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SCHOOL SPORTS IN THE BALKAN COUNTRIES – A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Abstract: School sports are part of both the educational and sports systems, and they are regulated differently in some countries. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to make a comparative analysis of the management models of school sports in 5 Balkan countries: Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. The systems were observed based on four criteria: documents forming the basis of the school sport model, financing, the system of school sport competitions, and the branching of the system. It was established that in all models from the observed countries there are general and specific documents that are important for the functioning of school sports. Although the management structure is similar in all observed models, the control by individual sectors is carried out seriously only in Slovenia. In all models, only physical education teachers are responsible for the implementation of all programs and projects. Also, insufficient and unsystematic financing of school sports can be observed in all countries (except Slovenia), which results in problems in the implementation of school sports competitions. Based on the characteristics of the examined models of school sports, it was determined that the organization and management of school sports in

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Slovenia contributed to better results in terms of criteria that can be used to assess the quality of school sports.

Keywords: *school sport, organization, regulations, participation, competition.*

Introduction

According to the provisions of the Statute of the International Federation of School Sports (ISF), the primary objective of school sports is to promote the physical, intellectual, moral, social, and cultural development of students (ISF Statutes, 2000). Therefore, the quality of the organization of school sports and the work with students should not be evaluated based on victories and the number of trophies won, but mainly by the mass participation, that is, the number of students who actively participate in it (Choi, Johnson, Kim, 2014).

School sports are part of both the educational and sports systems, and they are defined and regulated differently in some countries. The core objective of school sports is to transform an inactive and sedentary lifestyle into a societal construct aimed at increasing the number of children engaged in physical activity (Bailey, 2006; Mooses et al., 2021; Dudley, Okely, Pearson, Cotton, 2011). The degree to which physical exercise and sports exhibit positive outcomes is contingent upon the level of societal development and its prevailing values (Malm, Jakobsson, Isaksson, 2019). Such benefits may be more or less noticeable depending on these factors.

There is a difference in the type, size, and direction of support that individual societies provide to school sports (Eurydice, 2015). The relationships that determine and direct the development of sports, children, and school sports are, most often, burdened by social circumstances, in which politics plays an important role in determining the adoption of strategies in all important areas of society, including education and sports (Merkel, 2013).

The state and development of school sports are influenced by numerous internal factors that arise from the internal organization of the system, from its reliance on the school, its personnel, material and financial potential, to the territorial organization on which it relies (Houlihan & Green, 2006). Organizing at the local level is crucial for the survival of the system, the number of participants, and higher levels of competition, making it a key factor for success.

In the countries of the European Union, problems related to school sports are significantly smaller due to the better material basis on which school sports can rely, a higher degree of understanding of importance of physical activity, and more teaching staff compared to the number of students (Marshall & Hardman, 2000). However, the report of the European Commission on sports reveals that several EU members still have concerns regarding the quality of physical and health education

programs, school sports, and the qualifications of the teachers who perform these activities (Eurydice, 2015).

Examples of developed countries can serve as positive role models for organizing school sports. England has a long tradition in school, voluntary, and professional sports, and its education system is a key foundation for youth sports, both inside and outside the school system (Lindsey, 2020). Private elite schools set an example for other schools in how to organize high-quality physical education classes as well as opportunities for children to participate in sports at the “doorstep” of the home. In 2002, almost 42% of all students in England took part in extracurricular sporting activities, thanks to the government’s involvement in financing the sports community of teachers and coaches, producing results not only in terms of popularizing sports but also in terms of educating a healthy nation (Daley, 2002).

Based on the research of current school sports systems in the countries of the European Union, extracurricular activities, as well as supplementing physical activities, are most often focused on competitions and other events organized by the school and school clubs, as well as events organized by the school in partnership with other institutions. Greece and Finland have interesting initiatives on the concept of school sports competitions, which attach more importance to the participation of as many children as possible in the competitions, rather than their competitive character (Eurydice, 2015; Yli-Piipari, 2014). In both countries, the motivation of children to engage in sports is considered the most important, while also highlighting the satisfaction and enjoyment of children who participate in school sports competitions. More and more countries are trying to increase physical activities in everyday school life, such as exercise during recess or several times during the school day, and even on the way to school.

