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A POLITICAL AGENDA OF SPORTS?

Case
Study

Keywords

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the most recent running marathons in Bucharest to see whether they are part of a political agenda or not, and if yes, what are the reasons for this. Is this a way of allowing people to bond together, and to take part in charity? Is this part of the way media imposes its agenda on people, or vice-versa? Is it a way of political elites to control the masses and make them take part in welfare activities? The paper will take into account the hypothesis of sports and welfare holding communities together.

INTRODUCTION

In 2016 and 2017, marathons were organized in Bucharest with the meeting point in Herastrau Park. The purpose of this paper is to analyze what were the reasons, supposedly part of a political agenda, behind organizing these events. The 2016 Runfest event offered the participants vouchers and food from the sponsors Mega Image and Romanian Taste. It was organized with a publicity purpose, to advertise certain products which were displayed during the catering services. The marathon was then described as being a non-competitive one, and anyone regardless of age and abilities could join if they wished. The edition for October 2017 presents its purpose clearly on the marathon's website: to give for charity. On the web page, associated NGOs are present, such as those for children's homes. The OMV Petrom Half Marathon in May is, according to the results displayed on the website, a competitive one. Yet, this is just an opinion after first sight: on the menu bar above, we see "Charity" and we find listed there several associations willing to help children's homes. The competition is not necessarily a real competition, not one whose purpose is athletic only; it is more an occasion to socialize, show how fit you are, benefit for your own health and give a positive example to others to donate for charity purposes. Another marathon, from June 2017, DHL Stafeta Carpatilor, calls itself explicitly a charity marathon: almost 1500 runners have taken the race in spite of the rain and gathered 15000 euros for the Paralympic athletes.

There are, of course, other benefits, both personal and public (for charity), and there are also marathons organized in other cities in Romania, according to Ro Insider ("Pick your challenge: Romania events for running fans in 2017", 2017): "Running events have multiplied in Romania in recent years and various competitions are available to runners depending on their skill level, from occasional to triathlon ready. Besides keeping in shape, these races offer participants the possibility to see beautiful places in Romania and to raise funds to support various charities."

While supporting charity, the marathon event also encourages personal sports practice taken to an advanced level: the marathons are "for anyone wishing to take their sports practice to competition level." ("Pick your challenge: Romania events for running fans in 2017", 2017)

On social network platforms such as Facebook, users claim that this is a suitable event for corporate workers. Indeed, for a marathon in Bucharest from 2016, one user claimed that the event was a pleasant experience from which they had all ended up as winners. He praises his company, Electrica CSR, which encouraged him to participate with his colleagues in this event that

shows the involvement of their company in charity and that also has benefits on their personal and social health. Any type of activity, sports included, has the potential to gather together people in a cohesive community. It is similar to the way any type of culture, or subculture works: it is built on common rules, it holds certain values, it has set up traditions and festivities, and it has certain cultural products. It will last as long as it has value for the groups interested in it. For marathons, common values are group cohesion, and personal health. Marathons could be regarded as traditions and festivities. Their cultural products could be the money they raise for charitable causes, as well as their commitment to such causes. On another level, they function the same way as teambuilding events work for corporations to motivate their employees to work together and also to know each other on a personal level, not only on a professional one. Corporations try to raise the team spirit to a very strong level. They wish to keep their employees loyal to the company and by strengthening the ties between them, the company hopes to benefit from quality work and investment on the part of their employees. The employees will invest all their resources, professional and personal. They will come to see their work as pleasant and not just a matter of something serious, and simple work to be done. They will enjoy what they are doing, just like with marathons, and also produce something useful, such as the donations for charities during marathons. At the same time, it is a known fact that mass-media nowadays in Romania has strated promoting health issues for its inhabitants. During commercial breaks on tv they keep reminding us that we need to avoid excesses of salt, sugar and fats in our food, or to walk on foot at least 30 minutes every day. We know that we are becoming more and more sedentary in our lives, due to all the technology that entertains us and makes our lives easier at work. Corporate workers especially could be regarded as leading sedentary lives, so teambuilding events and marathons try to offer activities that involve sports and outdoor activities in compensation.

