

From the Pan-Balkan to the Balkan Games: A chronicle of transition and an overview of the political aspect of the Games

Panou, E.* , Anastasiou, A.

Department of Physical Education and Sports Science, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Themi 57001, Thessaloniki, Greece

Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to explore the pivotal role sport has played in the political and diplomatic goings-on in the Aemos Peninsula, in a period during which Balkan countries sought to bring about a rapprochement among them. The object of the study has been approached through the Greek perspective on how the role of sport in inter-Balkan relations evolved, as will become evident by the primary sources used. The establishment of the celebrated Pan-Balkan Games stands out as the first successful attempt at reconciliation among Balkan nations, who decided to set aside the former conflicts and animosity that had afflicted the troubled area of the Balkan Peninsula. Political conditions were becoming gradually more and more favorable and thus brought to fruition the vision for the establishment of the Pan-Balkan Games, while the Games themselves acted as an agent of unity, reconciliation and solidarity among the Balkan countries. Two distinguished political figures were the driving force behind the promotion of unity in the Balkans, Eleftherios Venizelos and Alexandros Papanastasiou. These two eminent Greek politicians created a most promising political setting; the former with the radical shift in Greek foreign policy he effected, and the latter by conceiving and establishing the Balkan Conferences. The circumstances were by then ripe for the Pan-Balkan Games to be established. Their opening ceremonies attracted the interest of Balkan governments, which participated through prominent representatives who gave celebratory and enthusiastic speeches on Balkan stability and union. The luster of the Games began to wane, however, after the breakdown of negotiations among governments and the consequent failure to reach a unanimous agreement and sign the Balkan Pact, which could finally lead to a genuine, bona fide union of Balkan Countries. Similarly, this political stalemate took its toll on the Pan-Balkan Games, which forfeited their political significance and their integral role in negotiations; the 'Balkan Games', as they have been dubbed, still take place nowadays.

Keywords: Pan-Balkan games; Balkan conferences; reconciliation; union; politics.

1 Introduction

Sports events involving participants from a number of countries transcend all local and national boundaries which bind people. Sports surpass the narrow borders of countries and bring together athletes, fans and governments. Thus, sports emerge as a valuable communication tool and an agent of friendship and peace among peoples (Pope Pius XII, 1964-65; Pope Paul VI, 1966; Avgerinos, 1989; Mouratidis, 1990).

Additionally, sports play a pivotal role in the foreign as well as the domestic policy of a state, as for instance when one hosts an international sports competition (Lehmann, 1986); representatives of a country act as agents for their respective nations, countries and political systems, and in this way contribute to showcasing the efficiency and superiority of political systems and enhance prestige. Furthermore, they provide

*Corresponding author: e-mail: elpanou@sch.gr

opportunities for secret or quiet diplomacy, overcoming tensions and negative memories, and promote good-fellowship among countries. Of course, sports competitions can also ignite international and bilateral tensions and strife.

The political dimension of sports competitions is widely acknowledged, and the general consensus is that international sports impact international relations in a positive way (Beacom, 2000). They enable countries to cultivate a favorable environment in order to boost diplomatic relations by sending delegations of athletes abroad or on the contrary, refuse participation in athletic events, thus expressing political dissension against certain policies. In these cases, sports are considered to be “a tool of diplomacy” (Epsy, 1979).

There is abundant and copious historical or sociological research on the relation between sport and politics (e.g. Macintosh & Hawes, 1994; Riordan & Kruger, 2002; Keim, 2003; Gasser & Levinsen, 2004; Foer, 2005; Hough, 2008; Cha, 2009; Sugden, 2010; Bromber, Krawietz & Maguire, 2013), a fact which validates the importance of the present paper.

In the troubled and tumultuous region of the Aemos Peninsula which has also been dubbed the ‘Powder Keg of Europe’ (Castellan, 1991), a most important sports competition was born and raised, the Pan-Balkan Athletics Championships. These Games become all the more significant when one considers and delves into the historical formation of the region, as well as the political goings-on which took place around the time the Championships were taking shape, ever since the first moments of their establishment.

