



# National POLICY BRIEF



## PROMISE POLICY BRIEF: CROATIA, 1 OF 2

### Supporters' Varteks FC

October 2018

#### INTRODUCTION

PROMISE explored the ways young people with a history of stigmatisation or conflict participate in society. In Croatia, our research focussed on young people who are engaged in a specific social organisation - Supporters' Varteks FC. It is football club founded and owned by its supporters. Originally, Varteks FC played an important role in Croatian football until its management and local political/football elites changed its name to Varaždin and brought the club to bankruptcy as a result of numerous deals, legal cases and convictions related to match fixing. In 2011, this led the White Stones, passionate supporters of the old Varteks team, to join with other supporters to found a new football club with the old name – Varteks. Today that club is also known as 'Supporters' Varteks'.

This policy brief is concerned with young people within football clubs, football supporters, the national football federation, local self-government, and the broader institutional and political framework for football in the Croatian society.

Football competition in Croatia is organised in 5 divisions. The first division (and partly the second) is professional, while in lower divisions football players are amateur; they play and also work, study, go to school or are unemployed. FC Varteks play in the fourth division and sometimes in the third division. The club has poor working conditions and they don't have their own ground. Moreover, the local government does not permit them to play on the city stadium where FC Varaždin plays. Supporters of Varteks are also owners; there are around 300 of them as members and when they work in the club, they do so as volunteers. Before 2011, the core group of supporters and the club founders, The White Stones, were just an ultras group supporting the old FC Varteks. Today they are active on various levels within their own football club. The structure of the club is democratic and all elections are based on the principle 'one member-one vote'. They all decide about the management at their annual meetings. They have moved from a relatively passive position of supporters of the old club to being active members/owners of the new club with the old name and old pride, which is not compromised by the legal cases, match fixing scandals and convictions that happened under the management of the old Varteks, later known as Varaždin FC.

From its very beginning and the separation from the Yugoslavian Football Federation, the Croatian Football Federation remained closely linked with the political establishment. The only difference is that in the context of the new Croatian state, the Croatian Football Federation (CFF) has emphasized nationalistic and 'state-building' character. CFF sees its own role as not only a sport institution, but also as a national institution that maintains and builds national identity. Members of the board are usually members of political parties, mostly of the HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union). Importantly, key CFF management figures were involved in criminal activities, with ongoing legal cases or already convicted for corruption and other criminal acts.

Local governments are crucial in the system of financing both amateur and professional football clubs in Croatia. This reliance is caused by the bad economic situation and the lack of investors and sponsors. It means that clubs with strong links with local governments have a certain security in their activities; they have a significant advantage in comparison to those clubs without direct links with the local political/economic establishment. There are only few clubs in Croatia with democratic principles and transparent financial activity. They are usually marginalised, like Varteks FC, and ignored when it comes to financial support from the local government or investments in the infrastructure. It is clearly evident in the case of Varaždin, where local government supported old Varteks, and later Varaždin, who became bankrupt following by criminal activities and corruption.

The policy recommendations are directed towards the Croatian Football Federation, local government in the city of Varaždin, youth networks on a local and national level, human rights organizations, and the Ministry of Interior.

The aim of the recommendations is to inform and inspire action towards the democratisation of football in Croatia, the improvement of Varteks FC position regarding equal rights of football clubs in Varaždin, the protection of human rights of football supporters, measures against corruption in CFF, and the de-politicisation of football in Croatia.

## KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Equal rights of football clubs in local community (city of Varaždin)**

Our research showed the unequal position of Varteks FC in comparison with other clubs, especially in comparison with Varaždin FC because of the use of the city stadium. Our respondents frequently mentioned the inequality as the marker of their position, despite the fact that they, as citizens of the city of Varaždin, pay taxes and give money equally like others. It means, as one respondent said, that 'some citizens are more equal than others'. Respondents emphasised that it is especially painful regarding their children, because those in Varteks FC football schools do not have the chance to play on the pitch of the city stadium, although their parents belong to the same city. At the same time, the city government favoured Varaždin FC and they play on the city stadium as the privileged club. This is the cause of frustration among the people involved in Varteks FC.