Modernist and Postmodernist novels and poems have long treated subjects such as alienation and isolation in the city. The characters of Hanif Kureish are only some examples of persons who feel alone in big cities. Marathons could be regarded as occasions to stop these types of feelings experienced by individuals in big cities. Marathons try to connect various persons from all walks of life, all ages, all abilities who take running as a hobby. Otherwise, we see lots of persons doing fitness in parks, by themselves. Marathons are ways to connect them together, to make them spend time with their friends and family. Through marathons, people get to know others with the same hobbies, and welfare, through donations for

charity, is another way of showing that they care for someone else who is in need. Charity is another way of connecting people, of making them feel less isolated in big cities. It is also known that doing sports even if just for hobbies helps people deal with depression; team sports are also recommended as psychological therapy in helping patients deal with social situations, to ease their anxiety relating to others or to help them relate to others and even make friends.

However, marathons are not only a way to make everyone feel good in big cities. On some occasions, on social media, users have complained about the marathons stopping traffic on various areas and disturbing the normal traffic by public and personal transport due to deviations. The response that came from the organizers was that the event had been announced well in advance; what is more, they mentioned right from the start that such public events are part of the life of any capital city. The question raised by the present paper is whether marathons in big cities are not events that are part of a larger political agenda. Such marathons, by having as a result donations to charity purposes, could be meant to help citizens accept to contribute to welfare and not to wait to receive welfare from the state.

HISTORY OF MARATHONS

The history of the marathon starts very seriously: Pheidippides was a Greek soldier who ran the first marathon as a messenger to announce victory. He was a messenger who wished to report the victory from the Battle of Marathon by running all the way from there to Athens, where he fell dead after delivering the message. Besides the Olympic marathons, organized for professionals, there are nowadays the wheelchair division and also marathons for non-professional runners. The tradition of marathons for recreational runners has been observed in Chicago since the eighties, with an explosive success in the nineties (Suozzo, 2002). This holds true for other cities as well: “New York, London, Paris, and Berlin can boast fields ranging up to more than 30,000 participants” (Suozzo, 2002).

The purpose of such marathon has to do with the image of the cities where these event take place – and the image of the city is inseparable from its tourist attraction:

“They are image-builders that enable cities to compete with one another in the quest for tourist dollars; marathons allow cities to send a message of affluence and celebration to the larger world beyond their limits.” (Suozzo, 2002).

Marathons were used to repair the cities’ damaged images by various events. For instance, the La-Salle Bank Chicago Marathon in 2001 was the first

marathon after September 11. The large numbers of participants helped the city’s damaged hotel industry; it also helped with emotional support for “national suffering”, showing solidarity (Suozzo, 2002).

Contemporary marathons are also used to convey a message, similarly to the first ancient Greek marathon. Whereas the Greek soldier wanted to share the news of victory in battle, the contemporary marathons promote commercial messages, which are also part of political agendas. This is the case of marathons organized in Romania. Bucharest Running Club organizes, for 2017, three marathons: April 2 – UNIQA Asigurări Bucharest 10K&FAMILY RUN, May 13-14 - OMV PETROM Bucharest HALF MARATHON, and October 7-8 - Raiffeisen Bank Bucharest MARATHON. This series of marathons has the declared purpose of promoting a healthy life through sports at national level. They wish to encourage mass sports. The Ministry of Youth and Sports claimed that exercise, adrenaline, competition, and fair-play can change our lifestyle in a positive way. Recent statistics have shown that one of four Romanians suffer from at least one chronic health issue. What is more, only 9,2% of the Romanians go for sports activities in their free time. This is a reason why Bucharest Running Club wishes to encourage the practice of sports for Romanians through the organized marathons. At national level, this is a declared problem which has been put up on the political and media agenda. It is a known fact that Romania faces demographic decline, as well as the young population’s leaving for jobs and life abroad. They have also faced an economic crisis, with low salaries and even loss of jobs. The media often talks about issues related to stress and contemporary life, as well as sedentary jobs in corporations, and little time left for relaxing and communication with loved ones due to the temptations of using technological devices such as smartphones, tablets and laptops to spend free time. The message delivered by the General Director of UNIQA Insurance was for the Romanians to run for their health, a slogan covering both psychological and physical issues the media constantly reminds us. These issues are part and parcel of contemporary life, where we deal with isolation due to moving to a large city – it is known that Romanians from rural areas move to the capital in order to get more professional opportunities – as well as stress related to busy traffic and work problems. Life in the big city has a fast rhythm, Romanians believe, to which we need to adapt. By organizing these marathons, Romanians living in Bucharest get the opportunity to spend time with their work colleagues, family, as well as to socialize and get to know other persons with similar, healthy hobbies such as sports. The political message being delivered is that politicians

