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Spain, *La Roja*, and the forging of the nation: truth or fiction?***

Introduction

The paper analyzes the role of the national team of Spain denoted by the neologism *La Roja* in promoting patriotic sentiments and building national unity. In a 2014 study entitled *Goles y banderas. Fútbol e identidades nacionales en España*, Alejandro Quiroga Fernández de Soto (Quiroga, 2014) argues that the successes of the team in 2008-2012 (Champions of Europe in Austria and Switzerland, World Champions in South Africa and again Champions of Europe in Poland and Ukraine), brought about a patriotic revival, while *La Roja* itself became an integrating factor which united the Spanish regardless of political differences and distinct identities. The assertion is highly debatable for two reasons: firstly, the resurgence of the national symbols was temporary and did not occur uniformly across the country, especially in Catalonia and the Basque Country; secondly, it would be more fitting to speak of journalistic patriotism rather than actual patriotic revival within the Spanish society. The paper critically assesses the patriotic discourse rooted in the successes of *La Roja* in 2008-2012.

It is nothing unusual that next to their official name, certain national teams are referred to using a sobriquet that draws on the colour of their shirts, but this is not the case with Spain. Here, we are dealing with the neologism *La Roja* (Eng. the Red One) which for all intents and purposes has become the substitute of “the national team of Spain”. Its creator, Luis Aragonés, the national team coach in 2004-2008, intended it as a neutral term that would overcome Spanish disputes of identity and politics. Choosing such an appellation, Aragonés wished for the Spanish national team to have its very own name and identity, just as in Argentina or Brazil (García, 2010). Although the term *La*

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** The paper draws on certain findings from the book by the author, *Historia, nacjonalizm i tożsamość. Rzecz o piłce nożnej w Hiszpanii* (Kubiacyk, 2020).

Roja evoked fairly ambivalent sentiments as soon as it was coined¹, one noted the non-confrontational nature of a designation which could be accepted by a Spanish, Catalan, or Basque nationalist and an ordinary football fan alike (De la Madrid, 2013:183-185). It was also a fact of some significance that adoption of the name *La Roja* coincided with the economic crisis which affected Spain in 2008, as it strove to deal with the ever stronger decentralist tendencies originating with the Catalan nationalists. The country needed a new myth on which the community and sense of unity could be built. The idea of *La Roja* – a national team for all, without any political undertones – was something that appeared to fit the expectations. The goal seemed right, especially considering that since the Olympic Games in Antwerp (1920) where Spain won silver, *La Furia*, as the team would henceforth be called, suffered from distinct shortage of success. However, the reality would prove even more complex.

The Spanish national team is unlike any other, given that due to robust decentralist tendencies the state anthem has no lyrics, while the Spanish flag is not a universally accepted symbol since it connotes Francoism and the unfinished process of *transición*. In Catalonia and in the Basque Country, it is often replaced with the flags of autonomous regions called respectively *senyera* and *ikurriña*, not to mention that it occasionally happens to be destroyed or set on fire, just as the pictures and likenesses of the Spanish king. Also, the national team does not have its dedicated national stadium on which they could play, and it has been long since a game was played in two regions where the decentralist drive is the strongest (the last time the Basque Country saw a match of the national team was in 1967, Catalonia in 2004). In Spain, football clubs linked to regional identities come first while autonomous communities have their teams as well; consequently, the national team is neither the first nor the only choice. This is particularly evident in Catalonia and the Basque Country, where FC Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao – with all their history – are the equivalent of ‘national team’ in the respective regions. Importantly enough, there is a proportion of footballers who are unwilling to play on the national team, and not all Catalonians and Basques support it, even often delight-

¹ On the one hand, plain linguistic manipulation was alleged; the neologism was apparently an instance of post-language which distorted the true meaning of the national team (Benítez Grande-Caballero, 2018). On the other hand, a deeper purpose was surmised, a kind of impulse which would imbue the national team with renewed vital force (Burns, 2017: 274). To some, *La Roja* was a marketing gimmick (Screti, 2009), while others felt it undermined the national quality. The leader of the Vox party declared explicitly: “I shall never refer to the national team [of Spain] as *La Roja*. I believe it to be a way of eliminating of what is national about the team. At most, I might call it *La Rojigualda* [name of the Spanish national flag – F.K.]” (Fernández, Campos, 2019).

ing in its defeats². Catalanness or Basqueness of the national team players has been and continues to be criticized³.

