Who owns the name? Fandom, social inequalities and the contested renaming of a football club in Timişoara, Romania

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ABSTRACT: Recent scholarship in critical toponymy has raised questions about the impacts on urban residents of selling naming rights and about the possibility of contesting the commodification of urban place names. This article examines these issues using Poli Timişoara, the major football team of Timişoara, Romania, as a case study. The cashstrapped local authority sold the naming rights for the team to raise revenue. However, when the club's private owner was unable to finance the team, the local authority reacquired the naming rights of Poli, now under the name Asociaţia Club Sportiv Poli (a new team with a small fan base). Drawing on the everyday narratives of fans, this article explores how the commodification of a local club name can cause social tensions. This is important for understanding urban residents' access, or lack thereof, to social capital resources and how this leads to the manifestation of social inequalities which co-determine fans' reactions and responses to the change in the name of a sports team. The findings suggest that commodifying names can mobilize serious contestations among partisan groups about who owns the name, although such contestations appear to be on uncertain ground because of post-communist urban practices of delayed economic restructuring.

Key-words: Place naming; commodification; football clubs; fandom; Timişoara

1. Introduction

An increasing number of cities around the world are selling the naming rights of well-known landmarks, buildings, and other phenomena to businesses to generate additional revenue. Examples include the trading of naming rights of the First Gulf Bank Metro Station in Dubai, UAE and the 1-800-ASK-GARY Amphitheatre in Tampa, Florida (Rose-Redwood, 2011). The valuation process associated with naming rights is complicated by a variety of factors, such as new signage promoted under the umbrella of private-sector interests which are influencing and changing the naming process of the urban landscape (Light & Young, 2015). Consequently, an accurate evaluation of naming rights is required to reduce the conflict between public supporters of property and socially empowered figures in the business world. However, the (re)naming of sport clubs, including football clubs, is a relatively under-explored issue in critical toponymy. Edensor & Millington (2008: 190) argue that football clubs "are not placeless organizations. With their extensive networks of local and regional institutions, clubs have local roots and make material decisions that inextricably link or bind the football economy to particular localities." All sports clubs have working offices or headquarters and each has a designated geographical orientation (street name and street number). Consequently, the geographical location and the name associated with it provide a cultural background related to the activities of a particular place (Berg & Vuolteenaho, 2009).

The aims of this article are twofold: (1) to consider the responses of football fans to the sale of the name *Poli* (a football club in Timişoara, Romania); and (2) to consider how competing cultural claims are presented and managed when valuing the importance of local fans having access to social capital resources in an urban post-communist context. Exploration and analysis pursuant to these aims reveals how post-communist neoliberal practices are reframing

the social scenes of contemporary urban groups through privatization of the spatial identities of football clubs, producing a range of social tensions as evidenced by the everyday experiences and narratives of fans.

This analysis makes an original contribution by examining responses to the sale of the name of a sports club, and the consequent inequalities among users of the major stadium in Timişoara; there are currently no extant studies of these issues in a post-communist context. As such, this research advances current debates about the sale of naming rights in critical toponymy (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010; Rose-Redwood, 2011; Rose-Redwood & Alderman, 2011; Light & Young 2015).

It is worth noting several important features to fully appreciate the context of the study area. Timişoara is a major city in the Western part of Romania, marking a point where the majority of foreign and domestic investment capital converges in the Banat region. It has a population of about 320,000, where cultural diversity is shared by 16 ethnic groups (Author & other, 2016; Voiculescu & Jucu, 2016). In the history of Romania's football, several clubs from Timişoara, such as *Ripensia Timişoara* and *Chinezul Timişoara*, won the national championships during the interwar period (1919-1939). After the Polytechnic University and the team *Asociaţia Fotbal Club (AFC) Politehnica Timişoara* were created in 1921, and especially during the communist period (1947-1989) when Ripensia and Chinezul clubs were dissolved, the AFC team gained momentum and began to receive more attention from local fans. Furthermore, the construction of the *Dan Pãltinişanu* stadium in the 1960s allowed the AFC team to move from the relatively small stadium of the Polytechnic University to a new 30,000 seat stadium (Figure 1). Following a complicated post-communist quasi-neoliberal path, AFC Politehnica Timişoara was relegated to the 5th division; the local authorities subsequently created a new team, *Asociaţia*

Club Sportiv (ACS) Poli Timişoara, while most of the fans in the city embraced the idea of another new team – *Asociaţia Sportivã Universitarã (ASU) Politehnica Timişoara*. The sequence of events have resulted in ongoing tensions among local fans, which are explored in further detail throughout this paper.

[Figure 1 about here]

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The second section examines the literature on selling naming rights and discusses debates connected to fandom. The third section considers the context behind changing of the *Poli* name, outlining the national and local nature of public–private practices and how these have impacted *Poli Timişoara*. The fourth section introduces the methodology for the study. The fifth section explores results, delineated in terms of (i) identities, blame, and mistrust and (ii) varieties of post-communism through delayed and compromised economic restructuring. Finally, the last section presents the discussion and conclusion.

2. Selling naming rights, fandom, and social inequalities

Recent work in critical toponymies has identified a need for more engagement with the commodification of place-naming rights (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010; Rose-Redwood, 2011; Rose-Redwood & Alderman, 2011) or so-called *toponymy as commodity* (Light & Young, 2015). As the private sector's role in the transformation of the urban landscape has grown in the context of neoliberal urban governance (Hackworth, 2007; Ward, 2008), the selling of naming rights is one way for cash-strapped local authorities to generate revenue. Light & Young (2015: 441)

argue that "there is a need for in-depth case studies of the commodification of urban place-naming rights. Such case studies could look at the practices of how city authorities and governing elites arrive at the decision to sell or auction their placenaming rights." This is why both institutional and legal mechanisms, along with the reasons behind the choice of private sector sponsors, deserve more attention. For all these challenges, it is reasonable to suppose that urban citizens (e.g., urban fans) would respond differently to the corporate renaming of public spaces in different political contexts.

