

THE METAPHOR *POLITICS AS A GAME/SPORT MATCH* IN THE ONLINE MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF THE EU-WESTERN BALKANS RELATIONS

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Abstract. In this paper, we critically investigate the media portrayals of the EU-Western Balkans relations through the metaphor *POLITICS AS A GAME/SPORT MATCH*. We apply the analytical framework of critical metaphor analysis to study this metaphor in a corpus of 123 online news articles published in Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia and Hercegovina, between January 2018 and September 2019. The results show that the roles of the EU and the WB are presented asymmetrically, where active agency is attributed to the EU and a passive role to the WB. Their current relations are depicted either as a one-sided match with the EU as the dominant player, or as a match in which the EU is one of the global players and the WB is a mere playing field. In both cases, the role of the WB is marginalized. The EU-integrations are also manipulatively presented as a competition between the WB candidates. Game and sport match metaphors, which invoke the idea of rules and merit-based outcomes and which can drive up readers' engagement, inspire loyalty to one player/team and motivate them to read media articles, were used to simplistically and binarily present complex political situations governed by fluctuating rules.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, game metaphors, sport metaphors, media discourse, the EU, the Western Balkans, critical metaphor analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkan countries have been on the path towards the EU accession for quite some time now but, despite all the encouragement, the negotiation chapters opened, more or less positive reviews, a myriad of reports, public statements, handshakes and smiles at press conferences, the membership itself seems to be nowhere in sight. The EU playground has been reluctant to accept new players for a long time. The prognoses as regards the accession are uncertain and the whole process bears significant differences to that when the first "batch" of the countries joined the Union in the first decade of the millennium.

The EU-WB relations, however, are not limited to the uncertain membership of the new candidates but entail another, certainly not a negligible dimension, that of the position(ing) of both the Union and the WB countries on the global political stage. It is true that WB countries cannot wield much power in the global arena, where even the EU's role

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has become less important with the new developments including Brexit and the inadequate reaction to the pandemic in some member countries. Nevertheless, there are other powers which have been trying to enter the WB's "playground", some of which, such as Russia, have had a powerful symbolic capital in the collective consciousness of some Balkan peoples, and even if the ties with Russia are not that strong and traditional with Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as they are with Serbia and Montenegro, both the investment and the so-called soft power help them make their way through prejudice. The same goes for Turkey, and China's investment policy in the region is beyond competition. Feeling that the WB's countries aspiration towards the EU integration has been somewhat challenged by other possible alliances, WB's online media use the conceptual metaphor POLITICS IS A GAME/SPORTS MATCH to depict global politics involving WB countries.

In this paper, we present POLITICS IS A GAME/SPORTS MATCH conceptual metaphor, as realized in the online media news articles in three Western Balkans countries – Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Hercegovina, in the period January 2018 – September 2019, employed to present the WB-EU relations.

Section 2 briefly outlines the socio-political background, and is followed by section 3, which outlines the relevant literature on critical metaphor analysis, conceptualization of politics as sport, and the conceptualization of the EU integration processes.

2. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SETTINGS

Although the accession of its last three members, all of them from the Balkans (Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia) has raised the hopes of those still waiting to join the large European family and, even though the EU diplomats seem to send positive signals as regards the prospective new membership, the negotiation process feels as a never-ending one. New chapters keep being opened, reports sent back and forth, but not even those (self)-perceived as the leaders in the accession race can tell with certainty when their role of a leader in the integration process (which, in practice, means nothing) will transform into that of a member. The fact that the Turkish negotiations have long been at a standstill, and those with Montenegro, Serbia and Albania allegedly progressing for years now, the actual results seem to be the same: neither Turkey nor the above-mentioned three countries have become members yet. There is no accession date set for any of them; the procrastination, accompanied by uncertain and non-binding promises and praises, makes the prospects of these countries actually joining the EU not a mote more certain.

The very term *Western Balkans* (WB) has entered political discourse as of late to mean the non-EC Balkan countries. Even though Slovenia and Croatia are also geographically not less the Balkans than the countries for which the umbrella term is coined and are geographically more western, they are not regarded as the WB. Petrović (2009) maintains that the Western Balkans are not defined by what they (geographically) are but by what they are not – they are not the EU. This can be compared to the frequent use of the term *Europe* to cover only the EU member countries, which might be read as an indirect assumption that if a (geographically) European country is not also a member country, it is not part of Europe. As both terms are strongly infused by contemporary ideology and politics, this 'non-Europeanness' can be read not only as a lack of economic power and a low standard of living in (post)transitional ex-communist dictatorships, but also as a cultural and civilizational backwardness. The region has had a tradition of a place exotic

and different from the rest of the Continent, and even now, in the era of increasing globalization, the Balkans is the “cultural Other” of Europe – a special kind of “internal Other” or “semi-Other”, traditionally regarded as a periphery and, as Petrović succinctly puts it, a “European non-Europe” (2009, 21). Other authors also note the dual nature/position of the Balkans. Despite the fact that the ex-Yugoslav republics are European geographically-wise, Bijelić notes their politically ‘Schrödingerian’ position – they are “neither here nor there, but in two places at the same time” (2002, 6), while Goldsworthy recognizes the controversy of the region’s position as derivative of its being “on the fault line” (2002, 26).

