

Kicking the Nation into Being: Sport, Myth, and the Making of a Malleable Hero in post-Yugoslav Croatia

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Abstract

This article examines the social construction of the former Croatian footballer Zvonimir Boban into a national hero over the last 35 years. Anchored in the so-called Maksimir riots of 13 May 1990 and Boban's mythologised kicking against a Yugoslav police officer, the article argues that it was less his footballing skills than the discursively constructed narrative around his persona that cemented his herodome in contemporary Croatia. This article analyses the discursive construction of heroism in contemporary Croatian popular culture through two complementary methodologies: narrative analysis of how Zvonimir Boban made sense of his own experiences and his (perceived) public persona; and a (critical) discourse analysis of how public perception of Zvonimir Boban was constructed in public discourse. It ultimately shows how through social processes of heroisation, Zvonimir Boban became a politically malleable hero, an idealised symbol and embodiment of Croatianness.

Keywords: Croatia; Zvonimir Boban; football, herodome; national(ist) myths

Introduction

"I am neither a Croatian soldier, nor a hero, but a normal person. The heroes went to war".¹ These ominous words by the former football player Zvonimir Boban in relation to his actions on 13 May 1990 - the day of the so-called Maksimir riots - are the starting point for this paper, which aims to discuss the interrelation of sport, (mythologised) herodome and national identity in post-Yugoslav Croatia. The above statement illustrates the paper's central argument: that Zvonimir Boban epitomises the modern Croatian national hero in all its contradictions, fluidity and situatedness.

¹ Matteoni, Robert. 2000. Nisam se pokajao. *Sportske novosti*, 14 May 2000. Translation by author; see also Šnidarić, Marko. 2012. *Boban: Ponosan sam na '90. i opet bih udario onog milicajca*. 24 Sata, 1 May 2012.

Figure 1: Zagreb mural depicting Zvonimir Boban's kick against a Yugoslav police officer on 13 May 1990



Source: Dario Brentin

Scholars of nationalism have long noted how central symbols, myths and heroes have been in national narratives and the formation of collective identities.² And while in the context of former Yugoslavia the study of heroic archetypes (i.e. the warrior-hero, the bandit or guerrilla-hero, the strongman leader-hero, the martyr-hero, etc.) has a long tradition, historian Vjekoslav Perica argues for the need to study heroes *from below*.³ In his work on the commemoration and memorialisation of hero-athletes in post-Yugoslav societies, Perica argues that during the 1990s, ethnonational heroes were manufactured for political purposes of ideologically legitimating newly formed post-Yugoslav political realities. At the same time, they were central to the marginalisation and exclusion of socialist heroes from public discourse and public space.⁴ In slight contrast, this paper argues that *from below* herodism, as conceptualised by Perica, does not necessarily have to be alternative or counter-hegemonic in its political agency. There is a need to understand *from below* herodism less as deterministic and politically manufactured, but as fluid and malleable in substantiating hegemonic narratives of national identity. This research thus follows scholars of herodism such as Keith Parry, who call for a sociological understanding of heroes and herodism, and

² For example, Smith, Anthony. 1991. *National identity*. Reno: University of Nevada Press; Hosking, Geoffrey, and George Schopflin. (eds.). 1997. *Myths and nationhood*. New York: Routledge.

³ Perica, Vjekoslav. 2014. *Heroes of a new kind: Commemoration and appropriations of Yugoslavia's sporting and pop-cultural heritage*, in *post-Yugoslavia. New cultural and political perspectives*, edited by Abazović, Dino, and Mitja Velikonja. New York & Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 96-133, 97.

⁴ Perica, Vjekoslav. 2014. Sport and nationhood. Commemorating hero-athletes in Post-Yugoslav States. *Südosteuropa* 62(1), 50-66; Perica, Vjekoslav, *Heroes of a new kind*.

underline that the field of sport, and athletes in particular, remain “one of the key domains from which people [...] draw their heroes”.⁵ Sporting heroes are deemed to have acquired “a special status by virtue of extraordinary and prestigious sporting skills and [...] moral qualities” that approach a social phenomenon.⁶

In the case of Zvonimir Boban, this paper argues that his fame and celebrity status go beyond the scope typically discussed in the scholarship of modern (sport) celebrities and associated fandom cultures.⁷ While football is the social context and a facilitator of his popularity, the paper argues that Boban’s *nationness*⁸ is central to how his public persona is portrayed, outweighing the sport-related stardom generally ascribed to international football players. It further contends that in Boban’s case, a distinction must be drawn between popular/emic perceptions or categories (i.e. national icon, national treasure, sporting role model) and the analytical/etic category of *national hero*. Whilst existing scholarship often links herodism to narratives of sporting superiority and success,⁹ Boban can be described as a *national hero* not only because the *national* refers to the nation-state context in which the perceived hero is situated, but rather because there are distinctly *national* tropes central to his heroism. It can be further argued that Zvonimir Boban is a rare, and arguably the sole, Croatian footballer to whom a “constant aura of uniqueness”¹⁰ is ascribed. Rather than his overall sporting abilities, this paper argues that the discursively constructed and mythologised narratives around his persona - in particular, *that* one kick on 13 May 1990 - resulted in a deep entrenchment of Boban’s herodism in contemporary Croatia.¹¹

On that day, the game between the ‘eternal’ rivals of the Yugoslav football league, Dinamo Zagreb and Red Star Belgrade, at Zagreb’s Maksimir stadium was suspended due to violent clashes between opposing fans. More than three decades later, prominent narratives in almost all post-Yugoslav societies frame the riots as the symbolic date when the Yugoslav dissolution began – the so-called ‘day the war started’.¹² Only two weeks after the election of pro-independence candidate Franjo Tuđman as Croatian president, following the first democratic parliamentary elections in the socialist republic of Croatia, the tensely awaited game saw fights both in the stadium and on the streets, with the club’s hooligan groups - Red Star Belgrade’s Delije and Dinamo Zagreb’s Bad Blue Boys - clashing violently.

Amidst the chaotic scenes, one incident stood out. The 21-year-old Zvonimir Boban entered the rioting crowds to assist a Dinamo Zagreb supporter being beaten by Yugoslav security forces. After the police men let go of the supporter, Boban engaged in a heated verbal

⁵ Parry, Keith. 2021. The formation of heroes and the myth of national identity. *Sport in Society. Culture, Commerce, Media, Politics* 24(6), 886-903, 886; see also Parry, Keith. 2009. Search for the hero: An investigation into the sports heroes of British sports fans. *Sport in Society. Culture, Commerce, Media, Politics* 12(2), 212-226.

⁶ Bifulco, Luca and Mario Tirino. 2018. The sport hero in the social imagery. Identity, community, ritual and myth. *Im@go. A Journal of the Social Imaginary* 7(11), 9-25, 10; see also Allen, Dean. 2013. ‘National heroes’: Sport and the creation of icons. *Sport in History* 33(4), 584-594.

⁷ See Chung, Heejoon. 2003. Sport star vs rock star in globalizing popular culture: Similarities, difference and paradox in discussion of celebrities. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 38(1), 99-108; Crawford, Gary. 2004. *Consuming sport: Fans, sport and culture*. London: Routledge.

⁸ See Brubaker, Rogers. 1996. *Nationalism reframed: Nationhood and the national question in the new Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁹ Parry, *The formation of heroes*, 899; see also Povedák, István. 2014. *From heroes to celebrities. Problems of definition and potential solutions*, in *Heroes and celebrities in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Povedák, István. Szeged: Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, 7-18.

¹⁰ Bifulco and Tirino, *The sport hero*, 10; see *Zvonimir Boban: Nacionalni stadion je nepromišljen populizam – i pravi nonsens*. *Večernji list*, 8 September 2018.

¹¹ See Parry, *The formation of heroes*, 888.

