

LET'S PLAY A GAME: GO IN SERBIA ¹

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Abstract: This paper systematically reviews the development of the game of Go in Serbia from 2016 to 2025, based primarily on publicly available data from the European Go Database. It provides a descriptive analysis of the current situation with the game of Go in Serbia. The findings indicate that while the number of Go players in Serbia is relatively small compared to some larger European countries in terms of economy and population, it ranks second among the nations of former Yugoslavia, following only Croatia. The cities of Niš, Belgrade, and Kragujevac have seen the greatest development of the game of Go in Serbia. Niš, as the city with the highest level of popularization, already has three elementary schools committed to offering Go as an extracurricular activity. Serbian players are also actively engaged in exchanges with players from neighboring countries and frequently compete in various open tournaments. Moving forward, the development of Go in Serbia should involve continuing to treat schools as a key platform for promotion, which will require collective participation and long-term investment of multiple stakeholders.

Keywords: *Go, Serbia, European Go Federation, European Go Database*

INTRODUCTION

Go is an ancient board game that originated in China, with the earliest written records dating back to the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BCE). It boasts a history of over 2,500 years. The game was introduced to the Korean Peninsula and Japan at an early stage, and by the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), these regions had already accumulated a wealth of documents and material evidence, reflecting its widespread dissemination and influence. During Japan's Edo period (1603–1868), Go experienced significant development, gradually forming a mature system of gameplay and a theoretical framework.

In Europe, as early as the late 16th to the 17th century, some missionaries who traveled to China encountered the game of Go during their stays. In 1694, the English historian Thomas Hyde introduced several board games, including Go, in his work *De Ludis Orientalibus*. However, it was the German Oskar Korschelt who truly propelled the spread of Go in Europe and drew widespread attention to the game. While working in Japan, he became acquainted with the professional Go player Hon'inbō Shūho, studied the game in depth, and published a systematic introduction to Go in 1880, thereby significantly contributing to the promotion and rise of Go in Europe (Hanzysz, 2025).

In recent times, with the advancement of globalization and the increasing frequency of cultural exchanges, the game of Go has garnered growing attention in Europe and worldwide, achieving remarkable development. Throughout this process, the Japanese Go Association has played a pioneering role in the international dissemina-

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tion of Go. The Go terminology commonly used in Europe today is derived from Japanese, and the set of rules primarily follows the Japanese regulations.

Go was introduced to former Yugoslavia at an early stage. As early as in 1908, the game appeared in the city of Pula (then under the administration of Austria-Hungary). After World War II, sailor Ervin Fink established the first Go club in Ljubljana, marking the beginning of the game's gradual spread from Slovenia and Croatia to Serbia (Go Savez Srbije, 2025).

The European Go Federation (EGF), established in 1957, is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the popularity and development of Go in Europe. Any Go association located in Europe or its surrounding regions may apply for membership. The Serbian Go Association was founded in Niš in 1974 and has since developed a history spanning over fifty years (Go Savez Srbije, 2025). Serbia is currently a full member of the European Go Federation.

The European Go Database (EGD) is an open-source project designed to provide the European Go community with an easily accessible database containing records of all tournaments held in Europe since 1996. All individuals involved in organizing club and national championships can apply for user accounts here. Once approved, they can upload tournament data, which is then recorded and processed by the EGF Official Ratings System to calculate individual ratings and determine players' skill levels based on these ratings. Since November 1998, this system has been used to compute the official EGF ratings for players.

Currently, academic research on Go in Serbia is relatively limited. This study aims to explore the current state of Go in Serbia. The research employs quantitative analysis methods, retrieving, systematically summarizing, and analyzing publicly available data related to Serbia from the European Go Database. Finally, this article analyzes the current state of Go in Serbia.