A long history of conflict and a specific political and socio-historical background of the WB has influenced deeply the perception and, hence, the conceptualization of both the EU and the Balkans in both the regional and global public discourse.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical section of the paper will outline the analytical framework for this study and provide a review of the relevant literature.

3.1. Critical metaphor analysis

Even though traditionally regarded as a property of language, metaphor, i.e. metaphorical thinking, infuses our entire conceptual system and structures our perception (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). This can be easily inferred from several linguistic expressions stemming from the same concept: *to feel down, feel depressed, feel low, fall into a depression*. They all share the common reference to the feeling of *sadness* and all express sad feelings using words which suggest a *low* position or a *downward* movement. In the conceptual framework posited by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), *down* would be the *source domain*, mapped onto a *target domain*, which, in this case, is *sadness*. What all these expressions testify to is the fact that we think of *sadness* in terms of a *downward* movement and position. Hence, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) show how we understand one conceptual domain in terms of another, which is the very definition of conceptual metaphor – SAD IS DOWN, in our case.

The underlying conceptual metaphors can be extrapolated from linguistic evidence and the structures that shape the way speakers think. It is precisely this quality of metaphor, the possibility of structuring the way we think that transcends the purely linguistic perception of it. If uncritical of them, not only may those exposed to certain conceptualizations adopt the metaphorical expressions, but also appropriate the way of thinking which has triggered them. In this vein, some analysts argue that not only do we shape language, but language also has the power to shape us (Charteris-Black 2004, 2006, 2011), in a loop of a mutual interference of language and the world. Metaphor, therefore, may play a significant role in generating “politically influential representations” in social cognition (Charteris-Black 2006), as the very choice of metaphor may be reflective of certain ideologies. This testifies to the necessity of *Critical Metaphor Analysis* or CMA (Charteris-Black 2004), an approach to the study of metaphor in the social world. Apart from cognitive sciences, it draws on methods from several other research fields: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), studying how the abuse of social power, inequality and dominance are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text (Van Dijk 2001); pragmatics,

providing the methodology for studying the context in which the metaphors are linguistically instantiated and, corpus linguistics, as critical analysts of metaphor typically study authentic corpora. Thus, Charteris-Black (2004) proposes a three-step methodology of researching metaphor: identification, interpretation and explanation.

In *identification*, we should first determine if the lexical items used in a discourse are metaphorical or not. Most metaphor analysts now adopt one of the two metaphor identification procedures – either the one called MIP (Pragglejaz Group, 2007) or a variation of it, later developed by Steen et al. (2010), called MIPVU. In this paper, we shall rely on the latter, which involves the following steps: determine lexical units, establish their meaning in context, compare this contextual meaning with their basic meaning (as in a dictionary), mark the lexical unit as metaphorical in case the two meanings contrast.

Interpretation refers to determining the relationship between a metaphor and the cognitive-pragmatic factors determining it (Charteris-Black 2004, 37). The lexical items established as metaphorical in the first stage should now be identified as instantiations of a certain conceptual metaphor.

The stage of *explanation* refers to “identifying the social agency that is involved in their production and their social role in persuasion” (Charteris-Black 2004, 39). The discourse function of a metaphor is determined, as well as the motivation for its choice, on ideological and rhetorical grounds, Charteris-Black explains (ibid). It is at this stage that a critical analysis can take place.

Employing CMA and other related critical-discourse approaches to metaphor, researchers have investigated the interplay between society and metaphor (Musolff 2004, 2010, 2012, 2015, 2016; Semino 2008; Hart, 2008; Gatti and Catalano 2015, etc.). They have particularly focused on the language of media and politics, which was found to contain the metaphor politics IS SPORT in profusion, frequently appropriated to manipulative purposes.

3.2. Conceptual metaphor POLITICS IS SPORT

Kovescs (2010) argues that many of the aspects of political power can be understood through source domains (SDs) such as games and sport, business, and war. Sports have become a common and proliferate SD for metaphors due to their important role in popular culture of most nations. This is why, according to Callies (2009), they can be viewed as a vast arena for the interplay of language, culture, history and national identity, which is also the reason for their popularity in political discourse. Howe (1988) maintains that in this strand of metaphors, politics is viewed as a competition regulated by a set of rules, typically between two opponents. The underlying message could be imposing rules and orders which are known to regulate sporting events on unforeseeable and often entropic political processes.

The POLITICS IS SPORT metaphor includes the following mappings: politician as a sport player, political party as a sports team, democratic rules as sport rules, elections as sport matches, obtaining majority as winning a sports match, a political issue as a ball, voters as fans, etc. Metaphor users usually opt for the most popular sport within the target audience, but the selection of metaphors is also determined by the character of the political affair being metaphorically represented, i.e. the extent of the conflict presented, whether the emphasis is placed on individual conflicts or show-downs between political parties, etc.