¹² See Brentin, Dario. 2013. ‘A lofty battle for the nation’. The social roles of sport in Tuđman’s Croatia, *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics* 16(8), 993-1008.

exchange with an officer who was threatening him with a baton. Dinamo's team captain took a few steps back and delivered a flying kick that knocked the police officer to the ground. Boban's act was instantly applauded, with thundering chants of 'Zvone, Zvone!' coming from the stands. His subsequent 'mythical' kick against a Yugoslav police officer captured the political antagonisms of late Yugoslavia and made Boban instantly "immortal".¹³ The initial skirmish had escalated into the worst riots in Yugoslav sporting history, broadcast live in its entirety by Yugoslav federal television. While the fighting continued in the stands and on the pitch, the Yugoslav television commentator closed his broadcast with a defeatist and prescient remark on the significance of what he had just witnessed, proclaiming that "this usually ends in national separations."¹⁴

This singular instance of youthful *bunt* - a term broadly applied to various forms of Balkan social micro-/macro uprisings and historically inherent contrarianism against real/supposed/imagined oppressors - enabled Boban to be heroised and distinguished from other national figures. Following Tobias Schlechtriemen, this paper views the kick against the symbolic oppressor as a heroic transgression; an "act of crossing a boundary [through which] the essence of a heroic figure is constituted".¹⁵ The analysis, however, focuses on "processes of heroization", understanding heroic figures as "the result of cultural processes of meaning-making" rather than something that is "just there".¹⁶ It is an attempt to digress from the questions of what constitutes a modern (national/ised) hero, or from which characteristics (i.e. courage, self-sacrifice, etc.) such a status is ascribed. Rather, following Kristina Vugdelija's theoretical framework, this paper thus focuses on the "multifacetedness of the hero [...] thus approaching hero-making as a process of social construction which [is] continuously negotiated and reinterpreted".¹⁷

Constructing herodom: Methodological approaches

Bifulco and Tironi note that the skills, performances and successes of athletes turned heroes constitute the "real and concrete" actions that form the basis of heroisation, yet it is only through images and "narratives [...] that they acquire a heroic consistency".¹⁸ The medialised narration of contemporary mythologised herodom appears across diverse media forms, including daily and periodical press, fiction, film and radio, as well as documentaries. This article analyses the discursive construction of heroism in contemporary Croatian popular discourse by applying two complementary methodologies focusing on different aspects of language and meaning-making: narrative analysis methodology¹⁹, analysing how Zvonimir Boban made sense of his own experiences and his (perceived) public persona; supplemented by a (critical) discourse analysis, exploring how public perceptions of Boban were constructed in public discourse.²⁰

¹³ Runjić, Saša. 1999. Zvonimir Boban – od nacionalnog mita do studenta povijesti. *Globus*, 19 November 1999.

¹⁴ *The Last Yugoslav Team* (dir. Vuk Janić, 2000); See also *Dinamo - Crvena Zvezda – Domovinski rat je počeo na Maksimiru* (dir. Miljenko Manjkas 2014).

¹⁵ Schlechtriemen, Tobias. 2019. The hero as an effect. Boundary work in processes of heroization. *Helden. Heroes. Héros* 5, 17-26, 21.

¹⁶ Falkenhayner, Nicole / Meurer, Sebastian, and Tobias Schlechtriemen. 2019. Editorial: Analyzing processes of heroization. Theories, methods, histories. *Helden. Heroes. Héros* 5, 5-9, 6.

¹⁷ Vugdelija, Kristina. 2018. *The making of national heroes in contemporary Croatia. Remembering Franjo Tuđman*, in *Heroes – Repräsentationen des Heroischen in Geschichte, Literatur und Alltag*, edited by Rolshoven, Johanna / Krause, Toni Janosch, and Justin Winkler. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 193-219, 193.

¹⁸ Bifulco and Tironi, *The Sport Hero*, 13; see also Trotsuk and Subbotina, *Three questions*, 171.

¹⁹ Riessman, Catherine. 2005. *Narrative Analysis*, in *Narrative, Memory and Everyday Life*, edited by Kelly, Nancy / Horrocks, Christine / Milnes, Kate / Roberts, Brian and David Robinson. Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield, 1-7.

²⁰ See Wodak, Ruth, and Michael Meyer. (eds). 2015. *Methods of discourse studies*. London: Sage.

The methodologies were employed in a two-fold manner. On the one hand, discourse analysis was applied to journalistic texts covering the persona and career of Zvonimir Boban across various formats (i.e. life story, interview, portrait, clickbaiting, reportage, etc.). Additionally, popular culture reiterations (documentaries, monuments and murals, fiction, etc.) were used for contextualisation but not analysed in the same depth. This approach is particularly suited to the study of the outlined phenomenon because “discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it”.²¹ As postulated by Wodak and Fairclough, the “discursive event is shaped by [these situations, institutions and social structures], but it also shapes them”.²² Conversely, direct interviews with Zvonimir Boban were analysed as first-hand expressions that warrant close reading, as they constitute significant narrative blocks that reveal the ways Boban has sought to portray himself. As Riessman observes, “imagination and strategic interests influence how storytellers choose to connect events and make them meaningful for others”.²³ These interviews and their content are naturally fluid and sometimes contradictory, yet the method allows the tracing of patterns of identity and agency in personal storytelling, and illustrates the procedural and transformative nature of how Boban made sense of his life-defining experiences and their discursive (re-)constructions.

The analysis draws primarily on Croatian news media over the last 35 years, from Boban’s meteoric rise to national prominence until the present day. It analyses both established legacy print media and various forms of new and entertainment media. Given this temporal scope, particular attention was paid to open-ended, life-story interviews given by Boban, interpreted as *critical discourse moments*.²⁴ Functioning as focal points characterised by dense media coverage, these moments in time accentuated public awareness and elevated interest, arguably challenging “existing discursive positions or constructs or, in contrast, [contributing] to their further sedimentation”.²⁵ Analogue newspaper material from the 1990s and early 2000s was gathered at the National University Library in Zagreb, while more contemporary material was sampled via media-specific search engines. The keywords **Zvonimir Boban* were searched in each respective media outlet, thereby returning only the articles available on each digital platform. Articles that mentioned Boban only in passing, as part of a wider group, or in a marginal form, were deemed irrelevant for this paper and excluded.

Nationalism, myths and the pantheon of national(ist) heroes

Scholarly interest in heroes and herodom has been well established in a variety of academic disciplines, from social psychology and the humanities to leadership studies. Ascribing to the academic consensus that neither a unified scholarly definition of *hero* nor a clear understanding of what constitutes *herodom* exists, this paper primarily draws on work from sociology and nationalism studies interested in the social functions of these phenomena,

²¹ Fairclough, Norman and Ruth Wodak. 1997. *Critical discourse analysis*, in *Discourse as social interaction*, edited by van Dijk, Teun. London: Sage, 258-284, 258.

²² Fairclough and Wodak, *Critical discourse analysis*, 258.

²³ Riessman, Catherine Kohler. 2005. *Narrative analysis*, in *narrative, memory and everyday life*, edited by Kelly, Nancy / Horrocks, Christine / Milnes, Kate / Roberts, Brian, and David Robinson. Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield, 1-7, 6.

²⁴ Chilton, Paul. 1987. Metaphor, euphemism and the militarization of language. *Current Research on Peace and Violence* 10, 7-19.

²⁵ Carvalho, Anabela. 2005. Representing the politics of the greenhouse effect: Discursive strategies in the British media. *Critical Discourse Studies* 2(1), 1-29, 6.

rather than typological classification.²⁶ As argued by Kristian Frisk, heroism should be understood as socially structured and shaped by cultural, political and historical contexts, raising questions “about the relationship between the individual and the social order, the cause of history, the locus of human behaviour and the formation of cultural meaning”.²⁷

As noted in the introduction, the role of and the construction of heroes in national narratives is widely discussed in nationalism studies. In the former Yugoslav space, research on mythologised heroism and hero-worship has largely centred around historical figures and their role in shaping national identity narratives.²⁸ Recalling Perica’s arguments, the 1990s and the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia gave rise to “new heroic cults such as ethnic paramilitary leaders, adventurers, common criminals and con men released from foreign prisons to become political leaders or patriotic fighters in the Balkan wars, political demagogues and mavericks”.²⁹ While Perica focused on anti-heroes in sport and popular culture, his work is part of a broader shift in scholarship on nationalism and heroism towards contemporary figures and popular culture. In post-Yugoslav Croatia, research has focused on the country’s first democratically elected president, Franjo Tuđman³⁰, wartime general Ante Gotovina³¹, the ‘hero-city’ of Vukovar,³² and Croatian war veterans as a social group.³³ Yet the controversial musician Marko Perković-Thompson has attracted the most significant scholarly interest.³⁴ This paper aims to contribute to these scholarly endeavours through a case study of Zvonimir Boban.

