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Amateur football map (4th league) from Romania generated by the coronavirus (COVID-19) in the pre-pandemic season (2019/2020)

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Abstract. After the 2nd World War, for the first time after 7 decades, sports in general, and amateur football in particular, are facing a new global challenge generated by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. *Pre-pandemic football season 2019/2020* held on the field only for the first part (690 teams; 781 games), was suspended at the beginning of March, 2020. This situation generated an uncertain 5-month break until the first official games in play-offs (1-9 August, 2020) in which only 46 teams (6.6%) in total actually participated. In a state of global uncertainty, to the suggestion of RFF, the 42 county football associations were “invited” to identify new solutions in order to “finalize the season”, by declaring, or not, a champion team, another team for the national phase of Romania’s Cup and a county representative for the 3rd league play-off. With the help of statistical information provided by county structures, with the spatial analysis of statistical data reported and analyzed on local and regional level, were analyzed the created situations and, especially, the consequences generated by the pandemic situation upon amateur football in Romania illustrated by maps.

Keywords: Romania, amateur football maps, coronavirus COVID-19, pre-pandemic season 2020/2021

Introduction

“Freezing” the amateur football competitions at the beginning of March, 2020, had consequences upon the small football by entering in a sequential improvisation stage, with attempts to resume the competitions, be them singular or regional, with strategies applied on the County Football Association (CFA)¹ level in cooperation with the Romanian Football Federation (RFF)², in order to provide relationships between competition systems. The topic of this study refers to the finality of the 2019/2020 pre-pandemic season, interrupted on the beginning of March, 2020, after the tournament (781 games) which took place 690 football teams in the august-september of 2019. Having as support the maps of administrative territorial units (ATU-s) and localities with engaged teams, there are analyzed the applied strategies, the territorial systemic relationship and the typology of regional competition systems, the regional and local consequences and particularities of participating clubs from Romania.

Methodology

Elaborating a data base with statistical information referring to the competitions which took place in the 2019/2020 pre-pandemic season, taken from the archives of clubs, county football associations (CFA)¹, Romanian Football Federation (RFF)², etc, represented the first step of our endeavor. In order to manage such a complex data base which includes information referring to the number of clubs, teams, competition type, human resource (senior players), we used as cartographic reporting basis the administrative-territorial units (ATU) of county type, of ATU type (cities, towns and communes) and urban and rural localities. The complexity of spatial analysis (Bale, 2003; Sam and Hughson, 2010; Ilieş et al, 2014; Murphy, 2019) was dwelt with by the use of certain tools such as geographic information systems (GIS), ArcGis program. With the help of this program and the help of geographical and interdisciplinary analysis and synthesis methods used in similar studies (Reilly and Gilbourne, 2003, Ilieş et al, 2015; Kozma, 2015; Gartner and Huang, 2016; Ilieş et al, 2016a; Herman et al, 2016; Kijewski and Wendt, 2019, we have managed to represent graphically and cartographically (Dehoorne et al, 2019; Ilieş and Caciora, 2020), under the form of spatial and temporal analyses (Conner, 2014; Ilieş et al 2016b; 2016c; Robinson et al, 2017; Raisch, 2018; the results of the combinations between the used items illustrated by the maps.

Analitical component

There are analyzed series of data referring to: the finality of the 2019/2020 “pre-pandemic” season, which took place only partially, with scarce attempts of competition organization and “survival” and the territorial impact upon the amateur football from Romania.

2019-2020 competition season. Usually with a different start from one county to another (depending on the geographical position (fig.1; tab.1), the number of enrolled teams, the CFA’s strategy to promote football, the geomorphological (fig.1) and climatic conditions, as well as the vacation season for amateurs, it takes

place from August to September and the tournament ends, the latest, at the beginning of December. Unfortunately, the threat of coronavirus pandemic, more and more obvious in the European space at the turn of the year, proved to be a reality with negative effects upon the human community and without the perspective of “eradication” on short term. Facing an “unknown opponent”, the sports have been affected on all levels (Margvelashvili, M., 2021), and that includes football as well (Rico-Gonzales, 2021). The spring season (2019/2020 return matches) was resumed in 28 counties for one or two stages (suspended on the beginning of March), situation which continued until the summer of 2021 when, after almost two years of waiting, amateur football “partially came back to life”.

