The Composition and Geography of Bulgarian Olympic Medals, 1952–2016

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The Composition and Geography of Bulgarian Olympic Medals, 1952–2016

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ABSTRACT
Bulgaria was one of the leading sport nations of the second half of the twentieth century; however, the Bulgarian national anthem has not been played at Olympic Games since 2008. In the current article, historical records on planning are compared to the results of athletes to determine the factors behind the remarkable rise and decline of Bulgarian sport during the last six decades. Historical geographical information systems (GISs) are used to analyze the spatial distribution of Olympic medals in each of the successfully developed sports. The data reveal that often the central Bulgarian planners failed to achieve the goals set in the ambitious programme of the totalitarian communist state. In spite of the efforts for diversification, Bulgaria’s success came from only seven sports mainly; less than any other of the leading sport nations during the 1970s and the 1980s. At the same time, the victories of Bulgarian athletes had little impact on the sport activity of the common Bulgarian.

In just over six decades, Bulgarian sport went through an unprecedented cycle of a remarkable rise that peaked in the middle of the period (1980s) and a steady decline that reached its lowest, so far, point in London 2012. In 1952, a boxer won the first medal and in 1956 a wrestler the first gold at Olympic Games for Bulgaria. Remarkably, six decades later in London, again only these sports brought medals for the Balkan state. However, in the period between Melbourne 1956 and Sydney 2000, while relatively small in territory and population, Bulgaria was always among the top nations in the final medal table. This included an outstanding third place in the 1980 Summer Olympics. The past success of Bulgarian sport can only be explained from the perspective of the geopolitics of the Cold War when the country was a prominent player in the international sports system shaped by Communist–Capitalist antagonism. Sport was among the main priorities of the totalitarian states and converted in one of the few fields where the ‘Communist East’ outperformed frequently and convincingly the ‘Capitalist West’.

CONTACT Kaloyan Stanev kaloyan.stanev@upf.edu Historia Economica Departament d’ Economia i Empresa Ramon Trias Fargas, 25–27, 08005 Barcelona, Spain. © 2018 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
However, in spite of the projected image of an entire nation practicing and excelling in sport, the reality was marked by an increasing contrast: while the Bulgarian anthem was often played at medal ceremonies of international sport competitions, the physical activity of Bulgarians was actually diminishing at alarming rates. The authorities, in spite of the declared goals, generally failed to attract the population to mass sport activities. Ultimately, the socialist state concentrated its effort on the development of elite sport, which served both domestic and international propaganda. The limited economic and demographic resources required a careful selection of the sports that Bulgaria could develop at a high competitive level. The focus of this study is precisely the evolution of the national sport strategy and especially the relation between the planning and the actual results. The sport specialization is first explored at a national level and then the results are analyzed from both a rural/urban and a regional perspective. The goal is to determine the main factors behind the success in sport. The growing literature on the subject usually explains the achievements in sport by population size, economic development or political systems, among others. This case study could verify the conclusions of previous studies while the particularities of Bulgarian sport and the regional analysis offer a different perspective to the subject. In Bulgaria, the Olympic performance varied significantly between rural and urban areas and among regions as the successful development of each sport depends on different factors. For example, access to modern technology and local climate is more important for biathlon while tradition is the key for the success of Bulgarian wrestlers. The analysis of regional differences facilitates the better understanding of the main determinants behind the success or the failure of the sports developed in Bulgaria particularly, and in the world in general.

**Literature, Methodology, and Sources**

Bulgaria and other Eastern European states created a state-centralized sport organization that was able to mobilize significant resources to successfully select and train athletes. The impressive achievements of the Communist bloc attracted attention towards the political and social aspects of totalitarian sport. During the Cold War, western historiographers, such as Riordan, Hoberman, Raiport and Yessis, among others, explored the organization of sport in the Soviet Union and other communist states. The end of the Cold War opened the archives of many former communist states and the available works on Eastern European sport increased. In spite of the increased interest towards the history of sport and the growing availability of historical documents on the totalitarian communist regime, the history of Bulgarian sport remains rather unexplored. Although many of the features of Soviet sport organization analyzed by numerous historians have parallels in Bulgaria, the country has been rarely the direct subject of these studies. The notable exceptions are the works of Girginov, who focuses on the relations between state and sport, exploring in detail the evolution of the Bulgarian Union for Physical Education and Sport (BSFS) and various other aspects of the history of Bulgarian and Eastern European sport during
and after the Cold War. Apart from the Girginov, the literature in the field consists mostly of memoirs of the communist bureaucrats (such as Martinski, Meranzov and Slavkov) who governed sport during the Cold War. Most of the ongoing academic research focuses on the intersection of sport and politics although the total output is relatively small.

To evaluate the performance of Bulgarian elite sport both at national and regional levels, the analysis concentrates entirely on the international results of Bulgarian athletes and more precisely on the participation in the Olympic Games. The methodology seems to underestimate other relevant sport competitions, such as World or European championships; however, this approach actually reproduces the evaluation system of the BSFS, the governing body of Bulgarian sport: As a whole, the calendar for Bulgarian athletes was and still is organized on a 4-year cycle, coinciding with the Olympic cycle. During the communist period, the planning and all financial and organizational efforts were focused on the optimal performance at the Olympics. The other competitions were seen just as a preparation for the Olympic Games. The economic difficulties after 1989 emphasized this strategy as the reduced resources were concentrated mainly on the national teams, especially concerning sports with Olympic projections. Hence, during the entire period under consideration, the Olympic Games were the focal point of the sport programme of the state. Consequently, the success of Bulgarian sport planning can be evaluated through the results of the Olympic Games.

