The surrounding pubs are slowly emptying out. Last-minute shopping in the boutiques. Tickets in hand for the gates. Everywhere you look, blue jerseys, blue scarves. The derby between Dinamo Zagreb and Hajduk Split is about to start. The first chants can be heard from the hardcore fans' terraces. We are standing in front of the historic Maksimir Stadium.

British journalist and author James Montague has studied the history of ultras in the Balkans like few others.

“The Maksimir is one of the most famous stadiums in the world. The Croats label as "the first battle for independence" that match between Dinamo Zagreb and Red Star Belgrade, which was called off because of violence.”

Montague is referring to the events of May 1990, when Croatian footballer Zvonimir Boban became a symbol of Croatian resistance by kicking a policeman during the Maksimir riots. A few months later, the war that led to the breakup of Yugoslavia began.

I'm George Schinas. As part of the non-profit journalism organization iMEdD's investigation into fan violence, I traveled with Kostas Koukoumakas and Panagiotis Menegos to Zagreb. In the second episode of "Hooligan Express," we met the much talked-about Bad Blue Boys, the organised fans of Dinamo Zagreb that gained attention after Michalis Katsouris' death in Nea Filadelfeia. They are our gateway to the unknown world of ultras in the Balkans.

Upon landing at Zagreb airport, the significance and tradition of football in Croatia become evident. While waiting for our bags at baggage claim, we couldn't help but notice the large Dinamo Zagreb emblem displayed on the giant screen in front of us. From the airport, we headed straight to a taxi.

We crossed through Zagreb at night to meet with Andre, a sociology PhD who asked us not to use his last name, and who has researched the Bad Blue Boys for five years, having previously been among their ranks. We met him in a bustling pub near the train station. He was sitting among colleagues from various European countries, who were in Zagreb to attend a Sociology Conference.

“They hate politics. You know, they’re not a political group. They stay away from anything normal, mainstream, or commercial. They don’t want payment for trips to away games. They don’t want anyone running things. They want to have a vote and a dominant voice. What they want in terms of club management, is a socialist model.”

You may recall from the first episode Berislav Jelinić, editor-in-chief of Nacional magazine. As he says, the Bad Blue Boys have had no political influence for 15-20 years. But they haven't always refrained from political involvement. In the first free elections in 1990, for instance, they openly supported the conservative centre-right HDZ party, which remains in power today. Dinamo Zagreb continues to be a grassroots team to this day. Jelinić summarises it in one sentence:

“They want to push as many BBB members as possible within the board of directors to have a say in the assembly of the club.”

They view it as a move towards democratising decision-making. Jelinić disagrees. He points to Hajduk Split as an example, which operates similarly and has not won a league title in 18 years.

The city of Zagreb was embracing the Christmas spirit. Tourists and locals wandered through Christmas markets, enjoying mulled wine and sausages. Near the city centre stands the historic Esplanade Hotel, constructed in 1925 to host passengers of the renowned Orient Express. Adorning its walls are numerous photos of the train, the setting of Agatha Christie's famous novel. Inside one of the hotel rooms, we met with two current prominent members of the Bad Blue Boys, who agreed to speak with us under the condition of anonymity. They described how the incidents in Nea Filadelfeia left a lasting mark on the group.

“This incident will follow us for many years. It will change our group. For sure it will change the group.

What does this really mean?

This is the biggest game changer. It’s the biggest obstacle in our history.”

The Bad Blue Boys were established in 1986 and are considered one of the toughest hooligan groups in the Balkans. Their name was inspired by the film "Bad Boys" starring Sean Penn, which was released in 1983. Initially, they opposed anything Yugoslavian, like Serbian militias in Zagreb. Later, they confronted Croatia's first president, Franjo Tuđman, who temporarily renamed the team Croatia. According to sociologist and fan Andre, the BBB have targeted both the Croatian Football Federation and the team's former sporting director, Zdravko Mamić, who is currently living as a fugitive in Bosnia. During our meeting in the hotel room, the BBB summarised it in three sentences:

“I will not say we're the only ones or the best in Europe, though I believe it to be true. But we're willing to do whatever it takes to reach our goal. Clean club, clean mentality, clean group, regardless of the cost.”