This is evidenced by studies conducted in different countries. Helin-Garcia (2014) finds football to be the most popular SD in Spain due to the sense of national unity it underlies and inspires. The same is valid for Serbia, for much the same reasons, as found by the two Serbian metaphor scholars, Radić-Bojanić and Silaški (2008). Yu (1998) finds that the most popular SDs in the US political arena are those of baseball, American football and boxing, which comes as little surprise judging by the popularity of these sports in the States, whereas the Chinese prefer those of volleyball, football and ping-pong, as more popular in the East. Yu's (1988) findings corroborate Howe's observations (1988), where American football and boxing are identified as major SDs for the US politics metaphors. He also finds that the TEAM metaphor is often used, which inspires a sense of bonding between the people and the politician using it. Although the metaphor promotes loyalty on the one hand, it widens the gap between the politicians and their supporters/fans, on the other, as, despite the sense of exhilaration and thrill at the possible victory, fans do not actually share in it, but are mere observers of the "match" being played. Howe (1988) maintains that FOOTBALL metaphors emphasize physical conflict (as American football involves more violent physical contact than football) and politics as violent. The importance of winning or losing the game is even more pronounced in BOXING metaphors, where major politicians might be described as *heavyweight* boxers.

Sport metaphors may be a deliberate simplification of politics and, as such, can be used to manipulative purposes (Radić-Bojanić and Silaški 2008), i.e. sport metaphors in politics, may exclude parts of the population not so keen on sports. Radić-Bojanić and Silaški (2012) maintain that an average woman will have trouble understanding football metaphors, while most men will pick up on them instantaneously.

As Semino and Masci (1996) find, sport metaphors are not different from other metaphors, whatever their political motivation, as they highlight only certain aspects of reality, while deliberately ignoring others. This adds to the importance of their critical interpretation.

3.3. Conceptualisation of the EU and the EU-integration processes

The conceptualization of the EU has been the subject of a vast amount of research. Studying the EUROMETA corpus, which contains more than 2,000 texts from German and British newspapers, Musolff (2004) identified the following source domains: NATURE-WEATHER, LOVE-MARRIAGE-FAMILY, WAR-FORTRESS-BATTLE, GROUP-CLUB-CLASS, GAME-SPORTS, PERFORMANCE-SHOW, WAY-MOVEMENT-SPEED, TECHNOLOGY-BUILDING, GEOMETRY-GEOGRAPHY, SCHOOL-DISCIPLINE, LIFE-HEALTH-STRENGTH. Similarly, Kimmel (2009) finds that the EU is conceptualized as an EDIFICE, MACHINERY, CONTAINER, ACTIVE FORCE AGENT, AREA WITH A CENTRE AND A PERIPHERY, BODY, PERSON, ANIMATE BEING/CREATURE and a SOCIAL GROUP.

The studies of the EU-related metaphors conducted in the former candidate countries which last joined the EU and the current membership candidates are of particular significance to the present research.

Petraškaite-Pabst (2010) compares metaphors in Lithuanian and German discourse finding similar metaphors, which frequently included the following source domains: HOUSE, TRANSPORT, FAMILY and DISEASE. She emphasizes that Lithuanian political discourse did not develop as an original, new discourse, but picked up on the pre-existing EU's discourse, only adapted to Lithuanian political environment. Similarly, Werkmann and Buljan (2013) found that the metaphors on the EU in Croatian political discourse drew

on the pre-existing ones, with discernible changes over a 12-year period, different domains coming to prominence, depending on political conditions. Thus, in the early membership years, the discourse on the EU was dominated by the RACE and MOVEMENT metaphors, whereas more recent times brought about some more divisive metaphors – the SCHOOL/DISCIPLINE and PHYSICAL CONFLICT metaphors.

Studying Polish press, Horolets (2003) finds that the EU is represented as holding a dominant position, but alternatives are also suggested. Except for the standard metaphors for the EU (CLUB and PATH), she identifies new metaphors, such as the EU is the BABEL TOWER and the EU is the apocalyptic NEW BEAST – the metaphors deriving from the Bible are perceived as increasingly negative in this predominantly catholic country with many practicing believers. Horolets finds that the EU is also represented as a DEBTOR with an unpayable debt to Poland, which could derive from the history of suffering and destruction at the hands of some of the founding members.

In the Czech Republic, Drulák and Königová (2007) interviewed Czech civil servants on how they perceived the EU within a range of standard metaphors with the SDs of CONTAINER, MOTION and EQUILIBRIUM. The findings demonstrate that the duration of the respondents' contacts with the EU strongly influenced their perception, i.e. through contacts with the EU officials, they stopped perceiving the EU as a CONTAINER. According to the authors, Czech civil servants gradually learned to avoid vocabulary that gave the European Union state-like qualities: the more they learned about the EU, the less were they likely to compare it to a state. Instead, with time, they were more likely to use the MOTION and EQUILIBRIUM metaphors, perceiving the EU as an embodiment of permanent transformation, with few fixed points, as well as an intergovernmental entity.

