

# Dalkurd FF: being an Uppsala club during a pandemic

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**abstract** As the whole world struggles with the appearance of a large-scale pandemic, individuals and institutions begin to cope with the perspective of both short and long-term changes to their plans. What had been planned out by many during January and February of 2020, no longer became feasible already during the following months. Thus, with the impossibility of knowing for how long this situation will persist, both individuals and institutions have changed their plans with a focus on when the situation will reverse to a degree of normalcy. This article aims to briefly understand and analyses the strategies centered around a Swedish football club founded by Kurdish individuals regarded to the consequences of the coronavirus crisis in the country. Both fans and employees at the club have changed their strategies regarding the first year they would be playing in their new hometown of Uppsala. The author will argue that, although, the crisis has changed their strategy and hampered their plans of becoming a local institution, it has not, in fact, changed their plans to be an integrated part of the city, but it has provided the club with newer opportunities to do so.

**keywords** Sweden. Kurdish diaspora. Football. COVID-19

**Dalkurd FF: lo de ser un club en Uppsala durante la pandemia**

**resumen** Como todo el mundo lucha contra la emergencia de una pandemia en larga escala, individuos, instituciones empiezan a tratar de la perspectiva de cambios de planes de medio y largo plazo. Lo que se había planeado para muchos el febrero de 2020 ya no sería posible en los meses siguientes. Así que, con la imposibilidad de saber por cuánto tiempo esa situación va a persistir tanto los individuos como las instituciones han cambiado sus planes con un enfoque en cuando la situación se va a revertir para un grado de normalidad. Ese artículo intenta comprender y analizar brevemente las estrategias que se han centrado en clube de fútbol de Kurdos en Suecia respecto a las consecuencias de la crisis del coronavirus en el país. Tanto los aficionados como los empleados del clube han cambiado sus estrategias respecto al primer año que irían a jugar en su nuevo hogar, la de ciudad de

Uppsala. Se argumenta que la crisis ha cambiado la estrategia y dificultaron sus planes de convertirse en una institución local, pero eso, de hecho, no ha cambiado sus planes de integrarse a la ciudad. Sin embargo, esa situación ha otorgado al clube una nueva oportunidad de integrarse.

**palabras clave** Suecia. Diáspora kurda. Fútbol. COVID-19

### Dalkurd FF: ser um time de Uppsala durante uma pandemia

**resumo** Enquanto o mundo inteiro lida com o surgimento de uma pandemia, indivíduos e instituições começam a lidar com a perspectiva de mudanças tanto de curto quanto longo prazo para os seus planos. O que fora planejado por muitos durante janeiro e fevereiro de 2020, não mais seria possível durante os meses subsequentes. Logo, com a impossibilidade de se saber por quanto tempo a situação persistiria, ambos indivíduos e instituições mudariam seus planos, focando em quando a situação se reverteria para um grau de normalidade. Esse artigo busca brevemente entender e analisar as estratégias centradas em torno de um clube de futebol sueco fundado por indivíduos curdos em relação as consequências da crise do coronavírus no país. Ambos torcedores e funcionários do clube mudariam suas estratégias em relação ao primeiro ano que estaria atuando na sua nova cidade-sede de Uppsala. Argumenta-se que, apesar da crise ter mudado a estratégias e dificultado os seus planos de se tornarem uma instituição local, ela, de fato, não teria mudado seus planos de serem uma parte integrada da cidade, mas sim, teria provido ao clube com novas oportunidades de fazê-lo.

**palavras-chave** Suécia. Diáspora curda. Futebol. COVID-19

## Introduction

Founded in 2004 in the city of Borlänge, in the region of Dalarna, Dalkurd FF has had an impressive trajectory in the football landscape of the country. It took them merely thirteen years from their first season as an amateur club in Sweden's lowest division, to playing in the top tier of Swedish football (*Allsvenskan*). What began as a project by two Kurdish entrepreneurs in order to better integrate at risk youth in the city of Borlänge, especially the ones with a non-Swedish or non-Western background, has become a relevant institution that is known by both Swedes who follow local football, and Kurds from all over the world, especially because, ever since their promotion to the *Superattan*, (Sweden's 2<sup>nd</sup> tier) in 2016, and effectively, the first level in which players, coaches and the club are fully committed professionals, the club has not lost its position as such.