The main tool of the analysis is a specially created database with information on all medal winners. The data are organized in a geographical information systems (GISs) format and include fields with information on the sport, year and type of medal won, name and birthplace of the medal winner. The data on administrative divisions of Bulgaria are obtained from the project HGISE, and the works of Stanev while the personal information of the Olympic medal winners was gathered and organized for the sake of the present work from various sources.

The information on the selection of the prioritized sports and the organization of the Bulgarian sport system are extracted from original historical sources that include documents from the major national sports governing institutions, the BSFS, the Bulgarian Olympic Committee (BOC) and the Committee of Youth and Sport (KMS) in the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP). The analysis is also based on the memoirs of the men who managed Bulgarian sport during these six decades, including Trendafil Martinski, head of BSFS for more than two decades, Ivan Slavkov, the president of the BOC and the Bulgarian Football Union, and other sport administrators such as Luchezar Avramov and Hristo Meranzov. Furthermore, recently published documents of the Bulgarian Secret Services on sport uncovered new perspectives on the organization of Bulgarian sport during the Cold War.

The last section of the current work examines the Olympic results at regional level. The combining of different layers of information within the GIS allows the mapping of Bulgarian Olympic performance. The spatial analysis focuses on the contribution of each Bulgarian region in the historical medal count and the evaluation of the performance of each sport at regional level.
Bulgarian Sport Before World War II

Before World War II (WWII), sports in Bulgaria developed mainly on an amateur base, with limited involvement or assistance by the state. The traditional sport of the Bulgarian village was wrestling, where men like Nikola Petrov and Dan Kolov achieved international fame. After WWI, numerous sport clubs and organizations appeared throughout the country. Boxing and military-oriented sports such as equestrian, shooting and fencing were common while cycling and gymnastics clubs were widespread among young men and school boys. Football was also gaining popularity. At that point, Bulgarian athletes had limited experience at competitive international level. Although Bulgaria was among the 13 participants of the first modern Olympic Games in 1896 in Greece, the country did not participate again for almost three decades. After WWI, the interest towards this forum and other sporting competitions increased and the BOC was founded in 1923. Subsequently, Bulgarian athletes once again competed at the Summer Olympic Games in Paris (1924), Amsterdam (1928) and Berlin (1936). However, participation remained almost symbolic with no real prospects for success.

The Making of a Sporting Nation: Prioritized Sports and Olympic Goals

After WWII, the Bulgarian state changed its position. In the new geopolitical context, sport transformed into a major component of the rivalry between the East and the West and the state took firm control over all aspects regarding the development of sport. Immediately after the war, most of the existing sporting clubs or organizations were declared fascist and were swiftly dismantled. During the next four decades, the BCP closely controlled the sport federations and clubs. Sport was managed as any other social or economic activity in Socialist Bulgaria, through central planning. The main decisions were taken in the Politburo of the BCP and then disseminated to the respective committee, ministry or agency. Since 1958, the main tool for the implementation of the policy of the BCP was the BSFS. It united all sport federations while the regional councils of the BSFS managed sport at a regional level. The BSFS also united a complex system of clubs, centres and schools. By the late 1960s, this system was already functioning at national and regional levels and party members governed most sport institutions at national, district and municipal levels.

Sport was assigned a key role in the project of building a socialist society. The strategy of the BCP included two fundamental elements: mass participation and elite sport. The massification of sport was expected to bring multiple benefits. In the context of the Cold War, physical activity was expected to maintain a fit population to defend the state, if required. The improved overall health of the population reduced costs of the state and increased the productivity of workers. Sport was seen as a potential leisure activity that could help reduce crime and improve the social, gender and ethnic integration of the nation. Ideally, mass participation from an early age would also expand the pool of available talent for elite sport. Success in elite sport would bring domestic and international recognition for the communist system.

In spite of the growing ambitions of all states in the Eastern Bloc, only the USSR had the potential to develop all Olympic disciplines. In smaller countries like
Bulgaria, the demographic and economic limitations required the concentration of the effort and the resources into a limited number of sports. The organization of Bulgarian sport underwent various adjustments which reflected the evolution of the role of sport in the socialist project. There were four major reforms of the priorities in 1949, 1958, 1969 and 1988 (Table 1). During the first decades, the focus was on mass sport. The sports that were prioritized in 1949 included activities popular before WWII: equestrianism, cycling, gymnastics and shooting, and new sports such as athletics and the team sports of basketball, volleyball and football (soccer). Such a large number of priorities was unproductive at that stage, and in 1958 the main sports were limited to the team sports of basketball, volleyball and soccer along with table tennis, chess and the traditional wrestling. In these early days, policymakers were still experimenting with the structuring of sport and were guided by the ambition to develop both elite and the mass sport. In 1969, the politburo of the BCP issued a new strategy for the development of sports.26 By the early 1970s, the clubs and the BSFS received recommendations to focus on elite sport.27 Although the mass sport discourse was preserved, in reality the declared goals in mass sport were not backed financially by the state. The new approach focused on the diversification and increase of the number of successful competitive sports. Earlier in 1962, the BSFS had declared athletics and swimming as the main priorities.28 These sports, along with gymnastics, were seen as both prestigious and practical: They could bring medals in internationally popular disciplines while preparing a healthy population, ready to defend the motherland. Wrestling was declared as the national sport and received political patronage and substantial financial support. Furthermore, although early on an effort was made to extend the practicing of basketball, soccer and volleyball, the team disciplines were less cost-effective for the system and by the early 1970s teams sports were no longer prioritized. As a result, with few exceptions, team sports in Bulgaria could not match the success of individual sports.