METHOD

This study examines the development of Go in Serbia based on publicly available data. Data sources primarily include open projects from the European Go Database and statistics from websites such as the Serbian Go Association. Firstly, by comparing the number of Go players in Serbia with some EGD member countries, this study assesses the development level of Go in Serbia within Europe. Secondly, this study collects information on Go tournaments held in Serbia, focusing on the number of tournaments and the total number of participants. Given the comprehensiveness of the EGD, this study limits data collection to the period from 2016 to 2025 to more accurately reflect recent trends. The data in the charts was collected up to the time of the first submission of this article, on 22nd October 2025. Regarding the historical development and other background information of Go in Serbia, this study primarily references publicly available information released by the Serbian Go Association and related clubs. The author has obtained verbal authorization from the Serbian Go Association and club websites to use relevant materials available on their websites.

To further understand the current state of the development of Go in Serbia, this study employs Pierre Bourdieu's field theory as an analytical framework. Bourdieu views society as a space composed of multiple fields, in which different forms of capital—including social capital, economic capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital played crucial roles in various domains. From this perspective, Go in Serbia can be considered a component of the overall “sports domain”. In the discussion section, this paper aims to explore Go's position within the Serbian sport, analyze the status of relevant capital, and examine how stakeholders within this domain (such as clubs and players) utilize various types of capital to maintain or enhance their position within the domain.

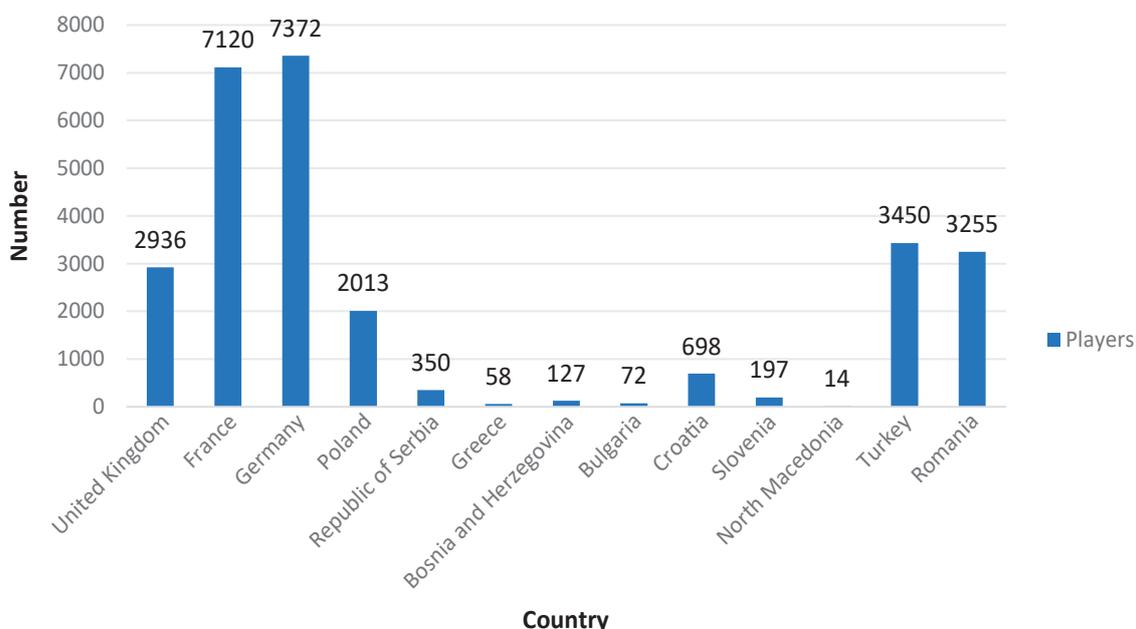
RESULTS

Go population in some European countries and Serbia

By querying the “Country/Club Statistics” section in the EGD, one can directly obtain the total number of Go players in all EGF member countries. As shown in Figure 1, France and Germany have a relatively high popularity of Go, with both countries having over 7,000 players. In the broader Balkan region, Turkey and Romania lead in the

Go development, with 3,450 and 3,255 players, respectively. Among former Yugoslav regions, Croatia ranks first with 698 Go players, followed by Serbia with 350 and Slovenia closely behind. As mentioned earlier, since the end of World War II, Go was introduced to Serbia through Slovenia and Croatia. Hence, these three countries have a relatively solid foundation in Go, and the popularity of the game in those countries is more prominent than in other former Yugoslav regions and even some Balkan countries.

