

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360485607>

Football and European Integration(s)

Chapter · March 2022

DOI: 10.4324/9780429262081-6

CITATIONS

3

READS

58

3 authors:



Alexander Brand

Hochschule Rhein-Waal

73 PUBLICATIONS 262 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



Arne Niemann

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

141 PUBLICATIONS 2,139 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



Regina Weber

German Centre for Rail Traffic Research

35 PUBLICATIONS 91 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



The identity effect of Europeanised lifeworlds: Becoming European through football? [View project](#)



EU as International Mediator [View project](#)

Football and European integration(s)

Arne Niemann, Regina Weber and Alexander Brand

What research on European integration has [often] neglected or underestimated, however, are the often unintended social and cultural practices that have contributed and are contributing to give the European project the dimension of a cultural *community* project.

(Pyta, 2015: 2; our emphasis)

Introduction

In this chapter, the focus is on “football governance” and “football fandom” as two domains, which substantially broaden and enhance our understanding of European integration dynamics. First, “football” – in contrast to the fields of action conventionally studied – offers a seemingly non-political arena, which has been dramatically transformed in the last 25 years *through* European integration. Second, a recognisable Europeanisation of structures, governance and format of the game has arguably also triggered reactions among those who follow football, that is, football fans, spectators and those simply interested in the sport. It is in that sense that a renewed focus on mundane and leisure-time activities, such as sport fandom, is warranted in order to grasp the depth of European integration beyond narrow political and institutional (European Union [EU]-focused) concerns.

Accordingly, this chapter starts with a brief overview of the structural Europeanisation in the field of football caused by both top-down decisions of European institutions and bottom-up initiatives of football clubs, officials and national associations. Such European integration has changed the game and the experience of football for supporters and followers of matches and clubs across the continent. Pan-European competitions and teams comprising players from all over the continent and beyond have become more of a daily routine to many fans across Europe, whether they appreciate this or not. It is in this sense, that a general normalisation effect can be assumed, that is, that “Europe” becomes more normal in the eyes of those who follow football.

In a second step, we will hence look into research that has been carried out on identity formation among football supporters as an attempt to conceptually frame how the structural changes mentioned might shape patterns of identifications among football fans. Our emphasis

will be on such identifications, which include or refer to “Europe” in a broader understanding, as well as those geared to the European integration project in a narrower sense. These two aspects are addressed through the two notions of “subjective Europeanisation” (Weber et al., 2020) and “banal Europeanism” (Weber, 2021; also cf. Cram, 2001).

Finally, our chapter concludes by highlighting key empirical insights from two recent, large-scale comparative research projects on the Europeanisation of football (FREE and EUFOOT, respectively). These have, among other things, set out to reveal how football fans react to the integration dynamics in terms of adjusted self-understandings and identifications. As the results of both projects indicate, there are strong dynamics of “becoming European” by the means of football. However, the discernible effects are neither straightforward nor uniform. We conclude that football has the potential power to buttress European integration, but one crucial element in this is that top-level European competitions remain at least potentially accessible for a multitude of those who follow the game, either as interested spectators or as emotionally invested supporters.

The role of football in European integration: Europeanisation and beyond

Quite a broad range of approaches have been used to conceptualise the role of football with regard to the European integration process.¹ Parrish (2003) employed the *advocacy coalition framework* in order to capture the development of an EU policy on sport and particularly football. As he suggested, two actor coalitions had emerged throughout the 1990s, which tried to steer policy in a direction consistent with their respective belief systems. While the Single Market advocacy coalition stressed the economic aspects of sport/football and thus advocated a regulatory approach, the Socio-cultural coalition emphasised the social, cultural and educational roles of sport, which therefore differs from normal economic sectors and thus deserves (at least in part) to be exempted from EU law. Hence, both a “football business coalition” (e.g. big clubs and media representatives) as well as a “sporting autonomy coalition” (most notably sport governing bodies such as the Union of European Football Associations, UEFA) increasingly petitioned EU institutions to act in their interest or to refrain from meddling in what they regarded their sovereign domains (Parrish, 2011). The equilibrium resulting from strategic interactions between these rivalling advocacy coalitions hence can be regarded as a main shaper of any attempt of the EU to enact regulation toward sport and football.