Organized on 2-3 hierarchical levels (league 4-6), amateur football distinguishes itself from one county to another, depending on the number of inhabitants, football tradition, economic potential, sports infrastructure, etc. The 2019/2020 pre-pandemic season, on the level of elitist league of organizing amateur football (league 4), included, from the 42 territorial administrative units, a number of 690 senior teams, encompassing around 13,800 amateur football players (an average of 20 players per team). It is important to mention that for amateur football, the title of county champion (League 4) and winner of Romania’s Cup, county level, represent the two major trophies on this level.

The pandemic situation which “covered” the world (Mc Curry, 2020) and Europe³ (Colluci et al., 2020) led to blocking the amateur football competitions in the spring of 2020 (starting with the beginning of March). In a situation with very many unknown variables, the chances of resuming amateur competitions decreased as the virus made more and more victims. Still, in order to ensure the cohesion between amateur, semi-professional and professional football (resumed with considerable sacrifices) at the proposal of the RFF, certain county structures (CFA-s), with modified rules and adapted to the situation, tried to finalize the edition begun before the pandemic.

On the level of the 42 county structures (NUTS 3) which manage amateur football in Romania, the 2019/2020 football season practically ended in 14 counties after finishing the tournament at the end of the year 2019. In 28 counties (67%; fig.1), the football activity was resumed in February (22)-March (7), 2020, but for at most one (15 counties), two (10 counties) or three stages (4 counties) because, starting with beginning of March, it was imposed the ceasing of all amateur sports competitions. Other counties also tried to provide a competition form to the unusual championship finality, but they gave up out of objective reasons, out of which the most important was the impossibility to respect the sanitary^{4;5} and financial conditions generated by the sanitary protocol imposed by the RFF and Ministry of Sport and Youth (MSY). To this it is added the lack of documents which should prove the official status of football club certified by *Sport identify certificate* (SIC) and MSY.

The effects of this situation, with consequences on the map of amateur football during the pandemic, show the lack of coherent strategies on national level. Each county structure identified “emergency solutions” with the declared purpose to send one team in the 3rd league’s play-offs.

Under these uncertain circumstances, after a break of almost 5 months (March-July), in an extremely critical sanitary situation on national and global level, to the suggestion of the RFF, the county structures tried to finalize, somehow forced, the competition and to send a team to the play-offs for the 3rd league. It was an optional request from the RFF, without being mandatory that the respective team should be also declared the county champion, but which, in Romania, generated a territorial option mosaic. The spatial analysis shows a variety of decisions depending also on the competition complexity established at its beginning: simple championship, championship with play-off and play-out, organization on one (33 counties), two (7 counties: Bacău, Bistrița-Năsăud, Caraș-Severin, Dolj, Giurgiu, Harghita, Maramureș, Neamț) or three series/groups (2 counties: Satu Mare and Vrancea) with participation of 46 teams. In some counties, such as Maramureș, the two series of league 4 are determined by the relief conditions, the Oaș-Gutâi-Țibleș mountain range separating the two depression spaces from North to South, the access being made through passes situated at 1,000m altitude (fig.1).