In a Western European context, it is normal for football club sales to occur between private investors as opposed to local authorities; for those unfamiliar with the specificities of the Central and Eastern European context, things are different. Post-communist transformation has raised the interesting challenge of studying capitalist relations which did not exist before 1989. Where Western fandom studies have explored changes under conditions of capitalist ownership, clubs in the CEE region (and certainly in Romania) have moved from state ownership under a communist system into a complex and dynamic situation where private ownership is now possible; this is complicated further by post-communist delayed economic restructuring processes and other specificities. In Romania, this hesitant or rather compromised neoliberalism has created particular tensions between the public and private sectors, and between Bucharest and other cities, which are generally not observed in Western European or American contexts. Within social sciences, debates on post-communist nostalgia for communism (Todorova & Gille, 2010) refer to positive perceptions about the communist past, which are a function of the uncertainties and failures of (neo)liberal democracy and the capitalist system i.e., macroeconomic instability, lack of job security, and burgeoning unemployment. In terms of football fans, the evidence suggests that nostalgia for the stable and egalitarian football in the

communist past has increased with the extent of failed economic reforms and instability since 1989. Indeed, the accumulation of current fans' frustrations and confusions has led to a post-communist crisis of fandom identity. For people who are deprived of a historical club name or of socialization on/around a long-established stadium, their claims may represent forms of restitution. Moreover, analysis of post-communist football fandom is almost completely absent in the current literature. In a recent article on the fandom of Dynamo Dresden, Ziesche (2017: 1) reveals how collective identity is linked to media images and how labelling and stigmatization could become "regimes of truth" for the identity construction of fans. In such circumstances, rationales and understandings pertinent to Central and Eastern Europe are sensitive because the context is different from that of Western societies.

It is surprising how little attention has hitherto paid been to the urban policy trend *vis-a-vis* football club naming rights, particularly given the bankruptcies that have occurred among football clubs in recent decades. Selling a club to a national or transnational company/owner and the trading of naming rights could be seen by some fans as a government strategy to increase overall revenue without increasing taxes (Bartow, 2007). Consequently, the selling of naming rights has emerged as an important issue in professional sports and this brings into attention the global-glocal debate (Swyngedouw, 2004), where networks, territories, and rescaling are at stake (Edensor & Millington, 2008; Hagen, 2011). While globalization emphasizes international influences, glocalization focuses attention on the interaction between the global and the local and the ways that this shapes governance and decision-making (Simonis, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2004). Moreover, glocalization relates to, and resonates with, the construction of place identity, in which fans' identities are influenced by the characteristics and cultural traditions of a given place. Some scholars have examined the changing spaces of football fandom in a global-glocal

context (e.g., Bale, 2000; Conner, 2014; Evans & Norcliffe, 2016) although they tend to approach this issue from the perspective of Western clubs. In a case study of football fandom in the UK, Evans & Norcliffe (2016) analyze how football spaces are economically and socially reproduced, and how supporters of two major teams (Everton FC and Liverpool FC) in the city work to both glocalize and globalize the football culture of Liverpool. Authenticity and 'local superiority' are key issues of glocalization for the Evertonians, while the football spaces of Liverpool are more refashioned by global forces. Similarly, in a discussion of the history of Celtic FC, Conner (2014: 542) claimed that "the routes" - i.e., where the identities are being performed and (re)negotiated – are more significant in today's globalized world than the historical and cultural roots of these identities. The Celtic FC fan identification and attachment processes "are composed of a deterritorialized transnational group of individuals from around the globe who each have their own individual reasons for supporting the Club."

Caught between the global and the local, sports fans can strongly contest changes in naming rights of stadia and clubs. In many cases, the commodification of a name could lead to perceived social injustice and a lack of access to social capital resources. As a rather more limited concept in which we envision what moral society looks like, David Harvey (1973: 97) defined social justice as "a particular application of just principles to conflicts which arise out of the necessity for social cooperation in seeking individual advancement." Thus, social justice refers to social and institutional arrangements related to the activity of production and distribution on an equal basis for all sections of the population and is a highly debated term in critical toponymies (Alderman & Inwood, 2013). Conflicting claims could be resolved through commonly accepted principles of justice, although Harvey recognizes that "unfortunately, there is no one generally accepted principle of social justice to which we can appeal" (1973: 98).

Therefore, *social inequalities* related to fans' access to social capital resources comprise unequal opportunities among the fans for a common benefit. In our case, we define social capital resources as "networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1995: 67). What Amartya Sen (2009) called an *inequality of capabilities* is, in fact, a result of what people can (or cannot) do with local resources (e.g., the power to participate in the social life of the community, access to sports, etc.) and this type of inequality seems to be critical for understanding fandom tensions created around the issue of naming (club) rights. Moreover, Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony is relevant in arguing how dominant groups in a (capitalist) society create specific norms to suit their own purposes. Gramsci's theory acknowledges the economic and social constraints on the less powerful and allows us to analyze the systemic features of a society characterized by inequalities of power, where "subordinate groups lack the language necessary even to conceive concerted resistance…the capability for resistance flourishes and may lead to the creation of counterhegemonic alternatives" (Lears, 1985: 573-4). Gramsci's cultural hegemony is not specifically about *manipulation*, but rather about *legitimation*. The experiences and values of dominant groups are validated in public discourse, while the ideas of subordinate groups are not, though it is a blurred line between dominant and subordinate cultures (Gramsci, 1971). Gramsci's view of society involves a complex interaction of autonomous spheres of power (cultural, economic, and political; public and private) within a sum of practices or attitudes and not a mechanical model of superstructure. Thus, such a power "helps define the boundaries of common-sense 'reality' either by ignoring views outside those boundaries or by labeling deviant opinions 'tasteless' or 'irresponsible' " (Lears, 1985: 571-2).

