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## The national team – shaping the nation's representation in football

### Introduction

Michael Billig points to two understandings of the term representation. In the first understanding, the word representation refers to “speaking on behalf of someone”, while in the second it refers to “representation, mapping”. Going further, Billig states that a particular representation of a group of people (e.g., a politician, a government, a political party) “speaks on their behalf” and at the same time “represents them” (Billig, 2008: 184). Such a dual, representational role is played by, for example, a national football team, which in Polish is commonly referred to as a national team or even simply as representation. The latter term actually relies on the obviousness of the concept, which is intended to refer to a specific football team. In other words, the term representation in the context of Poland may evoke associations directly with Polish national football team. As Jarosław Kiliński observes: “the athlete embodies the nation by acting on its behalf, and its successes and failures are the victories and defeats of the community” (Kiliński, 2004: 260). At the same time, athletes represent the nation, and their message is directed both inward, towards the represented collective, and outward – to the international community. Thanks to its dual representative role, a national football team can fulfil a number of important functions. On the one hand, playing football in the national colours contributes to the reproduction of national identity and widely understood nationalism (Dębicki, 2009; Małczyński, 2012). On the other hand, the performances of a sports team affect the image of a given state (or other political entity) and are sometimes used in public diplomacy (Dmowski, Szałański, 2012; Mickiewicz, 2009; Kobierecki 2016).

In the light of the role played by a national football team, a management of this team seems to be an important issue. The proper selection of players (i.e., representatives) affects the fulfillment of tasks related to representing the nation. National football teams are organized by national football federations. In the case of Poland, this function is performed by Polski Związek Piłki Nożnej (Polish Football Association; PZPN). The se-

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lection of players is handled by the national coach who works on behalf of the national federation. It is the coaching staff that decides who will be selected for the national team. This means that the dominant role in the management of the football team, which is an important national symbol, is played by an organization that is autonomous from the national government. However, the decisions of the manager, who determines who speaks for the nation and represents the nation, are sometimes contested by the public – mainly sports fans and journalists. Those with an interest in the sport often have their own vision of the national team and sometimes try, despite the dominant position of the national football association, to influence the shape of the national team.

This paper is an analysis of the role of the men's national football team in representing the nation. I will focus mainly on the issue of representativeness of the team squad. I am primarily interested in the issue of how footballers' appointments are aligned with the logic of sporting competition and the requirements of representativeness. I place my considerations in the context of a sporting field in which competition takes place over the ability to define the football representation of a nation (and perhaps even a nation in general). In this field, the dominant role is maintained by the national football federation, which remains autonomous from the state authorities while being subject to pressure from the public.

### **National representation in sports competition**

The main role of the national football team is to participate in international sports competitions, in which it competes against teams of a similar status. Preparation and registration of the national team is the responsibility of the national football association (in the case of Poland of PZPN), which has the exclusive right to represent the country in the sport in question. This privilege stems from the monopoly of the football organizations, which are affiliated with the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), to organize official matches. In sports law (Lat. *lex sportiva*) there is a rule of uniform representation: “in each sport only one governing organization can operate at each geographical level [...]: an international federation, a continental federation (if it exists) or a national federation” (Wach, 2012: 66). Having own national team is considered to be one of the manifestations of self-determination. As Marzena Józefczyk notes:

According to international relations scholars, statehood is defined by three traditional elements: territory, population, and sovereign power. However, it seems reasonable to add the fourth element: the national football team. A state is independent when it has an internally and externally independent government, territory, is able to defend its borders, but also when it is able to field its own team in international competitions (Józefczyk, 2009: 149).

The very fact of functioning of a given national team becomes a message that speaks of the “existence of a given national entity”. This message is sent both internally and externally. The first case concerns the current and potential fans of a particular nation-

al team or, more generally, members of the nation represented. The football team “flags the nation” by reminding people of its existence. Support, on the other hand, provides an opportunity to identify with a particular nation and affirm national identity. In this way, the game of the football team contributes to the reproduction of nationalism. In the second case, the recipient of the message is the international community. The performance of the national team in the international arena contributes to the creation of the image of the nation and the state. Participation in sports competitions becomes a way for a nation to appear in the social consciousness of foreign observers (Jaskułowski, Parus-Jaskułowska, 2003). In turn, sporting successes shape a positive image of the represented nation. Members of the national team, thus, act as a kind of diplomats (Kobierecki, 2016: 120-125).