The Pan-Balkan Championships provided nations with the opportunity to acquaint themselves with one another and promoted understanding and solidarity in a region which was previously plagued by animosity, distrust and suspicion among countries due to their conflicting interests. These sports gatherings were used as a means to reconcile and resolve differences among the Balkan countries, in a political environment which fostered contact among them, but also brought to surface disagreements which had to be overcome. The purpose of this survey is to explore the political role the Pan-Balkan Games played in the political setting of the Balkan Peninsula during the time of initiatives and negotiations intended to unify the Balkans, based on the principles of an inspired political vision.

2 Method

The method of historical research has been used for the successful completion of the current study. Both primary and secondary sources were utilized in order to collect historical information. In particular, the study was based on S.E.G.A.S. official documents and Greek newspaper articles of that period.

3 The Balkans in the interwar period. Matters of safety and cooperation

With the end of the 1st World War the Entente prevailed over the Triple Alliance and peace treaties were signed in the Peace Summit which was attended by the USA, the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Japan. The treaties were: The Treaty of Versailles (June 1919), the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye (September 1919), the Neuilly-sur-Seine Treaty (November 1919), the Treaty of Trianon (June 1920), and the Treaty of Sévres (August 1920) (Koliopoulos, 1987). The latter treaty was rejected and abrogated by the Turkish government under Mustafa Kemal, an attitude which ultimately led to armed conflict between Greece and Turkey and the Catastrophe of Smyrna. The Treaty of Lausanne heralded the end of the Greco-Turkish War, which stipulated population exchange and delineated the borders of the two countries (Koliopoulos, 1987).

The Treaties that were signed changed the face of the Balkan Peninsula; new countries were established, populations were exchanged and as a result, the issue of

minorities emerged as a pressing matter. Tensions in the area were further aggravated due to the problems that arose, both at a national and at a diplomatic level. The main characteristic of the Balkan area was territorial, political and economical instability. The Balkan nations that had sided with the victors had to ensure the current status quo, since the defeated parties strived for a revisiting and amendment of the treaties.

The Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928), which was signed to condemn the use of war as an instrument of national policy, and Aristide Briand's Plan for the creation of a political and economical federation among European states had a positive impact on Balkan countries (Sfetas, 2011). Balkan Governments begin to be more positively inclined to the idea of union as such an initiative could assist in facing the crisis of 1929 and in boosting the potential of each country (Sfetas, 2012).

The establishment of a Balkan Federation was proposed in the 27th International Convention for Peace by the Greek politician Alexandros Papanastasiou (Delphi, October 1929) (Tounta-Fergadi, 1994). Papanastasiou's proposal was based on the premise that all Balkan nations had common characteristics, and there were numerous geographic, cultural, political and financial reasons which made the prospect of a union extremely favorable for all parties. The Convention backed the proposal for the organization of Balkan Conferences with the participation of representatives and delegates from all countries, aiming to unite the Balkan countries. Yugoslavia strongly supported Papanastasiou's proposal for the Balkan Conferences since Balkan stability and cooperation would benefit the whole region (Sfetas, 2011).

Diplomatic relations among the Balkan states began to recover, and the prospect of a restoration of the political conditions was in sight thanks to the foreign policy of the Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos from 1928 to 1932 (Hatzivasiliou, 2005). The Greek Premier sought to change diplomatic negotiations following a radical open foreign policy which aimed to relieve tensions among the Balkan states. As a result of said policy, a bilateral Treaty for Friendship, Reconciliation and Judicial Settlement was signed between Greece and Italy (September 1928), a considerable diplomatic success for the Greek Prime minister, as it ensured the maintenance of the borders as they were, and the support of Italy in the event of a conflict between Greece and Yugoslavia, Bulgaria or Turkey, with which Italy was allied (Tounta-Fergadi, 1993). This Treaty became the basis for the ensuing treaties, namely the Greek-Yugoslav Treaty, the Protocol of October 11th 1928 and, a few months later, the Friendship Pact of March 1929 (Svolopoulos, 1974 and Tounta-Fergadi, 1993). Venizelos aimed to capitalize on these two diplomatic successes and attempted to approach the Turkish government. Turkey kept a rigid stance and was averse to any diplomatic initiatives, but this did not curb Venizelos' determination to reach a solution to the problems dividing the two nations. Finally, in June 1930, a Friendship Convention was held, and some bilateral financial disputes were settled; in October 1930 the two countries signed an Agreement of Friendship, Neutrality and Arbitration, a Treaty of Commerce and Navigation, and a Treaty for the Limitation of Naval Armament (Tounta-Fergadi, 1993 and Karamanlis, 1996).

