

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON RELATIONS BETWEEN ROMANIA AND BELGIUM: THE CASE OF FOOTBALL (1937)

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Abstract. *This article describes the first football match between Romania and Belgium, played in Bucharest in 1937, trying to cover all its details and incorporated it as a part of history of these two countries relations. About 35,000 spectators watched the match, a high number compared to other home matches played by Romania's national team in the interwar period. The analysis of this match provides an image of the impact of football in interwar Romanian society. It takes into the light relevant aspects: the public interest in football (as audience), the great interest around the national team, the interference of football and politics (see the polemics on the romanization of Romanian national football team), the international interwar football connections.*

Keywords: *football, sport audience, international relation, national team, romanization.*

In November 2012, the Romanian football team defeated Belgium 2-1 in an international friendly played in Bucharest. As of the time of writing, this was the last match between the two national teams. This confrontation gave the Romanian press the opportunity to bring into the public eye the first match that was played between Romania and Belgium, almost eight decades before (in 1937).¹ Under these circumstances, it was natural to make comparisons, highlighting, for example, the lower number of spectators in 2012 as compared to the 1937 match. *Gazeta Sporturilor* showed that the stands of the National Stadium in Bucharest looked bleak, with only 6,500 spectators attending the match, compared to 35,000 spectators in 1937.² The conclusion was simple: the Romanian football team was witnessing a decline, a fact proven not only by the results of the national team but also by the decreasing number of spectators. The aim of this article is to present in detail the less known side of the first football match between Romania and Belgium (1937) as a chapter in the history of relations between the two states in the last centuries. Therefore, the present research goes beyond a simple account of a sporting event, mainly relying on the sports press in the two countries, and also on the popular press. Historical research on Romanian football has tackled this match from a statistical perspective, rather than analysing it.³ This

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¹ Pescariu 2012.

² Apostol, Ispas 2012.

³ Angelescu, Cristea 2009, p. 208–209.

was explained by the friendly aspect of the match, which meant that it did not entail any special stake.

Romanian-Belgian relations have been the object of a great deal of historical research. Yet, comparing the number of research articles written by both Romanian and Belgian historians on mutual aspects in the history of the two countries, we can notice that the former have allocated more space to tackling this topic. Nevertheless, Belgian historians have also been interested in many aspects pertaining to this topic.⁴

Romanian historians' interest has been aroused by the relations between the two countries, which were established before they emerged as modern states. In particular, they refer to the trade exchanges established between Belgian and Romanian towns in the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries.⁵ Relations between Romania and Belgium entered the modern era when the first Belgian consulate opened in Galați (1838).⁶ Belgium represented a pattern in the development of modern Romania which often took different embodiments. The most known episode in history was the proposal that Prince Philippe of Belgium, Count of Flanders, and second son of King Leopold to become King of Romania, which was suggested twice (1857 and 1866). He rejected the proposal because of the possible opposition of Napoleon III and international tensions. Thus, Carol of Hohenzollern ascended the throne of Romania and became Carol I (1866–1914). Another equally important embodiment was the Belgian model (1831) of the first Constitution of Romania (1866),⁷ which was adjusted to Romanian realities.

There were also situations analysed by historians, embodied in the political, economic and cultural relations between the two countries, which made Belgium one of Romania's most important foreign partners, including economic ties until the outbreak of the Second World War.⁸ It is worth mentioning here the support and recognition that the achievement of the Romanian independence (1877–1878) gained in Belgium,⁹ the trade exchanges, the fact that many Romanian students were educated in Belgian universities¹⁰ and even Romania's participation in different world exhibitions sometimes organised in Belgian cities. At the same time, German aggression towards Belgium in 1914 generated a spate of compassion in Romania.¹¹

⁴ Vandewoude 1969; Demoulin 1977.

⁵ Filimon 1978, p. 223.

⁶ Agrigoroaie et al. 1998, p. 335.

⁷ Berindei 2003, p. 553–560.

⁸ Vlad 2004; Vlad 2006.

⁹ Bărbuță, Bocșan 1980.

¹⁰ Vlad 2013.

¹¹ Filimon 1989.

Besides all these, historical research has also shown aspects of seemingly minor importance, such as the Belgian model in the development of the system of fortifications in Bucharest¹² or in the development of the Romanian railway.¹³ Historical analysis subsequently extended to the study of personalities,¹⁴ feminism,¹⁵ and relations between the two countries during the inter-war¹⁶ and Cold War periods.¹⁷ Therefore, it is necessary to mention again the fact that Romania was referred to as “Belgium of the East,” which underlines once more the close relations between the two countries. The name “Belgium of the East” was used with reference to Romania in both countries, even during the inter-war period.¹⁸

A topic which has not been tackled by the historical research carried out so far is that of the sports relations between the two countries. These relations did not exist before the First World War, but they witnessed a noticeable development in the 1920s. This was the result of both the development of sport in both countries and of the international development of the sports movement. The latter prompted an increase in the number of sports confrontations between the two countries. Yet Belgium, due to its higher level of social and economic development as well as its geographical position, considerably outclassed Romania in sports. This is noticeable not only at the level of international results but also in the sports infrastructure. While Belgium hosted an edition of the Summer Olympic Games (1920), Romania did not send delegates to these sports competitions until the Paris 1924 Summer Olympics.

Belgian sports in Romania

Throughout the inter-war period, Romania manifested a constant interest in Belgian sports. This was due to the Belgian sportsmen’s achievements in sports such as football and cycling and to the historical relations between the two francophone countries. This was a continuation of the Belgian political and cultural model that was adopted in Romania, emphasised so much more because Belgium was a Western European country. The Romanian sports press showed clear interest in Belgian sports. From 1926 to 1929 George Gavrilă published a series of 26 articles in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, many of which were titled *Letters from Belgium* detailing a number of aspects pertaining to

¹² Scafeş 2008.

