

SMALL SPORTING EVENTS AS A SPORTS DIPLOMACY TOOL: THE EXAMPLE OF THE FRIENDLY FOOTBALL MATCH BETWEEN BASQUE COUNTRY WOMEN'S NATIONAL FOOTBALL TEAM AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC¹

Los pequeños eventos deportivos como herramienta de la diplomacia deportiva: el ejemplo del partido amistoso entre la selección femenina del País Vasco y la República Checa

Pequenos eventos desportivos como ferramenta de diplomacia desportiva: o exemplo do jogo amigável de futebol entre a seleção nacional de futebol feminino do País Basco e a República Checa

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ABSTRACT: Many research articles focus on international sporting events that have the potential to gain a global audience, such as the Olympic Games or FIFA World Cups. These sporting events could be valuable sports diplomacy tools for the hosting countries, strengthening the hosting nation's soft power. However, the majority of the international sporting events could be described as small, with just a limited number of fans. On the other hand, as this article demonstrates on the example of the friendly football match between Basque Country Women's National Football Team and the Czech Republic that took place in November 2017, this kind of sporting event could be used as a relatively successful sports diplomacy tool (concerning its limited audience).

Keywords: sports diplomacy; small sporting event; football; Basque Country; Czech Republic.

RESUMEN: Muchos artículos de investigación se centran en eventos deportivos internacionales que tienen el potencial de ganar una audiencia global, como los Juegos Olímpicos o las Copas Mundiales de la FIFA. Estos eventos deportivos podrían ser valiosas herramientas de diplomacia deportiva para los países anfitriones, fortaleciendo el poder blando de la nación anfitriona. Sin embargo, la mayoría de los eventos deportivos internacionales podrían describirse como pequeños, con un número limitado de aficionados. Por otro lado, como demuestra este artículo con el ejemplo del partido amistoso de fútbol entre la Selección Femenina de Fútbol del País Vasco y la República Checa que tuvo lugar en noviembre de 2017, este tipo de evento deportivo podría ser utilizado como una herramienta de diplomacia deportiva relativamente exitosa. (sobre su audiencia limitada).

Palabras clave: diplomacia deportiva; pequeño evento deportivo; fútbol, País Vasco; República Checa.

RESUMO: Muitos artigos de pesquisa se concentram em eventos esportivos internacionais que têm potencial para ganhar uma audiência global, como os Jogos Olímpicos ou Copas do Mundo da FIFA. Esses eventos esportivos podem ser ferramentas valiosas de diplomacia esportiva para os países anfitriões, fortalecendo o poder brando da nação anfitriã. No entanto, a maioria dos eventos esportivos internacionais pode ser descrita como pequena, com apenas um número limitado de fãs. Por outro lado, como este artigo demonstra no exemplo do amistoso de futebol entre a Seleção Nacional de Futebol Feminino do País Basco e a República Tcheca, realizado em novembro de 2017, esse tipo de evento esportivo poderia ser usado como uma ferramenta de diplomacia esportiva relativamente bem-sucedida (no que diz respeito ao seu público limitado).

Palavras-chave: diplomacia esportiva; pequeno evento esportivo; futebol; País Basco; República Tcheca.

I. INTRODUCTION

Geoffrey Allen Pigman (2014: 94) began his article related to international sport and public diplomacy with the opinion that «[i]nternational sporting competition has played a rôle in diplomacy since at least the ancient Olympiad.» In the last century, when the modern sport was born (e.g., GuttmanN, 2014), the role of sport within international society became more or less important for nearly every country and many sub-state regions. Currently, the international sport could be seen as a useful soft power tool «[...] because of its universal popularity and its ability to serve as common ground between nations» (Trunkos – Heere, 2017: 5). This is the reason why sports diplomacy, falling under public diplomacy, emerged. Agreeing with Stuart Murray (2012: 581), sports diplomacy is defined as using «[...] sports people and sporting events to engage, inform, and create a favourable image amongst foreign publics and organisations to shape their perceptions in a way that is more conducive to achieving a government's foreign policy goals».