Eleftherios Venizelos' policy of signing bilateral agreements and treaties was not met with success in the cases of Bulgaria and Albania. Bulgaria stood by its initial territorial claims, as well as financial claims resulting from population exchange, refusing to compromise. Hence, negotiations reached a deadlock although they had begun long before Greece started negotiating with Turkey. Talks with Albania also failed, though this outcome was not particularly surprising, as Albania was one of Italy's satellites, fully dependent on Italian policy and influence.

4 Foreign policy and the establishment of the Pan-Balkan athletics championships

Political conditions in the Balkans seemed to be normalizing from the late 1920s, when nations realized that the advantages of a potential union far outweighed the disadvantages, that they stood only to gain from such an approach instead of bickering and refusing to put past grievances to rest. The afore-mentioned Pan-Balkan vision was further fostered by this fertile political climate of talks and joint efforts, which effectively created favorable conditions for the athletic rapprochement of the Balkan nations. It is a fact that the idea of organizing athletic championships among Balkan nations was first recorded in 1921 and was concluded with the establishment of the Pan-Balkan Athletics Championships in 1928 (Rinopoulos). The establishment of this eminent championship was a painstaking and time-consuming process, due to the volatile political conditions prevalent in the Balkan Peninsula at the time. The political climate and the tense international relations were adverse to the evolution of a sports event organized by Balkan sports federations and by extension, Balkan governments. The groundwork for the rapprochement of Balkan nations was finally laid and, after years of warfare, dead-end negotiations stemming from conflicting interests and rigid claims, it paved the way for the establishment of a most noble and illustrious athletic event. The decision to lay the foundations for the Pan-Balkan Games was unanimous among all Balkan representatives attending the Amsterdam International Sports Convention and initiated a series of talks and processes for the establishment of the Games, with Greece assuming a leading role (S.E.G.A.S., January 1929).

The Establishment Agreement for the Pan-Balkan Games was signed by delegates from the National Sports Federations of Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Greece and Romania, who participated in the 1st Balkan Sports Convention in Athens (1929) (50 Years of Balkan Games). The charter for the Games allowed for the future participation of two more nations, Albania and Turkey. In the Convention, representatives also decided on the time and place the Games would be held – the Games would take place every year, hosted by a different country each time. This decision had a significant political value as, on the one hand, athletes, delegates, officials and fans would have the opportunity to get to know other Balkan countries, and on the other hand, each hosting country would gain exposure and would be advertised abroad, while this Pan-Balkan athletic gathering would convey a message of solidarity and peace both locally as well as internationally, thus fostering a convergence of political opinions and would further the union of the Balkan countries.

Turkey did not participate in the 1st Balkan Sports Conference of 1929 and did not take part in the test trial of the Pan-Balkan Games (or Pre-Balkan Games as they are sometimes called) of 1929, despite seeming favorably disposed to the initiative in Amsterdam. In fact, the Hellenic Athletics Federation (S.E.G.A.S.) extended written invitations to all participating countries but Turkey did not respond, claiming they had not received the said invitation (S.E.G.A.S., March 1929). Eventually, although Turkey had expressed willingness to send a delegation to the Games of 1929, they did not materialize their promise (S.E.G.A.S., March 1929). Turkey took part in the Games for the first time in the 1st Pan-Balkan Games of 1930, after the successful consummation of diplomatic talks with Greece, which culminated in signing the Agreement of Friendship, Neutrality and Arbitration.

