

### **Subculture of Football Fans: between Sport and Politics**

There is a great number of different youth subcultures in modern Ukraine. These numerous informal groups should be paid particular attention as they have a considerable influence on the outlook formation and the way of life of young people who are adherents of subcultural movements.

The activity of football fans subculture known as “ultras” has considerably grew in Ukraine recently. Initially an apolitical movement has turned into an important moving force, and this force has surpassed the framework of football. In many countries this game is a part of the national culture and an object of the national pride that in many respects determines the level of interest which is shown to football and those processes, which surround it. The purpose of our study is to consider such aspect of ultras activity as politics.

Wikipedia tells that ultras are a type of sports fan renowned for ultra-fanatical support, occasionally to the point of violence and hateful chants and slogans. They are predominantly followers of association football teams, typically in North Africa and Europe [1].

The origin of the ultras movement is closely associated with Italy, where the first ultras groups were formed after World War II. The term “ultras” was used as a name for the first time in 1969. The active Italian style of support extended further on many European countries as it was more apparent in contrast with the “traditional” football culture: choreographic displays, vocal support in large groups, displaying of signature banners and symbols, giant flags, drumming and fireworks became the norm as groups aimed to take their support to higher levels. The ultras of Italy, Serbia, England, Spain, Germany and a number of other European countries are considered to be the most developed. Some ultra members

would never miss an away game and will follow their teams to different countries if they can afford it.

Ultras groups are usually centred on a core group of founders or leaders (who tend to hold executive control), with smaller subgroups organized by location, friendship or political stance. An ultras group can number from a handful of fans to hundreds or thousands, with larger groups often claiming entire sections of a stadium for themselves. The ultras are represented by a great variety of people. Of course, a major part of the ultras are students, the youth, as they have a lot of lively energy and free time. Many of them just come to the stadium because the sector means a feeling of unity to them. And for the youngest ones it is a way to assert themselves. They are emotional and keep one team. The last is, probably, their main weapon. The actions of ultras groups are occasionally extreme and generally are associated with violence and hooliganism in and out of stadiums that causes a long-standing animosity with the police.

Rather often ultras groups may be influenced by political ideologies or views on racism. In some instances, this goes to the point where the passionate and loyal support of one's team becomes secondary to the theoretical ideology of the ultras phenomenon. The politicization of football fans, and of ultras groups in particular, has deep roots. In the 1970s and '80s, Italian and Spanish ultras had a long and complex relationship with both the far right and the far left parties. In the former Yugoslavia, ultra groups in Croatia and Serbia formed the foot soldiers of the hastily assembled militia and armies that fought the Yugoslav civil war and conducted many acts of ethnic cleansing in the early 1990s. [2].

A kind of cross-club alliance between ultras has emerged more recently in Egypt, Turkey, and Ukraine. The clubs in Egypt became a major political force during the uprising against the fourth President of Egypt Hosni Mubarak in 2011. Ultras in Turkey also played a role in the 2013 protests of citizens against the actions and plans of the government of Turkey, shielding protesters and allying against police [3].

In Ukraine ultras is a many thousands army of football fans. They are easily mobilized for games and hold an active online presence (the Ukrainian ultras' Vkontakte group has more than 65,000 followers). "Being an ultra is a way of life, a way of thinking. It's when football is a lot more than just a hobby – it's your life!" explains the Ukrainian ultras website [4].

Ukrainian ultras have been an anti-establishment group, not affiliated with any political party till November 2014 when the demonstrations against then president Viktor Yanukovich began in Kiev's Independence Square (Maidan). The ultras of "Dynamo Kiev" and other clubs were visibly present at those demonstrations. In January 2014 the government adopted the law regulating activity of the fan movement in Ukraine. This law forced more apolitical ultras to come to Maidan to assert their rights for public actions and protect the protesters.

Using the situation, some political parties involved ultras in the political conflicts and used the movement of fans in their own favor. For example, in Lviv ultras of "Karpaty" openly support the nationalist party "Svoboda", its leader Oleh Tyahnybok, publicly praised the role of the ultras in his speech on January 25 following the opposition's rejection of a partnership deal with President Viktor Yanukovich. In Dnipropetrovsk on January 26, Dnipro ultras backed pro-Maidan demonstrators as they attempted to storm the regional administration building [5].

One more city where the football movement is very closely connected with political interests – Odessa. The Odessa ultras are divided into a set of the groups which are differently related to politics. The main part supports the idea of Ukrainian nationalism and is a shock wing for such organizations as "Svoboda", "Patriot of Ukraine", and autonomous rightists. However, there are two more groups which out of a stadium are their obvious antagonists. One of them follows the formula "Football is out of politics", the other adheres to the Russian neo-Nazism [6].

Ultras movement consists of many groups, and their views on some or other political events are not the same. There are different people among Ukrainian ultras: there are some real rightists, there are those who can rather be called

moderate nationalists, there are people for whom ideology is not important. The last consider, that political actions can be used as a kind of advertizing for fans, simply as performances [7].

“There is no football without politics in this country,” said one of the ultras who supports “Dynamo Kiev” [8]. Nowadays Ukrainian ultras is a well-organized and politicized agent but what part can they play in the country’s political processes? And can they at all?

Football associations and club owners decry the politicization of the game. They are, however, the leading political agents in the game. Does anyone imagine that the investments in European soccer by the royal houses of Qatar and Abu Dhabi have no political agenda? Did deposed Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra really buy Manchester City for sporting reasons? Of course not. These people know that football is a political game [9].

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