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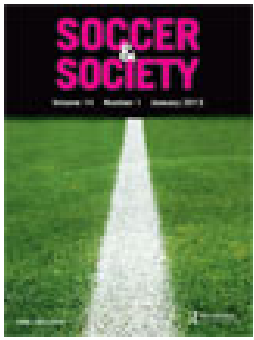


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The UEFA Champions League: a political myth?

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ABSTRACT

Discussing the UEFA Champions League (CL) as a political myth, we want to focus on specific renderings of this continent-wide competition in club football. Two broad narratives are identified in this article: a unifying one that seems to contribute to the formation of a positive Champions League myth in terms of (political) integration across Europe; and a negative one that suggests that the CL is a driver for (over-)commercialization and a threat for the integrity of 'true'/traditional football. We argue that these two CL narratives do not seem to (completely) neutralize each other. While fans may be alienated by the commercialization triggered through the Champions League, at the same time the CL may have a unifying effect by widening perspectives, fostering a common continental communicative space, or constituting an engine of lived integration.

Introduction

The UEFA Champions League (CL) has evoked much attention, fascination as well as criticism over the years. While it quickly developed into a commercial success story and a brand name, drawing financially well-endowed sponsors all too easily¹, it has also increasingly been criticized for its changes in format, its focus on nurturing elite clubs, at the expense of grassroots football, as well as already having reached some point of saturation and over-exposition towards likely spectators, fans and consumers.

Beneath this discussion of the likely sporting and commercial dynamics around the Champions League, there has always been some interest in this continent-wide competition as an integration engine, supposedly making Europe hang together more closely. In this regard, the very idea that millions of Europeans watch games – not only of their beloved clubs, not only of their respective national sides – has fascinated and inspired political and scholarly comment.² If it is true that Champions League finals are more prominent in the minds of Europeans than constitutional patriotism towards the EU Treaties, such unconscious identity work through lifeworldly activities becomes politically relevant.³ It may reach the stage of a political myth when actors refer to the presumed CL-effects on Europeanized mind sets and deliberately enhance their importance. In doing so, they may either seek to push a European agenda or to legitimize commercial interests with reference to 'the European idea'. Wittingly or not, however, they contribute to the very narrative of the Champions League as a generator of European(ised) mind sets.

In contrast, some narrative constructions of the CL may also carry the potential of possibly undermining such a (positive) myth. The starting point here is the observation that the introduction of the CL has arguably revolutionized European club football. This revolution, however,

seems to have come with a huge price tag: among the concerns voiced most often are the focus on elite-level clubs at the expense of grassroots football, all too expectable outcomes of the competition, the disturbing effect of financial matters leading to an ever more intense commercialization, and increasingly frequent threats of insolvency. In as much as such narratives of disruption and malign degeneration gain momentum, the political mythology of the same league-engineering integration across societies is most likely to crumble.⁴

Elaborating on narratives establishing and counter-narratives potentially challenging such politically relevant perceptions of the CL, we aim at uncovering the potential of top-level club football competition to function as a political myth. The rationale for, and added value of, this paper is threefold: first, as political myths have the capacity to play an important part in the provision of legitimacy for action as well as in the formation of group identities, uncovering and deconstructing key narratives may provide important insights into societal and political dynamics and trends.⁵ Second, the Champions League has neither been sufficiently analysed with regard to the notion of 'political myth', nor concerning its identity-building potential, yet. Third, identity-formation in everyday (supposedly non-political) transboundary contexts is still under-researched, in particular regarding politically salient implications. As football fans/spectators are very numerous, and given that they are presumed to be informed by rather local and national traditions (i.e. constituting a 'hard' case), discovering a substantial degree of CL-induced Europeanized identities among them could eventually point to a (potential) source of cohesion at times of various European crises.

We proceed as follows: first we briefly define 'political myths'. In section 2, we provide some brief background on the UEFA Champions League in the context of EU politics. Section 3 analyses and illustrates the CL as a positive political myth. In section 4, we specify the narratives that may counter the positive CL myth. In the fifth section, we provide some evidence on how the narratives resonate with the target audiences. Finally, we draw some conclusions.

Political myths

Starting from the general understanding of a 'myth' as a set of ideas and narratives on the meaning of an event, or a series of events, which contain a kernel of truth, but which are, at the same time, enriched by fictional elements, a political myth seems to relate to specifically political implications of such a rendering. Accordingly, Flood defines a 'political myth' as narratives which establish a certain *ideologically marked* account of a 'sequence of events, involving more or less the same principal actors, subject to more or less the same interpretation and implied meaning, circulat[ing] within a social group'.⁶ But this is only half of the story. Transcending this rather formalistic notion of the political qualities of such myths, one might feel inclined to ask for the functions of political myths.

Assuming that these myths do not simply evolve over time, but are, at least partially, built intentionally and nurtured consciously, one cannot but miss their constitutive nature for a collective formation of meaning. In that sense, myths can be presumed to have integrative functions, whether by design or simply through their impact of connecting peoples' horizons. A more recent strand of debate in History and Cultural Studies has likewise highlighted that 'collective myths' present idealized, selective accounts of something which are imagined and communicated precisely in order to, or with the effect of, constituting communities.⁷ In a similar vein, Moulton has recently argued that the main function of a 'political myth'⁸ is to shape legitimacy of some action, policy, entity or system of rules, all the while the veracity of the story told is not of central importance. What matters is, therefore, the degree to which this myth attains the status of dominant belief in a social group; in turn, the very level of acceptance of a myth as 'valid' might be conceived of as an engine of community-building. The analytical distinction between myths and narratives, according to Moulton, is that a myth can be thought of as a specific 'extension of narratives'.

