

## Socialization in Sambo and Inter-Generational Transfer of Sambo Values

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### Abstract

The sport of sambo is the result of the Soviet legacy, embedded in a rich historical tradition that seek to guide its practitioners through life. Here, I explore how this legacy is expressed through its practitioners, specifically, post-socialist sambo-practicing migrants. I conceptualize sambo's imprint as a structural and cultural conditioner according to Archer's (1995) analytical dualism, predisposing them towards certain situational logics. When the sambo practitioners interact with local sport environments, several courses of action are discerned. For the first-generation migrants who are born into the 'sambo way', the influence of sambo weighs heavily in their decision-making. This is negotiated, and the agency plays a vital part when integrating into the mainstream sports-sphere. However, for migrants not *born* into the sambo doctrine, the influence is peripheral and diminished in favor of other, stronger, belief systems. In conclusion, sambo exerts a strong normative force, but the transmission between generations severely hampers the meaning and impact of sambo.

Keywords: Soviet Union, martial arts, critical realism.

### 1. Introduction

Sport constitutes a space where a range of identities are constructed and expressed in embodied forms. The sociological literature has explored this in a range of cultural- and spatial contexts. However, a region with an immense sporting legacy that remains relatively underexplored in this literature is the former Soviet Union.

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Received: 12 October 2023  
Accepted: 14 February 2024  
Published: 31 May 2024



This paper explores how the teachings of the Soviet Union's martial art *sambo* (самбо) is expressed through its practitioners. Specifically, the paper explores how sambo is expressed as a cultural legacy amongst first- and second-generation migrants from post-socialist countries currently residing in the Nordic region. Sambo is a compelling case, because of its inherent tie to the Soviet Union legacy and, historically, to the socialist agenda. In the wake of the Bolshevik Coup, sambo was created by the Soviet Red Army. Consequently, sambo was born out of war and was a military sport for a long time. Today, it is an international competitive sport, but also a channel for cultural expressions at both the micro- and macro-level. Considering the emigration from post-socialist regions since the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, many former Soviet Union (sambo) athletes now reside abroad (e.g., Carmi, 2017). However, to date, we know little of how sambo expresses itself through its practitioners with a post-socialist background.

While the literature on sport and identity is primarily influenced by interpretivist- and constructivist research, this paper heeds the call to understand sport, culture, and social change from a critical realist (CR) perspective (Lindsey & Wiltshire, 2021; Wiltshire, 2018). CR asserts a mind-independent reality, where knowledge is conceptually and socially mediated. CR relies on transcendental arguments to uncover unobservable generative mechanisms that underpin social phenomena. These mechanisms become increasingly salient in times of change (Danermark et al., 2019) and are characteristic of migration at large.

To comprehend the generative mechanisms inherent in a post-migration ecology, this study draws on Archer's (1995) concept of analytical dualism, situated within the broader framework of critical realism. Archer critically addresses both "downward confluences" – where structure is seen as determinative of behavior – and "upward confluences" – where individual agency is perceived as shaping structure. She advocates for a distinct separation and sequential analysis of structure and agency over time. In this perspective, structure is pre-existing and exerts an initial influence on the individual, who is born into and socialized within these structural confines. Yet, individuals engage in reflexive deliberation about their conditions and life paths, thereby interacting with and potentially altering their structural contexts. A pivotal analytical element here is that of situational logics, which emerge from the dialectic between structure and agency, guiding individuals' actions in a manner that appears "logical" within their specific situational contexts. The dynamics of migration can be examined through the lens of Archer's (1995) analytical dualism, which underscores the interplay between pre-existing structural conditions and individual agency. Through this lens, the migration experience is seen not just as a physical relocation but as a complex journey of personal

and social transformation, where migrants exert their agency within the constraints and opportunities presented by structural factors. Such a dualistic approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how migrants' identities are shaped and reshaped in the context of migration, reflecting the intricate interplay between societal structures and individual agency. Yet, this idea has not been given attention in the sport literature, where an interpretivist approach still dominates, advocating 'multiple realities' in the lives of migrants and sport. Archer's (1995) ideas, and critical realism at large, have recently gained increasing traction in sport studies interested in social change (Lindsey & Wiltshire, 2021). However, Archer's (1995) analytical dualism has remained underutilized in empirical endeavors in this field; to the author's knowledge, no study concerned with sport and migration has adopted Archer's (1995) analytical dualism. This paper contributes to the emerging critical realist-inspired sport-for-change literature at large, but more specifically serves as a theoretical exploration of analytical dualism in this field.

The paper proceeds as follows. Firstly, we elaborate on Archer's (1995) analytical dualism. Secondly, we review the existing sport-and-migration literature on identity and sporting practices. Thirdly, we set the stage for the current case by accounting for sambo and its place within the greater Soviet society in a historical backdrop. This section is followed by the method, including the presentation of the data and the fieldwork's context. Finally, we present the results and discuss the conclusions of the paper.

## **2. Transmission, disruption, and negotiation of cultural patterns: analytical dualism**

This study is grounded in a perspective, assuming that cultural belief systems are, to various degrees, heterogeneous across the world. How belief-system impinges upon our society differ, but they constitute an inherent and permeating part of society. This then includes the sporting domain in which we are brought up in as well.