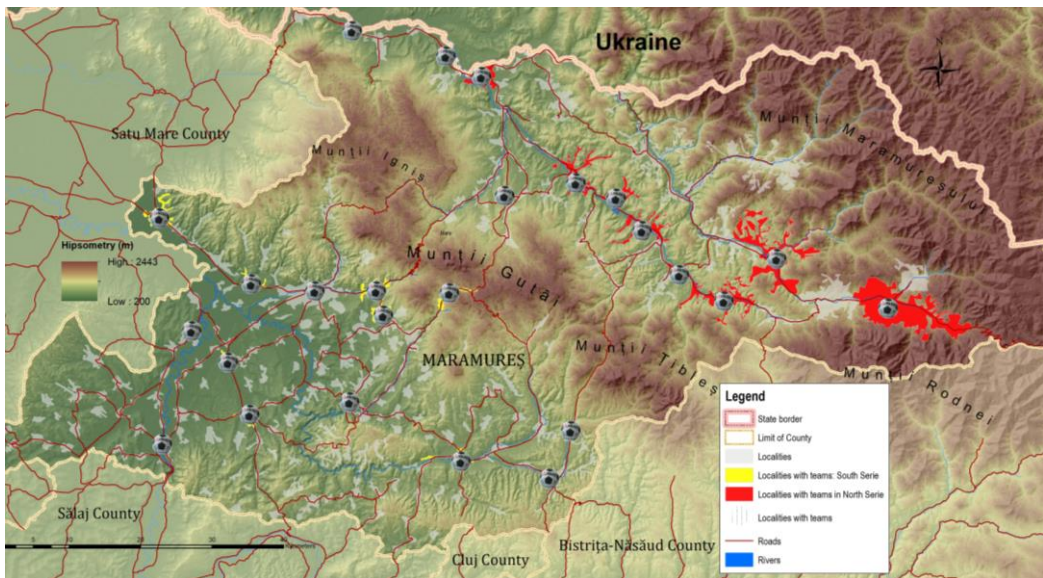


Figure 1. Maramureș County with central mountain barrier (Igniș-Gutâi-Țibleș) between North and South series of 4th fotbal league (data source: ¹; CFA Maramureș, 2020)

The forced break, the main enemy of the competition. For 42 counties, the date of March 7 suspended all amateur competitions, the break until the play-offs being of 5-9 months. Medically and sportively, on this level, it is extremely difficult to manage and protect the situation, if we refer to the “sports performance” of the implied human resource, especially players. The situation becomes even more complicated for 8 counties which finalized the tournament in November, the forced break being of 9 months. Under these circumstances, the absence of athletes’ regular medical checkup, together with the effects of the virus, those who identified solutions to finalize the competition took an important risk regarding the athletes’ health condition (Buhaș et al., 2018; Dragoș et al., 2019; Primorac et al., 2020).

Table 1. Romania. The situation at the level of the 4th league championships from the 42 CFAs (data sources:^{1,2})