The success of Bulgarian weightlifters in the early 1960s revealed the potential of the sport. This was recognized by Bulgarian planners and by the 1970s weightlifting received strong support from the state. It never turned into a mass activity, but at a relatively moderate cost, between 1970 and the early 2000s, less than 4,000 weightlifters garnered more than 400 medals from international competitions.29

The last socialist reform was initiated in 1988 in the prime of Bulgarian sport. The number of prioritized activities was extended by the addition of boxing as well as

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<td>Athletics</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>Athletics</td>
<td>Athletics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>Chess</td>
<td>Gymnastics</td>
<td>Boxing</td>
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<td>Boxing</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>Gymnastics</td>
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<td>Cycling</td>
<td>Table tennis</td>
<td>Wrestling</td>
<td>Rhythmic gymnastics</td>
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<td>Equestrianism</td>
<td>Volleyball</td>
<td>Wrestling</td>
<td>Rowing</td>
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<td>Football</td>
<td>Wrestling</td>
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<td>Gymnastics</td>
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rhythmic gymnastics, which became an Olympic sport in 1988, and the rowing sports. Again, no team sports were included. This change was a reaction to the results of the Bulgarian athletes during the 1980s as the new prioritized sports were already successful, even without the solid state support given to others. However, the socialist system collapsed soon after, and this new programme was not successfully implemented.

The selection of prioritized sports during the communist period depended on a group of factors: mainly the national traditions, practicality, international trends and the cost and the benefits of developing the sport. Ideally, the priority sports had to be accessible and beneficial for the mass population, and at the same time, to have the potential for success at international competitions. However, the selection of prioritized sports was also influenced by personal interests and partialities. As already mentioned, most of the chairmen of the sport federations were party members and their own political power affected the distribution of resources and privileges as well the abilities of federations to pursue their plans. Wrestling was probably the sport with greatest influence within the governing party. Its supporters included among others P. Kubadinski, a member of the Politburo and the chairman of the Bulgarian Wrestling Federation, and H. Meranzov the deputy head of the BCP’s Central Committee (CC) organizational department in charge of sport (1980–1989) who was also a vice-chairman of the BSFS. Ivan Slavkov attributes to Meranzov the lack of support of the team sports.

The prioritization of sports is reflected in the places available for each sport in sport schools, the number and the quality of the ‘no-show jobs’ in public institutions (as army and police) allocated to each sport, the distribution of specialized sport publications of the BSFS, and even the access to modern equipment and medical or training machines. For example, in the 1980s, the athletics, swimming and wrestling were allocated a higher number of the modern outfits sent by the sponsor Adidas to Bulgaria. However, the level of priority given to each sport was mainly manifested in the recourses distributed by the BSFS to the 42 (in 1989) sporting federations. During the golden years of Bulgarian sport (from the late 1960s to the late 1980s), wrestling and athletics were the leading recipients of state support. The federations of weightlifting, basketball, football and volleyball usually received between a third and half of the funds allocated to the two leading sports. However, the team sports had considerably higher incomes due to higher attendances. As a mass sport, swimming enjoyed substantial state support especially during the 1980s, and approximately US$35 million was spent on the construction of swimming pools during the second half of the 1980s. Boxing and gymnastics received approximately between 20% and 30% of the funds given to the leading sports while the rowing sports and cycling received slightly less. Occasionally, in years with important competitions, or when Bulgaria hosted major championship, additional funding was allocated to particular sports. For example, in 1972, the weightlifting federation received similar resources to wrestling and athletics. These differences in funding created tensions among federations. The most outspoken was the discontent of the rowing federation. As one of the most successful Bulgarian sports, the chairman, coaches and athletes aspired for funding proportional to their results.
Most of the investments in Bulgarian sport were generated by the national lottery. The limited resources required the undertaking of entrepreneurial activities to support the income of BSFS. The Bulgarian state assisted the organization of the national lotteries of Singapore, Malaysia and Sudan, sent medical and coaching stuff abroad and carried out other commercial activities with the intention of increasing the currency inflow. The increasing cost of Olympic success during the 1980s pressured BSFS to intensify the commercialization of its activities. Nevertheless, the state still had to subsidize at least one-third of the BSFS’s annual budget.

The Rise and Decline of Bulgarian Sport

Bulgaria missed the first post-war Olympic Games in London, but sent a team of 63 athletes to Helsinki 1952, where the country won its first Olympic medal. In the five Summer Olympic Games from 1952 to 1968, Bulgaria won medals mainly in the national sport of wrestling. Occasionally, boxers also returned with medals while gymnastics, shooting and football brought one medal each. This was enough for Bulgaria to finish at positions between 14 and 18 in the medal count during the 1960s. However, the government demanded more Olympic success and prestige.

As a result of growing investments, the improving infrastructure and accumulation of knowhow and experience during the next few decades more Bulgarian athletes qualified for the Olympic Games and the Olympic team grew with each forum (Table 2). In the golden years of Bulgarian sport, the country was sending more than 150 athletes to the Summer Olympic Games. The peak was reached in 1980. However, the boycott of the Moscow Games made it easier for Bulgarian athletes to qualify. Hence, the 1988 Olympics are probably more representative for the size of the Bulgarian Olympic team at its best.

The larger teams returned with more medals. In 1972, the country finished among the 10 leading nations in the overall medal table for the first time. The results were boosted by the breakthrough of the weightlifters coached by now legendary coach Ivan Abadzhiev. They won three gold and two silver medals. During the following

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Games</th>
<th>Athletes</th>
<th>Rank</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952 Helsinki</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956 Melbourne</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960 Rome</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964 Tokyo</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>1968 Mexico City</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>1972 Munich</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976 Montreal</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980 Moscow</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>1984 Los Angeles</td>
<td>Boycott</td>
<td>Boycott</td>
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<tr>
<td>1988 Seoul</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992 Barcelona</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996 Atlanta</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 Sydney</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 Athens</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 Beijing</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 London</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016 Rio de Janeiro</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Size of the Olympic team and rank in the medal table by nation.
decades, the Bulgarian weightlifters dominated the sport together with the USSR. However, in spite of the overall success, most of the priority sports did not fulfil the expectations. Bulgaria won only two silver medals in athletics while swimming and gymnastics returned without medals. Boxers, wrestlers, and the new stars of Bulgarian sport, the weightlifters, brought home the majority of the 21 medals.

