

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE EUROPEAN FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIPS: A BALKANS PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT:

The study aims to present the changing role of the Southwest European countries in the continent's football life from a basic sport-geographical perspective by analyzing the achievements and participation of these countries in the European Championships. The aim of the present paper is to explore how the differences observed on the continent are reflected in Balkans and what changes have taken place between 1960 and 2021. The study focuses on the flow of goods and services with a special attention to the region under scrutiny, in particular on the migration of players from the Balkans to other football regions and vice versa. Respectively, the findings of the study are based on the statistics of the European Football Championships. The results show that integration has also reached football, therefore, after the collapse of communist regimes, the region has become part of the global player flow, with the main direction being Western Europe and to a lesser extent Latin Europe, too. At the same time, football has increasingly become a vehicle of national pride and identity.

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Balkans, European Football Championships, football, player migration, UEFA

Introduction

This paper is part of a major research project which aims to explore the socio-geographical and sport-geographical contexts of the European Football Championships, focusing on the football region of South-Eastern Europe (Balkans) and this paper is primarily sport-geographical.

Geography is related to many other disciplines, too, and thus effectively supports these other disciplines. Such a discipline is sport geography, a discipline which has been around since the 1930s and which involves the territorial, social and economic aspects of sport (Bánhidi, 2011, p. 223). From a functional perspective, it is the study of sport phenomena using the methods and tools of geography based on the paradigms of geography. Sport is a social activity, as well as an important cultural component of leading a healthy life. Nevertheless, competitive sports, which are often also spectacular sports such as football, go beyond this, as they are closely linked to the economy and are part of the entertainment industry, too. Many sports may now be perceived as an integral part of global economic activity. Important players are athletes who migrate across geographical space.

The main aim of this study is to explore the regional context of European football championships, the spatial differences and the changing role of individual states and football regions on the European football map. Consequently, the changing role of the “donor” and “host” states and player migration along with trends will be highlighted. As an interpretative framework, the centre-periphery approach is used. This is a dual theoretical model for expressing spatial inequalities. This model was introduced by Immanuel Wallerstein (1983), who in his world-system theory divided different areas of the world into a centre, a periphery and a semi-periphery in transition. The centre keeps the peripheries at a distance from it in a kind of dependency by draining resources, such as the best footballers. The relationship between centre and periphery in terms of mobility, may be understood as a dynamic mediator; it may be unidirectional or multidirectional, with both attractive and unattractive elements. When it comes to player migration, these reasons are not investigated in the scope of this paper; however, it may be concluded that the acquisition of higher income is a main driver of player migration (Hautzinger, Hegedűs & Klenner, 2014, p. 106; Molnár, 2006, pp. 463-485).

In this study, it is investigated whether the football regions or states, which were created for the purpose of this research, have managed to catch up with the European integration. This was examined by using the statistics of the European Football Championship. The European Football Championship is a tournament organised every four years by the European Football Association (UEFA) for the national teams of the member countries. It is the most important event for football on the continent and for UEFA. The first championship was held in 1960. In 1968, it was renamed the European Championship. The present paper investigates 16 tournaments and uses statistical databases available on two digital platforms: www.UEFA.com and www.weltfussball.de. A geographical approach is used in the processing and evaluation of these data. Although the study covers a narrow population, it provides an overview of player migration based on the most talented European footballers.

The period investigated within the scope of this research project may be divided into two periods of equal length: the Cold War years between 1960 and 1990, and the almost three decades following this period (1990-2021). The reason for this distinction is that the fall of socialist regimes fundamentally changed the economic and social conditions in Europe. The terms “Eastern” and “Western Bloc” are used in this the study and the border between the two blocs, the Elbe-Adriatic line, was the so-called “Iron Curtain”. To the east there were the socialist countries, or in other words “Eastern Bloc”, and to the west the capitalist states, the so-called “Western Bloc”. The states of the Balkan football region are divided between the two blocs.

The region investigated in this paper is partly Europe; however, this requires further clarifications. On the one hand, the internationalisation of sport has had the effect of including players playing for clubs outside the continent in the European Championships. Secondly, UEFA’s scope extends beyond the European continent. It currently has 55 member countries, but many of them lie beyond Europe’s natural geographical borders. These include Russia and Turkey, which are situated on two continents, and Israel and Kazakhstan in Asia.

Foreign players will play a prominent role in player migration. There is no uniform, official definition of the term “foreign player”. Thus, in this paper a foreign player is a foreign national who, while retaining their original nationality, plays in the league of another country (and is consequently an employee) but continues to play for the national team of his home country. As to who can be a member of the national team of a country at a European Championship, is regulated by the relevant FIFA regulations (FIFA Statutes, 2019; FIFA Regulations, 2022). In this paper, national teams with a foreign player majority are defined as teams with a smaller proportion of national footballers playing for their home clubs.

