
BALKAN CUP WITHIN THE IDEA OF SOCIALIST SPORT (1946–1980)

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ABSTRACT: *The Balkan Cup represented the idea of integration of the Balkan countries through sport, more specifically, football. It took its first form in the interwar period, while its further development was interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War. After the war, the cup was restored, which had a special significance in the socialist ideology. In the first post-war years, the countries of the Eastern Bloc even paid more attention to this competition than, for example, the Olympic Games or world football championships. The competition also spread beyond the Balkans, as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland also participated. When the conflict with the Cominform broke out in 1948, the Balkan Cup suffered the consequences, first of all, with the exclusion of Yugoslavia. After Stalin's death, the cup spread outside the socialist countries, with Greece and Turkey also taking part. Gradually, the audience's interest in the cup waned, while in the political sphere, the Balkan countries moved farther apart. All of this led to the gradual shut-down of the competition, which essentially ceased in the 1980s, although certain disciplines were maintained until 1995.*

KEYWORDS: Balkan cup, football, socialism, sport, Yugoslavia

In the 20th century, the importance of football far exceeded the realm of sport. As the most important unimportant thing in the world, its influence extended to politics, where it became a significant factor in bringing nations together or driving them apart. As Hobsbawm notes, "For most of the world today, the eleven young men on the football pitch represent 'the nation', the state, 'our people', not politicians, constitutions and military forces."¹ With such importance, football also permeates conflicts, predominantly in the sphere of ritual violence, where the sport

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¹ Erik Hobsbawm, *Kraj kulture: Kultura i društvo u XX veku*, Beograd: Arhipelag, 2014, 39–40.

becomes “a safety valve for group tension, which is painlessly dissipated in symbolic pseudo-fights.”² However, history also knows a real football war between Honduras and El Salvador, which began on the football pitch but soon moved to the front lines. Thousands of people died on both sides in a war caused by a football match.³

During the interwar period in the Balkans, football became a key place for bringing together not only sports but also entire nations. The tense atmosphere that remained after World War I resulted in the creation of tension and mistrust among neighbours. Bulgaria’s relations with Greece, Romania, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were particularly low. Despite this, the idea of the Balkans as a single entity was alive. Politicians and intellectuals were guided by the catchphrase “Balkans to the Balkan peoples”. They sought to determine their destiny, and following 1928, they began to cooperate more intensively with one another.⁴

Football, as well as sport in general, was one of the branches in which cooperation could be established and developed the fastest. To some extent, the independent path of creating the first interstate football contacts soon met with political goals. The first concrete proposals for political rapprochement in the Balkans were recorded in 1929. Politicians encouraged this endeavour from the very beginning, considering that the Balkan Cup marks the beginning of a new era in Balkan football, which would have a beneficial effect on bringing countries closer together in the cultural, economic, and political spheres. The first Balkan Cup lasted from 1929 to 1931 and was played according to a double-point system. The other five were organised once a year according to a single-point system; that is, the participants played one game against each other.⁵

The benefits that the Balkan Cup had on the development of football, the strengthening of regional sports cooperation, and the improvement of the international atmosphere were obvious. Consequently, the new communist authorities soon noticed its potential for strengthening regional cooperation and sought to restore and shape it according to their own needs.

Idea of socialist sport

According to the Moscow agreement on the division of spheres of interest in the Balkans, Churchill and Stalin agreed that Romania and Bulgaria were mostly to be assigned to the USSR, Greece to the West, while an equal percentage of influence

² Erik Hobsbaum, *Nacije i nacionalizam od 1780: program, mit i stvarnost*, Beograd: Filip Višnjić, 1996, 161.

³ Dubravka Stojanović, *Rađanje globalnog sveta 1880–2015: vanevropski svet u savremenom dobu*, Beograd: Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2015, 389.

⁴ Mirjana Zorić, „Balkanska federacija – istorija jedne ideje“, *Vojno delo*, 7/2018, 493–564; Srđan Mičić, “Yugoslav Diplomacy and the Ideas of the Balkan Unity, 1925–1930”, *Balkanica Posnaniensia. Acta et studia*, 29/2022, 213–238.

⁵ More in: Nemanja Mitrović, Nikola Mijatov, “The Balkan Football Cup as an Instrument of Political Rapprochement in the Balkans (1929–1936)”, *Journal of Balkan Studies*, 2/2025, 279–308; N. Mitrović, N. Mijatov, “Football between politics, royal families and sport: Yugoslav-Romanian football relations 1922–1941”, *Istorija 20. veka*, 1/2025, 44–49; Mihai Ionescu, Mircea Tudoran, *Fotbal de la A la Z, Fotbalul Românesc de-a lungul anilor*, București: Editura sport-turism, 1964, 240–241.

was planned for Yugoslavia and Hungary. In other words, the socialist shadow loomed over most of the Balkans. With certain difficulties, sometimes more pronounced, sometimes not, the process of communist conquest of power began, which in Yugoslavia, Romania, and Bulgaria was completed by the end of 1947. Apart from those mentioned, the influence was also visible in the remaining two Balkan states, Greece and Turkey. In Greece, a civil war raged between the monarchist right-wing and the republican left-wing forces until 1949. The former were supported by Britain and the USA, and the latter by Yugoslavia. There were also Soviet attempts to impose influence in Turkey, but they ended without much success. On the other hand, in Albania, which Belgrade considered its protectorate, socialism won.⁶

Due to the fact that the new sociopolitical system took root in over 73% of the territory of the Balkan Peninsula, it can be said that this area belonged to the socialist sphere.⁷ Regional cooperation took place only between socialist states at first, but later, capitalist states also participated (Greece and Turkey). As most of the peninsula was socialist, they considered the Balkans to belong to them. Based on that, in the first post-war years, cooperation on the peninsula can only be referred to as cooperation between Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania.⁸

The communist government looked at sports somewhat differently. Adhering to Lenin's and Stalin's guidelines, they saw it as a political tool, very useful for attracting the masses to the new ideology. For example, at one of the first meetings of the Politburo in Yugoslavia after the war, a discussion ensued on how to attract youth to the party and the idea of socialism. Josip Broz Tito stepped forward and stated, "Sport, joy, fun, the youth want it."⁹ The attention that began to be given to the promotion and development of sports had a clear goal – to foreshadow the beautiful future that would come with socialism.¹⁰ Since football was the most popular sport, the socialist countries, including the aforementioned Balkan countries, were particularly concerned about its development.¹¹

In the example of Yugoslavia, it can be seen that the newly formed institutions exerted pressure and dictated the development path of sports. Among other things, the Committee for Physical Education of Yugoslavia, which was founded on

⁶ More in: Оливера Драгишић, *Комунистичко освајање власти на Балкану 1944–1947*, Београд: ИНИС, 2023.