From the narrative of defeat and fatalism to a vision of national unity

Until the creation and the phenomenal ascent of *La Roja* which began in 2008, the Spanish national team had been plagued by utter lack of success that seemed incomprehensible given the country's potential in terms of football. Without doubt, the 1982 World Cup was a major blow to Spain, even more so that they were the host. The Spanish national team was eliminated in the second leg of the tournament, shattering the hopes of its supporters. Numerous commentators maintained that the fondest memory Spaniards had of that World Cup was the official mascot *Naranjito*, which was supposed to evoke Spanish unity symbolized by the orange, a fruit all associated with Spain. Ignacio Camacho noted:

Spain lost 2-1 to Germany and tied with England 0-0, sealing the fate of their participation in the championships with one victory in five matches and very poor image, rarely – or never – seen in the host country team. No Spanish player happened to stand out at 'our' World Cup, and it was only *Naranjito*, the mascot of Spain '82, dressed in the colours of the national team, which showed a joyful and positive aspect which swayed fans across the country, whose best memory is an amusing orange that enlivened stadiums and was cheered on each single pitch, from the opening ceremony to the final (Camacho, 2017).

² The author experienced it personally during a several-month stay in Barcelona in 2018, when the World Championships in Russia took place. An atmosphere of tension in the entire region pervaded Barcelona in the aftermath of the unconstitutional independence referendum (October 2017), following which the Catalan Republic was proclaimed by the Catalan Parliament. The suspension of Catalan autonomy sparked street protests and a war of symbols, in which the Catalan ones (including those of the independence movement) co-existed with their Spanish counterparts. During a group level match which Spain played in Russia against Morocco, an enormous explosion of joy could be heard in the quarter where the author lived when Moroccans scored their second goal putting them in the lead (2-1) over Spain. The outburst was much more intense than the jubilation after *La Roja* tied at 2-2.

³ As an example, one could cite the legendary goalkeeper of Real Sociedad San Sebastián and the Spanish national team, Luis Miguel Arconada Etxarri, who during the World Cup held in 1982 in Spain came under criticism for using white socks instead of the regulation black ones with the Spanish flag. Although Arconada wore them as a luck-bringing amulet (he would use them when playing with his club as well), some considered it an indication that he avoided Spanish symbols. However, being on the national team was never an issue for Arconada, as he played with a captain's armband in Spanish colours, while the emblem and flag of Spain adorned his jersey (Quiroga, 2014: 212). Arconada was also blamed for letting in a 'strange' goal (*el gol de Arconada*) during the finals of the 1984 European Championships in France, scored from a free kick by one of Les Bleus, Michel Platini. Also, Basque Javier Clemente who coached the national team in 1992-1998, had to face allegations that he gave preference to Catalan and Basque players at the expense of footballers from Real Madrid. In the case of Arconada and Clemente, their being Basque offered grounds to accuse them of lacking Spanishness. As for more recent examples, one should mention Catalan FC Barcelona player Gerard Piqué, whose political views (supporting Catalan pro-independence politicians) as well as gestures and statements (e.g. showing the offensive middle finger while Spanish anthem was played prior to Spain vs Croatia in the 2016 European Championships in France) are claimed sufficient reasons to exclude him from the national team. Thus, it was Piqué's Catalanness which provided his critics with grounds for censure.

Successes were few and far between. Spain had to be content with fourth place at the World Cup in Brazil (1950), victory in the European Championships in 1964 (semi-finals and finals were taken place in Spain), and participation in the final of the European Championships in France (1984) which they lost. One should also remember the success of 1992, when during the Olympic Games in Barcelona the Spanish Olympic team won the gold medal, winning 3-2 against Poland. In a sense, the latter victory mitigated the bitter aftertaste of 1982. Paradoxically, Spain beat Poland at Camp Nou, the home stadium of FC Barcelona, a club identified with Catalonia and Catalan nationalism. Camp Nou would never again be as patriotic and Spanish as it was then. All that becomes even more significant when one realizes that the Olympic Games were a watershed for the Catalonia of Jordi Pujol's, who recognized them as a splendid opportunity to show how different Catalonia was, with its history, language, and symbols.

