

# Bulgaria: Contemporary mobilities of volleyball players in Europe

## Description

***Over the past five decades, Bulgarians have often been among the most mobile volleyball internationals, settling permanently abroad in clubs, especially in Italy and France, where their playing qualities have been recognized.***

The recruitment of Bulgarian volleyball players by foreign clubs is an old phenomenon. As far as we know, Boris Zahariev was the first to be recruited by Minelli Modena as early as 1948. The 1970s marked a second stage: the recruitment of some Bulgarian players by Italian clubs became acceptable to the regime, which saw it as a way of promoting the “socialist man.” Several of these sportsmen spent a few seasons there, giving satisfaction to their recruiters. Then, with the return of East-West mobility from 1989 onwards, other teams in European championships took advantage of the skills, pugnacity, and endurance of these Bulgarian players. Today, they continue to demonstrate their technical qualities, satisfying the recruiting clubs, their teammates, and the public.



## First Mobilities in Italy under Socialism (1948-1989)

During the second half of the 20th century, volleyball was one of the sports highly valued by the socialist political regimes of Eastern Europe because of the values conveyed by the communist ideology (sense of teamwork, discipline, etc.). Moreover, this sport was easily practiced by both sexes (the training is primarily focused on tonicity, coordination, and balance) and was not very dangerous (thus leading to fewer injuries). This vision was a significant factor in its development in Bulgarian schools, which made it possible to select the best elements early on and train them. This is how the national team welcomed excellent players who allowed it to shine on the international sports scene (finalist at the world championship in 1970, 4th and finalist at the Olympic Games in 1972 and 1980, respectively).

These performances contributed to the excellent reputation of Bulgarian players. This sporting success was concomitant with détente in relations between Sofia and Rome, a development linked to the privileged relationship maintained between the powerful Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the Bulgarian state. This context allowed two Bulgarian players, Petar Kratchmarov and Vasil Simov, to move to Italian clubs Catania (Pallavolo Catania) and Rome (Buscaglione Roma) in 1970. Others quickly followed these departures, and this presence outside the borders increased until it peaked at 14 expatriate Bulgarian volleyball players in 1985<sup>(1)</sup>.

The professionalization of players' agents in Italy in the early 1980s encouraged the development of

the sports recruitment market. Some observers suspect that the Italian mafia organized some of these transfers, as this operation was sometimes used to launder money for part of its criminal activities<sup>(2)</sup>. There is no formal evidence incriminating Bulgarian players or clubs in this practice. It is helpful to remember that the PCI was in open warfare with the mafia then. 31 of the 32 Bulgarian volleyball players who played abroad between 1948 and 1989 played exclusively in the Italian league, which shows the importance of the links between the two national sports federations. This relationship would continue in the following decades.

### **A change of generation and new destinations**

Five Bulgarian volleyball players (Assen Galabinov, Petjo Draghiiev, Evgenio Guentchev, Borislav Kyosev, and Petko Petkov) lived through the fall of the regime abroad, in Italy, and a sixth (Ivan Severinov), who had had a first experience of professional expatriation in Italy in 1984, returned there between 1990 and 1992.

Then a new generation of athletes diversified these departure options: indeed, if the Italian championship remained attractive, it was no longer the only one because of French clubs (allowing access to job security with employment contracts whose termination is strictly regulated) but also to a lesser extent, Greek or Turkish clubs, also wanted to recruit Bulgarian internationals, with better-paid arrangements to boot.

From 1990 onwards, these mobilities ceased to be exclusively male: a few Bulgarian female volleyball players also tried their luck in France, notably in Lyon, Francheville, and Huningue<sup>(3)</sup>. They quickly distinguished themselves, demonstrating their technical skills and pugnacity on the court. Volleyball players were recruited more and more, and by the end of the 1990s, a dozen of these internationals was playing regularly in the French league.

### **Two decades of expatriation on five continents (2000/2020)**

Over the next two decades, Bulgarian volleyball players made more of their careers abroad<sup>(3)</sup> to get better-paid contracts and shine in European leagues that offered them worldwide visibility. The number of expatriations has thus steadily increased<sup>(4)</sup>.