The national team went to the 1976 Olympics in Montreal with the ambition to repeat the success of Munich and to strengthen its positions among the elite of the world sport. Bulgaria finished seventh in the overall medal table. The countries from the Communist bloc dominated the Olympic Games in Munich and Montreal, by winning more than 50% of the available medals. The Bulgarian political and sport leaders were extremely pleased with the contribution to this success although they remained dissatisfied with the results in some of the sports. The investments were starting to repay although the results were not always the intended ones. In spite of some good performances in athletics, Bulgaria failed again to win medals in swimming and gymnastics, which was met with discontent by the sport functionaries. Moreover, the country lost its leading position in the most successful sport – wrestling. On the positive side, the rowing sports won several medals despite the limited funding. Overall, few sports turned out to be successful and, Bulgaria was the one among the leading nations that got its medals from fewer sports during the 1976 Olympics. The lack of diversity of the winning sports was a repeated concern for the administration of Bulgarian sport. Furthermore, for the first time, performance-enhancing drugs were illegal and Bulgaria was among the first ‘victims’ of this new policy. Two Bulgarian weightlifters gave positive results in the doping tests and were disqualified. This fuelled suspicions over the training methods and unfair success of the Socialist states.

Bulgarian sport reached its peak in the 1980s although the accomplishments were overshadowed by the political troubles of the Olympic movement. Before the games in Moscow and Los Angeles, the internal expectations were to finish between fifth and seventh in the overall medal table. However, the USA-led boycott helped the Bulgarians finish third in 1980. Thus although significant number of nations participated, this remarkable success remains under question because of the boycott. Four years later, the expectations were yet again high, as Bulgarian athletes seemed remarkably well-prepared; however, just months before the Games participation was cancelled and Bulgarian sport was denied the opportunity to validate the success of 1980. The boycott of 1984 left a generation of athletes without the opportunity to realize their lifetime efforts and dedication. Furthermore, this meant that most of the Bulgarian participants in the next Olympic Games had no Olympic experience. Still, Bulgarian athletes performed remarkably in Seoul and the Olympic Games of 1980 and 1988 remain the most successful for Bulgaria both in terms of medals and medal-winning sports.

After the collapse of the socialist project, Bulgaria gradually lost positions in the international sport which is reflected in the evolution of the Olympic medal table. During the 1990s, the medals won in the traditionally successful sports of wrestling, weightlifting, shooting and rowing were still enough for a decent performance. In Barcelona, Atlanta and Sydney, the country finished between position 16 and position
22, which is still above the standing of Bulgaria in the world economy. However, after the minor resurgence in Sydney 2000, when the medals were won by athletes still born and formed during the communist period, Bulgarian sport entered a period of sharp decline. This is confirmed by the reduced number of participants and the constantly shrinking medal count. By 2004, Bulgaria fell outside the top 30, and in 2008, 2012 and 2016 it fell outside the top 50, which is actually close to the national rank within the world economy.

Various factors contributed to the decline of Bulgarian sport. These include the economic and demographic difficulties of post-socialist Bulgaria along with the diminished status of sport within the priorities of the state. Furthermore, the increasing professionalization of world sport and especially the Olympic Games also contributed to the loss of competitiveness. This trend had been already recognized in the 1970s by the chairmen of Bulgarian sport. They often stressed that while Olympic sport is amateur and practiced mainly by university students, Bulgaria could remain competitive, but in an environment of increasing professionalization the leading positions would be lost due to the economic underdevelopment of the country. In the 1970s, they were especially worried by the decline of wrestling where the Bulgarians used to compete regularly for first place in international competitions while by the late 1970s and early 1980s it was not certain that Bulgaria was among the top three nations. They reckoned that even with the diversification of the medals, Bulgaria would slowly lose competitiveness. The results in the recent Olympic Games confirm these predictions. Numerous works, such as those by Johnson and Ali and Bernard and Buss and Andreff et al., show that the medals are going to the richer countries while Bian confirms the population size as an important condition for Olympic success. In such circumstances, Bulgarian sport would have faced problems even without the collapse of the organization created during the communist regime.

Still, initially the institutional inertia in the functioning of East-European sports systems helped Bulgaria and other former eastern European states to win more medals during the 1990s and early 2000s than what the economic or demographic weight of those countries would have suggested. The recent decline of Bulgarian competitive sport is a natural adjustment to the economic and demographic realities after decades of over-achievement.

While the other former socialist states like Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania experienced similar problems, the decline of Bulgarian Olympic sport after 1989 was the worst among the former Eastern Bloc. Since there is no considerable disparity in the economic and demographic conditions between Bulgaria and the other states, the difference should be explained by the social and cultural contexts of Bulgarian sport which are also identified as major contributing factors for Olympic performance. Bulgarian success came mainly in sports without grassroots where there was little connection between the mass practicing of the sport and the results of the national team, with one notable exception being wrestling. Without grassroots and without the adequate state support, most of the previously successful Bulgarian sports simply had no fundaments after 1989. This may partially explain the greater decline of sport in Bulgaria during the transition in comparison to the other former communist states. The Bulgarian sports that maintain some position are the still
popular combat sports boxing and wrestling, which are in fact the only remaining amateur sports in the modern Olympic Games.