In the years that followed, Spain dropped out of successive tournaments: the 2002 World Cup in South Korea and Japan, the 2004 European Championships in Portugal and the 2006 World Cup in Germany. Therefore, one should not wonder at Phil Ball's ironic remark that the medal at the 1920 Olympics was apparently won "by dint of an administrative error" (Ball, 2010: 153). Quiroga compared the Spanish national team to Don Quixote tilting at the windmills: it was proud but doomed to defeat, and each of the defeats "took the shape of yet another brick in the discursive wall of frustration, fatalism, calamity and injustice" (Quiroga, 2014: 13; 148). It was only the victorious *La Roja* of 2008-2012 (Champions of Europe in Austria and Switzerland, winners of the World Cup in South Africa, and again Champions of Europe in Poland and Ukraine) which put an end to the narrative of defeat and fatalism which had surrounded the national team of Spain almost the entire 20th century, and prompted the transition to the discourse of success (Quiroga, 2014: 139).

According to widespread opinion voiced by journalists, researchers, the media and numerous supporters, the successes of *La Roja* in 2008-2012 sparked a euphoria in Spain and contributed to the reawakening of the patriotic spirit. To a decided majority, the victories of the national team were an embodiment of the revival of Spanish patriotism and national symbols, the flag in particular. Vicente Rodríguez Ortega stated it in no uncertain terms: with the creation of *La Roja*, "Spanish patriotism has found its ideal, comprehensive vehicle in the shape of the national football team" (Rodríguez Ortega, 2015: 8). In an analysis of *La Roja*'s victory during the 2008 European Championship in Austria and Switzerland, Diana Plaza Martín underlined that revindication of Spain as a symbol and lending a new meaning to the Spanish flag – which was cleansed of Francoist connotations – was by no means an easy feat, especially in politics, but it could be attained through football. In Martín's opinion, the positive significance imparted to national symbols thanks to *La Roja* made it possible to forge a nation whilst abolishing the ideological dichotomy of the left and right (Plaza Martín, 2009: 5-10). Francesco Screti spoke of the impact of *La Roja*'s 2008 triumphs on Spanish unity in a similar vein, de-

scribing the team as a “euphemistic attempt” (*un intento eufemístico*), whose aim was to avoid using the word Spain in a country which was divided and replete with nationalisms (Spanish, Catalan, Basque, and Galician):

Spaniards can now brandish the Spanish flag without inhibitions; the triumph at sport lets them display it proudly and shout “Long live Spain!” or “I am Spanish!” without appearing to be too much of a nationalist, fascist, or Francoist. Thus, a sport victory renders the violence of nationalist attitudes banal by sublimating them (Screti, 2009: 7).

Screti argues that, united by successes of *La Roja*, the Spanish were not only able to find a distraction from the issues of daily life but also revivify the unity of the country, neutralize nationalist discourses and hum the anthem as a “simple national celebration” (*una simple celebración nacional*), i.e. without any nationalist attitudes brought into play, as well as promote their country as a brand after its credibility had been undermined by the economic crisis of 2008 (Screti, 2009: 10).

In an assessment of the success of *La Roja*, Jimmy Burns observed: “this is so much more than a football achievement. It is a political, social, and cultural phenomenon which the Spanish should acknowledge and be proud of” (Burns, 2013: 355). This view was echoed by Juan Carlos de la Madrid: “The sobriquet *La Roja* is, therefore, the only viable appellation for the team of a nation-state that Spain is” (De la Madrid, 2013: 184). Madrid added that Spain and the Spanish had become more joyful because “football, which brought that kind of joy solely to Real [Madrid] and FC Barcelona, has begun to offer it to Spain”, while the national team “transformed into a metonymy of the country” (De la Madrid, 2013: 203). According to the Spanish historian, those successes had the capacity to integrate the national with the response of the masses, by means of which football became a “possible homeland” (*una patria posible*) in Spain (De la Madrid, 2013: 203). This inspiring and therapeutic effect of *La Roja* was further discussed by the aforementioned Quiroga who, comparing the feelings of the Spanish associated with how their national team played before 2008 to a bulimic relationship, claimed that the great achievements of *La Roja* in 2008, 2010 and 2012 caused Spaniards’ bulimia to transform into a “patriotic oversatiation” (Quiroga, 2014: 170). Quiroga noted: “*La Roja* provided a safety valve for national pride, an kind of emotional palliative (*una especie de paliativo emocional*) at a moment when economic, social, and political crisis projected an image of a ravaged country, both in and outside Spain” (Quiroga, 2014: 155).