Insights from *principal-agent (PA) analysis* have been used to show that the EU may restrain the autonomy of football’s main governing bodies, FIFA (the International Federation of Football Associations) and UEFA, significantly (Geeraert and Drieskens, 2015; Geeraert, 2016). While football stakeholders (i.e. national football federations, fans, players and players’ agents) and public authorities as principals lack control options over FIFA and UEFA (the agents), they may rely on the European Court of Justice (ECJ) and the Commission (the supervisors) to exercise control on their behalf. These “supervisors” are able to control the sporting associations via three instruments: monitoring, sanctioning and steering, which in turn might be applied through two control routes: the EU law route and the EU sports policy route. The agents, FIFA and UEFA, in contrast may seek to limit the EU’s control through various strategies. Among them are directly engaging with the Commission, manipulating the preferences of football principals (in an effort to prevent their recourse to the ECJ and the Commission) and influencing the preferences of the member governments and the European Parliament (in an effort to diminish the Commission’s incentive to control) (Geeraert and Drieskens, 2015; Geeraert, 2016).

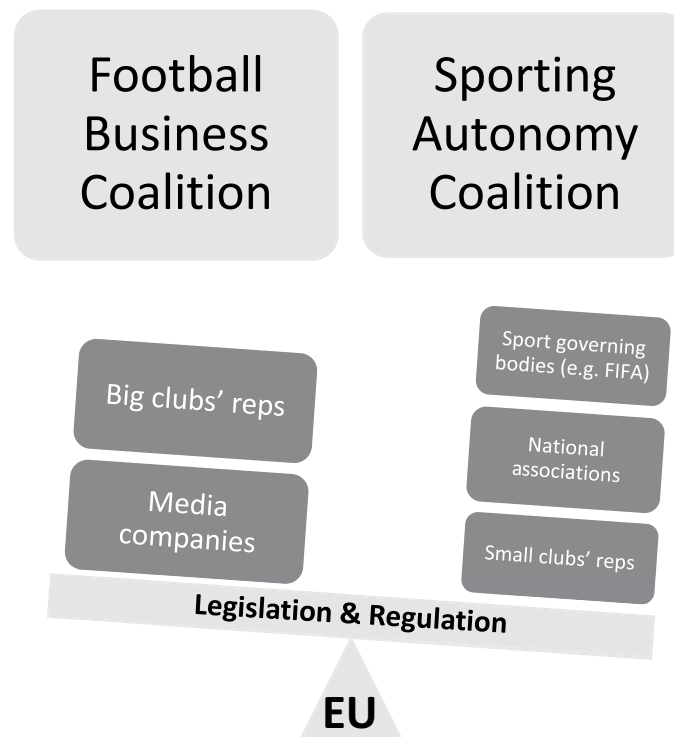


Figure 3.1 Actor coalitions in the making of EU policy on football

In addition, Geeraert and Drieskens (2017) have dealt with the question of what sort of power the EU constitutes in terms of global sport. Focusing their analysis on the case of football, they advocate an integrated approach which combines norm-setting and market power dynamics into a concept of “Normative Market Europe” (Geeraert and Drieskens, 2017: 79). Hence, according to their account, normative and market dynamics alternate and intertwine to result in a significant shaping power on behalf of the EU. Hence, EU practice reflects a *normative intent* (i.e. norms such as free movement and competition law principles are at the centre of its relations with FIFA and UEFA), whereas *normative processes* are visible through a certain degree of reflexivity in EU regulatory practice. For example, after engagement with UEFA and FIFA, the Commission diverged from purely technocratic and legalistic positions on issues of the restructuring of the transfer system (García, 2007: 210–212; Parrish, 2003). In terms of *normative impact*, the EU social dialogue generated an agreement between UEFA and football stakeholders on the promotion of minimum requirements for player contracts (Geeraert and Drieskens, 2017: 86). On the other hand, important aspects of a “Market Power Europe” are noticeable as well. First, as the EU’s internal market covers a large part of the international market for the transfers of professional football players, FIFA has been incentivised to align its rules to EU standards. Second, due to the EU’s high regulatory capacity, it can exercise substantial market power (also cf. García and Meier, 2017). FIFA and UEFA thus fear that non-compliance with EU measures will have adverse implications in the Commission’s application of EU law,

including its respect for UEFA's and FIFA's autonomy to regulate international football (Geeraert and Drieskens, 2017: 87–88).