In order to understand how structure and agency relate to sambo's expression through its practitioners, the paper draws from Archer's (1995) analytical dualism. Critical realism posits an objective reality that encompasses both observable phenomena and underlying, non-observable structures or mechanisms with the causal power to shape the observable world. This view acknowledges an objective reality existing independently of human awareness, yet it emphasizes that our understanding of this reality is mediated by social and conceptual frameworks. It highlights the stratified nature of reality, divided into empirical (experienced phenomena), actual (events that occur, whether

observed or not), and real (underlying causes and mechanisms), suggesting that while empirical evidence can reveal aspects of social phenomena, deeper mechanisms and structures in the real domain remain concealed, challenging the notion that empirical observation alone can fully capture the complexity of reality. This stratification, as discussed by Archer (1995) and Collier (1994), underlines the importance of recognizing the existence and methodological relevance of these transempirical objects within the research framework of critical realism. These ideas are consistent with Archer's (1995) notion of reality.

Adopting analytical dualism within the framework of critical realism necessitates a nuanced understanding of the relationship between individuals and their contextual environments, particularly in terms of structure and culture. Within critical realism, structure is conceptualized not merely as the materialistic entities that individuals navigate (such as institutional architectures and economic systems) but also as the deeper, often unobservable, set of relations that govern social interactions and outcomes. These structures represent the enduring patterns and arrangements within society that, while influenced by human activity, maintain a relative autonomy and exert a shaping influence on individual and collective actions.

Culture, within this framework, is viewed as the domain of shared meanings, practices, norms, and beliefs that emerge from and are sustained by the inter-subjective interactions within a community or subgroup. Critical realism distinguishes between the cultural system, which comprises the body of ideas, meanings, and practices shared by a group, and the social structure, which refers to the more tangible, relational aspects that organize social life. Culture and structure are thus seen as distinct but interrelated components of social reality, each with its own dynamics and mechanisms of influence. For example, Archer (1995) argues that individuals are *born* into a socioeconomically stratified world, thus exerting conditional influences on school choices and, later, job opportunities.

The second part, called the interactional phase (Archer, 1995), assumes that individuals to various degrees move within and beyond this structure with its influences. Accordingly, despite being born into a pre-existing structure, individuals possess reflexivity and can (re)act on the structure (Archer, 1995). According to Archer (1995), reflexivity means that individuals are aware of their beliefs; not that their beliefs are necessarily factually correct. Causality derives from the agency, and an individual's actions are perceived as the driving force behind change. Pertinent to the paper's purpose is also that Archer's idea of reflexivity has been suggested as a way to deepen our understanding of health inequalities (Scambler, 2013). For example, the expression of different values in a sport sphere may work in an exclusionary fashion, ultimately impacting migrants' health.

One important argument here is that different structural and cultural influences invoke different scenarios for individuals. This predisposes individuals (non-deterministically) towards certain *situational logics*. It is, for example, irrational for a wealthy person to attempt to reduce her fortune by changing certain structures that serve to maintain her socioeconomic status. In this case, a protectionist logic may be invoked to safeguard one's hegemonic position. Similarly, other logics may invoke a competitive mode, where the opposing logic must be eliminated, or, as the results will showcase, an opportunist logic. As the name indicates, an opportunist logic predisposes actors to capitalize on potential changes that may benefit the actor. Briefly summarized, this calls for a relational understanding between existing structures and agency, to understand how structures predispose a given individual towards a specific logic, and how this is negotiated by the individual. Ultimately, these situational logics will predispose an individual towards different courses of actions.

### **3. Sport's significance in a migration context**

A dominant idea within social policy is that sport is linked to migrants' integration into host societies; a strand of research that has garnished significant attention during the last decade (Smith et al., 2019; Spaaij et al., 2019). This research often looks at 'integration' conceptualized as 1) barriers- and enablers to sport participation, 'social inclusion' and, social integration (Spaaij et al., 2019). Accordingly, much of this research is fairly unidirectional in the sense that migrants are conceptualized as people who are being integrated into the societal fabric through sports. However, another sub-domain of this research has instead looked at how sports serve as dynamic arenas where migrants negotiate identity, resist dominant cultural norms, and foster social cohesion within diverse communities. Through an exploration of various cases- and sports contexts, several key themes emerge, shedding light on the complex interplay between sports, identity, and migration (Burdsey, 2004) from a more complex perspective.

One recurring theme is the role of sports in shaping cultural identity and fostering a sense of belonging among migrant communities. For instance, Asian-specific cricket teams in the UK provide a space for Pakistani diasporas to assert their cultural heritage while challenging prevailing notions of Englishness (Fletcher, 2015). Similarly, Lithuanian migrants in the UK use basketball as a means of expressing their identity and navigating inter-ethnic tensions within local sports communities (Evans & Piggott, 2016). These cases illustrate how sports serve as platforms for cultural expression and social

integration among migrant populations. Furthermore, sports can be sites of resistance against dominant cultural norms and power structures. Through participation in sports such as cricket, basketball, and taekwondo, migrants assert their cultural identity and challenge institutionalized whiteness or political boundaries (Fletcher, 2015; Lee & Bairner, 2010; Johnson, 2018). By engaging in sports, migrants contest prevailing narratives and carve out spaces where their voices can be heard, and where their culture can be preserved. In this regard, the case of Gaelic sports is illustrative. The transfer of Gaelic sports to Irish immigrant communities in Boston highlights the role of sports in preserving cultural heritage and fostering community solidarity (Darby, 2003). In Darby's study, Gaelic games served as symbols of Irish nationalism and provided a sense of pride and belonging within diasporic communities. Overall, these cases underscore the importance of sports in maintaining cultural continuity and promoting a sense of collective identity among migrant populations.