In what follows, we build on this conceptualization in two senses. First, we agree with the idea that a myth is formed *after* some narratives have, at least for the time being, attained the status of well-known and largely unquestioned interpretations; if they are (almost) taken to be a matter of fact, they might, in collusion, serve to establish a myth in people's minds. Second, we seek to emphasize the plurality of narratives existing alongside one another, also those accounts which carry the capacity to undermine the very myth because they seem to offer alternative interpretations and renderings.

The UEFA Champions League in the context of EU politics

Before we proceed to present the CL in its capacity to function as a political myth, some remarks on the League's location in the framework of tangible EU politics and regulation are in order. In the early 1990s there was pressure on UEFA from the big European football clubs and media groups to further develop European club-level competition to exploit its commercial potential. Consequently, UEFA expanded the European Champion Clubs' Cup in 1992/1993 to include a league format, the 'Champions League'. Again, under pressure from media companies and the largest European football clubs – threatening with a European break-away league – UEFA expanded the league format in 1997. The runners-up of the larger national leagues were thus allowed to participate, the number of matches increased, and revenues could therefore be substantially raised. UEFA's organization of the CL 'consolidated its role in European football as the sovereign organisation with regard to pan-European competitive structures', while 'its external prestige and economic power increased accordingly'¹⁰.

UEFA has managed to mitigate control by the European Commission – that has been conceptualized as a 'principal' or 'supervisor' of UEFA¹¹, with UEFA possessing 'supervised autonomy'¹² – in several ways: directly by lobbying the Commission and indirectly by manipulating the preferences of the European Parliament and Member States.¹³ After the European Court of Justice's Bosman ruling in 1995, UEFA's approach towards the EU institutions has been characterized as confrontational. Over the subsequent decade this transformed into a more positive relationship. UEFA had to be pragmatic given the European Commission's regulatory powers.¹⁴ Hence, in the case of the Champions League broadcasting rights, UEFA entered into a constructive dialogue with the Commission, which paid off because in the end the Commission largely approved central marketing arrangements for selling the CL media rights in 2003.¹⁵

UEFA thus realized that it was possible to reach reasonable agreements with the Commission and thus became (even) more proactive thereafter.¹⁶ For example, in its discussions with the EU over locally trained players for UEFA club competitions, the association lobbied at various levels of EU politics: the Commission, the European Parliament as well as national governments/member state politicians. Subsequently, the European Commission stated that the UEFA Home-grown Players Rule should be considered compatible with EU law,¹⁷ despite more sceptical academic legal analysis.¹⁸ UEFA gradually changed its strategy towards the EU because of (1) the requirements of the EU legal system and the power of institutions like the Commission therein, (2) socialization effects given the numerous recurring (increasingly fruitful) interactions,¹⁹ and (3) by engaging with, and gaining support from EU institutions, UEFA could manage to gain their support and thus be in a better position to regain legitimacy vis-à-vis other stakeholders (such as major clubs and media companies). This way, UEFA has sought to preserve its central role in the European football governing structures, as the single legitimate regulator of the game in Europe.²⁰

The Champions League as a (positive/unifying) political myth

As a corollary of the CL's positioning within EU politics, there has certainly been no shortage of academic depictions of the League as the epicentre of European-wide attention to football. Most of such accounts explicitly or implicitly postulate that the top-level European club competition has

attained an exceptional (if not mythical) status in professional football. For example, the Champions League has been considered a ‘real focal point for the most competitive [...] clubs’²¹, or a ‘premium product category with an extraordinary well-defined and well-designed brand identity’²², which is widely recognized throughout Europe and serves to ‘entrench the competition in the consciousness of European soccer fans’²³. The same goes for the media. A big German public broadcasting channel has suggested, for example, that ‘there’s almost nothing bigger in the life of a football professional than to win the Champions League once. [...] The League has become a myth [...]. Even though there are formidable financial interests of associations and clubs behind this myth – the magic of sports seems to be more important to the fans’²⁴.

Many commentators go further than this and suggest that the CL is more than mere sports and in fact works as some sort of integrative engine across European societies. For purposes of analytical clarity, it makes sense to distinguish three recurrent narratives, which in sum establish the idea of the CL as a force of (political) integration across Europe and also nourish the political myth of the Champions League. All three of them seem to be sustained by research, policy-makers as well as media commentary. First, it is commonly assumed that the regularity of interaction of elite clubs as well as the commercial success and quality of competition has led to a *widening of perspectives* among fans and spectators alike. Accordingly, the horizons of fans and the attention of CL viewers have shifted towards the European level with interest in European competition, in European-level competitors and foreign fandom across European boundaries becoming normalized over time. Second, some scholars and commentators have mused about the emergence of a *pan-European public (football) sphere* created through transnational media events and common experiences alike. And third, escalating that very logic, some zoom in on the togetherness emanating from such shared and regularized practices, which can be conceived of as some form of ‘*lived integration*’ that is perhaps preferable – as it is closer to everyday life and hence more authentic – to homogenizing regulation flowing from European/EU polity. The subsequent subsections illustrate these three narratives.