The success in Summer Olympic Games was not matched by the winter sports. During the Cold War, Bulgaria only won a single bronze medal at the winter Olympics and although after 1989 more medals were won, the results remain unsatisfactory. Interestingly enough, after 1989 there was an ongoing convergence in the performance of Bulgaria at winter and summer Olympics as the results of winter Olympians improved slightly while the ones of summer Olympians deteriorated significantly. The performance at the recent Olympic Games suggests that in the future, Bulgarian athletes can only aspire for a few medals in both Olympic events.

**Bulgarian Olympic Table: Gold for Wrestling, Silver for Weightlifting and Bronze for the Rowing Sports**

The all-time medal table shows that the medals won by Bulgarian athletes between 1952 and 2016 put the country among the 30 most successful states in the history of the modern summer Olympic Games (1896–2016). During these six decades, medals were won in numerous sports, but actually wrestling and weightlifting account for almost half of the medals. The third position in terms of success is taken by rowing, canoeing and kayaking. Although, according to the international classifications, these are different sports, they required similar training facilities and in Bulgaria the three are usually governed by the same federation. They garnered 14% of all medals and 13% of the gold medals. Thus, if a medal was awarded to different sports, in the Bulgarian case it would be gold for wrestling, silver for weightlifting and bronze for the rowing sports. There is a wide gap between the most successful sports and the next group that includes boxing, shooting, athletics and gymnastics. These four provided multiple medals in different Olympic Games. Each brought approximately 6%–8% of all the medals (Figure 1). However, the quality of medals in boxing shooting and athletics is a slightly superior to that in gymnastics. The latter only brought two gold medals. Less than 10% of all and only two of the gold medals were won in other sports; after huge efforts and investments, gold was finally won in swimming in

![Figure 1](image_url). Distribution of Olympic medals by sport. Sources: Own elaboration.
1988, and rather surprisingly, in biathlon at the Winter Olympic Games in Nagano. Hence, the sports that brought success to Bulgaria on a regular bases are just a few in number. Supporters of the totalitarian regime often argue that Bulgarian authorities were very efficient in their endeavour to reach the elite of world sport. They supposedly invested carefully the limited resources available in few sports with great potential for success and found a niche in wrestling and weightlifting which brought numerous medals and guaranteed a good finish at every Summer Olympics. However, the analysis of the data and the documents of the governing bodies revealed a different story. The number of priority sports was higher and the lack of diversity in the medal-winning sports was a great concern. Moreover, some of the prioritized sports were not successful enough while others were not successful at all.

The five gold medals won in athletics could be considered as a success. This is a prestigious sport, often regarded as the main event of the summer Olympics. However, actually the expectations in Bulgaria were a lot higher and the performance of Bulgarian athletics (especially the men’s team) was considered as an underachievement by the BSFS and other sport institutions. The returns in two of the other prioritized sports are even less satisfactory. The swimmers won only one Olympic gold while the performance of artistic gymnastics was also often regarded as disappointing. Unfortunately, although Bulgaria dominated along with the USSR the rhythmic gymnastics competitions during the 1970s and 1980s, it only turned into an Olympic discipline in 1988.

Other sports were more efficient. Shooting and the rowing sports won numerous medals with relatively limited investments. The updated categorization of 1988 recognized the success of these sports and planned an increase in their financing, but the end of the socialist regime undermined these plans. Weightlifting also brought high returns; however, the reoccurring doping scandals with the national team (1976, 1988, 2000 and 2008) damaged the international prestige of Bulgaria.

The differences in the performance between sports could not be attributed exclusively to the level of importance given to the particular sports as many of the prioritized sports failed to achieve the planned results. The success also depended on the level of the competition. Bulgaria had difficulties in competing in the popular Olympic sports. Although the ambitions of the BCP concerning sport included success in athletics and swimming, the results were not always satisfactory. For economic reasons, Bulgarian training facilities could rarely compare with the possibilities offered to athletes in richer nations, and Bulgarians had to compensate with other aspects of the successful training. This could be coaching, motivation or other methods (e.g. the use of performance enhancing drugs). The best results came in niche sports which could bring multiple medals with a relatively small investment.

Spatial Distribution of Bulgarian Olympic Medals

Bulgaria is among the 10 most successful countries in the history of Olympic wrestling and weightlifting, and among the first 20 in shooting and the rowing sports. However, not all Bulgarian regions contributed equally to this success, in spite of the efforts of the party to develop sport in all municipalities and regions of the country.
The next step of the current analysis is to explore the Olympic results at regional level in an attempt to evaluate the determinants of the success of each particular sport.

During the best part of the period, sport was managed locally by regional sport councils. These councils were required to prepare and follow 5-year plans for the development of sport in the respective region. The plans were expected to implement the national strategy of the BSFS. For example, to have a soccer section, which was the most popular sport in the country, it was mandatory for the regions to develop at least one of the priority sports in the national strategy of the BSFS. During the 1970s and the 1980s, the central authorities insisted particularly on the development of athletics. Although the BSFS tried to implement its priorities to the regions, decisions on the development of particular sports were often taken locally. Furthermore, the best Bulgarian athletes came from the multi-sport clubs which existed at municipal level and were not under the direct control of the BSFS. The clubs were usually part of institution or economic entity: The two giant clubs, CSKA and Leviski-Spartak, were under the umbrella of the ministries of defence and the interior, respectively, the ‘Locomotiv’ clubs in the Ministry of transport, ‘Academic’ in the ministry of education and so on. The army and the police also maintained clubs in the most important towns of the country. The rest were usually incorporated into or sponsored by local industrial factories. Most of the athletes had a paid, often fictitious position in the respective institution. This allowed them to maintain their amateur status and to compete at the Olympic Games.