Central to these discussions is the recognition of the dynamic interplay between structural influences and individual agency. Critical realism offers a valuable framework for understanding how migrants navigate their cultural heritage within the realm of sports (Mickelsson, 2022). By examining the complex interaction between social structures and individual beliefs, scholars gain insights into the multifaceted nature of sports-related identities among migrant populations.

In conclusion, the exploration of various sports contexts reveals the profound impact of sports on the negotiation of identity, resistance against dominant cultural norms, and fostering of social cohesion within migrant communities. By integrating cases and themes from diverse sporting contexts, scholars can deepen their understanding of the complex dynamics between sports, identity, and migration.

Albeit briefly reviewed, the connection between identity and sport for ethnic- and national groups is seemingly strong. Important to the paper's argument is that these are rooted in cultural and historical traditions, constituting a foundation inherent within these sport-practitioners and fans. This is not to say that they deterministically succumb under the structural and cultural influence, but throughout the literature, a certain pride and predisposition towards maintaining these values can be discerned.

Re-interpreting the existing research in critical realism-terminology would invoke a need to consider migrants' expression of their (cultural) heritage in sport as part of an interaction between structural influences and agency, and not only as a contested space with multiple realities, where sport mediates this expression as part of a social construction. Taking the case of taekwondo in North Korea, we could suspect that traditions and values infused within

taekwondo are 1) linked to the broader fabric of North Korean society and 2) can become part of an individuals' belief-system, i.e., a socialization mechanism that predisposes and guides individuals in their lives. When formulated like this, we could suspect that these values and beliefs guiding and governing an individual become a 'real' generative mechanism.

#### 4. Soviet, sport and sambo

Just like beliefs and values derived from taekwondo may form a constitutive part of a generative mechanism, sambo may be infused with meanings that transmit to the individual. As noted, this entails an explanation of how a particular sport reflects upon the broader societal context it is exerted within. This entails placing sambo into the greater picture of the former Soviet Union's social, cultural, and political dimensions. Sport in Soviet society, in general, has been given considerable attention (e.g., Riordan, 1988) and is connected to grander ideas, such as the fostering of new (socialist) men (Zilberman, 1982).

An area of research spearheaded by Riordan (1988, 2009, 2013) sport was conceived of as a powerful tool, both in shaping citizens, contributing to social solidarity and nation-building. Thus, sport was used to improve: "...*hygiene, health (physical and social), defence, patriotism, integration, productivity, international recognition, even cultural identity and nation-building*" (Riordan, 1988, p.570). Accordingly, the value of and use of sport encompassed several areas of governmental interest, especially in a relational understanding considering western societies.

More specifically, the Soviet Union's sport system was unique, in the sense that it initially strived to create a *new* sporting system, detached from other global sport institutions. This new system included the notion of 'worker sport' and 'physical culture' (Riordan, 2013). The system was distinctive to other (sport) systems and seen as a capable force in the class war between workers and the bourgeoisie. More broadly, it was seen as a capable force in the war between the communist regime and capitalism. Considering the significance placed on sport in Soviet society, a great deal of funding and thought went into the communist sport system, which, unsurprisingly, resulted in tremendous sporting successes. Most importantly, the success of Soviet athletes implicitly signaled the superiority of the communist ideology over western regimes (Edelman & Wilson, 2017).

In line with how the Soviet Union operated in general, the sport system was centralized and state-controlled. In developing this system of mass-sport, a grading system came to be constructed; *Gotov k Trudu i Oborone* (GTO). In

English, GTO is translated into ‘Ready for Labour and Defence’. Invented in 1931, GTO was meant to elevate sports participation and make physical culture a “...socialist way of life” (Mertin, 2008, p.167). By this time, the Soviet Union was an ethnic mosaic, consisting of several different ethnic groups- and regions. To this end, GTO was fundamental in the creation of a unified Soviet identity (Mertin, 2008). Naturally, GTO is an expression of the Soviet Union sport ideals; a socio-political institution where the people are united under the Soviet banner.

Riordan (2009), concerned with the nation-building function of Soviet sport, noted the paucity of research on post-communist regions’ use of sport and postulated that it remains to be seen how the Soviet legacy is expressed in contemporary time. Today, there is some evidence that certain functions of sport from the Soviet era are alive and well in contemporary Russia (Arnold, 2018). Arnold (2018) touches upon how contemporary Russia still use sport as a way for nation-building.

Sambo’s place within Soviet society must be understood from a historical perspective.

Sambo was created in the wake of the atrocities caused by the Bolshevik Coup; however, it was not for solely ideological reasons. In the aftermath of the Bolshevik coup, the Soviet Union was a nation in extreme disorder, where crime rates spiked. Chung (2018) argues that, because of this disorder and the social consequences, the creation of sambo can be seen as a reflection of the need to regain control. This was mainly done by two individuals, Vasili Oshchepkov and Viktor Spiridonov. Both collaborated with the Soviet Union government to improve the hand-to-hand combat practice of the Red Army (Juraevich, 2021). According to FIAS, sambo is categorized into sport sambo, combat sambo, and beach sambo. Sambo practitioners compete with jackets and shorts, where they start standing up. In sport sambo, this resembles judo and wrestling. No punches or kicks are allowed. In combat sambo, one can kick, knee, punch, and even head butt, in addition to the judo- and wrestling-inspired elements. On the ground, joint locks, and some chokes (depending on the sambo discipline) are allowed.