It is worth mentioning that the Pan-Balkan Athletics Championships coincided with the Balkan Conferences which were inaugurated, as was already mentioned before, during the 27th International Convention for Peace, following a proposal by Alexandros Papanastasiou.

The 1st Balkan Conference, with delegates from all six Balkan countries (Kerner & Howard, 1970 and Tounta-Fergadi, 1993) and the 1st Pan-Balkan Athletics Championships which featured representatives from five Balkan states except for Albania (50 Years of Balkan Games), took place at the same time in Athens, from October 5th - 12th 1930. The inauguration ceremony was attended by the Prime Minister of Greece Eleftherios Venizelos, the President of the Balkan Conference Alexandros Papanastasiou, the President of the International Peace Bureau Mr. La Fontaine, the diplomatic corps and the heads of the Balkan Conference delegacies (Tzomparis, 1930 and Voutsinas, 1930). The political significance of the Games became immediately apparent as officials exalted the role of the Balkan Games as a factor of political stability in the area, as promoting solidarity and understanding and as being elemental in fostering peace in the Balkan region, values which undoubtedly were vital conditions in order to further promote the union of the Balkan states (Voutsinas, 1930). The Bulgarian representative, however, addressed the inauguration with a laconic speech sparing all political references, a stance which mirrored the Bulgarian government's attitude throughout the Conference, during which delegates expressed their dissatisfaction on the issue of minorities threatening to withdraw from the Conference. On the whole though, the committees of the Conference reached useful conclusions and formulated interesting proposals pertaining, on a political level, to signing treaties for peace, friendship and cooperation among the Balkan nations, and on a financial and scientific level pertaining to agricultural cooperation, commerce, customs union, marine transport, cooperation among universities and other matters.

The 2nd Pan-Balkan Games (October 4th, 10th and 11th 1931) were held in Athens, with the participation of five Balkan countries, except for Albania (50 Years of Balkan Games). The Games took place a few days before the 2nd Balkan Conference (October 19th -26th) (Kerner & Howard, 1970) hosted by Turkey in Constantinople and Ankara. The Prime Minister of Greece Eleftherios Venizelos attended the opening ceremony, as did the President of the Turkish government Ismet Pasha and the Greek and Turkish Ministers of Foreign Affairs (Andreas Michalakopoulos and Tevfik Rüştü Aras respectively) (Voutsinas, 1931). The enthusiastic reception of the Turkish officials in the Panathenaic Stadium was seen as an endorsement of the Greco-Turkish agreement previously signed which was sealed and validated one day after the commencement of the Games (Aravantinos, 1931). The ensuing Conference dealt with the pressing matter of minorities and the Treaty which caused Albania and Bulgaria to form a common front opposing the opinions of the other Balkan states.

In October 1932, the 3rd Pan-Balkan Athletics Championship took place in Athens (Igglesis, 1932), with five countries participating with the exception of Albania and subsequently, the 3rd Balkan Convention was held in Bucharest (October 22nd -28th) (Kerner & Howard, 1970 and Tounta-Fergadi, 1933). In light of the political upheaval prevalent in Greece after the recent elections and failure of political parties to form a coalition and the ensuing hung parliament, the opening ceremony was not attended by Greek officials of the same stature as in previous years. The Conference nevertheless, made considerable progress concerning thorny issues, as delegates issued a draft of the Balkan Pact, with Bulgarian delegates abstaining from the vote and raising the issue of minorities once again.

The 4th Pan-Balkan Games of October 1933, held in the Greek capital (Zamarias, 1933) in which athletes from all six Balkan countries competed, preceded the 4th Balkan Conference, which was hosted by Thessaloniki in November of the same year (Tounta-Fergadi, 1994). The press spoke enthusiastically about the Games and referred to them

as a monumental achievement of the Balkan Federation, primarily emphasizing their role in promoting favorable political developments and the union of the Balkan states in a powerful political and financial federation (Giannaros, 1933 and Voutsinas, 1933). Besides, discussions had resumed and made considerable progress, leading to the eventual signing of the Balkan Pact. The workings of the 4th Convention closed with the commitment to put all previous resolutions into effect. On a political level, delegates concluded that Ministers of Foreign Affairs would meet with their counterparts and the Balkan Pact should be submitted to their respective governments for approval (Kerner & Howard, 1970).

