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Kosovo basketball plays for a sustainable sporting future

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ABSTRACT

In February 2008, Kosovo declared independence from Serbia which was significant in its enduring trajectory towards sovereignty. Yet, 'independence' has been a complex process and the nation remains in pursuit of legitimacy from key global governing entities (e.g. United Nations and European Union). Simultaneously, the acquisition of international sport membership has been instrumental to the sustainability of the country's sport sector and a mechanism for raising its profile and cause. Beyond the IOC and FIFA's agency in this space, the plight of other national sporting federations is less well known. Contextualised against an understanding of how the region's histories bear upon the development of Kosovo's sport, we examine organisational possibilities for Federata e Basketbollit të Kosovës (FBK) and its members during the period and consider ways this adds to narratives about the country and its sporting past. Positioned within organisational sustainability theories, and drawing upon data from basketball sports workers, archival sources and sport federation resources, we present an interrogation of relationships between national development and individuals' navigation of sport participation. Illustrating processes of resilience, survivability and thriving, the research contributes to a critique of ways organisational in/stability affects sector development and individuals' navigation of employment experiences and opportunities.

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Since Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008, the (re)development of the sport sector has gained momentum. This has included establishing a performance pathway, introducing a men's basketball academy, hosting international qualification tournaments, successful performances in the Balkan League, the EuroCup (Europe's second-tier professional basketball club competition), and international competitions. Notwithstanding its relative size and status within the region and world (i.e. a population of 1,773,971 (Agjencia e statistikave të Kosovës 2022)), the emerging presence of Kosovo's national sporting federations, and international lobbying by key agents, contribute to illustrating the nation's new-found global position. The progress has enabled wider acknowledgement of its capacities, power and abilities, and sporting prowess. For basketball, Kosovo's men's team entered the

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international table at 164. In February 2023, they were ranked 80th (of 169 teams – an improvement of 14 places from 2017), with a European ranking of 37 (of 47 teams). Conversely, in February 2023, Kosovo's women were ranked 89th (of 118 teams) and 40th in Europe (of 43 teams) (FIBA 2023). Such participation demonstrates Kosovo's ability to hold its own on the global basketball court.

Entry into international basketball competitions for Kosovo has been significant not only in terms of global sport politics and diplomacy but comprised one of many markers within the nation's long road and struggles toward statehood and sovereignty. Notwithstanding the enduring regional tensions and political processes affecting Federata e Basketbollit të Kosovës (FBK), the nation's performances have been pivotal in affording sports workers opportunities to gain and navigate meaningful employment during times of instability and accrue labour skills and capital to advance their lives and mobilities. Yet, the situation in Kosovo is distinct in that the conflict and post-conflict periods raised an intertwining set of concerns with regards to the existence and continuity of the sector, the legitimacy and power of sport organisations therein, and securities afforded to workers pursuing employment and career development within the system.

Parallel to these concerns, there is emerging interest in developing a better understanding of the consequences upon sport organisations and their members within conflict, post-conflict, catastrophic environments (Cherrington and Black 2022; Jeong 2022). Exploring contexts that have included war ravaged settings in the Middle East, indigenous territorial experiences, urban violence and environmental degradation, scholarship has adopted a diverse conceptualisation of catastrophe, trauma, resilience and coping (see Begović 2021; Cherrington and Black 2022). Within the Balkan region, Begović (2021) has highlighted the trajectory that countries within the region (e.g. Montenegro), have taken through geopolitical conflict toward new forms of governance and autonomy. Begović (2021) identifies that questions exist regarding the legitimacy of systems and processes of institutions, power inequities and sustained concern over the participation and representation of varied forms of sport labour. Adding to this space, we offer an examination of some of the human costs geopolitical upheavals have had, and still have, on the continuities of individuals' work and organisational relationships. Appropriately, it is of value to interrogate Kosovo professional basketball as a site to examine sport and organisational sustainability concerns.

Critiques of sustainability in sport have gained considerable momentum over the last two decades as researchers have illuminated various concerns about the sector's constituent parts and processes, stakeholders and relationships, and current and future states (Barker-Ruchti 2019; Dimoula et al. 2013; Lang 2020; Lindsey 2008; Loland 2006; Shipway 2018). A key focus area has been professional sport organisations and global sports labour (Agergaard and Ungruhe 2016; Brown-Devlin 2018; Parnell et al. 2022; Richardson and McKenna 2020; Roderick and Schumacher 2017). In general, conceptualisations of sustainability in sport have been predicated on the existence of an organisation/institution (e.g. National Governing Body (NGB)) as the central component of the system and its processes, and management behaviours that ensure survivability, continuity, adaptability and thriving (Brown-Devlin 2018; Lindsey 2008; Skinner and Stewart 2017; Totoro 2017). While sport organisations may experience perturbations due to socio-economic, geopolitical or cultural forces, there is a continuity to their presence that provides degrees of reference and security on a day-to-day basis and during times of conflict and uncertainty. Yet, such sustainability may easily be taken for granted and largely presumed to endure in perpetuity.