The main idea behind sambo was to compile the most effective form of self-defense that could exist. This included the merging of several martial arts, such as boxing, judo, jiu-jitsu, and the mixing of several ethnic styles of wrestling. In this sense, sambo can be seen as the precursor to mixed martial arts and can be interpreted as somewhat different from that of other traditional martial arts with longer histories (e.g., consider Japanese judo). Yet, it is not only the temporal aspect that differentiates sambo from other traditional combat sports. It is the emphasis on effectivity and the pursuit of an ultimate form of self-defense techniques. While other traditional martial arts have a



clearly defined ruleset that limits the techniques available, this is less pertinent to sambo.

According to Chung (2018), systematic self-defense training began in the Soviet Union as early as 1919. When considering the merging of several martial arts, it seems unclear when the term 'sambo' was specifically adopted. However, with the emergence of the GTO, the program also included self-defense. This included all the martial art styles that ultimately converged into what became known as sambo. Thus, whether explicitly or not, sambo seemed to form a part of the GTO program. Today, sambo has been incorporated into the physical education of Russia. It is considered the national sport of Russia and is quickly gaining prominence as a legitimate sport, which has been provisionally accepted into the Olympic Games. Still, traces of the militarized influence in sambo can be found. Firstly, when scrutinized closely, this is evident in the ruleset of sambo. For example, ground-fighting is not permitted to proceed beyond 30 seconds, and quick-finishes are premiered (e.g., leg-locks). This can be juxtaposed with other grappling arts, where point systems are much more developed and emphasized, such as in Brazilian jiu-jitsu. More importantly and as already mentioned, old narratives of how sambo came to rescue Russian soldiers' lives in Soviet Union's wars still live on. The main take-away can be reflected in sambo's meaning: to constitute the most efficient martial art there is, and to serve as self-defense. The first is pertinent to the former Soviet Union's idea of superiority, effectiveness, and perhaps, soft diplomacy. The emphasis on effectivity calls for sambo-practitioners to understand what works. While this could be interpreted as a feature that diminishes the cultural and national distinctive features of a particular sport, it is important to consider the more abstract notion of effectivity and pragmatism; two constructs well-known to the Soviet Union. Sambo's military and ideological influence have become an essential part of Soviet history (Chung, 2018). As of now, even in non-Slavic countries, sambo is used to promote Russian culture (Chung, 2018) and is talked about as an export product (Cynarski, 2018).

Framing sambo in a critical realist-conception, sambo can be viewed as a *cultural structure*. It exists materially through institutions, sambo facilities, and other administrations but is also permeated by ideas, doctrines, and a (Soviet) history that can be found within these structures (e.g., through rulesets). This is imperative; even though FIAS is leveraging sambo as an international product, the historical legacy of sambo is omnipresent. It is so through the explicit maintenance of its history through FIAS, through narratives of sambo's superiority in war and its continued importance for post-socialist societies. It is a cultural heritage, that may be transferred from federations to organizations, from organizations to coaches, and from coaches to practitioners.

## 5. Method

The fieldwork was conducted in the beginnings of covid-19 at one sambo club in Scandinavia by the first author while the second author assisted in study conceptualization and write-up. Ultimately, the pandemic disrupted the fieldwork entirely. As restrictions were put in place, the first author's contact with the club members was exclusively through digital means since we had become acquainted by that time. As Covid-19 restrictions later were eased, the fieldwork was supposed to continue. However, by that time, the club had experienced economic difficulties, and the (private) landlord who hosted their club decided to release them with immediate effect from their contract. What followed was that we contacted the members despite the club's breakup.

Sambo clubs are scarce within the Nordic region, and sambo's popularity is low. However, as the fieldwork unfolded, the head coach of one additional sambo club appeared as a valuable informant. However, due to Covid-19, his club was shut down, and no comparative ethnographic fieldwork could be performed. Nevertheless, this head coach was only one out of two (first-generation) migrants with an initial sambo background, dating back to his childhood. This was deemed important, considering the theoretical emphasis given here on structural influences. Additionally, this informant had an important role in establishing sambo in Scandinavia. Considering the valuable perspective this informant provided, the study includes his perspective as well. The fieldwork lasted five months, in which I visited the club one to two times a week. The main material here derives from interviews and informal conversations with participants at the club through an ethnographic approach. This material consists of seven life narratives.

The club's head coach (pseudonym Aleksandr) was interviewed twice and was a key informant. Aleksandr is a Bulgarian migrant above the age of 60. I interviewed Aleksandr twice after the club's breakup. These interviews lasted around two hours each. Aleksandr was a pioneer in launching sambo in Scandinavia and laid the foreground for developing Scandinavian combat sports. Despite this, Aleksandr was socioeconomically vulnerable and struggled, as the results will show. Another of the interviews included a dyad-interview with two younger Bulgarian migrants, a male and female respectively, who were in a romantic relationship. Their socioeconomic status was different from Aleksandr, as the male was an accredited lawyer, while the female was a successful athlete. This also characterized another young interviewee, Sofia, who worked in the entertainment industry, and the co-coach Yan who ran a physical therapy clinic. The diversity was again displayed in the case of Yuri, a 35-year-old asylum seeker from Russia. Yuri's situation was precarious, as he was waiting for the decision of asylum, all the while struggling financially and

socially. Yuri was also the only Muslim practitioner, while e.g., Aleksandr was of Christian faith. However, religious beliefs remained peripheral and were only noted in Yuri's narratives of discrimination based on religious affiliation *outside* of the club. Five interviews were held digitally, and two interviews were held in Aleksandr's apartment.