Consequently, *La Roja* became a “bonding agent of the Spanish sports republic” (*pegamento de una república deportiva española*), which united a great many Spaniards regardless of the differences of their political views and identities (Quiroga, 2014: 164). What is more, it was claimed that there were designs to carry out and finalize the process of Spanish *transición* relying on the successes of the national team (Resina de la Fuente, Limón López, 2014: 328). Such an interpretation is apparently supported by the fact that Spain’s national team functioned in a manner similar to a football club, while

its coaches, Luis Aragonés and Vicente del Bosque, had to work out how to impose one style and one shared idea in a team whose core was composed of players from Spain's foremost rivals: FC Barcelona and Real Madrid. Acknowledging the role and significance of football clubs in Spain, one sought to realign the national team into a quasi-club, to some extent depriving it of national identity but imparting the identity of a neologism that was conceived as a kind of lure⁴.

It is therefore no surprise that with as many as seven players from the Pride of Catalonia⁵, *La Roja* happens to be called 'Barceloña', a combination of the words Barcelona and España (Fitzpatrick, 2012: 17). Some believe that the rapprochement between the Catalan and Spanish identity created a positive climate around the national team in Catalonia (Quiroga, 2014: 199). As Jimmy Burns puts it: "*La Roja's* adoption of *tiki-taka* meant not only a change of tactics but also a change of identity: no longer the bull but the toreador, with the *olé*s of the audience accompanying the passes of their Spanish stars, as if they were watching poetry in motion" (Burns, 2013: 343). The palpable Catalan support for *La Roja* should not, according to Quiroga, be seen solely as an outcome of the large number of Catalans on the team, or as a consequence of the similarity of playing style between the national team and Barça. It was a process of catalanization which fostered greater acceptance for *La Roja* in the eyes of some Catalans who might be opposed to what Spain represents. Hence, with the success of *La Roja* as a foundation, the existence of a double identity in Catalonia became possible, as mental identification with Spain did not contradict regional and national identification. In this sense, in 2008-2012 – a period when *La Roja* won everything there was to win – one could claim that a proportion of Catalans identified with the national team of Spain (Quiroga, 2014: 199). Much the same could be observed in the Basque Country. Admittedly, not everyone there is tolerant of public displays of Spanish symbols and support for Spain's national team, but the successes of *La Roja* did spark outbursts of jubilation⁶. Analyzing

⁴ The tremendous importance attached to football clubs in Spain is best illustrated by a situation which arose in 1920, after the Spanish national team won the silver medal at the Olympic Games in Antwerp. Namely, a company from Tarragona which produced *Orthi* chocolates, began to sell their products with a set of trading cards entitled "Football. Equipo nacional". The pictures showed the eleven players, according to their respective positions on the team. Significantly enough, they were portrayed in the jerseys of their clubs rather than the outfits of the national team. Overleaf, there were details of the players and their profile, with a caption "national team" (*equipo nacional*) above (Gil Pérez, 2014: 175). The fact that football clubs take precedence over the national team is clearly seen today as well. For instance, shortly before the 2018 World Cup in Russia, Real Madrid issued an announcement that when the tournament is over, the then coach of the national team, Julen Lopetegui, would become the coach at Real. Catalan daily *Sport* called it "an attack of Real Madrid on *La Roja*" (Folch, 2018: 2). As a result, Lopetegui was dismissed by the president of the Royal Spanish Football Federation, Luis Rubiales.

⁵ Without doubt, it was Vicente del Bosque who allowed the Catalan element to become the cornerstone of *La Roja's* success (Gómez, 2010).

⁶ In 2013, on the day when Spain played the 2014 World Cup qualifier against France (which they won) Basque television station ETB-2, broadcasting in Euskara, aired an interview with *lehendakari* Iñigo Urkullu after his first 100 days as the head of the Basque government (the broadcast started at half-time). It turned out that 39.3% Basques watched *La Roja*, while only 8.2% tuned to the interview with Urkullu, which encouraged journalists at *El País* to title their coverage of the game as "*La Roja* beat Urkullu" (Chávarri, 2010).

Basque public response to *La Roja's* World Cup victory in 2010, Eduardo Rodríguez drew attention to how normal and natural the Basque street was in that respect, with Bilbao sellers running out of *La Roja* shirts, and thousands of young people celebrating in the main streets and squares of the region's capital, Vitoria (Rodríguez, 2010). José Juan Toharia highlighted evident presence of Spanish symbols in the Basque Country following the feats of *La Roja*:

The [Spanish – F.K.] flag soon became immaculate and – quite ordinarily – the flag of our national team, meaning the obvious flag of everyone without any connotations with any other sign. This banalization of the symbolic element, so affectionate and thoroughly natural, is a healthy symptom which simultaneously suggests that perhaps the inner identity of the Spanish today, the youngest ones above all, is more benign and peaceful than some occasionally claim (Toharia, 2010).