⁷ Viewed strictly from a geographical point of view, the Balkan Peninsula occupies a territory of about 470,000 km². Therefore, it is an area whose northern borders are bordered by the Sava and the Danube. The parts of Greece (80%) and Turkey (3%) that geographically belong to the peninsula occupy a total of 128,234 km². If we were to look at the political and cultural framework, the territory of the Balkans would be much larger because it would include the entire territory of the former Yugoslavia and even 95% of Romania. Because, in geographical terms, only the Romanian part of Dobruđa belongs to the Balkans. [Marija Todorova, *Imaginarni balkan*, Beograd: Biblioteka XX, 2006].

⁸ Nikola Mijatov, *Sport u službi socijalizma: Jugoslovensko iskustvo 1945–1953*, Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju; Čigoja štampa, 2020, 425–433.

⁹ Archives of Yugoslavia (AJ), Fond 507, CC LCY, Politburo 1945 – 1978, Meeting CC LCY 25.11. 1945.

¹⁰ James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of sport and physical education in Russia and the USSR*, London, 2010, 348–401.

¹¹ Nikola Mijatov, *Sport u službi socijalizma: Jugoslovensko iskustvo 1945–1953*, 439–440; James Riordan, "Soviet Sport and Soviet Foreign Policy", *Soviet Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1974, 322–343.

May 8, 1945, had the task of working on international rapprochement and particularly strong connections with the surrounding countries of people's democracy, as socialist countries called themselves in those years.¹² One of the important indicators of the party's influence on this sphere is the fact that the football teams of Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania have long arranged matches exclusively with each other or with other socialist countries in the first post-war years.¹³

In the beginning, people's democracies were less interested in big competitions like the Olympics or the World Cup because they were "too capitalist" for their taste. For example, Romania refused to participate in the London 1948 Olympic Games, stating that "the organisation of Olympic Games in London is reactionary, fascist, and managed by war criminals".¹⁴ As for Yugoslavia, there is a report of the Committee for Physical Culture from 1947, in which it is clearly stated that the most important event for that year and the following 1948 are Balkan Games.¹⁵ Adding to this, pillars of the socialist sport were massiveness, availability, amateurism, and the socialist ideology that would permeate it.¹⁶ Consequently, through the Olympics or the World Cup, it was impossible to highlight the socialist ideology in the right way, especially considering the fact that amateurs would surely lose to professional players. The solution was later found in faux amateurism: making a professional player with fictional jobs.¹⁷ The Physical Culture Federation of Yugoslavia, as well as similar organisations in other people's democracies, believed that their socialist view of sport should be propagated at competitions where propaganda could be easily carried out. At that moment, those that existed in the Balkan Peninsula in the interwar period were seen as ideal competitions. Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and even Albania have appropriated and adapted the Balkan Sports Games and the Balkan Football Cup to their needs without much difficulty. In the first competition, athletes could compete in different sports. The most important disciplines were athletics, wrestling, swimming, tennis, and fencing. To make it clear that it had become a socialist competition, another discipline was introduced. Partisan march as a discipline was designed and introduced by Yugoslavia. It was a unique sport that had been unknown in the world until that moment. It consisted of marching through places where Yugoslav partisans had fought the Nazis.¹⁸

¹² AJ, Fond 836, Office of the Marshal of Yugoslavia (KMJ), II-6-c/1, Hajduk tour report of the Yugoslav Army team in Malta, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria with a tour diary and an overview of the organisational status of members of the KP party cell at the Hajduk team March 4–3. July 1945.

¹³ Albania played its first match outside the socialist world against Denmark only in 1963. Bulgaria in 1955 with Egypt. Romania also in 1955 with Norway, while Yugoslavia, thanks to its participation in the Olympic Games, already in 1948, they had the opportunity to meet the national teams of Luxembourg, Turkey, Great Britain and Sweden [Vasa Stojkanović, Dragan Krstić, *600 utakmica reprezentacije Jugoslavije: 1920–2003*, Beograd: Sport, 2003, 45–46; https://eu-football.info/_matches.php, Accessed: 21 March 2025].

¹⁴ Nikola Mijatov, *Sport u službi socijalizma: Jugoslovensko iskustvo 1945–1953*, 406.

¹⁵ AJ, Fond 321, Committee for Physical Culture, f-8, Report on the work of the Committee for Physical Education of the Government of FNRJ in 1947.

¹⁶ N. Mijatov, *Sport u službi socijalizma: Jugoslovensko iskustvo 1945–1953*, 106.

¹⁷ Ibid, 341–402.

¹⁸ The State Archives of Serbia (DAS), RZS 1945–1982, br. 1, Balkan Central European Games 1948.

These competitions were presented by the Eastern Bloc as the first organised in post-war Europe, immediately after the war. Newspapers of that time emphasised their importance for “deepening the brotherhood of people strengthened by the common fight against fascism”, while the character is best described by the quote that they are “the most important international sports institutions of all those countries where people have taken power into their own hands and where physical culture and sports have become the property of the people”.¹⁹

Renewal of the Balkan Games and the 1st Balkan Cup

It is an indisputable fact that the idea of reviving the games came from the party ranks and that, as such, it represented a state project of the greatest importance in Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania. However, in order to increase the propaganda effect, it was decided that the proposal should come from youth organisations. Newspapers like the Yugoslav *Borba* stated that the games will “spread brotherhood and solidarity among the Balkan peoples”. At the first Congress of the Balkan Anti-fascist Youth, the need to hold the regular Balkan Games was highlighted. The congress was held in July 1945 in Belgrade and was attended by delegates from Yugoslavia, Greece,²⁰ Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania.²¹

The final agreement on the renewal of the competition was reached during the second meeting of sports officials’ representatives in Belgrade on March 29, 1946.²² Then, a document was signed, stipulating that the Balkan Sports Games and the Balkan Cup would be organised at the same time in October 1946. The capital of Albania was chosen as the location for both events. During those meetings, the rules of the competition for the Balkan Cup were adopted, disciplines were arranged, and an agreement was reached to hold competitions each year in different capitals of the participating countries.²³

¹⁹ Bora Stojadinović, „Balkanske srednjeevropske igre: još jedan prilog saradnju zemalja narodne demokratije“, *Fiskultura: časopis za teoriju i praksu fizičke kulture*, 7–8/1948, 155–157; „Од Балканских игара до великог такмичења спортиста земаља народне демократије“, *Борба*, 17. 3. 1948, 5.

²⁰ Greece was represented by delegates of the National Panhellenic Youth Organisation (EPON), which was part of the National Liberation Front (EAM). Their presence said that the hopes of the Yugoslavs in the victory of the democratic forces in Greece were high and that Greece would eventually be a part of the socialist community. [Георги Даскалов, *Участта на българите в Егейска Македония 1936–1946: политическа и военна история*, София: Полиграф, 1999, 297].