care about the population. It is a gesture that is seen on the spot: it is not something whose result will be seen in the long run, but here and now. Romanians have often complained that politicians do not care about them – they only care about their careers in politics, about their well-being and about corrupt behaviour in order to get lots of money and lead happy lives. Marathons are a way of showing that politicians care about the Romanians' health, personal happiness, personal time, having fun, as well as making them feel charitable towards others with visible results. The Romanians are shown that politicians and the state care about charity organizations by supporting such activities. There have been lots of cases of very sick persons who have advertised through television and other media to help gather money for humanitarian causes through voluntary donations. During the communist period, the state used to support such cases. There are Romanians who are nostalgic after the old times due to such reasons and accuse the political world of not taking care as they should of the country, its population, its health, its opportunities for careers and cultural development. Athénée Palace Hotel from Bucharest is a partner of Bucharest Running Club. It encourages sports tourism and promotes Bucharest as a tourist destination. This remind of Chicago and other cities that used marathons as opportunities to draw attention to the touristic potential of the capital of Romania. It is also an opportunity to advertise for this hotel which offers support to the participants in the marathon through the program Mett with Purpose which promotes mindful eating – meaning healthy meals.

The marathon on 14-15 October 2017 organized by the same Bucharest Running Club has as a declared purpose helping children with autism. This is the motivation for the participants, the message of the marathon as well as its practical purpose. The slogan of the event is that your own efforts can make the difference. This shows that the Romanian state is not a welfare state, but at the same time it supports the volunteers willing to help and offers them the opportunity to do something about charitable causes themselves. A percentage from the participants' tax will be directed towards an autistic child's therapy. The message of the marathon will also help to raise the awareness of the general public towards the need of volunteering for charitable causes.

Marathons in the contemporary world are thus used to promote healthy lifestyles, as well as involvement with charity, and, last but not least, the touristic potential of Romanian cities. Since most Romanians have been attracted for years by touristic and professional offers abroad, as well as by personal opportunities, these marathons give a nationalistic message. They try to help built cohesive groups of Romanians and make them act

for common causes. The marathons expose contemporary problems of Romanian society and suggest taking action. The participants at the marathons act like messengers for these causes. At the same time, the organizers and partners also communicate their advertising campaigns.

Contemporary marathons in Romania follow the program of those marathons organized abroad in big cities. Romanian marathons promote tourism in the respective areas, healthy lifestyle, cohesion, as well as awareness of social issues. In fact, Romanian marathons try to signal problems of the Romanian society. They try to revitalize tourism, group cohesion, and charity. A special feature of Romanian marathons is that they are not organized just in big cities. They are also organized as challenges for mountain climbers, as well as in small towns like Brasov in the mountains, to underline the touristic potential of this country. The International Marathon organized in Brasov in 2017 promoted, allusively, the touristic potential of mountain areas of Romania, and directly, social causes. This marathon drew attention to Telekom foundation, which raised money from the participation tax from runners for the benefit of children and adults with serious illnesses.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF COMPETITIONS

If the main purposes of such marathons are charity, then why the competition aspect? Or, to which extent are such marathons competitive, and in what way the competition aspect helps form a cohesive group?

Does competition truly increase motivation? Hinsz (2005) claims that a lab experiment with university students shows that competition “did not significantly influence idea generation performance, self-efficacy, or goal commitment.”

We could thus claim that the competition aspect of marathons is not that important – something else, not personal achievement motivates participants to take part in such events. The goals are clearly set from the beginning: advertising of certain food service through sponsorship, advising the participants for a healthy lifestyle, including meals and exercise, making them aware of the importance to volunteer for charity work and spread the message, socializing, and perhaps others.