¹³ Marton 2004.

¹⁴ Buşa 2007.

¹⁵ Petrescu 2006.

¹⁶ Goddeeris 2008.

¹⁷ Stanciu 2007.

¹⁸ Vlad 2013.

the sports activities in the country. During this period Gavrilă lived in Belgium together with his wife, being a doctoral student in economics at the University of Anvers.¹⁹ A content analysis of his articles reveals that of the Belgian sports, football had the most mentions, followed by cycling, boxing and hockey.

Year	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930
Articles	3	13	4	5	1

Table 1. Articles on sports activities in Belgium published by George Gavrilă in *Gazeta Sporturilor* (1926–1929)

Sports	Football	Cycling	Boxing	Hockey	Swimming	Athletics	Wrestling	Tennis	Car racing	Aviation
Hits	8	11	9	3	1	1	1	2	1	1

Table 2. Number of mentions of Belgian sports in George Gavrilă's articles (1926–1929)

As far as football is concerned, the manner in which Gavrilă depicted Belgium's 0-9 defeat against England in 1927 is relevant. He highlighted the fact that this match was the best he had ever seen, praising the Belgian bravery and accounting for the score through objective issues.²⁰

But Gavrilă was not content only with providing accounts of the state of sports in Belgium for *Gazeta Sporturilor*. In one of the articles, Gavrilă confessed that during an evening party in his capacity as a member of the referee staff in Malines, he was to deliver a presentation on "Sports Activities in Romania."²¹ This was a clear sign of his involvement in offering an image of Romania to the Belgian public. Moreover, in an article tackling the evolution of boxing in Belgium, he argued that the future participation of Belgian boxers in various boxing events organised in Romania would contribute to the development of this sport in Romania.²² In 1929, following the Belgian model, he advocated the introduction of multiple trial sports events (horse riding, swimming and cycling) to Romania, which could have increased the number of spectators.²³ Gavrilă also tried to defend sports during the various controversial discussions on its advantages in inter-war

¹⁹ † George Gavrilă, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 11 February 1930, p. 1.

²⁰ Gavrilă 1927a, p. 1.

²¹ Gavrilă 1927b, p. 1.

²² Gavrilă 1927c, p. 2.

²³ Gavrilă 1929a, p. 4.

Romania. Thus, he even translated for *Gazeta Sporturilor* various points of view advocating sports retrieved from the Belgian media or belonging to Louis Delattre.²⁴ His early death in Anvers in February 1930 ended abruptly what was a brilliant career in the sports press. *Gazeta Sporturilor* paid him tribute in an article highlighting his contribution to promoting Romania's image in Belgium and in Europe along with his actions towards revitalising the "Romanian colony" in Anvers. He was referred to as one of the few "innovative spirits" Romanian sports had at that time. As a result, his death was considered "the loss of an energy of true creation, of a good and honest character" and it was felt not only in Romania but also in Belgium "where these qualities are not quite rare."²⁵ After Gavrilă's death, *Gazeta Sporturilor* continued to inform its readers about the evolution of sports in Belgium. For example, an article published in 1930 presented a detailed account of the state of boxing in the country.²⁶ *Gazeta Sporturilor* also hailed the victories gained by Belgian cyclists who participated in the Tour de France²⁷ during the 1930s. Foreign correspondence from abroad did not solely focus on Belgium; during this period *Gazeta Sporturilor* published similar accounts from England, France and even Hungary. Belgian football came to the attention of the Romanian sports press, which showed an interest not only in the results of the national team but also in the national football championship. Occasionally the results of the Belgian championship were published in the Romanian sports press. However, the attention paid to the Belgian football championship was lower compared to other countries in which football was deemed more developed (England, Italy, Austria and France). Another particular aspect related to football in the two countries is the lack of matches between Belgian and Romanian team clubs throughout the inter-war period. This seems paradoxical, given that during the period a number of Romanian teams would play home or return games against French, Italian and even English teams.

Football in Romania and Belgium during the inter-war period: A comparison

Football was one of the last team sports in the period that registered direct competitions between the two countries in comparison to field tennis, table tennis or hockey. In general, there was a low number of encounters between Romanian and Western European teams, this situation applied at the level of the national team and was substantiated in games played in Romania during

²⁴ Delattre 1929, p. 1; Gavrilă 1929b.

²⁵ † George Gavrilă, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 11 February 1930, p. 1.

²⁶ I. 1930, p. 4.

²⁷ *Circuitul Franței s-a terminat*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 3 August 1930, p. 4.

the inter-war period. Thus, until the game played against Belgium, the Romanian team had registered only one home game against a Western European team (Romania vs France 6-3, Bucharest, 1932).²⁸ However, Romanian football clubs participated in tournaments in Western European countries and Romania's team had played some away matches against teams from that part of Europe (Switzerland, 1933, Germany and Sweden, 1935). The usual opponents that the Romanian national team played against in home and away matches were neighbouring or Central European countries until 1937 (Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, Hungary, Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia). In case of other individual sports, there were relations between Romanian and Belgian sportsmen.

Sport	Date	Location	Results
Tennis Davis Cup	1928	Bucharest	Romania-Belgium 5-0
Tennis Davis Cup	1929	Brussels	Belgium-Romania 4-1
Hockey World Championships	1933	Prague	Romania-Belgium 3-2
Hockey World Championships	1934	Milan	Romania-Belgium 3-2
Hockey World Championships	1935	Davos	Romania-Belgium 2-1
Tennis Table Corbillon Cup (Women's Team)	1937	Baden	Romania-Belgium 4-2
Football Friendly	1937	Bucharest	Romania-Belgium 2-1

Table 3. Sporting confrontations between Romania and Belgium's national teams until 1937

Among the sports team confrontations between Romania and Belgium other than football, the greatest attention was paid to the Romania vs Belgium tennis match (Davis Cup) in 1928.²⁹ This was mainly due to the fact that the match was played in Bucharest, and it was the first time a team representing Belgium played in Romania. This match was significant for the history of Romanian tennis, as it was the first victory gained by the Romanian team in the Davis Cup. *Gazeta Sporturilor* highlighted that the game was a means of

²⁸ *O strălucită victorie românească*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 13 June 1932, p. 1.