By far the most widely used conceptual lens in linking football to matters of European integration, however, is that of *Europeanisation*. Europeanisation can be broadly defined as the process of change in the domestic arena driven by change at the European level of governance (Schmidt, 2002). Accordingly, the very governance structures of football have undergone a significant degree of Europeanisation in the past quarter century. One can broadly distinguish two different dynamics of Europeanisation in the realm of football (Niemann et al., 2011). The first is top-down pressure from the European level, that is, rulings by the European Court of Justice or investigations and decisions by the European Commission, processes that are commonly referred to as downloading. These pressures are matched by various attempts to influence such measures on the part of domestic actors (such as national governments, national football associations and select football clubs), commonly defined as bottom-up Europeanisation or uploading (Börzel, 2002). These reciprocal processes must be distinguished from a second strand of Europeanisation dynamics, fed by transnational processes, such as the formation of cross-border lobby networks (e.g. the former G-14, now the European Club Association)² or the creation of a *de facto* pan-European football league, the Champions League. We call this dynamic crossloading (Brand and Niemann, 2007; also cf. Howell, 2004).

Works that have analysed the Europeanisation of football have primarily focused on four aspects that influenced the game across the continent since the mid-1990s: (1) the regulation of player markets after the Bosman ruling by the ECJ, (2) the Europeanisation of broadcasting rights, (3) increasing coordination of clubs on the European level and (4) the growing prominence of the Champions League (Brand et al., 2010).

Of these aspects, the Bosman ruling and the subsequent lifting of caps on overseas players have exercised the most visible effect on the game in Europe. Research findings suggest that the ruling was implemented without much resistance domestically, sometimes even beyond what was strictly required, as in Germany and Austria (Brand et al., 2013). Although the ruling sparked numerous domestic responses, most of these merely tried to mitigate its adverse repercussions. Transfer regimes were already considerably liberalised in countries like France,

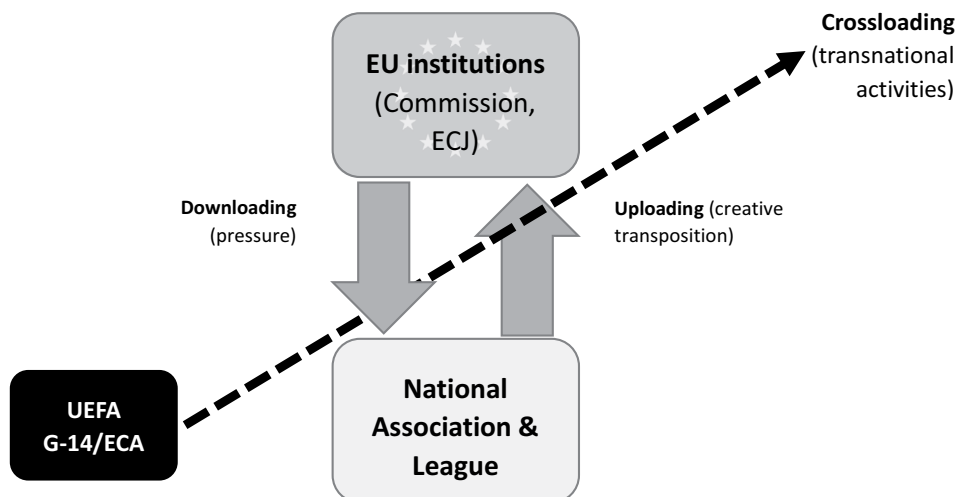


Figure 3.2 Structural Europeanisation dynamics and dimensions in football

Spain and England (Ranc and Sonntag, 2011; García et al., 2011; Grant, 2011). However, the Europeanisation pressures emanating from the Bosman ruling very substantially impacted new or non-EU Member States. Poland changed its nationality regime immediately upon accession in 2004, having already adapted its transfer regime in 2001 – a transformation which was amplified through membership in UEFA and FIFA (Kedzior and Szcapanik, 2011). Non-EU member Switzerland implemented the nationality aspect of the Bosman ruling when the bilateral agreement between the EU and Switzerland on the free movement of persons came into effect in 2004, while the transfer regime had been gradually changed already from 1996, three years before the bilateral agreement was signed (Lehmkuhl and Siegrist, 2011).