No	County	Football team ranked 1st, 2nd or 3rd	No of		Place in ranking	Stages played	Decision to declare the champion by		Aban-don	Champion	To the promotion play-off
			serie	teams			Place	By play-off			
1	Alba	CS Ocna Mureș	1	15	1	16	x			C	B
2	Arad	Victoria Zăbrani	1	16	1	15	x			C	B
3	Argeș	Vointă Budeasa	1	20	1	22	x			C	B
4	Bacău	ACS Viitorul Curita	2	12	1	15		X		C	B
		<i>Dinamo Bacău</i>		12	1	15		X			
5	Bihor	CAO 1910 Oradea	1	16	1	15	x			C	B
6	Bistrița Năsăud	Silvicultorul Maieru	2	8	1	12			X	NO	NO
		Progresul Năsăud		7	1	11			X		
7	Boțșani	Dante Botoșani	1	1	1	14	X	X		C	B
8	Brăila	ACS Victoria Traian	1	11	1	17			X		
		ACS Sportul Chiscani			2			X		C	B
9	Brașov	FC Precizia Săcele	1	16	1	16		X	X		
		Corona Brașov			2			X		C	B
		ACS Colțea 1920 Brașov			3			X			
10	București	CSA Steaua București	1	16	1	18	x			C	B
11	Buzău	CSM Râmnicu Sărat	1	18	1	20	x	X		C	B
12	Călărași	Venus Independența	1	18	1	20		x		C	
		AFC Unirea Mănăstirea			1				X		
		ACSM Oltenița			3			x			B
13	Caraș Severin	ACS Progresul Ezeriș	2	9	1	14		X		C	B
		ACS Rapid Buchin		9	1	13			X		
14	Cluj	ACS FC Someșul Dej	1	14	1	15		X		C	B
		ACS Florești			2				X		
		ACS Suporter Cluj N			3			X			
15	Constanța	Viitorul Fântânele	1	18	1	20			X		
		CS Năvodari			2				X		
		Gloria Albești			3			x			C
16	Covasna	ACS Sepsi OSK 2	1	14	1	16	x	X		C	B
17	Dâmbovița	ACS Roberto Ziduri	1	18	1	18	x	X		C	B
18	Dolj	Unirea Tricolor Dăbuleni	1	16	1	17	x			NO	B
19	Galați	Avântul Valea Mărului	1	14	1	14	x			C	B
20	Giurgiu	AFC Victoria Adunați Copăceni	2	16	1	18			X		
		CS Argeșul 2009 Mihăilești		16	1	18	x			C	B
21	Gorj	ACS Știința Turceni	1	14	1	14	x			C	B
22	Harghita	CS Gheorgheni	2	10	1	13	x			C	B
		<i>AS Sporting Odorhei</i>		14	1	13			X		
23	Hunedoara	CSM Jiul Petroșani	1	11	1	19	x			C	B
24	Ialomița	AS Bărăganul Ciulnița	1	15	1	17		X		C	B
		Victoria Tândărei			2			X			
25	Iași	Unirea Mircești	1	16	1	17	x			C	B
26	Ifov	AS Viitorul Domnești	1	12	1	11	x			C	B
27	Maramureș	CSM Sighetu Marmației	2	11	1	13		X			
		CS Progresul Șomcuta Mare		13	1	14		X		C	B

28	Mehedinți	<i>CS Recolta Dănceu</i>	1	12	1	11					NO	B
		CS Strehaia			2		x					
29	Mureș	CS Unirea Ungheni 2018	1	12	1	13	x				C	B
30	Neamț	AS Bradu Borca	2	12	1	13	x				C	B
		<i>Victoria Horia</i>		12	1	13			X			
31	Olt	CSO Petrolul Potcoava	1	15	1	17	x				C	B
32	Prahova	CSO Plopeni	1	16	1	16	x				C	B
33	Sălaj	Sportul Șimleul Silvaniei	1	11	1	14	x				C	B
34	Satu Mare	CSM Satu Mare	3	14	1	12	x				C	B
		Talna Orașu Nou		11	1	11			X			
		Recolta Dorolț		12	1	16			X			
35	Sibiu	CS Măgura Cisnădie	1	17	1	19		X			C	B
		ACS FC Avrig						X				
		<i>Păltiniș Rășinari</i>			3			X				
36	Suceava	CSO Siretul Dolhasca	1	14	1	15	x				C	B
37	Teleorman	CS Unirea Țigănești	1	16	1	18	x				C	B
38	Timiș	CS Avântul Periam	1	18	1	18	x				C	B
39	Tulcea	Pescărușul Sarichioi J	1	9	1	10	x				C	B
40	Vâlcea	ACS Minerul Costești	1	12	1	19	x				C	B
41	Vaslui	Sporting Juniorul Vaslui	1	13	1	14	x				C	B
42	Vrancea	<i>Sportul Ciorăști</i>	3	6	1	10		X			NO	B
		Victoria Gugești		5	1	8		X				
		CS Panciu		5	1	8			X			
TOTAL				690		781					39	