²⁹ G.H.T. 1928, p. 1. See also Gavrilă 1928, p. 1.

“bringing together the two countries that shared the same Latin origin.”³⁰ Consequently, the tennis match Romania vs Belgium represented a good opportunity to assert the friendship between the two countries, which underwent many trials during the First World War: “Those who stepped side by side under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris will show today that they will stay friends during the peacetime. Welcome Belgian sportsmen and come back soon.”³¹ Gavrilă also offered minute details on the Romania vs Belgium 1929 Davis Cup match in Brussels, providing Romanian spectators with the reactions the Belgian media displayed on the occasion of this sports event.³² It is worth mentioning that both the Belgian and Romanian football teams³³ participated in all editions of the World Cup during the inter-war period (1930, 1934, 1938)³⁴ without significant victories. Romania’s national football team was awarded better places in the final standings of these championships without it entailing that Romanian football outclassed that of Belgium. A preview of the 1937 match argued that a football match between Romania and Belgium was necessary as the two countries shared “an old friendship, a friendship of mutual pain and joy and in these circumstances, the sports and natural ties could not be ruined by a striking lack of harmony.”³⁵ Consequently, the 1937 Romania vs Belgium football match was part of a larger framework of the relations between the two countries, not limited to sports ties. The same opinion was shared by Blaremborg:

A match of football is a pretext for taming grudges and the collective wild impulses, being an excellent opportunity to friendship assertions, which are so strong into the human feelings. The match between Romania and Belgium follows to connect, from the sport’s perspective, a solid friendship of our countries which appeared during the sad wartimes, a friendship whose common elements are our culture, our spirits and our longing for peace and better times.³⁶

It also mentioned that “the exquisite sporting bond” existing between the Romanian and Belgian football players had been established during the ship voyage they took together on the occasion of the world championship held in Uruguay. This was a 15-day transatlantic voyage that the Romanian, Belgian and French national teams took together aboard the Conte Verde, picking up Brazil’s team in Rio do Janeiro. Therefore, the idea of a match between the

³⁰ G.H.T. 1928, p. 1.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Gavrilă 1929c.

³³ Hubert 2006.

³⁴ Vigarello 1990.

³⁵ Lis 1937a.

³⁶ Blaremborg 1937.

two countries appeared in 1930 and became a reality seven years later. In this regard, the contribution of the Belgian referee Langelus was essential, he was considered a friend and a fan of Romanian football. By 1937, Romanian football had registered tremendous progress. This can be seen in the level of international matches and in the increase in the number of players and clubs.

After numerous controversies, it was decided that football should switch to professionalism, a beneficial aspect in the development of Romanian football at that time. Compared to other sports, football was better developed in Romania during the 1930s, both in terms of practitioners, its organisational structure and audience size. In this period, football was seen as a major sport together with boxing, while other sports were seen as minor.³⁷ This label was obviously subjective, yet close to reality if we compare rugby with football.³⁸ The professionalism also penetrated in Romanian football beyond the top level league³⁹ (in 1934 was created the second tier league – Divizia B – and in 1936, the third tier league – Divizia C).⁴⁰

Year	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936
Number of clubs	178	258	299	379	495	520	564

Table 4. The number of football clubs affiliated with the Romanian Football Federation⁴¹

Year	1930	1935	1936
Registered club players	6,393	26,279	37,245

Table 5. The number of football players registered in Romania⁴²

³⁷ Popa 2013, p. 164–185.

³⁸ Rotar 2020.

³⁹ See, for instance, the professional contracts of some players of Sporting Pitești – Romanian second tier league – Campionatul Ligii de Sud – in 1934 (AgCSNAR, *Asociația Sportivă „Sporting Pitești”* (1933–1946) fund, file 1/1933–1935, fol. 7, 10 (contracts for Gheorghe Farago and Adalbert Egedi in 1934). See, also, file 5/1937, fol. 24).

⁴⁰ For some information regarding the activity of football clubs in Divizia C (1936–1938) see AbCSNAR, *Clubul Sportiv Blaj* fund, file 3/1936. Also, for the activity of some football clubs in the districtal competitions informations could be found, for example, in AbCSNAR, *Societatea Sportivă „Axente Sever” Aiud* fund, file 2/1937, *Districtul de Fotbal Aiud* fund, file 3/1936, 11/1938, *Clubul Gimnastic Aiud* fund 6/1937–1940 and so on.

⁴¹ *Federația de football după 6 ani*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 2 January 1935, p. 6.

⁴² *Ibid.*

By comparison, in 1937 Belgian football counted more than 150,000 registered football players and about 1,500 clubs even though its population was 10 million smaller than that of Romania.⁴³ Thus, from this point of view Belgian football ranked better than Romanian football.