²¹ „Такмичећи се дочекујемо Први конгрес балканске омладине“, *Омладина: лист Уједињеног савеза антифашистичке омладине Југославије*, 18. 5. 1945, 5; „Балканска омладина мора бити најчвршћи бедем у одбрани великих тековина ослободилачке борбе против фашизма и његових помагача“, *Борба*, 9. 7. 1945, 4.

²² The Yugoslav delegation was headed by Miroslav Kreačić, Secretary General of the Central Board of the Yugoslav Physical Culture Association. Bulgaria was headed by Ivan Pijanečki, deputy president of the Central Union of Gymnastics and Sports and editor of the newspaper *Narodnen sport*. In front of the Romanian delegation was George Likiardopol, a member of the national sports organisation, and the Albanian Galib Hatiba, a member of the Central Committee of the sports federation. [„Заседање Друге балканске физкултурне конференције у Београду“, *Борба*, 31. 3. 1946, 3].

²³ „Балканске игре одржавају се у знак нових спортских успеха и пријатељства балканских земаља“, *Политика*, 6. 10. 1946, 7.

One of the reasons Albania was chosen as the first host was the intention to encourage the development of gymnastics and sports, as well as for Albanian athletes and football players to gain much-needed experience in international competitions. Yugoslavia, considering Albania as its protectorate, tried to help with the preparations of the Albanian football team. It should be emphasised that, although the Football Association of Albania had existed since 1930, the first international appearance of the football players was during the Balkan Cup itself. Ljubiša Bročić, one of the most capable Yugoslav coaches, was appointed as the new coach of the Albanian national team in a gesture of Yugoslav support to Albania. In terms of sport, the games were also important for the other participating countries because, as the first post-war competitions, they were an opportunity to determine the level of development and quality of Balkan athletes.²⁴

On October 4, the Albanian people solemnly welcomed the athletes from Yugoslavia, Romania, and Bulgaria at Skanderbeg Square. What was noticeable was the favouring of Yugoslavia. While other countries were represented only by flags, on the streets of Tirana there were also pictures of Yugoslav and Albanian leaders: portraits of Josip Broz Tito and Enver Hoxha were at every step, while the people often chanted “Enver–Tito”. The grand opening event was supposed to take place on October 6. However, the parade of athletes, the taking of the collective oath of the participants to socialist ideology and the first football match were postponed to October 7 due to rain. The night before, the draw for the Balkan Cup matches was made, and Yugoslavia and Albania had the honor of opening the competition. That day, the stadium was full, and the state had organised special trucks to allow people from the interior of Albania, especially from Durrës and Elbasan, to arrive and watch the game.²⁵ In the end, Yugoslavia won by a score of 3–2.

The match that determined the overall winner was also the last one to be played. Albania and Romania met on the final day of the cup on October 13. To the satisfaction of the packed stadium, the match was won by the home side, the “green team”, by 1–0.²⁶ The delighted Albanian fans stormed the pitch after the end of the match and carried their players on their shoulders. The Balkan Cup and the Balkan Sports Games ended with a big fireworks display, ceremonial speeches, a parade of all participants, and the presentation of awards. Yugoslavia was the winner of the Balkan Sports Games (in the track and field domain), while Albania was presented with the Balkan Cup trophy in the presence of Enver Hoxha. The first international appearance and participation in the tournament was crowned by the Albanian national team winning the renewed Balkan Cup. Such a success has never been repeated by the Albanian national team, as they have never won any major tournament or cup in the meantime.²⁷ On the other hand, the Balkan Games had enormous impor-

²⁴ Vasa Stojković, *Legende fudbala*, (Beograd: NIŠRO „Jež”, 1985), 300; Besnik Dizdari, Përmes përrurimit të shkrimit të parë për Kombëtaren..., *Panorama Sport*, 5. 10. 2016. <https://www.panorama.com.al/sport/permes-perurimit-te-shkrimit-te-pare-per-kombetaren/>, Accessed: 20 March 2025.

²⁵ „Због неповољног времена Балканске игре одложене су за данас“, *Борба*, 7. 10. 1946, 5.

²⁶ Nemanja Mitrović, *Decenija iskušenja: jugoslovensko-rumunski odnosi 1948–1958*, Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2024, 406.

²⁷ „Победа Албаније представља највеће изненађење балканског шампионата“, *Политика*, 16. 10. 1946, 6; „Свечан завршетак Балканских игара“, *Борба*, 14. 10. 1946, 5; Besnik Dizdari,

tance for Albanian athletics and especially for women's emancipation. The change in the system also led to a different view of the role of women in Albanian society, and this competition was recorded as the first in which Albanian female athletes appeared and participated.²⁸

Table no. 1: *Balkan Cup 1946*

VII Balkan Cup (I after World War II) Tirana, 7–13. 10. 1946						
Teams:		Score:			Date:	
Albania – Yugoslavia		2–3			October 7, 1946	
Bulgaria – Romania		2–2			October 8, 1946	
Albania – Bulgaria		3–1			October 9, 1946	
Romania – Yugoslavia		2–1			October 11, 1946	
Bulgaria – Yugoslavia		1–2			October 12, 1946	
Albania – Romania		1–0			October 13, 1946	
Placement:	Matches:	Wins:	Draws:	Defeats:	Goals:	Points:
1. Albania	3	2	0	1	6–4	4
2. Yugoslavia	3	2	0	1	6–5	4
3. Romania	3	1	1	1	4–4	3
4. Bulgaria	3	0	1	2	4–7	1

All the participating countries, and especially Yugoslavia, believed that the importance of those competitions was immeasurable. For Yugoslavian sport, the Balkan Sports Games and the Balkan Cup were of primary importance because, apart from sports association, their basic idea was the integration of the Balkan countries into a single socialist country. That particular goal was indicated at the very next, third Conference of Balkan Sports Workers held in Bucharest on December 2–8, 1946. In the congratulatory telegrams addressed to Tito, Hoxha, Georgi Dimitrov (leader of Bulgaria) and Petru Groza (leader of Romania), it was written that the Balkan athletes were ready to “establish the friendship of youth, people, and democracy in the Balkans through their work”.²⁹ At the welcoming of the All-Union Council for Physical Culture and Sports, the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union also spoke of the hope that at some point there would be a further expansion of the competition, first to the surrounding countries, and later to the “first socialist state” (USSR). Of course, regret was also expressed at the conference that the representatives of Greece were unable to participate.³⁰ On the other hand, during the meeting of the representatives of Hungary and of Yugoslavia in Belgrade on November 24, Hungary was convinced to send delegates to the conference and to join the Balkan

Ballkaniada 1946: Shqipëria – kampione e Ballkanit në startin e “Luftës së ftohtë” në Evropë. Tiranë: Rozafat, 2007, 80.