Marathons are occasions for people to be part of crowds. Usually when we are part of a crowd we feel protected and we feel that we are socializing. Romanian culture in small towns and rural areas emphasized socializing, in the sense that in small communities everyone knew each other and was very hospitable and kind. Periodically, for various celebrations, the members of a small community would get together to celebrate and preserve

various traditions, with the coming of spring, Christmas, someone's wedding day, and so on. Marathons are a way of replacing those traditions which are impossible to keep in a large city where we do not even know for real our neighbours in a block of flats and seldom communicate with them. Romanian kindness even to strangers is well-known, and the charity part of marathons tries to replace this side of the community which is lost when young generations move to the big city. What is more, in small rural areas, grandparents had established a whole tradition of healthy eating using for ingredients fruits, vegetables and even meat from one's own household. When young people go on holiday at their parents or grandparents they are told to keep eating healthy. The advertisers sponsoring meals during the breaks try to go along these lines and show their customers that they also do care about their health. Yet there is more to this than just caring for their health. The food prepared by grandparents in rural areas is also invested with and associated with feelings of love and being part of a family. By running young people remember the way they used to play in their childhoods spent in the countryside with their grandparents when they would be free of the temptations of technological devices such as tv, tablets and sedentarism. This is a way to make people who have moved to the big city and left their loved ones in rural areas to feel at home and not isolated.

Megan Teigen (2006-2007) wrote about a feeling of "ambivalence toward the modern city" of London when she referred to Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* and to her short story *Street Haunting*. This feeling is "rooted in ambivalences of modern identity". The city makes characters feel, on the one hand, peaceful, as well as experiencing the violence of life there; characters find both connectedness and isolation when moving on big streets with the crowds.

Marathons thus try to leave the competition aspect in the background, moving in fact to something totally opposed: making the contestants close to each other. The competition is only on a formal level among participants. The idea of competition moves towards the figurative idea of competition with oneself. We only compete with ourselves, setting up goals and challenges for ourselves. The other contestants are there as supporters and helpers. The marathons focus on the idea of creating a community in large cities. They try to minimize the idea of possible culture shock when someone moves from a small community to the big city and to help people socialize. Mass-media constantly warns of the effect of lack of socializing in real life due to technological devices and social networks. At the same time, it is through social networks and the internet that participants find out

about these marathons and connect together in real life.

Another problem reported by the media was the fact that students use medical excuses not to take part in sports classes at school. The idea of competition stresses them when it comes to games such as basketball or volley. Marathons try to erase the idea of competition, moving it to completion on a personal level with one's own self and to emphasize the idea of teamwork. In this way, sports prove to be fun. You do not need to be a professional athlete to enjoy yourself doing sports. Reischer (2001) confirms that "individuals engage the marathon in the service of a project of self-transformation."

While the marathons are advertised on their sites as being for everyone with no necessary experience, and just an occasion to promote health and fitness, Reischer (2001) warns that training for a marathon still does demand certain energy and training, as well as motivation. The conclusion could be that there still is some competitive factor at work, even if not with the others as much as with your own person:

"While many people practice running as part of a general program of health and fitness, those who run to train for a marathon are undertaking, I would argue, a project which is more explicitly self-regarding. To achieve general fitness from running requires little more than two or three miles a day, three days a week; those with more ambitious fitness goals might choose to run more. But marathon training, and the marathon itself, demand such a far greater investment of time, energy, and commitment—not to mention a tacit willingness to endure some degree of pain—that fitness goals alone hardly seem sufficient explanation or motivation. Patterns of participation in the marathon also suggest its uniqueness: most people who run a marathon will do so only once. While just one in a thousand Americans run even one marathon in their lifetime, less than one in ten thousand run it a second time."

Judging by these facts, we could start reflecting on the message wishing to be conveyed by marathons in Romania and the reality of keeping fit as leisure and the competitive degree existing for participants in marathons. The sites advertising these city marathons make it look very easy; at the same time, it is not so. However, the satisfactions are there and the participants are rewarded for their efforts. They also prove that they can be very generous to others and do charity, as well as spread the message to others to be careful about their health. The participants need to take their work seriously, and to prove that "the marathon serves a certain social utility, as a ritualized public celebration of social values such as strength, endurance, and fortitude." (Reischer, 2001).