Figure 1. Number of Go players in some European countries



Data source: European Go Database, n.d.

According to EGD regulations, if a player does not participate in any designated tournaments within a certain period, they will be removed from the current rating list, but their rating information will still be retained in the player database. Currently, the minimum player rating set by the EGD system is 30k, which corresponds to a rating value of -900. The ratings ascend from 29k, 28k, and so on up to 1k; above 1k is 1d, followed by 2d, 3d, and so forth. The Go rating corresponding to the 1d rank is approximately 2100, with a fixed difference of 100 rating points between each consecutive rank. Table 1 displays the recalculated data for active Go players in Serbia from 2016 to 2025 after the system upgrade. The COVID-19 pandemic, which spread globally from late 2019 to early 2020, not only had a severe impact on public health but also significantly affected the sports industry. The number of participants in Go tournaments in Serbia saw a notable decline, dropping from a peak of 94 players in 2019 to a low of 40 players, a decrease of 54 participants. This change particularly impacted Serbia, which already had a relatively small base of Go players.

From the distribution of rating scores, the decrease in active players is primarily concentrated in the range below 500 points, while the number of players above 1500 points shows relatively minor fluctuations. This indicates that for players with a certain skill level, Go has become a stable hobby, making them more inclined to continue participating. These players also form the core of Serbia's current active Go community and are the organizers of various Go events in the country. In contrast, beginners often find it difficult to persist with Go in the long term. If unexpected events or personal factors intervene, they are more likely to discontinue their participation.

Table 1. Number of active Go players in Serbia from 2016 to 2025

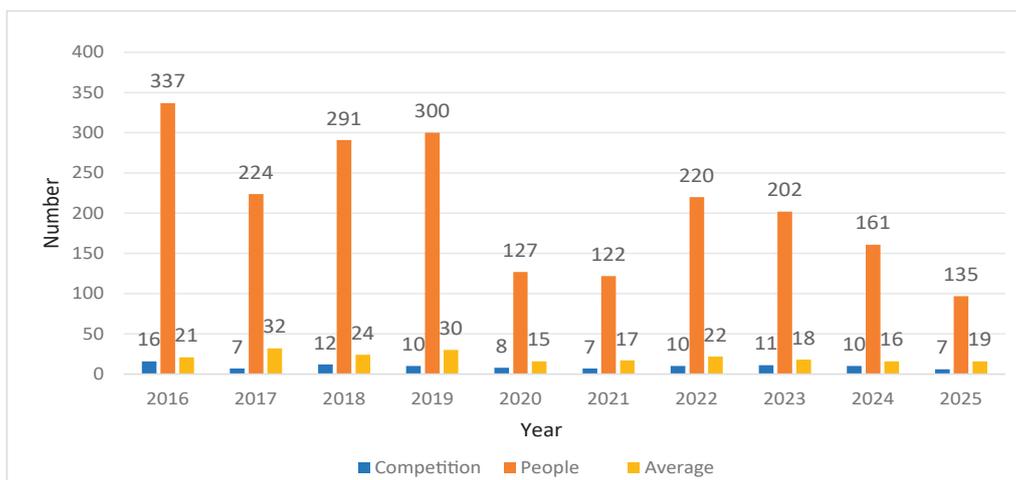
Rank	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
<-500	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	8	2	-
-499<0	4	4	5	8	2	5	5	8	5	2
1<500	45	27	37	37	15	6	7	6	11	3
501<1000	5	8	6	8	10	7	8	6	6	3
1001<1500	6	7	5	8	5	7	12	7	9	7
1501<2000	13	15	13	15	13	13	12	12	13	9
2001<2500	15	17	14	16	14	9	13	13	13	15
>2501	3	3	3	2	2	2	3	2	2	1
Total	91	81	83	94	61	50	61	62	61	40
Average GoR	904 (12k)	1133 (10k+)	946 (12k+)	950 (11k-)	1239 (9k+)	1245 (9k+)	1277 (8k-)	1001 (11k)	1145 (10k+)	1548 (6k+)

Data source: European Go Database, n.d.