The mythologising aspect of Croatian nationalism recalls Ivan Čolović’s hypothesis that Zvonimir Boban’s life story can be understood as a ‘mythological story’³⁵: tale of *us* against *them* that accentuates his heroic attributes as a football player, glorifies his real and/or ascribed sacrifice(s) for the nation and celebrates his mental strength through his critical awareness of ‘what is at stake’³⁶ throughout his career. Yet, his much-mythologised persona cannot be understood outside of the context of the role sport played in the formation of post-

²⁶ Frisk, Kristian. 2019. What makes a hero? Theorising the social structuring of heroism. *Sociology* 53(1), 87-103; Trotsuk, Irina, and Mariya Subbotina. 2021. Three questions to start the sociological study of heroism. *RUDN Journal of Sociology* 21(1), 169-180.

²⁷ Frisk, *What makes a hero*, 99.

²⁸ Anzulović, Branimir. 1999. *Heavenly Serbia: From myth to genocide*. London: Hurst&Co; Čolović, Ivan. 2002. *The politics of symbol in Serbia*. London: Hurst&Co; Kølsto, Pål. (ed.). 2015. *Myths and Boundaries in South-Eastern Europe*. London: Hurst&Co.

²⁹ Perica, *Heroes of a new kind*, 97-98.

³⁰ Vugdelija, *The making of national heroes*; Škrbić Alempijević, Nevenam, and Marijana Belaj. 2014. Remembering ‘the father of the contemporary state of Croatia’. The celebration of Tuđman’s birthday in his birthplace. *Traditiones* 43(1), 79-109.

³¹ Vukušić, Iva. 2013. *Judging their hero. Perceptions of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in Croatia*, in *Prosecuting war crimes. Lessons and legacies of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia*, edited by Gow, James / Kerr, Rachel, and Zoran Pajic. London: Routledge, 151-182; Pletenac, Tomislav. 2014. From conviction to heroism. The case of a Croatian war general. *Traditiones* 43(1), 111-123.

³² Potkonjak, Sanja, and Nevena Škrbić Alempijević. 2018. *Remember Vukovar. Emplacing war-time memories, constructing a hero-city in present-day Croatia*, in *Heroes – Repräsentationen des Heroischen in Geschichte, Literatur und Alltag*, edited by Rolshoven, Johanna / Krause, Toni Janosch, and Justin Winkler. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 171-193.

³³ Sokolić, Ivor. 2019. *Heroes at the margins. Veterans, elites and the narrative of war*, in *Framing the nation and collective identities. Political rituals and cultural memory of the Twentieth-Century traumas in Croatia*, edited by Pavlaković, Vjeran, and Davor Pauković. London: Routledge, 143-159.

³⁴ Duvnjak, Neven. 2014. *Marko Perković Thompson. National hero or Croatia’s troublemaker?*, in *Heroes and celebrities in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Povedák, István. Szeged: Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, 186-199; Pletenac, Tomislav. 2016. Accidental celebrity. Constructing fame in post-war Croatia. *Traditiones* 45(1), 31-46; Vugdelija, Kristina. 2023. *Tvorba nacionalnih heroja u suvremenim kulturama sjećanja u Hrvatskoj*. PhD thesis, Zagreb: University of Zagreb, 171-219.

³⁵ Čolović, Ivan. 1985. *Divlja književnost: Etnolingvističko proučavanje paraliterature*. Belgrade: Nolit.

³⁶ Čolović, *Divlja književnost*, 233-251; see also Schlechtriemen, *The Hero as an Effect*.

Yugoslav national identity, specifically the role of the Croatian national football team.³⁷ As Ozren Biti notes, the Croatian national football team was instrumental in the creation of the “cult of the national team”, discursively constructed as a “true” performance of “Croatianess”.³⁸ Manifested through media coverage, public interest and exuberant outbursts of joy during periods of success, the national team increasingly fostered high levels of public identification throughout the 1990s. A myth emerged during Franjo Tuđman’s regime in which athletes representing Croatia were not merely athletes, but rather the symbolic embodiment of the Croatian state. Defining myth as “symbolic text”, Zdzisław Mach elaborated the ways its surrounding narratives transmit “values, norms and patterns essential and fundamental for a given culture”;³⁹ stories we tell each other about ourselves. In her work on the role of the heroised individual in heroisation processes, Veronica Kitchen argues that “the capacity of states or other groups to use heroes [largely depends] on the negotiation of the heroic narrative”⁴⁰ between the individual, the group and the audience. She describes this relationship between the construction of political community and organic heroisation as “iterative and self-reinforcing”⁴¹ with the capability to “do the work of linking together individuals into a political community by personalising the values of the community.”⁴² Since the Tuđman regime relied on historical traditionalism and the invocation of political myths and symbols,⁴³ it thus relied upon constructed *heroes* to foster political legitimacy: e.g. participants in the so-called Croatian Spring, the Croatian émigré community or the *Homeland War* defenders. Successful athletes were celebrated as “Croatian knights”, unambiguously constructing a symbolic parallel to Croatian historical statehood.⁴⁴ Conversely, Tuđman’s legitimacy depended upon the loyal backing of these chosen “knights”, including Zvonimir Boban, captain of the Croatian national football team, who was periodically dubbed not only a “knight”, but a Croatian “ban”.⁴⁵ Generally, athletes representing the Croatian nation were ideologically framed as “national ambassadors”⁴⁶ and broadly perceived as the embodiment of the ‘new values’ of a nation.⁴⁷

Zvonimir Boban – the man and his making

Zvonimir ‘Zvone’ Boban was born on 8 October 1968 in Imotski, close to the present-day border of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, then constituent republics of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. A talented footballer from a young age, he joined Hajduk Split’s youth team at age 12 but moved to Dinamo Zagreb’s academy a year later. Touted as a generational talent, he made his professional debut in the Yugoslav first league on 12 December 1985 against FK Radnički Niš, aged just 17. At 19, he became the youngest team captain in Dinamo Zagreb’s history. He was instrumental in leading the team to two second-

³⁷ Brentin, *A lofty battle*.

³⁸ Biti, Ozren. 2002. Vatreći – hrvatski nogometni proizvod. *libra libera* 11, 25-38.

³⁹ Mach, Zdzisław. 1993. *Symbols, conflict and identity: Essays in political anthropology*. Albany: Suny Press, 58-59.

⁴⁰ Kitchen, Veronica. 2019. *Heroism and the construction of political community*, in *Heroism and global politics*, edited by Kitchen, Veronica, and Jennifer G. Mathers. London & New York: Routledge, 21-35, 21.

⁴¹ Kitchen, *Heroism and the construction*, 23.

⁴² Kitchen, *Heroism and the construction*, 33.

⁴³ Malešević, Siniša. 2002. *Ideology, legitimacy and the new state. Yugoslavia, Serbia and Croatia*. London & Portland: Frank Cass, 226-227.

⁴⁴ Eržišnik, Nela. 1998. Nogometna ‘Oluja’ u Francuskoj. *Vjesnik*, 7 July 1998.

⁴⁵ Židak, Tomislav. 1995. Dan kada je Boban postao ban. *Sportske Novosti*, 13/14 May 1995; see also Jurišić, Bernard. 2009. Ban boban i(li) poglavica niko. *Sportnet*, 13 January 2009; Samovojska, Antun. 2020. Neponovljivi lider svačionice i glavni lik jedne od pet utakmica koje su po CNN-u promijenile svijet. *Sportske Novosti*, 14 June 2020. The “ban” was a medieval title of nobility reserved for high-ranking officials who were appointed to govern Croatian territories. Historically, a ban had significant political authority vis-à-vis foreign rulers which is why the title remains a powerful political symbol of Croatian sovereignty until today.

⁴⁶ See Brentin, *A lofty battle*.