While there is a dearth of academic literature concerning the changing of sports club names, the literature about the reactions of fans is equally limited. As Boyd (2000) appositely argued, arenas or stadia are physical memory places; but when commemoration is substituted for commercialization, then commodification becomes a threat to public memory places. The identity of memory places is thus altered because commemorative names of stadia are sacrificed for corporate naming. Taking Arsenal Football Club as an example, Church & Penny (2013: 830) highlighted the role of power and space seen in the new modern stadium as an 'Arsenalization' of space. They concluded that through jointly agreed actions and contestation "supporters and stadium institutions not only negotiate but they will seek to influence practices and spaces". Others such as Woisetschläger et al. (2014), contend that old stadium names could remain as sites of fans' resistance to naming right sponsorships. On the other hand, geographers have been interested in the relationship between branding football and local embeddedness, where "historical, geographical, cultural and economic embeddedness of football provides the ontological significance of the local" (Edensor & Millington, 2008: 188). In particular, match-day routines among fans of Manchester City FC have been transformed with fans preferring to socialize in central areas of Manchester and less around the stadium itself (*ibid*. Edensor & Millington, 2010). Pushing further the idea that the sociality of match-day rituals are evident nowadays for football fans in Norway and Britain, Hognestad (2012) argues that fans still relate to clubs as a consequence of physical considerations and social networking, even if television is considered to have the largest impact on the everyday community relationships of football fans.

In a comparable context to football stadia, football clubs are progressively purchased by wealthy individuals (and more rarely by multinational organizations) that exploit global football clubs (i.e., players, coaches, and administrators) for their benefit. This brings forth challenges

experienced by the new owners when they deliver and consume social assets that are considered the property of the football business but also tokens of local identity. The transportability, as well as the lack of trust in new owners, is one of the main factors determining how fans evaluate the benefits and disadvantages of renaming a football club, and those fans may be willing to move their allegiances elsewhere. There are several meaningful comparisons of fans that moved entirely from one club to another location and (re)named it. The first is the formation of a new club by Manchester United fans who became disaffected with the corporatization of Manchester United and set up FC United of Manchester (Brown, 2008; Porter, 2015). In addition, there is the case of Wimbledon FC which moved to Milton Keynes and was renamed Milton Keynes Dons FC in 2002-2003; disaffected fans established a new club called AFC Wimbledon (Hognestad, 2012). Thus, professional sports clubs can move wholesale to different cities for financial gain, suggesting that "while some (football) brands may be global fluids, the economic, social and cultural embeddedness of most clubs in local contexts restrict the potential to extend brand awareness'' (Edensor & Millington, 2008: 190). On the other hand, the transnationalization of the football economy (involving football clubs, the media, sportswear, the sports betting industry, security, the logistics and transport industry, and catering concessions) requires a portable workforce, consistently extending football marketing and branding (Medway & Warnaby, 2014). This scenario is particularly common but not exclusive to other institutions around the world, beyond those related to football clubs. For instance, the Roads and Transport Authority (RTA) of the Government of Dubai reported that a project to sell the naming rights of Dubai metro stations was "the 'ultimate branding and marketing opportunity' for national and international corporations seeking greater visibility in the fast-growing city" (Rose-Redwood, 2011: 35).

3. Selling of the Poli name in a post-communist (football management) context

The change from communist political structures to a capitalist order has been an important period for people living in Central and Eastern Europe. For some people, post-communist nostalgia for the communist past was at stake (Todorova & Gille, 2010), while others were critics of communist state-led actions. Chelcea & Druţã (2017: 525) suggest that Central and Eastern Europe operates nowadays under the auspices of "zombie socialism" where "post-socialist transition is long over" and where political and economic elites in the region continue to use the ghost of state socialism as a disciplinary device and an "ideological antioxidant."

The landscape of political and economic transformation in Romania was based on uncertainty, high levels of unemployment, the privatization or closure of communist factories and businesses, and a hunger to attract new foreign direct investment. Romanian sports in general, and football in particular, cannot be divorced from these wider processes of transformation. In particular, the cash-strapped local authorities were intent on finding solutions for the major football clubs of the cities/towns to maintain football at high levels.

As the post-communist context of football management is inextricable from the case-study explored herein, it is pertinent to briefly introduce Romanian football and the ways in which its organization, governance, and management structures evolved in the post-communist period. *Federaţia Română de Fotbal* (The Romanian Football Federation; FRF) is the governing body for football in Romania. Its major role is to organize the national football team and all Romanian football structures and competitions. FRF has been affiliated with the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) since 1923 and with the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) since 1955. The major rules are administered by FRF's General

Assembly and cover the status and transfer of players, disciplinary actions against football players and club managers, and the status of referees (FRF, 2017). Some of the duties of FRF were delegated to *Liga Profesionistã de Fotbal* (The Professional Football League; LPF), which is a sporting structure applicable to all professional clubs in Romania that are in the first football league – Liga I. In the period 1996-2013, the president of LPF was Dumitru Dragomir, a former communist manager of the team *FC Olt Scorniceşti*, Nicolae Ceauşescu's preferred team; the president of FRF was Mircea Sandu, a Romanian national football player in the 1980s. Both figures have been strongly contested by most football clubs in Romania outside the capital, Bucharest. Fans across Romania have accused them of being communists who are laundering money for the post-communist building *Casa Fotbalului* (The House of Football) and for their favoring of the principal clubs in Bucharest. Money laundering is a major reason why, in the post-communist period of Romanian football, some renowned clubs (e.g., *Rapid Bucureşti, Politehnica Timişoara, Universitatea Craiova*) were relegated to the 5th division. With the widespread prevalence of uncertainties (e.g., due to a lack of investors; corrupt so-called 'investors' who launder the local authorities' money; clubs with debts to the state, etc.) many clubs have been renamed or have lost their naming rights, while others have even been dissolved.