Number of competitions and participants

As can be seen from Figure 2, the game of Go has maintained a relatively stable number of annual competitions in Serbia, which also validates the presence of an active player base. The period from 2020 to 2021 marks a significant drop: between 2016 and 2019, participation in Serbian Go competitions was relatively high, peaking at 337 participants. However, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of participants began to fluctuate. Although it rebounded to 220 in 2022, a slight declining trend has been observed since then. In terms of the number of competitions, approximately 10 events are held each year, with an average participation of around 21 people per event, indicating that Serbia’s Go tournaments currently maintain a relatively stable participant base.

Figure 2. Number of Go competitions held in Serbia and number of participants from 2016 to 2025

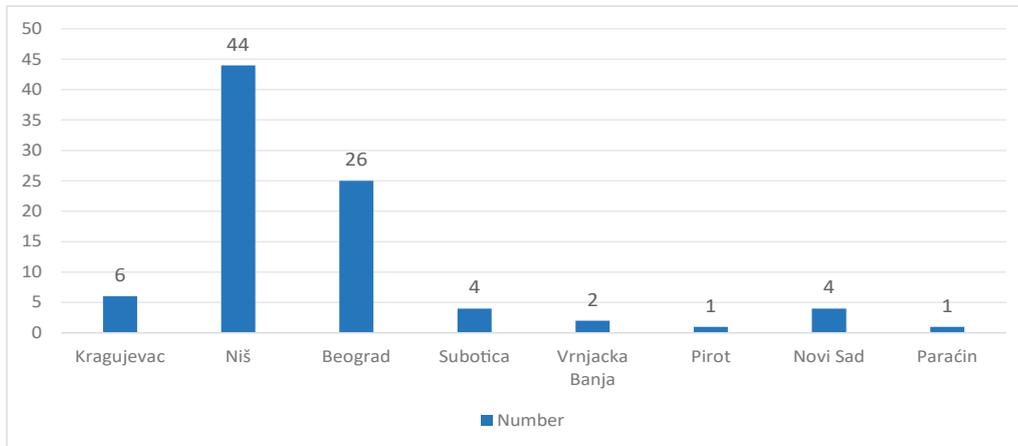


Data source: European Go Database, n.d.

The EGD database also allows for queries on the venue of each match. After excluding some online competitions and events with undetermined specific locations, and further pinpointing certain venues to their respective cities through map searches, the following data was ultimately obtained. As shown in Figure 3, Niš hosted a total of 44 competitions, significantly more than any other region. Belgrade ranked second with 26 competitions. As men-

tioned earlier, the Serbian Go Association was established in Niš as early as 1974, reflecting the city's profound Go tradition and long-standing developmental foundation.

Figure 3. Locations and frequency of Go competitions held in Serbia from 2016 to 2025

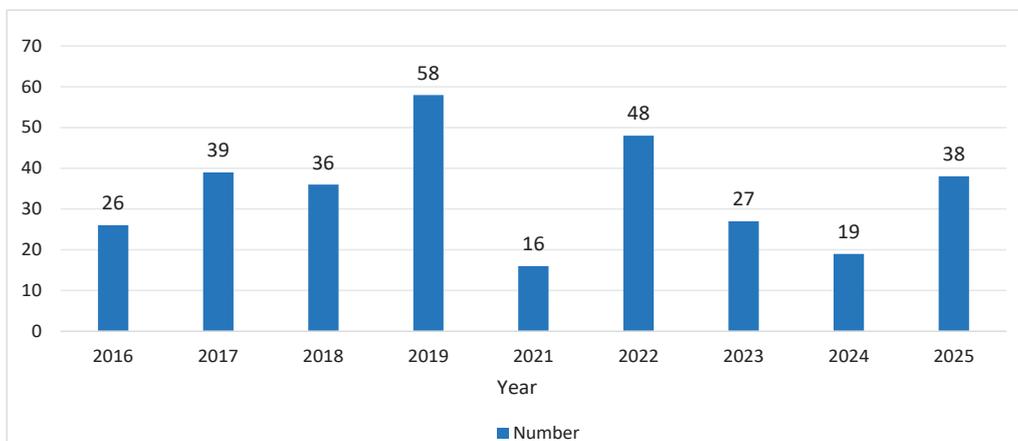


Data source: European Go Database, n.d.