Although some clubs could attract some of the more talented athletes by offering them better financial and training conditions, most of the Bulgarian medal winners had spent at least their developing years in their regions of birth. In 1948, the BCP decided that sport should be practiced primarily where people worked and studied and overall there was a genuine effort to develop sport evenly throughout the country. Still, the Olympic results reveal that the successful Bulgarian athletes are unevenly distributed throughout the country: For example, the multisport clubs were categorized into different groups depending on a number of factors, including their Olympic contributions, and in 1981 the 19 clubs in the highest category were based in only 12 towns. Moreover, more than half of the regions (16 out of 28) had no top-class athletes.

**Urban Versus Rural**

The degree of urbanization is often identified as a contributing factor for Olympic success. The towns and villages offer different conditions for the practicing of sport. In most sports, it is challenging to develop competitive athletes in rural areas. The towns, and in particular the big ones, usually provide better infrastructure, often essential for the practice of many sports. Good examples are the winter sports, the rowing sports and swimming. However, other sports are less dependent on modern training facilities or equipment and the specific culture and traditions of the villages provide good environment for the development of successful athletes. The perfect example in the case of Bulgaria is wrestling. The sport does not require state of the
art infrastructure or equipment and it had strong grassroots with annually held popular contests in almost every Bulgarian village.

As expected, the results vary significantly between sports. Apparently, in Bulgaria, weightlifting and boxing are urban sports: In the first, only one of five medal winners was born in a village. The success of weightlifting depended on the development of breakthrough training methodologies and early selection by a small number of world-class coaches; these coaches were only available in towns, as this sport had little tradition in Bulgaria.

Boxing, with 14 out of 15 medal winners born in towns, is almost completely urban. On the other hand, the other combat sport, wrestling, is a predominantly rural as two-thirds of the medal winners were born in villages. Perhaps this also meant that with the urbanization of Bulgaria the talent pool of wrestling has decreased. This was compensated by the improvements in the organization, early selection of the talented wrestlers, improvements in the coaching and training methodologies, etc. Thus, wrestling remains the leading Bulgarian Olympic sport although without the past success.

The medal winners in the majority of the other successful sports were usually born in towns. In gymnastics and shooting, all the medal winners came from the towns and most often from the big ones. These sports require training facilities and coaching which the rural zones could not provide. In athletics, 12 medals are urban and six rural, which somehow replicates the overall proportion of all Bulgarian Olympic sports. The rowing sports present quite an interesting case as they require specific training facilities that are only available in the large Bulgarian towns. Hence, most of the Olympic medal winners were born either in Sofia or Plovdiv and only two were born in villages. However, these two – Nikolay Bukhalov and Vanya Gesheva – are the most successful Bulgarian Olympians with multiple medals. Their results somehow alter the overall picture by taking almost 23% of all medals.

Bulgaria had more people living in rural zones before the 1970s; thus, it is not surprising to discover a significant number of medals won by people born in the rural zones, especially during the early decades. Overall, approximately two-thirds of the Olympic medal winners were born in towns. However, before 1980, more medals came from rural zones. Since 1988, there are four urban medals for each rural. This change is the result of the ongoing urbanization of Bulgaria, especially during the 1950s to the 1970s. Furthermore, the number of successful sports grew and most of the medal-winning sports developed more successfully in urban conditions. Finally, in the recent decades, the professionalization of sport has increased gradually and has made it extremely challenging to win medals without the adequate economic conditions (facilities, medical support, etc.). The economically deteriorated rural zones of Bulgaria simply could not provide such conditions and are no longer a source for successful athletes.

**Regional Specialization**

To study the regional sport specializations, Bulgaria is divided into 28 regions which coincide with the current administrative subdivisions of the state. This structure (with
minor changes) was in place throughout the best part of the studied period and corresponded to the regional organization of sport during the communist period.\textsuperscript{72}

As one could expect, most of medals were won by athletes born in and around the largest cities. Sofia-city and Plovdiv regions are on the top of the list, followed by Stara Zagora and the other big Bulgarian towns, Varna and Burgas. There are several regions without any individual Olympic medal: Athletes born in Kyustendil, Kardzhali and Gabrovo regions never won individual medals in Olympic Games (Figure 2). There is no apparent connection between the three regions: They are not closely located and they have a diverse economic and ethnic structure. For the best part of the period, Gabrovo has been a relatively well-developed district with high urbanization rates and high percentage of population working in industry while Kardzhali is among the least developed Bulgarian regions with a high percentage of Muslim population.\textsuperscript{73}

The results change significantly when the population of the districts is taken into account: Most of the regions with best per capita results are located in the southern part of Bulgaria which roughly coincides with old Eastern Rumelia province (Plovdiv, Sliven Stara Zagora, Burgas and Pazardzhik). Sofia loses its leading position as Plovdiv, Razgrad, Stara Zagora, Sliven, Ruse, Pernik and Smolyan obtained more medals per capita than the capital (Figure 3). The best record is achieved by the second largest Bulgarian city Plovdiv, which suggests that Sofia region failed to employ efficiently the human and material recourses available in the capital in contrast to Plovdiv which established a good system that produced great athletes with fewer resources. The data prove that although the access to modern sporting facilities is essential, it is not enough to develop numerous champions.

Most of the Bulgarian regions won medals just in one or maximum two sports which shows a strong regional specialization. For example, the regions of Blagoevgrad in the Southeast and Razgrad in the North never produced medal winners in other sports than wrestling; however, the wrestlers born in these two regions brought more

![Figure 2. Spatial distribution of Bulgarian Olympic medals 1952–2012. Sources: Own elaboration.](image-url)
than 5% of all Bulgarian Olympic medals. Only athletes from Plovdiv and Sofia won multiple medals in different sports.