The joy with the successes of *La Roja* and the accompanying display of Spanish symbols in the Basque Country, including flags, shirts, or scarves, was something extraordinary, especially considering the Francoist period when – as Quiroga underlines – it became a norm that people would strictly avoid showing their affiliation or identification with the Spanish national football team (Quiroga, 2014: 233). Characteristically enough, writing on the 2010 exploits of *La Roja*, the right-wing daily *La Razón* titled its report “*La Roja* scored a goal over the nationalists in the Basque Country and Catalonia” (*La Roja' mete un gol a los nacionalistas en el País Vasco y Cataluña*, 2010), while *El País*, in which he success was described as “everyone's goal”, emphasized that “only one colour filled the streets of Spain and the loud cheering changed into one single voice. From Madrid to Barcelona, each detail in every city served to write one and the same story of a country open to the historic mission of its national team” (*Un gol de todos*, 2010).

The years 2014-2018: the end of the myth of *La Roja*?

One should undoubtedly consider the extent to which the patriotic animation which belied José Ignacio Wert's theory of “patriotic anorexia” (Wert, 2001) among the Spanish, was a real, grass roots manifestation of the community, or whether it actually resulted from social engineering and constituted a media fabrication. One could even claim that much the same applies to the designation ‘Spanish Fury’, which drew on the fiery spirit that Spain's national team showed during the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp, as the term proved to be a concoction of journalists. I am inclined to argue that those were the Spanish media which created the patriotic climate around *La Roja* and managed to elevate it to a symbol of Spanish unity reborn. Newspaper titles, interviews, photographs, radio and television shows all undertook to spread one message, to promote Spanish symbols and the successes of *La Roja* as the successes of Spain. The crux of the matter is that the language of those narratives did not so much refer to facts but created them. It is all about the credibility of the communication, which requires that its form should not be separate from its content. A reliable description resorts to stylistic figures

only to a degree necessary to give an account of an event or a sequence of events. In the instances above, the stylistic figures employed in the communication became more important than the facts themselves. One can hardly help the impression that rhetorical devices were used deliberately to project an emotional reality rather than to supply a narrative description of what had actually happened.

It is a fact that after the first success of *La Roja* in 2008, Spanish newspapers were still visibly cautious (or even anxious) as far as the use of the moniker was concerned. Perhaps it was yet uncertain whether it would catch on and be widely accepted. Only the victory at the 2010 World Cup dispelled those doubts. Still, it would seem that despite the existence of a “football-identity axis Madrid-Barcelona” (*el eje futbolístico-identitario Madrid-Barcelona*), which was demonstrated in a study by Manuel González Ramallal and, in fact, informed the interpretation of *La Roja*’s successes by the Spanish press (González Ramallal, 2014: 339), individual authors maintained that the triumphs of the national team and the patriotic spirit enlivened by sport inspired positive attitudes in the face of the economic crisis in Spain. Therefore, *La Roja* of 2008-2012 was largely a media (press-radio-television) marvel, something one wished to exist instead of what actually was, something more akin to Jean Baudrillard’s simulacrum rather than reality. Hence one can hardly agree with Burns, who contends that the successes of *La Roja* go beyond football achievement, being a political, social, and cultural phenomenon. Indeed, had Burns’s words reflected the actual state of affairs, one would have stopped using the neologism *La Roja* to describe the national team, which in its turn would have been universally supported throughout Spain, especially in Catalonia and the Basque Country. This did not happen, however, since supporters in those regions remained reserved towards *La Roja*, even though a proportion enjoyed its successes and displayed Spanish symbols. Often enough, such attitudes faced some backlash from the opponents of the national team, and even led to acts of downright aggression (Lara, 2016: 22; Fernández Díaz *ve en Gràcia ‘tácticas de kale borroka’*, 2016: 22; *La euforia por el triunfo de ‘La Roja’ acaba con 21 detenidos y 74 heridos durante la celebración*, 2010; *Agreden en Getxo a dos aficionados que celebraban el triunfo de España*, 2012). As Ekain Rojo-Labaien observes:

The victorious era of the Spanish national team in 2008-2012 and the celebration of Spanish nationalism that it brought about failed to eclipse the manifestations of the peripheral nations, even though it succeeded in socializing the Spanish flag as something positive and devoid of connotations with Francoism (Rojo-Labaien, 2014: 31).