Đurović and Silaški (2014a) find the same metaphors in Serbian and English – the predominant SDs are those of FAMILY, CLUB, CONTAINER, BUILDING, JOURNEY, *inter alia*. Nevertheless, the authors maintain that these metaphors contain a distinct evaluative element in Serbian discourse. They emphasize the power dynamics of the teacher-student metaphor for representing the relations between the EU and Serbia. In another study, Đurović and Silaški (2014b) shift focus towards the STEP and TRAFFIC LIGHT metaphors, believing these to be, to an extent, responsible for the Serbs' perceiving the accession no more realistic than it was a decade ago.

The available literature shows that, despite largely sharing the same SDs for the depiction of the EU, the metaphors used are usually adapted to the political circumstances at home and are, over time, subject to change.

The metaphors studied in this paper are those featuring one of the frequent SDs in politics – that of GAME/SPORT MATCH, commonly used in the EU-related discourse, as evidenced by the data from the EUROMETA corpus referred to above (Musolff, 2004). Nevertheless, in line with the studied literature, it is our expectation that this metaphor will also largely be adapted to the political situation regarding a highly-specific EU-integration process and a new historical moment marked by prolongation and an uncertain accession.

4. CORPUS AND METHOD

The first step in this study was collecting a corpus of recent online news articles, containing instantiations of the GAME/SPORT MATCH metaphors in the context of the EU-WB relations. We applied the search criteria “the EU” and “Balkan” in the Google Search and covered the articles published between January 2018 and September 2019 in

Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Hercegovina. These articles were read by the authors, in order to find potential instances of the said metaphors, by looking specifically for the lexical items associated with the SD of GAME/SPORT MATCH, which resulted in a total of 123 articles.

Under the analytical framework of CMA (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2006, 2011), the next step was testing the metaphoricity of these lexical items, for which purposes we used MIPVU (Steen et al., 2010). After that, the conceptual GAME/SPORT MATCH metaphors were identified (the *interpretation* stage) and the excerpts containing them were included in the final corpus for this study. This excerpt corpus contains 5,913 words from 123 articles. In addition, at this stage, based on the instantiations found, the metaphors were classified as follows: the general metaphor POLITICS AS A GAME/SPORT MATCH, and the more specific, narrower conceptual metaphors – POLITICS AS FOOTBALL, POLITICS AS BOXING, POLITICS AS CHESS, POLITICS AS BASKETBALL, POLITICS AS TENNIS, POLITICS AS A GAME OF CARDS, POLITICS AS WATER POLO. A statistical overview of the number of instantiations of each of the metaphors was also made at this phase of the research.

Finally, the explanation phase involved a critical analysis into the motivation for the choice of the metaphors and their rhetorical and discourse function and effect.

5. ANALYSIS

Based on the articles read, we found that two types of political processes were the most prominent in the media portrayal of the EU-WB relations – that of their relations on the global political stage, with the EU as one of the world's great powers and the WB as a developing region under its influence and that of their relations within the context of the WB's prospective accession to the EU. The conceptual metaphor POLITICS AS A GAME/SPORT MATCH was used to depict both types of these processes in the WB's online media.

In our corpus, global politics is often conceptualized as a game in which the great powers are seen as *players*:

- 1) Kina je najnoviji **igrač** u **igri** moći na Balkanu, a njene aktivnosti bude sumnju u EU da bi Peking mogao da iskoristi ekonomsku snagu zarad političke dobiti. (B92, 13/02/2019)
[China is the newest **player** in the power **play** in the Balkans, and its activities raise doubts among the EU [officials] that Beijing might use its economic power for political gain.]
- 2) Rusija je, kako se navodi, “tradicionalan” **igrač** u regionu, ali sada Zapadni Balkan vidi kao deo “velike **igre**” koja može da omete i oslabi EU. (Alo, 16/02/2019)
[Russia is said to be a “traditional” **player** in the region, which now sees the WB as part of a “big **game**” that can disrupt and weaken the EU.]
- 3) Zemlje Zapadnog Balkana opredijeljene su za članstvo u EU, ali u regionu se i dalje prelamaju politički i ekonomski uticaji i drugih “velikih **igrača**” poput SAD, Rusije i Turske... (Mondo, 17/05/2018)
[WB countries are committed to EU membership, but political and economic influences of other “big **players**” such as the US, Russia and Turkey are still breaking in...]

As can be seen, a number of the world's most influential countries are conceptualized as players in the ‘game of powers’ (excerpt 1) or ‘great game’ (2) played out in the WB region, China being ‘the newest player’, Russia being the ‘traditional’ one (2) or one of the ‘big’ players, as also are the US and Turkey (3). The players such as China and Russia

‘raise doubts’ in the EU or can ‘disrupt or weaken’ it – thus, they are not seen as being on the same team but as players who play against it. In the game whose goal is the political influence in the region and where active agency is a property of the great powers, the WB itself is asymmetrically seen as a mere *playground*, i.e. having a passive role:

4) **Finalni meč** oko Balkana

Jezikom fudbala: riječ se o **finalnom meču** svjetskih sila oko sfera uticaja u jugistočnoj Evropi. Za sada je **rezultat 1:0** za SAD. Ali, Rusija još nije **predala utakmicu** i smatra da još ima šanse.

