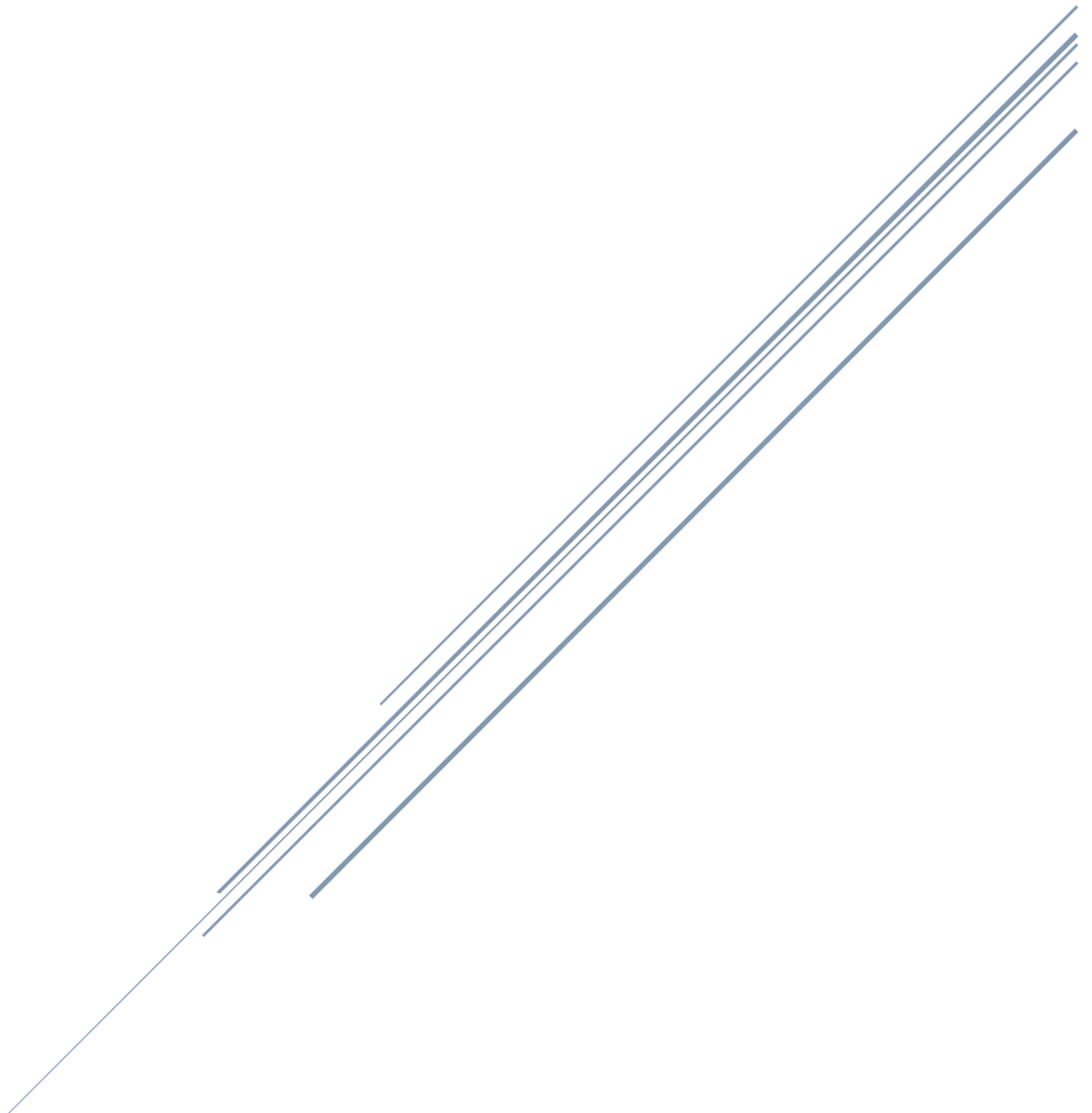


# FIFA'S IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Does International Sport Matter?



## Introduction

Amid an international division of east and west, defined by each government as a battle of good and evil, the two most powerful states in a bilateral system faced off head-to-head in 1980. In an era defined by the constant ideological battle between the United States and the USSR, there are very few examples of tangible contest: the Cuban Missile Crisis, the space race, and the miracle on ice are some of the few which immediately come to mind. The Soviets had won gold four years in a row, and nobody in the international hockey community believed a group of college hockey players in the USA had any chance to defeat the USSR, having lost in a warmup game 10-3 just months before the Olympics. A single semi-final matchup in the 1980 Olympics is one of the few chances in which individuals could witness these two superpowers duke it out, and one of the most recognizable events of the cold war for many Americans. It is no coincidence that people care about watching their nation compete and win on the world stage. In 1945, George Orwell described a connection between sport and politics: "Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence: in other words it is war minus the shooting."<sup>1</sup>

Sports are not a matter of life and death, but they do provide states the opportunity to compete and showcase themselves on a public stage and assert their dominance in a realm outside of simply military combat. In 2018, the World Cup had "A combined 3.572 billion

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<sup>1</sup> D'agati, "Surrogate War," 454

viewers – more than half of the global population aged four and over.”<sup>2</sup> In 2022 the stats are trending even higher, and in a country where soccer is rarely the focus, “The English-language coverage of USA’s encounter with England on Friday 25 November was the most watched men’s football match on US television ever, with a peak audience of 19.65 million viewers on FOX.”<sup>3</sup> The World Cup is one of the most important sporting events in the world and serves as a battleground for states to partake in non-security related competition. This essay will seek to understand the importance of international sport through the lens of international relations theory, and whether sport directly affects how states interact with each other. It will do so by looking at the interaction of Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia on a political level before attempting to understand whether FIFA had any effect on political decisions.

