

Examining Bulgaria's Current Lack of Performance at Elite Sport Level

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Abstract

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In the past few decades, professional sport in Bulgaria has been experiencing difficulties in performing well at an elite level. The country fails to live up to the standard that was established prior to the political changes in 1989. However, little to no research has been done, in order to examine the reasons behind this lack of performance by Bulgarian athletes and teams. Therefore, the goal of this study is to focus on the issues that might hinder the development of professional athletes and their performance. The research uses De Bosscher's SPLISS model which is a conceptual framework whose goal is to analyze sport policy factors leading to international success.

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative phenomenological research method was applied. 8 semi-structured interviews were conducted with people in Bulgaria who are directly involved in the development of sport in the country and are aware of the ongoing problems that teams and athletes face. Those people include physical education teachers (3), youth academy coaches (3) and youth academy players (2). As part of the research, they were asked various questions in relation to the SPLISS model's content.

Following the structure of the SPLISS model it became evident that Bulgarian sport is falling behind in its development which is caused by a lack of sufficient funding, sport policies and regulation which do not facilitate the progress of young talent and teams in the country. There are also numerous factors in play in terms of sport as a priority among people. According to the participants, there is also a certain level of distrust in the current system, caused by the inept efforts of the state to support athletes during and after their careers. The absence of an established talent identification system is also a problem that needs to be addressed in order for Bulgarian sport to overcome its struggles.

Recommendations for further research are also pointed out at the end of this master thesis. That includes a quantitative approach instead of qualitative one, which would reach a larger field of participants delivering more detailed data.

KEY WORDS: SPLISS model, elite sport, Bulgaria, sport, factors

Table of contents

1. INTRODUCTION	3
2. THE SPLISS MODEL	5
3. REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA: GENERAL INFORMATION	8
4. SPORT, POLITCS AND SOCIETY IN BULGARIA	10
4.1 Financial support for sports within EU and Bulgaria (pillar 1)	13
4.2 Sport policies in Bulgaria and Europe (pillar 2)	14
4.3 Talent development, sport and the youth. Sport in the educational institutions in Bulgaria (Pillar 4) 17	
5. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS	21
5.1 Research method and questions	21
5.2 Interviewees.....	23
5.3 Data analysis.....	25
6 RESULTS	27
6.1 Financial support by state	27
6.1.1 Lack of financial support	28
6.2 Sport policies in Bulgaria and their effectiveness	30
6.3 Relation between educational system and sport, position of sport in schools	33
6.4 Talent development, talent identification system and sport as a career in Bulgaria	37
7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	45

1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern day era sport has become part of the culture and daily life of millions of people around the globe. The positive effects of physical activity have been proven multiple times and since then society and governments have invested a lot in order to make it accessible to everyone, everywhere. Green (2004) states that sport is by definition perceived as a “good” thing and very few possibilities to think otherwise exist in society.

Elite sport on the other hand has been turned into a business tool that generates millions in revenue thus having a tremendous influence on the lives of ordinary people. Fischer (2003) claims that elite sport nowadays provides an abundance of storylines that people enjoy following and that the elite sport success makes a powerful impact on the public. According to Garmichael and Grix (2012), the high investments that governments make in order to increase their countries’ medal winning percentage do not need any additional justification since the processes that happen in the elite sport circle appear to be self-evident.

The goal of this master’s thesis is to examine the reasons behind Bulgaria’s lack of performance at elite sport level that has been present ever since the political changes in 1989. These issues resonate in a lack of performance at elite and professional levels garnered with decline in medals won at Olympic Games and other international competitions and championships regardless of type of sport. Prior to the fall of communism Bulgaria enjoys a relatively successful period in sports, finishing in the top 10 medal winning countries between the 1970 and 1988 Olympic Games. The reasons pointed out for these shortcomings are the reduced physical activity of the population which subsequently leads to less sport talent across the nation as well as the alienation of state and government from sport relations and funding which stems from economic difficulties Bulgaria has been experiencing for the past two decades.

One of the purposes of this thesis is to examine the social, political and economic factors responsible for the downswing Bulgarian sport is experiencing since the political changes in 1989. The SPLISS model is used in order to receive a clear view of where the Bulgarian elite sport currently stands, what problems are found within its core and what its future is. In addition to the SPLISS model, this paper gathers the opinions of people who are directly

involved and have executive functions in the field of sport (physical education teachers, youth academy coaches and youth academy players) and see matters and issues through their own point of view. Accordingly, the two research questions that this master thesis revolves around are “What are the reasons behind Bulgaria’s current lack of performance at elite sport level?” and “How people involved at grass-root sport level in Bulgaria see the current status of elite sport?”.

2. THE SPLISS MODEL

There are multiple ways and methods in existence, which serve to measure the sporting success of teams, nations and individuals. A recent one is the Sport Policy Factors Leading to International Sporting Success method (SPLISS) introduced and developed by de Bosscher, de Knop, van Bottenburg, and Shibli in 2006. It measures the organizational effectiveness of a nation in order to enhance its athletes' fruitful career paths. In 2006, de Bosscher et al. presented this comprehensive model that underlines the major factors for successful sport policies at international and elite level. The model revolves around 9 pillars (see figure 1) of policy determinants that are considered essential to international sporting success.

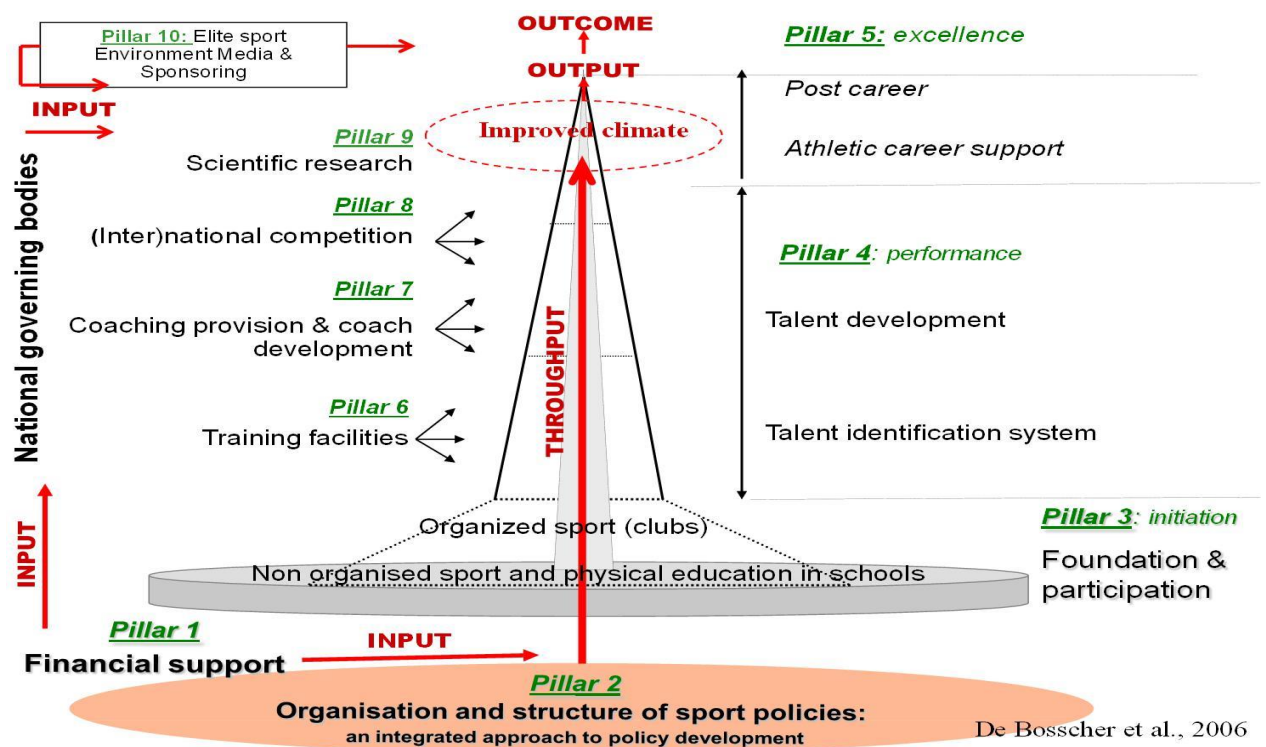


Figure 1. The nine pillars of sport policy factors influencing international success (De Bosscher et al., 2006)

Each pillar is described by the so called Critical Success Factors (CSFs). Although, as stated above, there are various factors that play role in the designation of sport success, the nine-pillar model implies that 4 out of those 9 pillars – coach development, training facilities, financial resources and athletic and post-career support – are the most influential when it

comes to an effective sport system. That is solely based on the countries that fall under the SPLISS method (De Bosscher, De Knop, Van Bottenburg, Shibli, & Bingham 2009). As of 2016 fifteen countries use the SPLISS method as their pattern for high performance sport policy research. Those countries are as follows: Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, France, Finland, Japan, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Portugal, South Korea, Spain and Switzerland. In those countries a consistent model and clear structure of each of the 9 pillars is present.