⁴⁷ Perica, *Heroes of a new kind*.

place finishes in the Yugoslav first league in 1989/90 and 1990/91. He later moved to AC Milan, where he became a central figure in a team that won four Italian championships and the UEFA Champions League during the 1990s. While he led the Croatian national football team to a third-place finish at the 1998 FIFA World Cup, arguably his greatest international success came with Yugoslavia: in 1987, he played for the U-20 team that won the 1987 FIFA U-20 World Championship in Chile, part of a squad widely regarded as Yugoslavia's 'golden generation' that never was.

Once he completed his active playing career in 2001/2002, Boban pursued numerous post-football endeavours, as both an entrepreneur and pundit. He enrolled at the University of Zagreb, completing a university degree in history with a thesis on "Christianity in the Roman Empire" and briefly pursued a PhD in comparative literature before shifting his focus towards sports journalism and punditry. He became the director of the influential Croatian daily sports newspaper *Sportske Novosti* from 2006 to 2009 and for another brief spell in 2015, while working as a commentator and pundit for the television channel Sky Italia as well as a columnist for the Italian broadsheet sports newspaper *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, mostly commenting on Italian football. Over the past decade, whilst still occasionally active in media contexts, Boban shifted his focus towards becoming a football administrator and executive. As such, he held the roles of Deputy Secretary General of FIFA (2016-2019), Chief Football Officer at AC Milan (2019-2020), and, most recently, served as Chief of Football at UEFA, a position created for him in early 2021, from which he retired in January 2024.

The kick that made a hero

Zvonimir Boban's ascension into the symbolic pantheon of Croatian national heroes was arguably instantaneous. Although he had been a prominent rising star of Yugoslav football during the late 1980s, it was his actions during the so-called Maksimir riots of 13 May 1990 that triggered his meteoric rise to herodom. The Maksimir riots, themselves a heavily mythologised moment in late socialist Yugoslav history, anchor the starting point of Boban's heroism narrative.⁴⁸ Immediately following the brief but almost allegorical moment in which Boban kicked a Yugoslav police officer, it was celebrated in Croatian media as a brave act of resistance against a widely perceived Serbian hegemony within Yugoslav institutions - a hegemony that was being "blatantly demonstrated" by the unwillingness of the police to defend Dinamo Zagreb supporters.⁴⁹ Days after the incident, Boban gave an interview revealing that his reason for entering the pitch was because he had spotted a group of his cousins being beaten by the police:

*I yelled at the policemen 'How are you not ashamed'. Their fans did not touch at all. Then one of the police men hit me with the baton on the shoulder and the other on the elbow. I hope that was recorded. I went 'crazy' and knocked out one of them.*⁵⁰

Following the incident, the Yugoslav football association banned Boban, a decision widely interpreted as yet another attack against Croatia's growing aspirations for national self-determination.⁵¹ In an open letter replying to the ban a few days later, Boban tried to defend his actions by claiming self-defence against an "uncontrolled power holder with bloody eyes

⁴⁸ See Mills, Richard. 2018. *The politics of football in Yugoslavia. Sport, nationalism and the state*. London: I.B. Tauris, 202-228.

⁴⁹ Babić, Jasna. 1990. Na rubu kaosa. *Danas*, 22 May 1990.

⁵⁰ Beraković, Dražen. 1990. Nokaut maksimirskog bana!. *Sport magazin*, 16 May 1990. Translation by author.

⁵¹ Kožul, Ado. 1990. Boban kao Pogorelić. *Sport magazin*, 31 May 1990.

and without a brain or sense of reality”.⁵² He remained adamant that he was a “victim” of a “sport-political lynch” and that his actions had not been politically motivated:

*I got on the pitch when I saw that the fans were breaking through the fence and running towards the centre. I wanted to stop their further attack, which was my spontaneous reaction. What I want to say is, I hit a police officer, and I am not sorry.*⁵³

Referring to the police officer he had struck down, Boban asked how “such a guy” could “take care of peace and order”?⁵⁴ While expressing his loyalty to the political concept of the Croatian ethno-nation, Boban was nonetheless cautious not to break with the existing structures of Yugoslav sport. Although he was omitted from the national team for the 1990 FIFA World Cup, he was seemingly aware that complete exclusion from the Yugoslav national team would significantly lower his chances on the international market, a move that had been on the horizon in the months before 13 May 1990. After his suspension had ended, he represented Yugoslavia on several occasions, the final time in Belgrade against the Faroe Islands on 16 May 1991, by which time the political conflict in the Yugoslav federation had already claimed numerous lives.⁵⁵

The memorialisation of Boban’s kick in Croatia takes multiple forms. As observed by Škrbić Alempijević and Belaj in their contribution on the remembrance of Franjo Tuđman, processes of heroisation or hero-making require both discursive and material space.⁵⁶ In Boban’s case, the most prominent space is the yearly anniversary of the Maksimir riots, when almost all Croatian media engage in a mantric reification of his persona and the 1990 act, a journalistic practice established in the mid-1990s.⁵⁷ These anniversaries function as *sites of memory*,⁵⁸ crystallising collective memory and serving as socio-historical reference points. Vugdelija argues that these practices further “legitimize the established social order” producing a hegemonic “heroic narrative” that determines “the conceptions of the hero that are to be permanently remembered: which heroic features, what events from his life, what aspects of his work, and what are they supposed to symbolize”.⁵⁹

Zvonimir Boban’s action on 13 May 1990 – the ‘mythical kick’ reigns at the centre of the mythologised tale of his heroism. The image that captured the moment has been reproduced through a myriad of genres and stands as one of the most iconic photographs in post-Yugoslav Croatian history. The various multimodal aspects of cultural production emblematising Boban’s hero status in contemporary Croatia stretch from traditional forms of memorabilia, like documentaries and fiction movies,⁶⁰ to widely accessible public street art and murals⁶¹ and even individualised forms of memorialisation/glorification such as t-shirts or tattoos of the kick.⁶² As a way of contextualising the image in contemporary Croatia, the “iconic

⁵² Boban, Zvonimir. 1990. *Žrtva sportsko-političkog linča*. *Sport magazin*, 24 May 1990.

⁵³ Boban, *Žrtva sportsko-političkog linča*; Translation by author; see also Tripković, Luka. 1990. Poluuvenula ruža. *Večernji list*, 28 May 1990; Židak, Tomislav. 1990. Što sam Dinamu, sin ili pastorak?. *Sportske Novosti*, 31 May 1990.

⁵⁴ Boban, *Žrtva sportsko-političkog linča*.

⁵⁵ Klauški, Tomislav. 2009. *Mit o Bobanovu high kicku*. *Index.hr*, 13 May 2009.

⁵⁶ Škrbić Alempijević and Belaj, *Remembering*.

⁵⁷ Samovojska, *Neponovljivi lider*.

⁵⁸ Nora, Pierre. 1989. Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire. *Representations* xxvi, 7-25.

⁵⁹ Vugdelija, *The making of national heroes*, 194.

⁶⁰ see Brentin, Dario, and Brown, David. 2020. *Of friends and foes: Remembering Yugoslavia in sport documentaries*, in *sporting realities. Critical readings of the sport documentary*, edited by Sheppard, Samantha, and Travis Vogan. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 135-153.

⁶¹ see Brentin, Dario. 2019. *Ambassadors of memory: “Honoring the homeland war” in Croatian sport*, in *framing the nation and collective identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*, edited by Pavlaković, Vjeran, and Davor Pauković. London: Routledge, 160-176.

⁶² Rukavina, Željko. 2020. *Zvone Boban mi se javio i rekao da je tetovaža sjajna!*. *24Sata*, 22 May 2020.

power”⁶³ of the photo of Boban’s kick arguably allows for a comparison with the internationally much wider recognisable Tiananmen Square ‘Tank Man’; if not in global reach, then in local significance. At the time, the kick itself, though later heavily mythologised, did indeed represent a powerful symbolic act, even if the political implications were unclear and yet had to be discursively constructed into a heroic narrative. On that day, Boban became a *national hero* because he had dared to publicly challenge an entire political state system personified by a single police officer.