### **Literature Review**

Prior to looking specifically at the case of FIFA, it is necessary to outline the various theories within international relations which can be applied, current views on international sport in academia, and how they can be applied to study this topic. Realism, as a discipline, assumes that all states exist in an anarchic system. Classical realists believe “The international arena remains a self-help system, a ‘brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other.’”<sup>4</sup> More specifically though, Morgenthau and Thucydides “see more variation in order and stability *within* domestic and international systems than they do between

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<sup>2</sup> FIFA. *Global Broadcast*

<sup>3</sup> FIFA, "FIFA World Cup Delivering."

<sup>4</sup> Dunne, *International Relations Theories*, 35.

them... Thucydides devotes equal attention to internal developments... and external developments in the several theatres of war.”<sup>5</sup> Classical realists are entrenched in issues of security, and place little trust in institutions to mitigate the effects of an anarchic system. In international sport, there are governing bodies which force states to act in a uniform way. While states want to put the most competitive sports programs together, there is rarely an issue of security. Thus, the ideas of classical realists are difficult to apply here, as international NGOs add layers of protection to the natural self-help system. But “any approach to international relations has to incorporate, or at least come to grips with, key elements of Realist thinking”<sup>6</sup> simply because so much scholarship relies on the idea that states are the most important actors.

Instead of classical realism then, it will be more useful to investigate the interplay between structural realism and neoliberalism, which both recognize the existence of international institutions. Specifically looking at the views of offensive structural realist, John Mearsheimer, “it makes good strategic sense for states to gain as much power as possible and, if the circumstances are right, to pursue hegemony.”<sup>7</sup> In terms of international sport, Mearsheimer would argue that states could use competition to expand their own power, and that institutions are a way for the powerful to maintain their position. While a hegemony is nearly impossible to achieve, there are states which are expected to perform better than others. Philip A. D’agati employs the idea of a “surrogate war” to international sport to create

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<sup>5</sup> Dunne, *International Relations Theories*, 36

<sup>6</sup> Keohane, *Neorealism*, 159

<sup>7</sup> Dunne, *International Relations Theories*, 52

an academic realm in which offensive structural realism can be applied. D'agati defines this term as "a direct conflict between representatives of participant states by a means that does not feature as an expected outcome economic or infrastructural damage or loss of life."<sup>8</sup> He argues that surrogate wars function as an arena for states to witness an "expansion of power through prestige and not maximization of national security."<sup>9</sup> D'agati recognizes the possible limitations, specifically the difficulty in applying realism to realms outside of security. But he explains that it the idea of a surrogate war is "more versatile in its applications and provides a much needed and theoretically grounded study on crossroads of international relations and sports."<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, neoliberalism places more trust in the concept of institutions, and believes that they can promote cooperation, rather than serving simply as another battleground for power politics. Regarding power, Keohane outlines two important factors or complex interdependency: "the ineffectiveness of military force" and "the presence of multiple channels of contact."<sup>11</sup> States exist in an intertwined system of various institutions and commitments, and NGOs provide the opportunity for states to interact on levels where the stakes are not life or death. International sports organizations, such as the IOC or FIFA simply provide another arena for states to share information. Like with any institution, though, there is a hierarchical nature in which bargaining and other impure actions occur. Writing before the

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<sup>8</sup> D'agati, "Surrogate War," 451.

<sup>9</sup> D'agati, "Surrogate War," 454.

<sup>10</sup> D'agati, "Surrogate War," 452

<sup>11</sup> Keohane, *Neorealism*, 197

term “international institutionalism” was coined, Keohane states that a new model for understanding international relations must be created: “systemic theories that retain some of the parsimony of Structural Realism, but that are able to deal better with differences between issue-areas, with institutions, and with change.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, this paper seeks to do just that.

Through the focus of international sport, I expect it to become clear that states do not prescribe to simply just one ideology when making decisions. By utilizing frameworks outlined by theorists over time, I will argue that there are material benefits of competing in international competitions, and that states utilize NGOs to gain some form of power rather than simply promote cooperation.

### **Research Program**

I plan to take an extremely methodical approach in determining FIFA’s effectiveness as NGO to understand whether sports have a direct effect on foreign diplomacy. The rest of the essay will proceed in the following manner. First, because readers may not be familiar with FIFA, or the specific of their structure and past controversies, I will provide a historical context to FIFA as an NGO, and why it is a relevant topic to study regarding my research question. With that background, I will develop one case within the sports world which represents the most extreme of conditions. The case will deal with the region known as the Balkans, and the intense politics which have surrounded the area since Yugoslavia was dissolved in the 1990s. When it was a state, Yugoslavia was a powerhouse in the sports world, and Croatia and Serbia continue to be well represented in international competition, specifically at the last two World Cups.

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<sup>12</sup> Keohane, *Neorealism*, 197

With multiple soccer matches in head-to-head competition and a well-known political rivalry, the investigation into Serbia and Croatia will provide an academic conversation in which FIFA's role can be widely explored. I will then utilize the lenses of neoliberal institutionalism and structural realism to analyze my case, and answer the overarching question: Does sport directly impact diplomacy between countries? I expect to conclude that through the combination of the lenses of structural realism and neoliberalism, the example of FIFA does in fact create an observable effect on international relations.