However, as we demonstrate with regards to Kosovo sport and individuals' experiences working within the FBK, and as noted in previous work on sport in the region (Alaj, Arifi, and Metaj 2018; Giulianotti et al. 2017), when entities are absent, their legitimacy denied and/or confronted, and power curtailed, normative conceptualisations of organisational sustainability can be duly questioned and reconceived.

Accordingly, we draw on examinations of organisational sustainability and professional sport (e.g. Purdy, Kohe, and Paulauskas 2023) to frame and understand the experiences of a cohort of individuals working in Kosovo basketball through a conflict and post-conflict landscape. The paper aims to: 1) Highlight how challenges to the existence, legitimacy and power of sporting institutions within Kosovo (specifically, the FBK), and the subsequent (re)building of sport, presented issues of sustainability for those working within the sport; 2) Examine how worker's lives and career trajectories in professional basketball were effected by organisational systems, norms and process; and, 3) understand some individual's strategies under conflict/post-conflict to navigate their working conditions and ensure professional career development.

While prevailing examinations of Kosovo's recent sport histories privilege narratives of soft-diplomacy (e.g. Brentin and Tregoures 2016; Giulianotti et al. 2017; Krieger, Parks Pieper, and Ritchie 2020), there remains scope for further interpretations and discussions. Mindful of Kosovo's long and complex histories (Clark 2000; Djokić 2007; Malcolm 1998; Woehrel 1999), this paper acknowledges the regional reconfigurations that transpired over the late 19th and throughout the 20th centuries, in which the territory's modern sport organisations and international engagements commenced. Beyond the protracted breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991, we focus attention on the progression of FBK through the conflict, post-conflict, independence (circa. 2008), and the present. The plight of the FBK and its members cannot be read in isolation from the shifts of other entities within international sport. Appropriately, due consideration is afforded to aspects of the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) influence on political change. We acknowledge the situation in Kosovo, and issues faced by sport organisations and their members, bear similar hallmarks to other nations and regions experiencing conflict and its enduring consequences (Purdy, Kohe, and Paulauskas 2023; Shipway, Miles, and Gordon 2020). However, adopting a sustainability focus enables a new perspective and deeper appreciation of how NGBs such the FBK, serve as fundamental organisational anchors for the sector and its continuity, and how, in the case of organisational absence and legitimacy, individuals may negotiate their employment.

An historical landscape of Kosovo's sport participation

The histories of the region and conflicts have trajectories reaching back at least until the early Ottoman empire (Binder-Iijima and Kraft 2010; Djokić 2007; Marshall 2002). Nonetheless, we begin this story of Kosovo in the late twentieth century and amid the wider geopolitical disruptions that flowed from the breakup of the Soviet Union and latterly Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Whereas previously Kosovo had enjoyed a degree of sovereignty, autonomy and rights of the socialist period, during the subsequent tenure of Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević, many of these rights and freedoms were revoked, leading to heightened tensions in the relations between Serbs and ethnic Albanians within Kosovo. By 1998, in retaliation for the 'Kosovo Liberation Army's' (KLA) aggressive pursuit of

international recognition of Kosovo's independence, Milošević launched a brutal campaign against the KLA and civilians. The act brought strong condemnation from the international community who endeavoured to use diplomatic strategies (e.g. arms and trade embargo) to end the civil conflict. Sanctions, however, proved futile, and eventually NATO intervened with military force under the contested premise of necessary 'humanitarian intervention' (McCoubrey 1999; Wheatley 2000). Building from this, and alongside substantial global support, Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia on February 17, 2008. Even so, conflicts have continued over Serbia's authority, and its ability to determine the legitimacy and sustainability of Kosovo sport through the nation's autonomy.¹

Here, it is useful to locate Kosovo's national and sport independence within the landscape of federal sport development in late twentieth century Yugoslavia. Strong connections between Kosovo's national identity and its sport development emerged notably during Josip Tito's leadership of Yugoslavia. During his tenure (1953-1980), there was marked investment in the development of regional sporting infrastructure across the nation, notably within Kosovo's seven regions. Under the circumstances many citizens were able to still participate and enjoy sport. These advances were eroded by the changing political regime and the onset of Milošević's authoritarian government (Baliqi 2018; Šuligoi and Kennell 2022).