Regarding broadcasting rights, the European Commission's action mainly aimed at two domestic contexts and leagues, the German Bundesliga and the English Premier League (Niemann and Brand, 2008; Grant, 2011). However, the Commission's involvement came at a time when it was predisposed to tone down its initially proactive and interventionist stance, which had been purely based on EU competition policy considerations. In addition, lobbying efforts of select clubs and associations developed and resulted in effective coordination behind the scenes; such activity finally made the Commission backtrack on its prior ambition to decentralise this domain. Not least, the Commission's white paper on sport (COM 2007) – which, to some degree, enshrined peculiar exemptions of football *as a sport* from thorough competition regulation – was actively promoted by lobbying and coalition-building in the wake of broadcasting debates. These examples demonstrate that EU-level pressure may at times bring about only partial adjustment in football governance, while core policies remain intact despite their tension with EU legislation (Niemann and Brand, 2008: 100–101).

In parallel, the early 1990s saw the inception of a more intense transnational coordination between individual football clubs throughout Europe both as a consequence of emerging EU-level pressures as well as in an effort of pre-empting them. As international football governing bodies such as UEFA had been built as umbrella organisations of national football associations, individual clubs remained sidelined for much of the 20th century. As a counterweight, several “top clubs” from certain European countries united in what became known as the G14, thereby seeking to influence UEFA (and FIFA) by leveraging their individual power positions as “best-selling” clubs in European football (Mittag, 2018). While the G14 eventually dissolved in 2008, transnational club coordination remains intact and has now taken the more encompassing shape of the European Club Association (ECA). Despite featuring almost 200 ordinary and associated members to date, the ECA effectively still acts in the particular interests of Europe's top clubs (Keller, 2018).

Finally, the evolution of the former European Club competitions – most notably the European Champions Cup – into a *de facto* European league system in the form of the UEFA Champions League is perhaps one of the most tangible signs of a Europeanisation in football. Over time, the relatively consistent pattern of recurrent participation of largely the same “big clubs” throughout Europe (cf. Pawlowski et al., 2010) can be regarded as nearly equivalent to a pan-European “league mode” (Niemann and Brand, 2020). Against this background, the Champions League has been dubbed an “engine that supposedly makes Europe hang together more closely” but also a “political myth” that may contribute to more Europeanised mindsets and the European idea in general (Niemann and Brand, 2020: 329).

It is in this spirit that the development of such a *de facto* European League and the increasingly Europeanised players markets throughout the continent, which also bring fans and spectators into frequent contact with Europe domestically, may thus facilitate more “affective attachments” with a “European frame” (Sandvoss, 2012: 94).

Conceptualising the Europeanisation of football fan identities

Two ways of how to conceptualise and capture the essence of a Europeanisation of fan identities *through* following football as an increasingly Europeanised domain have been suggested recently: “subjective Europeanisation” (Weber et al., 2020) and “banal Europeanism” (Weber, 2021). Both ideas undoubtedly build on earlier attempts at capturing changes of the game in their capacity to impact on perceptions of and self-identifications among its followers (e.g. King, 2000, 2003, 2004; Millward, 2006, 2009; Levermore and Millward, 2007). However, both concepts briefly sketched out in the following aim at significantly extending the debate beyond spotting instances of an emerging European consciousness (e.g. Millward, 2009: 265) or more cosmopolitan leanings (e.g. King, 2000: 433) among the previously preferred objects of study, that is, British football fans.

Moreover, both “subjective Europeanisation” and “banal Europeanism” take some inspiration in the recently emerged literatures on *social transnationalism* (Mau, 2010) and transboundary forms of activity, mobility and their effects on perceptions and articulations of people across Europe (Delhey, 2005; Kuhn, 2015). More specifically, they refer to the already theorised link between increased activity and attention across European boundaries and the presumed resulting patterns of attitudinal and/or identity change. Football as a field for further study, and concepts geared towards a significant group of people populating this field, that is, fans, seem to be particularly promising in this regard due to their capacity to capture authentic or even mundane “everyday life” activities (Hanquinet and Savage, 2013).

*Subjective Europeanisation*³

Have perceptions and mindsets of football fans throughout Europe become Europeanised alongside the more European outlook of the game brought about by the structural changes described previously? In order to shed more light on this hypothetical link, one needs to tackle rather subliminal “identity work”, which is prior to fully developed identity formation. It is also agnostic to a large extent regarding any *political* implications in the stricter sense, including openly articulated understandings and appreciations of “European political integration” or even EU-level institutions.

However, such piecemeal and unconscious shifts in perceptions and identifications can be traced through the concept of “subjective Europeanisation”. This notion is creatively adapted from Robertson’s term “subjective globalisation” (1992: 9) and shares Robertson’s criticism of the neglect of ideational aspects of supposedly objective large-scale social change such as “objective globalisation” (2009: 121). A quite similar dichotomy seems to be at play in view of the objective transformation of structures in the field of football alluded to previously and a likely gradual change of perspective among those interested in following the game.