In recent decades, state borders have changed, and so have the names of certain countries. In this study, Germany is considered the successor to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), Russia to the Soviet Union or the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Czech Republic to Czechoslovakia. It is impossible to understand the changes in European football without looking at the role of the states with the most significant football life and football economy on the continent. The four states that were identified as the major European football powers are England, Germany, Italy and Spain (TOP-4.) The reason for using this category lies in the fact that they are the most successful countries in continental football. Only these countries, and France (TOP-5) in addition, have won the World Cup and are the most successful in club football. The European Football Association (UEFA), based on the so-called UEFA coefficient, considers the English Premier League, the Spanish La Liga, the Italian Serie A and the German Bundesliga as the strongest leagues. It is useful to distinguish France from the former because the analysis of player migration has led us to conclude that France is more of a donor

than the other countries. And UEFA's 2021 coefficient figures show that the French league is no longer the 5th strongest on the continent, but the Portuguese league (Country coefficients, 2020).

1. European football regions

Showing regional differences and the migration of players would make it difficult to include all UEFA member countries, therefore, in the scope of the present paper, the so-called European football regions were created. In addition to geographical location and cultural-geographical (e.g. linguistic or religious) aspects, these regions are also based on their own football culture, the traditions of the game and its economic importance. The categorisation may be debatable, but it does make it easier to understand the processes and changes (see Table 1).

Table 1. European football regions

Football regions	Countries (examples)
Central Europe	Visegrad countries, Baltic States
Western Europe	France, Benelux states, Germany, British Isles
Latin Europe	Italy, Portugal Spain
Northern Europe	Scandinavian countries, Finland, Iceland
Eastern Europe	post-Soviet states (e.g. Russia, Ukraine, Belarus)
South-East Europe (Balkans)	Greece, post-Yugoslav states, Romania, Turkey

The central Western European football region has all the German-speaking countries, France, the Benelux countries and the British Isles, too. The English league, the strongest and most powerful in Europe today, is the primary centre of European football. Traditionally, it has strong links with Northern Ireland, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Latin Europe is made up of Latin football countries. The term is common in the sports media, although Latin American football is often included. Latin Europe is often associated with the wit of the game and with technical, inventive football. Geographically, Greece could also be included in the region, but it has a different football culture and the game plays a different role in Hellenic sport and society, and is, therefore, included in the Balkan region. The name was motivated by the existence of a Latin Cup series between 1949 and 1957 involving France, Spain, Italy and Portugal. However, France's football culture is also different in many respects, being a major donor state in player migration; therefore, it was placed in the Western European region.

Traditional geographical considerations have played an important main role in defining Northern Europe, which may be considered more of a football periphery. Although the game is popular in these countries, the region's role in international

football is rather secondary. The Central European region includes the former socialist states of the region, excluding Yugoslav successor states. In contrast, it includes the members of the Visegrad Group and the Baltic States. They are categorised on the basis of their similar levels of development, their membership of the EU and their strong cultural Western orientation. The Eastern European region includes the successor states of the Soviet Union. Some of these countries, such as Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, are not geographically part of the continent, but are members of UEFA and are involved in European football. Their club teams play in European cups and qualifying tournaments for world competitions such as the European Championship and the World Cup.

The South-eastern European (or Balkan) football region is a key focus of this study. This includes the successor states of Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia), Albania, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania and Turkey. Within this category, it is important to distinguish the group of Yugoslav successor states. The reason for this is that until the 1990s, these countries played a decisive role in continental football, which, with the aim of creating a united South Slav nation, gave priority to team sports over individual sports. The impact of this may still be seen today in the success of these countries.

The integration of football has been made possible by a number of major events in Europe, one of which was the EU integration process, initially limited to the western half of the continent. This was later combined with the enlargement of the EU to the east. On the other hand, there has been a deepening of cooperation itself, including the free movement of labour, including professional sportsmen and women. A major breakthrough in player migration came in 1995 with the adoption of the Bosman rule which allowed the free movement of sportsmen and sportswomen from EU Member States along with other workers (Judgment of the Court, 1995).

2. The countries of the Balkan football region in the competition of nations

The teams participating in the European Championships were always selected in qualifying rounds, which in 1960 and 1964 were round-robin, straight knockout matches, and thereafter UEFA organised group matches and qualifying rounds. The evaluation of qualifying rounds is outside the scope of this study.

The number of participating nations has been steadily increasing. Between 1960 and 1976, there were 4, between 1980 and 1992 8, and between 1996 and 2012 16. The Western Bloc, Western and Latin football regions have been the most successful in the tournaments, with 35 countries taking part so far. Germany has participated in 13 consecutive European Championship tournaments since 1972, missing only the first three tournaments, which had only four teams. Russia has played 12

times at the European Championship. This was followed by football nations such as Spain with 11, then England, France, the Netherlands and Portugal with 10. At the bottom of the list are predominantly the countries with small populations, i.e., countries from central, south-eastern and northern Europe. 20 states have never participated before, such as the mini-states and several Soviet successor states, namely Belarus, Kazakhstan, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Lithuania and Estonia.