²⁸ „Балканске игре”, *Народни студент*, бр. 2, 18. 10. 1946, 7.

²⁹ DAS, RZS 1945–1982, archive book number 1, Report from the Balkan Gymnastics Conference in Bucharest in 1946.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Games.³¹ In Bucharest, the request of the Hungarian delegates was unanimously accepted, which broke the Balkan competitions out of the regional framework. As this was “the golden era” of Hungarian football, the participation of the Hungarian national team contributed to the overall quality of the Balkan Cup.³² Furthermore, the conference led to a shift in Hungary’s sports diplomacy, which began to focus more on the Balkans.³³

The Balkan Cup underwent a significant system change. Rather than being a one-week competition held in single capital city, delegates approved a proposal to hold the competition throughout the year. Meetings were now to take place in all participating countries. In other words, the Balkan Cup was physically separated from the Balkan Sports Games, which continued to be held under the old system. Thus, the competition would last longer and other sports were overshadowed by football, as it was already by far the most popular sport. An important decision was made to establish the secretariat of the Balkan Games with the headquarters in Belgrade. Its task was to see to the implementation of the conclusions of the conferences of Balkan athletes and to coordinate the organisation of Balkan competitions. The special task of the secretariat was to consider possibilities for further expansion of the competition. One of the proposals referred to the establishment of the Danubian-Balkan Cup, which, in addition to the aforementioned countries, was supposed to include Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Austria.³⁴ Austria stands out as the only non-socialist country to come into consideration; however, the Balkan Cup would remain within the socialist boundaries.

The VIII Balkan Cup, or the second one held after 1945, started with the same ceremonial manifestations as the previous one. According to the draw that was determined during the third Balkan Sports Conference, the Cup was opened by a match between the national teams of Albania and Romania, again in Tirana at the Qemal Stafa Stadium, on May 25, 1947.³⁵ Determined to prove themselves after poor performances in the matches against Albania in the previous cup, the Romanian players gave their all on the field. Their dominance was evident throughout the match, culminating in a decisive 4–0 victory. This outcome dealt a significant blow to previous year’s champions, prompting the Albanian top team to replace their coach, Adam Karpić, once again with Yugoslav expert Ljubiša Bročić. However, the Yugoslav coach was unable to produce a miracle, as the next match between Albania and Bulgaria was set for June 15. His influence ap-

³¹ In addition to Hungary, the participation of Trieste was also accepted, in those branches in which the city itself was interested. [„Југословенски фудбал представља европску класу“, *Борба*, 27. 11. 1946, 5; B. Stojadinović, op. cit, 156].

³² Róbert Győri Szab, “Football and Politics in Twentieth-Century Hungary”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 36, 2019, 8.

³³ Lorenzo Venuti, *Hungary as a Sport Superpower: Football from Horthy to Kádár (1924–1960)* (Berlin/Boston: Réseaux d’études des relations internationales sportives, 2024), 153.

³⁴ „У Букурешту је од 2. до 8. децембра одржана трећа балканска физкултурна конференција“, *Борба*, 14. 12. 1946, 7.

³⁵ Albania vs Romania international football match report https://eu-football.info/_match.php?id=6442, Accessed: 21. 3. 2025; Bulgaria vs Albania international football match report https://eu-football.info/_match.php?id=6464, Accessed: 21 March 2025.

peared to be limited, as Albania only managed to lose the game in Sofia by a smaller margin (0–2).³⁶

Before this cup, certain manifestations had already been established that propagated the brotherhood and cooperation among the Balkan peoples. The stadiums were surrounded by the flags of the participating countries. The audience applauded both teams. The visiting players entered the field carrying bouquets, which they then threw into the stands. The event included short speeches by the football representatives of the home and visiting associations and ended after the military orchestra played the anthems of the two countries, which the audience greeted with a standing applause. Also, the rule established in the interwar period of the monarchies that high representatives and politicians attend matches was respected now by the ruling communist parties. In particular, this one between Yugoslavia and Hungary was attended by the Vice President of the Presidium of the National Assembly of the FNRJ DMITAR Vlahov, federal ministers Sreten Žujović, Vicko Krstulović, Ivan Gošnjak, and Svetozar Vukmanović Tempo, as well as the Chief of the General Staff, Koča Popović, and Major General Ljubodrag Đurić. The attendees on the Hungarian side included the embassy staff, headed by Bela Santa.³⁷

In addition to the aforementioned, the swearing-in ceremony of the Balkan Cup was also held at the stadium. The oath stated: “On behalf of the athletes of the democratic countries participating in the Balkan Games, we, gathered here, swear by the blood of those who fell in the fight against fascism that we will develop our body and our spirit and that we will renew the economic and cultural cooperation of our countries”. Thus, in these elements and the slogan “Long live fraternal cooperation among the Balkan peoples”, the goals of the communist and labor parties of Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, and, since 1947, Hungary were strongly interwoven.³⁸

The final two matches of the VIII Balkan Cup took place on October 12. First, Yugoslavia faced Bulgaria in Zagreb, followed by Romania’s match against Hungary in Bucharest. Yugoslavia emerged victorious with a score of 2–1, while Hungary secured a decisive 3–0 win over Romania. The final standings revealed that Hungary was significantly ahead of the other participating nations, leading to Budapest being awarded the cup for 1947.³⁹

Table no. 2: *Balkan Cup 1947*

VIII Balkan Cup (II after World War II) May 25 – October 12, 1947.		
Teams:	Score:	Date and place:
Albania – Romania	0–4	May 25, Qemal Stafa, Tirana

³⁶ „Am debutat cu dreptul în Balcaniada de football, România a înscris la Tirana o victorie neașteptată cu piciorul de aur al lui Farkaș”, *Sportul Popular*, 26. 5. 1947, 1–2; „България победи Албания с 2:0”, *Отечествен фронт*, 17. 6. 1947, 5.

³⁷ „Репрезентација Мађарске ефикаснијом игром победила је Југославију са 3:2“, *Борба*, 30. 6. 1947, 5.

³⁸ „България загуби от Румъния с 3.2”, *Народен спорт*, 7. 7. 1947, 1.

³⁹ „Југославија је победила пожртвовани тим Бугарске са 2:1“, *Борба*, 13. 10. 1947, 7; „Magyarország válogatottja Puskás és Hidegkuti góljaival 3:0 arányban győzött Románia válogatottja ellen”, *Erdély*, 14. 10. 1947, 4.