10 June 1937: Romania vs Belgium 2-1

Viewed as a whole, 1937 represented an important milestone for Romanian football in terms of international away matches. Besides Romania vs Belgium, the national team also played home matches against Czechoslovakia and Sweden and away matches against Poland, Lithuania Latvia and Yugoslavia. At the same time, Romanian clubs' were active internationally, with football matches against renowned teams were organised in Bucharest.⁴⁴ Langenus, one of the most important referees of the inter-war period,⁴⁵ played the most important role in organising the first match between Romania and Belgium. Langenus enjoyed an excellent reputation in Romania at that time; on the occasion of his 70th refereed match (1937), an article was published in *Gazeta Sporturilor* in which he was referred to as a "tireless ambassador of Belgium," authoritarian and at the same time displaying a controlled calm.⁴⁶ Langenus's success as an international referee was also considered Belgium's success. Langenus was also asked to referee several matches played by Romania at that time, some of which were the most important matches in the history of Romanian inter-war football. Among these, mention should be made of Romania vs Czechoslovakia (1934 World Cup), Romania vs Hungary (1936) and Romania vs England (1939). The last two matches had a special significance: Romania vs Hungary had political implications because of the historical rivalry between the two countries, while the second match was played against the English who were considered the football leaders at that time. Not all of the matches refereed by Langenus satisfied the fans. For example, concerning the 1935 Romania vs Yugoslavia game, Vogel highlighted that the refereeing was not "as expected," the Belgian referee "who incurred large financial expenses" made two mistakes which could have cost Romania's victory.⁴⁷ Langenus endeavoured to help Romanian football, he even tried to organise tournaments of Romanian teams in the West with an unsuccessful attempt to tour Romania's second national team to Holland, Luxembourg and France, scheduled in 1937.⁴⁸

⁴³ *Prezentările*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 11 June 1937, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Rotar, Ursu 2019.

⁴⁵ Dunmore, Donaldson 2015.

⁴⁶ *Jubileul lui Langenus*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 19 May 1937, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Vogel 1936, p. 8.

⁴⁸ *Un mare turneu în Occident al echipei*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 18 October 1936, p. 1.

Match	Result	Location	Attendance	Date
Romania-Peru (as linesman)	3-1	Montevideo	2,459	14 July 1930 (World Cup)
Romania- Yugoslavia	2-1	Bucharest	20,000	29 April 1934 (Friendly)
Romania- Czechoslovakia	1-2	Trieste	8,000	27 May 1934 (World Cup)
Romania- Yugoslavia	3-2	Bucharest	30,000	10 May 1936 (friendly)
Romania-Hungary	1-2	Bucharest	35,000	4 October 1936 (friendly)
Romania-Sweden	2-2	Bucharest	25,000	27 June 1937 (friendly)
Romania-England	0-2	Bucharest	40,000	24 May 1939 (friendly)

Table 6. Romania's inter-war matches refereed by Langenus

Langenus was a correspondent for *Gazeta Sporturilor* in which he informed Romanian football fans about the various evolutions of European football. In 1934, after a match between Romania and Yugoslavia, Langenus provided *Gazeta Sporturilor* with details of his life and career and promised that he would write about the level of Romanian football in Belgian newspapers.⁴⁹ He believed that Romania's team was mature from the point of view of football. In 1936, Langenus published an article in *Gazeta Sporturilor* tackling the way in which England's team, following a series of defeats in matches against Holland and Belgium, could get over the fact that some teams on the continent had begun to grow and defeat it.⁵⁰ Langenus was also *Gazeta Sporturilor's* correspondent at the famous England vs Rest of Europe match (1938).⁵¹

A potential football match between Romania and Belgium was discussed in 1936, with both federations testing the ground before taking a decision. The situation required negotiations on covering the Belgian team's transportation costs to Bucharest. The match date was accepted by Romania's team in September 1936.⁵² The Belgian federation's written agreement for playing the match was received in October 1936, and the allowance of 45,000

⁴⁹ *Cu d. John Langenus*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 2 May 1934, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Langenus 1936, p. 1.

⁵¹ Langenus 1938, p. 1, 6.

⁵² *Cunoscutul arbitru John Langenus*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 7 September 1936, p. 3.

francs requested from the Romanian federation was accepted.⁵³ It was established that the same amount of money should be paid to Romania for the scheduled return match to be played in Belgium in 1938. However, the return match was not played in 1938, the next football matches the two countries played were in 1955 (Bucharest) and in 1957 (Brussels). Langenus also tried to organise a return match in Belgium in 1939, but with no success.⁵⁴ Romanian Federation postponed the return match invoking of reason of the National Team's full schedule in 1938. This postponement arouse Belgian Federation's dissatisfaction which asked compensation in money for such situation.⁵⁵ The outbreak of the Second War World in September 1939 made that the established data for the return match to be cancelled (December 1939).⁵⁶

The match against Romania was part of Belgium's tournament in the Balkans, which included a match against Yugoslavia in Belgrade. The Belgian delegation consisted of 15 players and 6 officials headed by Augustine Jouvenau, the vice-president of the Belgian Football Federation.⁵⁷ The match played in Belgrade received special attention in *Gazeta Sporturilor*.⁵⁸ The Belgian players were dissatisfied by the football pitch in Belgrade, which was devoid of grass; they ironically stated that football cannot be played on rocks.⁵⁹ After the match, Jouvenau stated that if the match had been played on a normal grass football pitch Belgium would have won by a two- or three-goal difference.⁶⁰ The Belgian player Hanse urged the Belgian federation to stop accepting international matches unless they were to be played on a grass football pitch. In such circumstances, it is no wonder that some Belgian players refused to play to the best of their ability because of the risk of injury. *Gazeta Sporturilor* concluded by saying that

in the West and elsewhere, football reached such a level of development that it is played only on grass football pitches. Only there can football players play real football. Moreover, the standards for certifying football pitches firstly include dimensions and secondly the mandatory composition of the ground is mentioned: black soil covered with English turf.⁶¹

⁵³ *Matchul de football Belgia-România*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 24 October 1936, p. 1.

⁵⁴ *Langenus va prezenta azi F.R.F.A*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 23 May 1939, p. 3.

⁵⁵ *30000 de franci elevațieni ne cere Federația belgiană*, in *Curentul*, 8 April 1938, p. 6.

⁵⁶ *Irlanda a răspuns*, in *România*, 28 July 1939, p. 11.

⁵⁷ *Caravana belgiană va fi compusă din 21 de persoane*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 27 May 1937, p. 6.