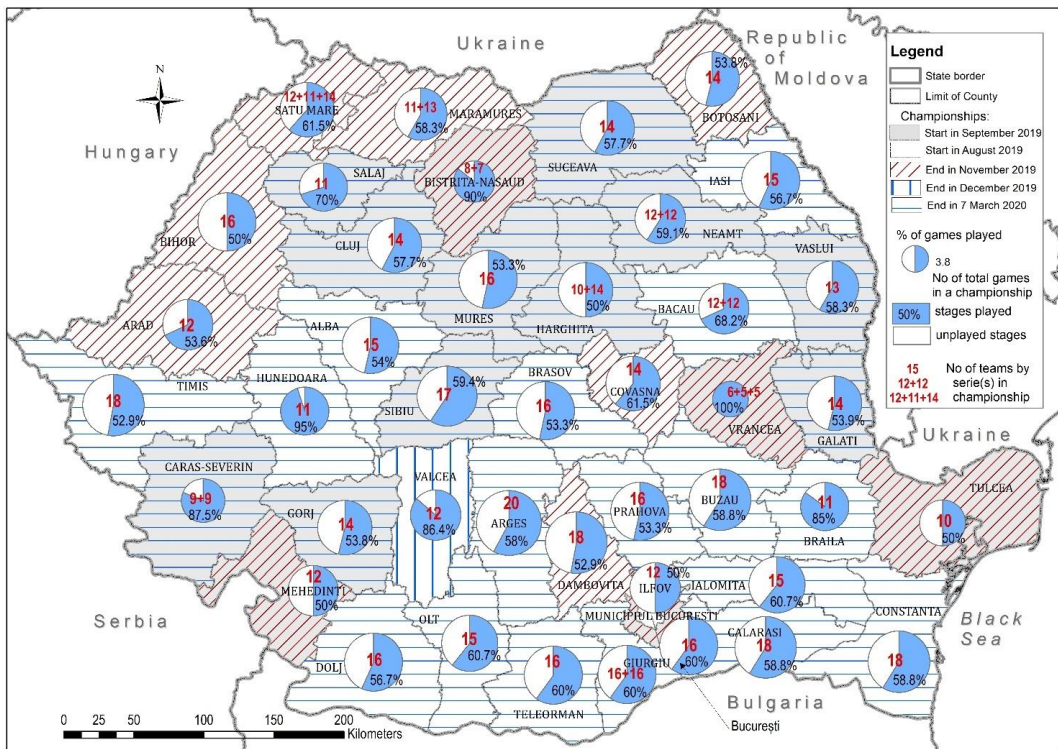


Figure 2. Romania. Sezon(s), no of teams, no of series and no of stages played in league 4 sezon 2019-2020 (data sources: 1)

The figure 2 generated by the territorial relationship between the competition break and specific activity, shows this risk which, in the absence of proper training conditions, could lead to severe situations regarding the athletes' health. The longest competition breaks occurred in the following counties: Ilfov (10), Maramureș (10), Tulcea (10), Arad (9), Botoșani (9), Vrancea (9), Covasna (8), Dâmbovița (8), Mehedinți (9), Vâlcea (7), and the longest seasons were in Argeș (22 stages, 5 months break), Buzău (20; 5), Hunedoara (19; 5), Teleorman (18; 5), Timiș (18; 5); Constanța (20; 5), Călărași (20; 5). In Bistrița Năsăud County, after playing 12 stages in each of the two series, on the 24th of November, 2019, the championship ended for good, being the county, which did not send any team to the play-off and neither did it declare any champion team⁶.