Bulgaria – Albania		2–0	June 15, Yunak, Sofia			
Romania – Yugoslavia		1–3	June 22, Giulești, Bucharest			
Yugoslavia – Hungary		2–3	June 29, CDJA, Belgrade			
Bulgaria – Romania		2–3	July 6, Yunak, Sofia			
Hungary – Bulgaria		9–0	August 17, Üllői út, Budapest			
Hungary – Albania		3–0	August 20, Üllői út, Budapest			
Albania – Yugoslavia		2–4	September 14, Qemal Stafa, Tirana			
Yugoslavia – Bulgaria		2–1	October 12, Stadion N.K., Zagreb			
Romania – Hungary		0–3	October 12, Giulești, Bucharest			
Placement:	Matches:	Wins:	Draws:	Defeats:	Goals:	Points:
1. Hungary	4	4	0	0	18–2	8
2. Yugoslavia	4	3	0	1	11–7	6
3. Romania	4	2	0	2	8–8	4
4. Bulgaria	4	1	0	3	5–14	2
5. Albania	4	0	0	4	2–13	0

The Fourth Balkan Gymnastics Conference was held at the beginning of November 1947. It showed a tendency towards further expansion and socialist transformation of the competition and the organisation itself. On November 5, the last day of the session, the conference was transformed into the Committee of the Balkan Games with the headquarters in Belgrade. Miroslav Kreačić, general secretary of the Central Board of the Yugoslav Physical Culture Association, was unanimously elected Secretary of the Committee. In accordance with the socialist trend, the name of the conference was changed to the Plenum of the Balkan Games. During the session, decisions were made on holding championships in various sports and specific dates were arranged.⁴⁰

In terms of further sports connections, the departure of Miroslav Kreačić to Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1948 was of crucial importance. The visit aimed to acquaint the sports organisations of those countries with the programme and the outlines of the Balkan Games. Poland agreed to participate in almost all sporting events except football, while Czechoslovakia accepted participation in basketball, volleyball, boxing, chess, and several other disciplines. The football federations expressed their interest in participating in the next Balkan Cup.⁴¹ The secretary of

⁴⁰ Albania was supposed to host the swimming championship in August, boxing in September, Bulgaria in basketball in June, and volleyball in September. Cycling and gymnastics competitions were to be held in Hungary in June, and chess and archery competitions in June in Romania. Yugoslavia had the honor of organizing a wrestling competition in May and then the Balkan Games in athletics in September 1948. Also, certain agreements were reached in organizing competitions in handball, equestrian sports, table tennis, weightlifting and ice hockey. [„Идуће године одржаће се велики број такмичења у новим дисциплинама“, *Борба*, 6. 11. 1947, 5].

⁴¹ It should be emphasised that on January 22, Kreačić led negotiations with the Football Association of Czechoslovakia. Some of the conclusions were that the rematch between the national teams of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia should be held on October 17 in Belgrade, as an appropriate manifestation of the celebration of the liberation of the city, that the youth teams should play the game

the Balkan Games Committee believed that the entry of Poland and Czechoslovakia would contribute to further development of sport in all Balkan and Danubian countries and enable the exchange of experiences and the improvement of the overall quality of sport. Also, he believed that the Balkan Games, by adding Poland and Czechoslovakia, would increase the international reputation and consolidate not only sport but also the political importance of the Eastern bloc and the cooperation of socialist states. Kreačić also presented his predictions for further development of the Balkan Games. He believed that, over time, the number of participants would expand to include “other freedom-loving peoples who are fighting for the same goals.”⁴²

Secretary Miroslav Kreačić convened the 5th conference, i.e., the “Plenary of the Balkan Games”, for March to accept the requests of the two countries for membership. The plenum was held in Bled on March 20 and 21, delegates were sent by all participating countries, as well as by candidates Poland and Czechoslovakia. On that occasion, they were unanimously accepted and became full members of the competition, which changed its name to the “Balkan and Central European Games”.⁴³ In the evaluation of this step, the interpretation that sport, on its part, successfully helps the peaceful democratic politics of people’s democracies and the strengthening of friendship between these countries was usually highlighted. Apart from the competitive part, there was great potential in the sphere of exchange of sports personnel, experiences, scientific works, and various sports materials.⁴⁴

The Yugoslav national team played its first game in the Balkan and Central European Cup on the home ground against Albania on June 27, 1948. The match ended in a 0–0 draw. Unlike the ordinary people who followed the game with great interest, the political elite focused all their attention on Bucharest.⁴⁵ From June 20 to 28, the second session of the Cominform was being held there, its main agenda item being a discussion of the situation at the top of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. Just one day after the match, the resolution “On the situation in the CPY” was adopted in Bucharest. It was assessed that the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) was leading a hostile policy towards the Soviet Union, that the Yugoslav leadership had abandoned Marxism, and that the party was led by spies and foreign mercenaries. In other words, the conflict between the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Central Committee of the CPY, which had been simmering since March, was exacerbated and became open and visible on Vidovdan (June 28).⁴⁶ The Balkan Cup itself was closely related to the wishes of the countries of people’s democracies to develop relations in the spirit of socialism, and

as a pre-game for the main match, that the city teams of Prague and Belgrade meet in May, as well as that the meetings between the city teams of Zagreb and Bratislava and Croatia and Slovakia be held [„Фудбалска утакмица Чехословачка–Југославија одиграће се 17. октобра“, *Политика*, 24. 1. 1948, 9].

⁴² „Укључивање Пољске и Чехословачке у Балканске игре представља нов, значајан допринос јачању спортске сарадње земаља народне демократије“, *Борба*, 24. 1. 1948, 7.

⁴³ DAS, RZS 1945–1982, nb. 1, Protocol of the Balkan Games Committee Conference 19–21.3.1948.

⁴⁴ B. Stojadinović, *op. cit.*, 155.

⁴⁵ „Југославија – Албанија 0:0“, *Polet*, 28. 6. 1948, 1.

⁴⁶ Милан Гулић, *Југословенска држава: 1918-2006: од Прводецембарског акта до Мајског референдума*, Београд: Институт за савремену историју, 2023, 593-615.

in that spirit, sport was only a political instrument. It could be assumed that the public presentation of disagreements within the Cominform would have had consequences for the competition itself.⁴⁷ However, it took time to overcome the shock that the resolution produced in the communist and labour parties, as well as the coordination of joint actions against the “treacherous Yugoslav party”.⁴⁸ In other words, football continued to be played for a few more months without significant political pressure.