Croatia, which became independent from Yugoslavia in 1991, has participated the most times in the region, with 6 tournaments. Romania, Turkey and Yugoslavia have featured 5 times. Surprisingly, Serbia, with a successful footballing history, has never participated in a continental tournament under its own name. The Balkan countries' participation in the European Championship has become more frequent as the number of teams appearing in the tournament has been increasing. Albania (2016) and Northern Macedonia (2021), for example, have already had 24 players. The region made a total of six appearances in the eight tournaments held up to 1990: four by Yugoslavia, one by Romania and one by Greece, and 24 in the eight tournaments after 1990. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus and Kosovo have never played in a tournament (see Table 2).

Table 2. Participation of Balkan football regions countries in the European Football Championships (year)

Countries	Participation	
	N	Year
Albania	1	2016
Bulgaria	2	1996, 2004
North Macedonia	1	2021
Greece	4	1980, 2004, 2008, 2012
Croatia	6	1996, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2021
Yugoslavia	5	1960, 1968, 1976, 1984, 2000
Romania	5	1984, 1996, 2000, 2008, 2016
Slovenia	1	2000
Turkey	5	1996, 2000, 2008, 2016, 2021
Did not participate: Cyprus, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo		

Source: UEFA.com, weltfussball.de

The increase in the number of teams from south-eastern Europe participating in the European Championship is not the result of more successful football, but of more people taking part in the tournaments. If we consider participation rates of the football regions (the ratio of the football region to the total number of participating countries), we find that there has been no significant improvement between the Cold War period (1960-1990) and the period 1990-2021. The Northern European and Balkan countries have increased their participation. In case of the latter, however, it should be borne in mind that the number of states in the region

almost doubled after 1990 with the break-up of Yugoslavia. The Central European indicator has remained virtually unchanged, while the Eastern European indicator has decreased (see Table 3).

Table 3. Participation of the national football teams of the football regions in the European Football Championships based on the participation rate¹

Football region	1960-1988		1992-2021	
	Number of countries	Participation rate	Number of countries	Participation rate
Southeast Europe	6	13,6	24	17,6
Northern Europe	3	6,8	16	11,8
Eastern Europe	5	11,4	10	7,3
Central Europe	5	11,4	16	11,8
Latin Europe	8	18,2	21	15,4
Western Europe	17	38,6	49	36,0

Source: UEFA.com, weltfussball.de

The most successful teams at the European Championships were the Western and Latin European teams. With the exception of England, the home of the game, which never won a gold medal. In 10 of the 16 tournaments, a team from one of the big (top 5) countries won. Germany and Spain triumphed three times. The latter being the only team to defend its title. France and Italy won twice. The Netherlands, Portugal, the Soviet Union (Eastern Europe), Denmark (Northern Europe) and Czechoslovakia (Central Europe) have all made it to the top of the podium. The Balkan region was won by Greece in 2004.

In total, 17 countries from the football region have reached the semi-finals. Apart from Greece, former Yugoslavia has reached the semi-finals three times (1960, 1968, 1976) because the first two times it won a silver medal and Turkey won once (2008). This puts the region slightly behind the Central European football region (7) (Czech Republic 5, Hungary 2). However, it is on a par with the Eastern European region: Russia has been in the top four six times.

Overall, the Eastern Bloc states were more successful during the Cold War years than afterwards. The East only managed to win the European Championship before 1990, but not afterwards. They reached the semi-finals 12 times in 8 tournaments up to 1988, and only three times in 8 tournaments after 1992 (Czech Republic in 1996 and 2004, Russia in 2008).

¹ Participation rate: the number of national teams from the football region participating in the European Championship during the period investigated / the number of national teams participating in the European Championship during the period investigated.

3. Host countries

Until 1976, the organiser was one of the four teams in the final. Then, before the qualifying rounds, UEFA decided which country would host a tournament, so this country already qualified for the tournament. The Western Bloc (Western and Latin European football regions) clearly dominated the hosting of tournaments, with 13 tournaments in total. In 1976, South-East Europe managed to host a tournament in Yugoslavia. The non-aligned policy of the South Slav state (i.e., it did not formally align with or against any major power bloc) played a decisive role in this. The next time the region was able to host a European Championship match was not until Euro 2020 in Bucharest in 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This gave a chance to countries that would otherwise have had little chance, such as Hungary², Azerbaijan and Romania. In 2012, the expanding European Union (EU) made it possible for Poland and Ukraine to organise the tournament together.