In some of the sports, the medals are concentrated in few districts while in athletics and wrestling the medals are spread more evenly. Wrestling is indeed the national sport of Bulgaria as more than half of the regions (18 out of 28) contributed towards the 68 Olympic medals. Most of the successful wrestlers were born in Eastern Bulgaria and as previously mentioned many came from the rural zones. In the early years, the medals came predominantly from villages in the Varna and Burgas regions. In more recent decades, they moved to the West and during the last three or four decades, the Varna and Burgas regions practically stopped providing champions. This could be the result of the urbanization and the deterioration of the rural zones and with them the decline in the traditions in wrestling in the two sea regions. Whole areas in the Northwest (Vidin, Montana, Vratsa) and the South (Smolyan and Kardzhali) as well as the Southwest never produced a medal winner in wrestling (Figure 4).

Although widely successful, weightlifting is not a traditional Bulgarian sport. It is extremely demanding activity, not very popular outside the circles of competitive athletes. At the same time, it is very useful in the building of the image of a physically strong nation. The key to the Bulgarian success were the world-class coaches responsible for the early selection and excellent training of the weightlifters. Most of the success is owed to the coaches scouting the schools, choosing youngsters with potential, followed by a lot of convincing and after the successful recruitment, years of hard and monotonous work. Once the weightlifters were selected in the national team led during decades by the legendary coach Ivan Abadzhiev, the exercise intensified and the athletes had to endure heavy physical and mental training throughout the year. Since the world-class coaches were very few, most of the champions came from towns or big cities, where these coaches were available. Almost half of the Bulgarian regions (13 out of 28) provided Olympic medal winners, which shows that
Bulgaria developed a successful system that reached many district centres in just a few decades. Among them, only Shumen and Plovdiv provided multiple medal winners. Plovdiv maintained a very successful sport programme that included a famous sport school that cultivated some of the most famous Bulgarian champions in all sports, including weightlifting. The case of Shumen is more unusual. Ivan Abadzhiev was born and coached in the town during the early days of Bulgarian sport. Not only did he discover and develop the qualities of some of the future champions during the 1950s and 1960s, but he also started his own coaching tree there. Some of the best Bulgarian specialists developed under his guidance and continued his work in Shumen, once he became head coach of the national team in 1969.

As indicated previously, a significant effort and resources were invested in athletics, swimming and gymnastics. Athletics, as a main priority, was developed in many Bulgarian municipalities. Consequently, the 18 medals won in the sport were achieved by athletes born in 10 different regions and only Sofia and Plovdiv have more than one medal winner. The rest are scattered around the country. Most of the medal winners were born in the largest towns and cities. This suggests that no region managed to create a successful system capable of repeatedly developing champions in athletics. In contrast, such schools were created in the rowing sports and gymnastics. In the first case, more than 30 medals came from just six districts and in the later only three districts contributed to the 13 medals. The rowing sports, although not prioritized until 1988, have been very successful for Bulgaria. Only few places in the country could provide the specific conditions necessary for the practice of this sport which explains the high level of regional specialization. More than half of the medals came from the Plovdiv district which has the best rowing canal in the country. Far behind Plovdiv is the capital Sofia which also had adequate facilities. Only a few medal winners were born outside Plovdiv or Sofia-city regions. The two leading regions also provided the best part of the medals in gymnastics.

Figure 4. Regional distribution of Olympic medals. Sources: Own elaboration.
The regional concentration was also relatively high in boxing where 18 medals were won in eight regions. Most of the medal winners were actually born in cities and big towns. Almost half of the medals were won by people born in the three coastal regions and only Varna and Sofia won multiple medals. They were followed by Plovdiv and Sliven with two medals each and Dobrich, Burgas, Lovetch and Pazardzhik with one medal each.

Shooting is another sport that brought prestige to Bulgaria. This is a sport that allows the players to participate in numerous Olympic Games and in multiple disciplines. Bulgaria had two multiple champions (Maria Grozdeva, the most successful Bulgarian Olympian, and Tanyo Kiryakov, who had their home regions in Sofia, and Rouse, respectively), as leaders in Bulgaria. The remaining medals are spread throughout Bulgaria. Overall, seven regions contributed to the 16 medals.

The remaining 20 Olympic medals were won in 10 different sports and no one contributed with more than three medals. They are relatively equally dispersed throughout the country.

The regional data reveal that the success of particular sports could hardly be attributed to a single factor and there seems to be a different story behind the success of each sport. More population usually resulted in higher probability for medals. Prioritized sports received better financing and support by the state, which also improved the chance for victory, without guaranteeing it. The rest of the determinants are less obvious and there are significant differences between sports. By and large, the geography of sports like biathlon or the rowing sports is determined by the availability of the specific training facilities. Other sports like weightlifting gymnastics and athletics are more dependent on the first-class coaching and medical stuff available predominantly in the larger towns.

Wrestling is the one sport that benefited most from the existing conditions in the country. It had solid grassroots in Bulgarian villages, received solid state support and benefited from good coaching traditions. As a result, the medals came from all corners of the country. The last Olympic Games showed that it remains the most successful Bulgarian sport and the only credible prospect for future medals.

**Bulgarian Sport: Glory in the Past, Difficult Times Ahead**

Between 1952 and 2016, Bulgarian sport went through an unusual evolution: The top 10 finishes during the 1970s and the 1980s and the mediocre, almost identical results in the first and the last Olympic Games covered by the current study, expose the peculiarity of the Bulgarian case of rise and decline. The evolution of Bulgarian sport fits the model studied by Andreff, who found that the political regime, regional differences in sport culture in a nation and athletes’ specialization in some Olympic disciplines, could also explain the high number of medals won by a nation.\(^74\) The excellent results during the 1960–1990s were the outcome of the effort of the communist leaders to transform Bulgaria into sport nation. This included two related but distinct aspects: Success in competitive sport and increase in the mass sport participation of the rest of the population. They failed in the later but achieved exceptional results in the first.
The Bulgarian case reveals that mass participation in sport activities has little relation to the results of Olympic Games. While weightlifting, gymnastics or the rowing sports brought multiple medals to the country, only a limited number of Bulgarians practiced these sports. At the same time, popular sports such as swimming, basketball, soccer and table tennis were less successful. The comparison between the plans and the results showed that the investments did not guarantee success. Bulgaria finished among the top nations due to the accomplishments of less popular sports internationally, like weightlifting, wrestling, rowing and shooting while the prioritization of swimming, gymnastics and the investments in athletics failed to bring the expected medals.