An in-depth look into the scale shows that pillar 1 is related to the financial aspects and human resources of a nation and its involvement in sport. Logically, countries that invest more in professional and elite sport provide a better number of opportunities for its athletes in order for them to train and improve. Pillar 2 describes the sport policy a country has chosen to adopt and its interactions with athletes from different federations. The introduction of an athlete to a particular sport is what pillar 3 represents. It may be argued that talented athletes and scouting talent in general is of utmost importance for the successful sport future of a nation. Various development and intensive training programs are being viewed in both pillars 4 and 5. In order for an athlete to reach top performance level a certain amount of incentives should be provided. Such as career and post career support. According to the SPLISS model, ability to provide comfort during an athlete's active career and post his/her retirement increases the chances for success immensely. This pyramid model serves as a filter which a large number of athletes go through in order for a proper selection to be present. That type of filtering is particularly observed in pillars 3, 4 and 5. The remaining 4 pillars are not less important to the development of athletes than the rest. Pillar 6 examines the infrastructure, pillar 7 the coach development, pillar 8 taking part of athletes in various competitions and championships and last but not least pillar 9 deals with research in the field of sport science and medicine.

In their examination of SPLISS data of different countries, De Bosscher and van Bottenburg conclude that meeting certain criteria in the pillars does not necessarily guarantee success at elite sport level. An example of that is sport participation in the model (pillar 3). According to the authors there is virtually no relationship between how well sport participation is in a given country and its results at the 2004 and 2008 Olympics. However, De Bosscher and van

Bottenburg acknowledge the fact that there is a significant shortage of data to help them thoroughly analyze the impact of sport participation (pillar 3) on performance of professional teams and athletes at elite level. Therefore, they note that despite all, it might still be “an influence on success”.

Application of the SPLISS model in the case of Bulgaria

Bulgaria is currently not part of the SPLISS project. Although it is absent, the SPLISS model could be used as a tool to describe the present state and issues of sport in Bulgaria. For the purposes of this study, pillars 1-9 could be utilized in order to provide a clear vision and picture of what the setbacks and obstacles have been in terms of organization, success, policies etc. in sport in Bulgaria. The SPLISS model and the 9 pillars in particular could be utilized in order for this study to give a clear evaluation of the issues that currently exist in sport in Bulgaria. Using the SPLISS model as a tool provides also a certain level of credibility to the end result of the study. This study focuses on as many as five pillars from the SPLISS model due to time and resource limitations. The five pillars present in the paper are as they follow:

- Pillar 1 - Financial support
- Pillar 2 - Organization and structure of sport policies
- Pillar 4 - Performance:
 - talent development
 - talent identification system
- Pillar 5 - Excellence:
 - post career
 - athletic support
- Pillar 6 - Training facilities

3. REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA: GENERAL INFORMATION

Republic of Bulgaria is located in southeastern Europe on the Balkan Peninsula. It has population of slightly over 7 million inhabitants which ranks it 104th in the world and with its 110,994 km² it is the 105th largest country in the world. Approximately 74% of Bulgaria's population is urban (Worldometer, 2017). The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Bulgaria is \$48.95 billion dollars and the GDP per capita is \$6820, which is the lowest among the countries members of the European Union (World Bank, 2017). Bulgaria is a predominantly Christian Orthodox with 59.4%, followed by 27.4% of unspecified and 7.8% Muslim (CIA Factbook).

The liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule in 1878 and the followed independence in 1908 mark a new era in the history of Bulgaria. The country establishes itself as a nation on the European continent with strong economy, industry and military. Shortly after becoming independent, Bulgaria is involved in three military conflicts in a row – two Balkan Wars and World War I, taking significant toll on territory, population and economy. This results in the formation of a royal authoritarian dictatorship led by Tsar Boris III in the years 1918-1943. Bulgaria finds itself on the losing end of World War II which leads to major political changes in the country – abolition of monarchic rule, replaced by communist one-party people's republic. This regime lasts for 45 years, a period in which Bulgaria experiences a significant raise in standard of living and by the 1980s both national and per capita GDPs increase 4 times (istoria.bg, 2017).

The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9th 1989 marks the end of the Cold War and just a day later the Communist Party in Bulgaria is forced to resign. In 1990, Bulgaria holds its first democratic elections as this marks the beginning of the modern history of the nation. However, the transition from plan economy to market economy proves to be a difficult one and is marked by great economic hardship as standard of living of Bulgarians deteriorates rapidly through the 1990s. As a main reason for that is the rampant corruption that spreads through all levels of government which causes conditions for organized crime to thrive and expand (Bezlov & Tzenkov, 2007). In 2017, 10 years after joining the European Union, Bulgaria is the most corrupt country among the member-states despite the efforts of the

Bulgarian government to fight it and putting it on top of its agenda. A survey among Bulgarians shows that 76% of people do not trust the political parties due to corruption concerns and 86% believe that the justice system is corrupt. In 2016, Bulgaria ranks the 75th most corrupt out of 176 countries (Transparency International, 2016).

4. SPORT, POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN BULGARIA

The aim of this section is to trace the evolution of sport in Bulgaria and how the idea of sport has been perceived through the years. The chapter focuses predominantly on factors that have both helped and hurt the performance of Bulgaria athletes and teams at an elite sport level. It also juxtaposes in a mild way the two political systems that Bulgarian sport had to operate in – the one during the Soviet-influenced era prior to 1989 and the other one is the democratic system of governance after the changes in that year. Performance of Bulgarian athletes and teams at Olympic level is being used as evidence of the apparent downswing that Bulgarian sport has been experiencing in the past two decades. Later on in the chapter, there are discussions about the importance of financial support in sports and in what state that financial support is in both within the European Union and in Bulgaria. Sport policies and their effectiveness are also being under discussion along with the concepts of talent development and talent identification system in Bulgaria.

According to Howell (1975), the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) appeared to be the first nation in modern day era to utilize the political importance of sport to a maximum degree. Although the USSR was welcome to participate at the 1948 London Olympics a decision was made to not take part in any of the events. However, soviet observers were sent and 4 years later, at the Olympic Games in Helsinki, the USSR entered the competition. This is described as a turning point in the history of the Olympics, marked by considerable changes in the way sport was viewed (Howell, 1975). This newly formed approach was trailblazed by the countries from the Soviet Bloc in which the USSR was the major leader and has openly showed the world that sport could very much be used as a political tool.

As a former socialist state, part of the Soviet Bloc, sport has always been an essential ingredient to the lifestyle of Bulgarians too. The significance of sport was permanently present on the agenda of the ruling party. A testimony for that is the USSR's own version of the Olympics – the so-called *spartakiads* launched in the 1920s that quickly spread to all other socialist nations (Girginov, 2004). The goal of those *spartakiads* was to promote physical activity, praise the socialist concept of equality and build a culture of athletes to represent the Marxism-Leninism ideas for the rest of the world. Unlike the Olympic Games,

spartakiads were held not only in big cities but also annually in small towns and rural areas. This could be seen as a clear evidence of the efforts of the state to reach all citizens and keep the masses' attention away from politics. According to Girginov's observations (2004) athletes during this time were not viewed as individuals on their own but rather as a typical feature of the "communist stubbornness" accompanied by diligence and hard work – a focal point in the Communist's doctrine.

As the political elite in Bulgaria strictly followed the USSR's model of governance, sport underwent significant improvement. Although everything in this field was done to serve the political agenda of the ruling party, society grew an immense interest towards sports, competition and physical activity. The idea of sport excellence consolidated both amateurs and elite athletes. In the era of an ideological warfare with the West, winning medals on the international sport stage became a top priority. It can be concluded that this was the global trend at the time on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Frey (1984) and Riordan (1986) state that the only difference between the United States and the socialist republics is that the United States is reluctant to admit that its efforts in winning on the international state are serious. As a result of this stern policy Bulgaria manages to make a name for itself at the international stage finishing in top 10 of the medal winning countries at three consecutive Olympiads between the years 1972 and 1980. During that period Bulgaria became a formidable force, especially in weightlifting and wrestling by winning a combine total of 45 medals (Olympic.org). The above data supports that the sport governing system prior to the fall of communism in Bulgaria was efficient and productive at international and elite level.

In 1989, Bulgaria underwent some major political changes abandoning the communist way of rule and orienting itself towards a democratic method of governance. Baytchinska (1997) and Dainov et al. (1997) describe this as a crucial process that influenced virtually all spheres of society and sport was no exception. According to them, this transition gave birth to a specific culture on its own. The abundance of new ideas and their mixture with old ones left sport governing and management in Bulgaria in a state of disarray. In the years after 1989, multiple private sport organization emerged whose goals and structure of management were unclear which subsequently lead to the creation of a chaotic and unhealthy environment to develop and utilize sport talent. Harvey and Houle (1994) called into question those newly

formed social movements and went on further to say that they do not have the capacity to lead to major reforms of sport.