⁵⁸ Lis 1937b, p. 1, 6.

⁵⁹ Lis 1937c, p. 6.

⁶⁰ Lis 1937b, p. 1, 6.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Gazeta Sporturilor sent a correspondent to the match, who provided a detailed account of the match.⁶² Lis opined that the Belgian team should have won, but it failed to do so because of the state of the football pitch, the heat and the biased refereeing of the Italian Barlassina. During the second half of the match, he cancelled a perfectly valid goal scored by the Belgian team after consultation with the Yugoslavian linesman. Lis revealed that in Belgrade after the match there was a state of disappointment among the Serbian players, officials and their fans. This was due to the good results scored by Yugoslavia in other home matches, which led to its being considered a very powerful team and thus worshipped. Lis pointed out that the disappointment was also reflected in the party after the Yugoslavia vs Belgium match, which lasted only 55 minutes. In view of the match against Romania, he recommended that the Romanian team not overdo high passes and dribbling, as this could make them easy prey for the Belgian team.⁶³ The Romanian Football Federation also sent a representative to the match,⁶⁴ who expressed his concerns after the match about the Belgians' game, considering them very dangerous opponents. In Bucharest, Belgium lined up the same team as in Belgrade, with Braine, a legendary player of the Red Devils, as their unquestionable star. He had played for Sparta Prague from 1930 to 1936⁶⁵ and was appointed captain of the European team in its match against England in London (1938).⁶⁶ The referee of the first Romania vs Belgium match was Augustin Krist (Czechoslovakia),⁶⁷ who would also referee for Romania's team in the 1938 World Cup in France. The linesmen were Ceureanu (Romania) and Lamoureux (Belgium), a common practice at the time in friendly matches.

Two weeks before the match, Lis criticised the Romanian officials' attitude towards this game, claiming they treated it "with ease," starting from the idea that Belgium represented "a competitor like many others we have defeated."⁶⁸ In his opinion, such an idea was totally wrong. He considered the match against Belgium more difficult than the one against Czechoslovakia, as there were few pieces of information about this team. Moreover, Belgium practised an athletic and sometimes harsh style, similar to the one practised

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Lis 1937d, p. 1.

⁶⁴ *D. Liviu Iuga pleacă azi la Belgrad, ca observator special*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 6 June 1937, p. 6.

⁶⁵ Moyse 1930, p. 6.

⁶⁶ *Azi, matchul Anglia-Continent*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 27 October 1938, p. 4.

⁶⁷ *Cehoslovacul Christ a acceptat să arbitreze matchul Belgia-România*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 31 May 1937, p. 6.

⁶⁸ Lis 1937e, p. 3.

by British teams, and overall it was an unpredictable and disciplined team. Lis' conclusion was that "an unaccounted easiness was floating in the atmosphere of the match against Belgium and its consequences could be a failure at a time a victory would be very useful."⁶⁹

Langenus published an article right after the Holland vs Belgium match⁷⁰ in view of the upcoming game between Romania and Belgium, pointing out that while the Belgian team had shown an excellent performance, it failed in terms of efficiency. In Langenus's opinion, Belgium slightly outclassed Romania, benefitting from some advantages, mainly connected to the cohesion of the team. Yet, he predicted a narrow victory for the Romanian team at the end of a fierce and high-quality match. Langenus advocated a consummate fair play spirit which should serve only to friendship. Langenus's views caused concern among Romanian officials.⁷¹

A month before the match, Langenus published articles in *Gazeta Sporturilor* in which he presented in detail the ways in which football was organised in Belgium,⁷² the state of professionalism,⁷³ of stadiums,⁷⁴ as well as an analysis of the national team's results.⁷⁵ The financing of the Belgian football clubs was interesting for the Romanians. Langenus stated that clubs were set up thanks to the teams' "associations of fanatics," this situation being in accordance with the Belgian spirit: "when three Belgians spend several days in a café, they have definitely set up an enterprise."⁷⁶ Langenus mentioned that an "association of fanatics" of the national Belgian team had been set up, but it was dissolved because of the team's unexpected defeat. Regarding Belgium's team, Langenus considered that along with the Olympic title gained in 1920, another of its achievements was the fact it was the first European team to not be defeated by England (Belgium vs England 2-2, Anvers, 1923).⁷⁷

Before the match, a series of opinions circulated in the Romanian press which disregarded both the value of Belgium's team. *Gazeta Sporturilor* responded to these ideas labelling them as inappropriate, as the value of Belgian football was higher than the value of the Romanian one: "A victory against

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Langenus 1937a, p. 2; Langenus 1937b, p. 1-2.

⁷¹ *Meciul cu Belgia*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 29 May 1937, p. 6.

⁷² Langenus 1937c, p. 1.

⁷³ Langenus 1937d, p. 1.

⁷⁴ Langenus 1937e, p. 2.

⁷⁵ Langenus 1937f, p. 2.

⁷⁶ Langenus 1937c, p. 1.

⁷⁷ Langenus 1937b, p. 1-2.