In Serbia, Go events are primarily divided into two categories: domestic competitions and open tournaments, typically organized as championships. These events are usually held on weekends or holidays and span over two days. Open tournaments are accessible to all players, with no restrictions based on nationality, age, or gender, requiring only the payment of a participation fee. The Serbian Individual Championship is a domestic competition that has been held annually since its inception in 1975. It is exclusively open to Serbian players and covers all categories, including youth, women, and men. As of 2020, the championship has been held 12 times in Niš, 15 times in Kragujevac, and 12 times in Belgrade, with a few events hosted in other cities such as Subotica. In terms of championship wins, players from the Kragujevac club have won the title 8 times, while the Belgrade club has also secured 8 victories. The Niš club, however, has achieved impressive 29 championship wins (Go Savez Srbije, 2025). This further confirms that Niš, Belgrade, and Kragujevac are the three most active cities for Go events in Serbia.

Serbia hosts two prominent open Go tournaments each year: the Niš Open and the Belgrade Open. Among these, the Belgrade Open has successfully held 47 editions as of 2025, while the Niš Open has reached 52 editions to date. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, cross-border sporting events worldwide faced disruptions, with varying degrees of decline in participant numbers, and Serbia's international Go tournaments were no exception. According to the data in Figure 4, the Belgrade Open was not held in 2020, and its participant count dropped from a peak of 58 in 2019 to 16 in 2021, a decrease of 42 participants.

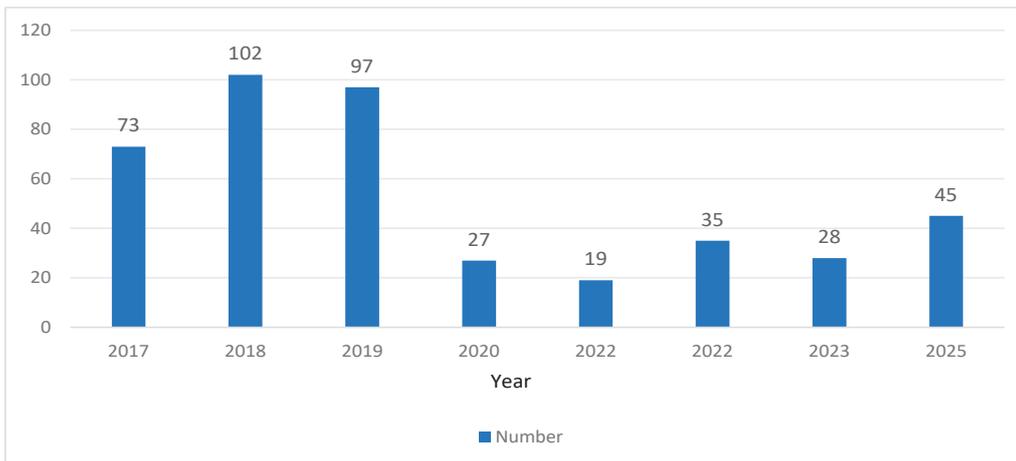
Figure 4. Number of participants in Belgrade Go Open from 2016 to 2025



Data source: European Go Database, n.d.

The situation with the Niš Open is different. As shown in Figure 5, the tournament was not held in 2016, 2021, or 2024, while two editions were held in 2022. The number of participants reached its peak in 2018 and 2019, with 102 and 97 participants respectively, highlighting the tournament's significant impact on the Serbian and even European Go communities. However, in 2021, participation dropped severely to just 19 players, a decrease of 83 from its peak. Although the numbers have since recovered somewhat, with 45 participants in the 2025 Niš Open, this figure remains far below the previous attendance levels.

