosovo
“Kosovo granted provisional Olympic recognition by IOC”	High-Performance Best Management	Reuters, Sport News. Journalist Karolos Grohmann	October 22, 2014	Kosovo had just received provisional Olympic membership by IOC.
“The remarkable Mr. Vokrri: Kosovo’s football rise”	High-Performance Best Management	Journalist Patrick Jennings for BBC Sport in Pristina.	September 9, 2019	The rise of the Kosovar football team has received much praise and surprise.
“Kosovo – England: More Than A Football Game”	Vast Media Coverage	YouTube channel COPA90 Stories. Established in 2005, located in the UK. 1,23 million subscribers.	December 4, 2019	Short documentary about Kosovo’s qualifier against England in 2019 with a focus on the friendly relations between England and Kosovo.
“Vice / Over Olympics and Kosovo, Serbia’s hands are bound”	Vast Media Coverage	Annie Cheney via Reporting Balkans. Website where participants of the SIT Study Abroad Program publish their findings. The program examines peacebuilding, post-conflict transformation and more in the Balkans.	May 15, 2015	Story on the first meeting between Serbia and Kosovo national teams in any sport. This was a Junior Women’s Handball game.
“Kosovo Gets a Real Team, if It Can Assemble a Team”	Vast Media Coverage	British writer and journalist James Montague in The New York Times	Februari 28, 2014	The Kosovo national soccer team is about to play their first FIFA approved friendly match against Haiti.

3.2 Data collection

The primary sources that were analysed in this thesis originated from the years 2014 till 2020. In 2011, the government of Kosovo launched the 'Strategy for the Achievement of Full International Recognition of the Public of Kosovo' to create momentum for the international recognition campaign (Government of Kosovo, 2011, p. 3). The government decided to turn its strategy in five directions. The fourth and fifth strategic directions are most relevant for this thesis¹. The fourth strategy aims on working with multilateral mechanisms to form relations with individual states and on gaining recognition from international organisations (Newman & Visoka, 2018), like the UEFA and the FIFA for example. The fifth and finale direction includes utilizing public diplomacy to attract positive visibility and momentum. Newman & Visoka mention Kosovo's use of civil society, media and artists to change the image of Kosovo from a war wrecked country to a solid functioning state. An active digital diplomacy campaign is also part of this strategy. However, there is no mentioning of the use of sports in this strategy. This thesis will contribute by adding examples of how sport is used achieve full international recognition. This official government strategy started in 2011, but very few sources regarding Kosovo, sport and diplomacy were traceable and available via the internet from the first years. The most relevant and useful sources were therefore selected from 2014 on, because at that time there was more international attention for sport in Kosovo. To make sure most recent developments were also covered, sources originated from 2020 were also included.

To ensure comparability, the selection of the sources went according the following criteria:

- **Relevance.** All discourse sources had to directly involve Kosovo, sport and politics. Sources that just briefly mentioned Kosovo and their intention to gain international recognition were not included. Sources that mainly focused on Serbia or other states seeking international recognition, were therefore also not included.
- **Variety.** To ensure a broad analysis, a variety of sources was selected. This particularly means variety in medium. The sources include two news videos, ten news articles, an official speech, the official FFK website and a personal story by a footballer.

¹ For more information on the other directions: Newman, E., & Visoka, G. (2018). The Foreign Policy of State Recognition: Kosovo's Diplomatic Strategy to Join International Society. *Foreign Politics Analysis*, 14(3), 367-387. DOI: 10.1093/fpa/orw042

For content analysis it is important to collect similar type of sources. All sources selected for this thesis aim to reach the international audience with their message/information. Furthermore, all sources are of similar length. This is also visible in Table 2, which shows no extreme deviant frequencies. The variety in sources is important to form a broad frame of the ways sports diplomacy is implemented in Kosovo.