Successful sports diplomacy creates a more positive image/brand of the country/sub-state region that uses this way of self-presentation. The international sports activities are indirectly linked to the broad information about the sender; about the state or sub-state region using it. Presumably, one of the most popular sports diplomacy tools is hosting famous sporting events. According to Geoffrey Allen Pigman (2012: 100), the «[...] international sporting events have been viewed by many governments as an ideal venue to showcase a country, its cities, and people to the world as attractive destinations for tourism and investment». Therefore, the organiser pursues forwarding the non-sport message(s) about the hosting nation together with sports one. For a hypothetical example, the sporting events hosted by the Czech Republic carry indirect sports diplomacy message(s) about culture, organization skills or the very existence of this Central European country. In the best possible scenario, the message(s) influence the sports fans, their opinions or basic knowledge about the Czech Republic, fight against the negative stereotypes connected with the Czech citizens (if there are any) or attract foreign investments.

However, there is a problem connected to the visibility of the sports diplomacy message(s). If the sporting events are not interesting for the sports fans, the sports diplomacy messages cannot influence them. In other words, the number of people interested in these sporting events and receiving the sports diplomacy message(s) is affected by the popularity of the particular sporting event. At the global level, mega sporting events get the most attention. According to Wolfgang Maenning and Andrew Zimbalist (2012: 9), «[...] a mega sporting event is a large or great sporting event. Just like beauty, what is great is subjective – it is in the eyes of the beholder. It would be folly to pretend that there is a clear line that demarcates

great from normal or ordinary; rather, the magnitude of a sporting event likely falls along a continuum of size, reach or significance».

Undoubtedly, the typical examples of mega sporting events are the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cups. The country hosting the Olympic Games can attract international publicity. The Olympic Games have the power to make the headlines, and nearly every daily journal, radio, television or website inform about them. For instance, according to the *London 2012 Olympic Games Global Broadcast Report*, «a projected 3.6 billion viewers saw at least one minute of London 2012 coverage on television (76% of the potential global audience)» (IOC, 2012: 4). However, many other international sporting events do not have the potential to gain a global audience like the Olympics Games. In this context, David Black (2008: 468) pointed out the existence of the «second» and «third order» sporting events. «Second order» events are the «events of international scope but lower-level participation and profile» (e.g., the Commonwealth Games, the Rugby World Cups), the «third order» events have a continental or regional scope (e.g., the Asian Games, the African Cup of Nations).

Simultaneously, many other international competitions do not «fit» into one of these «boxes» and are described as small sporting events. For instance, Futnet World Championships are one of them. However, these championships could influence only the participating nations where futnet is a traditionally popular leisure time activity, especially in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. In this situation, the number of sports fans is not very comparable to the Olympic Games, the Commonwealth Games, or the African Cup of Nations. Thus, small sporting events are described as the events that only have minimal power to influence sports fans on the global level because of the (lack of) popularity of the sport in general (e.g., Futnet World Championships) or because of their local impact (e.g., friendly football match between national teams ranked low by the FIFA World Ranking). The lack of global/regional popularity of small sporting events affects the number of people interested in those sporting events and who the recipients of the sports diplomacy message(s) are. Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the article, small sporting events could be used as a sports diplomacy tool.

A typical example of a small sporting event is a friendly football match between the Basque Country Women's National Football Team² and the Czech Republic that took place on 25 November 2017 in Eibar, province Gipuzkoa. Reasonably, this friendly football clash did not have the potential and ambition to be watched by sports fans worldwide. However, the Basque Country sent sports diplomacy messages to the Czech Republic, where the game was reflected by various media

2. The Basque national football team played the first match in 1915. The activity of the Basque footballers was often connected with the political aim of the Basque nationalists (e.g., Gotzon, 1998; Zákraavský, 2017). The history of the Basque women's national football team is younger, the first match took place in 2006.

and could have influenced the Czechs and their thoughts about the Basque people and region. Therefore, the article aims to demonstrate that the small sporting event like the friendly football match between the Basque Country Women's National Football Team and the Czech Republic could be used as a sports diplomacy tool to promote the Basque Country in the Czech Republic. Thus, the main research questions are: 1) What were the sports diplomacy messages that were sent to the Czech Republic? and 2) How were these sports diplomacy messages reflected in the Czech Republic?