Until 1992, the National System for Physical Activity and Sport was an open structure, which was financially secured by the state with a significant number of sport specialist and well-maintained sport infrastructure. As a consequence of the new political, economic and social changes this system was forced to exist in a new environment whose typical features were decentralization and decreased funding.

Bulgaria did not have to wait long in order to experience the malevolent effects on sport caused by this sequence of events. At international and Olympic level, a significant drop in performance is observed starting with the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. A table depicting the downswing of Bulgarian sport at Olympic events starting from 1988 is present.

Year and venue	Rank in medal count	Number of competitors sent	Number of sports represented
1988 Seoul	7 th	171	16
1992 Barcelona	18 th	138	19
1996 Atlanta	22 nd	110	17
2000 Sydney*	16 th	91	16
2004 Athens	33 rd	95	15
2008 Beijing	42 nd	76	16
2012 London	63 rd	63	16
2016 Rio de Janeiro**	65 th	51	14

Table 1 showing the progressive decline in performance of Bulgaria at Olympic level since 1988 (Olympic.org)

*At the 2000 Sydney Olympics Bulgaria records its best place in its post communism history.

**At the 2016 Rio Olympics Bulgaria records an all-time low in the 3 categories in the table

4.1 Financial support for sports within EU and Bulgaria (pillar 1)

Financing is undoubtedly crucial for the development of sport. European Union bodies have been trying to improve the conditions in which upcoming athletes train, compete and excel. All that begins with proper funding mechanism with equal distribution of welfare that can reach different levels of sport (.A study on the funding of grassroots sports in the EU launched by the European Commission itself examines the current problems that various clubs and organizations face when it comes to financing. As a major concern, the respondents of the study point out the fact that state funding is shifting its focus from grassroots level towards elite sport. Members of sport federations acknowledge that a large number of public policies fail to recognize the importance of grassroots sport. In addition, if a reduction of public funding occurs that might trigger detrimental effects on participation rates as membership fees would increase and less people with enroll in sport clubs and teams.

European Union bodies who oversee sport funding and development have come up with four types of funding models. Group 1 is known as the northern and western European model, group 2 as the Mediterranean model, group 3 as the rainbow model and group 4 as the BCP model (referring to the initials of the countries in this specific group – Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Poland). Bulgaria, as the country in question in this study, is where a mixture between group 3 and 4 types of funding operates. The rainbow model refers to countries in Europe where sport systems and infrastructure underwent a collapse in the early 1990s. Those are countries predominantly from Central and Eastern Europe (Fenger, 2007). According to the European institutions because of the relatively low average incomes in those countries, there is somewhat limited demand for physical activity and leisure sports. The level of involvement of public sector in this group is low, compared to countries from group one and two (XG FIN, 2012). Experts in the field argue that the countries of group 3 should address issues such as:

- enhancing sport culture by promoting the benefits of sport to the public
- encouraging private sector and households to be more actively involved in the development of sport
- make becoming a volunteer more attractive via the implementation of incentives

- expend the horizons of grassroots clubs by creating new partnerships and alliances

The BCP model of funding resembles the one from group 3 as the countries from this model share similar problems in terms of subsidizing and public expenditure. This particular model of funding is recognizable by the excessively high share of revenue pouring in from state run lotteries and betting services. For example, Bulgarian public authorities outspend households in the field of sport system funding massively which opposite to the methods which countries from group one and two have adopted. According to the report, Bulgaria fails to excel in the following departments:

- build a sport culture within communities and introduce the benefits of sports to its citizens
- make sure that money coming from lotteries, betting and gambling services becomes in fact the main source of income for grassroots sport development and regulate the mechanism through which funds are distributed
- become more actively involved in the search of sponsorships and donations for the development of Bulgarian sport in order to take pressure off the public sector
- introduce sport clubs and organizations to new methods of generating revenue and help them become more adaptable in the fast paced field of sport development

The above stated issues correlate with the very first pillar of the SPLISS model. Bosscher et al. (2006) determine financial support as a critical success factor (CSF). In order for athletes and teams to be productive at elite sport level, a state needs to provide a certain degree of financial security for the people under its care. According to various European studies on sport funding, Bulgaria falls behind in this race for sport development. There is currently a lack of connection between public and private sector, which causes turbulence in the field.

4.2 Sport policies in Bulgaria and Europe (pillar 2)

From historical point of view Europe and sport share a strong mutual bond (Scheerder, Van Tuyckom, Vermeesch, 2007). Europe has been labeled the birthplace of modern sport. As reasons for that, he points out the British public schools in the 18th century, which were the

first to promote physical activity among students. Ancient and modern day Olympics also have their roots on European soil (Renson, 1992). According to the European Commission in 1998, Europe is viewed as the “powerhouse of world sport”. That might be taken as truth considering the number of international sport organization, which have established their headquarters all over Europe - FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) has its in Zurich, IOC (International Olympic Committee) in Lausanne, IAAF (International Association of Athletics Federation) in Monaco. European countries have played a crucial role in the development and organization of sport. More than half of the FIFA World Cups and Olympic Games have been hosted by European countries throughout the years (Scheerder & Vermeersch, 2007).

“Sport for All” is a concept that has been adopted by the European community since the 1970s. From that moment on, sport policies in Europe were united by the idea that sport is a key component to the fulfillment of the values and ideals of the European Council. Every citizen is entitled to the right to active sport participation (Council of Europe, 2012). As the European Union expanded so did the “European Sport for All Charter”. In January 2007, Bulgaria joined the EU and the Bulgarian population was introduced to the contemporary ideas for sport development, which were foreign to it prior to the admission. A study by van Tuyckom and Scheerder (2008) examines the physical activity in Europe after the expansion in 2007. It analyzes and concentrates on two patterns - the first one is the overall physical activity of citizens and the second one is the social stratification of physical activity among the citizens of the then 27 EU member (study was conducted prior to Croatia’s accession in 2013). Although based on previous Eurobarometer surveys, this particular study of van Tuyckom and Scheerder tries to give an insight based on socio-cultural and economic reasons rather than focusing strictly on numbers. The findings from the study provide some remarkable data from the field of sociology and how sport participation behavior is distributed among citizens. According to the data, it is heavily geographically stratified. Some obvious differences are observed between North and West European countries on one end and South and East European countries on the other. The general pattern is that the rates of sport participation decline moving from north to south and from west to east.

As a country from Eastern Europe, Bulgaria falls into the category of countries with declining physical activity participation. The case with Bulgaria is particularly challenging where 78% of citizens never play sport although on average 63% of European citizens engage in some form of physical activity (Eurobarometer, 2013). In this regard, the information from these geographical models might call into question the credibility and efficiency of the “Sport for All” program that has been operating within the European community for almost half a century. Nordic countries increase their physical activity participation rate by the year whereas countries like Bulgaria struggle with the promotion of active lifestyle and health, hence the deteriorating percentages and numbers in that field.

All of the abovementioned issues fall under the second pillar of the SPLISS model, which examines the sport policies of a country and the way they are organized and structured. Apparently, in the case of Bulgaria, organization, structure and development of sport policies differs from the standard that has been set in the past years in Europe. This differentiation brings detrimental consequences to the sport environment, health promotion and active lifestyle in Bulgaria. Subsequently, this leads to reduced performance at international level by Bulgarian athletes and teams. Compared to the capitalistic state, when Bulgaria had the opportunity to choose and follow its own sport policies, the current sport system is not engaged with mass participation and the negative results are evident.

Bulgaria has adopted several other sport policies since the admission of the country to the European Union. One of them includes the “National Program for the Development of Physical Education and Sports 2013-2016”, launched by the Council of Ministers in 2013 whose purpose is to analyze and reconsider the role of different bodies in the national sport system and to focus also on sports infrastructure. The program has a vision to create and develop a functioning system that promotes and encourages physical activity and healthy lifestyle in Bulgaria.

4.3 Talent development, sport and youth. Sport in the educational institutions in Bulgaria (Pillar 4)

Physical activity and sports are essential to the upbringing of children and youth.

Participating in sports is crucial for the future of an individual. Studies in which children and adolescents point a bevy of social and beneficial reasons for taking part in physical activities have been conducted. Those include consolidating friendships, sense of belonging, making new friends and satisfaction from receiving praise and approval from coaches, teammates and parents (Weiss and Amorose, 2008).

Schools, similar to the family surroundings, play an important role when it comes to promotion of physical activity and healthy lifestyle of the youth. It is known that when entering adolescence, physical activity of youth declines along with age (Dumith et al., 2001). This coincides with the time when children move from primary to secondary school and that period is the time to prevent or at least slow down this decline (Cale and Harris, 2006). As this link weakens, it is both responsibility of school and parents to intervene in this process.