Yugoslav footballers also played a match against Poland in Warsaw on August 25, 1948, without pressure. However, shortly after that match, the conflict eroded Yugoslavia’s sports relations with other Eastern European countries.⁴⁹ Yugoslavia no longer participated in the cup, and the competition itself was abandoned by November. Yugoslavia withdrew from the competition immediately after the match in Prague. Already on August 28, the *Borba newspaper* wrote: “The shameful resolution of the Cominform did not spare Yugoslavian sport either, breaking up the Balkan Games, sports competitions with sportsmen from countries of people’s democracies.” Already at the beginning of September, a conference was convened in Budapest, where first Romania and then other countries took the position that the competition should be abolished.⁵⁰

As far as the match between Yugoslavia and Poland is concerned, it was played in the spirit of fair play.⁵¹ However, there was no word in the press about the arrival of the national team, sightseeing, and receptions. Words like cordial relations, fraternal feelings, and good relations between the two countries were absent this time. The match was presented exclusively from a sporting point of view in the dailies. There was great interest in the match, as evidenced by the fact that there were about 40,000 fans at the Polish Army Stadium in Warsaw. However, politicians were absent. The match ended with a score of 1–0.⁵² It was also Yugoslavia’s last appearance at the Balkan and Central European Cup and the last meeting with a team from an Eastern European country for many years. Football cooperation was

⁴⁷ O sukobu više u: *Jugoslovensko-sovjetski sukob 1948. godine, zbornik radova sa naučnog skupa*, ur. Petar Kačavenda, Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1999.

⁴⁸ Бранко Петрановић, *Историчар и савремена епоха*, (Београд: Новинско-издавачка установа „Војска“, 1994), 287.

⁴⁹ Richard Mills, *The Politics of Football in Yugoslavia: Sport, Nationalism and the State*, (London–New York: Taurus, 2018), 103.

⁵⁰ „Радни људи из свих крајева наше земље поздрављају друга Тита и обећавају да ће годишње планове извршити пре рока“, *Борба*, 28. 8. 1948, 2; „Поводом распуштања Балканско-средњоевропских играча“, *Борба*, 12. 9. 1948, 5.

⁵¹ A few days earlier, the representatives of Yugoslavia participated in the first sports games of the Trade Union Confederation of Poland. The games were organised in 11 sports, among which was football. The team of the United Trade Unions of Yugoslavia and the team of the Union of Polish Trade Unions met on August 20, and the match ended with a score of 1–1 [„Синдикална репрезентација Југославије играла је нерешено 1:1 са синдикалном репрезентацијом Пољске“, *Борба*, 21. 8. 1948, 6; Pavel Vavrišćuk, „Poljsko-jugoslovenski odnosi 1945–1948“, *Istorija 20. veka*, br. 2, (2016), 79].

⁵² „Jugosławia–Polska 1:0, Finalista olimpijski nie zachwycił“, *Życie Warszawy*, 26. 8. 1948, 2; *Szczęśliwe zwycięstwo Jugosłowian nad ambitnie grającą drużyną polską, Przegląd sportowy: tygodnik ilustrowany, poświęcony wszelkim gałęziom sportu: oficjalny organ KZOPN*, 26. 8. 1948, 1–2; „Jugoslavija:Poljska 1:0“, *Ljudska pravica*, 26. 8. 1948, 4; „Balkansko srednjoevropsko prvenstvo u nogometu“, *Narodni sport*, 26. 8. 1948, 1.

renewed in 1956.⁵³ The conflict that lasted from 1948 to 1953 worsened Yugoslav relations with all countries of people's democracy.⁵⁴

Table no. 3: *Balkan Cup 1948*

IX Balkan Cup (III after World War II) April 4 – November 7, 1948 (discontinued)						
Teams:		Score:	Date and place:			
Bulgaria – Poland		1–1	April 4, Yunak, Sofia			
Poland – Czechoslovakia		3–1	April 18, Polish Army Stadium, Warsaw			
Romania – Albania		0–1	May 2, Giulești, Bucharest			
Albania – Hungary		0–0	May 23, Qemal Stafa, Tirana			
Hungary – Czechoslovakia		2–1	May 23, Üllői út, Budapest			
Hungary – Romania		9–0	June 6, Mageri ut Stadium, Budapest			
Romania – Bulgaria		3–2	June 20, Giulești, Bucharest			
Yugoslavia – Albania		0–0	June 27, Avala, Belgrade			
Bulgaria – Yugoslavia		1–3	July 4, Yunak, Sofia			
Romania – Czechoslovakia		2–1	July 4, Giulești, Bucharest			
Poland – Yugoslavia		0–1	August 25, Polish Army Stadium, Warsaw			
Bulgaria – Czechoslovakia		1–0	August 29, Yunak, Sofia			
Poland – Hungary		2–6	September 19, Polish Army Stadium, Warsaw			
Poland – Romania		0–0	October 10, Stadium Ruch, Chorzów			
Romania – Hungary		1–5	October 24, Stadium of the Republic, Bucharest			
Bulgaria – Hungary		1–0	November 7, Yunak, Sofia			
Placement:	Matches:	Wins:	Draws:	Defeats:	Goals:	Points:
1. Hungary	6	4	1	1	22–5	9
2. Yugoslavia	3	2	1	0	4–1	5
3. Bulgaria	5	2	1	2	6–7	5
4. Romania	6	2	1	3	6–18	5
5. Albania	3	1	2	0	1–0	4
6. Poland	5	1	2	2	6–9	4
7. Czechoslovakia	4	0	0	4	3–8	0

The fate of the competition following Stalin's death in 1953

Once again, the Balkan countries found themselves in the situation of renewing the Balkan Games. In 1953, Yugoslavia was again one of the main instigators. However, the circumstances were different now. Since Yugoslavia was expelled from the Eastern Bloc after the conflict with the Cominform, it found new allies in the Balkans within the framework of the NATO pact. Rapprochement with Greece and Turkey led to the creation of

⁵³ *Jugoslovenske reprezentacije: 1920–1974, zbornik*, ur. Tomislav Marković, (Beograd: FSJ, 1977), 64–65.

⁵⁴ N. Mijatov, *Sport u službi socijalizma*, 436–456.

the Balkan Alliance, which was established by the “Treaty of Friendship and Collaboration” in 1953. Thus, a communist country became a friend of the constitutional monarchy and a capitalist republic. Close cooperation of Yugoslavia with two NATO member states is perceived, especially in the field of defense, which practically integrated Yugoslavia into the alliance. The following year (1954) Tito visited both Greece and Turkey and thereby established friendship as well as Yugoslavia’s position as the ally of the West.⁵⁵

The political and military rapprochement of Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey through the Balkan Pact created the nucleus for the renewal of the Balkan Games in athletics. The first ones were organised already in 1953 in Athens, by the three mentioned countries. Since then, the Balkan Athletics Championships, as the Balkan Games have come to be known from then on, have been held annually without exception, and championships in other sports quickly followed. For instance, basketball was introduced in 1959, and tennis came the next year.⁵⁶ The three countries were joined by Bulgaria and Romania in 1956, which meant that all Balkan countries, except Albania, were represented at the games.⁵⁷ Thus, through other sports, the Balkan Games were renewed.