The following part of the article is dedicated to the theoretical-methodological framework. It focuses on how sports fans obtain information about sporting events, competitions, performances or results, and how sports diplomacy messages are constructed. During sporting events, sports fans are affected by many types of inputs that help them form their perceptions about the sporting performance and the hosting nation. There are three primary sources of these messages: 1) the information in mass media, 2) the information presented through social media like Facebook, Twitter and, 3) the information included in the personal communication with the participants of the sporting events. In the theoretical-methodological framework, all of them are presented in general and in the context of the friendly football march between the Basque Country and the Czech Republic. Another part of the article deals with sports diplomacy messages that were reflected in connection with the aforementioned football game by the Basque political actors and mass media. Afterwards, the article demonstrates how these sports diplomacy messages were perceived in the Czech Republic.

II. THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

As mentioned above, sports diplomacy messages are messages about the hosting country/region that should be spread to the international public in the context of the sporting event. In the best possible scenario, the hosting nation could be seen as a great place to live, study at their universities, visit cultural or natural heritage, invest in the local business and companies. For instance, Doha, the capital of Qatar, hosted the 2016 UCI Road Cycling Championships. The cyclists, journalists, and sports fans could read in the official information bulletin of the Championships that «Qatar combines the attractions of a dynamic and forward-looking modern society with the courtesies and traditions of its deeply-rooted culture» (UCI, 2016: 2). It was a way how the politicians from the State of Qatar would like to present their country abroad. Thus, sports diplomacy messages could be observed in the statement of the politicians, athletes and people responsible for hosting sporting events; it is possible to find their statement in the official documents connected with the sporting events, in mass media or social media.

In the context of this small sporting event, the Basque sports diplomacy messages were investigated in the articles in the Basque mass media like *Deia*, *Diario*

Vasco, or *Gara*, as well as in the social media of the Basque political parties and politicians or official portal of the organizer, the Basque Football Federation (*Euskadiko Futbol Federakundea / Federación Vasca de Fútbol*). The research period was from 18 to 30 November 2017; the friendly football match took place on 25 November 2017. Therefore, all mentions of why the friendly football game between Basques and the Czechs was important were reflected.

Still, one of the most influential media is mass media - dailies, magazines, journals, radios, televisions - also informing about sporting events. As Elizabeth M. Perse (2001: 1) declared, «there is no longer discussion in that literature about whether the media have effects or not [...]». In this sense, most importantly, mass media set the agenda, and their editors decide if they publish some kind of information or not. If they agree to do it, their perspective affects how people reflect the sporting event, together with the broad knowledge about the sender. For instance, 15.5% of all the mentions about the State of Qatar in the context of sport were negative in the Czech national dailies in 2016 and, thus, it could influence how Czech sports fans would see Qatar (Zákravský, 2019: 151-152).

Focusing on mass media in the Czech Republic and how the game was described and presented, the database of Czech media *Anopress* was used. The database *Anopress* includes all nine Czech national dailies; one of them, *Sport*, informs about the sports issues only. Furthermore, it includes many local newspapers and nationwide and regional radio stations and ten Czech televisions, public as well as private broadcasting. One of them is Czech Television Sport (*Česká televize Sport*), the only public sports channel in the Czech Republic. Moreover, 146 Czech news websites are part of the databases; they were also included in the research. Afterwards, in the database, the terms related to the Basque Country in the Czech language (*Baskicko, Bask, baskický, baskická*) were searched from 18 to 30 November 2017.

Communication via social media influences many people and could play the same role as traditional mass media do. However, the users receive selected messages from the news portals, personalities they follow and their «virtual» friends. In addition, the users can choose the types of topics about which they are informed. For instance, in July 2021, Facebook was the most popular social media worldwide, having 2.856 billion active users, Instagram had 1.386 billion active accounts, and 397 million people used Twitter (Statista, 2021). Furthermore, according to David Black and Byron Peacock (2015: 717), «the unique synergy between sport and electronic media heighten the reach, visibility, and influence of sports events, iconic sports teams and rivalries, and individual sporting 'heroes', many of whom have become [...] among the most famous celebrity diplomats of the age». Thus, the voice of sports celebrities is echoed loudly in the mind of their fans; they have the opportunity to influence the attitudes and opinions of their fans. Afterwards, athletes may refer to social and political issues on their social media, leading to greater awareness of them among the public. For instance, NBA superstar LeBron James is one of the best-known athletes in cyberspace in connection

with the Black Lives Matter movement's activities (e.g., Coombs – Cassilo, 2017; Galily, 2019).