### **FIFA as an International NGO**

In the post-modern world, international Non-Governmental Organizations are an important aspect of the world's society. They provide meeting spaces for states to interact, and generally follow the goals outlined in the UN's mission statement: "the one place on Earth where all the world's nations can gather together, discuss common problems, and find shared solutions that benefit all of humanity."<sup>13</sup> The way that the UN is structured is that it has six main bodies, each of them existing for a different reason. The general assembly is the only one made up of all 193 member institutions, while the other five are made up of far smaller numbers.<sup>14</sup> The UN is the most notable, and one of the most important international institutions and serves as a strong foundation to compare other NGOs to.

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<sup>13</sup> United Nations, "About Us."

<sup>14</sup> United Nations, "About Us."

While the idea of international sport as a battleground for politics may not hold as much weight as, say, the United Nations, FIFA maintains as much structure and intentionality as any other NGO. Additionally, outside of the IOC, which is in charge of the Olympics, FIFA hosts the most watched sporting event in the world every four.<sup>15</sup> In terms of their mission statement, FIFA maintains similar goals to the UN as they apply to soccer: “Develop the Game, Touch the World, Build a Better Future.”<sup>16</sup> Both institutions say they are focused on engaging countries across the world and in general, making the world a better place. Currently, there are 211 individual entities which make up FIFA, including 23 states teams without the UN’s recognition of sovereignty. FIFA is made up of six smaller confederations, which oversee soccer within their own continent. Each individual country has one representative in congress, and each confederation is allotted a specific number of members on the executive committee based on the importance and value of soccer in their respective region, with the European Confederation (UEFA) holding the most seats and power.<sup>17</sup> This structure is rooted in the postcolonial nature of FIFA, which was formed by seven historic European powers in 1904. The structure of FIFA is clearly outlined, and with a generally democratic approach, provides a space for representatives of states to interact in a different manner. Like the UN, it gives every member a voice, but only certain members a stronger voice through additional assemblies.

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<sup>15</sup> Abeyita, “Most-Watched Sporting Events”

<sup>16</sup> Larkin, “The Structure and Policies of FIFA”

<sup>17</sup> Larkin, “The Structure and Policies of FIFA”



Based on a yearly report by the ASOIF, FIFA is one of the seven best international sporting organizations in terms of governance practices, with scores being calculated for five categories: transparency, integrity, democracy, development, and control mechanisms.<sup>18</sup> Although through an auditing process FIFA appears to be well governed, it cannot go unmentioned that since its inception, and even more so in the current century, FIFA is consistently dealing with corruption at all levels, including the elected president himself. Sepp Blatter, who was president from 1998 until 2015, has been banned from international soccer until 2027 because of various charges of conspiracy.

Controversies surrounding Sepp Blatter have existed since he was first elected president: "Blatter was elected as president for the first time in 1998... Within a year, however, British reporter David Yallop released a book accusing Blatter of spending \$1 million to bribe top officials and secure votes."<sup>19</sup> Since then, the scandals have only continued. In July of 2022 there was a trial "related to a \$2 million payment arranged in 2011 by Blatter, who led world soccer's governing body for 17 years, to Platini, a former France player who was at the time the president of European soccer's governing body."<sup>20</sup> The corruption trickled from the top down, and just 4 years after this arrangement was made, nine FIFA officials were arrested for a racketeering case. The arrest was carried out by the US Department of Justice, and the report stated: "'The indictment alleges corruption that is rampant, systemic, and deep-rooted both abroad and here in the United States,' said Attorney General Lynch. 'It spans at least two

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<sup>18</sup> ASOIF, *Fourth Review*.

<sup>19</sup> Hadley, "The Rise and Fall"

<sup>20</sup> Panja, "Sepp Blatter and Michel Platini"

generations of soccer officials who, as alleged, have abused their positions of trust to acquire millions of dollars in bribes and kickbacks.”<sup>21</sup> Although FIFA appears to be well governed, the ability to reap independent profit within the organization has created widespread corruption.

Within recent years, FIFA’s greatest controversies haven’t necessarily been the cases of individual corruption, but rather the culmination of what the corruption means, including the awarding of bids to host the World Cup. At the FIFA conference in 2010, it seemed likely that the United States was the front runner to be awarded the 2022 FIFA World Cup. But, after what many assume to be a connection of backdoor deals, Qatar was awarded the event, and began preparation immediately, using the 12 years to construct the eight stadiums in addition to the other necessities a host country needs. Since awarded, FIFA has been scrutinized for allowing a state which lacks the basic human rights of the western world to host the greatest event in the world. In 2016, “Amnesty International first reported numerous human rights violations stemming from the pressure the country was under to meet the 2022 deadline. Some 1.7 million migrant workers make up 90% of the total workforce in Qatar, and virtually all of them were underpaid and subjected to below-par living and working conditions.”<sup>22</sup> Certainly, there are inherent issues with FIFA, and it seems unlikely that the arrests of a few officials, and the banning of a president will create substantial change, but that will be figured out in years to come.

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<sup>21</sup> Justice, *Nine FIFA Officials*.