How the football team represents the nation depends on its performance on the field. As already mentioned, sporting success translates into a positive image of the represented country. For example, winning qualification to the finals of football tournaments allows for participation in major sporting events, which provide another opportunity to showcase the nation, this time surrounded by other winning nations in the context of peak global media interest. Events on the turf are given specific meanings related to interpretations of style of play and outcome. In light of these meanings, a nation may appear as winning or losing, fair or unfair, defending or attacking, and so on. A positive sporting outcome affects the interest of fans among the population that the football team is supposed to represent. An increase in the interest of the fans can be accompanied by an increase in patriotic feelings. Achieving success on the pitch is a kind of encouragement for fans who are convinced that it is ‘worth it’ (even if only for 90 minutes) to identify with a given nation. Victory gives a sense of power, especially if it is achieved over a strong opponent. Finally, sports rivalry allows conflict to play out in a safe, non-military sphere (Jawłowski, 2007: 230-232). Therefore, one of the primary goals of a football team is to present an appropriate level of football play and strive to achieve the best possible sporting results.

Remarkably, the institution that manages the national football team is to some extent independent of the state authorities. The autonomy of national federations is maintained by the position of continental and world football authorities – important actors of international relations (Włoch, 2012; 2013). Supranational football organizations, such as FIFA or UEFA (Union of European Football Associations), guard the autonomy of affiliated associations by applying pressure against governments that try ‘too hard’ to interfere in internal football affairs. The most severe form of punishment is the suspension of a country's teams.

This has been seen by Polish authorities, who have tried several times to intervene in the way Polish football is managed by the PZPN. The most spectacular example concerns corruption in football competitions organized and supervised by the PZPN. In 2005, only two years after corruption in sports became a crime as a result of amendments to the Polish Criminal Code, an af-

fair broke out, the unprecedented scale of which means that even a decade later all proceedings in this case were still pending. However, the compromise of the institution did not contribute to the introduction of changes in its functioning, and the attempts of Polish government to intervene through the Ministry of Sport met with firm opposition from the world and European football federations, threatening the suspension of Polish teams from international competitions (Woźniak, 2015: 67-68).

Suspended teams cannot play in international competitions and, thus, cannot fulfill their diplomatic function. Any pressure exerted by state authorities on sports activists must, therefore, be subtle or discreet enough not to provoke a negative reaction from football's supranational governing bodies.

The national football associations are, among other things, responsible for hiring a national coach. The selection of a national team coach is often controversial. Candidates for this position are assessed not only in terms of their professionalism, but also their nationality. It has become a common practice to appoint foreign coaches to lead national teams in particular sports. For example, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Leo Beenhakker from the Netherlands and Paulo Sousa from Portugal became coaches of Polish national football team. Thus, an important national symbol can be managed by a person from abroad. What is more, a foreign selector performs a kind of diplomatic mission, serving for a foreign country.

### **Football team as a metonymy**

National football team is a metonymy of a nation. Metonymy is the use of one "concept so that it replaces another" (Lakoff, Johnson, 2010: 68), such as part for whole, product for producer, place for event, effect for cause, etc. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson: "it is not simply a poetic or rhetorical device. Nor is it merely a matter of language. Metonymic concepts [...] are part of our ordinary, everyday thinking, acting, and speaking" (Lakoff, Johnson, 2010: 68). Metonymy has mainly, but not only, a designative function for it serves to organize not only language, but also thoughts, attitudes, and actions. The choice of metonymy depends on what aspects of a concept we want to emphasize. For example, in the phrase "good head" it is not "merely a matter of using the part (head) in place of the whole (person), but of choosing a particular property of that person, namely, the intelligence that is associated with the head" (Lakoff, Johnson, 2010: 66).

Through the metonymic relation, the football team directs our attention to the nation and facilitates mental access to this abstract concept. The football players, who substitute for the nation, embody it. As Eric Hobsbawm notes: "An imagined community of millions of people seems more real in the form of a team of eleven men with a name" (Hobsbawm, 2010: 151). Moreover, the players' play makes the nation on whose behalf

they are performing appear as acting and causing. The spectacle of football presents nations as viable entities that seek to make gains in international competition.