Ever since the admission of Bulgaria to the European Union in 2007, sport at schools has been closely monitored and regulated. In 2011, the Bulgarian National Assembly adopted a “Strategy for Development of Physical Education and Sport in the Republic of Bulgaria”. Its aim is to set a steady standard for the role and social functions physical education and sport have in society. The strategy acknowledges the existence of major problems in the current educational system and calls for urgent changes in the field. Raising awareness among young people about the importance of staying physically active, bringing school curricula up to date and increasing the investments in school-based sport activities are also goals that the strategy has set to work on.

Sport in schools

In a study of his, Tzvetkov (2014) states that the current state of physical education in Bulgarian schools does not meet the European criteria for high quality education. Through the conduction of multiple surveys and interviews with various representatives of school personnel (physical education teachers, managerial staff etc.), he attempts to discover to what extent the physical education teachers and specialists are involved in the problem. In the

conducted interviews, various solutions and possible measures in order to improve the current environment are discussed and proposed.

According to the participants in the study an underlying problem in the current educational system is the fact that a large number of physical education class in primary schools are taught not by qualified specialist in the field of sport but by generalists (individuals who teach multiple subjects and often times do not have the necessary sport qualification). The research also provides some numbers in the field such as: 55% of the primary school teachers are not familiar with the contemporary standards and requirements of sport education and training, 74% of teachers are forced to search for information in the field on their own. Last but not least 87% of teachers state that they would like to enhance their methods of work should the Ministry of Education give them such a chance.

Evgeniev (2014) examines the motivating factors for Bulgarian teachers and principals in sport schools. In his study, he describes the generally accepted notion that teachers should work with desire and passion is “long gone”. According to the results from the study, factors such as underpayment and unfair assessments of effort and results are the biggest examples of dissatisfaction among Bulgarian physical education teachers (*table 1*). Reliable information on tasks and performance in addition to the lack of qualification training in school come second in the dissatisfaction factors. Areas where Bulgarian physical teachers feel most satisfied are: the fact that job is usually consistent with the description; there is mutual support and communication among colleagues; and the social environment in schools is generally favorable.

Table 1. Summarized list of motivational factors for teachers in sport schools

№	Motivational factors	Teachers		
		Summarized results		
		Satisfaction	Neutral	Dissatisfaction
1	Equitable wage	4%	0%	96%
2	Job consistent with job description	61%	4%	35%
3	Equal and fair treatment of the members of staff	38%	24%	38%
4	Timely and fair assessment of the efforts and results	35%	7%	58%
5	Working conditions - favorable working environment	58%	19%	23%
6	Opportunity for qualification training in school	35%	23%	42%
7	Job security /protection against cutting/	50%	23%	27%
8	Social environment /relationship with colleagues, social climate/	54%	19%	27%
9	Timely and reliable information about the task and performance	35%	19%	46%
10	Work requiring collaboration /communication and mutual support/	73%	8%	19%

Along with the motivational factors for Bulgarian physical education teachers, Evgeniev also examines those for principals of sport schools. Similar to what teachers find dissatisfaction in, principals also see problems with wages as well as with the scarce amount of social benefits provided by the school. Next comes the somewhat unfair treatment of team members and the job security which offers little to no protection against cutting (*table 2*).

In the SPLISS model, non organized sport and physical education in schools lie in the basis of it. Thus, they are in way responsible for the successful development of a sport system that would yield benefits in the future. However, in the case with Bulgarian physical education teachers and sport school some major issues that hinder that development are observed. The study by Evgeniev (2014) shows that both physical education teachers and principals tackle with various problems on daily basis that have negative influence on their motivation, performance and the end results of their work. This imminently impacts the sport talent development of young students as they do not acquire the necessary habits for sport from an early age.

Table 2 - Summarized list of motivational factors for principals in sport schools

№	Motivational factors	Principals /management staff/		
		Summarized results		
		Satisfaction	Neutral	Dissatisfaction
1	Timely and fair assessment of the efforts and results of labor	62%	0%	38%
2	Equitable wage / basic + extra /	15%	0%	85%
3	Clear, precise and achievable targets / workplace /	31%	23%	46%
4	Social environment / relationship with colleagues, social climate /	85%	0%	15%
5	Timely and reliable information about the task and performance	54%	8%	38%
6	In school management / initiatives with the goals and decisions /	54%	15%	31%
7	Social benefits provided by the school	31%	0%	69%
8	Loyalty to the organization / school /	34%	31%	35%
9	Job security / protection against cutting /	48%	8%	44%
10	Uniform and fair treatment team members	30%	8%	62%

5. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

5.1 Research method and questions

This master thesis revolves around the following two research questions:

RQ 1 “What are the reasons behind Bulgaria’s current lack of performance at elite sport level?”

RQ2 “How people involved at grass-root sport level in Bulgaria see the current status of elite sport?”

Those questions served as a means to obtain in-depth data about the current state of sport in Bulgaria at grass root level and how it paves the way of young athletes to elite and professional level. They also help trace the processes that take place in schools, academies and teams and how those processes are viewed by the very same people involved in them.

In the realm of sport sociology and management, face-to-face interviews have proven to be an effective method of data gathering. Semi-structured interviews are a proper tool that provides sufficient information on a specific topic and utilize first hand experiences from people involved in the field where the particular problem has occurred. According to Patton (1980), qualitative research approaches provide detailed information on situations and events by using direct quotations from people about their experiences, persuasions, beliefs and thought processes. An example of such is the research done by Borer (2005) that analyzed the situation concerning the removal or renovation of Fenway Park in Boston. His qualitative methods included participant observation, abundance of interviews with fans and people from both inside and outside Boston, staff members of the Red Sox and last but not least people who were ultimately in charge of the decision about the future of the project – city officials and club owners. By doing so, Borer managed to examine how people responded to the debate about the future of the area.

Similar approach has been chosen for this particular study. The main people of interest were individuals who have strictly executive functions in the field of sport such as coaches, players

and physical education teachers. Town officials and club owners have been exempt of interviewing because their view on sport related problems might differ from the one of the people directly involved in the field. The reason for that is

In that regard a set of semi-structured interviews with open ended questions was chosen for sufficient answers and results. The participants in the study were divided into two categories - physical education teachers and coaches in one (category 1) and youth academy players (category 2) in the other. Prior to the interviews, all participants were shown the chart of the SPLISS model, depicting the nine pillars influencing international sporting success and asked questions accordingly. Therefore, different questions were made for the two categories. Via those interviews, some rather detailed information about the current state and problems of Bulgarian sport was obtained. Language barrier was not present since both the researcher and the interviewees were fluent in Bulgarian.

Category 1 interview questions:

**participants here were asked questions regarding pillars 1 and 2 of the SPLISS model*

1. In terms of financial support, do you think Bulgarian state is doing enough to help your cause?
2. Do you approve the way Bulgaria deals with the organization and structure of sport policies?
3. How do you view the current educational system and its correlation with sport?

Category 2 interview questions:

**participants here were asked questions regarding pillars 4 and 5 of the SPLISS model*

1. Do you feel that the Bulgarian sport system is doing enough to develop you talents?
2. Are you satisfied with the support you are receiving from coaches, sport clubs and state?
3. Do you vision being a professional athlete in Bulgaria as a secure path for your future?
4. What are the major obstacles that future professional athletes have to overcome in Bulgaria?

Category 1 and 2 interview questions:

**participants here were asked questions regarding pillar 6 of the SPLISS model*

1. Are you satisfied with the training facilities that your municipality has to offer?
2. What do you think is the overall condition of the sport infrastructure in Bulgaria?

5.2 Interviewees

The participants in the interviews are people who represent sport in Bulgaria at a grass-roots level - physical education teachers, coaches in youth academies and last but not least youth players from the same academies. Interviews were scheduled and conducted in the summer of 2016 when school was over and it was off season. In order for anonymity to be guaranteed names of the participants were replaced with letters. Hereby stands detailed information about the interviewees.

Physical education teacher A

Teacher A has been in the educational system for nearly 40 years. His take on the topic was particularly valuable for the research because of his experience, ability to compare the two political systems he had to work in (socialism and post socialism) and extensive knowledge in talent harnessing and sport management. He has also practiced wrestling and weightlifting coaching up to the early 90s – two sports which were delivering the most prominence for Bulgaria at international level.

Physical education teacher B

Teacher B is the only female that participated in the study. She has been working as a PE teacher since 2005 and her field of expertise is badminton - a sport predominantly practiced by females in Bulgaria. The number of female physical education teachers in Bulgaria is

significantly smaller than the number of the male. In that regard she gave quite good insight on how sport and physical activity is perceived by female youth in schools and how that reflects later on in terms of scouting talent and going pro.