4. Migration of football players

4.1 *The Cold War era*

In the first two decades of the European Championship, there was minimal cross-border movement of footballers, so that in the first five European Championships (1960-1976), there were only occasional foreign players in the different national teams. In 1964, the Spanish team had two players who had turned professional in Italy. In 1976, the Netherlands had five foreign players. In the socialist bloc, there were no foreign players, with the exception of Yugoslavia. In 1976, 3 of the 18 players in the South Slavic national team were employed abroad, two in West Germany and one in France. In 1984, the “Plavs³” were again involved in the European Championship, and only one foreign player from France was named. The geopolitical advantage of neutrality, as well as in terms of hosting, gave Yugoslavia the opportunity to connect with the West ahead of the other socialist states. In the 1970s, it received preferences from the European Communities (EC) that facilitated access to the EC market for labour, as well as trade in industrial goods (Vince, 2008). This allowed many sportspeople to earn their living in the West as professionals. The South Slav region’s significant role as an exporter of footballers dates back to the Cold War era.

From 1980, the tournament became an 8-team tournament. Greece then represented the Balkans, with a team made up entirely of national players. The role of foreign players in the Western Bloc national teams slowly increased during the

² Hungary bid for the event three times: jointly with Austria in 2004, independently in 2008 and with Croatia in 2012, but failed to win it on each occasion.

³ The traditional nickname of the Yugoslav national football team, derived from their blue jersey.

decade.⁴ The appearance of the Danish team at the 1984 tournament in Spain marked an important change. It was the first national team to be made up of a majority of foreign players, with only six of the 20 players playing in their country's championship. The 1984 European Championship was the first to have a majority of teams (5) with a foreign player presence. From the Balkan region, Romania entered the tournament with only national players.

In 1988, the tournament in the Czech Republic was dominated by foreigner players in two of the 8 national teams. Ireland was the first team and the first to take part in the European Championship without a single player from the national league, with 16 of the 20 players coming from the English points league. The Soviet team included only national players, along with Italy and Spain. The Danish team, on the other hand, included only 8 players from their national league.

4.2. The post-Cold War era

It was in 1992 that the first tournament after the fall of the Iron Curtain was held. The changing European circumstances provided an opportunity for a revival of East-West player movement. This was demonstrated by the fact that, in the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the successor to the Soviet Union, nine players played in Russian or Ukrainian leagues and 11 in Western or Latin European leagues. The Swedish home team was also dominated by foreign professionals (11-9), as was the Danish team⁵, which was suddenly invited to join the team (13-7). The team, which had already been a foreign player team at the European Championship, achieved its best result in the tournament, winning the gold medal. It was the first tournament in which no team had entered without a foreign player.

Table 4. European football championships in the light of some statistics

	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2021
1	70	75	88	70	70	176	160	160	160	352	352	368	368	368	552	620
2.	0	2	0	0	8	8	19	43	53	106	172	170	177	170	341	399
3.	0	2.6	0	0	11.4	4.5	11.9	26.9	33.2	30.1	58.9	46.2	48.1	46.2	61.8	64.4
4.	4	4	4	4	4	8	8	8	8	16	16	16	16	16	24	24
5.	0	1	0	0	2	3	5	5	8	13	14	15	16	15	23	24
6.	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2	2	4	9	9	7	7	16	19

Explanation: 1. Number of players (number), 2. Number of foreign players (number), 3. Percentage of foreign players (%), 4. Number of national teams at the European Championship, 5. Number of national teams at the European Championship in which they played

⁴ In the 1980s, for example, Hungarian footballers were already playing legally in Western clubs, and Yugoslavs from the 1970s.

⁵ Yugoslavia was not allowed to take part in the tournament because of international sanctions imposed due to accusations of participation in the Bosnian war. The Danes qualified, beaten by the Yugoslavs in the qualifying group.

The 1996 European Championship in England was an important landmark in the migration of footballers. On the one hand, the so-called Bosman rule was already in force. On the other hand, 16 teams were now allowed to play. The higher number of matches meant that a team could enter 22 players (this was the case until 2004). These relied mainly on foreign professionals, and their numbers at the Euros continued to grow.

From 1996 onwards, as more and more South-Eastern European teams were involved, it is worth presenting the tournaments in more detail, highlighting the important findings. In 1996, the English, Dutch, French, German and Swiss teams, as well as the Latin European Portuguese and the Central European Czech teams had a minority of foreign players. Apart from the Italian and Spanish national teams, Turkey only fielded national players. However, foreign players were in the majority in the Scottish, Danish and Russian teams and there was a clear predominance of foreign players in the Bulgarian, Croatian and Romanian teams in south-eastern Europe. Bulgaria counted on 5 national players, 17 of whom played abroad and 8 players were German foreign players. Two played for England, the rest were in the leagues of Austria, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Scotland, Spain and Turkey. The Romanian team was also diverse, with 10 national players, 5 from Spain, 2 from Germany and 1 each from England, Belgium, France, Italy and Switzerland. Croatia was expecting 5 footballers from Spain, 3 from Germany and Italy, 1-1 from England, Belgium, Japan and Turkey, in addition to national players.