- **Availability.** Because of my inability to speak or read Kosovar-Albanian, available English sources have been used in this thesis. Since the thesis is focused on sports diplomacy and how Kosovo is (explicitly) communicating towards the international community, I believe that this is rather an interesting focus than a limitation. The English sources were collected via the internet in the period March 2020 – July 2020. The following search terms were used: *Kosovo sports diplomacy – Kosovo sport – Kosovo football – Kosovo FIFA – Kosovo Thaci – Kosovo handball – Kosovo sport independence – Kosovo first match*

3.3 Sources

In the selection and collection of the data attention was also paid to the origin of the source. The producers of the discourse were sometimes involved with Kosovo's road to international recognition (in case of the official and personal statements) and sometimes an independent news agency produced the discourse (the news articles). It is important to pay attention to where the sources comes from, since this inevitable influences the message of the source.

The official website of President Tachi was not included for example. This website translated speeches of Tachi, many of them including sports. But the English translation was often not well executed, which made them not suited for this analysis because of possible errors in the translation and interpretation.

News outlet Balkan Insight proved to be a valuable contributor from inside the region, as were Prishtina Insight and the article via Reporting Balkans. These regional sources have a different understanding of the region, the situation and the people than the NYT or CNN for example.

Other sources mainly originated in the UK, like BBC sports and the channels responsible for both videos. The UK and Kosovo have a special relationship, as is shown in the COPA90 documentary about the EURO2020 qualification game between Kosovo and the UK. The role

of the UK to end the struggle with the Serbian troops, among the international collation, is vividly remembered in Kosovo (Sabbagh, 2019) and this is also the reason some Kosovar children are famously named *Tonibler*.

During KFOR, British troops played football with Kosovar citizens and this has made an impact on the Kosovar and British side. All British sources used in this thesis tend to focus on the positive role of sport in Kosovo and provide more information on the subject than just the sport facts. In *Rio Olympics 2016: Judo champ Kelmendi thrills Kosovo*, reporter Guy de Launey provides a large amount of background information on the struggle of Kosovo to become a member of IOC and to be internationally recognized: "Sport plays a key role in Kosovo's political campaign and its leaders are pressing Brazil and other countries to recognise its independence." (De Launey, 2016). The same goes for the NYT article of James Montague about the first official soccer match that Kosovo played against Haiti in 2014. He quotes the then coach Bunjaki: "Everyone is talking about the match, [] We want to send a signal to UEFA and FIFA that we have a right to be part of the football family. We haven't played a game in two years, but I want everyone to remember: This game will be when Kosovo start on their road to the World Cup after over 25 years of isolation." (Montague, 2014)

Current Kosovar president Hashim Thaci often plays an important role in the sources that were analysed. Thaci is known for using sport to put his country on the map and he seems to be well aware of the role that sport can play in international politics. In 2014, Thaci stated that his country's membership of the IOC, 'was already a form of U.N. membership" (Masters, 2016). Furthermore, in October 2016, Kosovo played against Croatia and after calling the game 'a historical game for the country', he stated that "*what's more important is that this is a game between two friendly countries. It will be a celebration, a victory for sport because both nations were victims of war.*" (Masters, 2016).

By recalling the troubled history both countries have with Serbia, he creates a strong bond with Croatia. And it is Croatia which has proven to be a very strong and independent football nation, which Kosovo ultimately aspires to be as well.

Two sources were of a more personal nature, the personal story of Shaqiri at the Players Tribune and the news article by Annie Cheney via Reporting Balkans. The platforms which produced their articles strike as independent platforms. By including sources from independent platforms, recognized news agencies and official platforms, there is an representative variety of sources in this thesis.

The fifteen sources were divided in five categories. This was done according to the subject of the source. *Official and Sport Diplomacy Solidarity* covers sources that have interaction with or are derived from official Kosovar sources. *Competent Cultural Ambassadors* focusses on personal stories by Kosovar sportsmen/women. *High-Performance Best Record* is a category that could have included many more sources, since many articles were written about the relative big success Kosovo experienced when (nearly) qualifying for EURO 2020. Sources in this category focus on sport successes in Kosovo. Collecting sources for *High Performance Best Management* was on the other hand difficult, since Kosovo did not organize big (international) sport tournaments for example. The article about Mr. Vokrri was therefore included in this category, since it describes the successful build-up of the Football Federation Kosovo. Other sources cover legislative success, like the IOC membership. Lastly, *Vast Media Coverage* is a category that again could have included several other sources as well, since it includes sources/events that have received a lot of media attention.