The Union of Physical Culture Organisations of Yugoslavia maintained a great interest in the Balkan Games. This body regularly participated in conferences and Balkan sports meetings. At one of the meetings in 1959, the Yugoslav association supported the initiative of the Bulgarians to establish the Balkaniada, a sports competition that was supposed to include all branches of sports. It was in some sense continuity from original Balkan cup that was held for numerous sports, not just football. The founding assembly of the Balkan Sports Games was held in Sofia from December 12 to 14, 1960. The most important goals that were proclaimed on that occasion were the strengthening of friendship among the athletes of the Balkan Peninsula in the spirit of Olympic ideas, the popularisation of fishing and sports, and the bringing together of the Balkan peoples.⁵⁸

Unlike most branches, the renewal of the Balkan Cup for national teams was met with a lack of interest, both from the spectators and politicians. A breakthrough was made in 1968 when the Balkan Youth Championship was launched by the football associations of Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, and Romania. Yugoslavia only joined the competition in 1971. Certain transformations were made in 1976, when the age limit was lowered from 23 to 21 years. That championship ceased to exist in 1981.⁵⁹

The great effort of the Turkish Football Federation⁶⁰, which had the greatest interest in renewing the national team competition, gave results in 1973. At the me-

⁵⁵ Милан Гулић, *Југословенска држава: 1918–2006*, 610; Ljubodrag Dimić, *Jugoslavija i Hladni rat*, (Beograd: Arhipelag, 2014), 71–75.

⁵⁶ „Жеље и наде пред велики тромеч“, *Борба*, 27. 6. 1953, 6; *Четрдесет година Атлетског савеза Србије: 1948–1988*, ур. Велимир Илић (Београд: Просвета, 1988).

⁵⁷ *XV balkanske igre, Beograd 20–22. jul 1956* (Beograd: Atletski savez Jugoslavije, 1956), 7.

⁵⁸ Diplomatic Archives Belgrade (DAMSPS), PA, 1960, Regional, f. 91, dos. 3, Minutes from the meeting of the founding assembly of the Balkan Sports Games held in Sofia from December 12 to 14, 1960, pov. br. 436322, 1–2.

⁵⁹ Balkan Youth Championship 1968–1981, <https://www.rsssf.org/tables/b/balkan-u23.html>, Accessed: 22. 3. 2025.

⁶⁰ It should be underlined that Turkey was particularly interested in establishing a Balkan football competition. Due to its geographical position, UEFA refused to accept Turkey as a full member

eting in Istanbul, it was decided to implement a cup system with semi-final and final matches, and that the first cycle would last from 1973 to 1976. This time, Yugoslavia was not part of the competition, and justified its absence by overlapping dates, pre-agreed obligations of the national team, and preparations for the World Cup. Yugoslavia presented the final decision not to participate at the next meeting of the Balkan Committee, which was held on February 26 in Athens. On the other hand, Albania was not even invited, as it was isolated within the socialist world with its cultural revolution.⁶¹

Table no. 4: *Balkan Cup 1973–1976*

X Balkan Cup (IV after World War II) April 18, 1973 – November 28, 1976		
Teams:	Score:	Date and place:
Semi-finals:		
Turkey – Bulgaria	5–2	April 18, 1973, Izmir Atatürk, Izmir
Bulgaria – Turkey	5–1	May 8, 1974, Levski, Sofia
Romania – Greece	3–1	May 29, 1974, 23 August, Bucharest
Greece – Romania	1–1	September 24, 1975, Stadium Kaftanzoglio, Thessaloniki
Final:		
Bulgaria – Romania	1–0	May 12, 1976, Ivajlo, Veliko Trnovo
Romania – Bulgaria	3–2	November 28, 1976, August 23, Bucharest
Cup winner:	Bulgaria	

In the second cycle of the Balkan Cup, which lasted from 1977–1980, Yugoslavia took part. The teams were divided into two groups. Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey were in the first, and Yugoslavia and Greece in the second group.⁶² The winner of the Balkan Cup was to be determined by two final matches between the representatives of Yugoslavia and Romania. The first was played in Belgrade on March 30 in a small stadium in front of only 7,000 spectators. The 2–0 victory resulted in a significant confidence boost for the Yugoslav players. It was even requested that the second match be played several months earlier than planned. However, that request was not granted, and the last game that could bring the trophy to Yugoslavia was played on August 27. An overly relaxed approach, coupled with the belief that the victory was already in their pocket, resulted in a heavy defeat of the Yugoslavs against the well-prepared Romanian

until 1962. Until then, the UEFA leadership believed that Turkey belonged to the Asian and not the European world. [DAMSPS, PA, 1963, Regional, f. 111, dos. 5, Problems of Balkan cooperation, January 20, 1963, pov. br. 442104, 3; Balkan Cup 1960-69; RSSF, <https://www.rssf.org/tables/b/balkanclub60s.html>, Accessed: 22. 3. 2025; Xavier Breuil, Pompiliu-Nicolae Constantin, "The Balkan Cups as a vector of European integration, 1929–1994", *Sport in History*, 35:4 (2015), 600].

⁶¹ „Балкански шампионат без Југословена“, *Борба*, 27. 2. 1974, 12.

⁶² Cătălin Oprîșan, *100 de ani istoria echipei naționale de fotbal a României 1922–2022* (București: Editată de FRF, 2022), 259–260

national team. Since the result of the first game was 2–0 for Yugoslavia, and the second 4–1 for Romania, the rule of aggregate score was applied, so the trophy ended up in Bucharest instead of Belgrade.⁶³

Table no. 5: *Balkan cup 1977–1980*

XI Balkan Cup (V after World War II) February 16, 1977 – August 27, 1980.		
Teams:	Score:	Date and place:
Group A		
Turkey – Bulgaria	2–0	February 16, 1978, Inonu Stadium, Istanbul
Romania – Turkey	4–0	March 23, 1977, Steaua, Bucharest
Bulgaria – Turkey	3–1	September 21, 1977, Levski, Sofia
Turkey – Romania	1–1	March 22, 1978, Inonu Stadium,
Romania – Bulgaria	2–0	May 3, 1978, 23 August, Bucharest
Bulgaria – Romania	1–1	May 31, 1978, Levski, Sofia
Group B		
Greece – Yugoslavia	0–0	November 16, 1977, Hairilau (Aris), Thessaloniki
Yugoslavia – Greece	4–1	November 15, 1978, City Stadium, Skopje
Final		
Yugoslavia – Romania	2–0	March 30, 1980, Karaburma Youth Stadium, Belgrade
Romania – Yugoslavia	4–1	August 27, 1980, August 23, Bucharest
Cup winner:	Romania	

The slow decline of the Balkan cup

In the four cycles of the Balkan Cup for national teams organised after the Second World War and the unfinished one from 1948, Yugoslavia failed to triumph, even though it was often considered the favorite. On the other hand, the youth national team had more success and managed to win the Balkan Junior Championship three times: in 1972, 1975, and 1976. After 1980, both competitions slowly faded away. The new cycle for A national teams was not implemented, and the Balkan Youth Championship was organised for the last time in 1981.⁶⁴

Some of the important reasons for the competition's demise were the change in the perception of the initiators of the last renewal of the competition and the audience interest. The Turkish state gradually began to distance itself from Europe and directed the focus of its foreign policy towards the Middle East. Following the sta-

⁶³ „Тражи се трофеј“, *Борба*, 29. 3. 1980, 13; „Прва финална утакмица Балканског купа“, *Борба*, 31. 3. 1980, 12; „Слаба игра и тежак пораз плавих“, *Политика*, 28. 8. 1980, 19.