Zeljko Cvrtila worked for 20 years in the Croatian Ministry of Interior. He was part of the anti-terrorism and anti-organised crime divisions. He arranged to meet us at a central café, where, over cappuccinos and orange juice, he discussed the internal structure and hierarchy within the Bad Blue Boys.

“The BBB is organised much like other fan groups across Europe. They are not much different. They have internal structures and follow certain rules of conduct. Like other groups of organised fans, it is known who the leader is, who organises, and who negotiates meetings and clashes with rival fans.”

The Bad Blue Boys have faced numerous accusations of ties to the far right and Nazism. During our meeting, they denied it.

“We're Croatian nationalists. We couldn’t care less about Nazism, Hitler, or Mussolini. We don’t give a damn about all this. For now, what is important to us is our country, our city, and our club.”

However, there is an abundance of videos and photos on the internet depicting Nazi salutes, fascist symbols, and far-right rhetoric in Croatian fans’ behaviour in the stands and actions. A simple search using "Bad Blue Boys" and "neo-Nazis" returns over 700,000 results.

British journalist James Montague points out that the ultras were actively involved in the Yugoslav wars, and the animosity from that era persists in today's fan rivalries.

“They were the bellwether of a country on the brink of collapse. They were the canary in the mine.”

Alliances among organised fan groups, known as twinning, are commonplace in Europe and the Balkans. Croatia and the Bad Blue Boys are no exception. These alliances can form based on shared political or religious ideologies, or something simpler, like jersey colours, or even friendships between leaders of the stands. Montague explains what an alliance means in practice.

“It means the enemy of my enemy is my friend. You become friends with someone and their allies, but also enemies with their enemies. It means that if you ever need support in a match to show strength in numbers or require reinforcements when traveling abroad, the allied ultras will treat you like kings, like guests.”

A former Panathinaikos fan, who preferred to stay anonymous, details the alliances to iMEdD.

“So Panathinaikos fans are allied with the Croatian Bad Blue Boys, and maintain a close brotherhood with the fans of Rapid Vienna, an Austrian team, who are not as “combative” as those in the Balkans, let’s put it that way. Olympiakos fans have a strong alliance with Red Star supporters, known as Delije, who are Serbs. PAOK fans have a strong bond with Partizan’s Grobari, who are also Serbs.”

The boundaries are quite blurred, and, obviously, alliances are not accepted or approved by all fans of a team. In our research, we also discovered reports of surprising alliances, like Iraklis fans with German fans of Mainz, or Panionios with London's Crystal Palace, even OFI with France’s Metz. But in the Esplanade Hotel room, we found out how the relationship between Panathinaikos and the BBB began some 13 years ago. On October 7, 2011, the Greek national team played for the Euro qualifiers against Croatia at the Georgios Karaiskakis stadium. At the time, Croatian fans, including members of the Bad Blue Boys, had been arrested upon trying to enter the stadium. During the game, clashes broke out, but, as the two leading members of the Bad Blue Boys told us, another unknown story unfolded behind the scenes.

“What happened was that local security in cooperation with the police and Olympiakos fans, arrested a friend of ours. They put him aside instead of taking him to the police for lighting a flare or throwing something. They abducted him and put him in a garage, where he was surrounded by Olympiakos fans.”

According to the members of the Bad Blue Boys, they then contacted Panathinaikos fans, who helped them save their comrade. The Croatian narrative obviously cannot be confirmed. Since then, the friendship between fans of the two teams has remained strong. This was shown by Panathinaikos fans’ involvement in the Nea Filadelfeia incidents and by the "Free the Boys" banner at Leoforos Alexandras Stadium seven weeks later in a Greek League derby against AEK. They demanded the release of the Croatian detainees, delaying the start of the match and provoking disapproval from the rest of the stadium.