<sup>22</sup> Geeter, “Why Hosting”

Though the organizational structure of FIFA may be imperfect, it is far from the only NGO which can be described as corrupt. Corruption has become an issue universally, “The UN recently acknowledged the need to tackle pervasive organised corruption networks, which often include politicians, civil servants, private sector and members of crime syndicates. It has also pointed to the terrible consequences of such complex, multi-jurisdictional corruption – including poverty and conflict.”<sup>23</sup> Looking past the corruption, FIFA still stands as a massive NGO which generates billions of dollars in revenue over a four-year cycle, due to the advertising and broadcasting associated with the World Cup. In 2018, it is estimated that Russia spent over ten billion dollars on constructing infrastructure to host the mega event, while FIFA made around six billion dollars off of the event.<sup>24</sup> Recent articles indicate that due to the entire event being hosted in one city, FIFA has increased its revenue for the 2022 cycle to over seven billion dollars.<sup>25</sup> Although Russia had just hosted the winter Olympics years prior, and spent fifty-one billion dollars to achieve that, they still had to construct over half of the eleven stadiums used in 2018. The government claims that the World Cup “would add \$26 billion to \$31 billion to the national economy.”<sup>26</sup> By having to build and renovate the infrastructure of the country to host a World Cup, there are certainly jobs being created, but in many cases, specifically Brazil in 2014, hosting a World Cup tends to cost more than the possible profits. Currently, Brazil’s Maracanã Stadium, which cost over \$500 million to construct, is being used as a place to store

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<sup>23</sup> Dell, “UN & Grand Corruption”

<sup>24</sup> Sheetz, “Here’s Who is Getting Rich”

<sup>25</sup> MacInnes, “FIFA World Cup Revenue”

<sup>26</sup> Sheetz, “Here’s Who is Getting Rich”

buses.<sup>27</sup> It will be interesting to see how the North American countries hosting the next World Cup in 2026 are able to profit, as many of the infrastructure costs needed in Russia and Brazil shouldn't be necessary in the USA, Canada, and Mexico.

While there are certainly issues with FIFA from a microscopic level to the structure itself, they are still the only avenue for international soccer competition outside of the Olympics and do contribute in positive ways across the world. While it is obvious that Sepp Blatter is not the most ethically centered man, he came into FIFA with outlined goals, and certainly accomplished them through whatever means necessary. When elected, Blatter ran on "a platform centered around pushing soccer beyond the traditional strongholds of South America and Europe and into Africa and Asia."<sup>28</sup> From 1998 to 2022, it is without a doubt that this goal has been accomplished.

In 2010, South Africa hosted the first World Cup in Africa. In 2022, Morocco became the first African state to advance to the semifinal round in the history of the event. These accomplishments came as direct results of Blatter's policies implemented within Africa, attempting to grow the game outside of its traditional hotbeds. As a leader, Blatter was well respected in Africa, "Kalusha Bwalya, a Caf executive committee member and president of the Zambian FA, said: 'He's the only candidate we know who has been supporting football for a long time. He's done a lot of good things for Zambia in particular and Africa in general. He's a good man and the best candidate.'"<sup>29</sup> Sports journalist Kennedy Gondwe states "Regardless

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<sup>27</sup> Geeter, "Why Hosting"

<sup>28</sup> Hadley, "The Rise and Fall"

<sup>29</sup> Smith, "Hearts and Minds of Africa"

what one wants to say about Sepp Blatter – love him or loathe him – there are things he’s done in Africa that are quiet outstanding,” and goes onto conclude that “You could say he did it for expediency, but he still did it.”<sup>30</sup> Recently, with the increased revenue from the 2022 World Cup, “The next four years will also see an increase in funding for FIFA’s forward programme with \$200m to be spent each year on international talent development ... FIFA says that more funding will also be accompanied by an increased oversight on spending.”<sup>31</sup>

The issues at hand with FIFA and the individuals which make it up are complex, yet widely overlooked because of the immense popularity across the world. Most people don’t tend to think about the role of FIFA when they watch the World Cup, and simply just associate it with the games they watch and the video games they play. Rarely in the public does FIFA get referred to as the intricate NGO that it is. But there is an importance in trying to figure out if FIFA, one of the most recognizable NGOs, is acting the way it is meant to as an international institution in promoting peace across the world. The rest of this essay will seek to understand the role that FIFA has as an NGO and how (if at all) it effects foreign policy by looking at the specific case of the Balkan region, and the juxtaposition of soccer and politics in a heavily politicized part of the world.

### **Sports and Politics: Hatred in the Balkans**

As referenced earlier in the paper, George Orwell was once quoted with saying: “Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness,

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<sup>30</sup> Smith, “Hearts and Minds of Africa”

<sup>31</sup> MacInnes, “FIFA World Cup Revenue”

disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence: in other words it is war minus the shooting.”<sup>32</sup> Since the disbanding of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, many of these adjectives which Orwell uses to describe sport could be used to simply describe relations between the new states which formed: Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Slovenia. This case will look specifically the states which were a part of the Dayton Accords, simply due to the empirical data available as well as their prominence in world sports. The case will follow this logical path: first, it will develop the general tensions which this region faced politically and militarily in the 90’s, prior to the signing of the Dayton Accords in 1995, before looking at the impact of the Accords. Then, it will look towards Serbia’s and Croatia’s foreign policy through typical political means, before finally explaining the interactions of their international soccer programs through FIFA.

The existence of division and tension within the region known as the Balkans has existed for centuries. This area of the world has faced constant occupation and influence from cultures and religions across the world, “by Romans, Byzantines, Venetians, Crusaders (third and fourth), Hungarians, Austrians, Ottoman Turks, Napoleonic French, Italians, Germans, Soviets, and lastly NATO.”<sup>33</sup> This ongoing conflict not only created fear of outsiders altering the region, but also forced whichever independent states existed at the time to fear, distrust and hate their neighboring countries. For building this case, the book *Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century* written by Paul Mojzes will be incredibly useful. Mojzes was

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<sup>32</sup> D’agati, “Surrogate War,” 454

<sup>33</sup> Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, 20

born in Croatia during the rule of the Yugoslavian empire and moved to Serbia as a child. Growing up in Yugoslavia and revisiting his birth town at various points in his life, Mojzes witnessed the atrocities of the region, and attempted to take an objective approach in studying them. Regarding a previous book written with a similar objective, Mojzes writes “Croat reviewers accused me of being pro-Serb; Serb reviewers accused me of being pro-Croat. Had the book been reviewed in Bosnia, reviewers would have probably accused me of being anti-Bosniak... I tried my best to avoid being one-sided.”<sup>34</sup> Though it is impossible to be completely objective in writing and research, in such a heavily nationalistic argument it is important to use resources which at least attempt to be objective and recognize their own biases. Thus, Mojzes’ writing on the multitude of genocides and ethnic conflicts within this region should prove useful in constructing a narrative to be compared alongside global sport.