⁶⁴ Balkan Youth Championship 1968-1981, <https://www.rsssf.org/tables/balkan-u23.html>, Accessed 01.04.2025.

te's goals, the Football Association of Turkey also turned to competitions organised there, such as the Asia Minor Cup. The Balkan Cup for Turkish football players was no longer relevant.⁶⁵

If we look at the attendance figures for these matches, the last two Balkan Cups show a decline in the number of tickets sold. The X Balkan Cup matches (1973–1976) were watched live by between 25,000 and 65,000 spectators, the only exception being the match between Greece and Romania in Thessaloniki, which was watched by 15,000 fans. The subsequent XI Cup (1977–1980) was watched by significantly fewer people. The most attended match was the one between Turkey and Bulgaria in Istanbul, which opened the cup. About 37,000 people watched that game. On the other hand, the first final match between Yugoslavia and Romania was watched by only 7,000 fans, which is a clear sign of the overall loss of interest in the Balkan Cup.⁶⁶ Such a situation showed that the qualifications for the World or European championship attracted much greater interest from the audience.

The only remaining Balkan football competition was the club cup. However, it also lost its importance over time due to the emergence of more serious competitions. After several years, only second-rate teams competed in the cup, basically those that failed to qualify for the UEFA Cup or the European Champions Clubs' Cup (Champions League). Finally, this type of Balkan championship was abolished in 1995 when the International Football Cup (Intertoto Cup) was taken over by the Union of European Football Associations and allowed the two best clubs of that competition to participate directly in the UEFA Cup. On the political side, the Balkans had gone through fundamental changes with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Yugoslavia disintegrated in a civil war, and other Balkan countries began their transition to capitalism and became EU member states. After that moment, the need for a Balkan regional competition ceased, and the football associations decided to discontinue organizing this competition.⁶⁷

Conclusion

The Balkan Cup, a competition of national football teams that had started in 1929, was revived after the Second World War, albeit in a new form. Under socialism, gymnastics and sports, including football, were widely used to promote the idea of brotherhood and unity among the Balkan people's democracies – Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania. By 1947, the unity through football and one socialist system had already influenced the expansion of the competition to Hungary and soon to Poland and Czechoslovakia. Excessive politicisation and instrumentalisation ultimately led to negative consequences. Most of the participating countries could not recover for a long time from the blow that Yugoslavia's conflict with the Cominform members inflicted on the competitions of the Balkan and Central European countries. The Balkan Cup, a tournament of national teams, needed nearly 25

⁶⁵ Xavier Breuil, Pompiliu-Nicolae Constantin, "The Balkan Cups as a vector of European integration, 1929–1994", *Sport in History*, vol. 35, no. 4, (2015), 600.

⁶⁶ „Прва финална утакмица Балканског купа“, *Борба*, 31. 3. 1980, 12.

⁶⁷ Jane Ace, „UEFA Intertoto Cup: History, Format and Winners' List“, *12UEFA*, <https://12uefa.com/uefa-intertoto-cup/> Accessed: 24. 3. 2025.

years to re-establish. History repeated itself, and just like in 1929, but also in 1946, the composition of the participants was not the same. Yugoslavia joined the competition once again in 1977. After 1980, there was no longer political interest or sufficient audience interest to keep the national team competition alive.

Overall, the Balkan Cup represents a separate episode in the history of sport where it was instrumentalised for the purpose of the unification of the Balkan countries and of promoting the socialist idea. Within the framework of the idea of socialism, which was very critical of capitalist sports, the idea of a separate socialist competition had particular importance. From a magnificent beginning that attracted great public attention, the Balkan Cup actually lost its importance after the Cominform resolution in 1948. In fact, the cup shared the faith of socialism: when socialist countries cooperated, the cup functioned; and when there was hostility, the competition ceased. Although it was restored through a process lasting several decades, more established international competitions took precedence during this time, in which athletes from socialist countries now competed on an equal footing on the world stage with their capitalist rivals. It was precisely this world arena that became the place of the prestige of socialism in the context of the Cold War, and thus, the Balkan Cup fell out of favour. Finally, with the inclusion of non-socialist countries such as Greece and Turkey, the cup lost its ideological essence and became a regional competition that was mostly used as a preparation for major world competitions.

Politics has always been the main driver of the Balkan Cup. When there were no more political reasons to insist on the cup, but also to insist on the process of unification of the Balkans through the socialist idea, the cup lost its importance and was finally extinguished in the 1980s. In its essence, the Balkan Cup remains an attempt to resist the global process of professionalisation of sport through major world competitions, but also represents a significant segment in the long history of friendship and hostility among the Balkan people.

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BALKAN CUP WITHIN THE IDEA OF SOCIALIST SPORT (1946–1980)

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Summary

The idea of unification and cooperation of the Balkan states took its practical shape in the form of the Balkan Cup. The first cups were organised in the interwar period, when they represented a form of cooperation between the ruling dynasties. After World War II, the Balkan Cup took on a new form within the framework of the idea of socialism. The most intensive cooperation was in the period from 1945 to 1948, when three cups were organised. During that period, the participating countries gave more importance to this competition than, for example, the Olympic Games or the World Championships. After the conflict between Yugoslavia and the Cominform, football cooperation died down, only to be renewed in the 1970s. The competition even transcended the borders of socialism: Greece and Turkey also took an equal part. The last cup ended in 1980, with some competitions continuing until the mid-1990s. However, the cup's importance was gradually declining since 1948, with world competitions taking over and the cup serving more as a warm-up for more serious matches. Overall, the Balkan Cup after World War II had two dimensions: uniting the Balkan countries through football and organizing a specific socialist type of competition that was to be a counterpart to the world's great capitalist competitions. When the idea of socialism collapsed with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the idea of the Balkan Cup disappeared with it.

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