To sum up; the fifteen English sources were selected via the internet in a period of five months. The selection criteria were availability, variation and a strong, demonstrably, relation with the analysed subjects. The five strategies listed above were used to order the discourse parts. To guarantee a complete and varied amount of sources, I decided to select fifteen sources in total. Due to limited wordcount and availability of sources, selecting more sources was not realistic. Everything at the above was done to ensure a minimal bias and a maximal reproducibility. Suggestion for different/further research are discussed in the conclusion.

4. Analysis and discussion

The analysis is constructed on the basis of the key-words/references, family, oppression, recognition, country and sport (in that order). In the summative content analysis, the analyzed discourse is linked to the broader context. By discussing and linking the analyzed sources and quoting relevant parts from the sources, the ways on how sports diplomacy is used for Kosovo are presented.

In Table 2, the frequency of occurrence of key-words is displayed.

Table 2. Frequency of occurrence of key-words

Source:	Category	Family	Oppression	Recognition	Country	Sport
“Rising Serbia-Kosovo Tension Damages Sporting Contacts”	<i>Official and Sport Diplomacy Solidarity</i>	0	2	3	18	13
“Win, Lose, or Drone, Kosovo Soccer Team Eager To Focus On The Field, Not Politics ”	<i>Official and Sport Diplomacy Solidarity</i>	1	6	10	22	13
“Kosovo, a country where the basis of identity is sports, peace and diversity.”	<i>Official and Sport Diplomacy Solidarity</i>	4	4	6	23	34
“Rio Olympics 2016: Judo champ Kelmendi thrills Kosovo.”	<i>Competent Cultural Ambassadors</i>	2	5	10	24	13
“Now I got my own army guy?”	<i>Competent Cultural Ambassadors</i>	23	10	0	5	15
“The hounding of a 17-year-old boy”	<i>Competent Cultural Ambassadors</i>	7	1	0	25	4
“Football adventures Kosovo – The Small, New Football Nation That’s Dreaming Big”	<i>High- Performance Best Record</i>	5	10	11	34	33
“For Kosovo, England Match More than Just Football”	<i>High- Performance Best Record</i>	2	3	3	22	6

“Kosovo route to world stage moved faster by sport than politics”	High-Performance Best Record	4	6	10	20	12
History description of the Kosovar National Football association & team. Description of the third, fourth and fifth period.	High-Performance Best Management	1	15	6	23	19
“Kosovo granted provisional Olympic recognition by IOC”	High-Performance Best Management	0	1	7	14	7
“The remarkable Mr. Vokrri: Kosovo’s football rise”	High-Performance Best Management	9	23	16	51	45
“Kosovo – England: More Than A Football Game”	Vast Media Coverage	3	16	5	8	17
“Vice / Over Olympics and Kosovo, Serbia’s hands are bound”	Vast Media Coverage	2	4	13	36	29
“Kosovo Gets a Real Team, if It Can Assemble a Team”	Vast Media Coverage	2	8	9	28	14

4.1 Family

The reference to family in all the analysed sources was not something that came up during the literature review, but it proved nevertheless to be an reference that was often made in the sources. Therefore it was included in this list of key-words, as it can contribute to a broader understanding of the use of sports diplomacy in the recognition process of Kosovo. Especially

in the strategy *Competent Cultural Ambassadors* there is a high frequency of references towards family. An explanation for this is that these sources centre around personal stories, which makes the references towards family logical.

In the contribution of Shaqiri, references to family are made most often. He describes his youth in Switzerland, after having fled Kosovo when he was very young. He and his brothers all played soccer and worked many side-jobs to be able to pay all tournaments fee and trips necessary for their football ambitions. His parents struggled to find jobs but worked very hard, also to provide for family that had stayed in Kosovo, also during the war. In his text, he included various personal stories and memories, such as:

*“When I was 14 years old, I was playing for FC Basel’s youth team, and we had a chance to play in the Nike Cup in Prague. The problem was that I had to miss a few days of school, and when I asked my teacher, he said no. In Switzerland, the teachers are very serious about school. I thought, **S***, O.K., well I’m going to have to fake like I’m sick.** So I had my mother write a note to the school saying that I had the flu or something, and I went to Prague for the tournament. I played really, really well, and that’s the first time I saw kids from other countries looking at me like, **Damn, that’s the kid from Basel. That’s him.** That was a really great feeling.*

We flew back home and I showed up to school on Monday, still pretending like I was a little bit sick, you know? And my teacher immediately said, “Xherdan, come over here. Come, come, come.”