Physical education teacher C

Teacher C is relatively new to the field, being in the system for as many as 5 years. He graduated university in 2011 and started at the local school in his hometown as a PE teacher of 14-17 year olds. As his primary sport he points basketball and he is currently engaged with coaching the school's team and gaining professional license for higher division teams. He was the youngest of the 3 interviewed PE teachers which was beneficial for the study in a way that the gap between him and students was not as wide as it was with teacher A and teacher B.

Youth coach A

Coach A works full-time as a football trainer in a youth academy in a small town of population of 5000. He is currently in his late 20s and has been involved in the game of football his entire life. During his childhood he was enrolled in a sport school and was part of many football clubs. At the age of 23 he had to quit because of injuries and not being given a lot of playing time. He has high coaching aspirations and takes his job very seriously trying to give all children equal opportunity to perform and develop their game. Football is by far the most popular sport in Bulgaria therefore his take on the subject was of particular importance.

Youth coach B

Coach B works as swimming instructor during the summer period due to the fact that the town has only an outdoor pool. Swimming is in general an expensive sport that requires both resources and dedication. It was interesting to see how such sport is perceived and what its position is on a national scale. The more complex and demanding a sport is, the more issues and problems accompany it and swimming in Bulgaria is exactly that. In that regard it was important to examine how such sport is approached by the Bulgarian state and sport policies and what involvement in the mass participation of citizens it has.

Youth coach C

Coach C is in his early 30s and he has been involved in the game of basketball ever since he was 12. He was part of numerous youth academies and played competitively for several years before going into coaching. After football, basketball is the second most popular sport in the country. However, in recent years professional basketball has had its struggles at both club and international level and coach C expressed his thought on the matter, giving some viable points.

Youth player A

Player A is part of a football academy in the aforementioned small town. Despite the fact that he is at the age of 16 he receives playing time for the men's team too. His participation in the study helped to understand how the sport future is being viewed by the upcoming generations. Scouting and growing talent might be considered as the cornerstone for every nation's success at professional level. The opinion of these young individuals and how they feel about the current situation in Bulgaria was of particular importance for the study.

Youth player B

Player B is a representative of an individual sport. He is part of the swimming club in the town where the research was conducted. Team sports in Bulgaria are given the advantage as opposed to individual sports. Player B expressed his opinion on the status quo and what he thinks should change in the near future in order for sports like swimming to excel.

5.3 Data analysis

Data analyzing process utilized three phases of data reduction, display and authenticity (Miles & Hubberman, 1994). At the onset of the data analysis, interviews were transcribed verbatim which resulted in approximately 40 pages of text. Then, a process of data reduction was set in motion whose goal was to eliminate unnecessary data. Information clustering and taking summary notes followed next. This resulted in the emergence of 5 themes and 6 subthemes, all closely related to the SPLISS model and the topic under research.

The steps taken in the data analyzing process were as they follow:

1. Transcribing of the interviews
2. Getting acquainted with the data: that included reading the interviews text several times and highlighting possible focal points
3. Patterns and themes searching: extraction of the most important points given by the interviewees and the creation of themes and subthemes
4. Translation of the extracted patterns
5. Themes and subthemes naming
6. Backing up themes and subthemes with citations and quotes from the interview participants.

6 RESULTS

The analysis of the data brought out 5 themes which coincided with the 5 models from SPLISS model which this master thesis investigates: 1) financial support, 2) sport policies, 3) talent development and talent identification system, 4) athletic career support, 5) training facilities.

In addition to the main themes, 7 subthemes also emerged: *1.1 lack of financial support *1.2 unequal distribution of funds*2.1 PE classes in schools, *3.1 role of coaches and state in talent development, *4.1 lack of parental support, *4.2 trust in the system, *5.1 access to sport facilities, *5.2 investments in sport infrastructure projects. Hereafter follows a detailed description of the results and findings from the qualitative research. Direct quotations from participants were also used.

6.1 Financial support by state

Participants from category 1 include physical education teachers and youth academy coaches. The latter gave their take on pillar 1 of the SPLISS model. Pillar 1 concentrates on the financial support that various clubs, sport teams and organizations are receiving from the state in order for sport at elite and professional level to excel. One of the main findings of this study is that money plays a significant role for the existence of sport in Bulgaria. Financial support by the state and who receives the better part of it sets the course for its successful or not so successful development. In regard to the SPLISS model, participants from category 1 gave an abundance of viable points and shared their thoughts on the reasons behind the lack of sport performance at elite level and what the financial support has to do with it.

Out of the 3 participants that were asked about the financial support 3 had a negative opinion about the matter. They expressed somewhat displeasure of the status quo and the current system and the way funds are being distributed in order to develop sport. As a subtheme from this research emerged the fact that youth academy coaches have to deal with the lack of sufficient funding on daily basis.

6.1.1 Lack of financial support

Sport inequality caused by scarce financing

Financial support or the lack thereof has many dimensions and that became evident from the answers of the participants in this research. One of the subthemes that emerged after the data analysis was the unequal distribution of funds coming from state to sport clubs and town halls. According to the data, it has become a trend in the past several years for smaller towns and clubs, depending heavily on state funding, to be neglected at the expense of clubs from bigger cities. Indubitably, that contributes to a certain level of social inequality and leaves a great number of young people with fewer opportunities for sport development and participation. The results show that this type of sport governance damages young talent in smaller town and rural areas, leaving little chance for sport improvement.

Quotes on sport inequality caused by scarce financing

Youth coach B - swimming

“The help we receive from the Bulgarian Swimming Federation is symbolic and it barely covers the costs. It is no secret that most of the funding goes to the swimming clubs in Varna, Sofia and Burgas (*major cities in Bulgaria*). We feel underappreciated here and we believe that we do not get a fair treatment.”

Youth coach A – football

“I strongly believe that football club from smaller towns and their academies are treated unequally in terms of receiving financial support from the state. Our team relies heavily on funding from the municipality and sometimes the money is just not enough since the city hall have so much more to deal with every day.”

“The gap between football in the countryside and the major cities is huge. Football clubs from the capital, for example, have luxury of not thinking about money since they are owned by wealthy businessmen or they have strong fan base that donates a lot for the development of their own youth academies. We on the other hand are totally neglected by the system

which is shameful considering that children both from big cities and small towns share the same love and passion for the game.

Youth coach C - basketball

“Municipality is our primary source of funding because we do not get much support from the federation. Its efforts are mainly towards bigger clubs in bigger cities. Due to lack of financial support we cannot afford to participate in nearly as many competitions or camps as we would like to. In the long run that has a negative effect on motivation and moral of the children because they talk with their counterparts from other cities and see that they get to travel and play more. They face the struggle that comes with little money at an early age.”

Sport as a priority

According to the participants the main reason sport in Bulgaria does not receive enough funding is prioritization and where exactly sport is on the government’s agenda. In their minds sport in Bulgaria does not receive nearly as much as attention as it does in other European countries. It is a common perception that government has withdrawn from sport and has concentrated on other issues not related to elite sport, sport development or overall physical activity of the youth.

Sport is also not a priority for local businesses and sponsors. According to coaches in the study, business owners and companies do not view sport as a means to popularize their business and expand. Therefore, those companies seek other ways to promote their product, leaving local sport clubs out of their marketing programs. Undoubtedly, that hurts the development of sport clubs and young talent as they are forced to sustain themselves through membership fees and the occasional help from state.

Quotes on prioritization of sport

Youth coach A - football

“Our team relies heavily on funding from the municipality and sometimes the money is just not enough since the city hall have so much more to deal with every day. We are trying to

reach out to local businesses but in the current time of recession they are struggling too and a very small percentage of them actually give something for the development of local sport.”

Youth coach C - basketball

“Biggest challenge we face is finding sponsors because most of the businesses know that we cannot give them even publicity for their money. It is quite sad that the majority of firms out there are on that mindset, because our goal is to keep children engaged with the game of basketball and teach sporting habit and not gain profit and accumulate revenue.”

6.2 Sport policies in Bulgaria and their effectiveness

In this study some knowledge on the perception of sport policies in Bulgaria was obtained. Pillar 2 of the SPLISS model examines the organization and structure of sport policies and how their formation influences athletes and sport clubs in terms of success at elite level. Participants from category 1 and youth academy coaches in particular expressed their thoughts on the way various sport policies in Bulgaria are being structured, modified and organized. The main notion from their answers was that the current way the sport policies in Bulgaria function impair in many ways the progress and development of the athletes they work with. Out of the three participants asked a policy related question only 1 expressed a positive opinion about the policies in their field. Subsequently that leads to a general underperformance at professional level in the later stages of their careers.