Turning now to Timişoara, the club *AFC (Asociaţia Fotbal Club) Politehnica Timişoara* (widely known as *Poli Timişoara* or simply *Poli*) was established in 1921. It took its name from the city's Polytechnic University which initially ran the club. The club enjoyed considerable success – winning two Romanian cups and twice finishing as runner-up – and was supported by a loyal and passionate fan base. In 1999, an Italian investor (Claudio Zambon) acquired the club's naming rights and the team was subsequently renamed *FCU (Fotbal Club Universitatea) Timişoara* in 2004 (ACS Poli, 2017).

In 2008, a Romanian investor (Marian Iancu) was selected by city hall officials to invest in the club. However, Zambon still owned the naming rights for *FCU Politehnica Timişoara* so the team could not use *Poli* or *Politehnica* in its name. Hence, it was renamed *FC Timişoara*. In 2008, Iancu and the city hall officials regained the right to the name *Politehnica Timişoara*. Iancu was subsequently discovered to have been using the club for money laundering and was convicted (De Banat, 2014). As a result, in 2011, the Romanian Football Federation relegated the team to the 5th division; however, due to substantial debts, the club was eventually dissolved altogether. This relegation was a blow to the city's pride and consequently the newly-elected mayor (Nicolae Robu) took action to restore first division football to the city. City hall officials had two options: re-start from the 5th division (the lowest division in Romania's domestic league) or merge with a football club from the higher divisions for quick results. Robu took the latter course and made an arrangement in 2011 with the nearby town of Recas to rename *ACS (Asociaţia Club Sportiv) Recaş*, a local team which had been newly promoted into the 2nd division, into *ACS (Asociaţia Club Sportiv) Poli Timişoara*. All the players from ACS Recaş transferred to the new team, leaving the town of Recaş without its own football team. The rights to the name of the historical *Poli* (along with its colors and flags) were acquired by the Timişoara town hall for *ACS Poli Timişoara*. This team was promoted to the 1st division in 2012 (ACS Poli, 2017).

While *ACS Poli Timişoara* is the team with the official support of the city hall and county authorities, it enjoys little support among fans. The creation of *ACS Poli Timişoara* outraged thousands of historical *Poli* fans who deeply distrusted the actions of the city hall. Fans regarded *AFC Politehnica Timişoara*, which was relegated to the 5th division in 2012, as the 'real' *Poli* team; they resented the fact that the original *AFC Politehnica Timişoara* was not given the

opportunity to work its way up from the 5th division on its own merits. Distrustful of private investors, a group of fans and sponsors established a new non-governmental organization in 2013 and adopted the team name *ASU (Asociaţia Sportivã Universitarã) Politehnica Timişoara* (ASU Politehnica, 2017). The team is now in the 2nd division. It plays in a small stadium in the city but regularly attracts 30,000 fans. Meanwhile, *ACS Poli Timişoara* plays in one of the largest stadia in the country but with crowds of 800 people or less (Figure 1).

As noted above, *ACS Poli Timişoara* is the team that has the support of the county seat and the local town hall authorities. In an interview with a local councilor associated with *Poli Timişoara* (who requested to remain anonymous), we found that "the name was obtained from the National Register of Federations, Foundations, Association and Trade. To avoid confusion…the name *Poli* in *ACS Poli* was selected rather than Politehnica." The formation of the team resulted in the addition of ACS due to the connection with ACS Recaş; this allowed a fusion of the two teams, whilst also preserving the initials. Moreover, the local councilor stated that "anyone who wants to show an association with *Poli Timişoara* will have to make mention of the name *ACS Poli Timişoara*."

A number of organizations have used the name Poli, but the press office of the Romanian National Registry of Associations, Foundations, and Federations explained that the value and meaning of these names differ on the basis of what initials or words are used with it. Despite the doubt that surrounds the legitimacy of *ACS Poli Timişoara* being the original team, the local state has heavily funded this team, meeting most of its expenses with sponsorship deals. Meanwhile, fans of the 'other' Poli team, *ASU Politehnica Timişoara*, have resisted by using the slogan "Poli we are" for the team, which also wears white and violet uniforms. Trams and buses in Timişoara are all colored in white and violet as a local symbol. A former staff member for

ACS Poli Timişoara stated, "The current regulation of FRF does not allow us to financially support both teams [ACS and ASU]…similar or identical names are not the norm; we can take note of ASU's affiliation to FRF, but the historical sign, colors and flag [belong] to ACS."

Despite popular support for *ASU Politehnica Timişoara*, major corporate sponsors (e.g., Romanian domestic furniture producer *Casa Rusu,* automotive group 'Continental' etc.) and authorities continue to support ACS in every respect (Monitorul, 2016). The difference between the funding available and expenditure of the two teams is substantial. The political favor given to the ACS club to start from the 2nd division is a depiction of the social inconsistencies associated with the naming issue. Fans' opinions had been ignored by the authorities supporting ACS due to the economic advantages they received from sponsors; the authorities perceived the actions of the die-hard ASU fans as unrealistic. Hence, fans stepped up to support the emerging ASU team and collected funds by themselves to sponsor it for the sake of preserving traditions and values.

4. Methodology

The methodology adopted for this case study follows the pattern of other case studies in social sciences (i.e., Patton, 2000; Yin, 2002) and more specifically in human geographies (i.e., Dunn, 2005). The paper is framed exclusively as a case study which is not necessarily generalizing results. The benefits and strengths of case study research are significant. First, although the force of transferability and the example are often underestimated for case studies, they can be useful for generating and testing a hypothesis, and for disproving of preconceived notions rather than theory verification (Yin, 2002). Second, they offer insights into real life practices; one can have more learnings stemming from these intense observations, than by a study involving only statistics of a large group (Holt-Jensen, 2013: 9). I use this case study to throw light on the

commodification of names and the implications of this process in the context of post-communist CEE.