Već vekovima je zapadni Balkan **igralište** za velike sile. Habzburzi protiv Osmanlija, zapadni sistem vrijednosti protiv komunističkih država: tako su se zvali **parovi u mečevima** tokom istorije. Sada se opet **igra utakmica** za moć i uticaj u regionu. Ovog puta su **takmičari** SAD i Rusija, oba u **ofanzivi**. Ali i Kina i Turska su **utrčale na teren**, dok je EU – uprkos velikom personalnom i finansijskom trudu – u jasnom **ofsajdu**. (Vijesti, 3/09/2019)

[Final **match** to win the Balkans

To put it in football terms: the final **match** is being played between world powers for the division of the spheres of influence in Southeast Europe. So far the **result is 1:0** for the US. But Russia has not yet **surrendered** the **match** and thinks there is still a chance **to win**.

For centuries the WBs has been a **playground** for the great powers. The Habsburgs against the Ottomans, the Western system of values against that of the communist states: these were the **pairs** in the **matches** throughout the history of the region. Now the **game** for power and influence in the region is being **played** again. This time, the **competitors** are the US and Russia, both on the **offensive**. However, both China and Turkey have **rushed** into the **pitch**, while the EU – despite considerable personal and financial effort – is in the clear **offside**.]

In excerpt 4, the game over influence is conceptualized as the ‘final match’ – the final football match, in particular, this being one of the most common sports in Europe (hence its choice as the SD). The US is depicted as being in the lead, which, however, is not all that definitive (just one goal difference), and Russia is still not giving up, both countries being ‘on the offensive’. Other, new players are joining the match – China and Turkey, whereas the EU is the only player at a loss – *in the clear offside*. The WB, nevertheless, is not even a player; it has the most passive of the roles in this match – it is just the football pitch. This metaphor starkly depicts the current position of the WB – it has zero influence in this game, it just has to endure the clashes being played out on it, and it has been for centuries so, as suggested in the excerpt.

Football is not the only sport chosen to depict the great game – other sports are used, too, to the same effect, as can be seen in excerpts 5 and 6:

5) “**TUČA**” ZAPADA I RUSIJE U SRPSKOM **RINGU**: Šta se krije u pozadini? (Telegraf, 12/01/2018)

[“**A BOXING MATCH**” BETWEEN THE WEST AND RUSSIA IN THE SERBIAN **RING**: What is behind it?]

- 6) **PAT POZICIJA:** Ukoliko EU odbije Zapadni Balkan, tada Rusija i Turska zauzimaju njeno mesto! (Dnevna gazeta, 9/02/2018)
 [A **STALEMATE:** If the EU rejects the [accession of] the WBs, Russia and Turkey to take its place!]

In excerpt 5, the metaphor GLOBAL POLITICS AS A BOXING MATCH is used – boxing is another prominent sport, although not as prominent as football. This metaphor reflects a much more conflictual and violent match than that of football, but again, a WB country, Serbia in this case, is seen as just an arena where the match takes place. The boxers are the ‘West’, on the one hand, used collectively, probably to represent the EU and the US together, and, on the other hand, Russia, representing the ‘East’. The WB, as often so in its history, finds itself between the rock and the hard place. In the headline given in 6, a chess metaphor is used – again, one of the players is the EU, which plays against Russia and Turkey, and finds itself in a ‘stalemate’ – the position in which there are no further legal moves it can play. It means quite an unfavourable position for the EU – it basically has to endorse the WB’s accession or let Russia and Turkey wield their influence over the region. It is implied that the EU does not want to embrace the WB but may be forced to, in order to avoid a worse position. Again, the choices to be made are on the EU, whereas the WB is still in the waiting room not sharing in the decision-making process.

The EU-WB political relations are mostly marked by the efforts of the WB to enter the EU. This political situation is also often represented as a sport match. Most often, the emphasis is on the duration of such a match, as the accession process has already proved to be a long one. Let us consider the following excerpts:

- 7) KOSOVO NA **KLUPI ZA ČEKANJE** PREMA STRATEGIJI EU O PROŠIRENJU ZA ZAPADNI BALKAN (Kosovo 2.0, 30/01/2018)
 [KOSOVO ON THE **WAITING BENCH** UNDER EU ENLARGEMENT STRATEGY FOR THE WB]
- 8) Evropska unija je, **košarkaškim** rečnikom, “**uzela tajm-aut**” da razmisli o eventualnom proširenju... (Mondo, 17/05/2018)
 [In **basketball** terms, the EU “has taken a time-out” to consider a possible enlargement...]
- 9) Zato su neke najskeptičnije zemlje smatrale da treba “**spustiti loptu**” i ne žuriti previše – rekao je neimenovani sagovornik “Novosti”. (Telegraf, 18/06/2018)
 [That is why some of the most skeptical countries felt that they should “**lower the ball** (not rush into the field)” [...] – said the unnamed interviewee for “Novosti”.]