“He waved me over and pulled the newspaper out of his desk. He pointed down and said, “Oh, you were sick?”

*“And on the front page of the paper, there was a photo of me smiling, holding the Player of the Tournament trophy. I just looked at him and put my hands in the air, like, **Well ... S***!**”*

(Shaqiri, 2018)

Personal statements like these give footballers a more familiar and friendly image and make them more relatable for the bigger public. By reading about what Shaqiri's family went through after and during the Kosovar struggle for independence, sympathy might be created for the cause of the country.

In the article about footballer Ilija Ivic, there is also a high frequency of reference to family. Ivic's mother allegedly lost her job because of her son's choice to represent Kosovo instead of Serbia in football. She is quoted: *"my existence is threatened at every turn, but I will not give up!"* referring to the struggle Kosovar-Albanians went through and are still going through (Radosavljevic, 2020).

In other news articles related to his situation, there is a constant mentioning of his mother losing her job over his choice. But where the media aims to link his choice of sport nature to politics, Ilija Ivic himself states that 'football is his life and he doesn't care about anything else'. The media plays a significant role in portraying this young footballer as a victim, linking the threads he receives to the oppression of Kosovar-Albanians in Kosovo itself. Because he is a young boy who claims to only want to play soccer, it is easy to frame him into an image that receives international sympathy.

In the other strategies, family is also occasionally mentioned, like in the speech of deputy minister Burbuque Bakija-Deva and the B/R Football documentary. In the article about Mr. Vokrri, there is also a significant focus on family. It includes statements of the son of Mr. Vokrri about his father and him stating that they 'want families to come' [to the stadium] to watch football.

In the NYT article, coach Bunjaki talks about Kosovo joining 'the football-family'. This concept is used more often by media and athletes. Family suggest the feeling of belonging somewhere and being protected and accepted no matter what. A phrase often heard is; that's what you do for family. Altogether, the mentioning of family seems to be used to create a sympathetic and recognizable image of Kosovo and its people.

4.2 Oppression

Sentiment like overcoming struggle and oppression as the Kosovar people have experienced this, is clearly visible in the analysed sources. In the description of the history of Kosovar football, mentioning of oppression, struggle and overcoming the past is quite frequent.

Sentences like:

Tortures, imprisonments, beatings were present every week, but football in Kosovo survived and was played until January 1998, when the Serbian war campaign against the civilian population of Kosovo began.

and

After many vicissitudes, multi-generational sacrifices, finally, the Football Federation of Kosovo, under the leadership of Fadil Vokrri, after many meetings and lobbies, managed to break all the barriers and in May 2016, initially it becomes a member of UEFA, and then FIFA, thus becoming part of a large family of European and world football.

(A brief history of Kosovo football. (n.d.))

display the use of family (multi-generational sacrifices) but mostly the overcoming of struggles to get to the point where Kosovo's football is now: a member of UEFA and FIFA.

The historical victimage described by Zdravkovic-Zonta (2009) is clearly visible in these quotes as well, by describing 'the Serbian war against the civilian population of Kosovo.' for example. Furthermore, James Masters article (2016) mentions these terms frequently as well, delivering various quotes from Thaci, referring to 'closing the chapter of isolation for our athletes'.

Later in the article, Thaci furthermore links the football game between Kosovo and Croatia as a match 'between two friendly countries' [] "both nations were victims of war. Sack & Suster (2000) describe how Franjo Tudjman used football matches to put Croatia on the international radar, and by linking Croatia and Kosovo together in soccer, Thaci appears to be using the same tactic. He is using Kosovar sports success to emphasise that Kosovo should be fully recognized, by using his English twitter account to reach the international community.