In the examined case, data from the official portal of the Football Association of the Czech Republic (*Fotbalová asociace České republiky*, FAČR), together with the Czech national football team Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts and Czech women's footballer's official Twitter and Facebook accounts were used. The research period remained the same, from 18 to 30 November 2017.

The other factor that influenced the sports fans attitude is their personal experience or the experience described by their friends. At this micro-level, the sports diplomacy messages perception is based on individual narratives. These narratives are not published and are shared among friends and familiars who listened to the active participant's stories. However, who are the participants in this sense? These are all athletes, not just sportsmen/women quoted in mass media, managers, staff and fans; everyone participating in the sporting events. Each of them has their own unique experience that helps form his/her view and thus leads to the acceptance, neutral attitude, or rejection of the sports diplomacy messages sent by the country or sub-state region. Therefore, the personal experience of the «unknown sports fan» does not influence the masses; on the other hand, it could strongly influence participant's friends and familiars because they know somebody with personal experience which tries to «tell the truth» about the sporting event; together with the sports diplomacy message(s), luckily for the hosting nation.

In the context of the friendly football match between the Basque Country Women's National Football Team and the Czech Republic, data from eight semi-structured or structured interviews with the active participants of the game, including the Czech football players, managers and staff, were collected. Furthermore, one more interview was taken; respondent N1 is an insider of Czech football, but she/he did not travel to the Basque Country for the match. All interviews were conducted via e-mail communication due to the limited time possibilities of the respondents. In the end, all nine respondents were anonymized due to a few requests for anonymization; the anonymization would be ineffective if only a small number of respondents were anonymized.

The information, coming from different sources, challenges sports fans' thoughts. How they perceive the sporting event and the sports diplomacy messages is based on the personal selection of the points that play a more or less important role for the individual. At its best, the sports fans recognise the country or sub-state region sending the sports diplomacy messages as a beautiful place to live, with a specific culture that they would like to experience. Ideally, how the sporting events are perceived by the foreigners is precisely what the sender meant to share through the sports diplomacy message(s). In contrast, the sporting events «[...] can also inform people of the negatives, as states are seldom able to entirely control the media exposure around the event» (Trunkos – Heere, 2017: 8-9). This is why the politicians from the hosting nations try to minimize the potential «stories» that could catch journalists' attention and jeopardize the whole

sports diplomacy message that the nations intend to project abroad. For instance, Garry Kasparov (2016: 152), the opponent of Putin's Russia and the former chess grandmaster, assumed that it was the reason why Russia wanted to release Mikhail Khodorkovsky, considered to be a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International, from the prison in 2013 because of the forthcoming Olympic Games in Sochi.

III. BASQUE SPORTS DIPLOMACY MESSAGES AND THE FRIENDLY FOOTBALL MATCH IN EIBAR

This friendly football match was seen as the example of the sporting event used as a sports diplomacy tool by the Basques. According to two respondents (N1, N9), the Basques initiated the game and offered the Czechs to visit the Basque Country. Subsequently, the sports diplomacy messages related to the game were supposed to be directed to the Czech Republic only. This sporting event did not have a «global radius» and the potential to influence international society as a whole; at the same time, it may have served to mobilise the Basque community. Thus, the game provided a framework for the Basques to demonstrate their national identity; in general, international sport has the ability to «[...] support the construction of a nation which has been imagined» (Cronin – Mayall, 2005: 2). Very often, there is a situation where hosting an international sporting event has primarily domestic political objectives. On the other hand, even in such a case - due to the international character of the sporting event - it becomes a space for strengthening the soft power of the hosting state or sub-state region.