Thus, Dalkurd FF has, in the few years of its existence, established itself as a relevant institution to the diaspora Kurdish population in the country. Dalkurd FF fits both into a narrative of football clubs in Sweden founded around ethnic identities, such as Assyriska and Syrianska, who represent the *suryoyo* diaspora in the country, while still accounting for both their ideological and historical differences (ROMMEL, 2011); at the same time, they are also another chapter in the history of successfully established Kurdish individuals and

Kurdish institutions in Sweden (KHAYATI; DAHLSTEDT, 2014). The whole idea of Kurdishness, thus, becomes ‘a strategy to actively create an alternative identity and home in relation to the forced and stigmatised immigrant identity’ (ALINIA; ELIASI, 2014, p. 77). Kurds in the country have been, ever since their first wave arrived in the late fifties and early sixties, one of the most active Kurdish diaspora population in the world, regarding the production of content related to Kurdish culture, such as literature, TV channels, publications, music and others (BRUINESSEN, 1999). Aided by local state policies that have allowed minorities in Sweden to build and maintain cultural institutions based on their ethnic backgrounds (BOREVI, 2002), Kurds in Sweden have become a minority with a relevant cultural capital, both in the country, towards other Swedes (of all ethnicities) and to Swedish society in general, but also towards the Kurdish population in Kurdistan<sup>1</sup> and other diaspora populations all over the world as well; nevertheless, as they are constantly required to balance their own sense of belonging and ethnic identity between Kurdish and Swedish perspectives, strategies and articulations between those two are constantly at play.

It is within this background that Dalkurd FF appears and grows as a football institution, first in Borlänge, gaining the attention of both Kurds and Swedes, as they climb through the football pyramid of the country. In 2017, the board would decide on a move from Borlänge to Uppsala, 140km away. During my ethnographic research, which included observations of football practices, meetings, day-to-day operations at the club, attending four football matches, and also following the club’s social media pages and observing how people would react to them; furthermore, I also engaged online interactions with fans, board members and employees, alongside having structured interviews and informal conversations, it is this ethnographic material that serves as the basis of this article, the move was majorly seen as opportunity for the club to grow, since they would move to a bigger city, play in a newly renovated stadium, in a location much closer to the capital (Uppsala is only forty minutes away by train from Stockholm), and with a much larger Kurdish population in the region. According to an employee at the club, responsible for marketing and social media, Uppsala in itself would already have a larger Kurdish population than Borlänge; added to that, the Kurds in both Stockholm and in the nearby city of Västerås, the potential of fans coming to the stadium to watch the club was much bigger than remaining. Besides, several informants (fans, members and employees alike) have confided me that they felt that the club was being persecuted by the municipal authorities of Borlänge, due to both to the city preferring the local and more traditional club IK Brage, and also due to a perceived institutional racism aimed towards a club with clear “ethnic associations” that was not “Swedish”. Despite of a clear association to Dalarna symbols (the *Dalahäst*<sup>2</sup> on the crest and

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the word Kurdistan refers to the areas located in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey which, historically, contain a large Kurdish population and are known as the Kurdish territory to nationalistic Kurds.

<sup>2</sup> The *Dalahäst* is a wooden horse commonly seen in the country and associated with Swedish traditional folklore. The region of Dalarna is also often seen in the country as quintessential Swedish.

the prefix “Dal” in the club’s name) as well, as Kurdish ones, the rift was seeing as bigger than the consequences of moving.

Thus, when such opportunity arose, the club rushed to take advantage of it, officially relocating in the year of 2018. Although their headquarters were already based in the city, since the local stadium in Uppsala had not yet been completely reformed, both the 2018 and 2019 seasons were played in Gävle (with the exception of the last home match, already played in Uppsala), which is located some 110 kilometres away from Uppsala. The 2020 season was supposed to be the first season in which Dalkurd would officially be an Uppsala club, playing all its home games in the city’s stadium, that they would share with local *Allsvenskan* club Sirius and a newly founded female team. Due to the COVID-19 crisis which has affected the whole planet, those plans had to be changed, and the club has adopted a series of strategies to position themselves as a local club in Uppsala, maintaining and articulating their Swedish and Kurdish identities, being, both at the same time.

### **Dalkurd FF: becoming an Uppsala institution in the middle of a pandemic**

My ethnographic research had begun with the aim of understanding the articulations between Kurdish identity and Swedish society through Dalkurd, which would mean understanding how the club operates within a framework of both Kurdish and Swedish identities and a Swedish institutional and bureaucratic framework, while also becoming a new institution in the city of Uppsala. The Kurdish diaspora in many European countries has successfully articulated themselves with local institutions, both to the advancement of the Kurdish cause and their own individual social and capital standings (DIAS, 2020). Hence, this trend can be inserted in a flux of Kurdish articulations vis-à-vis the societies which they would be a part of, outside of Kurdistan. While conducting fieldwork with both employees at the club and fans alike, all of them had expressed several plans on how to make Dalkurd FF a part of Uppsala, and not only a club that happened to play in Uppsala. For now, I will discuss both perspectives – the first one from people inside the club, and the other from the fans of the club - in light of the relocation and how the COVID-19 crisis has affected those plans.