During Milošević's tenure, Kosovo sport organisation's abilities to develop autonomy relied not only on the proactive lobbying of their own sports leaders but also on the political relationship with neighbouring officials in Serbia, the wider region, and International Sport Federations. In the first instance, Kosovo's global sporting representation had been subsumed within that of Yugoslavia. Since the breakup of the region, Kosovo had respective representation under the banners of the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, then Serbia and Montenegro, Serbia, and finally, its status as an independent nation in 2008 (Brentin and Tregoures 2016). Within the Olympic movement and International Sport Federations, whose committees and executive board memberships were tightly controlled and regulated, and included Serbian representatives, there was the limited ability for Kosovo to be afforded a voice.

Where recognition from larger global institutions proved difficult, Kosovo state officials, including individuals such as Besim Hasani,² saw opportunities to raise the nation's international sport profile. Despite few guarantees a soft diplomacy approach would work, a strategy emerged to lobby larger sport organisations, starting with the IOC, FIFA and UEFA, then with FIBA. Notwithstanding continued anti-Kosovo lobbying by Serbian representatives and their allies, Kosovar sport organisational protagonists remained persistent in advancing the case of regional and international participation (Djokić and Ker-Lindsey 2010). The first obstacle was the need for the country to be officially recognised as a nation by the international community. As Brentin and Tregoures (2016) note, UN recognition is the standard definition of internationally acknowledged political status. Within this aim, sport formed part of a raft of soft diplomacy measures to extend the State's more substantive geopolitical agendas (e.g. IMF and World Bank recognition (which was eventually achieved) and UN status and EU membership (pending) (Begović 2021). Reflective of Lindsey's (2008) observations of the sport sector, the actions described above attest to a nuanced interplay and interaction between individual agency (e.g. personal connection and political relationships being advanced) and the formal organisational efforts and decision-making (e.g. in the form of official policy) that contributes to, and may be necessary for, sustainable practices to come to fruition.

Theoretical positioning

The concept of sustainability draws attention to how sport organisations maintain structures and processes to ensure participation and performativity (e.g. keep the organisation afloat, maintain a presence in the sport through competition, financially support individuals' long-term employment) (Skinner and Stewart 2017). At the organisational level, sustainability has been conceptualised as environmental sensitivity, cultural transformation, effective resource management, financial/economic parsimony, and 'future proofing' (Stoughton and Ludema 2012). However, it has also been noted that organisational sustainability is complex, and the way sustainability ideas contribute to structural processes and individual/collective experiences warrant closer scrutiny. Specifically, we are drawn to scholars who have explored how organisations adapt to contextual challenges and thrive within the evolving environments in which they operate (Moulaert et al. 2013; Vaiou and Kalandides 2017). Collectively, this work has reiterated the significance and interconnectedness of organisational resilience and coping strategies, solidarity and commitment to shared purposes/goals, professional network fortification, and capacities for social entrepreneurship and creative enterprise. Vaiou and Kalandides (2017) note that for organisations to adapt, innovative solutions that draw upon resilience and contextual networks and resources are necessary. In the case of Kosovar sport, these aspects of sustainability are evidenced in the management practices and structures of the nation's sport organisations and its members in their approaches towards day-to-day realities, fulfilling professional and personal needs and objectives, and maintaining continuity of participation within the sport system. Importantly, and relevant to Kosovo sport post-conflict, is Vaiou and Kaplandides' (2017) perspective that sustainability comprises an entity's capacity to (re)organise, rebalance and achieve equilibrium. Part of which entails enacting learning and contingency strategies from these experiences, and making proactive decisions that *might* better ensure individual and organisation survivability (i.e. the ability for the organisation to maintain routine processes and practices in the immediate term to ensure existence within the 'system') and *thrivability* (i.e. the organisation's ability to effectively and efficiently go beyond *in situ* resource deployment to foster growth).

In sport, discussions of sustainability have predominated within management debates about sporting infrastructure and the natural environment (López-Bonilla et al., 2020), the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2022), organisational change (Lindsey 2008; Purdy, Kohe, and Paulauskas 2023), event legacy (e.g. sport mega events (Gulak-Lipka and Jagielski 2020; Loland 2006), and employment relations (Taylor, Doherty, and McGraw 2015). Pertinent to this paper is Lindsey's (2008) acknowledgement of an interplay between individual pursuits of sustainability (e.g. in terms of continuing agency, practices and relationships) and the structural levels of sustainability (e.g. programme and network continuity and capacity building). Building from this interpretation, Purdy, Kohe, and Paulauskas (2023) interrogated employment experiences in professional men's basketball in Ukraine during the Euromaidan conflict in 2014. Congruent with previous studies (e.g. Cummings et al. 2019; Moldavanova and Goerdel 2018), and a foundation for this work on Kosovo, they found workers' adaptation to the conflict bore similar characteristics to other sectors vis-à-vis coping with traumatic events in the workplace. Nevertheless, in the absence of clear sport organisational strategies, it was noted individuals relied on operationalising their professional sustainability strategies (e.g. utilising networks, revisiting contracts).