What sports diplomacy messages were sent from the Basque Country to the Czech society? Firstly, the existence of the Basque people who live within the Monarchy of Spain and France was reflected. If politicians want to present their region or country in the best possible way, they first point out its very existence. Subsequently, they try to convince the international society of the positive aspects associated with their country or region (Peterková, 2006: 87). In general, the politics of Spain and its regions is not a common topic in the media discourse in the Czech Republic. Therefore, the football match was used to introduce the basic info about the Basque nation.³ The Czechs were likely to ask themselves who their rival was.

Secondly, the Basque footballers and politicians openly discussed the officialization of the Basque national teams, not only on the football pitch. Ana Esther Furundarena, PNV's specialist in education, the Basque language, sport and culture, mentioned demand for the officialization supported by the Basque fans

3. Football has been used for this purpose by Basque politicians before, for example in the context of the participation of the Athletic Club of Bilbao in the UEFA Cup in the 2004-05 season, when the Basque government promoted the region through the term *Euskadi* (Basque Country) on the jerseys, which was intended to attract tourists to visit the Basque Country (Castillo, 2008: 716).

who visited the game in Eibar (Deia, 2017a). The Basque leftist newspaper *Gara* published that «the match served as a demand for the right of the nations to compete on equal terms» (Ulasagabaster, 2017: 1). Against the backdrop of the clash between the Basques and the Czechs, a workshop about the history of the Basque national football team was prepared for the football fans, including a round-table discussion with José Ángel Iribar (Euskadiko Futbol Federakundea, 2017), a Basque nationalist, one of the founding members of the leftist nationalist coalition *Herri Batasuna* and a legendary goalkeeper of Athletic Club. Another nationalist, Jon Redondo, a member of the Basque government, did not forget to remember the 80th anniversary of the creation of *equipo Euzkadi* (Txakartegi, 2017).⁴ This message aimed to inform Czech football fans about the Basque effort to compete officially, become a member of UEFA or FIFA, and maybe find support for this claim. In addition, it aimed to mobilise the local population in support of the idea that Basque national sports teams should compete officially.

Thirdly, the Basques wanted to pay attention to different social conditions for men and women. Symbolically, the match took place on 25 November, on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Several nationalists mentioning the right of Basques to participate officially in international sporting events highlighted the inequality between men and women as well. In this sense, they believed that every nation and person, a man or a woman, should have the same rights. For example, Izaskun Bilbao (EAJ-PNV, 2017a), the only PNV's member of the European Parliament, Mireia Zarate (EAJ-PNV, 2017b), or Raket Molina (EAJ-PNV, 2017c), declared the importance of the game between the Basques and Czechs in this connection. The daily *Gara* headlined the match report in this way: «A game for equality among nations and persons» (Ulasagabaster, 2017: 1) and the Basque footballers took a photo of themselves with a banner saying: «No violence against women» (Encinas, 2017). Thus, it was supposed to demonstrate the Basque willingness to fight against this type of violence and break this taboo. In general, this sports diplomacy message is connected to the first one. Furthermore, the Czechs, who have not ratified the Council of Europe *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*, sometimes called *Istanbul Convention*, yet, could start to be interested in this issue. Fulfilling this unspoken ambition was not probable; however, it would have been much more likely if it had arisen during a more significant and worldwide popular sporting event.

To sum up the previous section, a clear message directed to Central Europe was that the Basque Country located in the Bay of Biscay is a specific region

4. *Equipo Euzkadi* was a Basque national football team existing during the Spanish Civil War. The Basque government, led by José Antonio Aguirre, saw the Basque football team as an ambassador of the Basque Country that travelled to the European and American countries to inform about the situation in Spain (e.g., Estomba Etxepare, 2007).

with unique people who proudly proclaim their Basque identity different from the Spanish. Furthermore, they pointed out that Basque footballers are prohibited from competing officially. As a nation, they should have equal rights such as other nations without states, e.g., Scotland or Wales, and equal rights should also exist between women and men.