Widening of fans’ perspectives

As regards the broadening of fans’ perspectives beyond local and national frames, King was perhaps the first to systematically explore such ideas.²⁵ Carrying out ethnographic research on a group of locally based Manchester United F.C. (ManU) fans in the late 1990s, he argued that these fans were beginning to see themselves as more European and that two main mechanisms were propelling this change. First, the increased opportunity to travel across Europe brought about by the greater number of CL games made supporters progressively see themselves as ‘European’ in a cultural sense. Beyond that, he suggested that the increased coverage of all European leagues on British television made supporters more aware of other European national leagues, cities and countries and that this familiarity was also building up a European consciousness. For him, observations like the following proved instructive in this regard:

“[These fans] want Manchester and Manchester United to compete at this *emergent transnational level so that the city and club can be recognized as the equal of the other great clubs and cities in Europe*. For these men, post-national identity does not involve the elevation of their identities and interests to a supranational level but, on the contrary, an increasing devolution of interests and affiliations down to the level of the local and the urban. This local level is then re-connected into a new transnational context”²⁶

Following from that, as King states, ManU fans have become more interested in the recent developments at Juve in Italy or Feyenoord in the Netherlands (20 years ago still a competitive side at CL level) instead of paying attention what was happening at Premier League clubs like Coventry.²⁷ Indeed, much of the literature on the presumed effects of CL competition on the consciousness of fans is littered with similar analogies. For example, Holt suggests: ‘nevertheless, the growth of European competition through the Champions League make the results of Arsenal

relevant to supporters of Valencia, and the result of Barcelona relevant to the supporters of Chelsea²⁸. Hence, fans' frames of reference are changing, also at the level of supporters' perceptions, without naively giving in to any sentiment that sport had turned fans and followers into cosmopolitans all too easily.²⁹

Nevertheless, 'being top', from the perspective of a fan, might not necessarily imply 'for the sake of being the best representative of nation XYZ', but being the best in a continent-wide competition of top performers. The shift might also have included that such success is pursued not on the basis of 'nationally' defined squads, but with resort to a team composed of the best players a club can sign throughout Europe and the wider world.³⁰ And widening of horizons also seems to have taken place in conjunction with adjacent phenomena such as the increase in 'foreign fandom'³¹. The 'Fans without borders' study of 2012 did not delve into explaining the drivers of this phenomenon.³² Nevertheless, according to the frames established in football fanzines such as Austria's *ballesterer*, this development/change had to be attributed to the CL, as the latter 'aggrandized the identification with a second team whose jerseys could be bought at home and worn while watching the team play in a pub around the corner, whose fan one could become without ever having been to Bernabeu or Old Trafford'³³.

Driver for the emergence of a pan-European public (football) sphere

The second narrative postulates that the CL fosters a pan-European public sphere. The latter can be broadly defined as an open forum of communication beyond the national arena – a cross-border (European) realm of communication and mobilization.³⁴ As a starting point one can observe that the CL constitutes a fundamental break from hitherto existing tournaments, in the sense of having brought about a regular, and in terms of participation relatively stable, league-alike competition of thoroughly internationalised/Europeanized club squads. In this process, the CL became the world's most popular club competition, and the CL final *the* global sport mega event, even surpassing the Super Bowl in terms of audience rates.³⁵

In academic and media commentary, all ingredients of the narrative depicting an emergent transnational space of communication through football are present. Already at a relatively early stage, the Economist suggested rather pointedly that '[Europeans] still insist on speaking different languages, they read different papers, worship at the shrines of different celebrities, chortle at different television programmes. But there is one big exception. Every Tuesday and Wednesday, much of Europe's male population tunes in to watch the Champions League [...]'³⁶. Albrecht Sonntag, head of the FP-7 research project FREE,³⁷ added to this narrative and suggested that the CL may have succeeded where politics had failed, e.g. in establishing a transnational time regime across Europe through defining 8.45pm (GMT+1) as the prime time for European football, for two and a half decades at least.³⁸

In a similar vein, Jonathan Hill, the former Head of the EU office at UEFA (of course not a disinterested, neutral observer), argues that 'it would be absurd to suggest that the Champions League is succeeding where the European parliament has often failed, but the fact that millions of Europeans now *watch the same games at the same time must surely count for something*'.³⁹

What has further inspired the idea of the CL as an emerging trans-European public space is patterns of transnational viewership. Of specific interest in this regard would be audience ratings of matches in which no home team was involved, and national(istic) proclivities would be less of a decisive factor of watching the game. Some evidence (from scattered data)⁴⁰ indeed demonstrates that mild trans-nationalizing dynamics may be discernible.⁴¹ In the German context, it can be shown that the CL had generated a high and stable audience for top events. Occasionally, there have been very high audience shares with single CL games where no German team was involved, as in the 2008 final, which was the year's top CL event. In addition, the 2015 CL final between Barcelona and Juventus drew a higher TV audience (9,72 Mio) than the same year's quarterfinal between Porto and Bayern (9,55 Mio) and significantly more than Leverkusen against Atletico in

the round of the last sixteen (5,99 Mio).⁴² And the 2017 CL final between Real and Juventus drew a higher TV audience in Germany than in Spain.⁴³

There are also some counter-intuitive figures concerning CL audiences beyond the German context. For instance, data on the 2009 CL final between Barcelona and Manchester United show that audience shares in Croatia and Portugal were close to those in Spain, and ahead of the UK. Hence, the 2009 CL final generated huge interest in *various* European country contexts despite the fact that the teams involved did not come from the respective domestic leagues. Much the same, and again in an anecdotal fashion, could be said about the 2012 CL group stage match between Barça and Celtic Glasgow, which drew 7.1 Mio viewers in Spain (37%), but also an impressive 1.5 Mio in the Dutch market (23%, compared to a ‘mere’ 10% increase to a 33% audience share on the next evening for Ajax).