Belgium is likely to boost our international fame.”⁷⁸ Two of Belgium’s recent results supported this assertion (Belgium vs Germany 0-1 and Belgium vs Yugoslavia 1-1). *Gazeta Sporturilor* considered the match to be crucial, as it confirmed Romania’s belonging to Western football. This match was played after Romania’s acceptance into the Central European football competition (1936), representing a great step ahead for Romanian football, which until then had been played in traditional confrontations against neighbouring countries from the Balkans: “Having been swamped for years on end in the Balkans of football mediocrity, we have found our way out for a short time.”⁷⁹ Consequently, the match against Belgium began to gain importance, as it would prove the value of Romanian football to the “Western world.”⁸⁰ A committee was put in charge of selecting the Romanian players for the match.⁸¹ It was decided to bring all the players for a training camp in Bucharest a few days before the match. The team Romania was to play with had to represent the ethnicity of the country. This referred to the fact that, in this period, some members of the Romanian team were of Hungarian or Jewish origin, which led to a number of discussions regarding their loyalty to the national team.⁸²

The Belgian team was much more experienced than that of Romania. The Belgian Football Federation was established five years before the Romanian one, the first official match played by the Belgian national team was in 1904 (Romania’s first match in 1922), and the Belgian national team had played almost 200 games (Romania played only 64). Furthermore, Belgium’s traditional opponents were from Western Europe.⁸³ In addition, Belgium won the Olympic title in 1920 while playing on its home field. For this match, the stadium stands were enlarged and the tickets in the central areas were sold out 10 days before the match.⁸⁴ Ticket resale was avoided at the match and it was decided that each spectator would only be allowed to buy one ticket or book only one box.⁸⁵ The evolution of Romanian football at that time was marked by the public interest in the teams and players, including even intimate knowledge about the national team. It was obvious

⁷⁸ *Un pas înainte*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 11 June 1937, p. 1.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Comisia de selecție își începe activitatea în vederea matchului cu Belgia*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 15 May 1937, p. 1.

⁸² Popa 2013, p. 308–315.

⁸³ *Prezentările*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 11 June 1937, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Fulga 1937a, p. 1.

⁸⁵ *Noi și serioase dificultăți în alcătuirea echipei naționale*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 8 June 1937, p. 6.

that the worshipping of football players was beginning to develop. Consequently, in a preview of the match against Belgium, *Gazeta Sporturilor* presented the Romanian team's superstitious tradition of being accommodated in the same rooms at the Bucharest Union Hotel before every international match played at home.⁸⁶ The newspaper presented in detail the pranks, the baptism and the oath that a beginner player in the national team, Gică Popescu (the 17-year-old fullback) had to undergo.⁸⁷ In addition, on the day the match was played, *Gazeta Sporturilor* wrote about the way the players had spent their free, and it ironically depicted some other details from the team's families, for example, the opinions Baratki's mother-in-law about the match.

The match was broadcast on Radio Romania.⁸⁸ This was not a novelty, it was rather a common practice given that the first broadcast of a Romanian football match had been in 1933. About 35,000 spectators watched the match, a high number compared to other home matches played by Romania's national team in the inter-war period (**table 6**), meaning that the match could be considered a success. It is worth mentioning that the spectators who attended the match in Bucharest outnumbered those in Belgrade. This was not a unique situation at the for matches played in the two capitals. For example, when England played successively in both countries in 1939, 35,000 spectators attended in Belgrade and 40,000 in Bucharest. Yugoslavia vs Belgium played in Belgrade gathered 13,000 spectators, which represented an average number of spectators attending international matches organised there. Lis pointed out that the maximum number of spectators in a match played by Yugoslavia in Belgrade amounted to 15,000 people.⁸⁹ One of the first comments made by the representatives of the Romanian media referred to the fact that fewer public figures watched Romania vs Belgium in Bucharest compared to the match played in Czechoslovakia in April 1937. Thus, the press noted the presence of the Belgian Ambassador Guillaume, V. V. Tilea and Gabriel Marinescu, while the match in April against Czechoslovakia was attended by King Carol II and Prince Royal Mihai. Tilea and Marinescu were key personalities in Romanian football at that time. Tilea was a politician closed to King Carol II, he acted as Romania's minister plenipotentiary in Great Britain (1939–1940) and as president of the Romanian Football Federation (1933–1939). Marinescu held the position of minister of internal

⁸⁶ Fulga 1937b, p. 6.

⁸⁷ Făgărășanu 1937, p. 6.

⁸⁸ *Matchul Belgia-România va fi radiodifuzat*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 11 June 1937, p. 1.

⁸⁹ Lis 1937f, p. 3.

affairs (1939). From 1936 to 1940, Marinescu was the chairman of Venus football club, one of the largest clubs in Romania at that time.

Romania's team went without two of its best players in the match: Bindea (physically unprepared) and Dobay (a malaria patient).⁹⁰ Due to Dobay's absence, a 17-year-old player, Gică Popescu, played his first match for Romania's national team. Undoubtedly the best player was Iuliu Baratki, who played for Romania and scored the two goals of the match. However, before the match, there were doubts about his selection to the Romanian team. These doubts were fuelled by the suspicion that Baratki, who was a Romanian player of Hungarian origin, would not be fully committed to Romania's team as there was a dispute between Romania and Hungary, which had made efforts to recruit Baratki to their team.⁹¹ Baratki played for both national teams during the inter-war period, and was not the only player in this situation. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that Baratki

had gone through the cruellest press campaign for the past months. He was blamed for everything: that he was a player, that he was a good player. That he was still able to play... Even the colour of his hair. If we are not mistaken, a peer ironically announced that in order to get rid of ironies, Baratki is determined to dye his hair black.⁹²

Reluctance to include him in the team was also fuelled by the fact that he was seen as an individualist player and that he had never played together with Bodola and Covaci in Romania's attacking line.⁹³

The schedule of the Belgian team in Romania was planned following a meeting between Ambassador Guillaume and Octav Luchide.⁹⁴ It included a reception at the Belgian Embassy in the presence of teams and leaders, a lunch offered by the ambassador and a lunch in Snagov (near Bucharest). The Belgian team, joined by representatives of the Romanian Football Federation, laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Hero, a common practice at the time whenever international football or other matches were played.⁹⁵ After the match, the Belgian team left Snagov and departed for Ploiești, where they visited the Vega refinery, one of the largest refineries in Romania owned by a French-Belgian company. From here, they headed for Breaza where the Belgian players bought Romanian woven fabric as presents for their families and friends. The Belgian team left home by the Orient Express from Sinaia,

⁹⁰ *Noi și serioase dificultăți în alcătuirea echipei naționale*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 8 June 1937, p. 6.