The social construction of the humble hero as a national(ist) moral vertical

In retrospect, Boban recalls the moment as being more than just an “ordinary upheaval” against an individual police officer who acted improperly, but as a challenge to the legitimacy of an entire political system; a moment in which he had to be ready to risk “career, life [...] everything for the Croatian goal”.⁶⁴ Although some commentators have suggested that he seems “reluctant”⁶⁵ to talk about 13 May 1990, others have pointed out that Boban “is always amenable to fielding questions from interviewers who feel not asking about it [i.e. the Maksimir riots] would be akin to quizzing Neil Armstrong about his life’s work and not mentioning the moon”.⁶⁶ Conversely, Croatian journalist Aleksandar Holiga observed that “you don’t speak to Boban - he speaks to you if he so chooses, and he also gets to pick questions: there is no way you’re asking him about that ‘high kick that started the War’”.⁶⁷ But, as a ‘true hero’, Boban neither points out his heroic act nor singles out his own actions. On the contrary, a central narrative trope over the last 35 years has been his highlighting that the “true heroes” were the “guys, who are responsible that we live in our own homeland, [who] consciously risked their lives [although] they knew what could happen to them [...] they were brave, true patriots”.⁶⁸ On the eve of the 30th anniversary of the Maksimir riots, Boban reaffirmed this narrative:

*I did not become the symbol of resistance, nor did my kick. All the people who were defending themselves that day are symbols. That was an uprising of all of us [...] Many claim that back then, I risked more than the others. That is not true. I may have risked my career, but in that context, that does not mean anything. My real impulse and the only one who guided me, and all the others, was the wish for freedom from the regime.*⁶⁹

The centrality of humbleness and humility in the modern hero has been widely discussed,⁷⁰ yet it also illustrates Boban’s self-narration as a socially responsible actor, aware of how he is being perceived, yet resisting the allure of self-aggrandisement. As a *hero of the people by the people and for the people*, he constructs his persona through traditional populist narratives that equate him with the fans and more broadly the common people, emphasising the collective struggle of an ethno-national community:

⁶³ See Alexander, Jeffrey / Bartmanski, Dominik, and Bernhard. Giesen. 2012. (eds.). *Iconic power: Materiality and meaning in social life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁶⁴ Čerina, Leo. 2011. *Utakmica dinamita i zvezde na maksimiru promjenila je svijet*. *24Sata*, 11 January 2011; see also *The last Yugoslav team* (dir. Vuk Janić, 2000).

⁶⁵ Kuper, Simon. 2021. *Zvonimir Boban: ‘I always felt I was created to play football’*. *Financial Times*, 11 June 2021.

⁶⁶ Glendenning, Barry. 2024. *Zvonimir Boban and a history of sticking it to the man*. *The Guardian*, 25 January 2024.

⁶⁷ Holiga, Aleksandar. 2016. *Zvonimir Boban, a controversial interview and Croatia’s conflicted relationship with its national side*. *The Blizzard* 21, June 2016.

⁶⁸ Matteoni, *Nisam se pokajao*.

⁶⁹ See also Wegmann, Michael. 2017. *Kroatien-legende Boban schrieb mit Tritt gegen Polizisten Geschichte*. *Blick*, 18. September 2017. Translation by author.

⁷⁰ See Swain, Jordan, and Elise Murray Dykhuis. 2024. *Heroism and humility, in the Encyclopaedia of Heroism Studies*, edited by Allison, Scott / Beggan, James, and George Goethals. Cham: Springer, 1035-1039.

*I recall with pride to have been part of this story, together with the [Bad Blue] Boys and the Croatian people [...] I never wanted the role of the hero; the heroes are the soldiers who carried the weight and created Croatia. Because of one blow against a police officer, I am not a hero.*⁷¹

Whether genuinely felt or not, this narrative trope functions as a powerful discursive tool, legitimising Boban to act as a *moral figure* and enabling him to speak authentically on behalf of *the people*. A commentator from the leading conservative Croatian daily newspaper *Večernji List* described him accordingly as someone who

*stands out amongst Croatian football players through his game, but also intellectually, politically and spiritually. From a milieu where there is no lack of uneducated lovers of *cajke*⁷², primitive and those inclined to gamble, Boban emerged cultured, with a university diploma and as a person inclined to noble gestures.*⁷³

In that sense, Zvonimir Boban functions as a discursive projection surface in the Croatian public sphere. These discursive projections, as illustrated in the quote above, mobilise a myriad of embodied tropes from processes of modernisation to occidentalising/de-balkanising narratives symbolically and literally personifying Croatia's socially constructed belonging to 'Europe'. Zvonimir Boban is being portrayed as someone who rose above his humble beginnings in the Dalmatian hinterland – a region often portrayed as the Croatian “inner Balkans”⁷⁴ – a region widely perceived and understood not only as a structurally and economically peripheral one, but also as the hotbed of Croatian nationalism where your “birth [place] instantly inscribes [your] belonging to [the political] right”, and culturally stigmatised as “backward” and “provincial”.⁷⁵ Boban, who has centred his professional and personal life mostly outside of Croatia since the early 1990s, has nevertheless frequently referred to his home region as character-defining and central to his success:

*This is a feisty region where everyone always fought to survive [...] the barren land gives you a character, it forms you, strengthens you. One of the bigger reasons why we made it.*⁷⁶

Illustrating this connection to his native birthplace, a video of Boban driving around the area in his car with the windows down, singing along to Ante Cash's song *Volim Imotski* [“I love Imotski”], went viral in the summer of 2024. A year later, he collaborated with Ante Cash as a lyricist on the song *Imotski*:

*All that makes me
You gave me ages ago:
Small playgrounds
Coffee like soil
And the guard of the brazen

Everything that is important
I took from you ages ago:*

⁷¹ Redžić, Dea. 2020. *Nije Boban udario policajca. Policajac je udario mladića, a ja nisam mogao gledati*. *Index.hr*, 13 May 2020. Translation by author.

⁷² *Cajke* is a pejorative term predominantly used in Croatia to describe turbo-folk music, a genre of South Slavic popular music which originated in Serbia by a combination of electronic and folk music in the early 1990s. It has ever since functioned as a symbolic marker of distinction, both internally (socio-culturally) and externally (ethno-politically) creating and constructing *otherness*. For a more in-depth analysis on the intersection of popular music and national identity in contemporary Croatia see Baker, Catherine. 2010. *Sounds of the borderland: Popular music, war and nationalism in Croatia since 1991*. Farnham: Ashgate.

⁷³ Jajčinović, Milan. 2007. Poseban nogometaš zvonimir boban. *Večernji list*, 4 January 2007. Translation by author.

⁷⁴ Luketić, Katarina. 2015. Strategije nepomirljivosti: Cvjičevsko-tomašičevski kompleks u suvremenoj hrvatskoj medijskoj zbilji. *Narodna umjetnost* 52(5), 31-51.

⁷⁵ Pavković, Jozo. 2015. *Bobanova Hercegovina. razapeta između dvije domovine. čeka nove zore*. *Večernji list*, 6 October 2015; see also Schäubel, Michaela. 2014. *Narrating victimhood. Gender, religion and the making of place in post-war Croatia*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.

⁷⁶ Gabelić, Tomislav, and Mislav Znaor. 2023. *Zvone Boban vratio se gdje je sve započelo: 'Nekad je ovo bio sirotinjski kraj, to te sve ojača'*. *24Sata*, 3 August 2023. Translation by author.