Effectiveness of current sport policies

Various sport policies in football, basketball and swimming were under discussion as part of this research. Youth coaches pondered on the effectiveness of the policies that currently operate within their sports. Football, a major sport in the country, was thoroughly examined in the study. The origin of the struggles that Bulgarian football is experiencing in the past decade can be traced to the introduction of some policies and regulations whose effectiveness is questionable. An example for that is the absence of law that forces football clubs to use players from their own youth academy in matches. At the moment, the method that Bulgarian Football Union operates does not facilitate the work of youth academies and it

makes it hard for young football players to make it to the professionals. The ones that do, do not feel well prepared and have hard time making an impact on their teams. Subsequently, they underperform, have their playing time reduced and that causes problems for Bulgarian football in the long run both at club and national level. As a short-term solution Bulgarian professional teams, focused on winning now and immediate profit, resort to the services of foreign players, giving no opportunities for upcoming generations to prove themselves.

Quotes on effectiveness of sport policies in football

Youth coach A– football

“The current sport policies hinder the talent development of the kids. For example, in the first and second tier of Bulgarian football a rule existed that each time had to play at least 2 players from their youth academies for as little as 45 minutes per game. The idea of that rule was to utilize the product that comes out of the youth academies and help young player get a feel for the professional side of sport. However, due to unknown reasons this rule was removed and now very few 18-19 year olds get good minutes on the pitch.”

“In most of the professional clubs there is a severe presence of foreign players on the roster. The admission to the EU leaves no restrictions on the number of EU-citizens players that each team is allowed to have due to the free movement of people, products and capitals. However, there are no restrictions for players coming from other continents either. That limits the spots for Bulgarian players even more and most of the young players leave the game by the age of 19. Imposing some kind of restriction on number of foreigners on each team might hurt some managerial and agent interests but that will benefit our players greatly.”

Effectiveness of sport policies in basketball

Basketball, just like football in Bulgaria, struggles with problems stemming from dubious policies imposed by both state and federation. According to coaches, a major concern is the efforts that are being made to involve as many young people in game as possible and give them fair chance to compete. The rules that are put in place at the moment do not facilitate this process. Right now, Bulgarian basketball is in need of reform that will make young

players feel appreciated and valued. Similar problem as in football concerning the import of foreign national in professional basketball are observed here. There are little to no restrictions of how many foreign players can be enlisted in to the rosters and club owners and coaches of professional teams take advantage of that rule by deciding to neglect the upcoming generations.

Quotes on effectiveness of sport policies in basketball

“Naturalization of foreign players became a bad habit that we cannot get rid of it to this very day. For some weird to me reason the Federation concluded that having 5 foreign players on the team is acceptable and does not harm the Bulgarian basketball in any way. They actually believe it helps it. However, I do not think that anyone up there takes into consideration the discouragement that such decisions inflict on young Bulgarian players who truly love the game and want to get better. Courtesy to an inadequate management, however, that sadly cannot be.”

Effectiveness of sport policies in swimming

Swimming appeared the only one of the several sports under examination in this master’s thesis whose sport policies were perceived with approval. According to youth coach B, swimming in Bulgaria is gaining more recognition and popularity by the day and unlike other sports, policies here help with the development of the sport. The implementation of various programs whose goal is to promote swimming among the youth has made experts in the field believe in the bright future of the sport.

Quotes on effectiveness of sport policies in swimming

Youth coach B - swimming

“I believe that in the past few years things have gotten better in terms of programs that make it easier on us. It appears that the number of opportunities to get into swimming has risen. The launch of the “Learn how to swim” program, which is part of the National Strategy for Development of Physical Education and Sport in Bulgaria, has definitely been of great help for our cause. The idea of this program is to provide free teaching and swimming to children given that certain requirements are met. That is something that did not exist 10 years ago and

given how people become less and less attracted to sports I am happy to see that efforts are made to reverse this process.”

6.3 Relation between educational system and sport, position of sport in schools

According to the Physical Education and Sport at School in Europe Eurydice Report by the European Commission (2013) all countries members of the European Union have acknowledged the important role that sport plays at schools and for the upbringing of young individuals. Physical education at educational institutions has taken a central place in the curricular framework and sport classes are compulsory for students in primary and secondary schools. According to the report, approximately half of the European educational systems have their own national strategies engaged with the promotion of physical activity and bring awareness to both parents and children about the importance of sport. Bulgaria has its own program in the face of the “National Strategy for Development of Physical Education and Sport in Republic of Bulgaria 2010-2020” that has been adopted with the sole purpose of tackling the abovementioned issues.

In the SPLISS model, non-organized sport and physical education in schools are marked as a factor of importance for the development of teams and athletes. Proper early childhood sport education sets strong foundations for successful athletes in the future. This study examines also this particular part of the SPLISS model (figure 2). Physical education teachers, part of category 1 participants, were asked about the current state of the educational system and what is the position of sport within it.

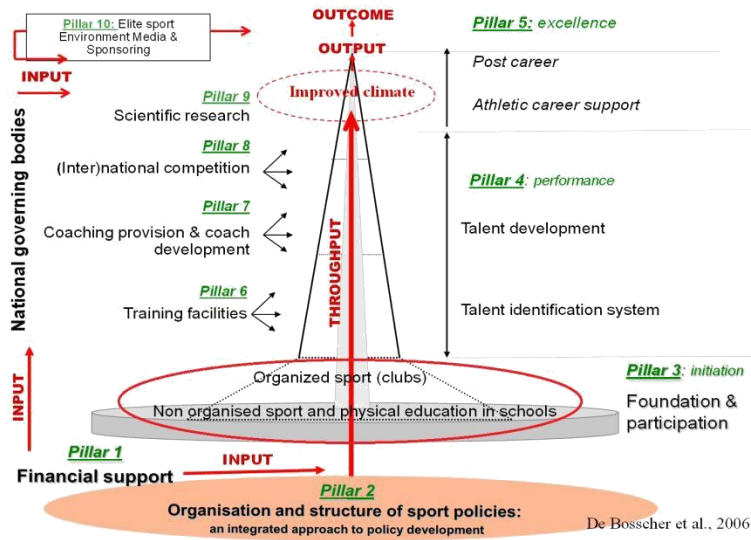


Figure 2. The non-organized sport and physical education in schools section situated in the basis of the SPLISS model(De Bosscher et al., 2006)

The information obtained from the interviewed physical education teachers was in contradiction with the report of the European Commission and the National Strategy for Development of Physical Education and Sport in Republic of Bulgaria 2010-2020. According to them the educational system and sport in schools have become two very distant and foreign to each other concepts. If there was a chart where school classes were arranged by importance, physical education classes would be on the bottom of that chart. All three interviewed PE teachers shared the same notion of despair, lack of perspective and overall dissatisfaction with the academic conditions they have to work in.

The educational system and sport

According to physical education teacher A, sport classes in schools have undergone some serious metamorphosis in the past several decades in terms of importance, overall perception and purpose. Prior to the political changes in 1989, physical education classes were regarded as a top priority and success at school competitions was means to demonstrate prestige in society. Successful school athletes would then be encouraged to pursue career at professional level and represent Bulgaria at international events. In a way, Bulgarian schools were used as a place to farm talent by putting sport on a pedestal. However, nowadays that appears to no longer be the case. Physical education classes a regarded as secondary and do not enjoy

nearly as much attention as they did years ago. That has resulted in the reduction of the number of classes per week which on its own impacted on the overall perception of sport in school among students, parents and teachers. In recent years, a reduced level of interest could be observed which according to the physical education teachers in this research has a negative effect on the relationship between sport and children in Bulgaria. Currently, Bulgarian schools fail to instill sporting habits in the youth at an early age. This alienation from sport makes it hard for coaches at youth academies to search for talented athletes, which subsequently leads to underperforming at elite level in the future.

Quotes on educational system and sport

Physical education teacher A

“I believe that the bond between the student and the physical education teacher has never been as weak as it is now. Back when I first started almost 40 years ago, students had great passion for sports and we, the physical education teachers, were highly appreciated and respected. It was not difficult to instill sporting habits at a very early age. Today physical education classes are reduced to an all-time low and in my view it is by far the most neglected subject at school by students.”

“I personally have discovered many talented wrestlers and weightlifters that went on to become champions of Bulgaria and some of them even competed at international level and were very successful there too. All those athletes came from within schools and local communities. There was so much talent to choose from and we were able to send extraordinary people at Olympic Games and World Championships. Today the whole capacity of the weightlifting and wrestling in Bulgaria is concentrated in a few clubs located in the major cities. The amount of potential that remains undiscovered is huge and the results are evident. The reason we are no longer a force in those sports is because we stopped using the school as a sport academy.”

Physical education teacher B also talked about alienation from sport in terms of gender equality and how females receive fewer opportunities to participate in competitions as opposed to their male counterparts. According to her, it is of the essence to introduce more extracurricular classes in order to increase the number of students interested in a particular

sport and start developing their talents from there. At the moment, a gap between males and females exists, which serves no good purpose for Bulgarian sport on all levels.

Quotes on sport inequality between males and females

“I work predominantly with female students and I dare to say that women put more effort in sports compared to their male peers. And yet, females do not get the same amount of training time and opportunity to use the different sport facilities. By doing so, we successfully alienate a lot of potential athletes from sport at an early age. Moreover, sport in schools has become irrelevant in the eyes of students and parents and the most frightening is that institutions like the Ministry of Education are doing very little to change that.”