Cumulatively, the research above has underscored that organisations might possess various strategies for their own survival and success. However, further investigations are needed that explore how environments and organisations create amiable conditions or opportunities for individuals to navigate their own career sustainability. Accordingly, this paper draws attention to connections between organisational sustainability and what sustainable working conditions within professional sport may be. Here, we develop an understanding of how sustainability manifests within a specific type of organisational setting (in this case, in basketball within a context weathered by particular forces). We do so by illustrating how Kosovo's historical and contemporary sport position, relationship and power, bears upon the experiences of individuals to seek out particular career trajectories. Our theoretical contribution is in advocating for recognition within macro and meso structural conceptualisations of organisational sustainability of the human dimension, consequences, labour cost and agency that may exist within continuity and growth agendas.

Methodology

Informed by the interpretivist paradigm, this project adopts a case study methodology (Merriam 1998), to frame and understand the experiences of some key individuals working in Kosovo basketball through a conflict and post-conflict landscape. This approach requires sensitivity to the bounded phenomenon as being particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam 1998). Firstly, this case is particularistic in that it is bound by specific temporal and spatial parameters of the Kosovo basketball system through a substantive moment of geopolitical change. Descriptively, the case comprises interrogation of the organisational context of FBK and Kosovo state sport, the sector challenges, and the relationship to nuances of participants' working lives. Heuristically, the case contributes to progressive debates and research on welfare in sport and provides a unique account of geopolitical turmoil.

Data generation constituted examinations of organisational websites, newspapers, and selected key archives from national and international bodies (i.e. FBK, IOC, UN), including committee minutes, official reports and media statements, resolutions, and decisions (e.g. 'UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) on the situation relating Kosovo', <https://peacemaker.un.org/>; FBK, <https://www.basketbolli.com>), and interviews with purposefully selected workers from professional basketball in Kosovo. In relation to the former, we note that sport organisations' digital spaces are not, inherently, sociological or historical, and that critical reflection in creation may not always be a priority for organisational websites. Moreover, these websites do not always comprise the usual documents that scholars may expect to find (e.g. complete and accurate financial reports, minutes from meetings, etc); particularly when organisational legitimacy and continuity have been thwarted by crises or other forces (Kohe 2015; Osmond and Phillips 2015). Additionally, as is a feature of archival and online research, there is sensibility that needs to be shown with regards to archival silence; recognition of the absence of information and detail within the material evidence (Booth 2005). Specifically, we accept that the available material, both written and oral sources, have omissions, and that these do come to bear on the subsequent reading and analysis of the content we present. Finally, we were limited by the availability of, and access to, existing archival records and those that were able to be translated into English.

A gatekeeper recruited five participants who had longstanding involvement in the Kosovo professional and national basketball communities as assistant coaches, head coaches and/or general managers. Two were senior coaches from the wider Balkans with careers spanning

over several decades were able to speak about experiences across the region, and offered perspectives on broader historical and socio-political trajectories and realities they witnessed through the sport. These perspectives were complimented by three others who were coaches and/or in general managers in the sport, have lived and worked in basketball through the 1990s, understand the contemporary organisational challenges, and are driving the development of the national federation in the present.

As widely recognised in and beyond sport research (e.g. Smith and Sparkes 2016), interviews offered an appropriate means to interrogate perceptions of working conditions. Interviews were in the English language, 90 min in duration, recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview schedule focused on the participant's role within men's professional basketball in Kosovo, the memories of key periods in the nation's sporting histories, and the wider socio-cultural and political forces and changes within the region over the latter period of the 20th and early 21st centuries. The deductive analysis focused on several pertinent themes relating to organisational sustainability: resilience, survivability, and thriving. While we acknowledge other interpretations were possible, these ideas afforded ways of evaluating the historicising within the literature and conceptualising individual narratives of the region's past, interpretations of the present, professional career difficulties, and moments of individual agency and identity politics.

In our approach we acknowledge two intertwining subjectivities. First, that prevailing research perspectives have tended toward Westernised and hegemonic accounts of these events in which there is consensus over respective geopolitical positions, acts, and responses. For example, substantive inequities between Kosovo and Serbia's respective political power, capacities, and influence. Second, we accept that our stance commences as English-speaking researchers from Western backgrounds, but our interpretations have been significantly informed and enriched by long-term professional and personal engagements within the region (Purdy, Kohe and Paulauskas 2019; Purdy, Kohe and Paulauskas 2023). The research methods collectively contributed to the recovery of memories deemed important for these individuals. Subsequently, we share a critical dialogue about the past and what participants reflected that it meant to their lives and current working conditions.