*Respect, freedom,
A wild line, never a losing one*

*I realise that I never left.
As your learning is my blood,
And your thoughts may fix my beliefs.*

*And now, when my knees pray for a new spring,
And the Zagreb winter lasts too long,
You are clearer, little town, clearer than ever.⁷⁷*

Boban's upbringing and the geography of his native city are frequently cited both by himself and media commentators as formative influences. He was raised in an "anti-communist household"⁷⁸ with a "nationalistically oriented father"⁷⁹, who from an early age "planted [...] the values of a patriarchal catholic family"⁸⁰ into his children. This could be interpreted as a strategy of heroisation, which Ivan Čolović has defined as the "popularization" of national heroes through the process of "rooting," in which "the popular, peasant origin of some national leader or fighter is stressed."⁸¹

Throughout his professional and post-playing career, Boban's own family life has been under steady scrutiny from Croatian tabloid media. Having married his 'teenage sweetheart', the fashion designer Leonarda Boban (née Lončar), in 1993, the pair were frequently portrayed as one of Croatia's most elegant and fashionable couples.⁸² Media attention intensified following the surprising end of their relationship in 2021, after 28 years of marriage, during which they adopted four children and had one biological daughter of their own. One celebrity tabloid labelled the break-up as the reason why "Croats have ceased to believe in fairytale love".⁸³ In a final twist, Zvonimir and Leonarda reunited in 2024, re-establishing their status as Croatia's "fairytale" relationship.⁸⁴ Leonarda was also frequently credited as the brain behind Zvonimir Boban's appearance, with him being regularly voted as one of the "best dressed" Croatian men by fashion and tabloid media alike.⁸⁵

Boban's appearance, hairstyles, and fashion sense were periodically scrutinised for clashing with hegemonic notions of Balkan masculinity. Persistent rumours about his sexuality have circulated in the Croatian public. In 2009, the openly gay novelist Nicolas Bendini published his first novel, *Solo per una notte* ("For one night only"), in which he tells the story of a secret love affair between a Croatian professional football player and an 18-year-old Parisian high school student. Croatian tabloids immediately speculated that Boban was the player in question. Despite the author insisting on the novel's fictional nature, figures such as Ćiro Blažević, the former team coach of the Croatian national football team who is known for his homophobic views, insisted that it was shameful for a "Croatian knight" like Boban to be

⁷⁷ The song can be listened to here: YouTube. *Ante Cash – Imotski (Iden Doli Intro) ft. Zvonimir Boban, Vedran Mlikota & Ante Gelo* (accessed: 2 August 2025). Translation by author.

⁷⁸ Šnidarić, *Boban: Ponosan sam*.

⁷⁹ Lasić, Igor. 2002. *Od Mračaja do maksimirskog arhipelaga*. *Dani*, 11 October 2002.

⁸⁰ N.N. 2002. *Od sada sam samo tata i muž*. *Story*, 2 October 2002; see also Hazler, Iris. 2016. *Zvone Boban: Krao sam bonove za menzu i švercao kazete*. *portal.hr*, 30 March 2016.

⁸¹ Čolović, *The Politics of Symbol*, 59.

⁸² Vučićević, Tanja. 2024. *Bobani nisu jedini*. *Gloria*, 31 January 2024; Banjeglav Perković, Gorana. 2024. *Kako je počela ljubav bobana i leonarde*. *Story*, 5 February 2024.

⁸³ Parlov, Tomislav. 2022. *Hrvati zbog njih prestali vjerovati u ljubav iz bajke*. *Story*, 4 November 2022.

⁸⁴ Večernji list. 2025. *Ljubavi su dali drugu šansu*. *Večernji list*, 14 February 2025.

⁸⁵ For example, Bonačić, Dino. 2012. *Tko su najbolje odjeveni Hrvati?*. *Miss7*, 3 April 2012; Hajduk, Tina. 2025. *Zvonimir Boban jedan je od najbolje odjevenih Hrvata*. *Diva*, 14 April 2025; 24Sata. 2025. *Sve odjevne kombinacije Zvone Bobana: Vratio se u Dinamo, ali nikad nije izgubio smisao za stil*. *24Sata*, 14 April 2025.

named in the book at all.⁸⁶ Although largely confined to the fringes of the Croatian commentariat⁸⁷ and online forums (i.e. Reddit, Twitter/X, forum.hr), the rumours persist, even being acknowledged by Boban himself or addressed by former players such as Robert Prosinečki.⁸⁸ The complexity and contradictions with which Boban's sexuality and masculinity continue to be discussed echo Sarah Gee's discussion of David Beckham's "flexible masculinity"⁸⁹, which is able to bridge the paradox of rejecting traditional definitions of masculine behaviour and appearance, whilst also encompassing hegemonic traits and codes of heroic masculinity.⁹⁰

Whilst maintaining a low profile about his personal life, illustrating the "sacredness of family"⁹¹, Boban was far more outspoken about his religious beliefs. He expressed little understanding for fellow athletes who claimed not to have the time to go to church or for God: "for Jesus we always have to find time and throughout our lives aim to be closer to him", he explained during an interview with Radio Međugorje.⁹² For Boban, Catholicism represented "a lifetime ideal, our [Croatian] tradition and our [Croatian] cultural essence".⁹³ These formative aspects, along with his unapologetic and authentic embodiment of them, must be understood as the construed social and cultural cornerstones of what formed him into a persona who exhibited Croatian national values "the right way", for both national and international audiences.⁹⁴ Understood as a *moral vertical* of society, Zvonimir Boban can be identified as *sacred*; embodying what Edward Shils terms the "sacred centres of society".⁹⁵ These central value systems are identified as *sacred* in the sense that they represent domains in which the core values and beliefs of a society are discussed and established. In this sense, perennial humility, unconditional love for the homeland, and selfless sacrifice, or in Boban's own words:

*I would die for Croatia. Croatia is the reason for my life. The most important reason. I love her as much as I love myself. I love her as much as anything in the world.*⁹⁶

The political malleability of a modern national hero

After establishing himself as an "icon of the right"⁹⁷ on 13 May 1990, Boban remained a staunch supporter of the Croatian state political project under Franjo Tuđman throughout the 1990s. Despite never becoming a member of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), he openly advocated for them in the early 1990s and would regularly defend the controversial

⁸⁶ Gol.hr. 2009. Može li nogometaš biti homoseksualac?. *Gol.hr*, 27 May 2009; Rimac, Ivana. 2009. Autor gav priče: Šuker i Boban me fasciniraju. *Jutarnji list*, 28 May 2009.

⁸⁷ Pukanić, Ivo. 2007. Moralni debakl arsena oremovića. *Nacional*, 5 March 2007.

⁸⁸ Lović, Dejan. 2017. Homoseksualci su mi govorili da sam p*der, hulje da sam loš. *24Sata*, 10 June 2017; Index.hr. 2024. Prosinečki: Svašta se priča o šukeru. Priča se i da ja pijem, a da je Boban gej. *Index.hr*, 29 April 2024.

⁸⁹ Gee, Sarah. 2014. Bending the codes of masculinity: David Beckham and flexible masculinity in the new millennium. *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics* 17(7), 917-936.

⁹⁰ Albeit this peculiar narrative trope would warrant additional investigation, the scope of this article and the chosen methodological tools unfortunately prevent it from going deeper into the issue. The author is aware, that the sources provided are at best indicative and do not substantiate the argument scientifically. However, they *are* indicative of an existing phenomenon that would need to be tackled with the appropriate tools and that could provide insights into broader discussion of masculinity and gender issues in the post-Yugoslav space.

⁹¹ Večernji list, *Ljubavi su dali drugu šansu*.

⁹² Informativna katolička agencija. 2003. Zvonimir boban gost Radio Međugorja. *Informativna katolička agencija*, 22 September 2003.

⁹³ Gerovec, *Zvonimir Boban*.

⁹⁴ See Džindo, Edi. 2021. Cijeni ga cijeli svijet, ali ne i njegova Hrvatska: Nismo iskoristili njegov potencijal. *Večernji list*, 18 April 2021; Kuper, *Zvonimir Boban*.

⁹⁵ Shils, Edward. 1975. *Center and periphery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; see also Čolović, *The politics of symbol*.

⁹⁶ *The last Yugoslav team* (dir. Vuk Janić, 2000). Translation by author.