The connection between the three main elements of the paper (naming rights, fandom, and social inequalities) is emphasized as a key issue. Interviews with local officials and fans of both local teams (ACS and ASU) provide the primary data for this study, augmented by data from secondary sources (newspapers, national and local football websites).

The sampling strategy for interviewing the fans was as follows: 10 of the author's friends who are fans of both teams were contacted. These people were used as the basis for snowball sampling (relying on referrals from initial subjects) to generate further interviewees, rather than sourcing participants on social media. Snowballing has advantages over using social media to source participants because it is more efficient in securing interviewees who are rich in information or learning about critical cases (Patton, 2002). Indeed, the snowballing approach proved to be useful; while various potential interviewees were recommended initially, it became apparent that certain names were mentioned over and over again. In other words, there was inter-subjective agreement about key people who should be approached for interviews. Thus, it can be asserted that the interviewees for the study provided a reasonably salient sample.

Interviews were conducted in August 2016 with 120 fans from both sides collectively: *ACS Poli Timişoara* (n = 52) and *ASU Politehnica Timişoara* (n = 68). See Table 1 for broad characteristics of the sample of fans.

[Table 1 about here]

In designing and carrying out the interviews, care was taken to avoid cognitive burden: participants needed to understand the concepts of the research (e.g., neoliberalism, naming rights) but this was facilitated by circumventing specialist terminology, where necessary and possible, in favor of more everyday language. Furthermore, not everybody could discuss their understandings and opinions with ease which posed complexities in terms of ensuring equal elicitation opportunities among interviewees. As such, a balance between speaking and listening, watching body language, remembering (Cloke et al., 2004) as well as paying particular attention to limited degrees of reflexivity was important.

Interview topics included: resistance to the naming rights of *Poli*; connections with protestors in other cities/countries; the availability of website platforms (e.g., blogs, online journals, and comment rooms); the role of private owners in selling the name of *Poli*; and fans' everyday connections to social capital resources. Further, local officials were interviewed to identify, clarify, and explore relevant procedural and legislative issues. These included a former ACS staff member and a former local city councilor who had been a club committee member in the 2000s and thus part of the decision-making process of re-naming and selling the club's name.

All interviews were conducted in Romanian. To encourage participants to discuss and represent their perceptions, a narrative (rather than structured) note-taking (rather than audio recording) approach was adopted. I was aware that the participants' identities impacted their responses, mainly given participants' gender framework. As most of the interviewees were male (Table 1), who proved to be more dedicated to the faith of the local teams and more affected by the tensions in the selling of the *Poli* name, I consider that the results were appropriate and showed a general picture of the current fandom positions in Timişoara. Moreover, most of the interviewees were educated young people (high-school and university students; intellectuals,

such as doctors and teachers, as well as people who work for non-governmental organizations), which reflected in the quality of the collected data.

The analysis of secondary sources was based on selecting major editorials dealing with debates on the *Poli* name. Following interpretation methods of primary and secondary sources in social sciences (Dunn, 2005; Patton, 2000), a table with values (themes and quotes) was created for depicting the necessary data. Then major themes were identified and relevant actors' quotes were chosen. The results were explained and connected to the examination of the sale of *Poli* name.

5. Results

5.1. Identity, blame, and mistrust

Fandom has long been an intense aspect of Timişoara culture. The resistance of ASU fans began after 2012 in conjunction with the name change, and their frustration is represented in an interview with an ASU fan club leader: "I understand they need investors, but they left us to continue our forefathers' will [heritage] from the last hundred years." Considering both the views of fans who contested the *Poli* naming rights and fans of ACS (who did not), all the interviewees were clearly influenced by the construct of place identity, which suggests that people's self-identity is influenced by the characteristics of a given place (Hauge, 2007). They were also well informed about the meaning of naming rights, but each side had their own opinions.

The main targets of the resistance were the local politicians who were responsible for the divided situation. All the fans interviewed questioned the motivations of politicians, including the current mayor and local town hall councilors, whose links with wealthy investors were raised as a matter of concern. Many participants expressed mistrust of their local leaders because they

wasted monetary resources and offered little support to the community. Others echoed this point, noting that investors were as much to blame as politicians. A central issue that drove the protests of ASU supporters was the loss of income and access to the *Dan Pãltinişanu* stadium resulting from the change in leadership. A lack of consideration for the fate of the team and players' livelihoods was also mentioned. One interviewee commented, "we had to move from our historical stadium" and "I paid a lot of money as a public contributor to the local budget, but have nothing to show from that." The fans perceived that local leaders were untrustworthy and had spent local resources on a product that was irrelevant to their needs.

The Romanian Football Federation and EU Football Courts were also blamed because regulations produced by FRF in Bucharest were imposed on clubs throughout the country. The fans expressed mixed feelings about the impact of the domestic federation on their practices. Some argued that FRF contained corrupt individuals who were not interested in developing regional and local football traditions, with an ASU interviewee claiming, "The Romanian Federation put pressure on us to respect their laws…they wanted to destroy regional brands like *Poli* because it is an old club and they were interested only in developing their own affairs, laundering public money…most of the former and current leaders have dozens of legal problems; more than that, some of them are in jail." The perception that FRF wanted to maintain control, regardless of cultural and historical traditions, was widespread. The rivalry with Bucharest has a long historical background. Tensions exist between "the periphery" of the current study (Timişoara city and the Banat region) and the capital city of Bucharest. Here it is important to briefly explain the cultural tensions between people living in the Banat region and Bucharest. Located at the edge of the Pannonian Plain, Banat includes part of western Romania, northern Serbia, and south-eastern Hungary, with Timişoara being its largest city. As a genuine

multicultural region made of 16 ethnic minorities, people are proud of their Habsburg and Austro-Hungarian cultural influence (Author & other, 2008: 17-19). On the other hand, Bucharest, situated in southern Romania, was part of the historic province of Wallachia and was under the influence of the Ottoman Empire for more than five centuries. A long-standing distrust still lingers toward Bucharest, where corruption is considered by Timişoara fans as a norm among politicians and football leaders. These tensions could be conceptualized as a form of regional competition.