And even in the British TV market which has seen slightly decreasing audience ratings for CL games in the last couple of years – due to broadcaster changes, some saturation on behalf of viewers as well as shifting consumption habits in the age of online and social media broadcasting⁴⁴ – viewership for CL finals *without* an English side competing has been rather staggering. More than 6 Mio viewers in 2014 (Atletico vs. Real), and 4,2 Mio in 2015 (Barça vs. Juve)⁴⁵ appear substantial in the face of the mentioned countervailing trends, and in addition the fact that no home team was on the pitch. Even though it might seem too far-fetched to read the emergence of a ‘European public sphere’ in top-level football of such anecdotal evidence, we think it is noteworthy that *pan-European* patterns of CL viewership have emerged and stabilized over time. What is more, such phenomena have fomented ideas of a gradually emerging ‘public space’ among those interested in football throughout Europe.

As Hill put it: through the Champions League ‘we might be witnessing the gradual emergence of a European “public space.” An elusive holy grail for believers in a post-national, political identity for our continent, a *European public space* involves the idea that citizens *who share concerns can communicate directly* across national boundaries’⁴⁶. Such talk about possibly emerging public spaces across national borders ties in with ideas on political integration.

Lived integration

From a social science perspective, the interesting aspect in the cases under discussion is that we are talking about the CL, leisure time activities such as watching sport on TV or going to a match, rather than matters of high politics, political news or public diplomacy efforts. Certainly, there was also a fascination with the idea of these unconventional ‘politics’ to unfold rather unconsciously and alongside the elite debates and discourses in Brussels. This fascination might explain why quite a few scholars and media commentators seemed to escalate the logic of integration through the CL. For instance, King asserted that ‘[t]he connections between the big city clubs of Europe and the increasing frequency of their encounters on the pitch, which are watched on television by millions across Europe is an important factor in European integration’⁴⁷. In a similar vein, the *Economist* suggested that (largely) due to the Champions League ‘European football teams have turned into a living, *breathing embodiment of European integration*. Clubs that once recruited fans and players from their immediate neighbourhoods now scour the continent for talent and are watched in every country. [...] Football has probably made Britons think more amicably about their fellow Europeans than anything else in Britain’⁴⁸.

In a more critical vein, the apodictic quality of some of the conclusions presented here is striking. Be it journalists (usually critical observers of the commercialization of sports), policy officers (which can be assumed to have a stake in myth-building, if only for purposes of legacy) or scholars (partly fascinated, partly defending their object of study as non-marginal): quite a few of them have contributed to the emergence of a political mythology around the CL. Some have resorted to rather aggrandizing language such as that of the CL as one of the few sources of genuine ‘*European enthusiasm*’ in the words of late Ulrich Beck⁴⁹ or providing ‘emotional glue for the continent’ of

which politicians at the European-level could only dream.⁵⁰ Similarly, Niemann and Brand have posed the (rhetorical) question: ‘Which happens to be more in the minds of Europeans – constitutional patriotism towards the Community Treaties or Champions League finals?’⁵¹

This leads us to another important dimension: the above is linked to the narrative of a growing Europeanized consciousness among those watching the CL as a regularized, normalized competition rather than a series of exotic, extraordinary event on top of the ‘normal national-level’ competition.⁵² King notes that the CL package (logo, anthem etc.) comes with symbols recognized as ‘European’ in nature – the logo designed with a nod to the EU’s flag – an idea which perfectly ties in with assumptions on ‘emerging pan-European consciousness’ broadly conceived.⁵³ Closely related, Niemann and Brand talk about a potential Europeanization of fan identities through the CL which seems to affect fans’ and supporters’ fames of reference and communities of belonging due to the CL’s perceived elevated status, intensified and regularized fan travel, and highly Europeanized squads in Europe’s top flight.⁵⁴

In sum, these re-productions of narratives contribute to the creation of the Champions League as a (positive) political myth. The following section specifies CL-related narratives that are less positive and may potentially counter the positive political myth formation.

(Potential) counter-narratives on Champions League realities

Nearly since its launch, the CL has also drawn a lot of criticism and negative sentiments. There are two main (clusters of) interrelated narratives which have emerged and solidified over the years and which do *not* present the CL as a positively integrating force, but rather see it as the harbinger of unwanted change that effectively undermines the integrity of much esteemed values and sport systems. There is, first, a strand in the mounting debate on the commercialization of sports/football, which zooms in on the CL as an important factor undermining professional football in Europe. Related to this is, second, the narrative on the CL as the grave digger of ‘traditional football’ in the sense of undermining still valued aspects of the game, particularly its competitive balance.