We inquired with the Bad Blue Boys in Zagreb about their relationship with Panathinaikos fans.

“I wouldn’t like to go into details. I think I’ve been revealing too much. Let's say they help us when we're in need, and we help them when they need us. This will be enough.”

In research released in October 2023, iMEdD noted the connection between Ukrainian and Croatian far-right fans through channels on the Telegram platform. The same investigation uncovered that after the arrest of the Bad Blue Boys in Athens, Ukrainian fans had shared photos of support and solidarity with the detained Croats on social media. However, the Bad Blue Boys fans we spoke with expressed criticism regarding the current role of social media in ultras culture.

“Social media changed everything. Society, economy, politics... Same with the lives of ultras. Simple as that. Things that were once hidden are now visible, making propaganda much stronger. This can have either a positive or a negative side.”

If all of this seems perplexing, remember what researcher James Montague said in the first episode.

“It's almost as if you need a translator to understand them, to decode them.”

Let's circle back to where we began. To Maksimir Stadium in one of the most significant derbies of the Balkans: Dinamo Zagreb vs. Hajduk Split. Croatia's renowned "eternal derby".

“This is the big rivalry in Croatian football. They absolutely hate each other. It's the big city, the capital, pitted against the distant Adriatic outpost. One team epitomises everything the other hates. Get it?”

We watched the match from Maksimir's press box. Despite its importance in terms of the score, it offered no spectacle and no goals. But in the stands, it was an entirely different match. Approximately 3000 Hajduk Split fans had traveled over 300 km to support their team in Zagreb. The match was deemed high-risk by the police. For the die-hard fans, this translated to heightened police presence and checks by specially trained dogs. For the average fans, it meant a lack of alcohol at the stadium's concessions.

The Bad Blue Boys are just one piece of the puzzle of the complex world of ultras. A world of extremes with its own rules, its own social identity, and often anti-social behaviour. Last August, they crossed undisturbed 1500 km from Zagreb to Athens for a match they were banned from attending and which, in the end, was called off. A descent that resulted in a dead man. Michalis Katsouris. Our conversation with Andre in Zagreb comes to an end.

“Also, I would like to add, I am really sorry for poor Michalis and his mother. He was really part of the ultras movement. In fact, he was closer to us compared to many Greeks who were vocal about his death. He was living the same life as us. Not a normal, ordinary life of any Greek. He lived more of an ultra life, that few Greeks can understand.”

In the days when we were preparing our luggage for the trip to Croatia, another serious incident took place in Athens.

“One of the flares, launched by an unidentified individual, directly strikes a riot police officer in the thigh. The officer collapses, bleeding, and for10 minutes, according to his colleagues' accounts, he suffers a cardiac arrest.”

Michalis Katsouris is not the last casualty of fan violence. Our investigation concludes with yet another fatality and the government's decision to close football stadiums in Greece.

Coming up next: the murder that reshaped history, deciphering the meaning of "new hooliganism," and the people left behind.

“The stream, my friend, is manageable. But once it becomes a torrent, you don’t stand in its way, or you'll be swept away too.

We're no longer talking about mere fans or hooligans. We’re talking about armies.

I fell out of bed in pain. At first, I thought it was a nightmare, but it was real.”

"Hooligan Express" is a podcast series by the non-profit journalism organisation iMEdD.

Research, writing, storytelling:

Kostas Koukoumakas, George Schinas, Panagiotis Menegos

Sound mixing and design: Aris Athanasopoulos

Illustrations: Eugenios Kalofolias

Communication and social media:

Vaso Batsomitrou, Konstantinos Melitas, Athina Thanasi

iMEdD podcasts, content, and production manager:

Panagiotis Menegos

For more material from our research on fan violence, visit lab.imedd.org.