Mojzes begins his timeline with the First and Second Balkan Wars, which occurred just years before the first shots were fired in World War I, in 1912 and 1913. Although rarely discussed, especially in comparison to the Armenian Genocide, these wars serve as two of the first genocides in the twentieth century. Using the 1913 Carnegie Endowment Inquiry, Mojzes states that “all the belligerents violated *every* article of the Second Hague Conference of 1907.”<sup>35</sup> While it may seem unclear why conflict in 1912 directly affects life now, “it was the beginning of other wars, or rather a continuous war, the worst of all, a war of religion, of reprisals, of race... It has become a competition, as to who can best dispossess and ‘denationalize’ his neighbor.”<sup>36</sup> The First and Second Balkan wars set a precedent in this region

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<sup>34</sup> Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, 19-20

<sup>35</sup> Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, 28

<sup>36</sup> Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, 28

for competition and conflict based solely on race and religion. While not all the actors in this conflict will appear later, the notion of militaries ordering the systematic killing and erasing of other villages and people holds true in nearly every battle fought in the region during the twentieth century. For this case the years in which Yugoslavia existed, and maintained regional power will be omitted, and the timeline will jump to the 1990's when Yugoslavia was disbanded. I am doing this to simplify the story, because dealing with the communist conglomerate of Yugoslavia as its own state while maintaining that Serbia and Croatia are entities as well becomes convoluted, and unnecessary due to the goal of this paper. FIFA, nor any NGO does not currently recognize Yugoslavia as a state, although Serbia has absolved the former Yugoslavia's sporting records.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia created incredibly negative consequences for this region, because from 1919-1990, individuals felt comfortable moving between the various states united as Yugoslavia. When this unification ceased to exist, and each individual state wanted to secede from Serbia, the Serbian government felt it was their duty to protect their blood. Twelve to twenty percent of Serbs lived in Croatia, and thirty-three percent lived in Bosnia at the time.<sup>37</sup> While the simplest way to argue about the situation is to claim the Yugoslavian wars of the 90's was due to Serbian aggression, it can also be seen as an attempt for Serbia to maintain their state in a civil war. The even greater question which looms over the Yugoslavian wars is: "Were the wars caused by ancient hatreds or by contemporary political ambitions of leaders?"<sup>38</sup> Since Robert Kaplan wrote his famous book "Balkan Ghosts" in 1993,

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<sup>37</sup> Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, 140

<sup>38</sup> Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, 137



the ancient hatreds theory has been prominent in attempting to answer the question as to why there was conflict in the Balkans. While Kaplan's book has received extensive criticism throughout the years, it attempts to do something interesting, which is that it "Combines up-to-the-minute political reporting and literary travel writing."<sup>39</sup> But, in trying to describe the moment as it is happening, the book comes across as insensitive and somewhat inaccurate in the eyes of many scholars.

Denison and Mujanović present the ancient hatreds theory before arguing heavily against it: "The 'ancient hatreds' thesis is the idea that groups of people fight each other because they have always despised one another due to differences of identity and culture."<sup>40</sup> Mojzes is far more objective in his possible explanations and sees "no reason for an either-or case" (Mojzes 137). While Denison and Mujanović vehemently deny the assumptions that there has been constant ethnic tension in the Balkans, citing it as having the fewest wars in a European region<sup>41</sup>; Mojzes references the constant battle between not only Christians and Muslims, but additionally between various sects of Christianity. He states "the argument that the Balkan population, at least its Slavic segment, lived in harmony and friendship until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is not convincing."<sup>42</sup> Mojzes goes on to present the argument that the role of nationalism led to territories attempting to expand their power, and resulted in wars that "left some of the states aggrieved, hoping for rectification of injustices."<sup>43</sup> In following with Mojzes' argument, it is quite logical that ethnic hatreds did exist and help fuel

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<sup>39</sup> Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts*, Cover.

<sup>40</sup> Denison, "Syria Isn't Bosnia"

<sup>41</sup> Denison, "Syria Isn't Bosnia"

<sup>42</sup> Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, 140

<sup>43</sup> Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, 140

the fire, but that leaders also utilized nationalism to justify their attempts to expand their territory and power. He returns a few pages later though to emphasize that ethnicity was a driving force in the wars of the 1990's, blatantly stating "people were killed of their ethnic identity, even if they were barely aware of it themselves."<sup>44</sup>

The wars "ended" with the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995, which resulted in the agreement that "Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia agree to fully respect the sovereign equality of one another and to settle disputes by peaceful means."<sup>45</sup> For a group of states who clearly have had ongoing tension rooted in ethnicity to have to agree to settle disputes peacefully seems impossible, especially when Mojzes recounts that in 1995 when visiting a knife seller at a Bosnian market, the purpose of the knives was "To cut Serb throats."<sup>46</sup> How could any disputes be settled peacefully when just years ago, individuals were being eradicated due to their ethnicity?