The CL as a driver of commercialization and financial crisis

There is no denying that the CL itself is a competition in which commercial interests and motivations (clubs, players, agents, associations, media companies, sponsors etc.) played a huge role from the very beginning. In fact, key drivers pushing for the overhaul of the traditional European Champions’ Cup format in the first place were commercial in nature.⁵⁵ Giulianotti and Robertson have offered what amounts to one of the most full-blown criticisms of the CL, which has – through the explosion of its revenues, especially concerning broadcasting rights – come to embody the quest to generate more money above any other purpose.⁵⁶ In this process fans are increasingly depicted as consumers and big elite clubs have gradually transformed into multinational corporations.⁵⁷

Analysing one important implication of commercialization, Haugen and Solberg have focused on the CL as the main driving factor behind the rampant ‘financial crisis in European football’⁵⁸. Using statistics and a game theoretic approach, they highlight that the growing levels of indebtedness (and dependence on volatile external investment) as well as the rising numbers of insolvencies can be attributed to what they term the ‘cost push effect’ behind the drive to qualify for the CL as the means to finance a club’s budget or to become/remain competitive.

Real-life stories of ‘financially asphyxiated’ clubs abound and illustrate this relationship aptly: Malaga CF, for instance, was reported to be in dire need to reach the CL group stage in 2012 to survive financially,⁵⁹ with Lille desperately hoping to ‘win the Euromillions’ since the payoff for reaching the group stage had already been integrated in the running budget.⁶⁰ Similarly, in 2001 FC Tirol, which was burdened with huge debt, counted on reaching the CL group stage, only to file for bankruptcy shortly after failing to do so.⁶¹ Such matter-of-life-and-death stories might also

have a thrilling effect on the audience and could increase the attractiveness of CL competition in the eyes of those who follow in the short run. The more this kind of stories pile up, though, and the more clubs encounter severe financial troubles, fall behind their once national competitors, the more business narratives dominate the sports coverage, the more this might also nurture the resentment of people primarily interested in football, their club or some sort of diversified competition. Again, inasmuch as notions of degeneration and allusions to disruptive qualities of CL-level competition gain the upper hand, the myth of the league as an integration engine could be challenged.

The CL as a grave digger of 'traditional football'

The second counter-narrative cluster, which builds on the commercialization narrative, singles out the CL as the main culprit for all sorts of problems and perceived deformations of modern football. This includes notions of the CL supposedly 'killing football'⁶² as well as the 'greed of the rich' seemingly having spoilt the game forever.⁶³ It can be divided into two main sub-narratives.

First, the CL has been regarded as the main culprit for the denigration of conditions in domestic leagues. Looking at leagues such as the ones in Greece, Belarus, Switzerland and Croatia, Smith purports the view that the CL in fact destroys healthy and often much esteemed national-level competition across Europe.⁶⁴ What is left is (a) third-class rivals of some disconnected national powerhouse eventually making it to the CL ranks and (b) quite a few semi-peripheral clubs which never aspire to compete in the CL, but merely to get the most exposure in some CL matches for marketing their talented young players to elite clubs. According to this narrative, sport – under the conditions of CL competition – has become a mere business window for many clubs in Europe, if they are still connected to the elite system at all. This pattern is largely a result of a specific payoff structure of CL monies. Peeters, in his study covering thirty-four national leagues over an eight-year period, confirms the detrimental effect of the CL on the competitive balance at the national level (seasonal: distance between higher and lower ranked teams; championship: degree of dominance over multiple seasons).⁶⁵ If national level football is assumed to have become less surprising, less exciting and nowadays leaves less room for 'miracles', it can have an ambivalent effect on the perception of the CL: the CL could crowd out national leagues, in terms of ascribed attractiveness and viewership. Furthermore, singled out as the main culprit for the slow decay of once beloved national-level competition, the CL is tied into a decidedly negative narrative.

Second, and related to the first point, the CL's very structure has impacted negatively on the competitive balance within the CL itself. As noted by 11Freunde, perhaps the most widely read football fanzine in Germany: '[there is] the sad fact that the Champions League has become the most boring competition of all. Because it is the ever-same rooster of teams which compete. In the semi-final stage, at the latest, surprises are denied access'⁶⁶. As a result, Koenig suggested before the 2017 CL final that it is 'to be hoped that Real isn't going to undermine the myth [through winning the trophy again]'⁶⁷. With regard to elite clubs toying again with the idea of a European Super League Football Supporters Europe (FSE) observed in 2016 that 'from the perspective of many football fans ... there is nothing healthy in a one-sided development leading to big clubs getting more and more money whilst the smaller clubs lose out'. How much leeway UEFA would have to reform this structure without risking yet another breakaway league is contested. Thus, clubs, leagues and the organizing association seem to be locked in a situation which is set to produce much hardship, bring frustration and eventually turn enthusiasm into disinterest, according to this narrative.

While negative CL-related narratives concerning the game's accessibility/affordability and authenticity are less pronounced (and will thus not be illustrated in a detailed manner here), it is interesting to note that the cluster of narratives related to the CL as the grave-digger of 'traditional football' are rather staples in the academic literature and media commentary. Fanzines only occasionally seem to join the chorus asserting that the CL 'will continue to be

a force of destruction at an ever faster pace', having already contributed heavily to a 'completely dysfunctional system which has effectively destroyed competition'⁶⁸. Frequently, fanzines and fans/spectators as well as sportspeople and fan networkers seem to offer a slightly less doomsday and more ambiguous narrative when criticizing the CL. According to their narrative, the CL might still be depicted as challenging valued aspects of the game mentioned above. However, most criticisms are rather directed at how the CL is structured and organized, not the League itself nor the events produced through it (nor necessarily its more commercialized aspects in principle)⁶⁹.