Interviewers noted that the mismanagement eliminates opportunities for sources of income, such as revenue from tickets, or leads to *divide et impera*, where fandom from different historical Romanian clubs "are now divided and relegated to the 4th or 5th divisions." Interviewers provided examples of other Romanian teams facing disparities in treatment. One commented, "see what happened…to *Steaua Bucureşti* and *Universitatea Craiova*," citing another case of perceived inequality. The teams cited by the interviewees, Steaua Bucharest and *Universitatea Craiova*, are also afflicted with divided fans. Steaua is the former army team, but the Ministry of Defense refused to sell it to a wealthy investor, George Becali. As a result the dispute over naming rights resulted in two teams: one with the right to the name *Fotbal Club Steaua Bucureşti* (in the 4th division) but with few fans, the other entitled Fotbal Club FCSB (with an extensive fan base) which is currently in the 1st division. Similarly, most of *Universitatea Craiova's* fans joined the newly created local authority team, *FCU Universitatea Craiova*, while a few supporters fused with the 4th league relegated *Fotbal Club Universitatea Craiova 1948*. The situation was further skewed in this direction after the local municipality finalized the construction of a 40,000 seat stadium for FCU in 2017. Accordingly, the Timişoara case is not unique in the context of post-communist Romanian fandom.

Although EU football bodies and FRF were blamed for regulating the club's naming rights, interviewees did not indicate awareness of similar resistance or dissatisfaction in other European countries. The costs and risks associated with resistance suggest other non-contentious channels were not useful in challenging the loss of naming rights and the rights of ASU team to play at the *Dan Paltinişanu* stadium. This is the largest stadium in Timişoara (and the largest in Romania at the time of construction in 1963, with 30,000 seats) placed near the Student Campus area of the city and bearing the name of a *Politehnica Timişoara* player from the 1970s. Asked whether they had attempted to use regular channels in their resistance, most participants mentioned they had used Facebook and ASU's blog to complain about the local authorities, but to little effect. One ASU fan stated, "We, the fans, are very united. If we hear of [the authorities] limiting our rules and rights, then we have to protest. But our voice is only reflected in the local media, while the authorities have done nothing for us. We wrote on many walls in the town that 'AC Recaş is not Poli' but the authorities did not care about us." Even the Polytechnic University's Rectorat building in the central area of the city was inscribed with this graffiti (Figure 2) because the current mayor was the former rector of the University (2004-2012). These comments suggest that the influence and usefulness of official representative bodies is perceived to be limited, with one participant grouping their leaders alongside members of the local council and the mayor as being responsible. Reliance on a shared identity as Banat people was a key aspect of fandom and provided a mechanism through which they could organize and mobilize.

[Figure 2 about here]

The glocalization of ASU fans works both at the historical heart of the game and in local territories that have adopted football; for instance, if we compare the supporters of Liverpool (Everton FC and Liverpool FC) with those of Timişoara we can notice that the fans of ASU perceive the 'localness' of the support base as a 'virtue', exactly as in the case of Everton FC supporters in Liverpool (see Evans & Norcliffe, 2016: 226). As noted, culture and tradition were more powerful forces for the ASU fans, potentially enabling the establishment of dense networks of trust. However, one ACS fan said, "I usually counter-write on the city walls that 'AC Recaş nu e Poli' ['AC Recaş is not Poli'] and 'ACS is Poli' because, for me, the team who plays at *Dan Paltinişanu* stadium is the real *Poli*, and this is ACS *Poli*." Therefore, resistance came from both sides in a fight and counter-fight for claiming the rights to the name of *Poli*.

5.2. Varieties of post-communism through delayed and compromised economic restructuring

The loss of a historical name was clearly foreshadowed by events prior to the 1990s. Indeed, the role of communism and, more exactly, the move away from communism, was an important part of the context for the sale of (and response to) the name *Poli*. As for the implications of the end of communism and the particular circumstances of post-communism in Romania and how they affected the way that the naming issue of *Poli* unfolded, several political and economic stages can be traced: instability (early 1990s); reformist government (1996-2000); return to power of former communists (2000-2004); Romania joining the EU (2007); global financial crisis (2008-2011); and most recently recession and frequent public protest (2012 onwards).

First, the political and economic instability of the early 1990s was associated with former communist elites in power (Boia, 2001). This period of uncertainty led to the phenomenon of nationalism (see the anti-Hungarian events in Târgu Mureş in March 1990) and the *mineriade*

(i.e., miners called by left-wing president Ion Iliescu to come to Bucharest to defend his position in front of protesters on June 1990 and September 1991). Moreover, statements by the president such as "*nu ne vindem tara*" ("we don't sell our country") reflected the former communist elite's distrust of neoliberalism, and a distaste for foreign investors. In fact, it was a gradualist approach to reform, characterized by economic decline and recession, but little actual restructuring. This atmosphere led to falling living standards, the rise of ultranationalism, and a deterioration of Romania's international image. This general political background strongly affected football support. Some traditional football teams had to reorganize on the basis of private Romanian investment because foreign investors were still seen as 'enemies' of the country, while former big communist enterprises underwent restructuring. Moreover, some football supporters and teams became associated with ultranationalist parties.

Second, the government of the 1996-2000 period had lofty ambitions but achieved only limited actual reform. That government continued the process of limited privatizations, while living standards continued to fall (Boia, 2001). Interestingly, many communist industries experienced bankruptcy. In terms of the mid- and late-1990s market reforms, Stoica (2004: 274) highlighted that "in Romania most medium-size and large enterprises are still owned by the state, and the several attempts at mass privatization have been unsuccessful." In this context of lack of private investors and collapsing living standards, football support continued to decline. Nevertheless, mayors and local government officials still found resources to gain electoral capital through building new stadia and paying football players.