The problem of improving the model of organization and management of school sports has not been investigated enough. School sport belongs to the system of education, the system of sports, and the system of health, and the research has proven that physical activity realized through school sports has a positive effect on the overall status and integral development of students. However, there are significantly fewer researches related to the organization and management of school sports, and comparative researches of different systems were not found in the available literature.

The system of school sports in the Balkan countries, depends on various cause-and-effect connections and relationships of external factors such as state support in material and financial terms, health, governmental and non-governmental organizations dealing with behavioral disorders. All of these are factors that can influence the implementation and introduction of better elements of management and leadership based on strategies, action plans for the realization of strategies, laws and by-laws, as well as the technology of school sports organization. The aim of this paper is to make a comparative analysis of the organization and management models of school sports in Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro.

Methodology

The data collection and analysis employed multiple methods due to the complexity of the research problem. The research incorporated both qualitative and quantitative approaches, case studies, and an analysis of the practice of examined models of school sports.

A sample of observed school sports systems. The research sample comprises five current school sports systems, including the system of Republic of Serbia Republic of Croatia, Republic of Slovenia, Republic of Montenegro and the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina). The observed systems have varying characteristics of governance and management defined by founding and other legal acts. The sample includes all subsystems formed based on valid legal documents issued by governmental (education) and non-governmental (sport) organizations.

Study design. The systems were observed based on four criteria, including the documents forming the basis of the school sport model, organization and management of school sport and financing, the system of school sport competitions, and the branching of the system with student participation in school sport competitions. Student participation was observed at the primary and secondary school level for 2018/19.

Data analysis. The research utilized the descriptive method to describe facts and processes, including documents and practices of examined school sports systems. The modeling method was employed based on the observation of critical factors of the structure, behavior, and functioning of the model and its adequate description in logical, conceptual, and linguistic terms. The comparative analysis of the same and related elements from the examined school sports systems was also used to identify similarities in phenomena and behavior, as well as differences between them. These analyses will serve as the basis for drawing certain generalizations and conclusions.

Results and discussion

The study findings demonstrate that all countries have developed strategic documents concerning the development of sports, implementation plans, and corresponding regulatory documents (regulations, instructions, directives) that regulate sports, including school sports programs and competitions.

Slovenia presents its strategic documents in the form of the National Sports Program, while Croatia and Montenegro have both strategies and national sports

programs. The priorities of all sports development strategies and national sports programs are similar and include the development of children's and youth sports, including school sports, the development and improvement of sports infrastructure, increasing the number of citizens engaged in sports, as well as the development and improvement of top-level sports.

Of the special documents related to the regulation of school sports, Serbia and Croatia have School sports development strategy. Croatia, Slovenia, and Montenegro have national sports programs that also include school sports.

The general goals related to the development of school sports in the observed models are similar and refer to:

- (1) Improvement of the material and technical conditions for the implementation of school sports;
- (2) Increasing the number of sports sections and other extracurricular sports and recreational activities within school sports;
- (3) Increasing the number of students participating in school events and competitions;
- (4) Improvement of professional work within school sports.

Within the educational strategies and laws on primary and secondary education of all countries, the importance of physical activity and health is emphasized, which is implemented through concrete curricula and programs of physical, sport, and health education. The aforementioned curricula define the role of school sports competitions and provide guidelines for pupil participation in them.

In the National Sports Program of the Republic of Slovenia (2014–2023), whose strategy is developed by local communities, there is a different way of organizing legal acts and organizing sports and school sports than in other countries. This approach stems from the mandatory educational system and has produced positive results in practice, both in terms of quantitative growth (the share of sports-active citizens and students, the number of sports organizations, the number of registered athletes in competition systems has increased) and in terms of quality (the number of categorized and top athletes, the number of medals won at major competitions, the number of professionally educated staff in sports).