IV. REFLECTIONS OF THE BASQUE SPORTS DIPLOMACY MESSAGES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The game between the Basques and Czechs took place on 25 November 2017 in Eibar. For the first time in history, the stadium of SD Eibar, Ipurua Futbol Zelaia, hosted a football match of the Basque national team. The friendly match was visited by 1800 spectators (Deia, 2017b), the capacity of the stadium was 7083. The Basque nationalists were not absent either, for example, Aitor Esteban, a member of the Congress of Deputies of Spain, Itxaso Atutxa, Mireia Zarate or Josu Mendicute. After the Czech and the Basque anthems were played, it was a promising start for the Basques; their first goal came from Erika Vázquez in the eighth minute. They increased their lead in the second minute of the second half when Nahikari García shot the second Basque goal. The Czech Republic, namely Eva Bartoňová, scored a long-shot goal in the 65th minute. The Basques missed a penalty in a game full of chances; however, they won the match.

Nevertheless, in the context of the Basque sports diplomacy, an item more important than the result is: how the sports diplomacy messages presented in the previous section were reflected among the Czechs? Firstly, it is focused on the Czech media, including the national and regional dailies, televisions, radio stations or news websites. In addition, the database *Anopress* was used. However, no information about the football match was published there. Thus, none of the Basque sports diplomacy messages was spread to the Czech society via Czech mass media.

On the other hand, Czech women's football fans gained information about the game on the website of women's football in the Czech Republic, which is part of the Football Association of the Czech Republic official website, and their Facebook and Twitter. On the website, five articles related to the game between the Basques and Czechs were published. In the first, the women's national team coach Karel Rada announced the list of players who travelled to the Basque Country (Fačr: Fotbal Ženy, 2017b). The following two texts mentioned the basic information associated with the game, travelling to Bilbao, where the Czech team was accommodated, and the first training on the Basque soil. Czech football fans could browse many photos from these two days, including the pictures photographed during the walk through Bilbao that showed the Guggenheim Museum, the old part of the city called Casco Viejo, or Plaza Moyua. (Fačr: Fotbal Ženy, 2017c). The fourth text is a match report including the video with comments of the Czech footballers and the coach and many match photos (Fačr: Fotbal Ženy, 2017e). The last article is a

five-minute video that looks back at the stay of the Czech national football team in the Basque Country (Fačr: Fotbal Ženy, 2017a). All of the information, photos and videos were published on their Facebook and Twitter where - especially on Facebook - they were liked, followed and commented positively by other users. On 27 November 2017, the Czech women's footballers' Twitter account had 1329 followers (Ženský Fotbal, 2017b) and their Facebook 10 840 followers and 10 959 likes (Ženský Fotbal, 2017a). Some messages related to the women's game in the Basque Country were published on the official Twitter account of the Czech national football team with 22 900 followers (Česká Fotbalová Reprezentace, 2017) and the videos on the YouTube channel with 10 116 subscribers (Ceskarepre, 2017). That could spread the Basque sports diplomacy message to the Czech football community. However, the message about the existence of the Basque region was the only Basque sports diplomacy message reproduced by these media channels; the second message (officialization) and third message (different social conditions for men and women) were not discussed at this level yet.

Many people in the Czech Republic connected the Basque Country with the Kingdom of Spain, and some of the respondents described the region as a part of Spain (Respondents N3, N6, N7, N8). They admitted that they did not have any broader knowledge about the region or about the local football before the friendly match. Some of them «searched the information [about the Basque Country] online» (Respondent N8). Two respondents mentioned the activity of the terrorist group ETA (Respondents N2, N4). However, they did not speak about a sense of fear and talked about «the region of very patriotic people proud of their mother country» (Respondent N4). In the football world, the Basque Country is often associated with Athletic Club from Bilbao, famous due to the Basque-only policy when the club supports the local players, athletes of Basque descent, or the footballers who were «formed» in the Basque Country (e.g., Groves, 2011; Vaczi, 2015; Gutiérrez-Chico, 2017). In the popular discourse, it means that «only the Basques can play there» (Respondent N5). One respondent imagined «Athletic Bilbao, pleasant weather, beautiful nature and fishing area» (Respondent N9), the other respondent had been informed about the Basque Country from her/his family that it is «a region full of good food and interesting monuments» (Respondent N4). According to this information, it is possible to say that half of the respondents did not have any more profound knowledge of the Basque Country; however, the second part of them imagined a more specific picture of the region, especially connected to the positively reflected things like nature and culture, or Athletic Club from Bilbao and their unique transfer policy.