Similarly, and in an interesting twist, one of the most widely publicized campaigns of supporters 'against modern football' used a *CL match*, and by proxy European-wide broadcasting, as its stage. In 2013, Ajax fans protested at the occasion of playing against Manchester City with clearly visible banners criticizing foreign investors as well as exorbitant ticket prices. The ambivalence here consists in the fact that the fans did attend a CL match, in fact did not protest the CL as such, but rather publicly stated their resentment towards some aspects of (over-)commercialization to which the CL has evidently contributed.

As a matter of fact, such an ambivalent, almost 'schizophrenic' posture does not seem to be uncommon among football fans across Europe and within debating circles of supporters and fanzines. Emblematic is the commentary titled 'Schizo' from the German monthly *11 Freunde*, criticizing the competitive balance within the CL itself. Interestingly, the author then makes a sharp U-turn arguing that, on the other hand, one has to be honest that quite often watching CL games '... is a lot of fun'⁷⁰. The fun-component, or rather the appeal of the CL, is then described in terms of the competition's inner dynamic to push teams to perform, to see players extending their limits, to watch in real time how miraculous goals are scored and eventually some surprise outcome might happen despite all structural constraints.

Such ambiguous accounts, as well as the campaign of the Ajax supporters sketched above, are illuminating because both renderings foreground some of the negative aspects which characterize the second critical narrative: lack of championship competition and resulting boredom as well as lack of affordability/access for the regular fan in particular. Observed from a distance, both criticisms also seem to formulate specific expectations which the CL as such could (and sometimes even does) match. Hence, what we can see at play is some oscillation between resentment and fascination fed by undeniable appeal of the competition. It is in this sense that the second counter-narrative seems less fundamentalist than the first one on commercialization (more generally). It contains a kernel of appreciation which ties in perfectly with many supporters' practices who seem to take issue with the over-emphasis on the business aspects surrounding the CL, all the while tuning in the broadcasted games and flocking to the stadium because of the attractiveness and high quality of the competition.⁷¹

How do the narratives resonate with the target audience? Some evidence

An important question concerns the degree to which such narratives – reconstructed here from a multitude of speech acts, linked to scholarly research and opinionated commentary – actually resonate with the lifeworlds of the core target audience of the CL mythology (in case it actually exists). Aside from some ethnographic research, mostly in the British and Scottish contexts, snippets from interviews, and occasional observations in magazines and media, not much evidence has been collected so far on the hypothesized effect of the CL on fans in terms of widening perceptions, an emerging pan-European sphere, or as an expression of lived integration.

The recently published German survey 'Situational Analysis Professional Football 2017'⁷² contained a small section on the CL, but with arguably limited reach (German football fans) and at least partially non-representative character.⁷³ Interestingly, some of the results seem to match the aforementioned mixed-motive structure of fan perceptions quite nicely. For instance, despite all criticism and a largely absent perception of the CL as an 'integration engine', fans noted the CL's appeal due to 'cool matches' and the 'best players performing' at this competition.⁷⁴ Such

praise is overshadowed by strong sentiments about the lack of competitive balance, rising inequalities and the resulting two- or three-tier structures in football.⁷⁵

To our knowledge there is only one broader survey that has undertaken to elucidate the perceptions of Europeans, and of football fans *throughout Europe*, on football-related matters respectively: the FREE Survey ‘Football in European Public Opinion’.⁷⁶ Among the most interesting results in general, even though no separate CL effect has been controlled for, was that in the survey of Europeans (fans and non-fans), a total of 61,2% of all surveyed stated that ‘football – to some degree or strongly – unites Europe’⁷⁷, which brought football in close range to arts and culture, the most unifying bond in the perceptions of people, and way ahead of democracy or EU institutions! In that sense, there is by now evidence for some ‘integrative’ and ‘unifying potential’ of football, at least if one is to argue that in order to work, the idea must resonate with people. Interestingly, football as a unifier reached majorities in eight out of nine country contexts surveyed (Poland being the exception). This high level of appreciation is all the more stunning since only 51,5% of respondents identified themselves as interested in football or being fans.⁷⁸

Also impressive is the number of people following football at the CL-level, even more so when compared to the number of people following football in the national context throughout Europe.⁷⁹

The data thus suggests that, across European societies, the CL is followed by half of the people, and slightly more people than national tournaments (cf. Figure 1). This is a result which runs counter to many intuitive assessments and all the more so if one takes into account that these are representative samples of whole societies, not only football-affine audiences. In any case, the CL – despite all criticisms and the negative narratives notwithstanding – seems to have true potential to draw mass attention across the continent. In this regard, the high levels of interest in the CL in Germany, Spain and the UK are rather commonsensical, whereas fairly high levels of interest in Austria, Denmark and Turkey invite more hypothesizing, aside from proxy effects (e.g. the Danes having a penchant for British football).

The fan survey conducted alongside, much to our surprise, confirmed the slight preference for following the CL over following the national championship (cf. Figure 2):⁸¹

Feeding into the narrative of the CL as an appealing competition, majorities of football fans also rate the quality of football shown in the CL higher than that played by national team: a total of 56,7% of all respondents of the online survey find CL-football more attractive (in terms of quality) than the one played by national teams, with some considerable variation between countries/respective national teams presumably (among German fans, only 43% shared that opinion, whereas 63,8% of the UK respondents agreed)⁸³.