The analysis of sports development strategies in the observed countries showed a positive result in the increase in the number of students participating in school sports activities. However, in all systems, except in Slovenia, there is no connection between certain indicators of the growth of participants in certain segments of sports activities, which are connected with the educational system and school sports. Based on the results achieved by Slovenia, a positive experience that could improve other systems is the increased participation of the educational system and its stronger connection with school sports. Here, we are not referring to the activities of professional councils

and physical education professors but rather a systemic solution in which education would concretely support school sports.

In all Sports Development Strategies, school sports infrastructure is considered the main prerequisite for the development of sports in general. In Western European countries, the percentage of the active population ranges between 13% and 72% (Breda et al., 2018), while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is at an extremely low level of 6% (*Sport Development Strategy for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2022–2030*), and in Serbia, it is 10% (*Sport Development Strategy for the Republic of Serbia 2014–2018*). To better understand the current situation regarding the activities of the population in the surrounding area, it should be noted that in Slovenia, the total percentage of physically active citizens is as high as 64% (*National Sport Program in the Republic of Slovenia 2014–2023*). This high percentage is related to the sports infrastructure and certainly has a reflection on the education and guidance of students towards school sports (Eurydice, 2015).

Research conducted in most countries to develop the Sports Development Strategy focused on the conditions of sports facilities in primary and secondary schools. The results showed that schools in Slovenia meet all standards related to physical education and school sports programs. However, in Serbia and Croatia, over 30% of primary and 45% of secondary schools lack adequate indoor facilities. Most schools in these countries have outdoor playgrounds of varying sizes and equipment (*School Sports Development Strategy in the Republic of Croatia 2009–2014*; *National Youth Program 2020–2024*; *School Sports Development Strategy in the Republic of Serbia 2014–2018*). Therefore, significant attention is directed towards infrastructure construction in the school sports development strategies. Unfortunately, in Montenegro, the Sports Development Strategy (2018–2021) found that no investment has been made in school sports infrastructure or teaching aids for physical education classes for years, and in some cases, since the schools were established. The Ministry of Sports is currently implementing several projects to improve school sports infrastructure. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, research conducted Sports Development Strategy showed that sports facilities are mostly in poor condition and neglected since 1984 and the Winter Olympic Games. The lack of material and financial resources limits the awareness of the need to exercise to improve health. Sports facilities that are not owned by schools are often leased for physical education and school sports competitions.

According to data from the European Union, Slovenians rank first in the use of natural sports fields and are among the most active citizens in the European Union (Eurydice, 2015). Unlike other countries in the research, Slovenia has made significant progress in developing sports infrastructure in the past ten years. Their National Program indicates that they have created “decent infrastructural conditions”. Slovenia has the best school sports infrastructure compared to the other countries in the research, which is also needed for organizing and conducting school sports competitions. Other countries should learn from Slovenia’s experience to improve the

state of their infrastructure as support for better development of school sports, based on space and equipment.

The organization of sports in each country is affected by the specificities of social organization (Houlihan & Green, 2006). Although similar development goals and guidelines are the basis of the system in their documents, the way of organization and interaction between the elements of the system largely determines how it functions. The national branch associations' connection with the associations of local bodies is crucial for the development of school sports and the inclusion of as many students as possible in its activities.

Regarding the position of school sports in the organizational and management system of sports, it is essential to note that Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro have national federations for school sports. In Slovenia, the Sports Institute "Planica" performs this function (*National Sport Program in the Republic of Slovenia 2014–2023*), and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Ministry of Civil Affairs manages school sports. Each federation for school sports unites territorial organizations of school sports according to the specific structure in certain countries (Table 1).