Discussion

This section draws out key features of FBKs' efforts to ensure its continuity during conflict. Here, it emerges that organisational sustainability was predicated on members' resilience and capacity to endure the uncertainty of the geopolitical situation and maintain their sport engagement as best as possible. From this, we examine how resilience developed into mechanisms of survivability in the immediate and longer-term post-conflict environment as the FBK sought regional and international recognition. Further on, we consider how survivability transformed into thriving as the FBK achieved consolidation, rebuilt resources and established new institutional structures and employment opportunities in sport. Yet the FBK's progress is fragile. As scholars note, sustainability is a process not an end point (nor necessarily linear) (Purdy, Kohe and Paulauskas 2023; Lindsey 2008; Teare and Taks 2021). For Kosovo, unresolved/unresolvable questions continue that relate to its individual identity and participation, and development of the nation's sporting organisations. These concerns contribute to wider tensions about what ways sport is developed, whose priorities and interests are served in development processes, and who 'benefited/s' in the immediate and long-term.

Efforts, and challenges, to organisational and individual survivability

As a commencement point, the degradation of capital investment in Kosovar sport, and the exclusion of Kosovar athletes reached a climax during the war years (1998–99) in which the regional geopolitical disruption dominated people's lives. Over time, the situation became problematic for Kosovar citizens who were 'violently excluded from using professional sport facilities' (Kabashi 2011: 14). As one coach recalled, 'Under occupation, sports were in very, very bad condition, [we were] very limited what [we could] do...' Another coach remembered, 'It was when the world was heavy, when the world was really very heavy, you could not even practice, because the cities were under siege the whole time.' There was also growing awareness of the event's more complex influence upon sustaining regular work practices. As a third coach reflected upon the conflict:

[Just before] the war started...Coach...invited all his players into the office..... He ha[d] Bosnia[n] players-Muslim, he had Croat-Catholic, he had Serb-Orthodox players, and Montenegrin-Orthodox players..... and Coach told ... the players ... 'war is going to happen [and] to prepare, do not try to take arms, weapons and go to fight.... To whom you are going to shoot, friend to a friend?' And after three days he was fired because he said that...You cannot find anyone that was [a] basketball player or coach who took part in atrocities, doing murder, doing savage things. And even though during the war, the telephone lines were sometimes broken... but still somehow, we kept the communication going.... Since in [neighbouring country] there was no direct fighting, [one] Coach invited his friends from the places where the war was going on... to his home, to find refuge.

The interpretations these coaches had of their situation were demonstrative of the interplay, and interdependencies, between resilience and survivability, and the need to develop strategies to exist through the realities at the time. To note, during the period of war (1998 to 1999), Kosovars were banned from sports facilities and competitions, and both the basketball league and participation in international matches (including friendlies) were officially halted (Kabashi 2011). Thus survivability comprised, in this instance, of ceasing participation and dissuading direct engagement in the conflict. Consistent with Purdy, Kohe, and Paulauskas (2023), who highlighted how sports employees moved/operated within geopolitical conflict, the coaches above responded to contextual uncertainties by mobilising their networks to ensure their survival.

Within the post-conflict reconstruction phase, regional priorities were placed on basic renovations to damaged facilities (Kabashi 2011; La Cava, Lytle and Kolev 2006; La Cava et al. 2006). As experienced across the region, the paucity of physical culture investment impacted physical education, recreation, and professional sport (Begović 2021). Here, international and development aid agencies (primarily by 'the Global North') provided resourcing and organisational governance (Alaj, Arifi, and Metaj 2018; Giulianotti et al. 2017; Krasniqi & Krasniqi 2019). For example: Play International, Open Fun Football Schools, Laureaus, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the EU Commission. In some sports, for example basketball, renovation provided means to enable participation and commencement of domestic competitions. As the post-conflict space has been a site for pursuing soft-diplomacy (Brentin and Tregoures 2016; Gauthier 2019), concomitantly it has been a landscape to craft more robust, better resourced, and connected organisations, systems and processes. Aligning with sustainability debates (Lindsey 2008; Shipway, Miles, and Gordon 2020), at this time, the emphasis within the FBK's organisational practices was

balanced between ensuring continuity through challenging times, developing collective resilience to external forces, *and* capacity building toward thriving (e.g. growing financial reserves, corporate partnerships, and memberships) (Moldavanova and Goerdel 2018; Totoro 2017). Yet, for other sports there was a patchwork approach to investments, resourcing remained unequal across sport organisations, and the situation was compounded by a lack of clear State and sport sector oversight and strategic planning (Kabashi 2011).