This was particularly evident during the final games of Copa del Rey in 2009, 2012 and 2015, when FC Barcelona played against Athletic Bilbao. Catalan and Basque supporters used the opportunity to parade local symbols, as well as whistled and booed at the national anthem and the Spanish monarch. What is more, the absence of major success during subsequent tournaments in 2014 (World Cup in Brazil), 2016 (European Championships in France) and 2018 (World Cup in Russia) caused the euphoria sur-

rounding the national team to abate noticeably, while the discourse of defeat and fatalism which had accompanied it for such a long time seems to have resurfaced in the newspapers (*España, eliminada en la fase de grupos por quinta vez*, 2014; Estepa, 2014; Herguedas, 2016). It may be worthwhile to consider a number of examples. After losing to the Netherlands (1-5) and Chile (0-2) during the 2014 World Cup, Spain dropped out already at group stage. *As*, a Madrid journal, noted in a title that Spain was eliminated at group stage for the fifth time in history, and revisited those painful moments in the article, recalling the World Cups in Chile (1962), England (1966), Argentina (1978) and France (1998). In addition, the journalists did not fail to mention that since 1998 in France, Spain had never left the tournament that soon (*España, eliminada en la fase de grupos por quinta vez*, 2014). Clearly, the narrative of failure returns here, with numerous references to the past and emphasis on the fact that Spain loses to increasingly weaker rivals. The article focused on enumerating the causes behind the defeat and the former greatness of *La Roja* does not reverberate anywhere in the text. Moreover, the title refers to Spain, not *La Roja*, which might suggest that the defeat of the national team is tantamount to the defeat of Spain. Another daily, *Marca*, went as far as titling one of their articles “The End of an Exceptional Generation”. Among other things, it states as follows:

We witness the end of a golden age in Spanish football [emphasis by the author], marked by three triumphs that fans shall remember forever: the championships of Europe in 2008 and 2012, and the World Cup of 2010 [...] It is only logical that Spanish supporters are disappointed, but the respect one should have for that national team should endure eternally. [The players of *La Roja* – emphasis by the author] achieved what no Spaniard had imagined attainable. They brought happiness to millions of people in Spain. They taught the whole world to fear that team. Everything in life comes to an end, and the final farewell to the exceptional generation was written at the Maracana (Estepa, 2014).

As may be seen, the journalists of *Marca* – unlike those from *As* – attempted to defend the national team citing its previous achievement; here, the success of the team is strongly associated with the happiness of the Spanish people as a community, which could be interpreted as an endeavour to uphold the link between the identity of the national team supporter with the Spanish identity, which the great triumphs in previous years had in a sense helped to rebuild.

Following *La Roja*'s loss to Italy (0-2) in 1/8 finals of the European Championships in France 2016, the *El Mundo* daily did not hesitate to head its article with a suggestive “Keys to Spain’s Defeat”, and added in the commentary:

The triple champion, the national team capable of playing fourteen matches without a loss in a major European tournament, suffered total collapse in Paris. Spain’s elimination in the 1/8 after an awful game confirmed what we saw four days earlier against Croatia. **It was the most bitter end to an era** [emphasis by the author]. The gloomiest of goodbyes to Vicente del Bosque (Herguedas, 2016).

When *La Roja* faced its third major disappointment in a row during the 2018 World Cup (having lost on penalties to the host, Russia, in the 1/8 finals), the Spanish media (Basque and Catalan ones in particular) spared no spite where the squad was concerned. As if the erstwhile demons and habits of scathing appraisals of their own national team had returned with twice as much force. *El País* was convinced that “Spain Took a Decade-Long Step Back”. It was argued that Spain grew weaker and played worse than in 2014 (when it performed poorly in the group stage, with much laboured 1-0 victory over Iran and 2-2 draw with Morocco), which caused it to go back to where it had been ten years before (Sámamo, 2018).