*Table 1. Organization of school sports**

Organizing level	Region	County	Municipality	Primary school	Secondary school
Serbia	8	26	150	3317	515
Croatia	6	21	429	2036	440
Slovenia	6	16	212	454	155
Montenegro	3	–	24	163	50
Bosnia and Herzegovina	12	–	141	1259	304

* based on various strategic documents from the researched countries (listed in the References)

Based on the detailed descriptions of the organization and management model of school sports, certain similarities can be observed, such as the composition of administrative and supervisory boards, and the existence of commissions that manage specific segments of work. However, the Management Board of Slovenia differs from other models of school sports in that it includes members who are responsible to the institutions that delegated them, including representatives from the Ministry of Education, Sports Institute "Planica", Faculty of Pedagogy, Faculty of Sports, primary and secondary schools, school principals, and two coordinators of school competitions. Similarly, in Croatia, a representative of the Central State Office for Sports was appointed as a member of the Executive Board.

In the sports system, school sports are vertically connected with local governments, national sports federations, and regional centers, as well as with educational institutions, which is the case for all observed models of school sports (Naul & Scheuer, 2020). In the Slovenian model, unlike others, the goals of the National Sports Program are related to measures that connect different social areas and require multidisciplinary activity and intersectoral coordination across multiple sub-structures of sports. The residents of the Republic of Slovenia have the opportunity to engage in sports in various forms, which can be interconnected, with schools playing a foundational role. According to the Slovenian model, sports programs, facilities, and natural areas for sports are key measures to provide opportunities to achieve goals.

The organization method of school sports in Slovenia, in practice, has shown better results than others. It should be used to improve other models from this research by formulating the link between national sports programs and connecting different social areas, utilizing a multidisciplinary approach and intersectoral coordination. Furthermore, it is necessary to provide and equate extracurricular physical activities, as well as additional sports programs with regular teaching activities.

Financing of school sports in Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro occurs at several levels. Local government associations for school sports are financed from municipal or city budgets, while school sports federations are financed from the budgets of the respective ministries of sports and education. However, in a large number of cities and local governments in Croatia, no funds are allocated for school sports. In Serbia, it is evident that the number of registered city school sports associations is much smaller than necessary, and there is an uneven allocation of individual local communities for school sports. Additionally, the funds allocated for school sports in Montenegro in recent years have been uneven, indicating insufficient continuous and stable financing. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, financial resources for the implementation of school sports programs for children and youth are uneven from year to year, depending on the organization and financial capacity of local governments. In Slovenia, funds are obtained more stably from different sources, including the Ministry responsible for education, the “Planica” Sports Institute, various sports association funds, and the Sports Funding Foundation.

School sports competitions take place at various levels in different countries. In Serbia and Croatia, competitions occur at five levels (school, municipality, county, region or inter-county, and republic-state competitions), and the sixth level is international school sports competitions. In Slovenia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, school sports competitions occur at four levels (school, municipality, county, and regional), with the fifth level being international competitions.

In Serbia, all activities are organized by 26 county coordinators, in Croatia by 21 presidents of county centers for school sports, in Slovenia by 16 regional center coordinators, in Montenegro by 24 municipal and 3 regional coordinators, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina there are responsible persons in accordance with a specific

state organization. School and municipality competitions, which are considered the most important in all school sports systems, provide opportunities for the largest number of active students at the first and second levels. To conduct a comparative analysis of the organization and management of individual school sports systems, the branching of the system and the number of students participating in school sports competitions (as shown in Table 2) are among the most significant indicators of success.

*Table 2. Students participation in school sports competitions for 2018/19**

Criteria	Students	Students in sports	Students in sports (%)
Serbia	751860	167815	22.3
Croatia	481760	120000	24.9
Slovenia	187822	86532	46.1
Montenegro	96006	20000	20.8
Bosnia and Herzegovina	388702	75000	19.3

* based on various strategic documents from the researched countries
(listed in the References)

Based on the available data on the number and percentage of students participating in school sports competitions, recent studies demonstrate that Slovenia has achieved the most favorable relative outcomes. This outcome is expected, given the considerable number of programs and sports branches in the country. However, there were challenges encountered in collecting data for the analysis of observed models, attributable to inadequate precision of the available data in Montenegro and the absence of a unified organization dealing with school sports in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Evidently, Slovenia has achieved a significantly higher number of students participating in sports competitions, and an even distribution of sports branches in all regions.