To this above end, Kosovo's ambition was to engage with the wider sporting community and gain legitimacy for the country's sovereignty through recognition by, and membership in, international institutions. Some Kosovars, initially representing Serbia or associated recognised nation-states, were initially able to maintain an assemblance of a professional sporting career and achieved regional and international success. As one basketball coach noted, such successes mattered given that before IOC recognition, 'no one knew that we existed because [our nation] was not recognised and then you cannot go outside [the country] to play...'. As some Kosovar boxers have experienced recently (Cerkini 2021), questions of nationality remain an impediment to international participation.

The inaccessibility of international competition had implications beyond the game and extended to those who were unable to access international sport structures and systems outside of personal networks. For example, a basketball coach noted: '[To stay current] you need to engage in official training and coaching seminars organised by FIBA held in Europe, in Spain, or France... but these were not open to us. And it's a big penalty for athletes in this country'. The point here is not that there were limited opportunities for international mobility for athletes and coaches (as noted earlier, some players were able to access playing, training and development locations outside of Kosovo). Rather, the reflections speak to beliefs individuals felt about the existing barriers to their mobility (and with that, their possibilities for progression in the sport). To note, whereas EU sport professionals that have formally recognised national organisations can access regional sport assistance, networks and resources (e.g. EU athletes support, training development and mobility opportunities, etc.), such resources and engagements are difficult, though not necessarily impossible for Kosovar athletes to secure. While individuals could, rightly, travel abroad to some destinations, Kosovars faced additional difficulties with respect to visa and passport restrictions, travel bans, political sanctions and costs. Furthermore, with Kosovo not recognised by FIBA, individuals were not able to participate in FIBA-endorsed events.

For those working in sport, access to professional development and the ability to feel valued within, and contribute to, a wider community in their sport is necessary for individuals to maintain their credentials (e.g. coach and refereeing qualifications), knowledge and skills, current practices/regulations, and networks. Illustrating an interdependence between survivability and thriving, some individuals possessed the agency and means to engage with professional development opportunities, including attendance at sports-specific conferences, involvement in coaching exchanges, and trans-regional training events. Such mechanisms afforded means to establish key personal connections that aided further career progression and regional mobility. For example, one basketball coach stated:

I met [another coach] at a European competition in Croatia. And I made a connection with him. And then he helped me because he was working in a [NCAA programme], he knew the coaches, and those coaches invited me [to spend time there].

This mobility mattered to Kosovars who could not rely on the country's established sporting reputation and the reflected kudos that may come from working in the upper echelons of a nation's sporting system. Other coaches commented on the importance of spectating at international tournaments as a form of professional development. One noted, 'I went to the European competition... I went to watch everything on my own. I was curious to see [what was happening in] Europe, how the young players were playing'. Another coach commented, 'I wanted to develop... and I had to invest my own money, my parent's money. I had to invest in myself in getting more knowledge, more skills'.

Additionally, Kosovar players used their agency, networks, and professional nous to seek opportunities and forge career trajectories. In Kosovo, some players went to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) system in the United States and others represented nations at the international level where possible (e.g. North Macedonia, Turkey, Finland, Serbia, Germany, Slovenia). In the NCAA, Kosovo-born players included: Arian Maliqi ((Delta State), Muhamed Hasani (Rutgers), and Agim Hamiti (Utica). Although this political and bureaucratic situation may have been unique to Kosovo, similar agency and decision-making have also been evidenced with professionals navigating crises, challenging external forces, and developing resilience and thriving in other sport employment settings (e.g. Purdy, Kohe and Paulauskas 2023; Byers et al. 2022; Teare and Taks 2021).

Establishing structural foundations for longer-term sustainability

As part of Yugoslavia basketball, Kosovo shared a strong tradition, with significant performances recorded at regional, international and Olympic tournaments in the post-World War Two era. To rehearse, in 1991, the FBK declared its independence from Yugoslavia's political and sports systems. While transnational competitions were successfully held between 1991-1997, all participation ceased during the period of war (1998 to 1999). Post-conflict, the FBK capitalised on sporting enthusiasm by creating an elite league that started in late-October 1999 in Pristina (Federata e Basketbollit të Kosovës 2023). Ultimately, the league faltered after just one season with teams unable to participate in international/regional competitions.

Although there was momentum for the restoration of sport among national entities, and efforts of international organisations and NGOs to assist, the pathway to FBK's eventual full sporting independence was an arduous process borne out over two decades. The efforts of individuals to resource and advance their professional careers during this time, to note, were intertwined with the larger progress needed for Kosovo's national sport bodies' international recognition. However, advances were stymied by continued bureaucratisation that inhibited state agendas and contributed to developments still being shaped along ethnic lines (Begović 2021; Brentin and Tregoures 2016). As examined next, Kosovo sport protagonists continued to go about their routines in hope of a shift in public and political opinion, and an enduring change in the status and legitimacy of its sport organisations.