In the modern day, tensions still exist, but there have been deliberate steps made towards trying to enhance relations between the states. In 2018, the two presidents of Croatia and Serbia met, "'the relations between Serbia and Croatia are burdened with the past, which this time we have not talked about... It is our task to talk and seek solutions for issues which divide us,' Grabar-Kitarovic said after the two-hour talks."<sup>47</sup> This meeting is not only significant for the international community, but incredibly important for Serbia, who must improve relations with its neighbors before joining the European Union. Within Bosnia though, there

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<sup>44</sup> Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, 144

<sup>45</sup> University of Minnesota, "Summary of the Dayton Peace Agreement on Bosnia-Herzegovina."

<sup>46</sup> Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, 137

<sup>47</sup> Ilic, "Improve Ties After Decades"

continues to be issues regarding the three separate entities interacting in peaceful ways. In 2021, “Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik sparked fears of a secession bid when he said Republika Srpska would pull out of three key Bosnia Herzegovina state institutions — the armed forces, the top judiciary body and the tax agency.”<sup>48</sup> The issues of ethnicity and nationalism have pertained throughout the history of the Balkan region and continue to be at the forefront of politics today. General diplomatic conventions have not generated long term peace in this area and are unable to foster a sense of cohesion between the states or within Bosnia.

This is where the role of FIFA and international soccer becomes pivotal, in providing an outlet for these states to compete against each other, rather than fighting wars. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Croatia competed in a friendly against the United States in 1990, immediately joined FIFA as an independent state in 1992, and UEFA in 1993. The Croatian soccer program claims that the first ever soccer matches played on Croatian soil were in the late nineteenth century, but that they were played by English industrialists who then taught the Croatians how to play.<sup>49</sup> Since they joined international competition, Croatia has been a top-tier team, qualifying for every World Cup except for 2010. They received bronze in 1998, silver in 2018, and bronze in 2022.<sup>50</sup>

Serbia, on the other hand, absorbed the history and name of the former Yugoslavia, and continued to play as FR Yugoslavia until a name change was forced in 2002 to Serbia and Montenegro. In 2006, Serbia’s soccer program officially became known simply as Serbia. Unlike

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<sup>48</sup> Ott, “Why there’s Fear”

<sup>49</sup> Croatian Football Federation, "About Us - History."

<sup>50</sup> Croatian Football Federation, "About Us - History."

Croatia, Serbia was not able to compete internationally until 1994, and was not allowed to qualify for the World Cup until 1998.<sup>51</sup> Though they do not have the accolades and results that Croatia does, Serbia has been able to qualify for every World Cup in the past 24 years except for 2002 and 2014 but has not made it past the group stage since their first World Cup in 1998. Based solely on results, the Serbian team has been disappointing on the world stage in comparison to their rivals Croatia, although they can claim a 1930 bronze medal since they maintain the Yugoslavian team's history.<sup>52</sup>

Bosnia as a national team has existed since its independence from Yugoslavia in 1992 and has only managed to qualify for the World Cup once, in 2014. But, although the Bosnian soccer program may not qualify for international competition often, their overall record isn't awful, as they have as many wins as they do losses (98) as well as 59 ties. On average they sit in the top 60 teams in the world, with their highest ever ranking being 13<sup>th</sup>. Like the political realm, Bosnia has been dominated by its two rivals, Croatia, and Serbia. In head-to-head matches, Bosnia is 0-0-4 against Croatia, and 0-2-3 against Serbia.<sup>53</sup>

The most notable interaction between any of these three countries comes from the qualifying process for the 2014 FIFA World Cup, in which Croatia and Serbia had to play each other twice, once in each country. The first match was played in Croatia and resulted in massive news stories which were shared across the world. This was one of the first times that these two countries competed directly against each other since the bloody wars of the 1990's. A

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<sup>51</sup> Wikipedia, "Serbia National Football Team."

<sup>52</sup> Wikipedia, "Serbia National Football Team."

<sup>53</sup> Wikipedia, "Bosnia and Herzegovina National Football Team."

microcosm of the intensity of this match can be seen in the story of Sinisa Mihajlovic, the head coach of the Serbian national team at the time. Mihajlovic was born in Croatia to a Serb father and a Croat mother. In his teens, Mihajlovic faced a decision as whether to join a Serbian soccer club or a Croatian one. Since joining the Serbian club Red Star Belgrade, he has become a symbol of Serbian nationalism. Leading up to the intense matchup, "Mihajlovic, now 44, admits that the fixture was one of the reasons he took the job of national manager and that he 'would give three years of [his] life' to be playing in it."<sup>54</sup> His individual story serves as a small example of just how meaningful this first match was between the bitter rivals.

The result of the match and the way it played out became just as meaningful for each state, with Croatia becoming the victors. The event itself was incredibly hostile for the Serbian team, as "The Serbian national anthem was booed at the start of the game, and the home fans in Zagreb continued with abusive chants against their fierce rivals. At one stage a chorus of "Kill a Serb" echoed round the stadium. Serbian supporters were barred from attending the match which Croatia won 2-0."<sup>55</sup> Later in the same year, the two teams met again in Belgrade, and the match ended in a draw. There are not nearly as many news stories covering this rematch as there were covering the match in Zagreb.