In 7, Kosovo is depicted as a player, not an active one but one waiting to enter the game – however, most players sitting on the reserve bench never enter the match and depend on the decision of others, which highlights not only the waiting process, but also the uncertainty of the outcome. Hence, the agency is attributed to the great powers again (notably the EU) and, asymmetrically, the patient is the WB. In 8, reference is made to another particular sport, very popular in the WB – basketball, in which one of the players, the EU, takes a ‘time-out’, to reconsider *potential* enlargement. In 9, political decisions are likened to a ‘ball’, which is often the case in political metaphors – however, here the ball is ‘lowered’, which literally means what the phrase following this metaphor realization directly suggests – that one should not rush too much. It is not a coincidence that such a

statement was made by an unnamed source, bearing in mind that such, not so optimistic messages are not particularly welcome. Decision-making is, thus, presented as a match over which the WB countries have no control.

The sport match in which the goal is to enter the EU might prove not only a long one, but also a never-ending one. Let us consider the excerpt 10 below:

10) **Utakmica** za EU bez rokova

Specijalni predstavnik EU i šef delegacije u BiH Lars-Gunnar Wigemark, komentarišući Strategiju, u Sarajevu je naglasio kako je **utakmica** otvorena i bez konkretnih rokova, uz objašnjenje da su bitni rezultati a ne kalendarski termini. (Slobodna Evropa, 6/02/2018)

[The **match** for the EU without deadlines

Commenting on the Strategy, the EU Special Representative and Head of Delegation to B&H, Lars-Gunnar Wigemark, stressed in Sarajevo that the **match** was open and without specific deadlines, explaining that results are what matters, not calendar dates.]

In 10, the match ‘for the EU’ is depicted as ‘open’ and ‘without deadlines’, implying that the end of the match is practically nowhere in sight. However, the players are the WB’s countries, gaining this time an active role, but subject to restrictions and conditions – they are to produce ‘results’.

Another feature that makes the ‘match’ unusual is that the ‘rules of the game’ may change at any point of the match, making it hard to win and being unfair to the players involved:

11) Popa je rekla, kada je reč o pristupanju Zapadnog Balkana EU, da se često govori o promeni „**pravila igre**” u tom procesu...” (Politika, 17/05/2019)

[Popa says that, as regards the accession of the WB to the EU, there is often talk of changing the “**rules of the game**” in the process....]

12) Lajčak je podsetio da je evropska integracija politika EU, koja znači da one zemlje koje žele da pristupe moraju da **igraju po njenim pravilima**, ali i da to znači da i Unija mora da poštuje ista **pravila**. (B92, 9/06/2019)

[Lajčák reminds that European integration is an EU policy, which means that those countries that want to accede must **play by its rules**, but also that the Union, too, must adhere to the same **rules**.]

The excerpts 11 and 12 speak of the changing game rules and the EU’s not abiding by the rules it prescribes. One might say that this match is not entirely fair, which is in line with the previous findings of the asymmetry of the roles of the two players, where one is active and in total control over everything, the rules included. Furthermore, this game or a match is also very often marked by foul play and technical errors:

13) Demokratska stranka saopštila je da je Evropska komisija u izveštaju nabrojala **greške u koracima**... (RTS, 16/11/2018)

[The Democratic Party said that the EU Commission report listed **step fouls**⁴... (RTS, 16/11/2018)]

- 14) Izveštaj Evropske komisije o Srbiji: **Žuti karton**, a nije ni poluvreme (European Western Balkans, 31/05/2019)

[European Commission Report on Serbia: A **yellow card** shown before the end of half-time)

- 15) Proces pristupanja nije egzaktna nauka, on ostaje politički proces i mogu da zamislim da se '**crveni karton**' izvuče u svakom trenutku, ukoliko zemlja članica oceni da napredak u nekom polju nije dovoljan ili nije održiv – kaže briselska analitičarka. (Balkan uživo, 25/02/2018)

[The accession process is no exact science, it remains a political process, and I can imagine a '**red card**' being shown at any point if a Member State considers that [a candidate country's] progress in a given field is insufficient or not sustainable, says the Brussels analyst.]

A technical error of an illegal movement in basketball called 'steps' (13) and especially serious foul play awarded with yellow (14) and red cards (15) in football, are called by the referees – in this case, the EU. The WB countries are perceived as being active players, but still subordinate to the [EU] referees, who can punish them at any moment, as the Brussels analyst suggests (15). Another mistake which WB countries are at risk of making is finding themselves in an 'offside' position, which is, again, used within the metaphor POLITICS AS A FOOTBALL MATCH.

- 16) Balkanski **živi zid**

Mesto u **živom zidu** pred **golom** Unije, koje nam se nudi, svakako nije zahvalna pozicija. Sličnosti sa ovom današnjom pozicijom možemo naći u mnogim periodima tokom istorije Srbije i drugih balkanskih naroda. Druga opcija mogla bi da znači, opet **fudbalski** rečeno, da budemo u nedozvoljenoj poziciji, usamljeni u **dubokom ofsajdu**. Ono što je najvažnije jeste da, baš kao što **igrači** u **fudbalskom živom zidu** oberučke štite svoje „vitalne organe i funkcije“, tako i mi pokušamo da kroz pregovore sačuvamo svoje vitalne interese u trenutku kada nas pozovu da zauzmemo mesto u novom balkanskom graničnom zidu Unije. (Srpska ekonomija, Oct.2018)

[Balkan **free-kick wall**

A place in a **free-kick wall** before the Union **goal** that is offered to us is certainly not an enviable position. We can find analogies to this present position in many periods throughout the history of Serbia and other Balkan nations. Another option could mean, again in terms of football, being in an illicit position, alone in a **deep offside**. Most importantly, just as **players** in a **football free-kick wall** do whatever they can to safeguard their “vital organs and functions”, so we try to preserve our vital interests through negotiations when they invite us to take a place in the new Balkan Union border wall.]