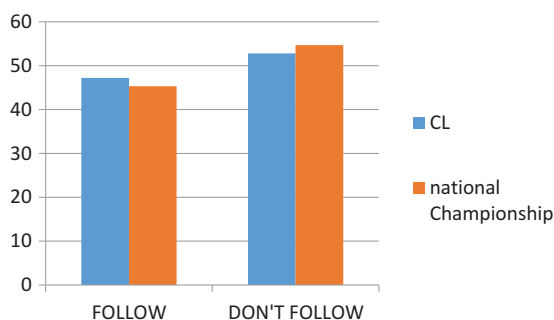


Figure 1. General public following football according to competition.⁸⁰

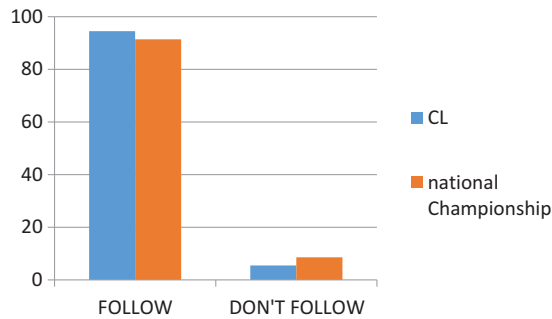


Figure 2. Fans following football according to competition.⁸²

Conclusion

Two broad narratives have been identified in this article: a unifying one that seems to contribute to the formation of a positive Champions League myth in terms of (political) integration across Europe; and a negative one that suggests that the CL is a driver for (over-)commercialization and the grave-digger of traditional football. These two broad CL narratives do not seem to completely neutralize each other. They should probably *not* be seen as having an ‘either/or’ character. Identities tend to be multiple and complex.⁸⁴ People/fans may be alienated by the commercialization triggered through the Champions League, *and at the same time* the CL may have a unifying effect by widening perspectives, fostering a common continental communicative space, or constituting an engine of lived integration. Some of the above cited outlets have indicated this: alienation, interest, fascination and attachment often tend to go together. Hence, while one narrative seems to foster the creation of the CL as a (political) myth, the other at least does not seem to prevent this process.

Our findings concerning the CL as a (positive/unifying) political myth may seem at odds with an increasing anti-European populism and Euroscepticism. However, there are many other factors that influence attitudes towards the European Union/EU membership, some of which might countervail unifying/integrative tendencies. In other words, the CL may indeed have the (unifying) propensity that we imply in the paper, which may however be overridden by processes such as (a) the various EU crises such as the Eurozone and the migration crisis, (b) the rise of illiberal democracy in Europe, or (c) increased politicisation/polarization in European politics. All of these factors have been argued to enhance Eurosceptic/anti-European attitudes.⁸⁵ The positive/unifying myth may, to some extent, nevertheless alleviate such disintegrative processes.⁸⁶

Where does this leave us in terms of future research? As for the CL as a political myth, apart from investigating further whether the two twin-narratives identified above really do not tend to be off-setting (and perhaps even are mutually reinforcing), more empirical work is necessary, investigating the extent to which the narratives actually resonate with fans’ lifeworlds. What seems to be particularly worth examining, is the identity dimension (of fans), which is largely under-explored. One promising avenue in this respect may be to differentiate between ‘communities of belonging’ (in terms of ‘self’ and ‘other’) and ‘frames of reference’ (reference points in terms of spaces of action and perception)⁸⁷. However, such identity dimensions have (also) not been investigated empirically in the context of sports/football, thus clearing the ground for substantial further research on important themes of this paper.