“I wish I could see more extra curriculum sport classes implemented in the school program. Currently there is only 1 physical education class part of the extra curriculum program. In my opinion, that is insufficient because in that way we do not have a chance to see which children are better at sports than others and later on put some extra effort to develop that talent.

Physical education teacher C also discussed how sport in school is being perceived today and how Ministry of Education does very little to change the status quo. The present model of governance does very little to encourage participation and competition among students when it comes to physical education classes. School tournaments and championships are reduced to a minimum and that is one of the many reasons why sport does not reach out to the majority of children and parents.

Quotes on educational system and sport

Physical education teacher C

“I am also involved in coaching the school’s basketball team and I can go as far as to say that the current system of sport organizing is not working. For example, we have only 4 to 6 games per year which is highly insufficient if you want to make something out of these kids. Having so few matches does not help them gain the experience necessary to go to the next level and progress. It seems to me that the Ministry of Education is uninterested in building competitive spirit in young people. Even if they do not go on to become professional athletes

they can still use that competitive spirit in real life. As long as physical education in schools is being viewed as an unimportant subject we should really limit our expectations when it comes to elite sport. The current way of managing has proven to be unbeneficial and the need of change has never been more urgent.”

6.4 Talent development, talent identification system and sport as a career in Bulgaria

Talent identification systems and development is of the essence for a successful path in the world of elite sport (Russel, 1989). According to Durand-Bush et al. (2001) there is a lack of theoretical framework to describe talent in a concrete way since it is an extremely complex and intricate concept. Talent identification models have in general a low level of accuracy, which subsequently led to their credibility and validity to be called into question. However, in the SPLISS model of De Bosscher et al. (2006) proper talent development and the existence of talent identification system plays crucial role for a successful sport future of a nation (pillar 4).

Pillar 4 of the SPLISS model is also examined in this thesis as participants from category 2, who are athletes from youth sport academies, expressed their thoughts on the way the Bulgarian sport system and environment deals with scouting talent, provision of opportunities for the upcoming young athletes and methods of work in sport clubs. Their opinions were somewhat similar given that both participants shared a certain level of displeasure of the current system of sport organization. This displeasure was not targeted towards their own clubs rather than the model of sport governance at national level. The lack of strategy also has been mentioned as a reason for sport setbacks.

Pillar 5 of the SPLISS model is related to excellence, which consists of both post career and athletic career support. Once professional athletes decide to put an end to their career that is considered a pivotal moment in their life. Becoming part of regular life and stepping out of the limelight might be difficult for some individuals. According to Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) the end of a sporting career is often marked by depression and brings dramatic changes into the social, personal and family life of athletes. These possible consequences might play a role when young athletes are still uncertain whether they want to pursue a career in professional

sports. According to the obtained data from this research, Bulgaria currently does not offer any kind of support for newly retired athletes. Financial support for such individuals is also scarce. The participants of the study shared a common concern regarding the minimal pensions and benefits professional athletes receive once they retire. According to them, these possible scenarios might affect their ultimate decision regarding whether they pursue a career in sports once they have the chance to compete professionally. Youth academy players in particular have stated that their parents have a say in such decisions and given the current situation and how Bulgaria deals with athletes during and after their careers it is likely that they steer their children in other directions in life.

Quotes on talent development and talent identification system

Youth academy athlete A - football

Quote 1

“Our football club and coaches in particular are doing the best they can to provide us with the best conditions to train in and improve. We might be coming from a small town but that does not stop us from competing hard. However, I think that the way regional leagues are organized does not provide us with enough opportunities to get better and play nearly as many matches as our counterparts from other cities do. Unfortunately, if you come from a smaller city your chances will be reduced as opposed if you were born in Sofia for example. Players my age there have more than double the amount of matches we have and twice the experience. When you are 10 that does not matter in a significant way but once you enter adolescence every game brings invaluable experiences that is necessary to evolve and make it to the men’s league one day.”

Youth academy athlete B – swimming

Quote 1

“In my opinion individuals sports in Bulgaria do not get nearly as much support as the team sports do. That reflects on the talent development of athletes like me who have chosen those sports. Coaches are doing the best they can to provide better opportunities for us and our future as athletes. However, I do not think they receive enough credit by the state for the work

they do. To my knowledge, there is no coaching development programs so we are using the same methods of training that were used 20 years ago. In that regard it is difficult for us to keep up with the pace that other swimming clubs in Europe and around the world impose.”

Quote 2

“The lack of enough swimming events year-round definitely hinders our development and does not make us feel as competitive as we would like to. I think the reason for that is the Swimming Federation that does not do what is necessary to gain funds and involve more people into the sport.

Quotes on athletic career and post career support

Youth academy athlete A– football

Quote 1

“My dream is to play football professionally. However, I am fully aware that there is a high probability that never happens or even if I do I might end up playing in a 2nd division team here in Bulgaria. That way I will not be making enough to sustain my family or myself. My parents are generally supportive of me but in this case, they want me to focus more on education and play football recreationally. The parents of many of my counterparts feel the same way about us trying to play professionally and I understand them.”

Quote 2

“I think my best chance of playing professionally is if I get scouted and go abroad. Opportunities there seem to much more than what we get here. Apparently more luck and less hard work is needed in Bulgaria in order for someone to make a breakthrough in elite sport. A lot my teammates and friends feel the same way about the current state of affairs here and become less optimistic about the sport future of the nation.”

Youth academy athlete B – swimming

Quote 1

“Swimming is obviously my favorite sport and I am grateful for the support I receive from the coaches here. It is a very demanding sport that is not very popular in Bulgaria. Here we have a unique chance to practice it that not very many people in Bulgaria have. However, because of the aforementioned lack of swimming events and competitions my future as a professional swimmer is unclear. As much as I would like to compete professionally I am focusing on other areas where I can improve such as education and eventually coaching as it is the only way that I can remain close to the sport I love the most.”

6.5 Importance, current state of sport infrastructure in Bulgaria

Pillar 6 of the SPLISS model deals with the training infrastructure and its importance in terms of elite sport as well as securing proper conditions for athlete development. It is the last pillar that is examined in this master thesis. A number of studies have been conducted in order to examine the importance of sport infrastructure and how it affects both amateur and professional levels of sport. Xiong (2007) states that the government of China recognized the importance of sport infrastructure in the country's fitness level and in 1995 proceeded with the adoption of policy that allowed more spending on sport in China. According to Hong (2008), the elite sport and performing at a high level has been the main goal of China since the 1960s. The aforementioned policy, however, and its aim was to increase mass sport participation which according to the Chinese government would inevitably lead to the influx of talent and young athletes that would go on and compete successfully at Olympic Games, World Championships etc.

Hallman et al. (2012) investigate four sports – running, tennis, swimming and football (football and swimming are examined in this master thesis too) and to what level the importance of sport infrastructure is connected with participation. According to their results, socioeconomic factors are not the only index that influences participation in the chosen sports. The presence of sport infrastructure appears to be of great importance too.

Participants in this particular study also shared their opinions regarding way sport infrastructure in Bulgaria is improved, maintained or built. Training facilities questions were asked to all participants with the sole purpose to generate responds that describe as accurately as possible the state of sport infrastructure in the country. Answers to the first question, “Are

you satisfied with the training facilities that your municipality has to offer?” were rather similar to each other as all participants expressed a certain level of satisfaction in regard to the condition of the sport infrastructure in their town. The second question “What do you think is the overall condition of the sport infrastructure in Bulgaria?” and the answers to it differed in some way as physical education teachers were somewhat pleased with the way school gyms are being maintained and are in general satisfied with the conditions they have to work in. Youth academy athletes and coaches, however, did not share the same level of satisfaction like the physical education teachers. According to them, the overall condition of training facilities in Bulgaria is not up to standard with the European and that obstructs their work methods and prevents them from reaching their maximum potential. In addition to that, participants expressed their concerns regarding the fact that seasons play crucial role in their physical preparation and during the winter the intensity of their trainings drops because most facilities are simply not made to operate in winter conditions.

Quotes on training facilities

Question 1 quotes (training facilities at the local level)

Physical education teacher A

Quote 1

“I am definitely satisfied with the training facilities we have here in the school. Since joining the European Union in 2007, schools in general received a lot of funding to renovate classrooms and sport gyms. Prior to that not much had been done in order to keep school infrastructure in good shape and the consequences of those 20 years of transition and inactivity in that field could really be seen.”

Physical education teacher C

Quote 1

“The construction of a new sport hall in 2010 gave the school an opportunity to increase the number of sport classes offered. It allowed also many more students to practice various sports by giving them both choice and space to do so. Winter is no longer an issue since we have

enough room where the students can play. Before, we had too many students and only one sport hall so we had to reduce the sport classes of everyone so that everyone could at least practice sport.”