The message promoted by city marathons could thus be more complex: enjoy what you are doing, while trying to do your best. Everything is personalized and tailored to the strengths of various age groups. For Romanians, the message would be to struggle to be their personal best, as in this way they can also help the others. Romania needs young workforce in order to ensure the future of the older population. This connection does not need to be just accidental.

A national issue in Romania is the de-professionalization. Romanians have adapted and they work in various areas abroad where they claim that they earn more. Marathons could have the purpose of making them focus on a competition with themselves, to keep focused on one goal and the joy of its achievements. When Romanians are passionate about a certain domain where they cannot find work, their ways of setting goals and their motivation decrease. Marathons try to help them train to keep motivated and achieve their objectives.

What is more, marathons allow Romanian participants to realize that they have enough power to change something about their country through contributing to charity work. If they wish to change something, they can do it straight away. It is much more efficient than engaging in protests.

CORPORATE CULTURE

City marathons could be regarded as being part of the corporate culture. The way the participants are organized within the marathon reflects the way a corporation is organized.

First of all, corporate culture include sets of beliefs, values and perspectives on the world and employee behaviour, which marathons, as we have seen, also have: endurance, strength, good health, being sociable, supporting charity, patriotism, and so on: “The corporate culture is a set of conceptions, beliefs, attitudes and values generally acceptable and maintained for the relatively long time. The term ‘corporate culture’ is usually defined as a set of accepted values and opinions creating informal standards of behaviour in organisations which have a positive effect. The culture determines the inside atmosphere of the organisation, it is some (intangible) product that results from the people’s thinking and their activities performed in the organisation. (Kampf, Ližbetinová, 2015).” (Hitka et al, 2015)

The activities performed within a marathon are running and donations for charity, as well as promoting the image of their city or country. Marathons, regarding charity issues, could be perfect examples of team work just as we see in corporations: “Staff management places great

emphasis on team work, participation and consensus.” (Hitka et al, 2015)

The team work is obvious in marathons, as the participants contribute to a common charity cause. There is competitiveness and focus on results – running to show endurance and the results are the donations for charity causes. The focus is indeed on customers – which could be both the beneficiaries of the charity donations and even the participants themselves, who are customers in the sense that they are the beneficiaries of a health program organized by this event: “According to the opinion of employees current focus of the enterprise is on a customer, competitiveness and results” (Hitka et al 2015: 32)

The city marathons are examples of organizational culture. Organizational culture also includes corporate culture. Organizational culture refers to values and types of behaviour that “contribute to the unique social and psychological environment of an organization” (“The Business Dictionary”, 2017). These cultures promote health so that the production is high, as well as employee motivation and loyalty. Such cultures also use metaphors comparing the company to a family for employees. The marathons try to work in the same way, by creating a sense of community with the participants, that are taught to eat healthy, exercise and help those in need. The common activities help them get a sense of community by sharing their hobby with those interested in the same lifestyle.

CONCLUSIONS

Romania tries to be situated on the same level with countries abroad that organize such types of marathons. By participating in marathons organized in Bucharest and other cities in Romania, Romanian runners feel part of a wide community, extending beyond country borders. They experience the feelings of being citizens of the world, as part of the European Union and of countries beyond it. They feel motivated to collaborate by means of teamwork and feel part of a family, as the rhetoric of corporate cultures claims.

The problems of the welfare state may not be the issues for motivating participants to take part in charity work. Even rich countries support the practice of donations for charity. However, this type of activity appeals to Romanians as they believe that politicians care about the individuals and their quality of life.

Sports are recommended for individuals dealing with depression and low self-esteem. Thus, marathons are recommended activities for both health of mind and body. Once the participants feel they are important for the politicians, they face the

future of their country with a more positive outlook.

The marathons employ rhetoric similar to those of corporate cultures, which makes them have a familiar appeal to the participants.

In the ancient world, the first marathon was interpreted as a sacrifice: the Greek soldier who was the messenger of victory died after delivering the message. In the contemporary world, people are more narcissistic, since they care about their personal health. At the same time, the charity donations aspect comes to add the dimension of caring for the others as well.

The message of the marathons could be that it is not enough for the leaders (the politicians) to do their work, the population needs to be motivated to cooperate.

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