At the organisation level, sporadic delegation visits between Kosovo and FIBA before 2008 were positive moves to enable the country's independent progress in the sport. Yet, the nation's progress remained constrained by Serbian actions. As is well noted (Alaj, Arifi, and Metaj 2018; Kabashi 2011; Krasniqi & Krasniqi 2019) there is extensive and substantive spill-over of political intervention and dominance of Serbia into Kosovo's sport organisational and infrastructural landscapes and networks. This includes the continued tenures of

prominent dignitaries within the region's key sport organisations who were not only figureheads within the country's sport administration, but known allies within Milošević's networks; some of who remained serving in the post-conflict era.³ Notwithstanding the tensions, by 2008, when Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia, rapport had been established among national and regional sport officials within various federations and confederations. This new optimistic climate, and spirit of understanding many parties respectively held, invariably provided affable conditions for further strengthening transnational relations.

In basketball, incremental gains were being made to widen its regional profile. Prior to this, for example, in the 2013/2014 season, Kosovo was granted access to the Balkan League (involving Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, and Israel). Other marginal gains in participation were also made. In 2013, for example, FIBA recognised Kosovar Streetball, the innovative 3 × 3 version of the game, popularised by youth and among the grassroots of the sport (Federata e Basketbollit të Kosovës 2023).

After significant lobbying activity and continued antagonism from Serbia, who still sought to deny Kosovo its legitimacy contrary to shifting international opinion (Gauthier 2019), Kosovo was granted full recognition by the IOC in December 2014. While the consequences of independent IOC membership were positive in many respects (e.g. access to funding and support for sport development, inclusion in international events, etc.), the changes provided conditions for other International Federations to follow. For example, in March 2015, the FBK became an official member of FIBA World (becoming the organisation's 215th member) and in May 2015 were granted access to FIBA Europe.

Trajectories for thriving: playing ball post-independence

Post-FIBA recognition, Pristina was the first team in Kosovo to participate in the FIBA Europe Cup. Not unlike the routine vernacular employed by international sport organisations promoting the power of soft diplomacy (Brentin and Tregoures 2016; Giulianotti et al. 2017), the moment contributed, in part, to narratives about the roles of sport within the nation's geopolitical progress. Moreover, explanations of Kosovo's achievements were couched in historical tropes of a long, arduous, and collective triumph over adversity and perceived as a 'righting' of enduring injustice. Within this rewriting, there was an evident effort to simultaneously acknowledge the country's sporting past and develop a new empowering legacy.

Admission to FIBA enables Kosovo international representation after a quarter of a century of isolation and opens up opportunities for the development of basketball that Kosovo has never had. This generation of basketball players and this leader of FBK bear the burden of 70 years of basketball in Kosovo and the denied desires for 24 long years in isolation. At this stage, great work and teamwork is needed from all those involved in Kosovo basketball. However, such cases are those when the contribution and work of past generations should be remembered, when all their work should be thanked and when great work should be promised from now on (Federata e Basketbollit të Kosovës 2023).

For the FBK, recognition brought opportunities to thrive that included access to funding (e.g. from FIBA and/or EU sport agencies), assistance to build systems and structures related to talent identification and development and establishing connections to the regional and global basketball 'family'. Foremost within this advancement were efforts to send

high-profile teams to Kosovo to simultaneously provide players with opportunities for high-quality competition, draw attention to talent within the region (e.g. Lithuanian men in the 2017 Eurobasket qualifiers), and promote the sport domestically and further afield. In addition, a wider range of Kosovo age group basketball teams were able to participate in international competitions. Such activities contributed to a positive climate for the sport and provided broader career horizons (e.g. opening a talent pathway) for sports workers, and have created a base for the league to continue to flourish over the subsequent seasons.

In terms of the national structure, there is a programme of male and female representative teams at the senior, U18, U16, U14, and U12 (Federata e Basketbollit të Kosovës 2023). Alongside national squads, Kosovo's professional structure includes nine teams in the Men's Super League, nine teams in the First League, ten teams in the Second League, as well as six teams in the Women's Super League, and six teams in the First League of Women. In the 2019-2020 season, for the first time, Mabetex Prishtina participated in the FIBA Euro Cup Women groups. Further domestic investments were made in 2021 with the establishment of a national centre dedicated to the development of young male players (at present, 16 players aged 13-14) with the aim to include young female players in 2022 (Federata e Basketbollit të Kosovës 2023). The centre is a hub for talent development, offering vigorous training and playing schedules, and serves as a provider to continually rejuvenate and fortify the country's club system. As promoted on FBK's website, the project aims to centralise the potential talent in the sport and provide continued investment into the sport's future and Kosovo's international representation and participation (Federata e Basketbollit të Kosovës 2023).