Notes

1. Holt, ‘Global Success in Sport’.
2. King, *The European Ritual*.

3. Niemann and Brand, 'Europeanisation from below?.'
4. Koenig, 'Champions League: Der Mythos bröckelt'.
5. Moulton, 'Political Myths and How to Study them'.
6. Flood, *Political Myth*.
7. cf. Becker, 'Begriff und Bedeutung des politischen Mythos'; Hein-Kircher, 'Politische Mythen'.
8. Moulton, 'Political Myths and How to Study them'.
9. Holt, 2009, 22.
10. Geeraert, *The EU in International Sports Governance*, 14.
11. Geeraert, *The EU in International Sports Governance*.
12. Foster, 'Can Sport be Regulated in Europe', 53.
13. Geeraert and Drieskens, 'The EU controls FIFA and UEFA', 1459.
14. García, 'UEFA and the European Union'.
15. European Commission, 'Decision Relating to a Proceeding Pursuant to Article 81 of the EC Treaty'.
16. García, 'UEFA and the European Union'.
17. European Commission, 'White Paper on Sport'.
18. Lynam, 'UEFA's Home-Grown Player Rule'.
19. García, 'UEFA and the European Union', 218.
20. King, 'The new symbols of European football'; García, 'UEFA and the European Union', 219; Geeraert, *The EU in International Sports Governance*, 70.
21. Brand and Niemann, 'Europeanisation in the Societal/Trans-National Realm', 193.
22. Sonntag, '8:45 – the European hour'.
23. Holt, 'Global Success in Sport', 51 & 54.
24. ZDF, 'Mythos Champions League', our translation.
25. King, 'Football Fandom and Post-National Identity in the New Europe'; *The European Ritual*; 'The New Symbols of European football'.
26. King, 'Football Fandom and Post-National Identity in the New Europe', 427; our emphasis.
27. King, 'Football Fandom and Post-National Identity in the New Europe', 436–7.
28. Holt, *UEFA, Governance, and the Control of Club Competition in European Football*, 29.
29. Brand and Niemann, 'ECJ Rulings or Wayne Rooney's hair'.
30. Niemann and Brand, 'Europeanisation from below?', 10.
31. Millward, *The Global Football League*.
32. MasterCard, 'Fans without Borders Study 2012'.
33. Federmaier & Selmer, 'Zwanzig Jahre Revolution'.
34. cf. Neidhardt, 'Öffentlichkeit, öffentliche Meinung, soziale Bewegungen', 7; de Beus, 'The European Union and the Public Sphere'.
35. Holt et al., 'Introduction: Sport in Europe 1950–2010', 6.
36. Economist, 'How Football Unites Europe'.
37. FREE = Football Research in an Enlarged Europe, 2012–15.
38. Sonntag, '8:45 – the European hour' our emphases'.
39. Hill, 'A European Language'.
40. Audience measurement in various European contexts is a commercial activity with considerable prices to be paid for obtaining longer-term quality data. Therefore, we had to resort to the sparse data from the public domain.
41. Niemann and Brand, 'Europeanisation from below?'.
42. Meedia, 'BR trumpft mit „Nockherberg“ auf, Leverkusen quotenschwächstes Champions-League-Team'; Quotenmeter, 'ZDF: Quotenschmaus trotz Bayern-Aus'.
43. The Sunday Times, 'Champions League Final Audience lower than US'.
44. Gibson, 'Is the Unthinkable Happening'.
45. Sweeney, 'Sky Sports' Champions League'.
46. Hill, 'A European Language'.
47. King, 'Football Fandom and Post-National Identity in the New Europe'.
48. The Economist, 'How football unites Europe'. Yet, some studies have shown the need to qualify such assumptions. e.g. Cox et al., 'Myths of Nation in the Champions League'. 2015.
49. FAZ, 'Europa braucht eine neue Solidarität gegen Mitsprache'.
50. Kopp, 'CL vernetzt Europa (Ja)'.
51. Niemann and Brand, 'Europeanisation from below?', 8–9.
52. cf. King, 'Football Fandom and Post-national Identity in the New Europe'; 'The new symbols of European football'.
53. King, 'The New Symbols of European football', 324–5.
54. Niemann and Brand, 'Europeanisation from below?'; Brand and Niemann, 'ECJ rulings or Wayne Rooney's hair'.

55. cf. García, 'The Influence of the EU on the Governance of Football', 37–8.
56. Giulianotti and Robertson, *Globalization & Football*, 80 & 130.
57. Ibid. 99.
58. Haugen and Solberg, 'The Financial Crisis in European Football', 533.
59. SBD, 'Malaga Faces Huge Game to Qualify for the Champions League'.
60. SBD, 'Lille Had A Lot On The Line In Its Champions League Qualifying Home Return Against Copenhagen'.
61. Adrian and Schächtele, *Immer Wieder, Nimmer Wieder*, 165–67.
62. Campbell, 'Champions League 'is killing football'.
63. Scherer. 'Die Gier der Reichen'.
64. Smith, 'When Champions League Cash Tilts the Playing Field'.
65. Peeters, 'Broadcasting Rights and Competitive Balance in European Soccer'.
66. Behnisch, 'Schizo', own translation.
67. Koenig, 'Champions League: Der Mythos bröckelt', own translation.
68. Biermann, 'Der Untergang', own translation.
69. Biermann, 2012.
70. Behnisch, 'Schizo', own translation.
71. See also the discussion/fans' voices reported in Giulianotti, 'Sports Spectators and the Social Consequences of Commodification'.
72. See FC PlayFair 'Situationsanalyse Profifußball 2017'.
73. While the survey was answered by more than 17.000 participants, the focus groups were based on work with only 25 subjects.
74. Ibid., 10.
75. Ibid.
76. FREE, 'Survey of Football in European Public Opinion (CATI)'; 'European Football Fans Survey (Online)'.
- 77.. FREE, *Survey of Football in European Public Opinion (CATI)*, 52.
78. Ibid., 56.
79. Ibid., 58.
80. FREE, *Survey of Football in European Public Opinion (CATI)*, 15–16.
81. FREE, *European Football Fans Survey (Online)*.
82. FREE, *European Football Fans Survey (Online)*, 24–25.
83. Ibid., 60, 143.
84. e.g. Risse, *A community of Europeans*.
85. cf. Braun and Tausendpfund, 'The Impact of the Euro Crisis on Citizens' Support for the European Union'; Krouwel and Kutiyski, 'Soft Sceptics and Hard Rejectionists'; de Wilde et al., 'Converging on Euroscepticism'.
86. Despite the particularity of London and the influence of the urban-rural divide, it is noteworthy that there is a correlation between English clubs' participating in the CL and the respective cities/towns/districts strongly voting for remain in the 2016 referendum, see Hix, 'Premier League points against Brexit'.
87. cf. Brand and Niemann 'ECJ rulings or Wayne Rooney's hair'.

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