In (16), Serbia is offered a passive, defence position of being a 'free-kick wall' before the 'goal' of the EU. Players in the wall can be injured and have to protect their 'vital' organs. The alternative is being left completely alone in a 'deep offside', a position

⁴ A violation of the rules in basketball which occurs when a player runs with the ball without dribbling it.

which cannot produce any valid results. This extended metaphor comes from the context of the immigration coming from the Middle East, where the WB is a transit area – the immigrants are likened to a fast-coming ‘ball’ which threatens their ‘goal’ and which they need to be protected from.

The options before WB countries are these: having no choice at all and staying completely passive as either playing fields or players waiting to enter the game, being presented with two very restrictive options, or trying to play the long or never-ending game, under changing rules and with the referees free to call foul play and errors all too often. Game and sport metaphors by default evoke images of fair play and competition where one side wins on self-deserved merit, but this is not so when they are used to depict the current EU-WB relations.

In another group of metaphors, the EU’s and the WB’s politicians present the integration process as successful. Instead of conceptualizing it as a one-sided match between the WB and the EU, they present it as a competition between the WB countries themselves, in which some players appear to be winning and getting nearer to the tournament prize – the EU membership:

- 17) Godišnji izveštaj Evropske komisije: Srbija „regionalni **šampion**“ u ekonomiji
Srbija je postigla „određen napredak“ u velikom broju oblasti, a najviše u ekonomskom delu gde je „**šampion** u regionu“, navodi se u saopštenju Vlade Srbije o Godišnjem izveštaju Evropske komisije o procesu pristupanja Srbije Evropskoj uniji. (Ekonomске vesti, 17/04/2018)
[European Commission Annual Report: Serbia – a “regional **champion**” in the field of economy
Serbia has made “some progress” in a number of areas, most notably in the area of economy where it is the “**champion** in the region”, according to the statement by the Serbian government on the European Commission’s Annual Report on Serbia’s EU accession process.]
- 18) Neko bi rekao da ova vijest i nije toliko loša i nepovoljna pošto je Crna Gora nekakav „regionalni **šampion** evropskih integracija, visine plata.“ (Dan, 7/05/2018)
[Some would say that this news is not that bad and unfavourable as Montenegro is a kind of a “regional **champion** of European integration in terms of wage levels”.]

In 17 and 18, both Serbia and Montenegro are presented as the ‘regional champions’; these are actually quotes from the report of the European Commission (17) and from a former president of the European Council, Van Rompuy (18). Being better than other candidates does not mean anything in terms of the prospective membership, but this spin on the situation allows for presenting certain developments as successes. The competition frame invokes rewards, achievement, redemption, a sense of loyalty, and people can fundamentally relate to any such scenario and show a desire to participate. In this strand of metaphors, the winners are foregrounded, whereas the losers of the tournament are not mentioned and are kept backgrounded. The EU is the judge who decides the winners, again taking a moral high ground and assuming an active agency as in the previous strand of metaphors; however, it does not seem to be awarding any concrete prizes – being a ‘champion’ does not mean joining the EU, praise is all the WB candidates may receive; also, being a ‘champion’ itself is relativised as, paradoxically enough, there seems to be more than one champion in a tournament with only a few players.

Even if accession does take place one day, the WB might only make its ‘second league/division’:

19) **Druga liga** na samitu Unije

...Uspostavljanjem uslovnog članstva, EU praktično uvodi u svoj sistem takozvanu **drugu ligu** EU. EU u perspektivi može da razvije ovaj sistem i na taj način da neka od postojećih članica ispadne iz prve lige i bude u statusu koje imaju zemlje ZB – dakle, s manje obaveza, ali i manje privilegija. (Alo, 4/01/2018)

[**Second League** at Union Summit

...By establishing a conditional membership, the EU is practically introducing into its system the so-called **second league** of the EU. The EU can further develop this system in the future so that some of the existing members drop out of the first league and be demoted to the status of WB countries – with fewer obligations but also fewer privileges.]

The sport metaphor involving the ‘second league’, lower in status and position than that of the ‘premier league’ is reminiscent of the journey metaphor of ‘multi-speed’ Europe; both are used to reflect a controversial idea of different levels of integration amongst the EU members – it is controversial as it might be seen to be undermining the core principles of unity and equality on which the EU was founded, and promoting segregation and inequality instead. The WB countries, depicted as clearly the worse teams, would thus be kept segregated, fighting for the position of the second league champion, which might hope for being promoted to the premier league some time in the future. In addition, as suggested in 19, some EU members from the bottom of the premier league would also risk relegation to the second league.