By having players return to aid their home clubs, the national centre also contributes in part to sustaining a dynamic grassroots basketball network, and with that, subsequent opportunities for local coaching, administration, volunteering, and community outreach. These systems and structures are already well-evidenced in the European sports landscape and may not seem profound. Yet, what is significant is the intensity of the (re)building (to recall, it has been approximately 15 years since the recognition of independence). Whereas historically Kosovo had a vibrant basketball culture, and residues of the sport remained in the post-conflict period, of interest is the breadth and depth of investment in resurrecting infrastructure, governance, and process over a relatively short time.

Conclusion

Beyond illustrating how national sporting organisations navigate conflict and post-conflict spaces, the recent path Kosovo basketball has taken demonstrates some of the complexities of developing and maintaining sustainable sport organisations in the contemporary global sport space. In the first instance, we see ways the country's use of sport/basketball contributed to the wider processes of nation-building and organisational resilience that aided Kosovo's independence. It is evident that high-level political negotiations and advocacy has been advantageous in enabling and continuing Kosovo's participation in several international and sporting spaces. Yet, steps in the country's progression remain (e.g. EU and UN membership). Further to macro-level pursuits of sustainability, attention has also been afforded to practices and processes at the community and individual levels of basketball. This includes FBK's efforts to ensure the immediate focus on performative and training aspects of the sport is prioritised, longer-term and broader efforts that augment infrastructure with welfare provision (e.g. education and dual career support, mental health/wellbeing

resources, financial and career planning advice, etc.) are resourced. Such initiatives also build upon existing sport-for-development and sport development ventures in Kosovo sport more generally undertaken under the auspices of the European Union, United Nations and NGOs. The process for the FBK to get to this point is also useful for understanding how sports organisations may exhibit adaptability, resilience, strategic development, crisis management, and savvy decision-making in light of adversities and uncertainties.

This analysis of FBK's progress opens new directions for interrogating the development of a specific sport organisation within a particular geopolitical space, and what might be meaningful to the continuity and success of workers' experiences therein. Such interrogation may translate to examining other sport spaces where organisational legitimacy is challenged (e.g. Taiwan Chinese Taipei, China), the integrity of sport labour is contested (e.g. the IOC refugee team, 'independent' athletes), and/or geopolitics curtail global sporting affairs. As such, greater scholarly attention needs to remain on examining the conceptualisation of sustainability within sport, and the varied consequences the pursuit of sustainability can have across the sport sector. However, as organisational sustainability and sport scholars remind us (Moldavanova and Goerdel 2018), sustainability is a process, not an endpoint, and necessitates continued simultaneous navigation of the geopolitical landscape, careful resource management and investment, and capacity building (e.g. strengthening the sport's communities, and building and fortifying stakeholder relationships within and across sectors).

Historically, a common trope is to portray sports organisations as being on a linear trajectory of development, progress, and improvement. Which, largely, it may be. Yet, as in the case of Kosovo and the FBK, enduring and contemporary forces and events intertwine to produce distinct contexts that bring about destabilisation, heightened uncertainty, destruction, or disruption of processes (e.g. normalcy), and rebuilding that does not necessarily future-proof sport or sport federations well. Reflective of sustainability observations of the sport sector and elsewhere (Lindsey 2008; Moulaert et al. 2013; Vaiou and Kalandides 2017), the actions described in this paper attest to a nuanced interplay and interaction between individual agency (e.g. personal connection and political relationships being advanced) and the formal organisational efforts and decision-making that contributes to, and may be necessary for, sustainable practices to come to fruition. While FBK may continue their international participation, border and sovereignty disputes within the region mean the preservation and security afforded by 'independence' remains contingent upon continued pressure for UN, EU, and/or NATO membership or concession (AP news wire 2022).

Notes

1. For example, as part of a complicated territorial strategy exacerbated by protests by Kosovo Serbs over municipal roadblocks in North Kosovo. NATO was called upon to support the deployment of troops to defend Serbian sovereignty in the region (Klllokoqi and Semini 2022).
2. Hasani was one of the most notable individuals committed to lobbying for Kosovo's sporting future. As inaugural president of Kosovo's 'National' Olympic Committee (KOC), since 1992, Hasani engaged in a personal mission to lobby internationally for Kosovo's autonomous Olympic participation.
3. Key individuals included, Slobodan Filipović, IOC member (1987-1995), President Ivan Ćirković, Serbian Football Association President and Serbian Olympic Committee, and, within basketball, Borislav Stanković, who served as FIBA Secretary General (1976-2002) and IOC member (1988-2005).

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