Since the teams competed in 2013, they have not faced each other again in a head-to-head matchup. That has not stopped the bitter rivals from appearing in the news though, specifically for their continuous hatred for each other and for other Balkan states. Just recently at the 2022 World Cup, "FIFA fined the Croatians 50,000 Swiss francs (\$53,000) after the team's

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<sup>54</sup> Wilson, "Sinisa Mihajlovic"

<sup>55</sup> BBC, "Croatia Beat Serbia in Acrimonious Football Game."

fans verbally abused and taunted Canada goalkeeper Milan Borjan, who has Serbian family ties” and “The Serbian soccer federation was fined 20,000 Swiss francs (\$21,300) for a political banner about neighboring Kosovo displayed in the locker room before playing Brazil in the team’s opening game.”<sup>56</sup> The flag showed a map of Serbia which visually displayed ownership over Kosovo with the phrase “no surrender” even though Kosovo exists as an independent state. FIFA as an NGO stepped in and attempted to resolve the issue, but with so much tension behind the messages, a fine seems ineffectual. The battle between Croatia and Serbia was undoubtedly “bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence: in other words it” was “war minus the shooting.”<sup>57</sup> Certainly, the extreme history between the states which once made-up Yugoslavia, a “peaceful” settlement to wars in 1995, and the continuous competition between these states both directly and indirectly in international soccer makes it difficult to understand how FIFA fits into resolving the tension. The next section will analyze this case and seek to understand if FIFA can provide an opportunity outside of typical political conventions to affect international relations.

### **Case Study Analysis**

The case of Croatia and Serbia in international soccer is a difficult one to try and make sense of, because there is so much politicization rooted in the very nature of direct competition

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<sup>56</sup> Associated Press. “Fined for Balkan Statements.”

<sup>57</sup> D’agati, “Surrogate War,” 454

between these two states. How can FIFA be expected to promote cooperation in the Balkans when no other NGO has found a successful way to do so? Through the lens of neoliberalist thinkers, such as Keohane, there is an argument to be made that FIFA is effectively promoting complex interdependence. The head-to-head matches in 2013 were one of only times which these two states could confront each other under a specific set of rules and norms and exit out of the situation without any economic wounds or loss of life. While the information shared during the matches weren't necessarily positive (ethnically charged chants shouldn't be promoted), there was still a sharing of information which is needed in a world where institutions are meant to mitigate the negative effects of the anarchic system.

Additionally, although they may not be the most threatening or powerful actions, FIFA does have the ability to inflict fines and suspensions for a variety of issues, specifically noted in the case study section. The issue here is that a \$53,000 fine is unlikely to coerce fans to let go of their hatred and not attempt to attack their opposition verbally. But the idea is still there, and FIFA appears to actively be attempting to reduce the corruption within the organization. By allowing for a yearly audit, and banning corrupt officials, FIFA is trying to regain its trustworthiness as an NGO.

An issue with attempting to understand this case through the lens of neoliberalism exists with the roots of conflict in the Balkans, dating back to at least 1912. As referenced earlier, this war can be seen as "the beginning of other wars, or rather a continuous war, the worst of all, a war of religion, of reprisals, of race... It has become a competition, as to who can

best dispossess and ‘denationalize’ his neighbor.”<sup>58</sup> The issue arises here in trying to understand the goals of each state for competing in FIFA, and if providing an alternative battleground for states to extend a war of religion is justifiable. The groupings of the FIFA 2014 World Cup Qualifying stages could have been altered to ensure that Serbia and Croatia did not have to face off, but instead they were placed into a situation to enhance a hostile situation. In an interview leading up to their 2022 semifinal match against Argentina, Croatians clearly state that the conflict of the 1990’s plays an important role in their identity: “Fabijanac admits while some of the squad were not even born during the bloody Balkan war, it is something which still hangs over the country, spurring its players on.”<sup>59</sup> When the teams met in 2013, nearly every player on the field would have been born during or before the war, which only could have increased the role of history in adding to the match’s intensity. While FIFA seems to ultimately fail in promoting cooperation in heavily politicized situations, the role of FIFA as an NGO may be better understood through the lens of an offensive realist.

FIFA provides the opportunity of the state to enhance their position through purely monetary means. It exists as the major avenue for teams to compete in international soccer, and to attempt to gain revenue through their sporting teams. The team that wins the World Cup makes over \$38 million, with \$400 million total in prize money available. Also, based on projected statistics from Russia in 2018, there is supposedly a monetary incentive for a team to host the World Cup, although that fact is highly controversial.<sup>60</sup> In an article posted by a Qatari news source, “in the longer term, the money spent on hosting, if managed correctly, builds

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<sup>58</sup> Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, 28

<sup>59</sup> Morse, “From Bloody Balkan War”

<sup>60</sup> Geeter, “Why Hosting”



capacity for that country's economy to expand" but "For a host country, a World Cup is about pride and honour and publicity, more than it is about making money."<sup>61</sup> For teams competing in international sport, there is the opportunity to increase their position fiscally by winning a World Cup. For an offensive realist, the ability to enhance a states security by increasing the flow of money is logical, especially if there are no opportunities to negatively impact their own status quo.

But it is more than just monetary considerations which incentivize teams to invest in their soccer programs. Soccer is not simply about pride for a host country, but for every state which participates in planned competition. As D'agati states in his description of surrogate war in the lens of offensive realism, as was referenced earlier, it is an "expression of power through prestige and not maximization of national security."<sup>62</sup> Looking at why Serbia and Croatia compete in FIFA cannot simply be explained through fiscal considerations, but because they want to portray their country in the greatest light. And when they compete against each other, like when the United States competed against the Soviet Union in 1980, it becomes "a site for direct, head-to-head competition between the two ideologically opposed camps."<sup>63</sup> This argument seems to much better describe why Serbia and Croatia would be willing to engage in FIFA, and more specifically in matches against each other, because "propaganda victories are attainable through sport without triggering military response."<sup>64</sup> For two states which agreed to

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<sup>61</sup> Brownsell, "Do Host Countries."

<sup>62</sup> D'agati, "Surrogate War," 454

<sup>63</sup> D'agati, "Surrogate War," 454

<sup>64</sup> D'agati, "Surrogate War," 454

be peaceful in 1995 through the Dayton Accords, there are very few outlets outside of international sport to try and inflict their will over the other directly.