Choosing football team as a metonymy of the nation has the effect of highlighting certain properties that we attribute to the nation. A team of athletes is a metaphor for community, indicating the “communal nature of a nation” (Anderson, 1997). A football team that consists of young, athletic men portrays a nation using the categories of youth, strength, vitality, and masculinity. Finally, players who are expected to play on the national team are expected to be somewhat representative: appropriate background, language skills, or adequate moral stance, among others.

### **Selection of national team players**

The selection of players who will perform in the national team needs to be adapted both to the logic of sports competition and the requirements of representativeness. A football team is not a static representation of a nation. The on-field rivalry is real, and the players actually face off against their rivals. The course of this rivalry, in turn, as already mentioned, influences the formation of the nation's image. The role of the coach of the national team is, therefore, to appoint such players who will make it possible to achieve the best possible result on the field. According to the logic of sports competition, the selection of representatives of the nation must be based on the principles of meritocracy: the team should include footballers who will guarantee sporting efficiency. In turn, the role of the selector is to accurately assess the suitability of individual athletes for the representative role and to manage the team, which will result in achieving the maximum use of the players' potential (Woźniak, 2017: 177).

At the same time, the national football team is required to be representative – the team is supposed to adequately represent the nation. The basic level of representativeness is provided by the FIFA regulations, according to which the players playing for the national team must have the citizenship of the represented country. The set of athletes who can potentially be called up to the national team is determined primarily by the rules for citizenship designation. National football federations adjust the appointments of national team players to the local legal order that defines the boundaries of the national community. Therefore, the football national team reflects the rules and practices governing access to citizenship of a particular nation-state (Sonntag, 2015: 113, 288).

The logic of the sports competitions requires a constant expansion of the team's potential. Therefore, the coaching staff of the national team is constantly looking for talents that will provide the right result on the field. Sometimes the search crosses national borders. A way to increase the number of players who could potentially play for the national team is to naturalize players from abroad. In such cases, sports activists may try to influence the citizenship process. This was the case, for example, with the naturalization of Emmanuel Olisadebe in 2000. The Nigerian-born footballer was granted

a Polish passport in a fast-track procedure thanks to lobbying by PZPN. Subsequently, the player contributed significantly to the promotion of Polish national team to the 2002 World Cup, which took place in South Korea and Japan (Siemiątkowski, 2020; Rudynek, 2020). This example shows that the appointment of a naturalized footballer can significantly increase the potential of the national team and improve sports performance.

However, FIFA restricts naturalized players from being called up to the national team. In 2004, the organization tightened the rules, introducing a thread of a clear connection between the naturalized footballer and his new homeland. In this way, world football's governing body is trying to protect the game from unwanted migration of players. There is a risk of a mass outflow of talent from peripheral countries to the center and semi-periphery (mainly from South America and Africa to Europe and the Persian Gulf countries). At the same time, FIFA strengthened the representative nature of national teams, requiring that the naturalized representative with the new homeland is connected by something more than just a passport. Under current FIFA regulations, a naturalized player is entitled to play for his new home country's national team if he meets certain conditions: 1) he was born in the territory of the federation he wishes to represent; 2) his biological parents were born in the territory of the federation he wishes to represent; 3) his grandparents were born in the territory of the federation he wishes to represent; 4) he has lived in the territory of the federation he wishes to represent for: (a) at least 3 years – in the case of persons who lived in the territory before reaching the age of 10 ; (b) at least 5 years – in the case of persons who lived in the territory before between the ages of 10 and 18 ; (c) at least 5 years – in the case of persons who lived in the territory after the age of 18. In addition, a player who lived in the country of naturalization between 10 and 18 years of age must prove that his naturalization is not related to his application for a place in the national team. An additional obstacle to calling up players from abroad is that players cannot represent two countries. FIFA requires players with dual nationality to decide to play for only one national team. Only a player who has not played more than three matches at adult level (not including matches in the finals of continental or world championships) before turning 21 can change national colours.