Moreover, from the end of the 1990s onwards, we have seen the almost systematic linking of these mobilities (without returning to Bulgarian clubs) and a significant increase in their duration. Sportsmen and women have often lived abroad for more than a decade. This long expatriation is observed both among volleyball players (Svetoslav Angelov – 1999/2022, Nedyalko Delchev – 2000/2020, Ivaylo Barutov – 2001/2014, Mateï Kaziiski – 2005/2022...) and volleyball players (Elena Koleva – 2000/2020, Mariya Filipova – 2003/2017, Strashimira Filipova – 2005/2020...)<sup>(1)</sup>. The evolution of these careers leads many athletes to settle permanently in their host country. In France, this is the case of Krimina (Beltcheva) and Igor Yotov, who live in Tulle, or Rusena Slancheva and Radoslav Arsov, who live in Nancy. In Italy, we find Nedyalko Delchev in Prata del Pordenone and Yordan Galabinov near the town of Pontedera. Those who settle down usually end up considering naturalization.

From 2011 onwards, the number of female players moving abroad has exceeded that of their male colleagues (64 women for 60 men). This trend, which a growing awareness can explain on the part of those concerned (opportunity to win titles, international visibility, enhancement of CV), has been

maintained over the last decade. In France, some have played for teams that dominate the national championship (RC Cannes, AS Béziers Volley, ASPTT Mulhouse, Saint-Raphaël, Le Cannet). Others have opted for Italian teams, some of which shine in major international matches (Imoco Volley Conegliano was the world champion in 2019, Pomì Casalmaggiore – was runner-up in 2016, Norda Foppapedretti Bergamo 3<sup>rd</sup> in this championship in 2010). The Bulgarian national team often selects these players (Gergana Dimitrova, Youlya Stoyanova, Dobriana Rabadjieva, Eva Yaneva...). They can thus be at the forefront of the national scene and of their host country, a double satisfaction for them. From the beginning of the 2010s, their reputation has been established thanks to the talent and the game developed on the field by the previous generation; the coaches quickly trust them and rely more on them.

The latest remarkable development is that all male and female volleyball players are no longer recruited only by European and Turkish clubs. Men now regularly join Russian or Iranian teams, and women frequently join Azeri (Azerrail Baku, VK Lokomotiv Baku, Rabita Baku, Igtisadchi Baku) or American clubs, especially in the last decade. This is one of the consequences of the financial crisis of 2008, which resulted in a decrease in the treasuries of Italian clubs that had previously welcomed many Bulgarian players. However, Europe remains the primary sports market where many talented players compete. After France and Italy, countries such as Switzerland, Germany, and Spain recruit some of them. Very recently, it is often in Romania (CSM and Dinamo Bucharest, Medicina Târgu Mureș, CS ?tiin?a Bac?u) and, to a lesser extent, in Greece, Cyprus, Hungary, and Poland that volleyball players have been able to get contracts. It is likely that links with neighboring countries and the former Eastern bloc remain prevalent and play a role in the geography of recruitment. Finally, although it may appear more anecdotal, these players exist in Asia, South America, and Africa.

Thus, the return of East-West mobility has considerably favored the international recruitment of Bulgarian volleyball players. Their number has increased from 7 expatriate volleyball internationals (all men) in 1989 to 137 (70 women and 67 men) in 2015. In 2020, a year marked by the Covid-19 crisis, at least 137 (81 women and 56 men) still played in foreign leagues. Over the last three decades, these athletes have favored these European leagues, which have offered them excellent professional visibility and stability. These departures have also enabled them to extend their professional careers by coaching in a “second life” some of the teams that had welcomed them<sup>(5)</sup> or their compatriots<sup>(6)</sup>.

### Notes:

(1) Survey carried out by the author on the profile of 361 professional volleyball players (212 male, 149 female) of Bulgarian nationality who played in foreign professional leagues between 1948 and 2020 (consultation of various sports websites dedicated to volleyball – *Volleybox*, *Lega Volley* -, portals of the IOC and sports clubs as well as of players' agencies)

(2) Interview with an FFVB sports agent, having placed Bulgarian volleyball players in France between 2000 and 2010, 1 December 2014.

(3) Interview with a former professional volleyball player who played for French N3, N2, and pro B and pro A teams, as well as for a Swiss pro A team, 5 October 2014.

(4) 13 interviews conducted by the author with Bulgarian male and female volleyball players and two sports agents between 5 October and 15 November 2014; "[Les deux vies de Rayna Minkova](#)," *Le Parisien*, 10 November 2012.

(5) Pascal Goumy, "[Igor et Krimina Yotov ont fait le choix de s'installer en Corrèze il y a dix ans](#)", *La Montagne*, 4 January 2014. Jérôme Gallo, "[L'ASUL Volley et son recrutement](#)", *XXL*, 19 June 2013.

(6) "[Volley \(Elite\) : Radoslav Arsov, l'homme providentiel pour le VC Marcq ?](#)", *La voix du Nord*, 26 September 2014.

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