Upon talking to several people who work at the club, before the pandemic had begun, all of them were quite enthusiastic with the prospect of starting to work and play in the city of Uppsala, instead of only operating its bureaucratic side, while having to travel to Gävle to play. Several of them would describe this situation as “having thirty away matches instead of only having fifteen”. The trip to Gävle and the lack of fans were perceived as detrimental to the club, both technically and financially. Now that they were to be established as an institution in Uppsala, not only did they expect to have a larger audience to their matches, but also planned on creating several instances of being a part of the “city environment” as I would hear from several informants. They hoped to continue their work

with the football academies, which served hundreds of children from 6 to 16 years old, while at the same time, they hoped to achieve a presence in the area of Gottsunda, an area considered to be a ghetto in the city due to its largely non-ethnic Swedish population and a higher degree of criminality than the rest of the city. As a club that has begun as way of integrating at-risk youth, one of my informants would confide me that this would still be one of their main social concerns, while simultaneously, it would be a way of both giving something good to the city of Uppsala and potentially recruiting new long-time fans. Hence, not only would Dalkurd *play* in Uppsala, but they would engage in *being a part* of Uppsala, just as much they would see Kurds as not only *being in Sweden*, but expressing a desire of being a part of it. As one of their long-time fans would confide me, Dalkurd FF is also a Swedish football club, thus it would also need to win games in Sweden in order to be successful. Its successfulness would translate into putting Kurdish identity in the forefront of Swedish society, while engaging a Kurdish transnational belonging.

Yet, due to the pandemic, this strategy had to be put on hold temporarily, since, although Sweden has not declared a total lockdown or the quarantining of its population (PATERLINI, 2020), many of the activities of the club had to be put on hold. Ever since early March, all games, in both professional divisions of Swedish football had been postponed until June; and many of the board members and employees had begun working from home. Thus, players have had to change their training regimens, from getting ready to begin the season to being put on hold, they have had to adapt to the new situation. Any plans of community outreach in Gottsunda had to be, for example, changed. Nevertheless, Dalkurd FF had decided to help the health care workers of Uppsala by donating and delivering meals to hospitals which began to be overcrowded by a growing number of patients. Dalkurd FF would donate 50 SEK out of every 250 SEK of the association fee to become a member of the club. When delivering those donations, the club would be represented by the figures of its chairman (*ordförande*) and its CEO. Seeing that Dalkurd FF, as every other football club in the country, legally has be run by its members who vote on choosing the board in democratically elections, this would also serve as a way of potentially growing its membership in the city of Uppsala, creating deeper roots into the city. Although, life in Sweden has not been as impacted as in other countries, most work places have changed to home office (including universities and high schools), the number of clients on restaurants and bars has been capped at 50 people and signs reminding people to keep a distance are to be seen everywhere. Sweden's approach to the pandemic, thus, would rely more on individual responsibility to avoid the spread of the virus than quarantining or forcing a social isolation of its population.

On the other hand, Dalkurd FF's recently new supporters club (founded in 2020) and called *Bagarna* (bakers), aims to articulate Dalkurd FF initial origins, as Dalkurd's founders and many of its first members have worked and/or owned pizzerias in Borlänge, while also appealing to a working-class origin instead of an ethnic one. Their desire is not only to attract Kurdish fans, but anyone who wished to support the club. This organization

was in the process of becoming an official institution – that is, one registered at the country's tax registries and thus able to charge membership fees – when the coronavirus crisis began. The five founding members had plans of creating chants for the matches, bringing flags using the colours of the club (and the Kurdish flag), creating a membership association plan and starting a website to broadcast their activities. When I first approached them, in February, after a cup match, before all competitions were halted, they were planning to solve the bureaucratic issues before April, which was when the Superattan was scheduled to begin.

If, as pointed by Besnier, Brownell and Carter (2017, p. 258) sports would articulate both the local and the global, and 'the future of the nation-state', Dalkurd FF is a clear representation of this articulation as it uses Kurdish national symbols (colours, the flag, the name) in an arena that is highly international, namely, football, while, at the same time, it is inherently local, both in a larger Swedish perspective seeing that it operates within the constraints of Swedish football, a fact that is often pointed out by the employees while talking to the ethnographer on the bureaucratic aspects of the clubs, but also in a more local perspective, one that is concerned with the presence of the club in Uppsala.

Furthermore, Dalkurd point out to a Sweden, in which the presence of ethnic minorities from outside of Europe that has been a fact since the 1950's, also begin to engage with traditional Swedish institutions, such as its football environment. From its early years without the presence of "foreigners" (Gammelsæter, 2009) to the appearance of "immigrant clubs" (Andersson, 2009), football has become a relevant tool for both differentiating ethnic identities within a Swedish background, in which ethnic groups would affirm their ethnic belonging vis-à-vis other minority groups in the country, through a Barthian process of self-affirmation and differentiation (BARTH, 1969), but at the same time, would engage in becoming a part of Sweden by participating in a codified system of meanings, values, morality and tradition contained with the history of football in the country. Hence, Dalkurd is a club in which an amalgamation of Kurdishness and Swedishness is at the center of its identity, and also a club in which, in spite of a pandemic, its fans are in the process of creating strategies to make it a club *of* Uppsala, instead of *in* Uppsala, in order for Uppsala to be its home city.