Figure 5. Number of participants in Niš Go Open from 2016 to 2025

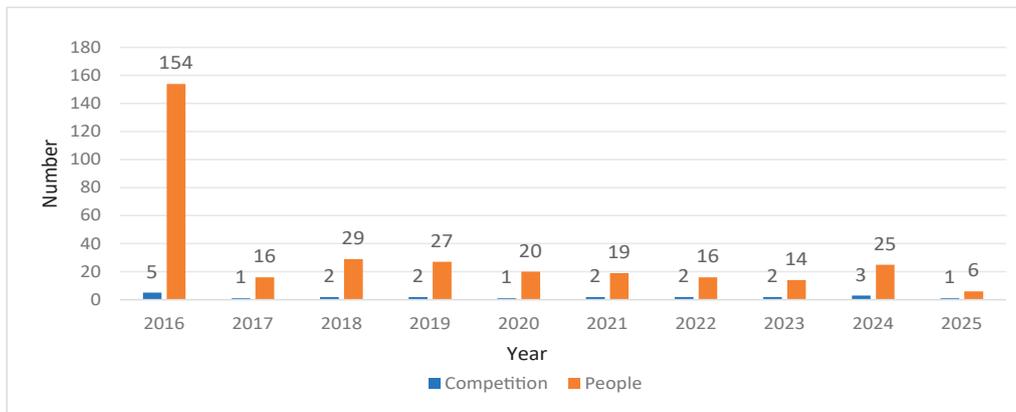


Data source: European Go Database, n.d.

The Popularization of Go in Serbia

Serbia also specifically holds Go competitions targeted at young people, including higher-level events such as the European Student and Youth Go Championships. It is worth mentioning that the 2016 European Go Congress held in Subotica included three age groups: U12, U16, and U20, which resulted in a significantly larger number of participants. During the statistical process, the author filtered competitions whose names included keywords such as "student" and "youth," as well as events whose names reflected school elements and where participants were primarily students. At the same time, individual competitions that did not clearly reflect student or youth attributes were excluded. The final summarized results are shown in Figure 6. As clearly illustrated in the figure, since 2017, the frequency of student and youth Go competitions held annually in Serbia has remained relatively stable, generally ranging from 1 to 2 times per year, with an average participation of approximately 19 people. These young players form the talent pool for the development of Go in Serbia.

Figure 6. Go competitions and number of participants among Serbian students and youth from 2016 to 2025

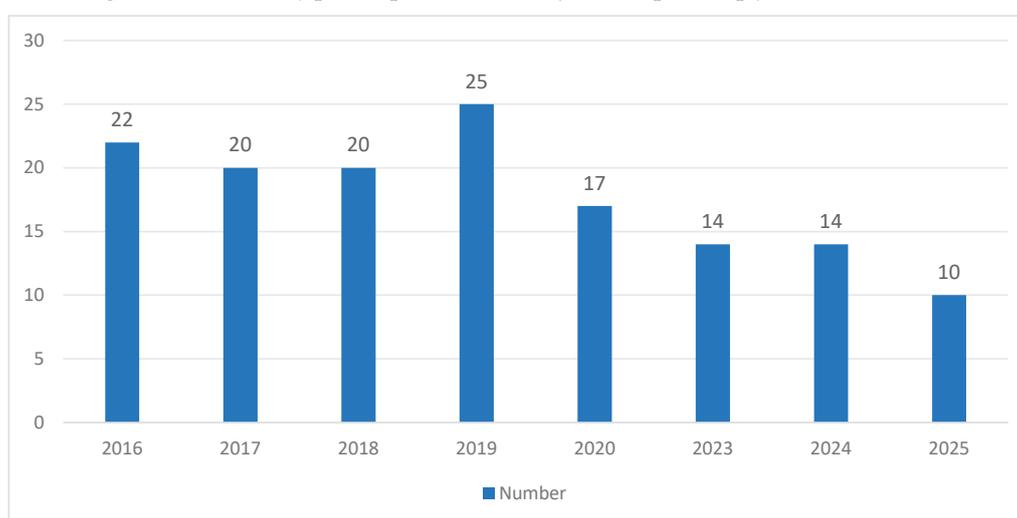


Data source: European Go Database, n.d.