National football federations must, therefore, adapt their national players' appointments to both the local legal framework, which defines the boundaries of the national community, and the FIFA regulations, which govern the status of naturalized players and those with dual citizenship. Despite this, federations do not give up trying to increase the potential of their national teams by acquiring players formed abroad. There are two basic strategies that make this possible. The first strategy involves naturalizing foreign players who have been playing in the local league for a long time (thus fulfilling the requirement of long-term residence). An example of this is the naturalization of Roger Guerreiro, Brazilian player who played for Legia Warszawa for several years before he joined Polish national team (Przybysz, 2020). Another strategy is to call up players who have spent their adult lives abroad, but have the appropriate (immigrant) back-

ground. For example, Polish team for Euro 2012 included several such players. Damien Perquis and Ludovic Obraniak were born in France, but their grandparents originated from Poland (*Damien Perquis jest już polskim obywatelem*, 2011; *Reprezentacja. Damien Perquis ma polskie obywatelstwo*, 2011; Koprowiak, Drosio, 2008; Nawrot, 2009). Eugen Polanski, Sebastian Boenisch and Adam Matuszczyk were all born in Poland but emigrated to Germany as children (*Bogusław Eugeniusz Polański przez Sosnowiec do kadry Smudy*, 2011; *Reprezentacja. Polanski zmienił zdanie. Chce grać dla Polski*, 2011; Kołtoń, 2010). In the case of players from the diaspora, there may also be lobbying by the national football association, which will put pressure on state institutions to deal with the formalities of granting or confirming citizenship. Such a situation occurred in October 2021, when the president of PZPN sought the President of Poland to expedite the procedure of issuing a passport to Matthew Cash, a British-born footballer with Polish roots (Seweryn, 2021; Serwański, 2021).

### **Contestation of the football team**

People who are in some way interested in international sport expect the football team that represents them to perform at its best while remaining representative (an adequate representation of the nation). Therefore, the appointments made by the selector are widely commented on, interpreted, and even criticized and contested by them. The selector imposes his vision of the football representation of the nation, but individuals who identify with the represented nation are not passive recipients of his vision. Sports journalists eagerly express their opinions about the composition of the national team, often suggesting the appointment of specific players. On the one hand, journalists suggest to the national team coach which players are worthy of attention. On the other hand, they create pressure by demanding that their comments on the shape of the national team be taken into account. The voice of journalists is heard and can easily reach the ears of the national team coach. The media not only control the work of the coaching staff by providing information about their activities, but also try to influence the personnel decisions of the selector. Moreover, media content to some extent shapes public opinion and influences the reception of the national team. Fans of the national team are in a different situation. Their comments can gain publicity mainly through anonymous folklore that functions in various forms in stadiums (Marczyk, 1996) and on the Internet (Małczyński, 2016). Fans also express their approval or disapproval of the actions of the football team and its coach through attendance at games. A separate issue is the selector's resistance to criticism from the media, fans, sports activists or other actors of social life. As it has been mentioned many times, the national coach works for the national football association, which has a dominant position in the field of sport. The personnel decisions of the national team coach, therefore, remain largely independent of external

pressures. Despite the selector's privileged position, other social actors do not give up the competition to shape the nation's football team.

An extreme expression of dissatisfaction with the decision of the national team manager is a boycott of the national team. It sometimes happens that people interested in football demonstratively disassociate themselves from the team that is supposed to represent them. A boycott can be used as a tool to criticize a team's composition due to its subjectively perceived lack of representativeness. For example, during the 2012 European Championships, some fans decided not to support Polish national team, among other reasons, due to the presence in the team of players with questionable affiliation to Polish nation (Burski, 2013). Among those boycotting the national team was former footballer, publicist and MP, Jan Tomaszewski. In his view, several footballers did not deserve to play for Polish national team. Tomaszewski pointed to the 'foreignness' of Obraniak, Perquis, Boenisch and Polanski. In turn, he accused Łukasz Piszczek of involvement in a corruption scandal (*Jan Tomaszewski: 'trener bez matury powołał kadrę harńby'*, 2012; Satora, 2012). Speaking of the PZPN national team or Smuda's team (named after the coach Franciszek Smuda), critics cut the metonymic link that was supposed to connect the football team with the nation.