Designating the champion or the team participating in the play-off. While waiting for a more favorable sanitary situation for resuming the competition, the organizing bodies of the counties (CFA/AMB) had to “improvise” in this respect. Thus, several situations occurred (Tab.2; Fig.3):

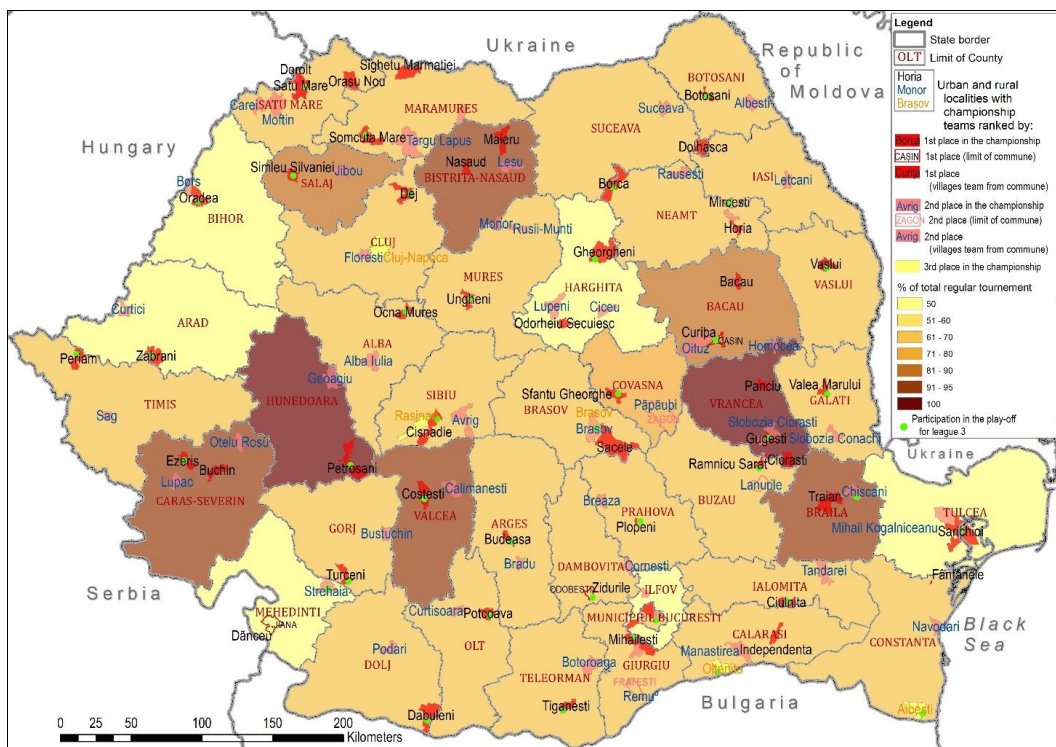


Figure 3. Romania. The situation at the level of the 4th league championships from the 42 CFAs (data sources:1; 2)

-Most counties decided “the champion” based upon its sports merits, that is the ranking at the moment the competition stopped (the beginning of March, 2020). The decision was easier in the case of championships with a single series and where

there were points or score differences between the highest-ranking teams. There were 35 counties in this situation (83.3%).

-A qualifying tournament with first ranked teams took place in 5 counties (11.9%): Brăila, Braşov, Cluj, Ialomiţa and Sibiu. In all cases there were teams which declined their participation or withdrew during the tournament because of sanitary or financial protocols, or because of the lack of perspective to reach the play-off⁷. There were teams which did not meet the RFF's requirements (Certificate of Sport Identify; financial sustainability), condition which could have been solved in a regular championship.

-Some play-off matches were played by the first ranked teams on level series in 6 counties (14.2%): Bacău, Caraş-Severin, Giurgiu, Harghita, Maramureş and Neamţ.

-In Bistriţa-Năsăud, the only one on national level, the CFA did not designate any champion team, out of the winners of the two League 4 series, to participate to the play-off for League 3, practically ending the competition on the 24th of November, 2019.