Bagarna's plans, as told to me by its members, were concerned with organizing supporters to help the club achieve success in the field, and in order to do so, the club would need local support beyond ethnic identities, and a constant presence of the local population of Uppsala; a fact that is also recognized by both members and employees alike in the club. As Herd (2017) would point out, football fans often engage in constructing football through a Maussian concept of magic, in which (and it is precisely in that manner that the founding members of Bagarna would wish to do so) football fans would shape and influence the reality of what would be transpiring on the pitch.

Even though the halting of all sports competitions in the country has also partially halted some of these initiatives planned out by them, it has not completely stalled them. As two of them have told me, they had an online meeting in order to discuss some bureaucratic

issues, and seeing that no one could predict when the season would begin, or if it would be accessible to fans, all they could do was wait and try to organize themselves better for when the club begins to play and their presence in the bleachers would be possible. This situation was seen as a setback, but not one that would put their plans to an end, since, as they would tell me, supporting Dalkurd FF was an integral part of their identities, not only as football fans, but also as Kurds in Sweden, and as Swedish citizens, engaging in football, in a similar way as Guedes (1998) would point out by using the Maussian concept of total social fact, while observing football and Brazilian identity, which in this case, would be articulated both through their ethnic belonging as Kurds, but also with their nationalities and their sense of belonging to Sweden.

## Conclusion

The coronavirus crisis has affected virtually all countries in the world, nevertheless, there is a perception that Sweden has been one of the places where life is most similar to what it used to be before the pandemic began with lighter limitations than in many other places. Yet, even though in comparison, life in Sweden is more similar to a normality, it still has affected the lives of people in the country, including individual and social institutions plans. It is within this perspective that Dalkurd FF has had to adapt its role and its position, as it was supposed to begin the process of becoming an Uppsala institution, while they would lay their roots in the city.

Considering the history of the club, as one that began as a way of integration through sports; and a history which is constantly espoused in the discourse of members, employees and fans alike, all of them would see it as a continuation of their history, rather than a new approach, for the club to engage in the same type of actions in the city of Uppsala as they did in Borlänge. Seeing, as many of people connected to the club would confide me, that a football club that changes location can often be seen with suspicion, Dalkurd FF would have to work in order to be a part of Uppsala; to be seen by its population as a permanent institution, and not one that would change from its location when a new opportunity would arise. Everyone I talked to in the club saw the move to Uppsala as a permanent deal, and it would be one of their tasks to prove to both the people of Uppsala, and Sweden in general, that this was supposed to be the case; for all the actors involved with Dalkurd FF, the club was already an institution of Uppsala and was to be one for the unforeseen future.

Their strategy to prove that they were indeed a part of Uppsala had to be adapted due to the coronavirus crisis. For the club, it meant having to find different strategies to engage in public outreach that would result in marketing the club as a part of the city. As the media would portray the effort and the sacrifice of health care workers in the face of a pandemic, Dalkurd chose to help this sector of the population in Uppsala as a way of portraying themselves as an institution that was also engaged in the fight against the virus, while at the same time, garnering more members. Thus, Dalkurd would help Uppsala (and Sweden) cope with the strains caused by the pandemic, as a way of asserting themselves as

a part of the city. Seeing that the Swedish government would rely on individual responsibility, and, as pointed by Berggren and Trädgårdh (2006), extreme individualism would be the driving force of Swedish solidarity, only possible if all are equal in rights and responsibilities. Thus, upon dealing with a pandemic, the club would take upon itself to act in solidarity as the responsible and expected thing to do from all Swedes. As for the newly created group of fans called Bagarna, they decided to plan their steps while the league was stopped, in order for, when things would go back to normal, they would be ready to be operational.

Therefore, as things were to change all over the world, this Swedish football club founded around Kurdishness would adopt different strategies for their goals, while also planning on how things would be after this crisis was over. In both cases, none of them would perceive the changes caused by the coronavirus as something that would remain in the long run, but rather as an obstacle that would soon be overcome, and that would give them an opportunity to adapt to life after all of this is to be over. That does not mean that they did not take the threat of the virus seriously, seeing that they were always acting according to the recommendations set forth by the government agencies, and, in a Durkheimian perspective (DURKHEIM, 1974), they would be acting in a moral way; nonetheless they would not let the virus scrape their long term plans, as they were beginning to settle in the city of Uppsala; on the contrary, they would, as an institution, engage in different strategies to assure themselves as an important and altruistic part of the city.

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