

BIG IN GAZI BABA

documentary feature in development



Winner of the **Vanessa Redgrave Award**
PriFest Forum, September 2023

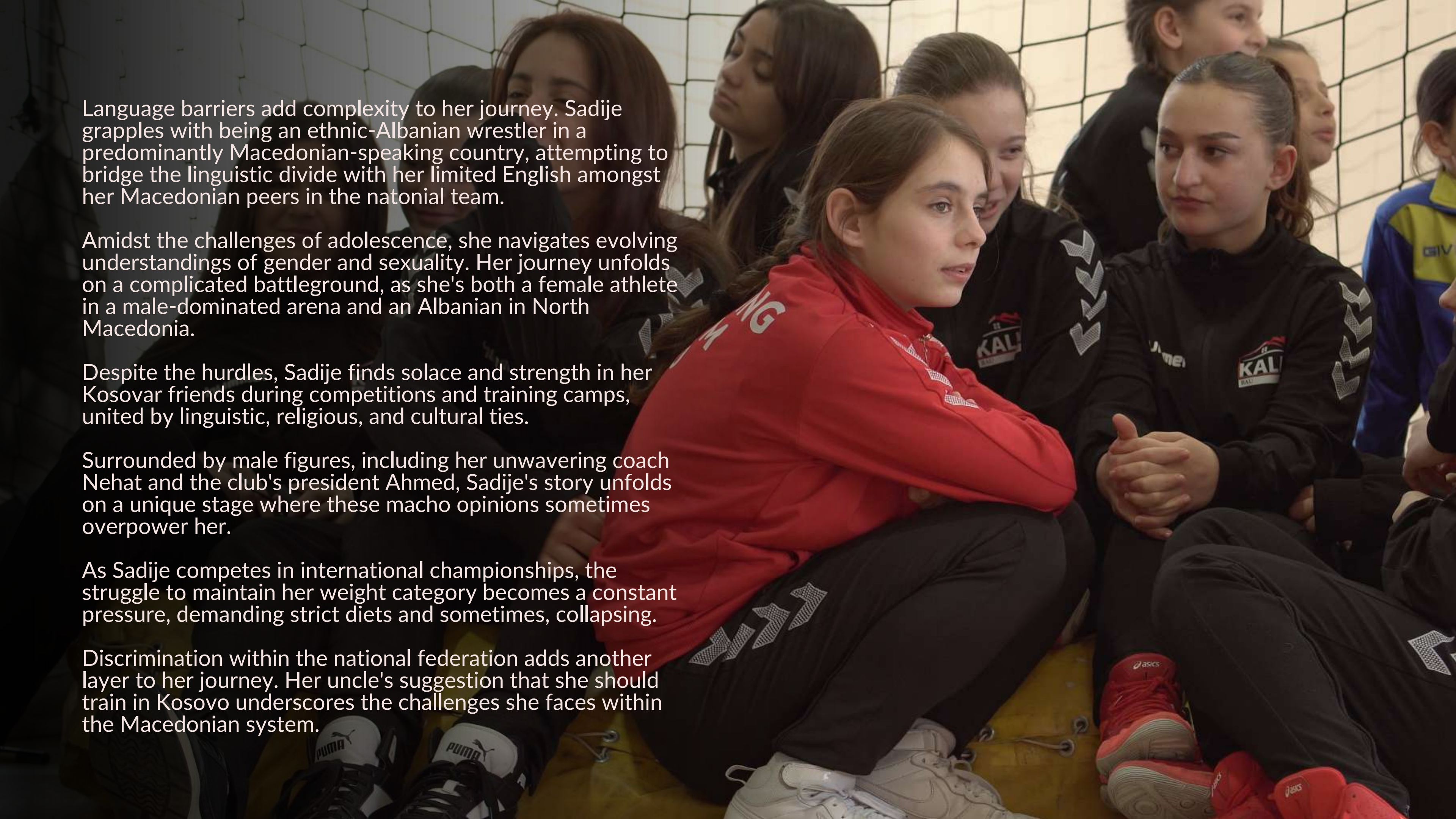
A young girl with brown hair, wearing a blue jacket, is looking intently at a man. The man, who has a beard and is wearing a blue and white shirt, is leaning forward with his hand near his face, looking back at her. In the background, there is a blue banner with white text in Macedonian and English, and a large oval logo with a red border. The logo contains a stylized figure in blue and red, with the year '1977' and the word 'LIRIA' below it.

SYNOPSIS

Sadije is a 13-year-old Albanian wrestler defying conventions in North Macedonia's complex societal landscape. As the only girl in a male-dominated wrestling club, she embodies resilience in her neighbourhood community. Against the backdrop of the nation's history, marked by a little-known civil war in 2001, Sadije's story unfolds.

In the densely populated, predominantly Albanian-Muslim neighbourhood of Gazi Baba, Sadije trains alongside boys at the Liria wrestling club. Her spirited personality and turbulent attitude make her a natural leader.