During every interview, thorough notes were taken. Subsequently, we scrutinized the notes right after each interview. When interviewing the informants, we intentionally framed the questions to align with the overarching tenets of critical realism; to elucidate mechanisms behind individuals' actions, intentions and outcomes (Brönnimann, 2021). According to Brönnimann (2021), critical realists must rely on *why* and *how* questions to establish a coherent interview guide with regards to causal trajectories. In broad terms, and in according to our pre-understanding of the sambo climate in Scandinavia, our entry point was to establish *how* the sambo practitioners were received of the local environment, *how* their training (and possibly associated ideology) may have differed in their context, *how* this affected the practitioners, if any subsequent change occurred and if so, *why* it occurred.

In analyzing the notes, we adopted a critical realist-thematic content analysis approach developed by Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021). The first interview script was scrutinized to elicit nascent and relevant content. All nascent experiential themes were recorded. We then moved on to reviewing the second interview script, with both a deductive and data-driven approach to assessing previously mentioned themes as well as new themes. This was done for all notes and scripts. The regularities and strengths of the themes were noted. Subsequently, inferential themes were created based on the experiential themes. In an iterative process, 'redescription' and abduction (Fletcher, 2017) were deployed to create an emerging conceptual framing. Finally, the dispositional themes created based on this process reflects the 'real' domain, concerning "...the potential powers that must exist for the phenomena in the world to manifest." (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021, p.173).

All participants provided consent and were informed of the study purpose and the demands on confidentiality and anonymity. Importantly, the participants were diverse. This was reflected in socioeconomic status, language, social vulnerability, and citizenship. As evident from the participant description, the data revealed sensitive themes. Based on our pre-understanding of certain informants' situations, we deemed it necessary not to ask for a recording of the interviews. The threshold into peeking into the lives of the informants felt high, and we wished to respect their integrity. We also feared that the information would be poorer in terms of themes and depth. The study has been ethically approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (DNR: 2021-03116).

## 6. Results

Two themes emerged out of the analysis. This included the differing trajectories of the establishment of sambo abroad and its broader integration implications, and the shifting inter-generational meanings of sambo. The first section primarily highlights the pioneering migrants, who possessed the unique properties of being sambistas from childhood and being sambo-coaches. The second section takes account of the inter-generational meanings of sambo, as explored through all practitioners.

### *6.1 Integration implications and establishment of the ‘sambo way’ abroad*

The task of establishing sambo academies in Scandinavia was pursued by Aleksandr and Konstantin, the two first-generation migrants who were senior. While their stories shared many similarities, the ways in which they pursued to establish their clubs differed with respect to their interaction with their surroundings. This seemed to impact their overall well-being.

Aleksandr grew up during the socialist reign in Bulgaria, where he was enrolled in sports from a young age. By that time, only the military and police in Bulgaria were taught sambo, which gave it a prestigious status, according to Aleksandr. Eventually, Aleksandr was allowed into sambo practice, and the skills he gained created possibilities beyond his imagination. For example, for a period of Aleksandr’s life, he was stationed in Mexico as a head security chief for high-ranking politicians; had it not been for private issues, Aleksandr was certain that he had remained in Mexico. Then, in the ‘80s, Aleksandr emigrated from Bulgaria and ventured to Scandinavia. Here, he met Yan, a polish judoka who came to be his assistant coach. Importantly, Aleksandr maintained that sambo is by far the most effective martial art existing, which he attributed to the Soviet military success and mindset. When I asked how sambo had come to influence his life, Aleksandr contended that, for him, sambo meant “...the development of humility, discipline and leadership skills”. This reflected on Aleksandr’s leadership, and club, which he perceived was a direct product of sambo-mentality, and the ‘sambo way’ permeated Aleksandr’s life. Throughout the fieldwork, I myself experienced the mentoring effect of Aleksandr, where he expanded his role beyond the boundaries of sport and discussed matters such as mindset and psychology.

Konstantin was born in Russia, or as he expressed it himself, in “...the motherlode of sambo”. Like Aleksandr, Konstantin was molded in the same rigorous sambo context. Similarly, Konstantin elucidated how sambo had

strengthened him and equipped him with several imperative life skills. However, despite accrediting sambo for teaching him about health, hygiene, and psychology, Konstantin remained cautious about over-stating sambo's effectiveness and its implementation in other contexts. According to Konstantin, providing sambo to the local Scandinavian population was a "difficult sales pitch". This was because of sambo's militarized and aggressive nature, juxtaposed with the increasing popularity of other martial arts of non-military origins. Yet, Konstantin also maintained that there was a huge interest in sambo as a cultural legacy, a sort of fascination of the old Soviet and the rigorous training that Soviet and contemporary Russia is associated with. Accordingly, for Aleksandr and Konstantin, sambo served as a source of pride, as the Gaelic Games did for Irish migrants in Boston (Darby, 2003).