Furthermore, he often mentions sports in his speeches, as published on the official website of the President of Kosovo: <https://president-ksgov.net/en/home>. It shows how important Tachi beliefs that sport is for Kosovo as well, just like Tudjman considered the same for Croatia.

Both documentaries are full of personal stories of overcoming Kosovar struggle, perhaps to form an sympathetic story that attracts viewers. A country struggling in war and to gain independence, succeeds and now gets to play beautiful football is something that intrigues many people. This is probably because people want to link football rather to overcoming

oppression (who doesn't love a good comeback sport story?) than to give the floor to Serbian citizens who disagree with the Kosovar football privileges and membership to international organisations.

In the B/R Football video (2019), Coach Challandes states:

"Kosovo, after four years, it's like a baby! It should be an incredible story in football"

(B/R Football, 2019, min. 3.38-3.48)

Since the appointment of Swiss coach Bernard Challandes in 2018, the national football team grew stronger and started winning (friendly) football matches. The (diplomatic) relation between Switzerland and Kosovo is strong. Tens of thousands refugees arrived in the 1990's, fleeing from the conflict. After the war, Switzerland has been actively involved in the reconstruction and development of Kosovo as well (Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 2020). There are no official numbers, but an estimated 200.000 Kosovo Albanians live in Switzerland and together with the community living in Germany, these diaspora make for one of the main incomes in Kosovo, sending around 152 million euros back to Kosovo each year (World Cup: Why Kosovo will be cheering on Switzerland against Serbia, 2018). The Swiss football team includes three players born in Kosovo, among them Shaqiri. In his article, he frequently mentions overcoming struggles, but these are more personally focussed, like gaining money for the football tournaments as described in the previous category.

In the B/R Football video, footballer Herolind Shala is interviewed as well and he describes the impact of football on the Kosovar people:

"When they come to the game or when they see the game even on TV, they forget about their problems and their daily life."

Coach Challandes:

"If we can bring pleasure and pride for people, it's a wonderful gift."

Shala:

"Because if we do that [qualify for EURO2020], the world is going to expect and they're going to see what Kosovo really is. [] Then everybody is going to see what talent Kosovo has."

((B/R Football, 2019, min. 11.37-12.07)

Football and sport still remains to be something that distracts people from their daily and historical struggles in Kosovo. This is also mentioned in the BBC article about Mr. Vokrri. The article is relative long, but there is still a notable high frequency of the key-words around oppression (23).

In the following quote, the historic victimage and the misunderstanding of the West that all tensions should be cleared by now (Petersen, 2012) come together:

Like so many people here, Vokrri's life was marked by the war that still raged in this region only just over 20 years ago. By the bitter cycle of vengeance and counter-vengeance, and the tensions between ethnic Albanians and Serbs that still exist today.

(Jennings, 2019)

Overall, the struggles that come forward most in all sources are these of the war, becoming an independent country, becoming part of international (sport) institutions and still not being recognized by all countries worldwide. All sources focus on the 'positive side' of the story, the side of a country fighting for their recognition, a.k.a. the Kosovar side. But the article about the first ever sport match between Serbia and Kosovo delivers a different message. Cheney describes that also the Serbian athletes prefer to focus on sports instead of politics and they loath the fact that many people believe that sport and politics always mix. Even though the article also describes the process that Kosovo had to go through to become an independent state, it still leaves room for more sides of the story.

In the article about the rising tensions between Serbia and Kosovo visible in sports, Zivanovic (2018) emphasizes that both countries suffer from the worsening bilateral relation. The article concerns Kosovo blocking a humanitarian match of Red Star Belgrado in Kosovo and in 2019, Zivanovic wrote a different article about Kosovo stopping the Red Star Belgrado football team at the border, referring to the event in 2018 as well (Zivanovic, 2019). The two countries continue to oppress each other through sports.

4.3 Recognition

In the handball game article by Cheney, it was discussed that Kosovo was not allowed to use their flag and national anthem in the first matches they played as provisional member of FIFA and UEFA. Their flag was also banned from the World Cup 2018, together with the flag of Taiwan, among others.