Catalan and Basque newspapers had no mercy either as they censured yet another letdown by *La Roja*. *Deia*, a Basque daily, stated explicitly that “Spanish Football Can’t Do Anymore” (Artetxe, 2018), while Catalan *L’Esportiu* added bluntly: “*La Roja*’s Failure”, drawing attention to the absence of Andres Iniesta during the game, and even using the word “disaster” to describe the outcome (Correas, 2018). In any case, it was symptomatic that three consecutive failures in major tournaments sufficed to blot out the earlier three spectacular successes which became but a distant memory. Does it not demonstrate how ephemeral those past achievements of *La Roja* really were, and how fragile were the associated hopes for a Spanish unity?

Still, it needs to be noted that the narrative is not quite the same, as *La Rojita* came to aid of their older colleagues in 2019, winning the U21 European Championship. *El País* readily hailed the young victors “the kings of Europe” (Torres, 2019). Some, on the other hand, try to mitigate the situation and keep the narrative of defeat in check, writing that currently *La Roja* finds itself in a period of *transición*, and calling for everyone to be realistic at the same time: “*La Roja* and Spanish football need to become thoroughly immersed in reality, so as to be able to accept that the past is very far away from the present” (Moñino, 2019).

Considering the above, the demiurgic power of *La Roja* that would forge Spanish unity appears to be a myth rather than reality. The flag of Spain is still far from being a positive symbol in those regions of the country where strong decentralist tendencies are still present. In Catalonia and the Basque Country, the *estelades*, *senyeres* and *ikurriñas* are more numerous each day, driving out the Spanish flag from public space (Kubiaczyk, 2018).

Undoubtedly, it is a major problem for Spain’s national team that supporters identify more readily with local football clubs, which in the case of FC Barcelona (Catalonia) and Athletic Bilbao (Basque Country) become no less than foremost representatives of those region. Moreover, there are autonomous ‘national teams’ which make efforts to be recognized as official (although I personally believe that the unofficial regional teams do not represent Catalans and Basques as well as FC Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao do).

Conclusions

Despite the successes of the national team, *La Roja* – the designation it was given – has not become a symbol of Spanish unity. Hiding behind the freakish linguistic creation betrays submissiveness of the metropole with respect to the peripheries which overtly demonstrate their hostility towards the Spanish state. A neat neologism will not suffice to speak of genuine identification of the Spanish community with their national team. Therein lies its greatest failing. In my opinion, using of the term *La Roja* denotes a dissociation from the history of Spain, even its renouncement. This attests to Spain's weakness and shows that nationalism is an enduring and irresolvable problem in that country. Therefore, the success of *La Roja* is only momentary, a fractal one⁷, which does not merely refer to the fact that the Basque Country and Catalonia did not celebrate it as much as Madrid or other regions. After all, Catalan and Basque nationalists could have easily presented it – *à rebours* – as an attempt to draw on the period of Franco's rule. Furthermore, when *La Roja* rose to fame in 2008-2012, both social life and sport witnessed expressions of nationalist sentiments among Catalans and Basques, where it was alleged that Spain does not exist. Spanish flag continues to be associated with centralist nationalism, while *La Roja* is unwelcome in Catalonia and the Basque Country. Nothing has changed. Also, just as the appellation *la furia española* harbours Basque contribution behind its creation, so *La Roja* carries with it all the ailments and weaknesses of Spain today: a constitutional monarchy and democracy made up of 17 autonomous communities.

It would seem that expectations with regard to the national team – those unrelated to sport – are similar to those one had historically pinned on the Spanish language, envisaging that it would become a mortar to cement national unity. It may be recalled that in late 15th century, following the marriage of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon, which was the cornerstone of Spanish unity, *castellano* was recognized as the language of the empire and a universal instrument of linguistic communication. A renewed attempt to unify the country by enforcing use of one Spanish language was made in the 20th century by General Franco. As we know, both attempts did not eradicate regional languages. On the contrary, in response to Francoist policies, particular regions began to manifest them even more boldly, especially in Catalonia and the Basque Country. In the early 21st century, football or, more specifically, the national team designated as *La Roja* was conceived as an integrating agent of Spanish unity. And yet, the endeavour

⁷ This fractal nature is not a new phenomenon and does not apply only to *La Roja*. Javier Marías observes that the national team of Spain is to perform the political function of uniting the country for a spell of several weeks during championship tournaments. In this sense, Marías evaluates and praises the work of the national team coach in 1992-1998, Javier Clemente, who managed to unite the entire group of players around the very idea of the national team, even though it was mainly composed of Basques and Catalans. Still, it was a national team for the moment, an instant national team, continually criticized by the newspapers of Madrid (Marías, 2011: 41-42).

failed to produce the expected results. In spite of spectacular successes in 2008-2012, the national team under its apolitical, freshly coined label did not win the affection of all Spaniards, encountering greatest opposition in Catalonia and the Basque Country. Not only did it fail to become a means of integration, but also sharply highlighted identity issues which plague the Spanish society.