The spatial analysis exposed great differences between regions and a certain level of regional specialization. Only the districts of the two largest cities provided champions in multiple sports while the rest of the Bulgarian regions specialized in one or a maximum of two sports. Although the capital Sofia was the centre of the sport life of Bulgaria, it was actually the region of the second largest city Plovdiv that was more efficient in producing Olympic medal winners. While it is rather challenging to pinpoint one major factor that could explain the regional differences, it seems that population size and access to good coaching and training facilities improved the chances for Olympic success. However, even the importance of these basic variables varied significantly between sports.

It is apparent that with the increasing cost of Olympic medals and the current economic and organizational difficulties of Bulgarian sport, it is unlikely that in the near future the country could recuperate even slightly its previous standing in the world of sport. The glory days are long gone.

Notes

1. Central State Archives (further quoted as CSA), Fund (f.). 678 registry (r.) 3 archival unit (a. u.) 73, 21.
3. CSA, F. 597, r. 6, a. u. 10, Plenum of BSFS, DKMS, MNP, OF and BTS on the Perspectives for the Mass Sport in the Light of the Goals of 11th Congress of BCP and the July Plenum of BCP.


10. CSA, f. 597, r. 6, a. u. 11, 4th Plenum on the Improvement of the Efficiency of Sport Centres in the System of BSFS.


13. The world cup of football is the only international sport forum comparable to the Summer Olympics. However, like most other communist states, generally speaking, Bulgarian football failed to compete with the West both at club and national levels. In spite of some achievements such as qualifying for the Bulgarian nationals in four consecutive World Cups between 1962 and 1974, and the fourth place in 1994, the results in football are not comparable to the success of the Olympic athletes.

14. The database excludes the athletes that were born in Bulgaria but won medals for other countries. For example, Bulgaria-born weightlifters Nikolay Peshalov, Halil Mutlu and Naim Osmanuglu won gold medals for Croatia and Turkey. In recent Olympic Games, increasing numbers of Bulgaria-born wrestlers, weightlifters, shooters and rowers among others, have participated under the flag of other countries. However, it is uncertain what part of their success could be attributed to Bulgaria; therefore, they are not included in the study.


17. The archives of the BSFS, BOC and KMS are stored in the Central State Archives at the Archives State Agency in Funds 597, 593 and 678, respectively.


24. CSA, f. 597, r. 6, a. u. 129, 52.

25. CSA, f. 597, r. 3, a. u. 195, 10.


33. CSA, f. 597, r. 6, a. u. 106.
34. CSA, f. 597, r. 6, a. u. 138.
36. CSA, f. 597, r. 4, a. u. 218-224, *Annual Budgets of BSFS*.
38. CSA, f. 597, r. 4, a. u. 218-224, *Annual Budgets of BSFS*.
39. CSA, f. 597, r. 3, a. u. 20. 13th Plenum of CS of BSFS and BOC.
40. CSA, f. 597, r. 3, a. u. 20, 13th Plenum of CS of BSFS and BOC.
41. CSA, f. 597, r. 6, a. u. 74.
42. CSA, f. 597, r. 4, a. u. 218-224, *Annual Budgets of BSFS*.
43. In Rome 1960, one gold, three silver and three bronze medals; In Tokyo 1964, three gold, five silver and two bronze medals; In Mexico 1968, two gold, two silver and three bronze medals.
44. CSA, f. 593, r. 1, a. u. 91.
45. Bulgaria is eighth in the unofficial table by points and ninth by medals. Up until the Barcelona Games in 1992, Bulgarian teams always finished within the top 10 teams by medals won at Summer Olympics.
46. The Bulgarian weightlifters frequently faced accusations over the use of performance-enhancing drugs (doping). However, during the Olympic Games in Montreal, anabolics were still not on the list of prohibited medications. Hence, the medals from Munich are considered to be ‘clean’.
47. CSA, f. 597, r. 3, a. u. 20, 27-60.
48. CSA, f. 597, r. 3, a. u. 20, 13th Plenum of CS of BSFS and BOC.
49. BSFS, Otcet na CS BSFC’s V Kongres [‘BSFS’s 5th congress report’] (Sofia: BSFS, 1977).
50. CSA, f. 597, r.3, a. u. 20, 13th Plenum of CS of BSFS and BOC.
51. CSA, f. 597, r. 6, a. u. 69.
52. Andreff, Globalization of the Sports Economy, 13–32.
53. CSA, f. 597, r. 3, a. u. 20, 13th Plenum of CS of BSFS and BOC.
54. Ibid.
55. CSA, f. 597, r. 6, a. u. 178.
60. CSA, f. 597, r. 6, a.u. 45.
62. CSA, f. 597, r. 6, a.u. 45, *BSFS and the Territorial Administrative Organization*.
63. CSA, f. 593, r.1, a.u. 223.
64. BSFS Congress Reports, 1958–1990.
66. CSA, f. 597, r. 6, a. u. 163.
67. BSFS, Plenum po Olympijskaka podgotovka (‘Plenary session on Olympic preparation’) (Sofia: BSFS, 1988).
68. CSA, f. 597, r. 6, a. u. 133, 5.
69. BSFS, Statistical Yearbook (Sofia: BSFS, 1982).
73. Ibid.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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