Kosovo is, however, a full member of the European Handball Federation and Competitions Manager Markus Glaser said this decision was made with tested knowledge that “especially for national representative teams, they are also representing their political situations.”

(Cheney, 2015)

Murray (2012) describes the dangers of mixing diplomacy and sport, because it can also reinforce tensions between countries or ethnic groups and Zec & Brentin (2017) have analysed these nationalistic feelings that sparked the riots in Maksimir park, of which is suggested that it started the war on independence in Croatia. Flags and nationalistic feelings are thus very important and play a big role in gaining independence and recognition. This is reflected in the collected sources in this thesis as well. Under the strategy *Official and Sport Diplomacy Solidarity*, two sources highlight the problems of mixing politics and sport.

In the Balkan Insight article about the rising tensions between Kosovo and Serbia which is visible in sport, various sporting events that are influenced or cancelled because of political tensions are mentioned.

“For two years, we gave permission for the match, but this [year] we will not because at the last game things happened that do not belong to sport. There were offensive messages and that’s why we have rejected Red Star’s request. We have also informed UEFA that there will be no match,” Vokrri told the Koha Ditore daily.

[]

But Vokrri told the media that the sound of Serbian fans cheering “Kosovo is Serbia” at the 2017 game had been offensive.

(Zivanovic, 2018)

In the B/R Football video, James Montague reports the following when he is at the match:

"It's a little bit mad what's happened. They started to sing "UCK". Which is the Kosovo Liberation Army. And I can see in the Montenegro end, there's fighting going on between the two sets of fans."

(B/R Football, 2019, minute 8:57 – 9:06)

In the RadioFreeEurope (RFE) article, the title already reveals the mix of sport and politics, despite the fact that Kosovar players state that they don't like the mix of politics and sport. But it seems to be something inevitable and it does not merely focus on tensions between Balkan countries. The RFE article reports that the Czech Football Association has announced a ban on signs in the stadium when they played Kosovo.

"A portion of the Czech public, led by President Milos Zeman, has objections to [Kosovar sovereignty]. The Czech Football Association appeals to fans to abstain from political displays."

(Heil, 2019)

The article furthermore mentions Spain, which battles with separatists movements in the Basque region and therefore opposes Kosovo's independence. They have also blocked Kosovar national symbols during international games in Spain.

These nationalistic feelings and emotions that are linked with sport are described in the literature about Croatia and sport (Zec & Brentin, 2017) and it is something that is visible in this analysis on Kosovo as well. Sport is often automatically linked with politics, since many people associate the sports teams and athletes with the politics of the country they are representing. But often, athletes try to obtain from making political statements.

References towards recognition within an international sport organisation as the IOC, UEFA and FIFA were also included in this category. This explains the high frequency in IOC article, where there is a frequency of seven. Grohmann (2014) also pays attention to the Serbian reaction to the IOC decision. The Serbian Olympic Committee (OKS) is quoted:

“The OKS most vehemently condemns the decision by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Executive Board to grant provisional membership to the national Olympic Committee of the unilaterally declared Republic of Kosovo [].”

Furthermore, in the article about Kelmendi, there is mentioning of the Kosovar flag as well. Kosovars are not content with their flag, but the display of their flag at the Olympic Games 2016 might change this feeling and improve the international status of Kosovo.

““Recognitions have slowed significantly in recent years,” says James Ker-Lindsay, senior research fellow on the politics of Southeast Europe at the London School of Economics. “In the absence of recognition at state level, one of the key ways to legitimise Kosovo is integrating it into international sporting organisations and events.”

(De Launey, 2016)

The same sentiment is sensible in the description of the history of the FFK and in the speech by the deputy-minister. These official channels focus on that it has been long overdue that Kosovo could join international sport organisations in their eyes. In the deputy’s minister speech, she puts it as follows:

“Since its independence in 2008, Kosovo has made efforts for international recognition and opportunities for engagement in international sporting events. Moreover, delayed membership and participation of Kosovo's federations and athletes in international events and competitions has had a significant impact on Kosovo's sports.”

“Sometimes what politics cannot do, sport can achieve it, and this is best proved by Kosovo's admission to the International Olympic Committee, by voting also representatives of countries that have not recognized the Republic of Kosovo.”