⁹¹ Faje 2015, p. 162–168; Angelescu, Cristea 2009, p. 183–188.

⁹² Castor 1937, p. 2.

⁹³ Fulga 1937c, p. 6.

⁹⁴ *Primirea belgienilor*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 4 June 1937, p. 1.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

the summer residence of the Romanian royal family.⁹⁶ The Belgians turned down an invitation from the “Belgian colony” in Ploiești to play a match there.⁹⁷

The Belgian delegation entered Romania at the Stamora Moravița border point and was welcomed by N. Urzică.⁹⁸ It was offered a bunch of flowers with the national emblems of the two countries and, in honour of the guests, a marching band performed the *Sambre et Meusee*. The next stop was Timișoara, and at the train station the delegation was welcomed by sports officials and fans and the national anthems of the two countries were played. The Romanian Football Federation had ordered the football teams in that area of the country to welcome the Belgian delegation.⁹⁹ Belgium’s team arrived in Bucharest at the Gara de Nord and was greeted by about 300 people.¹⁰⁰ Among them, mention should be made of the representatives of the “Belgian colony” in Romania. The public guards in Bucharest performed the royal Belgian anthem in honour of the guests on the platform of the railway station.

The importance of the match can also be measured by the four out of eight pages allocated by *Gazeta Sporturilor* in the issue published right after the match.¹⁰¹ Besides offering an account of the match, various elements pertaining to the match, sometimes tinged with irony, were minutely presented. It also included statements given by the players of the two teams, by the coaches, by the referees and by other public figures in attendance. All of the Belgian officials and players, with one exception, considered Romania’s team to be better than that of Yugoslavia. The most important statement from a Belgian official came from Ambassador Guillaume, who was impressed by the way the Belgian delegation had been received and hoped that the match would be only “the preview of a long series” of sporting confrontations between the two countries.¹⁰² Vornic suggested that if Romania had not been unlucky, they would have won the match by 3-1, or even 4-2.¹⁰³ During their stay in Romania, the Belgian delegation drank 137 bottles of champagne, “an unconquerable harmony” established at one point between the leaders of the

⁹⁶ *Echipa Belgiei vizitează azi Valea Prahovei*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 12 June 1937, p. 6; *Echipa Belgiei a părăsit România*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 13 June 1937, p. 6.

⁹⁷ *Primirea Belgienilor*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 4 June 1937, p. 1.

⁹⁸ *Belgienilor li s-a făcut o primire grandioasă*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 10 June 1937, p. 6.

⁹⁹ *Vin oaspeții*, in *Sportul Capitalei*, 8 June 1937, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ *Buletinul matchului România-Belgia*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 10 June 1937, p. 1.

¹⁰¹ *România a învins Belgia cu 2-1 (1-0)*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 12 June 1937, p. 1, 4-6.

¹⁰² *Declarații după matchul de ieri*, in *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 13 June 1937, p. 4.

¹⁰³ Vornic 1937.

two teams. They considered that the match scheduled in Belgium in 1938 would also be a “champagne return match.”¹⁰⁴

I will not insist on describing the unfolding of the match, as it was largely referred to by both Romanian and Belgian newspapers. I will highlight the fact that Baratki scored the two goals for Romania and Vorhoof scored for Belgium at the end of the match.¹⁰⁵ Romanian players received a bonus of 7,000 lei after the victory over Belgium.¹⁰⁶ The fair-right newspapers criticized this match considering it as a trick of federation to exaggerate its importance for rising the prestige of Romanian football: the Belgian team was seen as having a not impressing track record during its history, the Belgian players were exhausted after the internal competions and after the match against Yugoslavia played four days before.¹⁰⁷ According to the its fair-right ideology *Buna Vestire* newspaper criziced the selection of the Romanian team as having too many Hungarians players as origin as players of national teams (as represented the minorities players, namely not having pure Romanian origins). For this reason *Buna Vestire* emphasized the fact that Gică Popescu (at his first presence in the national team) was sabotated due to his Romanian pure origin by the minorities players. *Buna Vestire* explained this through the fears of the minorities players to not be get out from the national football team by the Gică Popescu’s qualities. The same newspaper considered Gică Popescu as a symbol of nation who was bullied by the minorities players. In this point, *Buna Vestire* compared Gică Popescu as rose chrysler imperial planted by a stupid gardener (the Romanian Football Federation) amongst the weeds (the minorities players).¹⁰⁸ Also, we can find the same kind of criticism in *Porunca Vremii*, another Romanian fair-right newspaper.¹⁰⁹

After the match, *Gazeta Sporturilor* brought into discussion those who disregarded the importance of the match against Belgium. They were referred to as “unprepared specialists who give sentences and pass grades” and who had believed that the Belgian team had come to Bucharest just to have fun and lie in the sun in Snagov.¹¹⁰ As counter-arguments, *Gazeta Sporturilor* mentioned the high number of spectators who attended the match. Another argument was the echo of the match in the international press, as, for example, the newspaper *L’Auto* from Paris made a phone call to request details about the match.

¹⁰⁴ Castor 1937, p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Socaciu 1937.

¹⁰⁶ *Primele jucătorilor*, in *Sportul Capitalei*, 12 June 1937, p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ Popescu 1937a, p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ Popescu 1937b, p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ For instance, Iftimie 1937a, p. 2; Iftimie 1937b, p. 2.

¹¹⁰ Lis 1937f, p. 3.