In line with Steger and James (2011), who have highlighted the ultimately interpretative quality of human beings’ renderings of change at the macro level (such as globalisation), “subjective Europeanisation” also investigates subjective “imaginaries” and “modes of understanding” of a person’s surrounding lifeworld, here how fans position themselves vis-à-vis the significant domain, which they are heavily invested in for a large portion of their leisure (and life) time. In all this, “subjective Europeanisation” aims at capturing the effects of experience and exposure (to changing football) more subtly than through any search for articulations that speak the language of “political integration” or “pan-Europeanism” (as a *political* project).

“Subjective Europeanisation” hence rests on two main pillars: narrations of and references to “communities of belonging” (COBs) and articulations of respective and appropriate “frames

of reference” (FORs). Whereas COBs aim to capture group-based forms of identification and delineation from others, FORs highlight spatial or scalar aspects relevant to someone’s concept of self. Regarding football, a COB draws our attention to the (un-)importance of national origin in judging players and other actors on the pitch and the formation of communities of like-minded fans, such as through friendships or thematic networks. It also comprises how fans include their memories of football events in narratives, which might support both community building as well as the drawing of boundaries vis-à-vis other fan communities.

FORs, in contrast, include the level of attention (Mutz, 2015) and attractiveness assigned to different forms of competition (national vs. European level), the reasons for such orientation and the eventual normalisation of “going Europe” (Millward, 2006), that is, travelling on the occasion of football matches and experiencing Europe all along that way. While the average self-concept of a football fan hence might not be structured around notions of being a “staunch EU citizen”, she or he might well be subjectively Europeanised to quite some extent. This can be seen as a result of following other European leagues frequently, locating the own club main rival outside the domestic context and being tacitly attached to the agenda of “Football Supporters Europe” while nevertheless wishing that their beloved club would qualify for the Champions League. The latter might be regarded as a must because this is seen as a competition of the *best*, and occasionally fandom might even include the planning of a trip through Europe alongside an away game.

Banal Europeanism

The concept of “banal Europeanism” draws upon Billig’s “Banal Nationalism” (1995), which analyses how national identity and the feeling of belonging to a certain nation are constructed and corroborated through everyday practice and experience. Billig distinguished between “hot nationalism”, which is explicit and conscious, and “banal nationalism”, referring to rather sub-conscious and implicit forms of identification with a nation (1995: 43–46). Central to Billig’s argument is that nationalism (especially in Western societies) is so ubiquitous and normal that it is not recognised anymore *as nationalism*, all while it is reiterated through everyday activities, symbols and cultural practices. Building on this, Cram invented the term “banal Europeanism” as a helpful concept to study how people imagine the EU and slightly shift their focus towards the European level, triggered by a “normalisation” of the Union in the European citizens’ everyday lives (2001).

Football, again, seems to provide a fertile ground to study such “banal” identifications with Europe in a lifeworld context. The Europeanisation of structures in football (as described previously) provides fans with several “direct links” to or banal experiences of Europe throughout a football season: pan-European competitions, broadcast around the continent, and transnational transfers of players and managers, which create and construct a more casual exposure to Europe and thus arguably normalise it through a series of banal experiences.

The evolution of a *de facto* pan-European elite league, the Champions League (CL), with a recurrent roster of participants and only a few occasional “guests” surviving the first rounds of the competition is certainly the most well known and approachable sign of Europeanisation in football. Matches, especially semi-finals and the final, create a European “fireplace” where fans meet across the continent watching the same match at the same time on TV. These matches are covered through broadcasting and media, even in those countries where clubs have low chances of participation (Niemann and Brand, 2020). Still largely centralised broadcasting rights of European club competitions keep the level of exposure to all sorts of European-level matches high (not only the ones involving the own preferred club), even though the advent of

pay TV has had a decelerating effect in some markets (Bohas, 2021: in this volume). On the other hand, online streaming has created more options and potential points of contact for wider cross-country audiences (Izquierdo and Troncoso Ferrer, 2014; Boyle, 2015; Vlassis, 2021: in this book). Watching football matches in other European top leagues alongside following the CL has hence become more widespread and normal.