⁹⁷ Pavković, *Bobanova Hercegovina*.

president, turning himself into “Tuđman’s darling”⁹⁸. He certainly was not unique within Croatian sport. Questioning the power dynamic between athletes and politics, one commentator for the left-wing periodical *Feral Tribune* described athletes during the 1990s as “nationalist décor” for political elites.⁹⁹ Speaking to the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* during a time when international scrutiny over Tuđman’s authoritarian politics had become increasingly louder, Boban remained loyal, describing the Croatian president as the “greatest in [Croatian] history [because he] gifted us freedom”.¹⁰⁰ Aside from being a symbolic national ambassador for the newly independent nation, Boban’s fraternisation with the president ranged from intimate summer card games to a brief spell as a consultant at the Ministry of Education and Sport in the late 1990s.¹⁰¹ Shortly after Tuđman passed away in late 1999, Boban eulogised his importance to Croatia in an interview with *Slobodna Dalmacija*, in which he parroted hegemonic state-building narratives and the historic role of Croatia’s first president:

*Dr Franjo Tuđman led us, gave us an idea of how to firmly and resolutely achieve that goal. We made it, we were all as one. Unfortunately, afterwards, some things went an unwanted way, but these do in no way take away from the historic role of the HDZ and Dr Franjo Tuđman. We got our nation-state under his rule, and as such, he will stay in history positioned at number one [...] I was overjoyed that I was able to be so close to such an important figure. The conversations were predominantly sport-related, and he was very interested in sport; he loved it, knew what it meant for a society. It is of great luck for the Croatian state that Dr Tuđman understood sport in that manner.*¹⁰²

In early 2000, Zvonimir Boban joined the short-lived *Udruga za promicanje hrvatskog identiteta i prosperiteta* (“Association for the promotion of Croatian identity and prosperity”) run by Franjo Tuđman’s son, Miroslav, together with HDZ politician Andrija Hebrang. Later that year, he was instrumental in organising a petition by numerous prominent athletes criticising the first indictments of Croatian generals at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The petition demanded the righteous upholding of the “dignity of the *Homeland War*”¹⁰³ and levelled harsh accusations against the liberal post-Tuđman government:

*The government of the Republic of Croatia, in the spirit of compromising blindness and high treason, in the service of anti-Croatian ideas of foreign plutocracies and globalising neo-imperialism, is breaking the constitution of the Republic of Croatia ever more severely, as well as all accomplishments of the century-long struggle of Croats for freedom and independence.*¹⁰⁴

The protest illustrated the deep dichotomisation in Croatian society over questions of Franjo Tuđman’s presidency and the contested legacy of the *Homeland War*. Within this polarised discursive field, Boban’s views carried considerable weight. The influential Croatian sport journalist Tomislav Židak once postulated that when “Zvonimir Boban states something, it [was] not just a thing of folklore”.¹⁰⁵ This brings to mind Perry’s notion that “heroes facilitate

⁹⁸ Petranović, Damir. 2015. *Kako je Zvone Boban od ljubitelja Tuđmana postao ikona lijevice*. *tportal.hr*, 6 October 2015.

⁹⁹ Lasić, Igor. 2007. Važno je sudjelovati. *Feral Tribune*, 6 April 2007.

¹⁰⁰ Olivari, Davorin. 1995. Prosinečki kao Pele!. *Super Sport*, 7 September 1995.

¹⁰¹ Zorić, Saša. 2024. *Tuđman i Šušak snimljeni u društvu legendarnog Hrvata: Pogledajte s kim su kartali na Brijunima*. *Dnevno.hr*, 22 February 2024; Čizmić, Martina. 2009. Kod naših političara jedna ruka je u džepu, a druga ana srcu. *Večernji list*, 21 March 2009.

¹⁰² Petranović, *Kako je Zvone Boban*. Translation by author.

¹⁰³ Birtić, Tomislav. 2001. Generali su predvodili narod, pa ako su oni krivi, onda smo krivi i svi mi. *Globus*, 20 July 2001.

¹⁰⁴ Erceg, Ivana. 2000. Kolektivni um hrvatske nogometne vrste. *AIM Press*, 17 October 2000. Translation by author.

¹⁰⁵ Židak, Tomislav. 2015. *Uvijek kad bi Zvonimir Boban ‘barut omirisao’, u Hrvatskoj bi došlo do panike!*. *Jutarnji list*, 5 October 2015; see also Čurić, Dražen. 2015. *Ne bi bilo dobro kada bi HDZ i desnica tražili problem*

cultural identification for large numbers of the population, emphasising the traditional values and norms of the dominant social classes [whilst often acting as] agents of social control by encouraging the emulation of their pro-societal behaviours”.¹⁰⁶

Whilst openly supporting the HDZ and Tuđman throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, Boban became less visible to the Croatian public once his playing career ended in 2001. Indeed, after his playing career, Boban increasingly positioned himself as a critical voice vis-à-vis politics as a whole - and the “lack of moral integrity”¹⁰⁷ within it, opining that “we live in a time of politicians without ideas and politics without ideals” without naming any single politician.¹⁰⁸ In what could have been interpreted as a direct confrontation with the HDZ, Boban claimed that “with many [politicians] one hand is on the heart, while the other one [is] in the pocket”.¹⁰⁹ The laying of the right hand on the heart during the intonation of the national anthem was and remains one of the most striking acts unifying national symbolic imagery with HDZ’s political identity in post-Yugoslav Croatia.¹¹⁰ If the 1990s marked a period in which Boban served as a utilitarian national hero who could be utilised by the HDZ government and Tuđman, his post-playing years should be labelled as his years of ideological awakening and maturation. More than anything, the process and narration of herodism became less driven from above, and more reliant on Boban’s careful self-positioning as a hero beyond and above politics.

In 2015, during a tense pre-parliamentary election phase and after an eight-year media hiatus, Boban gave a much-anticipated and heavily discussed in-depth interview to the Croatian daily newspaper *Jutarnji list*. Speaking to the prominent liberal novelist Miljenko Jergović, Boban addressed a range of social and political issues, and announced that he would be voting for the social-democratic candidate Zoran Milanović rather than for the HDZ candidate, a statement that echoed strongly in the Croatian public sphere.¹¹¹ His subversive and politically “forbidden” transition from an “icon of the [political] right” to the (perceived) left¹¹² was carefully framed as a critique *from below*, from a morally pure and patriotic position. Boban claimed that he could support the then HDZ candidate Tomislav Karamarko because he did not want to vote for “de-tuđmanisers who tuđmanise”,¹¹³ implying that the political right in Croatia had been reduced to empty rhetoric, and specifically questioning Karamarko’s ideological rectitude due to him having been the campaign chief of Stjepan Mesić – the first post-Tuđman president under whose mandate the processes of democratisation were titled “de-tuđmanisation”.¹¹⁴ Paradoxically, an ideological cornerstone of Karamarko’s campaign was indeed “re-tuđmanisation”, widely criticised as the return to a

samo u Bobanu. *Večernji list*, 5 October 2015; Čutura, Zoran. 2015. *Bobanov prelet sa ‘desna’ na ‘lijevo’*. *AlJazeera*, 6 October 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Parry, *The formation of heroes*, 899.

¹⁰⁷ Marijačić, Ivica. 2000. Kome je stvaranje države bio mrak, neka svijetlo pronađe izvan Hrvatske. *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 27 December 2000; Čizmić, *Kod naših političara*; Gerovec, *Zvonimir Boban*.

¹⁰⁸ Flak, Igor. 2009. Zvonimir Boban: Živimo u vremenu političara bez ideja i politike bez ideala. *Večernji list*, 20 March 2009.

¹⁰⁹ Flak, *Zvonimir Boban*.

¹¹⁰ Biti, Ozren. 2008. Ruka na srcu kao izraz narodne duše, *Nova Croatia* 2(2), 139-150.

¹¹¹ Jergović, Miljenko. 2015. *Evo što mislim o hrvatskoj politici i nogometu*. *Jutarnji list*, 3 October 2015.

¹¹² Pavković, *Bobanova Hercegovina*; Pešorda, Damir. 2015. *Bobanov izlazak iz ormara*. *Portal hrvatskog kulturnog vijeća*, 7 October 2015; Gerovac, Gordan. 2015. *Sad je posve jasno da Jure i Boban više ne moraju ići zajedno*. *Večernji list*, 11 October 2015.

¹¹³ Jergović, *Evo što mislim*.