Third, when former communists returned to power (2000-2004) a slow but steady overall consolidation of the Romanian economy was noticeable, with economic growth and marginal increases in living standards as well as an increasing engagement with joining of NATO and the

EU. Generally, this helped improve Romania's international image. In these conditions, football teams and their supporters benefitted from attracting foreign investors and football players.

Fourth, after Romania joined the EU in 2007, football teams enjoyed increased stability and increased foreign investment due to political and economic stability at the national level. The massive change in mobility (with Romanians freely travelling within the EU and people from other countries visiting Romania) enhanced the potential to attract team funding and football players from other EU countries. The increased living standards and the massive exposure to 'European' ideas and models positively affected football teams and their supporters. As Young & Light (2001: 953) argued, "[CEE] states are often represented as 'Western' in a process of 'Europeanisation' which seeks to emphasise their modern, liberal, democratic nature." Foreign ownership became a norm for more football teams in Romania; however, because Romania was not immune to the deleterious impacts of the global financial crisis of 2008-2011, the neoliberalization of teams was not fully consolidated.

Fifth, the post-2012 economic recession and the resultant demonstrations (see for instance Other & author, 2013; Author, 2015) was another barrier to football development and management. The events led to falling living standards and had further impacts for both football players and teams.

Summing up, broader political and economic post-communist developments which may appear to be completely unrelated to football strongly affected what happened to football teams and their supporters. This 'big picture' of limited and hesitant economic restructuring and post-communist political/economic shifts also led to changes in the everyday behaviors of football teams and supporters at the national level and manifested itself at the local level with Timişoara's football teams.

Among the fans interviewed, there were mixed feelings about the 1990s. Most felt that the period after communism failed to achieve anything and that they were financially worse off as a result. Some claimed that the FRF regulations were, in fact, worse than the regulations of the communist period. This is connected to post-communist nostalgia. One participant argued, for instance, "The new political system was difficult to be understood; clubs could not be financed from local budgets, and they had to attract foreign investors […] but it seems most of them were not thoroughly vetted to confirm if they really had money-making potential, and usually the process bankrupted the clubs." It was also noted that foreigners and Romanians with small businesses in Timişoara were allowed to finance the team for a short period of time, but local authority leaders did not have a vision for long-term sustainable investment. In the past, the absence of private ownership had made the continuation of historical practices and names easier to maintain. At the same time, corruption associated with former members of the Communist Party, who were involved in leading the club, had also caused frustrations. Interestingly, the Romanian interviewees have very different attitudes about socialist and communist systems. Those unfamiliar with the systems – mainly the younger, post-communist generation, incorrectly consider them inseparable, while those in various academic disciplines, such as economics and sociology, tend to focus on aspects of the systems most pertinent to their own work. Thus, socialism system relies on the idea that capitalism can exist in a socialist state and capitalism can work in a socialist state; meanwhile, communism is based on the principle that capitalism must be destroyed in order to develop a classless society. If communism is both an economic and political system, socialism is primarily an economic system.

Almost none of the fans had heard of neoliberalism, but their comments can be interpreted through that lens. Both ASU and ACS fans agreed that football cannot survive

without private owners and cash subsidies, but some of them went further: one ASU fan declared "we don't need corrupt local authorities to finance the club. We don't need tricksters [under the guise of private ownership] to come here and launder money. Now our club is in the 2nd division thanks to the fans' financial contributions—everything is transparent, no private thieves, no local leaders involved."

The issue of losing rights to the *Poli* name had significant impacts, as it resulted in the redirection of local resources in the city and, thus, a loss in social capital. All ASU participants expressed their frustration at the need to gather in a new small stadium. Moreover, networks of personal contacts were destroyed. Many fans had common chat rooms with the name *Poli* Timişoara, and now they had to create a new website named *ASU Politehnica*. They had to break long-standing friendships with fans that were then neutral or who transferred their allegiance to ACS. An ASU fan commented, "The relationship with my son has been tense since he became an ACS fan," and "I lost many friends who went with the mayor [i.e., the ACS team]." Losing the opportunity to network with other fans was also a major loss for one ACS fan who noted, "When we were a single club in the city, we had very good channels to meet each other…a simple Facebook announcement on the *Politehnica Timişoara* Facebook page and we would gather at McDonald's and march to the stadium. Now we are [a] few fans at ACS and not united…Nobody sings and shouts for our team, it is like at the theatre – silence. It's a pity we have no gallery, no strong networks to meet and build a well identified fandom." Many ASU fans are still active in trying to establish a vibrant atmosphere at the stadium. One fan stated, "Even when we were in the 5th division, we went with buses and personal cars to different villages in Timiş County where the team played, chanting, waving our white and violet flag."

Considering the diverse views expressed in the interviews, it is clear that *Poli's* traditions feature strongly in their concerns. Although the participants argued that threats of losing ownership of the *Poli* name mobilized the anger of fans, there was a shared identity and perception in terms of recent events. Poor management by FRF and local authorities were perceived as undermining established ways of life, even if they did not lead to frequent mobilizations. The issue of inequality was mentioned by almost all ASU participants, noting that privatization of the club and the Romanian Federation's attempts to control behavior presented a significant challenge to the continued existence of the team. Reference to forefathers and how they managed the team appeared repeatedly in the interviews, reinforcing the strength of tradition, again suggesting post-communist nostalgia for the more secure and safe system of Romanian football under state communism. There was an overriding sense that they wanted to continue with their historical name. Many participants noted that limited access to social capital resources was a key issue in producing social inequalities mainly due to local administration decision on imposing a lack of access to *Dan Pāltinişanu* stadium for the ASU supporters. This further strengthens the perception that fans are increasingly losing rights, including naming rights, under neoliberal pressures.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to evaluate the impacts of fandom and its social implications in the type of spatial conflicts emerging between the ownership of a sports club and the local communities involved, pushing forward the current debates in critical toponymies on naming rights. There have been recent calls for more study of the commodification of place-naming rights (see Rose-Redwood et al., 2010; Rose-Redwood, 2011; Rose-Redwood & Alderman, 2011; Light &