Sadije's family, a typical Albanian-Muslim household, envisions her as the family's future provider. As the youngest of three sisters, this expectation looms large as she grows older.



Language barriers add complexity to her journey. Sadije grapples with being an ethnic-Albanian wrestler in a predominantly Macedonian-speaking country, attempting to bridge the linguistic divide with her limited English amongst her Macedonian peers in the national team.

Amidst the challenges of adolescence, she navigates evolving understandings of gender and sexuality. Her journey unfolds on a complicated battleground, as she's both a female athlete in a male-dominated arena and an Albanian in North Macedonia.

Despite the hurdles, Sadije finds solace and strength in her Kosovar friends during competitions and training camps, united by linguistic, religious, and cultural ties.

Surrounded by male figures, including her unwavering coach Nehat and the club's president Ahmed, Sadije's story unfolds on a unique stage where these macho opinions sometimes overpower her.

As Sadije competes in international championships, the struggle to maintain her weight category becomes a constant pressure, demanding strict diets and sometimes, collapsing.

Discrimination within the national federation adds another layer to her journey. Her uncle's suggestion that she should train in Kosovo underscores the challenges she faces within the Macedonian system.

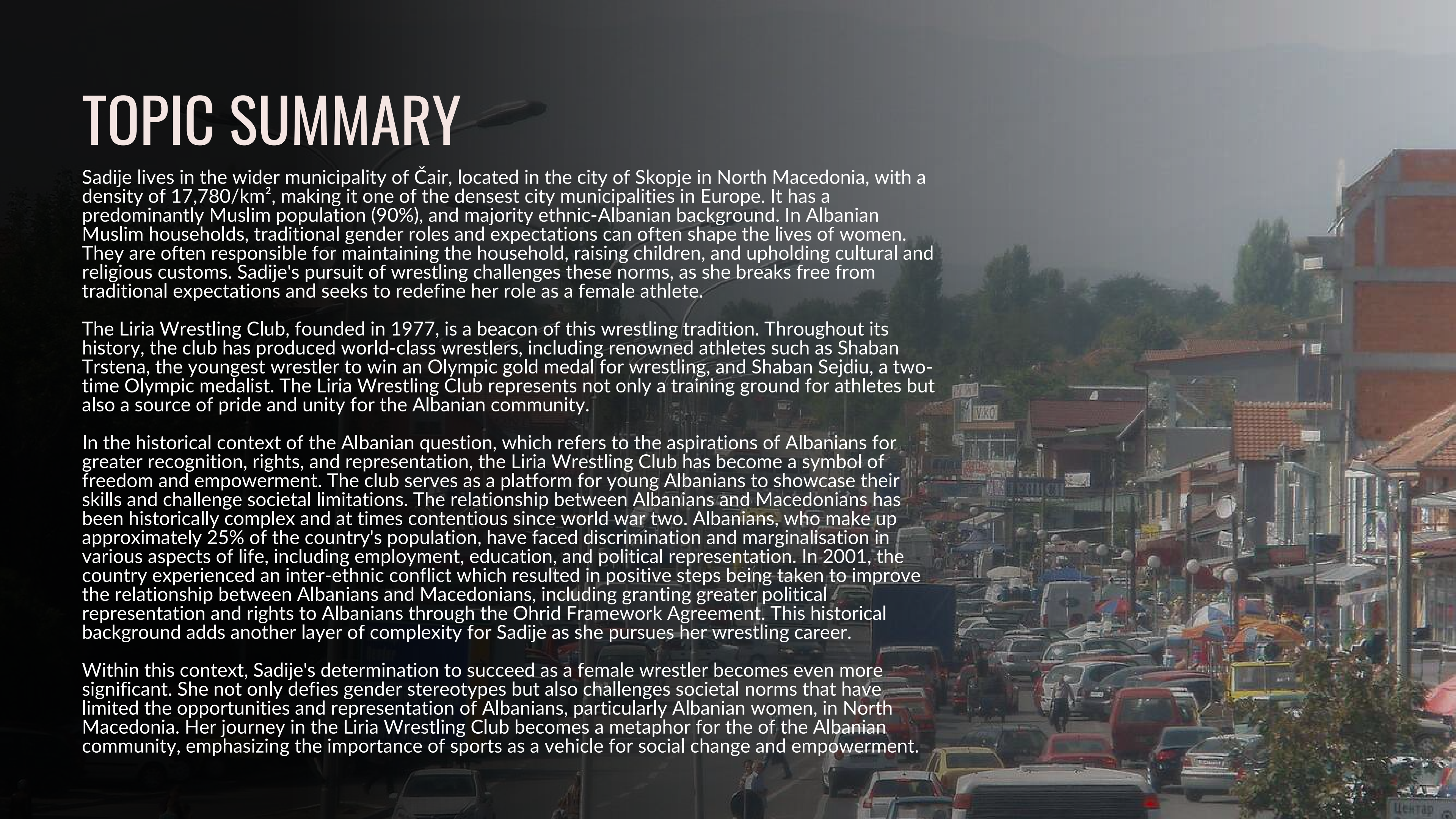
TOPIC SUMMARY

Sadije lives in the wider municipality of Čair, located in the city of Skopje in North Macedonia, with a density of 17,780/km², making it one of the densest city municipalities in Europe. It has a predominantly Muslim population (90%), and majority ethnic-Albanian background. In Albanian Muslim households, traditional gender roles and expectations can often shape the lives of women. They are often responsible for maintaining the household, raising children, and upholding cultural and religious customs. Sadije's pursuit of wrestling challenges these norms, as she breaks free from traditional expectations and seeks to redefine her role as a female athlete.

The Liria Wrestling Club, founded in 1977, is a beacon of this wrestling tradition. Throughout its history, the club has produced world-class wrestlers, including renowned athletes such as Shaban Trstena, the youngest wrestler to win an Olympic gold medal for wrestling, and Shaban Sejdiu, a two-time Olympic medalist. The Liria Wrestling Club represents not only a training ground for athletes but also a source of pride and unity for the Albanian community.

In the historical context of the Albanian question, which refers to the aspirations of Albanians for greater recognition, rights, and representation, the Liria Wrestling Club has become a symbol of freedom and empowerment. The club serves as a platform for young Albanians to showcase their skills and challenge societal limitations. The relationship between Albanians and Macedonians has been historically complex and at times contentious since world war two. Albanians, who make up approximately 25% of the country's population, have faced discrimination and marginalisation in various aspects of life, including employment, education, and political representation. In 2001, the country experienced an inter-ethnic conflict which resulted in positive steps being taken to improve the relationship between Albanians and Macedonians, including granting greater political representation and rights to Albanians through the Ohrid Framework Agreement. This historical background adds another layer of complexity for Sadije as she pursues her wrestling career.