Konstantin's approach to making this 'sales pitch' easier was to merge sambo with other local popular martial arts. In this case, Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ), and to downplay certain elements in sambo, such as aggressive throwing. This way, he could maintain his own unique style, which also made him exotic in the local circuit. As Konstantin familiarized himself with his surroundings, he realized that sambo, its militarized nature, and aggressive characteristics were poorly embedded within the Scandinavian martial arts culture but still had some appeal because of the (cultural) interest tied to the Soviet Union.

On the contrary, Aleksandr was reluctant to modify his approach and was framed as a polar opposite in relation to his martial arts surroundings. Similar to Konstantin, Aleksandr experienced difficulties in establishing sambo in Scandinavia: "I have not managed to popularize sambo in the North. I don't...have it in me.. I don't have the energy [...] I have struggled to introduce sambo to the Sports Confederation". According to Aleksandr, the local Sports Confederation maintained distance because of several reasons. First, they were too few in numbers to be considered a legitimate federation. Subsequently, they attempted to integrate into the judo federation, but faced resistance based on political reasons, according to Aleksandr. They met the same resistance when attempting to integrate into the wrestling federation, with the reason that the rulesets of sambo and wrestling differ too widely. Still, Aleksandr suspected these reasons to be only shallowly true, and that opinions against him and sambo laid the foreground for his exclusion.

I was aware that Aleksandr shared the same space as other martial arts (practitioners), thus, I was curious as to whether he had contemplated merging styles, just like Konstantin. Aleksandr looks at me as if he did not understand the question, and counter-asks me with "why you would merge sambo with anything else?". The (explicated) assumption that underpins Aleksandr's response is simply because "Sambo is the most effective martial art there is, but historically only people from Soviet had the skill". Consequently, Scandinavia

as an unexplored space presents an opportunity for Aleksandr to share his sambo knowledge; this then, does not include the merging of styles. Similar to Lithuanian migrants' assertiveness of basketball skills as reflective of Lithuania's greatness (Evans & Piggott, 2016), sambo constitutes a personal feature of Aleksandr which reflects upon the Soviet Union's legacy; that is, a clear link between how Aleksandr carries himself, and how this stems from a sambo upbringing. At the more broader level, it also reflects upon the pragmatic ideal infused in sambo, as a function of grander Soviet society ideals (Riordan, 1988).

Yan, the co-assistant coach, also acknowledges that the advent of BJJ in the '90s clouded the potential of sambo and perhaps hindered its establishment through Aleksandr. Yet, Yan also states that "Aleksandr has always been lonely in more than one sense". In elaborating upon this, Yan has seen the rise and downfall of multiple of Aleksandr's gyms. Yan asserts that, while it is commonplace to expand, have multiple people working on different administrative tasks, run children's classes, and so forth, the organizational capacity of Aleksandr has always been lacking. This has been accompanied by a history of broken collaborations and "burned bridges" per Aleksandr's words.

As Aleksandr talks about the history of his clubs, he is palpably frustrated. While his legacy is, today, well-known across the local martial arts community, the success of his business does in no way reflect upon this legacy. Aleksandr accredits this to entrepreneurs, non-authentic people, and a disbelief in his ways. As we sit in his apartment and sift through magazines that have highlighted Aleksandr's sambo achievements, there is a mixture of pride and sorrow hanging in the air, where the former is deeply rooted in the past and the latter in his contemporary day-to-day life.

As we meet up for our second interview in a suburban, we make small talk about previous dentist visits, in which I complain about my own recent costs. Aleksandr lets me know that he is too fresh out of the dentist's office - his first visit in 11 years. My first response is that I hope it wasn't overly expensive, out of which Aleksandr grins and replies that a voluntary social work organization paid for it in full. In the wake of the club's breakup and disappearing job opportunities, Aleksandr finds himself unable to pay rent for the next month. This has not come as a complete surprise, but as a culmination of struggling with his business, where the current pandemic is "the last nail in the coffin" according to Aleksandr.

Konstantin and Aleksandr diverge in their transmission of cultural sporting patterns and how the sambo-imprint is expressed in their lives. Aleksandr embodies the militarized style of sambo, its claimed superiority, and how sambo permeates one's life through its learnings on health, psychology, nutrition, hygiene and so forth. The structural and cultural influences of sambo is also evident in how Konstantin pledges his discipline and knowledge to the art of

sambo, and how this stretches beyond sport. However, Konstantin partially detaches himself from the 'superior' sambo culture in order to satisfy the locals' needs.

As Konstantin realizes the difficulty in establishing sambo along with its inherent cultural features, he decides to partially disengage with the sambo doctrine, i.e., his upbringing. Judging from Konstantin's narrative, this is an 'internal conversation' (Archer, 1995) where he enters the interactional phase; he assesses what his goals are juxtaposed with what structure he exists within. In this interaction, sambo is seen as both exotic and interesting by his surrounding but militarized, aggressive and somewhat alien. He recognizes that some adaptation is necessary but simultaneously that there is a considerable opportunity inherent to his sambo style. In merging his style with popular (Scandinavian) styles, and downplaying some elements in sambo, Konstantin adopts an opportunistic situational logic (Archer, 1995). This signals a crucial event in which he partially separates himself from the sambo-influenced way of doing things.