Consequently, Romania's victory against Belgium was considered "among the most outstanding performances" of Romanian football, representing "a valuable passport" to the sport. Those who belittled the victory were asked a rhetorical question by *Gazeta Sporturilor*: "After all, what team should Romania defeat in order to be granted importance by our famous specialists?"¹¹¹ *L'Auto's* account of the match mentioned that the Belgians had not played efficiently even though the Romanians had overperformed only in the first half of the match.¹¹²

Another conclusion prompted by the match and published in *Gazeta Sporturilor* was that, due to the popularity of Romanian football and of the national team, a stadium with a capacity of 50,000 seats should be built in Bucharest.¹¹³ This was in line with some ideas circulating in the newspapers of the time that forwarded the belief that Romania had the highest number of football spectators in Central Europe. Before their departure, the Belgian team left for Snagov, where after a few-hour sunbath, they had a traditional Romanian lunch (polenta with rustic poached eggs, minced meat wrapped in cabbage and fried chicken) accompanied with a performance by a band of musicians. Impressed by his entire stay in Bucharest, Jouvenau, the head of the Belgian delegation, stated that he had never enjoyed this "attention" as much in any of the countries he had visited before.

Hungarian newspapers from Transylvania greeted Romania's victory and ascribed the success to the Selection Committee, which had not been influenced by various voices demanding that the team should be made based on ethnicity.¹¹⁴ Thus, the commission abided by the principles of sportsmanship above everything else. The situation favoured Baratki's presence in the team, who proved to be the hero of the match. In the popular Romanian newspapers, the victory over Belgium was considered a resounding success of Romanian football¹¹⁵ and proof that the Romanian national team could play well with any national team.¹¹⁶

The match between the two countries also enjoyed the attention of the Belgian press, but to a lesser extent than the Romanian press. This was explained, on the one hand, by the fact that Belgium played an away match and, on the other hand, by the low stakes the match had for the Belgian national team in comparison with the Romanian one. *La Dernière Heure* had a correspondent with the Belgian team's Balkan Tour who offered a detailed

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² *Les Belges se montrèrent inefficaces*, in *L'Auto*, 11 June 1937, p. 7.

¹¹³ *Lis* 1937g, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ *A kitűnő összeállítású román válogatott*, in *Ujleket*, 12 June 1937, p. 7.

¹¹⁵ *O frumoasă afirmare a fotbalului românesc*, in *Universul*, 12 June, 1937, p. 6.

¹¹⁶ *Pop* 1937, p. 4.

account to the readers.¹¹⁷ We thus found out that Belgium's team left from the Gare du Nord in Brussels, being joined by the players' wives or fiancés, a number of club leaders and some fans. They travelled by train with a stopover for a night's rest in Budapest after a 24-hour train journey.¹¹⁸ The good reception of the Belgian delegation in Romania was emphasised, as well as the local interest aroused by the match.¹¹⁹ Jean Chapel also wrote in *La Meuse* that the Belgium team was welcomed with sympathy in Bucharest. Moreover, the newspaper mentioned various impressions issued by the Romanian press on the value of the Belgian team and of some players. For example, the Belgian player Raymond Braine was praised, being called "a phenomenon."¹²⁰ *La Nation Belge* highlighted that Belgium's performance was more scientific than that of Romania,¹²¹ attributing the defeat to the extremely tiresome journey. *La Dernière Heure* emphasised the fact that the Belgian team was superior in the second half of the match.¹²² Jean Chapel considered that the Romanian victory over Belgium could be characterised by La Fontaine's words: "that running solves nothing; we have to start moving at the right moment."¹²³ In contrast, other Belgian newspapers published only informative accounts of the results of the match and of the tournament.¹²⁴ One of the main conclusions of the "Diable Rouges's" Balkan tour was that the event represented excellent propaganda for Belgium football.¹²⁵

Conclusions

At first glance, the importance of the first football match between Romania and Belgium seems minor, as it was a friendly match. Even though a number of opinions were disseminated in Romania regarding the irrelevance of the confrontation, they were quickly dispelled both by the number of spectators and the quality of the match. The match gained additional significance as it was the second time a Western European national team played in Bucharest after the match against France in 1933. From this perspective, as we

¹¹⁷ *Roumanie-Belgique dernier match internationals de la saison*, in *La Nation Belge*, 10 June 1937, p. 4.

¹¹⁸ Sonck 1937, p. 5.

¹¹⁹ K.H. 1937.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Les diables Rouges, ambassadeurs du football belge en Balkans*, in *La Nation Belge*, 12 June 1937, p. 2.

¹²² T. 1937, p. 4.

¹²³ Chapel 1937, p. 6.

¹²⁴ *Football. Sur penalty l'équipe belge est battue*, in *Le courrier de L'Escaut*, 11 June 1937, p. 5; *Football. La défaite des Diables Rouge en Roumanie*, in *Gazette de Charleroi*, 12 June 1937, p. 1, 6.

¹²⁵ Chapel 1937, p. 6.

previously stated, the match was more important for the Romanian team, which broke the tradition of playing “home” matches against its traditional opponents, the neighbouring Balkan countries. Romanian football was seeking to integrate as quickly and as much as it could into Western European football, which was considered as the gold standard at that time. In the wider context, the match was integrated into the Belgian-Romanian relations, considered to be friendly due to the close historical destiny and the Latin origin. As a result, the match was seen as an extension of the Belgian-Romanian friendship and as the grounds for closer cooperation in the field of sports. In a much wider sense, Belgium represented for inter-war Romania a possible model of sports development, with the confrontation between the two national football teams being thus an echo of this situation. The comparisons displayed by the Romanian inter-war newspapers pertaining to the development of sports and football in the two countries were aimed to prove this. The match between Romania and Belgium on 10 June 1937 can be seen as a means of advertising not only the sport, but also the strong relationships existing at that time between the two countries.

On the other hand, the analysis of this match provides an image of the impact of football in inter-war Romanian society, as an international sports confrontation. In this respect, even if the importance of this match was lower comparing with other matches played by the Romanian national football team during the time, it takes into the light relevant aspects: the public interest in football (as audience), the great interest around the national team, the interference of football and politics (see the polemics on the romanization of Romanian national football team), the international inter-war football connections.

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