Young, 2015); this article demonstrates that changing the name of a sport team is an arena of contestation. The legitimization of the ACS club name by the local city authorities as *Poli* was strongly opposed by fans, who believed that the name violated the historical values of the team and club that the fans associated with the spirit of the game. Although acceptance of naming deals can alleviate clubs' financial problems, this case-study illuminates how a backlash from fans can have substantial negative impacts on the perception of that club within local communities. As Woisetschläger et al. (2014) argued, by viewing the resistance of fans through the lens of social identity theory, sponsorship associated with naming rights can be conceived as an act of out-group influence on the ritual place of the in-group. Hence, while evaluating the impacts of sponsorship due to name changing, researchers need to account for the responses of fans. In this case, that response was powerful, as the fan base rejected the decision of the local authorities and established their own team which was prepared to work its way up from the bottom.

The inequalities existing in the funding offered to the two teams claiming to be descendents of *Poli* (or *Politehnica Timişoara*) are evident. The preference of those in power for ACS left the ASU team – which enjoyed the support of the majority of fans – without any official funding or support. Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony helps us to better understand how dominant groups in society "create" norms, especially in relation to economic contexts, to suit their own purposes. As Lears (1985: 573) puts it: "People indeed create their own symbolic universes (Gramsci's spontaneous philosophy) to make life understandable and tolerable, and those symbolic universes do come to have an apparently 'objective' validity, particularly over generations as they spread from scattered individuals to broad social groups." A given symbolic hegemonic universe can serve the interests of dominant groups to the detriment of others

(Gramsci, 1971). For instance, ACS fans are typical of subordinate groups who legitimize dominant voices, sharing a kind of complicity in their own victimization. On the other hand, the fans of both teams were convinced that FRF was irresponsible in the way that it implemented regulations that appeared to favor the interests of teams in Bucharest. Some of the comments of fans also suggested that post-communist nostalgia may have affected their attitudes, although those unfamiliar with socialism and communism systems incorrectly consider them synonymous.

Football is a key area of pride in local communities, recognized by fans through their ways of celebrating local identities, traditions, and myths (Edensor & Millington, 2008). Although the sports industry has transformed itself in the past few decades, shared identity and glocalization remained very strong. Former major clubs, such as *Politehnica Timişoara*, are symbols of fans' regional/local social and cultural identities rooted in a tradition of rule by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as opposed to those in Bucharest which are considered by the local fans to be more Balkan in style. In this sense, the current attitudes of ASU fans reflect a wider division within contemporary Romania between Bucharest (with its history of Ottoman rule) and Transylvania/Banat (with its history of Austro-Hungarian rule).

The case study presented in this paper is novel relative to the extant literature, for a number of reasons. First, it explores the response of fans to a change of name, highlighting elements of social inequalities and injustice that exist in the preferences shown by officials in power; in this case, the inequality was reflected in the fact that fans who opposed ACS and supported ASU had no access to capital and had to raise money on their own to support their club. Second, this study is rooted in a specific context – post-socialism – which has been characterized by intricate political and socioeconomic issues of transformation that appeared due to the shift from the communist era to a capitalist system (Young & Light, 2001; Stoica, 2004).

As the former communist cadres (who did not have experience as entrepreneurs) were at an advantage in being employers due to their organizational experience and network resources established since the communism period (Stoica, 2004), post-communist Romania was characterized by a quasi-neoliberal reform, which lead to compromised economic restructuring. On the other hand, local political elites were eager to rapidly identify and capture venue sources to support football clubs and put their trust, often ove misguidedly in investors in order to gain popular support and achieve electoral success. However, this resulted in many major football clubs in Romania becoming bankrupt and even being dissolved. In addition, corruption and money laundering undertaken by leaders of FRF and LPF as well as by local mayors and private investors, gave birth to sorrowful examples like that of *Poli Timişoara* fans. This kind of 'zombie socialism' (Chelcea & Druţă, 2017), defining the post-communist period, is an effect of national political and economic restructuring which delayed/compromised economic restructuring generated in the post-1989 period.

Massey (1991: 29) explained that articulated moments in networks of social relations are necessary for analyzing spatial relations. Several such moments were revealed in the interviews for this case study in connection with access to social capital. Local communities have a right to networking and to the capital budget that is allocated for local sports teams. However, when local communities have limited access to capital resources, then the changing of naming rights can give rise to the perception of social injustice. Although conflict and rivalry in football are noteworthy everywhere, bonds of mutuality and (transnational) networks continue to be the most important issues that enable football fans be in contact with one another (Hognestad, 2012).

In summary, while drawing on the everyday experiences and narratives of fans, this article shows how the geographies of commodifying the name of a local football club are

relevant in the manifestation of social tensions and inequalities. This is important for understanding local people's access to social capital, including networking, resources, and support from local leaders. The findings push forward current theories of critical toponymies by highlighting that commodifying names can mobilize serious contestations between partisan groups about who owns a name; such contestations, however, appear to be on uncertain ground because of post-communist delayed economic restructuring practices.

Further research could explore the relationship between naming rights and football clubs' social and economic behavior to better understand if - and how - fans are respected and social justice is served. There is also ample scope to explore the aspects of fandom that are significant to place-based cultural and historical attachments with clubs. The owners of football clubs together with local decision-making actors need to be aware of such attachments when considering the sponsorship of a team's name (or even a change of name) since such proposals can trigger massive levels of resistance and contestation from the fans themselves.

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