Aleksandr emerges from the same structural- and cultural sambo-influences, but as he encounters the Scandinavian martial arts community, the interaction between structural influences, current context, and Aleksandr himself takes a different route. Aleksandr's cultural and structural influences are made salient when in altercations with the local federations, and Aleksandr readily acknowledges that he is not interested in compromising sambo with other styles, or in general, changing his ways.

Aleksandr's structure is questioned, yet he is adamant in keeping with his initial teachings. In Archer's (1995) typology, Aleksandr adopts a defensive mode of being in which he is explicitly and implicitly resists change, whether it be behavioral or social. Aleksandr's structural and cultural influences seem to have made a more robust impact on him, as a potential separation from sambo is barely an option. However, Aleksandr himself deliberates these matters, showing he is cognitively aware of what is happening, and his beliefs about why they are happening. Accordingly, whether his beliefs are correct or not with regards to sambo's effectivity, Aleksandr still holds this belief consciously, thus reflecting Archer's (1995) idea of reflexivity.

Importantly, Aleksandr's belief in sambo reinforces the structural influences already exerting their power. This belief also entails that sambo should be an uncompromised product because of its inherent pursuit to be the most effective martial art there is. This situational logic of defensiveness predisposes Aleksandr to maintain his current ways, however, in stark contrast to individuals who protect a hegemonic position, Aleksandr finds himself at the margins of the Scandinavian martial arts community. Like in Konstantin's case,

there seems to be opportunities ahead, but they are obscured because of Aleksandr's reluctance towards compromising.

### ***6.2. Inter-generational and shifting meanings of sambo and its implications***

Following Aleksandr and Konstantin, the two first-generation migrants' narratives on sambo, we turn to a generational aspect. A frequent theme was how strong the sambo imprint was on practitioners *across* generations. While Aleksandr and Konstantin expressed their approaches to sambo in different ways, they still shared a strong structural- and cultural foundation from sambo. The question of sambo's influence was more fluid in the lives of the informants who were not born into sambo, mostly the second-generation migrants. The influence seemed to exist on a spectrum, albeit a common theme was that it had a diminishing impact.

Sasha and Elena, a Bulgarian couple, were multi-athletes with specific success in karate. When asked why Sasha had joined Aleksandr, he replied that he had been interested in Aleksandr as a person. The reason for this interest lied in the fact that Aleksandr had escaped the Soviet reign and carried with him an interesting history tied to sambo. However, neither Sasha nor Elena expressed that they had any emotional tie to sambo, nor that it had impacted their lives in any other way than karate had not already.

This must be understood at the backdrop of the environment at Aleksandr's club. Drawing from the fieldwork, I was aware that Aleksandr conducted his training in true sambo fashion. This was reflected in both old-school militarized techniques and an aggressive mindset applied in practice. It was also expressed in his relations with his students, where he acted as a mentor in issues beyond the gym. In so far, Aleksandr created a space where he pursued his own idea of a classic sambo-gym. Thus, his gym was a socializer into the broader meaning of sambo. Despite this, Sasha and Elena were at best fascinated with the cultural legacy of sambo (Chung, 2018), and of Aleksandr's history. The imprint seemed to be of a different character, more in touch with a historical aspect. Subsequently, the sambo doctrine was not embodied in their lives or impacted how they conducted themselves.

This was further nuanced by Yan, the assistant coach. As Yan reflected on how sambo diverges in its meanings and impact on practitioners, he burst out laughing: "... but this is not unique for sambo, this is commonplace for all martial arts...". As a veteran of judo and with decades of martial arts experience, Yan posed as a rich source of comparative information between sambo, judo, and other martial arts. As one of Aleksandr's oldest friends, he had been through several training camps in various post-socialist countries and spent plenty of time in Aleksandr's clubs. Consequently, there had been



opportunities for Yan to adopt a more holistic sambo ‘way of life’, however, Yan, like Konstantin, expressed that sambo had a modest role in his life.

A final perspective of this was brought forth by Yuri. Yuri grew up in the rural areas of Russia. His journey to Scandinavia was not something he described in greater detail; however, it was clear that Yuri’s situation was fragile. Specifically, Yuri awaited a decision on permission to stay from the authorities. Relatedly, his financial situation was unstable, and his language skills hindered his everyday life. Bluntly speaking, Yuri was in a socially vulnerable position.

As Yuri politely answers questions about sambo, I feel the triviality of what sambo may mean in terms of a cultural legacy. As our discussion proceeds, my interpretation is that Yuri does not care about sambo in itself nor of its history to any greater lengths. Yuri’s greater beliefs, being a Muslim, hold precedence over any other belief system. As Yuri discusses these belief systems, he highlights to a greater degree the stigma he experienced because of his religious beliefs. Sambo’s meaning, whatever that may mean, is extraordinarily peripheral, if at all existing for Yuri. Instead, Yuri highlights what the *club* means to him. As one of the few social spaces Yuri has access to, the club constitutes a core element of enjoyment in his life.

In retrospect, and with the support of the ethnographical data I am able to make a distinction between the acquisition of the physical properties of sambo and the mental- and emotional. With Yuri being my main training partner for the last five months, I know that he had technically- and tactically adopted the sambo teachings of Aleksandr. However, beneath the acquisition of these aspects, no pride, recognition, or interest of the Soviet Union’s sambo history is relevant to Yuri.