Comments about the composition of the national football team reveal both ways of understanding the representation of a nation and nationality itself. Based on the statements of the fans of Polish national team<sup>1</sup>, certain themes can be identified that reflect their attitudes towards the representative role of footballers. Fans want their representatives to have the right qualities, including sports skills, impeccable moral conduct, patriotism, knowledge of Polish language and culture, and Polish origins. The football audience hopes for a favourable result. That is why they expect the representatives to be proficient in the art of football. The selection of the best players is a sign of rationality in preparation for sports competition and, in a way, care for the good of the nation. Fans may also demand exemplary moral conduct from the players representing them, both on and off the field. Players are expected to be self-controlled and dedicated. It seems important to have an attitude of fair play and to be a role model for others, especially for the youngest. As for the requirement of an adequate moral attitude, the media discourse may be a point of reference, as footballers are often presented in the context of various moral scandals. Patriotism is also related to the players' attitude. It is seen in the respect for national symbols, especially in the singing of the national anthem. However, the most important aspect of a football representative is his nationality. There seems to be a widespread belief that a representative of Poland should first and foremost be

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<sup>1</sup> The present analysis is based on qualitative research conducted by the author of the text and staff (Konrad Górny, Mirosław Marczyk, Krzysztof Piątkowski) and students of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Wrocław. The research involved 95 semi-structured interviews with fans of Polish national football team. The research took place during Euro 2012, when Polish national team included several players with questionable 'Polishness'.

a Pole – either in an ethnic sense (having Polish origins) or in a cultural sense (having undergone the process of acculturation into Polish culture/socialization into Polish society). Nationality is directly connected with the argument of language skills. The ability to speak Polish is seen as a sign of nationality, but at the same time it is sometimes rationalized — the knowledge of the national language is supposed to ensure the possibility of free communication between the representatives.

However, the fans of Polish national team are not a monolith and their views on the shape of the national team may clearly differ. They are divided, for example, over their attitude to the appointment of foreign players. Although the process of granting citizenship to potential national team members evokes rather negative associations, at least some supporters are able to accept naturalization as a way of increasing the team's sporting potential, especially if the naturalized players are of Polish origin.

## Conclusions

There are often disputes around the particular representations of the nation. Various actors of social life try to indicate the right ways of presenting the national community. The rivalry over the shape of the nation's representation in football has been dominated by the national football association. It is mainly up to the national football association and the coach it hires to determine how the football team will present the nation. The privileged position of the manager allows him to shape the national team according to his own vision. Meanwhile, the choice of players determines the properties of the nation, which are accentuated by the metonymy in the form of a sports team. The football metonymy of the nation is, thus, shaped with a certain autonomy from the state authorities. However, in determining who is to take on the role of representing the national community, the coach must conform to the local legal order and sports law. Both legal orders, in fact, determine the pool of players who may appear on the national team.

Appointments to represent a nation in football are based on adaptation to the logic of sports competition – the national team is required to be effective on the pitch. According to this logic, the selector should choose players who will guarantee a favourable result. Their ethnic origin or off-field moral attitude is irrelevant. What is important is that the players should meet the minimum requirements to play for the national team – first and foremost the nationality of the country they represent. The public, in turn, expects from the players both sporting skills and an appropriate reflection of the nation. The issue of the representativeness of individual players is sometimes the subject of public debate. In Poland, the appointment of foreign players is particularly controversial. From a sporting efficiency perspective, naturalizing talented players seems to be a beneficial practice. Therefore, among fans and sports journalists there are voices in support of granting citizenship to foreign talents. At the same time, strong opposition

to naturalization is noticeable. However, the opposition to appointing foreign players is less pronounced in the case of players of Polish descent. The different positions can be interpreted as manifestations of specific versions of the national ideology. The rivalry between different visions of the nation's football team manifests itself in attempts to exert pressure on PZPN, which holds a privileged position in this dispute. Criticism and contestation become the weapons of the dissatisfied – fans are able to boycott the team that supposedly represents them.

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**Abstract:** The national football team represents the nation and speaks for it. The football team plays an important role in the reproduction of national identity and nationalism. It is also used as a tool of public diplomacy. The team is managed by the national football association, which is autonomous from the state authorities. Thanks to its dominant position, the national football association can impose its vision of the representation of the nation. However, the vision of the selector is not received passively. The composition of the national team – an important aspect of the team as a metonymy of the nation – is sometimes contested by the public, especially sports journalists or fans.

**Keywords:** football, sport, national team, representation, nationalism

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