Within this context, Sadije's determination to succeed as a female wrestler becomes even more significant. She not only defies gender stereotypes but also challenges societal norms that have limited the opportunities and representation of Albanians, particularly Albanian women, in North Macedonia. Her journey in the Liria Wrestling Club becomes a metaphor for the of the Albanian community, emphasizing the importance of sports as a vehicle for social change and empowerment.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

As a filmmaker, I am profoundly fascinated by the ability of sports narratives to transcend the confines of the arena and explore broader societal issues. My interest lies in how sports can become more than just a spectacle of competition, transforming into a prism through which we can observe and understand the complexities of a nation's ambitions, goals, as well as its social and political situations. As Ian McDonald wisely pointed out, sports documentaries have a unique potential to shed light on underlying political and social issues that have not yet been fully explored and critically analysed (McDonald, 2007).

I also bring a unique sensitivity to Sadije's character and the challenges she faces, fully understanding the persistent sexist biases not only in sports but beyond. Recently, while directing a film that intersects American football, Islamophobia, and French identity, I gained a more nuanced understanding of how crucial representation is. I also touched on the obstacles faced by individuals navigating diverse cultural and social environments. It is with this sensitivity that I want to approach Sadije's story.

Over the past five months, my creative team and I, consisting of local producer Romir Jakupi, award-winning cinematographer Fejmi Dauti (Honeyland, 2019), and editor Avdi Thauri, have been fully immersed in this project. We all live within 30 minutes walk from Sadije and the team, making this a story that's right at our doorstep.

My approach, grounded in extensive research and ongoing development, has allowed me to gain Sadije's complete trust. I've personally spent over six months attending daily training sessions from Monday to Friday. This intimacy has enabled us to capture authentic and moving moments, reflecting the true essence of Sadije and her unique journey.

www.paulineblanchet.com





PRODUCTION NOTE

We are currently 6 months into intensive research and development following Sadije at the Balkan Championships in early May, as well as the European Championships in July 2023. We aim to film for at least the next 2 years as she moves to high school and goes through physical changes.

Our approach involves seeking a majority French producer considering that Pauline Blanchet is a French citizen. Subsequently, we plan to pursue national Macedonian film funding through a minority co-production arrangement involving my North Macedonian production company and a co-producer from Kosovo, given the film's significance within the region.

Creative Team:

Director: Pauline Blanchet

Producer: Romir Jakupi

DOP: Fejmi Daut

Editor: Avdi Thachi

A man with a beard and dark hair, wearing a blue t-shirt, is in the foreground, leaning forward and pointing his right index finger towards a young man. The young man, wearing a black t-shirt, is looking down and slightly to the side. In the background, a young girl with brown hair, wearing a white t-shirt with a red logo, is looking towards the camera. Behind her, several young men in grey t-shirts are standing and watching. The background is dark with some blue circular patterns.

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