By the 2000 Belgian-Dutch joint championship, the proportion of foreign players had risen significantly to 49% (n=172). Italy and Spain also qualified their national players. The English team had only one Spanish foreign player, the German team had four. The Portuguese and Czech teams had 11 national players out of 22. However, the French national team became a team with a majority of foreign, which resulted in them winning the tournament. Foreign players were in the majority in the Dutch and Belgian teams, as well as in the Northern European (Danish, Norwegian and Swedish) national teams. The south-east European teams relied mostly on foreign players. In the Slovenian national team, only 6 players were from Slovenia. In addition, there were 5 Austrian, 3-3 Belgian and German, 2 Croatian, 1-1 Greek, French and Swiss players. The Yugoslavian national team also had only 4 national players, and 7 Spanish, 5 Italian, 2 Dutch and 1 French, Portuguese, Japanese and German foreign players. The Romanian national team had 7 national players, 5 in Spain, 3 in Turkey, 2-2 in the Netherlands and Germany, and 1 in England, Belgium and Italy. The Turkish team had 2 foreign players from England and Scotland.

In 2004, Portugal hosted the tournament. The maximum number of players was set at 23. The majority of players were from national clubs for the Lusitanians,

and the Italians (only from Seria A) and Spain, England and the national team. Foreign players dominated the French, Dutch and Swiss national teams, as well as the Czech and Latvian, Danish and Swedish national teams. The big turnaround came in Eastern Europe, where the weight of national footballers became dominant once again. Russian "Sbornaya" arrived in Portugal with only 3 foreign players. The trend continued, and this became a feature of the Ukrainian national team at the European Championships. While other football regions followed the opposite trend. This was the case in the Balkans, from which 3 teams came to the tournament. The surprise winner Greece relied on their national players (15). They had 3 players from Italy, 2 from England and 1-1 from Germany, Portugal and Spain. The Croatian team had 21 foreign players, 7 played for Germany, 3 Italian, 2 Austrian and Ukrainian, 1-1, English, Belgian, French, Israeli, Russian, Portuguese and Turkish foreign players. The Bulgarian team had 12 foreign players (3 Germany, 2-2 Turkey, Ukraine, 1-1 Greece, France, China, Italy and Scotland.)

In 2008, Austria and Switzerland hosted the event. The German, Austrian, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Russian teams were dominated by players from their home clubs. Foreign players were in the majority in the Czech and Polish, Swedish, French, Dutch and Swiss teams. From the Balkan region, the Turkish team had players mainly from their national league (16 players) and 7 players played abroad: 2 players in England, 1 in France, 1 in Greece, 1 in Germany, 1 in Russia and 1 in Spain. The majority of the Greek players also played in national leagues (14), with 4 German, 1 Portuguese, 2 English and 2 Spanish. Of the Croatian team, 20 players came to the EC from non-national clubs, 6 were German, 3-3 French and Italian, 2-2 English and Russian, 1-1 Dutch, Greek, Austrian and Ukrainian foreign players. Romania's delegation included a minority of players from abroad (11 players: France 2, Italy 3, Bulgaria 1, Germany 1, Russia 1, Scotland 1, Spain 1, Ukraine 1).

In 2012, the tournament moved back to the eastern part of Europe, to Poland and Ukraine, after the 1976 European Championship. This time it was England, which only fielded national players. The teams from the TOP 5 countries were dominated by footballers from the national leagues. Foreigners were in the majority in the Dutch, Irish and Portuguese, Danish and Swedish and Polish and Czech teams. The Greek national team, representing the Balkans relied on 16 domestic players and fielded 7 foreign players (3 Germany, 1-1 France, Italy, Scotland and Turkey). The Croatian team had 5 Dinamo Zagreb players and 18 from other national leagues: 5-5 from Ukraine and Germany, 3 from the Premier League, 2 from La Liga and 1-1 from France, Israel and Russia.

At the 2016 European Championship in France, there were 24 teams, but the number of eligible players remained at 23. The change added small countries to the field, where foreign professionals dominated. The role of foreign players in national teams has been further strengthened, with their numbers doubling compared

to the previous tournament. 62% (n=341) of all players (n=552) were no longer playing for their national team. Only England had a team of only national players. Germany, Italy and Spain were dominated by national players. Russia, Turkey and Ukraine also had more national than foreign players. Three national teams had no national players: Northern Ireland and Ireland, and Iceland. There were national teams from Central Europe (Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia), except Hungary, Austria, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Sweden, Portugal and Sweden.