After the arrival of the Czech national team to the Czech Republic, the participants were asked about the atmosphere at the stadium. They all agreed that the spectators cheered very enthusiastically. Some of them spoke about the atmosphere that was «super» (Respondents N6, N7), «extraordinary» (Respondent N8), «fine» (Respondent N2), «perfect» (Respondent N4), or «excellent» (Respondent N9); «it was impossible to hear one's voice» (Respondent N4) and «for this moment, we

play football» (Respondents N6, N7). Equally, the Basque fans were «very friendly to us [to the Czech team]. They applauded us after the match» (Respondent N5), and they «were able to appreciate our skills» (Respondent N9). In addition to the great atmosphere, the respondents (N3, N6, N7) suggested that the Basque Country, as a small region, has «a high-quality» women's national football team and, as just one participant pointed out, they «do not play the international matches» (Respondent N3). In the assessment of the friendly match in the Basque Country, some participants mentioned the national pride of the Basques as well (Respondents N5, N6). When the interviews with the participants were examined, there was no negative comments, just the positive reactions related to the match that refer to a successful sporting event.

If these sports diplomacy messages are spread to society, sports diplomacy is perceived as successful. The Czech football players, coaches, and staff talked to their relatives and friends about the match, rival, atmosphere, or the visited region. Thus, they indirectly helped form a more positive image of the Basque Country among a few Czech citizens. Therefore, it is possible to say that the first Basque sports diplomacy message has been discussed in the Czech Republic at the micro-level. On the other hand, according to the data coming from the respondents, the second and the third sports diplomacy messages, which completed the first one, were not mentioned at all.

V. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In the examined case, three sports diplomacy messages were discovered and associated with the friendly football match between the Basque Country and the Czech Republic. First of them reflected the existence of the Basque Country, second referred to the officialization of the Basque national sports team, and third mentioned the different social conditions for men and women. However, how these sports diplomacy messages were reflected in the Czech Republic?

In the Czech mass media - the dailies, magazines, journals, radios, televisions - the Basque sports diplomacy messages failed miserably because of the disinterest about that sporting event in the Czech public space. This situation is not a consequence of disregarding the friendly match in the Basque Country; however, it results from women's football reflection in the Czech Republic. Compared to the Basques, women's football is a marginal issue in Czech society. This is why mass media did not inform about the game and did not «send» the Basque sports diplomacy messages to the Czech people. In contrast, the community of Czechs interested in women's football obtained enough opportunities to get the news about the game between the Basques and the Czechs, together with the first Basque sports diplomacy message. It means they could read articles, download photos or watch the videos published on the official website and social media of FAČR. These materials did not include any unfavourable messages about Basque football

or the Basque Country that could have influenced the sports fans to think about the region negatively. Instead, these materials referred to the positive things (e.g., the atmosphere during the match, the Basque culture). Therefore, a significant space to promote the Basque Country could also be observed at the micro-level. According to data from the respondents, who participated in the November football clash, only positive things were associated with the Basque Country. When they talked about their own «Basque experience», the first Basque sports diplomacy message was spread among their friends and relatives.

As assumed, the friendly football match between the Basque and Czech footballers, a sporting event with a relatively insignificant sports diplomacy effect compared to the mega sporting, «second» or «third order» events, could be described as a relatively successful sports diplomacy action. Of course, not «every Czech» was provided with the information about the match and the Basque Country that would inspire her/him to visit the region. However, a small minority of Czech people obtained a positive description of the Basque nation. If the mass media had informed about the match in a positive way and reproduced all three Basque sports diplomacy messages, it would have been the best thing for the Basque sports diplomacy. Nevertheless, the current situation cannot be described as unsuccessful Basque sports diplomacy toward the Czech Republic because it was successful on websites and social media and at the micro-level; furthermore, the game has domestic political objectives as well. In the Czech Republic, the game could entail hundreds of sports fans having better knowledge about the Basque Country and maybe starting to think about travelling to the region. Every goal counts in sport; every foreigner thinking positively about the nation using sports diplomacy counts in sports diplomacy. This is especially true in the context of small sporting events like this one.

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