In this statement, not only recognition but also (overcoming) struggle comes forward. More often than not, these key-words/references are linked to each other, since they are closely

connected for many. Overcoming the struggle of not being recognized, eventually has led to being a member of IOC, UEFA, FIFA and hopefully for Kosovo to EU, UN, NATO eventually. Notably, in the strategy *Competent Cultural Ambassadors* there is few to none mentioning of recognition of the state Kosovo or within a sport organisation. This can be interpreted as something they seem completely normal. By not specifically mentioning that Kosovo is now recognized as a member of FIFA for example, it sounds like it has been that way forever and there is simply no need to mention this again. This would be a form of normalization.

4.4 Country

The last two categories have a very high frequency in every strategy and in every source. This was to be expected since all sources were selected on the topics Kosovo and sport. Still, they are relevant for analysing how often the mentioning of Kosovo, state or nation is connected to the other key-words, like recognition. By showing this link, it becomes more clearer in what way sports diplomacy is used to gain international recognition for Kosovo.

The key-word **Kosovo** was most often counted in this category, because this is a main subject in all sources. In the COPA90 video, there is a fewer mentioning of the word 'Kosovo', probably because many people from Kosovo are speaking and being interviewed. Instead of talking about 'Kosovo' they mention 'our country' 'us' 'we' more often. The same goes for Shaqiri's piece, he often mentions 'home' but since he grew up in Switzerland, he mentions Kosovo less.

Another interesting observation is made in the article about Ivic. Whilst there is no mentioning of *Recognition* in the article, there is a high frequency of the mentioning of Kosovo and nation. One could argue that this is done because of the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo about this footballer.

By not mentioning the struggle for recognition in news articles, people are not reminded of the fact that Kosovo is a fairly new state still looking for complete international recognition. Heil (2019) is the only one which often refers to Kosovo with 'Pristina', mostly to emphasize political issues:

"[] due in part to the importance that Pristina has long attached to sports and culture to buttress its efforts for international recognition".

It was not displayed in the literature that naming/mentioning the country more frequently somewhere (in the news) eventually leads to more normalization on off the status of the country. I would argue that this could be the case, because when people keep hearing about Kosovo, they will eventually get used to this country being a part of the international society and more acceptance could follow from that.

Current president Thaci uses various strategies of sports diplomacy to reach the international society, most often via his (English) Twitter account. Tweets are too little to include as primary source in this thesis, but it is worth mentioning how Thaci uses this medium. On May 3, 2016 he tweeted: Best news! #Kosovo is the newest member of @uefa! Thank you to all those who voted “yes” for our children and youth to compete in football. Whereas the media could use these references to create a compelling and good selling story, the president of Kosovo presumably had a more political motive for referencing to the children and youth of Kosovo. By tweeting that everyone who voted “yes”, did so for the youth and children of Kosovo, he is indirectly implying that everyone who voted “no” is against youth and children (of Kosovo). By moving this sportive decision by UEFA members towards something as political and sensitive as children and youth, he is implying that Kosovo’s UEFA membership is purely something for the youth and children of Kosovo (something nobody could actively oppose) instead of an important political victory towards international recognition. By mixing emotion and rationality, he aims to gain more sympathy from the international world.

In his tweet, he mixes; *Official and Sport Diplomacy Solidarity* (supporting sport in Kosovo in his official role), *Competent Cultural Ambassadors* (the football team and the mentioning of children and youth) *High-Performance, Best Record & Best Management* (the membership of UEFA is quite an achievement) and *Vast Media Coverage* (using Twitter to spread this English message). Quite an impressive achievement in less than 140 characters.

4.5 Sport

As Sindbaek (2013) mentioned about Croatia; *it’s an obvious source of identity* and this is something that came forward during my research on sport in Kosovo as well. Most included sources concern football and it’s clear that this is the most popular sport in the country as well. Even though there is a fair share amount of attention for individual success, like Kelmendi’s golden medal, the successful route to EURO2020 for the Kosovo National Football team has received significantly more attention in the news on the internet.