The Balkan teams have relied on foreign players, with one exception. Turkey fielded footballers only from foreign clubs, i.e., Germany 3, Spain, Denmark and China 1. Albania, a first-time participant at the European Championship was really international with 21 foreign players from 10 countries (Azerbaijan 1, France 2, Greece 2, Croatia 2, Liechtenstein 1, Germany 2, Italy 5, Switzerland 4, Turkey 1, USA 1). The Romanian team had 14 players from other leagues (3 Bulgaria, 2-2 Italy, Spain and Turkey, 1 England, Croatia, Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia). Croatia had 7 players from Italy, 4 from Spain, 2-2 from Ukraine and Germany, and 2 from France and Russia.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 continental tournament was postponed until 2021, with the original name Euro 2020, and in view of the pandemic, participants were allowed to qualify 26 players. All teams had foreign players, with a proportion of foreign players approaching two-thirds (64%). The Spanish national team, which had previously relied on national players, was also hit by a foreign player majority, with only 10 La Liga players, 10 English, 2 Italian and 1 from France and Germany in the 24-man team. This means that another top league football power has a majority of legionnaires in its team. The national teams of the other TOP 4 countries remain dominated by national players. However, other national teams were dominated by foreign players: Austria (24), Belgium (24), France (20), the Netherlands (13), Portugal (20), Scotland (15), Switzerland (22), Wales (18). The teams of the Northern European football regions (Denmark, Finland and Sweden) and Central Europe (Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia) were mainly made up of foreign players. Eastern European teams, Russia and Ukraine, with 4 and 8 foreign players respectively, bucked the trend.

For the first time in the Turkish team at the European Championship, the majority of players came from foreign clubs, with 4-4 players from England, France and Italy, and 1 from the Netherlands, Spain and Germany. Northern Macedonia, which was participating in the tournament for the first time, was a diverse team. Of the 23 foreigners, 3-3 were from Cyprus, Croatia, Italy and Spain, 2-2 from Hungary and Slovakia, and 1-1 from England, Albania, Belgium, Bosnia, France, Germany and Turkey. The Croatian captain has qualified 19 players from foreign clubs (Italy 5, Spain 3, England, France, Germany, Russia 2, Poland, Scotland, Turkey, 1).

As the Balkan football region became a regular participant after 1996, it is worth

examining player migration in the region after 1996. A total of 553 football players from the region were qualified in the seven European Championship tournaments. The real number, however, is lower, as a player participated in more than one tournament. Of these, 323 (58%) were from clubs other than their home country. A total of 210 players were from the states of the former Yugoslavia, of which 78%, 164, were foreign players (see Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5. The Balkan football region at the European Football Championships 1996-2021⁶

	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2021
Number of countries	4	4	3	4	2	4	3
Total number of foreign players	44	51	41	47	25	58	57
Percentage in national teams (%)	50	58	59	51	54	63	73
Number of foreign players from TOP4 leagues	33	26	22	23	14	29	28
Percentage in national teams (%)	38	30	32	25	30	32	36

Source: UEFA.com, weltfussball.de

Table 6. The states of former Yugoslavia in the European Football Championship 1996-2021

	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2021
Number of countries	1	2	1	1	1	1	2
Total number of foreign players	16	30	21	20	18	17	42
Percentage in national teams (%)	73	68	91	87	78	74	81
Number of foreign players from TOP4 leagues	12	16	11	11	10	12	18
Percentage in national teams (%)	55	36	48	48	44	52	35