Within the Croatian national team, there is certainly a sense of pride in representing their country. Srđan Fabijanac, a Croatian journalist, describes this sentiment very clearly: “we have very strong national emotions and this ... is why the Croatian football players always play with the full heart for the national teams... When we play for the national team in football, in any sport, we play with more than 100%, we play with 110%.”<sup>65</sup> Engaging in surrogate war, whether against bitter rivals or a political ally, has meaning every time two states engage in it. When representing one’s nation, the prestige which comes with winning, or the sadness which comes from losing, means something to the states which partake in the surrogate war. But just because there is reason for states wanting to compete in FIFA does not mean that the results of matches have any affect on the decisions of their governments.

### **Conclusions**

In terms of observable changes or decisions in international relations, the case of FIFA stands in opposition to the thesis of this paper. It rarely serves as an organization which directly impacts the way states act. Each country sends a team into qualifying, hopes to make it to the World Cup, and cheers their team on along the way, with the goal of seeing their state hoist the trophy at the end of the tournament. This possibility only exists for about six of the 211 member nations, but the hope and joy it instills within a nation to witness its sports heroes competing on the world stage is what matters to most states. FIFA as an NGO is more than

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<sup>65</sup> Morse, “From Bloody Balkan War”

adept at fulfilling its own outlined goals.<sup>66</sup> “Grow the Game”- FIFA invests money yearly to increase access to soccer and has seen success over the past 20 years in bringing the game to non-traditional areas, namely Africa as mentioned earlier. “Touch the World” – FIFA incorporates 211 members, which is more states than the UN recognizes as members of their own NGO, providing a system in which even more states can interact. “Build a Better Future” – Though controversial, by successfully hosting the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, FIFA is forcing greater cooperation throughout the global community, and hopefully achieving this final goal.

The international relations theory of realism, in any of its variants, does not ultimately lend itself well to discussing FIFA as an NGO. The case of Serbia and Croatia serves as a difficult topic for a theorist to try to analyze, as it is a case which FIFA has had to deal with since the 1990’s and continues to deal with at the World Cup in 2022 yet remains unsolved. Croatia placing higher in the last two world cups has not been a cause to change the way that Croatia deals with Serbia. Similarly, the USA defeating Iran this past November did not give the USA a leg up in their current negotiations with Iran on a political level. FIFA cannot serve as a battleground for ethnic war, nationalist battles, or ideological conflict, but rather must adhere to its goals and serve as an area where cooperation must be found.

Cooperation in FIFA though does not automatically apply to cooperation in issues of security. Just because Croatia and Serbia competed in a soccer match does not mean that their governments could move forward with talks to become more peaceful. The United States and Iran competing in a soccer match did not incline leaders to try and make diplomatic decisions.

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<sup>66</sup> Larkin, “The Structure and Policies of FIFA”

But, on an individual level, these showcases of cooperation mean a lot in terms of reducing xenophobia and increasing general acceptance of other governments and people. The hosting of a mega-event primarily increases national pride, but examples from the 2006 World Cup indicate that the host country of Germany was able to enhance national pride without increasing xenophobia.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, “France’s victory at home during the 1998 World Cup was widely interpreted as showcasing the reality and benefits of the multicultural France versus the conservative, anti-immigrant policy of the National Front and its sympathizers.”<sup>68</sup>

Following the 2022 World Cup, one can hope that similar effects are seen. Qatar has not typically been viewed in a positive light by the west, due to the human rights issues which are in direct contrast with western ideals. But, following the hosting of a mega-event, it is possible Qatar has been able to showcase the positive aspects, and with the help of NGOs can begin to interact more positively in global politics. Discussing the reasons that he is supporting the World Cup and watching in Qatar, Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford made a promising point “‘Wales is an outward-looking, inclusive nation where people’s rights really matter to us,’ Drakeford said. ‘But it wasn’t always like that. In our own history, we have had times when things that we have done, including things that we have done in other parts of the world, wouldn’t measure up to the sorts of beliefs and standards that we hold ourselves to today.’”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Kersting, “Sport and National Identity” 290.

<sup>68</sup> Kersting, “Sport and National Identity” 290.

<sup>69</sup> MacInnes, “FIFA World Cup Revenue”

To answer the question which led to this research in clear terms, sport does not directly impact diplomacy between states. Although through researching, the goal was to prove there are direct effects, countries do not make decisions based on the results of sporting events. But, by looking at FIFA as an NGO, there are certainly indirect effects which FIFA promotes. FIFA allows states the opportunity to elevate themselves into a position which they may not be able to attain in other NGOs and is successful in its role as an NGO, achieving the mission statements of both it and the UN. Additionally, it provides an outlet for a state's national pride to grow without negatively impacting their views on other states. In most situations, outside of extreme cases, fans root their team on rather than generating hate for their opposition. Also, through fines and warnings, FIFA attempts to maintain unity and overall cooperation by opposing acts of hate.

The Orwell quote which has been referenced throughout this paper appears to be wrong in the case of world soccer.<sup>70</sup> Sport, in most situations is not war. It is not about hatred or jealousy, but rather the opposite. International sport is about the showcasing of one's state, the accepting of another team regardless of ideals, and the unification of over half of the world's population in watching the same event. Through the lens of a neoliberal institutionalist, FIFA may not be succeeding in altering foreign policy, but it is effective in its existence as an international institution; it successfully increases channels of communication outside of traditional military interaction.

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<sup>70</sup> D'agati, "Surrogate War," 454

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