-After the teams ranked on the first two places, the teams situated on the 2nd place in Mehedinţi and 3rd place in Călăraşi were designated to participate, without being designated county champions;

-In Constanţa County, the teams ranked on the first two places abandoned and the team from the 3rd place, Gloria Albeşti, was declared champion and participant in the play-off;

-After the play-offs between the teams ranked on the first two places, the team on the 2nd placed became champion and participant to the play-off in Brăila and Braşov Counties;

-In 4 counties: Bistriţa Năsăud, Dolj, Mehedinţi and Vrancea, the title of county champion for the 2019/2020 season was not awarded;

-The longest seasons with the most matches were in the following counties: Argeş 22 (20 teams) and 20 in Buzău (18), Călăraşi (18) and Constanţa (18), and the least matches were played, 11 in each county, in Bistriţa Năsăud (8), Ilfov (12), Satu Mare (13), Tulcea 10 (9) and Vrancea 8 (5) etc;

-In 12 counties the championship was not resumed in spring, the break being a much longer under these circumstances, up to 9 months;

-For the play-off organized at the beginning of August, the CFA-sent 41 teams, except Bistriţa Năsăud, which fought for the 14 places with promotion possibility. In the end, in order to complete the L3 series, 2020/2021 season, other teams from the 2nd and 3rd places from the qualification groups were also invited, the number of teams which got in the 3rd league in the following season being of 25 (61%) out of 41 participating (tab.2).

Regional architecture of the 3rd league promotion play-off

Table 2. Romania. Participating teams, dam groups and their performance (data source: 8)

	Region	County	Team 1	Team 2	Team 3
1	A North-West	Bihor, Cluj, Satu Mare	CSM Satu Mare	ACS CAO 1910 Oradea	ACS FC Someșul Dej
2	B North-West	Bistrița-Năsăud ^{a,b} , Maramureș, Sălaj	CS Progresul Șomcuta Mare	CS Sportul 2007 Șimleu Silvaniei	No team
3	A North-East	Iași, Neamț, Suceava	ACS Brațu Borca	CSO Siretul Dolhasca	CS Unirea Mircești
4	B North-East	Bacău, Botoșani, Vaslui	CS Dante Botoșani	Sporting Juniorul Vaslui	AFCS Viitorul Curița
5	A South-East	Brăila, Galați, Vrancea	ACS Sportul Chiscani	CS Avântul Valea Mărului	CSL Victoria Gușești
6	B South East	Buzău, Constanța, Tulcea	CSM Râmnicu Sărat	CS Gloria Albești	Pescărușul Sarichio ^b
7	A South	Călărași, Ilfov, Prahova	ACSM Oltenița	CSO Plopeni	ACS Viitorul Domnești
8	B South	București, Ialomița, Giurgiu	CSA Steaua București	AS FC Bărăganul Ciulnița	CS Argeșul Mihăilești 2009
9	A South-West	Argeș, Dâmbovița, Dolj	ACS Voința Budeasa	ACS Roberto Zidurile	Unirea Tricolor Dăbuleni
10	B South-West	Olt, Teleorman, Vâlcea	CSO Petrolul Potcoava	ACS Minerul Costești	CS Unirea Tîgănești ^b
11	A West	Arad, Gorj, Caraș-Severin	ACS Progresul Ezeriș	ACS Știința Turceni	CS Victoria Zăbrani
12	B West	Hunedoara, Timiș, Mehedinți	CS Avântu Periam	CSM Jiul Petroșani	CS Strehia ^b
13	A Center	Covasna, Mureș, Sibiu	CS Unirea Ungheni 2018	CS Măgura Cisnădie	ACS Sepsi OSK Sfântu Gheorghe 2
14	B Center	Alba, Brașov, Harghita	CSM Corona Brașov	CS Ocna Mureș	CS Gheorgheni

Note: XX Xxxxxx- teams that promoted to the 3rd league;

XX Xxxxxx - teams participating in the promotion play-off but not able to be promoted to league 3;

XX Xxxxxx - teams which did not participate in the league promotion 3 play-off due to the medical expenses needed to comply with the medical protocol.