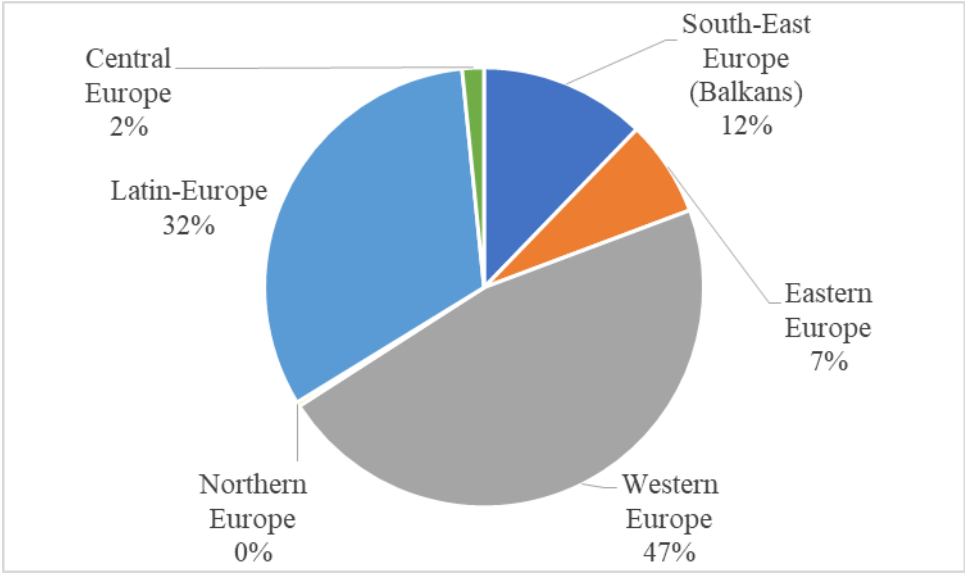
Source: UEFA.com, weltfussball.de

The proportion of foreign players in the football teams of the region is slightly on the rise. It may be concluded that the Balkan national teams, compared to other football regions, rely heavily on players playing for foreign clubs. In this, they are similar to the football regions of Northern and Central Europe. In Western and Latin Europe, the number of foreign players is lower, although an upward trend may be detected.

Since 1996, most of the South-East European foreign players (47%) have played in Western Europe, followed by Latin Europe (32%) (see Figure 1). The proportion of foreign players within the region is small (12%). The dominant direction of player movement from the Balkans is clearly towards the football regions of Western and Latin Europe. A movement of minor significance towards Eastern Europe started in the 2000s (see Table 7).

⁶ Number of players eligible: 22 (1996, 2000), 23 (2004-2016), 26 (2021)

Figure 1. Distribution of foreign football players in the South-East European football region by region of their club teams between 1996 and 2021



Source: UEFA.com, weltfussball.de

Table 7. Number of players from the Balkan football region who have played in the European Football Championship by geographical location of their club (1996-2021)

Footballregions	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2021	Total
South-East Europe (Balkans)	3	6	4	3	1	11	10	38
Northern Europe	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Central Europe							5	5
Eastern Europe	-	-	5	6	6	3	2	22
Latin Europe	17	19	10	11	3	21	19	100
Western Europe	23	25	20	27	14	16	21	145

Source: UEFA.com, weltfussball.de

Around a third of the region’s national team players have played in the top 4 European leagues. The proportion of players from the former Yugoslavian countries is higher, between 35% and 55%. The statistics show that the most attractive destination for footballers was Germany (61), followed by Italy (51), Spain (44) and England (16). For Central Europe, which has similar characteristics in international football, the German Bundesliga is also the most attractive destination, followed by England.

England’s relative marginalisation is interesting because in the 2000s the Premier League became the most attractive league in Europe. The 2000 European

Championship was the first time that most foreign players came from the English league, with 39 (11%), compared to 122 (19.7%) in 2021. England's appeal has implications for the whole continent. Its centrality is also reflected in the fact that players from other top 4 leagues have increasingly been transferring for England in recent years. Other TOP4 leagues also have a continental influence, but to a lesser extent. The Balkan and Central European football regions are similar in that the Bundesliga has been the biggest attraction for their players. A change may be seen from 2016 onwards, with the German league being no longer the most attractive for footballers from South-East Europe, but Italy.

The impact of globalising football has also seen the emergence, though in small numbers, of players whose club teams are based on other continents in the national teams of the South-East European region. In 1996 and 2000, there were 1-1 players from Japanese clubs. There were also Chinese participants in 2004 and 2016 in the tournament. In 2021, there were players from the USA, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

The Balkans as a football region cannot be treated as one. The former Yugoslav states are clearly characterised by a westward flow of players, a so-called donor character and a high number of foreign players in national teams. In contrast, Turkey, which has participated in five tournaments since 1996, has played mostly with national players in four European Championship matches and only became a foreign player majority team in 2021. At the same time, Turkey has also become a host state. The Turkish example shows that in the internationalisation of football, it is possible to become a kind of sub-centre, alongside the states that play the role of centre. The appeal of the Turkish league has not only extended to the Balkans but also, to a limited extent, to other neighbouring regions. In the 1990s, even German players were recruited to the league. Russia has played a similar role to Turkey on the European football map since the 2000s. The Balkan football region also has a limited absorption role due to the climate and financial centre nature of Cyprus, which may attract players from its own region and from Central Europe. Croatia is somewhat less attractive in the region.

Greece's journey is similar to that of Turkey, which has also relied mostly on national players for its participation in the European Championship. It has never played in a tournament with a national team. It has become partly a host nation, with a small number of players from other countries taking jobs in its league. However, the players on the Greek national teams have typically played in the major European leagues. This probably played a role in Greece winning the gold medal in 2004. Romania and Bulgaria did not achieve great success at the European Championships as both countries are donor countries on the football map.