Most public authorities also perceive sport as increasingly important, and include sports issues in their policies (Seippel, 2019). The Serbian government has long been committed to promoting the development of sport. Through its subordinate institutions, the Ministry of Sport regularly provides annual financial support to various sports organizations (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2024). In this context, Go has been officially registered as a Category IV non-Olympic sport by the Ministry of Sport of the Republic of Serbia, thereby paving the way for it to receive state funding. Based on the results of the city's sports organization funding competition, the City of Niš provides annual financial support for the regular activities of Go clubs.

In Serbia, Niš is a city with a relatively active development in the game of Go, hosting two Go clubs: the University Student Go Club and the Pro Go Club. The University Student Go Club focuses on cultivating high-level competitive players, while the Pro Go Club is dedicated to promoting and popularizing Go among the general public by establishing Go schools and organizing as well as participating in various tournaments. As an influential Go organization in Niš and across Serbia, the Pro Go Club not only regularly holds events such as the Niš Open and the Serbian Championship, but also organizes the Sretenje Tournament on Serbia's Statehood Day, marking it as an important anniversary event for the club (Go klub "PRO GO" Niš, 2025). This tournament has been held for many years and is regarded as a significant tradition among Go enthusiasts in Niš. Although it was not held in 2021 and 2022 due to certain reasons, it took place as scheduled in all other years. However, as shown in Figure 7, the number of participants in this tournament has exhibited a clear declining trend in recent years.

Figure 7. Number of participants in Sretenje Championship from 2016 to 2025



Data source: European Go Database, n.d.

For years, the Niš Pro Go Chess Club has been dedicated to promoting the game of Go in elementary schools. The schedule for these activities is usually determined through consultations with school authorities and typically arranged during after-school hours, with club members visiting the schools to conduct Go teaching sessions. The first Go school program was launched in 2012 at the "Učitelj Tasa" Elementary School in Niš. Furthermore, thanks to the remarkable success of the Go school activities held at the "Sveti Sava" Elementary School in Niš between 2016 and 2018, the Institute for Improvement of Education of Serbia has included Go in the recommended list of extracurricular activities for schools and student dormitories in the country. With the support of the Niš City Administration, the Pro Go Club initiated a new round of school Go promotion programs in 2025, covering the "Učitelj Tasa" Elementary School, the "Car Konstantin" Elementary School, and the "Sreten Mladenović Mika" Elementary School. These sessions are generally held once a week. As an official member of the Pro Go Club, the author has also participated in multiple Go teaching activities at the aforementioned schools, primarily assisting in organizing the activities, guiding students in playing Go, and providing personal suggestions.

DISCUSSION

Participation in sporting activities contributes to improved quality of life and the development of important life skills (Mihic et al., 2023). However, the development of Go in Serbia is constrained by various factors, the most prominent being a weak foundation. Within Serbia's sports landscape, Go is undoubtedly marginalized. Data clearly shows that the number of Go participants in Serbia remains relatively small. Compared to mainstream sports like football, basketball, and tennis, which possess substantial social and economic capital, Go's population growth relies primarily on limited dissemination. Go's appeal lies mainly in its cultural capital—its unique entertainment value and inherent cultural and intellectual attributes. In Serbia, Go receives limited social attention and participation, resulting in relatively weak accumulated social and economic capital. Go participants struggle to directly convert their cultural capital into the social and economic resources necessary for organizational operations and activities. Sustained financial investment is crucial for promoting Go, organizing competitions, and cultivating top-tier players. In Serbia, where Go culture is not yet deeply rooted, the sport struggles to attract sufficient public or private funding, which in turn limits its overall development prospects. As the data shows, Go tournaments in Serbia are highly concentrated in a few cities such as Niš and Belgrade. These cities possess strong social capital (club organizations and historical traditions). From a macro perspective, this also reflects the uneven distribution of capital within the “small field” of Go in Serbia, where a substantial foundation has not yet been established in other cities.