- Our recommendation is simple: the city of Varaždin should apply the policy of equal rights when it comes to the use of the city stadium. On a more general level, local government (the city council and sport related institutions) should change their prevailing perception of Varteks FC as a certain 'black sheep' or deviant social actor. Our research showed that they deserve respect because of their 'bottom up' approach, volunteering and enthusiasm in gathering many young people around sport.

## **Democratisation of football clubs in Croatia**

Amateur football clubs in Croatia, as well as many professional football clubs, are organized as NGOs. However, in many cases, transparent financial activity is missing, the use of public finances is blurred, and in general, the annual election of the boards and management is on the edge of legality. Many of our respondents pointed to that discrepancy, especially when mentioning well-known cases like the example of GNK Dinamo from Zagreb, the professional football club with millions of euros worth of contracts, is still organised as an NGO, receiving high amounts of money from public sources, such as the state.

- Based on our insight into the action and the club's development of Varteks FC within a hostile social and political environment, we would like to inspire and empower the process of democratisation of Croatian football. This means having transparent annual meetings and fair elections of the board, the assembly and the management of clubs based on the principle of 'one member-one vote'. Transparency of financial activities is urgently needed, knowing that most of the clubs depend only on public financing.

## **Reforms in HNS (CFF – Croatian Football Federation)**

The Croatian Football Federation is contaminated by numerous court cases and legal accusations against several key members. Instead of reforms, they are hiding in the shadow of the great success of the Croatian national football team at the World Cup in Russia. The leaders of CFF are using the success of the National team to cover many problems that are not related to the national team or to professional football in general. Moreover, they behave like the leaders of the communist party during the one-party period; which means that they perceive critical remarks and critical social actors as 'enemies'. Most of our respondents and Varteks FC present such a critical voice; they represent exactly that type of social actor who is critical against corruption in the CFF and within the Croatian football. Unfortunately, instead of a real dialogue, our respondents faced labelling and accusations of being 'traitors', 'hooligans', etc. The CFF is responsible for a much larger field of activities that goes beyond the national football team to include all divisions, female football, and the overall infrastructure. The resent situation regarding this labelling and complete absence of critical remarks is against the key principles of democracy and the freedom of expression. The CFF, with its networks within the political and juridical establishment, have in some cases succeeded to present criticism of football supporters as 'hate speech'. Our respondents have been accused for 'hate speech' just because they their t-shirts displayed the letters 'HNS' (CFF) crossed out.

- Our recommendation is that the CFF needs to reform, and promote transparency, democratisation, and investments in infrastructure and in amateur clubs who work with young people. They have to exclude members who are involved in criminal activities, especially those already convicted for corruption and other criminal acts. The Croatian Football Federation is not a political party and accordingly the organisation should be de-politicised.

## **Police: Protect the human rights of supporters and decrease the unnecessary repression**

During our fieldwork we witnessed many situations in which the police force applied certain selective approaches, which put our respondents in an unequal position in comparison to other spectators or supporters of other teams. In many cases, the police focused on The White Stones only because they are the only organised group of football supporters in the lower divisions. Alcohol consumption is forbidden during matches according to the law. However, the police would tolerate it for other spectators but not for our respondents. In instances where the police tolerated alcohol consumption, they would test some of our respondents after a certain time and give them bans because of a few beers they legally bought to the stadium. We also witnessed repression and a level of police control which was not necessary at all.

- Our recommendation is simple: Police should respect the human rights of football supporters, avoid generalisations and hostility towards football supporters. There is evident need for more education within police, especially regarding the work with young people.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

This policy brief is based on 25 interviews (The shortest interview lasted 40 minutes, and the longest lasted 230 minutes. The majority of interviews lasted between 80 and 120 minutes, and all transcribed interviews amount to a total of 301,612 words), 94 days in the field (around 1500 hours of observation) and 53 diary entries related to Varteks FC.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

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<b>FURTHER READING</b>	<a href="http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Supporters'-Varteks-FC.pdf">http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Supporters'-Varteks-FC.pdf</a>