The very moniker *La Roja* caused the national team of Spain problems in the field of sports. During the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, an argument broke before Spain v. Chile match concerning which of the teams is actually entitled to be called *La Roja*. Supporters of the national team of Chile, which had gone by the name since the 1940s, launched a special social media campaign #LaRojaEsNuestra (Eng. *La Roja* is Ours) and posted a video in which they accused the Spanish national team of appropriating the name (*La Roja Es Nuestra*, 2014).

In my opinion, the neologism *La Roja* displays traits of what Walter Benjamin defined as “overnaming” (Benjamin, 2011: 24), which leads to banalization of the thing it denotes. The problem is that *La Roja* does not convey the symbolic meaning of the word national team as instead of pointing to a natural connection and belonging it refers to a collective body devoid of roots. Indeed, a name that draws on the colour of jerseys does not have that aura which enables one to capture and identify all that which is linked to the past and to memory – the cultural context and tradition that a national team should possess. On the contrary, it seeks to erase it. ‘Spanish Fury’ was actually closer to the mark, since it connoted historically rooted nature and temperament of the Spanish people. The shortcoming of *La Roja* consists in the fact that by being in line with the requirement of political correctness in language, it was supposed to cure the symptoms, but not the causes. By demanding that people speak differently, one sought to change the way they thought and behave, which proved a delusion. Instead of a natural connection, there is a pretence of legitimacy. Therefore, one should consider the following remark prophetic: “They’re going to call it [the national team] *La Roja*, but it will be Spain [...]. When the defeat comes, we’ll need even more imagination to see Spain” (De la Madrid, 2013: 207).

A very recent example of that political correctness and, at the same time, a proof that *La Roja*’s myth is in fact perpetuated by the media, is the criticism voiced after the Royal Spanish Football Federation presented the official shirt in which the national team will play during the European Championships in 2020. The image of the shirt posted on the Federation’s Twitter account was accompanied by the following adage: “Our football sets us apart, our football unites us” (Royal Spanish Football Federation 2019). The controversy was sparked by the design of the jersey developed by Adidas, or more precisely the squares in various hues of red. This is intended to demonstrate that this national team is different from others, but confirm, on the other hand, that football is what unites all Spaniards, regardless of political divides. Also, the design apparently

draws on the jersey worn by the Spanish national team a century ago during the Antwerp Olympics (*Ya es oficial: está es la polémica nueva camiseta de España*, 2019; *Euro 2020: upolitycznione stroje reprezentacji Hiszpanii?*, 2019). Given the current tense political situation in Catalonia, there is a strong suspicion that it may be yet another centrally motivated attempt at building patriotic climate around the national team prior to the 2020 European Championships, which due to the coronavirus pandemic will not take place as scheduled.

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the role of the national team of Spain denoted by the neologism *La Roja* in promoting patriotic sentiments and building national unity. In a 2014 study entitled *Goles y banderas. Fútbol e identidades nacionales en España*, Alejandro Quiroga Fernández de Soto argues that the successes of the team in 2008-2012 (Champions of Europe in Austria and Switzerland, World Champions in South Africa and again Champions of Europe in Poland and Ukraine), brought about a patriotic revival, while *La Roja* itself became an integrating factor which united the Spanish regardless of political differences and distinct identities. The assertion is highly debatable for two reasons: firstly, the resurgence of the national symbols was temporary and did not occur uniformly across the country, especially in Catalonia and the Basque Country; secondly, it would be more fitting to speak of journalistic patriotism rather than actual patriotic revival within the Spanish society. The paper critically assesses the patriotic discourse rooted in the successes of *La Roja* in 2008-2012. Their poor performance in the last major tournaments in 2014-2018 and absence of any particular euphoria surrounding the national team confirm that the wave of flags which swept the country in the successful period was not an expression of profound, patriotic renewal of national symbols. At most, it may be argued to have been a forced attempt to boost Spanish (centralist) nationalism in the face of the increasingly active peripheral nationalisms, especially its most radical, Catalan embodiment.

Keywords: football, *La Roja*, Spanish national team, Spain, Catalonia, Basque Country, nationalism, patriotism, national unity

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