It is understood that active participants in various Go competitions in Serbia are mainly concentrated among players with a certain level of skill. Through personal participation in a series of open Go tournaments in Serbia and exchanges with local players, the author observed that most of these top-tier players are adults. In contrast, the number of participants in Go competitions at the youth and student levels is significantly lower, which directly hinders the speed and scale of Go's popularization and development in Serbia. Currently, some students in Serbia who are exposed to Go are influenced by their family environment. Parents who play Go or have a strong interest in it often guide their children to participate in the activity, helping them cultivate a stable and lasting interest. Furthermore, the Pro Go Club in Niš, as a participant in the Go field, actively collaborates with local primary schools to introduce the cultural capital (intellectual attributes) of Go into the school, aiming to promote students' long-term interest and identification with Go. However, although some primary schools have introduced Go as an extracurricular activity, Go is only positioned as a hobby and not incorporated into the formal curriculum. Therefore, most students only regard Go as a recreational game, and their overall understanding and skill level generally remain at a primary level, failing to form a long-term habit of participation. After leaving school, students rarely have an initiative to continue to study and practice Go, which makes it difficult for Go to evolve into a long-term hobby.

The shortage of coaches is another key factor hindering the popularization of Go in Serbia. Although there are some Go enthusiasts in Serbia with a certain level of skill, Go is more of a hobby for them, and most have their own primary professions. Unlike countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea, which have numerous professional Go training institutions and full-time coaches, Serbia's Go culture is relatively weak, and there is a lack of coaches who make Go their profession or main source of income. Currently, Go promotion in schools is mostly voluntary, with some players instructing students only in their spare time. This makes it difficult to establish a long term, stable teaching mechanism, thus impeding the systematic cultivation of a new generation of Go players in Serbia.

Besides certain internal constraints, external factors have also provided channels for capital inflow into the development of Go in Serbia, the most direct being international exchange. Serbia has long maintained friendly relations with the Go communities of former Yugoslavia and the Balkans. Players frequently gather at various tournaments, such as the Croatian Go Championship in Velika Gorica, the Banja Luka Open in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Serbian Open in Belgrade and Niš. On the board, they are competitors; off the board, they are friends. These international tournaments are not only competitive platforms but also venues for accumulating social capital, allowing Serbian players to gain rich competitive experience. This not only helps improve their Go skills but also promotes the spread of Go culture. However, unforeseen events such as the global pandemic may pose challenges to the sustainability and effectiveness of such international exchanges.

Technological advancements have also had a profound impact on the game of Go. Since the milestone event of AlphaGo defeating top human players in 2016, global interest in Go has increased significantly. Since then, various new Go AI programs have emerged, completely revolutionizing traditional training methods. Professional players and amateur enthusiasts alike have begun to widely utilize AI for learning and training. At the same time, numerous Go learning websites and online platforms provide enthusiasts with abundant and convenient learning

resources, enabling them to effectively improve their skills without leaving home. For Serbia, these emerging “cultural capitals” offer a low cost, high efficiency training pathway, assisting in narrowing the gap with countries that have a deeper Go tradition.

CONCLUSION

The data clearly shows that Go in Serbia can be considered to be on the fringes of the “sports domain”, with its development relying primarily on relatively limited cultural and economic capital. Although the popularity of Go in Serbia lags significantly behind countries with larger economies and populations like France and Germany, it boasts a relatively large Go player base compared to some countries in former Yugoslavia and the Balkans, demonstrating considerable development potential. This is thanks to the tireless efforts of Serbian Go players over the years, particularly in promoting Go among young people, which helps cultivate future talent. From the perspective of field theory, the future development path of Go in Serbia can focus on the cultivation and transformation of capital. Schools can continue to be utilized as an important platform for promoting Go, encouraging the continued development of Go activities and gaining institutional recognition for Go's “cultural capital”. This initiative requires not only the cooperation and support of education departments, sports institutions, and the media, but also the active participation of parents. Family sports culture has a lasting and relatively stable impact on youth participation in sports. For some teenagers, continued participation in sports during late adolescence may require greater parental support (Strandbu et al., 2020). Only when parents encourage their children's participation in Go can the likelihood of them developing Go into a long-term hobby be increased. Furthermore, actively building cross-sectoral and multi-level partnership networks is crucial to securing sustained social and economic capital. Academically, more empirical research on the topic of “Go and Youth” is needed. In conclusion, Serbia's sustainable development requires the joint participation and long-term investment of multiple stakeholders.

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