Figure 4. Romania. Promotion play-off groups, participating teams and their performances (data source: 6)

^a Bistrița-Năsăud County did not designate the champion for the 2019/2020 season and no representative to the promotion play-off to the 3rd league⁶;

^b Counties with teams designated champions but which did not participate in the league promotion 3 play-off due to the medical expenses needed to comply with the medical protocol.

The situation identified on the RFF level in the first stage was the configuration of some regional groups within the development regions, grouping 3 county representatives/champions on geographic criterion. 14 groups resulted with 3 teams each (table 2; fig.4), with 2 games each and a group with teams (North West B^{7:8}) during the period 1-9 August.

The first 14 teams ranked qualified directly in 13, while other 7 teams from the 2nd place, with best ranking line were to complete the list of 21 promoted teams. Finally, there were 25 teams promoted to complete the 3rd league series. The spatial analysis emphasizes certain aspects with local and regional impact upon the amateur football map (L4) and semi-amateur (L3) from Romania:

-Since the RFF established that in the pre-pandemic season no team from league 3 would be demoted, the 25 CFA-s/counties “lost” a team each, usually the best one and with financial resources, for the 3rd league semi-professional competition;

-On ATU-s level, the county representative teams had the headquarters in 7 cities, county residence, 18 towns, 15 villages, commune residence and two more villages: Zidurile (841 inhabitants) from Odobești commune (Dâmbovița) and Curița (725 inhabitants) from Cașin commune (Neamț);

-According to the table and results, 14 teams prevailed from 9 towns and 5 communes, taking the first place in groups;

-If Bistrița Năsăud County did not designate any team representative for the county, the teams designated by the counties Tulcea, Teleorman and Mehedinți did not participate to the play-off in groups because of the medical protocol⁵;

-Out of the 41 represented localities, only Bucharest (L1), Botoșani (L1), Brașov (L3) and Dej (L3) also had other teams in the upper leagues;

-Out of the 41 participating teams, 25 were promoted to the 3rd league. In A North-West and A-Center groups, all 3 teams participating to the play-off were promoted. Out of other 8 groups, 2 teams were promoted from each, from 3 groups, one team and from A South-West group, no team was promoted because of financial and sanitary protocol reasons.

Conclusions

The 2019/2020 pre-pandemic amateur football season was the first, after 52 uninterrupted editions, in a situation very difficult to manage for the 690 clubs and organizing bodies from the “small football”. On the level of the 42 county associations, after a complete tournament and maximum 3 stages in return, the football competitions stopped in 30 counties, on the beginning of March, 2020, played 781 stages. After a forced break of 5 months (34 counties) and of 9 months (8 counties), to the RFF’s suggestion, the county structures “identified” original solutions in July, in order to have a team in the play-off for the 3rd league. In most cases, in 35 counties, the teams situated on the first place were declared county champions on the 7th of March and were designated to represent the county in play-offs. There were play-offs in other 5 counties between 2 or 3 series winner teams or ranked on the first places. During the play-offs, some teams gave up out of financial reasons or because of not respecting the sanitary protocol. In 4 counties, the

champion title was not awarded and in 5 counties, the teams ranked 2nd or 3rd were declared champions and/or participants in play-offs. At the same time, the economic strength of urban areas is reflected, on this level as well, in the fact that out of the 41 participants in play-offs, 17 (41.4%) came from the rural area. Still, the biggest problem, with impact on emphasizing the disappearance phenomenon of teams, remains the forced break, also with medical and sportive effects. In reality, only 46 teams "come-back" on the pitch to play in July. With all the sportive and financial effort to respect the sanitary protocol, out of the 41 county representatives, regional play-off participants "in 3" (2 games each), 25 teams succeeded to play in the first "full-pandemic 2020-2021 league 3 season". For the following period, the highest challenge remains the health issue generated by the virus, but the prolonged sports break and the "thresholds" of the medical protocol are difficult to overcome on amateur sports level.

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