The Pact was eventually signed in Athens, Greece on February 9th, 1934 by Yugoslavia, Greece, Romania and Turkey, and became known as 'The Pact of the Balkan Entente' (Tounta-Fergadi, 1993). This final draft was a far cry from the proposals of the preceding Balkan Conferences, which intended to unite Balkan States in a powerful political and financial bloc. The governments settled for an agreement, mutually guaranteeing peace and cooperation and territorial integrity in the area. The vision of the Balkan Federation was put to rest and the proposals of the Conventions which recommended more radical changes and cooperation in a multitude of fields were not realized, thus depriving the area of the unique opportunity which had presented itself in the previous years for substantial and significant progress, for a true shift in Balkan relations.

The Balkan Games held after the signing of the Balkan Pact of 1934 were not politically charged as the Pre-Balkan Games and the subsequent Pan-Balkan Championships. The Balkan states abandoned efforts to promote a true and meaningful union among them, the opportunity was undeniably missed. This caused a shift in political conditions, of course, which was noticeable in all subsequent organizations of the Games. The waning political interest in the Games, which were previously seen as playing a pivotal role in promoting the unification of the Balkans, became even more obvious as less and less prominent political figures attended the opening ceremonies, inauguration speeches became less enthusiastic and did not celebrate the Games as a factor of peace, solidarity and stability in the area, and was all the more palpable in press reports, which gave lukewarm accounts of the events, adapting to the prevailing political sentiment.

5 Conclusion

There is a strong bond, an interconnection between the Pan-Balkan Athletics Championships and political developments in the Balkan Peninsula. The Balkan countries made joint efforts to overcome political differences and territorial disputes and this rapprochement created a favorable environment for the Balkan Games to come to existence, as national athletic federations and, by extension, governments came together to take on a common project based on cooperation and understanding. This athletic initiative was successful beyond doubt, since the Balkan countries made an effort to set their divergent opinions and conflicting interests aside and unite athletes and peoples on the track and field. Furthermore, the Balkan Games contributed to creating a positive atmosphere of friendship among the countries involved, acting as an agent of peace, fostering feelings of solidarity, friendship, tolerance and understanding.

The diplomatic line followed by Eleftherios Venizelos and his initiatives on the basis of Greco-Italian bilateral relations, as well as the diplomatic relations of Greece with the other Balkan countries benefited Greece considerably, and brought about a shift in the atmosphere of hostility, were countries were negatively predisposed to one another. Balkan governments began to make mutual compromises and mitigated their claims and this climate of acquiesce boosted the initiative to establish the Balkan Games, a most

noble athletics championship in the area. The political negotiations which were inspired by the grand idea of unifying the Balkans in a Federation of political and financial power were reinforced and thus reached a pivotal point with the Balkan Conferences taking place to the same end. This period of intense political activity coincided with the first years that the Balkan Games were organized, charging the Games politically. The championships were used as a springboard by politicians and journalists alike as a telling example of the efforts made towards reconciliation among nations and became an instrument of propaganda for the rapprochement of the Balkan states. The four Balkan Conferences, intended to submit proposals for the political, economic, commercial, scientific union of the Balkans, took place at about the same time as the Pan-Balkan Games. The climate of high expectations and anticipation was evident throughout this period, while eminent officials and diplomats had the opportunity to meet and discuss.

Balkan governments made the decision to not materialize the proposals and resolutions of the Balkan Conferences and eventually signed a pact of peace and territorial integrity in 1934, thus putting a damper on a true political and economic union of the Balkan states. This turn of events influenced the organization of the subsequent Games from then on. The role of the Balkan Championships in the negotiations among the countries dwindled; they remained, however, an agent of peace and a factor of stability, as was intended by the Balkan governments, in an area where conflicting interests could easily trigger new rounds of tension and breed political strife. Future research should focus on issues related to the contribution of the Balkan Sports Championship in rapprochement among the Balkan nationalities.

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