¹¹⁴ It should be pointed out that democratisation processes after Franjo Tuđman’s death were perceived as and labelled as “detuđmanisation” from the perspective of the political right, a process that went beyond Mesić’s first mandate.

more nationalistic and authoritarian political culture.¹¹⁵ In the interview, Boban did not advocate for the return of truly-tudmanist politics, but rather positioned himself as ideologically intangible. Anticipating the backlash that indeed followed, Boban pointed out in his defence that many considered him

*a Ustaša and [simultaneously somehow] already tomorrow's conspirative communist [but what he actually wanted to remain was] what he knows and believes to be, a free and fair, not a sacred man.*¹¹⁶

The interview established a new narrative arc of the national hero, one that underlined Boban's contrarianism, incorruptibility, and bravery to speak truth to power. Despite alienating some commentators on the political right, the wider public showed respect for Boban speaking his mind, regardless of the consequences.¹¹⁷ This ascribed contrarianism, his mythological status, and his numerous stints in administrative positions resulted in him being frequently hailed as the "saviour of Croatian football"¹¹⁸, offering a political compromise in the increasingly polarised Croatian footballing landscape of the 2010s.¹¹⁹ Despite the significant political capital ascribed to him, Boban positioned himself as an outsider to the "dirty games" being played in Croatian football and its adjacent politics, describing the state of Croatian football during the 2010s as "our state's shame".¹²⁰ In this environment, he "did not want to get his hands dirty"¹²¹ - a position that some commentators criticised as evasive. Others empathised with his position, claiming that "Zvone [was] too good for our football".¹²² Boban rarely engaged with this critique in any meaningful way, usually brushing aside attacks on him with a dose of irony:

*I've heard a lot about myself. Homosexuals told me that I'm gay, criminals that I'm a thief, villains that I'm a bad person.*¹²³

His perceived independence and discursively constructed moral authority on questions ranging from faith and politics to football tactics and administrative structures ultimately resulted in a widespread depiction of his persona as a "moral vertical" in and of Croatian society.¹²⁴

Conclusion

The story of Zvonimir Boban and his inclusion in the symbolic pantheon of Croatian national heroes illustrates the interrelation of sport, heroism and national identity in post-Yugoslav

¹¹⁵ Klarić, Jasmin. 2019. *Kratka povijest uvoda u autoritarizam*. *Telegram.hr*, 16 February 2019.

¹¹⁶ Jergović, *Evo što mislim*. Translation by author.

¹¹⁷ Jurišić, Bernard. 2020. *Bobanovi principi*. *Telegram.hr*, 7 March 2020.

¹¹⁸ Rivetti, Orlando. 2011. Boban je spasitelj hrvatskog nogometa, a ne političari. *Novi list*, 15 December 2011.

¹¹⁹ See Brentin, Dario, and Andrew Hodges. 2018. Fan protest and activism: Football from below in South-Eastern Europe. *Soccer & Society* 19(3), 329-336.

¹²⁰ Jergović, *Evo što mislim*.

¹²¹ Židak, Tomislav. 2010. Nadao sam se da je Boban 'naš čovjek'. *Jutarnji list*, 19 October 2010.

¹²² Alač, Zvonko. 2011. *Boban izašao iz ormara*. *Index.hr*, 20 December 2011; Džindo, *Cijeni ga cijeli svijet*. In April 2025, Zvonimir Boban was announced as the future Dinamo Zagreb chief executive starting with 01 June 2025. This arguable U-turn can be explained by the successful political institutionalisation of a yearlong battle for democratisation within the club arguably achieved by the victory of the 'Dinamovo proljeće' election list and the election of Velimir Zajec as Dinamo Zagreb's president at the election assembly in March 2024. To what extent the decision to return to Croatian football in a prominent administrative role shall impact on the existing narrative arc – whether messianic or hubristic tropes – remains to be seen. See Mlinarić, Ivan. 2025. *Zvonimir Boban kao figura puno donosi Dinamu, ali naša slika o njemu zamućena je kultom i mitom. Imamo razloga biti skeptični*. *Telegram.hr*, 17 April 2025; Vrdoljak, Juraj. 2025. *Boban i dva mita o Maksimiru*. *Velike priče*, 21 April 2025.

¹²³ Lović, *Homoseksualci su mi govorili*. Translation by author.

¹²⁴ Ledinski, Karlo. 2016. *Boban se vraća na nogometnu scenu! Postat će savjetnik novom predsjedniku Fife*. *Večernji list*, 22 April 2016; Ledinski, Karlo. 2024. *Boban nije želio izdati nogomet. On je iznimka kojoj su nogomet i moral ispred novca i moći*. *Večernji list*, 25 January 2024; Flak, Igor. 2024. *Tko je zapravo Zvonimir Boban*. *Sportklub*, 27 January 2024.

Croatia. From 13 May 1990 onwards, processes of heroisation resulted in him being personified as an idealised and heroic notion of Croatians. Stylised as a social and political actor who “consequently utilised Euripides” in his quest to “never tire of helping your homeland”,¹²⁵ Boban became a quasi-over-night national hero. The ideological and political functionality of national heroes *from below* for the Croatian state building project, highlights Veronica Kitchen’s argument that “heroes seem to be particularly important to political community-building in times of crisis” including “the formation of a new state, a moment when a political community is under severe challenge, or during periods of national upheaval or uncertainty, such as wartime.”¹²⁶ As such, Boban became a point of cultural reference and moral authority transgressing the occupational locale of being *just* a football player, embodying a broader role as an influential public figure and national ambassador.¹²⁷

Similar to Vugdelija’s observations on the heroism of other Croatian contemporary heroes, this article has shown that processes of heroisation are ones in which “actors continuously negotiate, contest and reinterpret meanings and understandings of [Boban’s] heroism”.¹²⁸ Boban’s herodism is thus less a fixed or essential quality than an effect of cultural production – a continuously negotiated, politically adaptable and malleable symbol that bridges sport, nationalism and collective identity. The analysis has underscored how Boban’s persona functions simultaneously as a national hero as well as a site of contested interpretations. At different historical junctures, his heroisation has served various political purposes: bolstering Tuđman’s state-building project in the 1990s, legitimising dominant nationalist narratives during periods of ideological uncertainty, and later offering a seemingly moral, above-politics figure who could critique the political establishment while remaining embedded in its symbolic order. In this sense, Boban exemplifies the social plasticity of heroes: figures capable of absorbing multiple, even contradictory, meanings while retaining their heroic aura.

Central to this process is Boban’s own narrative labour. Across decades of interviews and public appearances, he has constructed a persona marked by humility, self-effacement and populist identification with ‘ordinary people’ and the ‘true heroes’ of the *Homeland War*. These recurring discursive tropes - risking his career rather than life, refusing the mantle of heroism, grounding his values in family, faith and homeland - have been instrumental in sustaining his moral authority and transforming an impulsive act of rebellion into a national myth of resistance and sacrifice. The continuous re-narration of the Maksimir incident in media anniversaries, popular culture and memorial artefacts has further entrenched this narrative, producing what might be called a *moral vertical* of Croatian nationalism, embodied in a single sportsman.

Yet, the very durability of Boban’s heroism points to its malleability. As Croatian society evolved, his public image adapted: from ‘Tuđman’s darling’ and an ‘icon of the right’ to a critical voice denouncing politics without ideals and the proposed saviour of Croatian football. Each transformation illustrates the contingent nature of national heroes in contemporary Croatia, where heroic figures are less anchored in fixed historical realities than continually reconstructed through discourse, memory and popular affect. Boban’s trajectory demonstrates that national heroes are not simply ‘born’ or ‘made’ once and for all; they are continuously re-made, contested and re-legitimised in dialogue with shifting political,

¹²⁵ Junaci, Robert. 1995. Od rupca do himne. *Hrvatski obzor*, 24 April 1995.

¹²⁶ Kitchen, *Heroism and the construction*, 33.

¹²⁷ See Brentin, *A lofty battle*.

¹²⁸ Vugdelija, *The making of national heroes*, 217.

cultural, and societal needs. Ultimately, Boban's mythical status reveals the profound interdependence between sport, nationalism and collective memory in post-Yugoslav Croatia. Boban's kick at Maksimir stadium did not merely mark a moment of youthful defiance; it crystallised and personalised broader nationalist sentiments, providing an enduring narrative through which struggles, hopes and ambivalences about nationhood were articulated in the Croatian public. As long as these discursive needs persist, Zvonimir Boban will remain a malleable national hero; a symbol whose meaning is never fully fixed but perpetually renegotiated in the dynamic interplay between individual agency, political power and cultural memory.

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