According to physical education teachers, schools have better conditions for sport than municipality due to the influx of funding that they receive from European Union in order to maintain and improve infrastructure. On the contrary, funding that municipalities receive is targeted mainly at other infrastructure projects (roads, hospitals etc.) not related to sport.

Youth academy coach A (football)

Quote 1

“In the past few years our municipality has invested a good amount in order to help football. A couple of new outdoor courts with good quality were built which is nothing but a plus for our sport. The stadium where we play our home games receives a lot more care in terms of pitch, surroundings etc. compared to only a few years ago. All this creates a friendly environment for practicing football and as a result, every year we have more and more children willing to sign up. On that note, I am very happy with the way our municipality deals and cares for the future of sport in this town. I hope many other places in Bulgaria follow this example.”

Youth academy coach B (swimming)

Quote 1

“To my knowledge we are one of the few towns in Bulgaria under 5000 to have their own outdoor swimming pool. I am extremely glad that the town hall managed to find funding and renovate the sport complex that was built in the 80s but after the political changes in 1989 was abandoned and left in ruins for decades. For this period of time, swimming became a sport that people simply forgot about and could not practice anymore. Now with the resurrection of the sport complex swimming is gaining more popularity and children and parents realize the benefits that it brings along.”

Quote 2

“The city could not renovate all of the destroyed swimming pools. There used to be an indoor swimming pool, which is still in ruins and apparently, municipality struggles to find the proper amount of money that will get it going again. This is not good for us because now we cannot train during the winter season and that is the reason we cannot compete year round and cannot develop the talents of the many children that train here.”

Question 2 quotes (overall condition of training facilities in Bulgaria)

Youth academy coach C (basketball)

Quote 1

“The way I see it the training facilities in Bulgaria are definitely falling behind compared to different European countries. Other small towns from the countryside do not have multipurpose sport halls at their disposal, which is one of the reasons why basketball in Bulgaria has been in decline. Government investments in basketball infrastructure have been reduced to a minimum. A few state of the art arenas were built in the bigger city but they are not open for public use and obviously do not contribute for the development of talent in the country.”

Youth academy athlete A (football)

Quote 1

“Most of the stadiums we go to are in pretty bad condition. A large number of the spectators’ seats are either broken or missing entirely. Grass surface is poorly maintained which increases the chance of injuries and reduces the quality of the game. Professional teams from first and second division also use same stadiums we play at and that leads to low-level football. Situation is really critical during the winter when we have no indoor place to practice. The way we keep up our physical shape is by simple jogging exercises, which is not the optimal method of maintain best form.”

Youth academy athlete B (swimming)

Quote 1

“I am really disappointed with the fact that swimming in Bulgaria is less popular now than it was 20 years ago. And I think one of the reasons for that is the insufficient funds that swimming infrastructure has been receiving. Number of swimming pools in the country is low, compared to other European countries and we seemingly do not do our best to maintain properly the ones we already have. It is a very common sight that a few swimming teams share a small 25m pool, coaches quarrel over schedules and in general that creates an atmosphere that does not help for the development of athletes who train and are eager to excel. In my opinion, government has to invest more in training facilities if they want Bulgarian swimming to compete again at elite championships and Olympic Games. So far, the lack of new facilities and the failure to keep up the pace with the foreign competition and prevent us from being equal to the rest of the world.”

7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this master's thesis was to use the SPLISS model of De Bosscheret al. (2006) in order to examine the reasons that lie behind the lack of sporting success that Bulgarian teams and athletes have been displaying for the past two decades. As part of the qualitative research of this study, the opinions of people directly involved in the development of grass-root level sport were obtained. Those included physical education teachers, youth academy coaches and youth academy athletes. The purpose behind this approach was to have individuals whose job is to work with young talent and set them on the right track to professional and elite sport, express their point of view on the problems that are currently hurting sport in Bulgaria.

Examining 5 out of the 9 pillars of the SPLISS model was somewhat enough to gather a general overview of what the problematic areas in Bulgaria are in terms of success at elite sport level. Financial support (pillar 1) seemed to be something that the participants pointed out as a major problem for the development of sport in Bulgaria. Having to deal with a constant shortage of funds takes its toll on both productivity and motivation.

In terms of organization and structure of sport policies (pillar 2) participants expressed a certain level of displeasure too. The inability of the Bulgarian state and government to come up with clear and adequate sport policies and laws in order to facilitate the development of talent was pointed out as a major concern by the interviewees. Apparently, educational system and Ministry of Sport do not work hand in hand for the betterment of sport in Bulgaria, as there is a clear sign of miscommunication and unwillingness to work together between the two bodies. Through the conducted interviews, it became evident that Bulgaria is failing to adopt the modern methods of constructing and shaping of sport policies that have already been established throughout the European Union.

Talent development and talent identification system (pillar 4) were a focal point in this master's thesis as all of the participants in it are dealing with grassroots sport on a daily basis and their job is to scout talent and set young athletes on the right course to professional sport. From their responses, it can clearly be seen that the current system for talent development and identification that Bulgaria has now is somewhat flawed and does not allow the realization of the maximum potential that young athletes hold. According to the participants, there is an

abundance of talent found in sport academies across Bulgaria. However, the Bulgarian system for sport governance consistently fails to harness that talent. This resonates in a reduced number of athletes sent at international competitions and Olympic Games, which subsequently reduces the levels of success yearly.

According to the SPLISS model and pillar five in particular supporting athletes throughout their careers and after they retire is essential. Failure to provide comfort during and after competitive years will most certainly result in a reduced number of people willing to pursue a professional career in sports. Participants' answers to pillar five related questions made it clear that they do not feel that they are receiving enough support from state and governing bodies. Youth academy athletes united around the notion that becoming a professional athlete in Bulgaria hides many risks that most of them are not willing to take. According to the participants in the study, government should pay more attention to athletes who already compete professionally in order to encourage their performance and productivity. Currently Bulgarian athletes do not seem to receive the same support that they would otherwise receive in another country. As a result, it has become rather common for Bulgarian athletes, especially in weightlifting, to give up on their nationality and compete under foreign flag. Examples for that are Boryanka Kostova and Valentin Hristov who prior to the 2012 London Olympics decided to compete for Azerbaijan (RFERL, 2012). Sesil Karatantcheva, a notable Bulgarian tennis talent, declared in 2009 that she would represent Kazakhstan from then on as her coach described the decision as a matter of survival (Reuters, 2009).

Many studies have been conducted in the field of sport infrastructure and its importance to present and future athletic generations. Training facilities are also seen as a critical success factor in the SPLISS model (pillar 6) and were the last researched pillar in this master's thesis. The opinions of the participants concerning training facilities in Bulgaria differed from each other. Physical education teachers were particularly satisfied with the current state of sport base in Bulgarian schools. Courtesy to various projects launched by the European Union infrastructure in school has improved significantly. That allows physical education classes to take place in better conditions than before, which can be a plus for the development of future generations of athletes. However, participants such as youth academy athletes and coaches expressed their displeasure from the overall condition of sport infrastructure in Bulgaria. A

large number of training facilities in the country have not received proper maintenance for years. That has undoubtedly detrimental effect on the development of elite sport. According to the participants, the gap between big cities and minor towns in terms of sport infrastructure and opportunities is huge. The current method of distributing funds for training facilities satisfies the needs of neither side. The insufficient amount of those funds was also part of the discussion with the interviewees.

It is safe to conclude that the abovementioned problems are in a way a sheer reflection of the actual economic, social and cultural situation in Bulgaria. The past 25 years have been a tumultuous period for Bulgaria due to a transition from communist state to a democratic one. This period is marked by certain economic instability that unquestionably has taken toll on the development of sport in the country, as underperformance of Bulgarian athletes and teams at elite level is evident. Given the ongoing state of regress some major changes of the way sport in Bulgaria is governed, structured and run are needed in order to reverse this process.

Strengths and weaknesses of this master's thesis and recommendations for further research

One of the strongest suits of this master's thesis is that it is the first in its kind that uses the SPLISS model as a tool to evaluate the current sport situation in Bulgaria. This model is used by various countries across the world for a better vision of their sport policies, strengths, weaknesses and areas of improvement. The predominant approach when dealing with SPLISS model is quantitative type of research. However, a qualitative research method was adopted for this study whose goal was to gather opinions, thoughts and experiences of people who are directly involved in the development of sport in Bulgaria.

The small number of participants due to time limitations could be viewed as a weakness of this master's thesis. All of the participants were residents of the same small town in Bulgaria, which does not provide a complete picture of the sport environment in the whole country. Further recommendations for this topic may consist of expanding the number of participants and conducting surveys in the larger cities of Bulgaria. Examining Bulgarian elite sport landscape using the SPLISS model with quantitative approach could also be proposed as a way to further expand this particular topic.

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