Table 8. Proportion of foreign players in the national teams of football regions at the European Football Championships (%; 1992-2021)

	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2021
Western Europe	22,0	21,2	44,5	42,6	54,8	47,0	73,9	63,9
Latin- Europe	-	6,1	16,6	11,6	30,4	27,5	42,0	50,0
Central Europe	-	31,8	50,0	65,2	63,8	70,0	63,0	72,8
Eastern Europe	55,5	50,0	-	8,7	4,3	8,7	13,0	19,2
South-East Europe	-	50,0	58,0	59,4	51,1	54,3	63,0	73,1
<i>Post Yugoslavia states</i>	-	68,1	77,3	91,3	87,0	78,3	73,9	80,7
Northern Europe	50,0	40,9	75,6	84,8	78,3	78,3	93,5	89,7
<i>TOP-4 countries</i>	25	4,5	5,7	6,5	20,3	10,7	25,0	29,4

Source: UEFA.com, weltfussball.de

Among all the players who participated in the European Championship, there are no players from the Latin or Balkan regions who have moved to Northern Europe. This may be due to the smaller football economies and the region's unfavourable climate.

It is also interesting to examine the region from the perspective of the number and distribution of Balkan club players in the national teams participating in the European Championship. Of the 553 foreign players who played for Balkan national teams in tournaments between 1996 and 2021, 87 were players from Balkan clubs who became national team players for their home country. This difference illustrates the peripheral or donor nature of the football region. Turkey contributed the most foreign players from the region (46), followed by Greece (20), then Croatia (9), Cyprus (7), Bulgaria (3), Albania (1), Bosnia and Herzegovina (1) and Serbia (1).

Conclusion

The European football scene has undergone a major transformation in recent decades. Football has evolved beyond an everyday sport into a serious industry, while also becoming an important "tool" for European integration. This expansion has also crossed the continent's borders. The changes have had both positive and negative consequences, affecting states and football regions differently. Overall, the catching-up process for peripheral football regions, such as the Balkans, has been partially successful. The European Championship and the structure of European football has been successfully extended to the continent as a whole, including the peripheral regions. This is shown by the participation figures of the countries, the geographical changes in the organisation of the tournaments and, to some extent, the statistics on player migration. At the same time, however, there has not been a complete catch-up with the centre (Western and Latin Europe). This is shown by

the results, but also by important indicators of player migration. The national teams of the countries in the region were more successful before 1990, but afterwards player migration became donor-driven. The centre (Western Europe) is drawing players, maintaining its leading role in continental football.

At the same time, European football integration has also created opportunities. After the Cold War, the countries of the Eastern Bloc were able to become part of the global sports migration and sports economy. However, for the integration of Turkey and Greece into world football the change of regime was not necessarily required, and it was only partially necessary for the Southern Slav states (compared to Central and Eastern Europe), too.

However, because of its peripheral nature, the last three decades cannot be considered as a period of mere stagnation. Players from the East have moved to a more developed professional and sporting market, and can take their skills from higher level leagues back home and to their national teams, making their national teams more competitive. From the 1990s onwards, it became possible for countries to import footballer from other, more peripheral regions. Again, this has a positive impact on the competitive sports of these countries. Partial catching-up is most successful in Croatia and Turkey. Perhaps their role could be called semi-peripheral on the continent. However, catching up does not necessarily represent a final stage. A good example is Greece, which had a successful national football team in the early 2000s, even winning the European Championship in 2004, but afterwards the peripheral position of Hellenic football was reinforced. This is justified by the success of Croatia, which was an almost constant participant in the European Championship after 1996. All in all, it may be concluded that as a result of these processes national championships, especially those of small states, will become increasingly insignificant in the future, giving way to further internationalisation.

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GEOGRAFIJA EVROPSKIH FUDBALSKIH PRVENSTAVA: BALKANSKA PERSPEKTIVA

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APSTRAKT:

Na osnovu bazične sportsko-geografske perspektive u radu se predstavlja i analizira učešće i uspjeh zemalja Jugozapadne Evrope u evropskim fudbalskim takmičenjima. U tom smisu, osnovni cilj rada je pozicioniranje navedenog predmeta istraživanja u odnosu na širi kontekst društvenih i sportskih promjena karakterističnih za Evropu u periodu između 1960. i 2021. godine. Pored toga, istraživanje je usmjereno ka utvrđivanju nivoa integracije regiona unutar navedenog društvenog i sportskog konteksta. Takođe, istraživanje je fokusirano na protok ljudi, roba i usluga, pri čemu je naročita pažnja posvećena migraciji fudbaleri sa Balkana i obrnuto. Rezultati istraživanja su zasnovani na dostupnim sekundarnim podacima o evropskim fudbalskim prvenstvima. Rezultati istraživanja ukazuju da je nakon sloma socijalističkih režima region postao dio globalnog toka igrača, pri čemu je glavni pravac migracije bio ka Zapadnoj Evropi, a u manjoj mjeri ka Latinskoj Evropi. Istovremeno, fudbal širom Balkana postaje sredstvo za (re)produkciju nacionalnog ponosa i identiteta.

Ključne riječi:

Balkan, fudbal, evropska prvenstva u fudbalu, migracije igrača, UEFA