Conclusions

The models of school sports are based on the documents that regulate them. For this reason, a comparative analysis of documents five Balkan countries were performed. It was established that in all models from the observed countries there are general and specific documents that are important for the functioning and management of school sports (strategic documents, the Law on Sports with corresponding documents regulating sports and school sports). The positive experience of Slovenia with the increased participation of the educational system and its strong connection with school sports stands out, which could be useful for improving the model of school sports in other countries.

From the management point of view, the way in which the functions of planning, organizing, leading and controlling and governance in education and in sports overlap is specific. The key to solving the problem is in the good coordination and cooperation of educational institutions and organizations in sports. Greater participation of the profession and science (physical education and sports) in management, responsibility and increased engagement in equating extracurricular with teaching physical activities should be ensured. In this sense, it can be suggested to adopt the idea from the Republic of Croatia, in which the National Sports Council instead of the phrase “school or sport” introduces the phrase “both school and sport”, which aims to create conditions that would enable and encourage the institutionalized education of athletes. In order to realize this idea, it is necessary to engage educational institutions in other counties and create preconditions for the implementation of acceptable solutions that have already shown visible results in the practice of some countries.

In the analysis that were carried out in relation to the organization, management and way of financing school sports, it was learned about the characteristics of human resources involved in school sports. Although the management structure is similar in all models, the control of their work by individual sectors is not carried out as seriously as in Slovenia. In all models of school sports, only physical education and sports teachers are responsible for the implementation of all programs and projects.

In all models of school sports, except for the Slovenian one, insufficient and unsystematic financing of school sports can be observed, which results in problems in the implementation of school sports competitions. Slovenia’s financing model shows uniformity, orderliness, systematicity and especially efficiency in the way funds are distributed.

The compared competition systems in observed countries have certain differences, but they do not essentially represent a key factor in the efficiency of the system, which did not prove to be a decisive factor for increasing the scope of school sports activities and inclusion as many children as possible into school sports.

Based on the characteristics of the examined models of school sports, it was determined that the organization and management of school sports in Slovenia contributed to better results in terms of criteria that can be used to assess the quality of school sports,

In general, we cannot claim that we have covered all the factors that affect the school sports system with the researched criteria. One of the issues is matching participants in school sports with the organized sports system. It is important to research how different countries address this problem and how to encourage children who do not participate in organized sports to get more involved.

Additionally, this paper does not address teachers' motivation to engage in school sports. The quality of work and achievement of school sports goals depend significantly on teachers' efforts. It raises questions about how various systems acknowledge and appreciate the dedication and enthusiasm of teachers. Is internal motivation the primary driver for ensuring high-quality work in school sports, or are there systematic tools in place to support this?

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РЕЗИМЕ

Школски спорт је део и образовног и спортског система, а у појединим земљама различито је регулисан. Сходно томе, циљ овог рада је да се направи компаративна анализа организације и модела управљања школским спортом у пет балканских земаља: Србији, Хрватској, Словенији, Босни и Херцеговини и Црној Гори. Системи су посматрани на основу четири критеријума: документа која чине основу модела школског спорта, финансирање, систем школских спортских такмичења и разгранатост система. Утврђено је да у свим моделима из посматраних земаља постоје општи и специфични документи који су важни за функционисање и управљање школским спортом. Иако је управљачка структура слична у свим посматраним моделима, контрола рада по појединим секторима озбиљно се проводи само у Словенији. У свим моделима школског спорта само су наставници физичког васпитања и спорта одговорни за реализацију свих програма и пројеката. Такође, у свим земљама (осим Словеније) уочава се недовољно и несистематично финансирање школског спорта, што резултира проблемима у реализацији школских спортских такмичења. На основу карактеристика испитаних модела школског спорта, утврђено је да је организација и вођење школског спорта у Словенији допринело бољим резултатима у погледу критеријума који се могу користити за оцену квалитета школског спорта.

Кључне речи: *школски спорт, организација, регулатива, учешће, такмичења.*