In summary, while Aleksandr can be seen as a carrier of the sambo doctrine, his efforts to socialize both first- and second-generation CEE migrants into this doctrine failed in many aspects. At best, the interest in the history of Soviet culture and sambo proliferated as an interest of Aleksandr’s sambo teachings and origins. However, it had a marginal influence on the lives of both the first- and second-generation migrant practitioners, who were not *born* into the sambo way.

The structural and cultural influences of sambo *per se* were only invoked by Aleksandr, and not by an upbringing permeated by sambo culture and structure. Most informants expressed an interest in sambo, but not as a permeating force that shaped their lives. In this sense, their sporting influences were diverse, and, as Yan argued, most martial arts influence their practitioners in some sense; it is not unique for sambo. This open-mindedness to other martial arts seemed to shape the informants’ perception of sambo differently. That is, they were interested in the culture and history, but sambo in no way exerted any deeper influence on their lives.

## 7. Prologue

In quite a journey, the members of Aleksandr's club saw its upheaval, and different paths were taken. Although the inter-generational transmission of the sambo culture seemed weak, it should be stated that strong social bonds existed between the practitioners. While some friendships, such as Aleksandr and Yan had been in place for decades, other friendships of perhaps equal strength blossomed during the brief time the club was active. A striking example of this is the Bulgarian couple.

During a chat in the late summer with Sasha, he now hosts his own gym in Bulgaria. Prior to leaving Bulgaria, he gave Aleksandr his car as a goodbye gift. Prior to this, Aleksandr had been traveling on an old scooter to reach the gym and had struggled to pay for traveling expenses once the winter made it impossible to go by scooter. As I write this, Aleksandr has joined Sasha and Elena in Bulgaria and will likely retire there to make sure his pension will suffice, something it would not have in Scandinavia. Unfortunately, after the club's breakup, Yuri was denied permission to stay in Scandinavia.

## 8. Conclusions

One conclusion of the current paper is that sambo's influence and expression vary tremendously across a spectrum mediated by structure(s), agency, and other belief systems. The latter introduces an interesting approach to how structural foundations are comprised of several systems of meanings, where some seem hierarchal. One main contribution of this paper has been to pinpoint how structural and cultural influences are negotiated in a sport-and-migrations setting. Following Archer's (1995) idea of reflexivity, the data here suggest that both Aleksandr and Konstantin deliberate on their beliefs about sambo but choose to proceed differently.

The interaction between the structural and cultural dimensions of sambo and the societal structure in the Nordic context is intricate. Sambo, as a cultural and sporting practice, carries with it not only the physical techniques but also a set of values, norms, and traditions reflective of its Soviet heritage. This heritage may contrast with or complement the prevailing cultural and social norms in Nordic societies. The structural aspects (such as the organization of sambo clubs, their accessibility to migrants, and the recognition of sambo within the broader sporting community) play a crucial role in determining how migrants can engage with this practice. Moreover, the cultural conditioning involves how

migrants negotiate their identity and belonging through sambo, facing challenges of cultural adaptation while striving to maintain a connection to their heritage. This dual process of structural and cultural conditioning critically influences migrants' integration into their host societies, potentially facilitating social connections and mutual understanding through shared sporting practices.

Agency and reflexivity are central to understanding the transmission of sambo among post-socialist migrants. Migrants' engagement with sambo is not merely a passive reception of cultural practices but involves active negotiation and reinterpretation of these practices in their new social contexts. The concept of reflexivity, where individuals reflect on their circumstances, the social structures they inhabit, and their personal desires, allows for a deeper understanding of how migrants actively shape the transmission of sambo. This process is influenced by their reflections on identity, belonging, and the interplay between their heritage and the cultural norms of their host society. Through sambo, migrants exercise agency in preserving, adapting, or redefining elements of their cultural identity, demonstrating the dynamic nature of cultural transmission and the significant role of individual and collective reflexivity in this process.

While Konstantin perceives this disruption to his sambo-influences as both constraining but also enabling in terms of opportunities, Aleksandr's negotiation is much more conflict-oriented and put in opposition to his surroundings. This constrain remains static considering that Aleksandr fails in socializing his pupils into the sambo way, and thus fails to converge his individual beliefs into a collective belief, which may be necessary to accrue the power to acquire change or recognition (Archer, 1995). The diminishing impact of sambo's influence also coincides with other forms of transmission of ethnic culture/values between generations.

Two limitations should be mentioned. The critical realist-conceptualization of this study invokes certain criteria to the methodology. This fieldwork was fraught with difficulties, and the practitioners included can be, to various degrees, considered a hard-to-reach population (Shaghaghi et al., 2011). A full-fledged critical realist-conceptualization would have asked for repetitive interviews of all informants (Brönnimann, 2021), yet, this was only possible with Aleksandr. However, the data proved to be rich, and my hope is that the critical realist conceptualization has furthered our understanding of sport and migration from a sociocultural perspective, and highlighted the utility of analytical dualism.

Secondly, I have explored structural and cultural influences connected to sambo specifically. This was mainly emphasized with regards to Aleksandr and Konstantin, and less with the other informants. As Archer (1995) notes, the structural influences do not deterministically (i.e., downward conflation) decide

the individual's fate; however, what other sporting influences were present, and the magnitude of those, in the other informants' lives, are left unknown.

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