An overview of the instantiations and metaphors identifies is given in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Instantiations of the METAPHOR POLITICS AS A GAME/SPORT MATCH in the corpus

Metaphor	Instantiations	Frequency
POLITICS AS A GAME/SPORT MATCH	Igrač (37), utakmica (10), pravila igre (8), lopta (8), ritam (ubrzati, nametnuti) (7), igrati (se) (6), šampion (5), takmac (5), tempo (4), finalni (3), kontranapad (3), igra (2), diskvalifikovati (2), autsajder (2), nadoknaditi zaostatak (2), turneja (2), finale (1), igralište (1), kvalifikacije (1), druga liga (1), trening (1), trenerska ruka (1), osveženje (1), zicer (1), pobeđivati (1) [<i>player, match, game rules, ball, rhythm (accelerate, impose), play, champion, competitor, pace, final, counterattack, play, disqualify, outsider, catch up, tour, finals, court, qualification, second league, training, coach's hand, refreshment, sure shot, win</i>]	115
	FOOTBALL : žuti karton (4), crveni karton (4), domaći teren (3), živi zid (3), autogol (3), mreža/braniti mrežu (2), finalni meč (2), (prvo) poluvreme (2), parovi u mečevima (1), nedozvoljena pozicija (1), napad (1), ofanziva (1), odbrana (1), šutirati (1), gol (1), teren (1), utrčati na teren (1), krilo (1) [<i>yellow card, red card, home court, free-kick wall, own goal, net/defend net, final match, (first) half-time, pairs in matches, offside position, attack, offensive, defence, kick, goal, pitch, run</i>]	33

<i>into the pitch, wing]</i>	
BOXING: izboksovati (6), nokaut (2), nokdaun (1), tuča u ringu (1), bez rukavica (1) [<i>fight out, knockout, knockdown, fight in the ring, with gloves off</i>]	11
CHES: stalemate position (8)	8
BASKETBALL: tajmaut (4), greška u koracima (2), dvokorak (1), [<i>timeout, travelling/step (violation), two-step</i>]	7
TENNIS: brejk (1), smeč (1) [<i>break, smash</i>]	2
GAME OF CARDS: adut (1), talon (1) [<i>trump card, talon</i>]	2
WATER POLO: Usidravanje (1) [<i>anchoring</i>]	1
Total frequency	179

When sports are used as SDs, football metaphors prevail, followed by those of chess, boxing and basketball. Football and basketball are perhaps the favourite sports in the Balkans, which explains the frequency of their instantiations. On the other hand, chess is a game where it is important to employ strategy, tactics, make smart moves, including a sacrifice of some pieces to win in the long run. Compared to other sports, it is much more complex, involving many pieces which one player controls, which is more reflective of the complexity of real life and the chain of command as regards political principles. Chess players are seen as very smart people and perhaps it is to the advantage of politicians to equate themselves with such players in certain contexts. Additionally, it is an ancient game, and its use in political discourse precedes the appearance of many modern sports, which secures it some inherited space in political rhetoric. Boxing, on the other hand, as suggested earlier, involves much more violence and direct physical conflict than other popular sports and it is, thus, frequently chosen to depict politics in case of highly conflictual situations, especially bearing in mind that some political situations may result in direct physical confrontation.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the corpus, the EU is portrayed either as the winning, dominant player in a game/sport match, or as a referee, occupying a moral high ground and being in total control of the game. The only exception to this general conceptualisation of the EU is its presentation in the context of global political players fighting on the WB as a playing field, where its power and position are much more limited. On the other hand, the WB is invariably passively depicted as either an underdog or as a playing field. The roles of these two actors are therefore asymmetrical, whereby active agency is attributed to the EU and the role of the WB is marginalised.

The EU integration processes are presented as a game/sport played between the EU and the WB as a one-sided match, or between the WB countries themselves. The latter is a manipulative portrayal of a process that in itself is no competition at all and in which victory is meaningless, but allows politicians to manipulatively present the otherwise grim integration prospects as to some extent attainable.

In line with Howe's arguments (1988), game and sport metaphors, which invoke the idea of rules, order, and outcomes based on merit, were used to conceptualise perhaps

chaotic and unforeseeable processes which are far from being governed by strict rules. The results also corroborate the findings from the literature that the most popular sports in a country would inspire most political metaphors (Howe 1988; Yu, 1998; Radić-Bojanić and Silaški, 2008; Helin-Garcia, 2014), with *football*, *boxing*, *chess* and *basketball* metaphors coming to most prominence in our context.

We might argue that this sort of a *gamification of politics*, presenting political affairs as games or sports, could drive up readers' engagement, perhaps inspire loyalty to one player or team, and motivate them to read texts containing such metaphors. Therein lies the power of game/sport metaphors, but also the danger – a complex political situation tends to be oversimplified. Games and sport matches rely on a binary system which leaves little room for middle ground. In addition, the metaphors reflect the subjugated position of the WB, which is, indeed, a political fact, but it can also be argued that some of the readers of such media texts, when exposed to the overly marginalising portrayals of a country or region, might uncritically accept and subsequently entrench them, and then reproduce and perpetuate them in their own discourse.

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