In both Kosovo and Croatia, supporters feel that football is more than a game and link sport(success) to the nation's identity. Following the impressive success of Croatia at the World Cup 2018 where they reached the final, football earned a new boost. Croatia received mass attention and newspapers did not stop writing about how football means so much more than 'just' football in Croatia. Mirsoslav Blazevic, one of the first managers of the national Croatian team was quoted in *Los Angeles Time* during the World Cup in 2018: "No nation identifies itself with the football match as much as Croatia"(Baxter, 2018).

Similar statements have been made about the role of football in Kosovo. Ahead of the World Cup 2018 qualification match on March 25, 2017 between Kosovo and Iceland, news outlet *The Conversation* published the headline: "Kosovo's upcoming Iceland match is more than just football – it's a diplomatic score"(Tregoures, 2017). Later on in the article, it's mentioned that it would be impossible to deny the existence of Kosovo as a country if they would be able to qualify for the World Cup 2018. These statements are supported by the research of Labinot Hajdari (2019) in which he concludes that athletes and sports teams play an important part in image and nation building in Kosovo.

In finding sources on sport and Kosovo, it was nearly impossible to find sources that did not mention something about the struggle for international state recognition in Kosovo, which shows that all discussed references are intertwined.

5. Conclusions

Sport diplomacy is a tool for diplomacy to strengthen a country's image and it could therefore function as a tool to gain international state recognition. This analysis has shown how this takes place for Kosovo. Firstly, by linking sport to the future of the youth of Kosovo, an positive image about a country that is trying to become something valuable for their youth is created. By linking sport to personal stories as with Shaqiri and Ivic, a sympathetic image is created. They prove to be important *Competent Cultural Ambassadors* for Kosovo and create the sense that Kosovo should be granted international recognition because the Kosovar people 'deserve' this. Secondly, referring to the oppression and struggle Kosovo had to overcome in articles about sport is another way sports diplomacy contributes to international recognition. The constant reminder of everything Kosovo has been through (historical victimage) presents the situation as if Kosovo is justified to be fully recognized by the international community.

Thirdly, by mentioning and celebrating the fact that Kosovo has been recognized by international sports organisations in the past few years, it starts to feel logically that Kosovo would be recognized by all members of the EU. This strategy of *High performance – Best management* seems to be effective, but not as effective as the *High performance- Best Record*. By emphasizing the sport successes and the recognition of Kosovo by international sports organisations like UEFA and IOC, the international community perceives Kosovo as a competing country and not a disputed separation movement. The strategy of *Official and Sport Diplomacy Solidarity* is closely connected with this. Especially current President Tachi uses his position to remind people of the sport success of Kosovo.

Lastly, it has shown to be almost impossible to unlink sport in Kosovo with politics in Kosovo. In nearly every source, there is mentioning of the struggle of gaining independence or the war, whilst this is not the main subject of the source. Via the *Vast Media Coverage* strategy, the story of Kosovo is shared with the international community.

This historical victimage in sport has proven to be the most convincing way sports diplomacy has contributed to gaining international recognition in Kosovo. With responding to emotions and focussing on the importance of sport in Kosovo, sport contributes to the feeling that Kosovo should be granted independence. *Vast Media Coverage* has also proven to be a successful way for Kosovo to gain positive attention for their nation. By focussing on Kosovo's sports successes and their recognition by international sports organisations, Kosovo's image is strengthened which helps the process of gaining international state recognition.

This research aimed to fill the gap of knowledge on sports diplomacy in Kosovo and what role this plays in its search for international recognition. By analysing primary sources and linking them with defined sports diplomacy strategies, a deeper inside of the practical implementing of sports diplomacy is delivered. Further research could be taken into analysing more official Kosovar government sources, including non-English sources. Furthermore, an analysis on the ways Serbia is using sports diplomacy to block Kosovo's complete recognition would be an excellent addition to this research. Because football is by far the most important sport in Kosovo, an analysis strictly based on football sources would also make for an interesting research. Since the relation between sports and international politics is gaining (scholarly) attention, this will not be the last research on this topic in Kosovo. The future will show whether sports diplomacy in Kosovo has ultimately served their purpose; gaining complete international state recognition.

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