The CL competition itself provides ample chances for banal experiences of Europe. First, as one's own club is playing a side from another European country more often than once in a decade, such frequent encounters might foster attention to and more thorough knowledge of once-exotic foreign places. Second, media coverage before and after the matches is certain to provide ample information about all possible rivals or other interesting teams across the continent, including top players and potential future signings. Third, the whole ceremony around matches, including an anthem and a logo and the star ball adapting the symbolism of the EU flag (King, 2004), is reminiscent of symbolic formations of "nationhood" (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008), which might impact spectators' perceptions over time. In addition, the transfer market acceleration, following the ECJ's Bosman ruling, not only changed how current squads of top-level football teams look (Velema, 2018; Velema et al., 2020); as most teams are now dominated by non-domestic players (many of them from other European countries), the patterns of information gathering among supporters and those interested in football more generally have changed.

The availability of information on player statistics through websites, such as *transfermarkt*, in several languages and domains (.de, .fr, .pt and .co.uk, amongst others) makes it easy for fans to acquire knowledge about the relevant actors in football from across the continent in their own language within minutes. As it becomes the norm that clubs contract non-domestic players, fans are regularly exposed to players and other actors, such as managers, who address the audience in other languages than the fans' native language both in press conferences and through social media. This normalises cross-national experiences of fans. As most actors come from European countries, it shifts in-group boundaries potentially towards Europe.

As these examples indicate, the concept of "banal Europeanism" might be fruitfully applied to the study of football across Europe in order to make visible, inasmuch football fans have become unwittingly more normalised to, and hence also integrated into, a European frame of action. However, one caveat is in order here: as particularly the Champions League has become less accessible for teams from outside the so-called big-5 leagues (England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain) (cf. Bullough, 2018), a new chasm might be in the making. Banal Europeanism in football could attain the flavour of exclusivist "banal West Europeanism", as recent attempts to create a breakaway Super League, and their controversial reception, have also indicated.

Does football shape more European(ised) identifications among fans? First empirical evidence

Studies on eventually shifting patterns of football fans' identities – in particular whether a European or more generally cosmopolitan opening of supporters' perceptions and mindsets had occurred – often departed from investigations into clubs and fan communities in the English Premier League (cf. King, 2003; Levermore and Millward, 2007). This is not surprising, as England's top division can be regarded the first "global league" (Millward, 2011). In a similar vein, the nexus between internationalised player markets and squads and its impact on fan identifications has been subject to studies at various hubs of European football (Ranc, 2012). Equally important, the emerging importance of so-called "foreign fandom" – closely following a team outside one's country of residence – has received a good deal of attention in the last two decades (Nash, 2000; Kerr and Emery, 2011; Baker, 2017).

Most of these studies, however, focused on specific clubs and adjacent communities of supporters or only vaguely hinted at forms of “subjective Europeanisation” and “banal Europeanism”. Questions of any integrating force of football with regard to Europe (or even EU politics) rather remained at the margins of such inquiries for quite some time. Only in the last decade have two large-scale, cross-country/comparative research projects: Football Research in an Enlarged Europe (FREE, running from 2012 to 2015, funded through the EU) and The Identity Effect of Europeanised Lifeworlds: Becoming European through Football? (EUFOOT, 2018–21, funded through the German Research Foundation) sought to elucidate these effects more systematically.

FREE: what place for football in an enlarged Europe?

The project Football Research in an Enlarged Europe⁴ arguably set a new standard for investigation of the power of football in impacting societies and eventually contributing to the further integration of Europe. It was remarkable for several reasons. First, it successfully established football as a legitimate and fruitful domain of wider social and political science inquiry, both at the European (not only UK) level and also vis-à-vis the EU Commission, which funded the project under the 7th Framework Programme. Initially, the Commission’s call to explore day-to-day lives and experiences across Europe in their capacity to work as forces of integration had mentioned neither sport nor football (FREE, 2015: 5). Second, FREE managed to enlist the collaboration of research teams from nine different European (and not exclusively EU-European) countries with an impressive array of academic disciplines involved, history, sociology, anthropology, political science and gender studies among them. And third, in its multiple research streams, it did produce many insights into the oftentimes close connections between European integration and everyday, seemingly non-political activities surrounding football and its organisation as well as its consumption.

Regarding the history of European football, FREE could build upon existing and expanding work on the parallel trajectories of European integration as a political project and the formation of a European space of football through media, associations and club officials (cf. Young et al., 2011; Vonnard et al., 2016; Vonnard, 2020a). As Vonnard (2020b: 40) recently concluded, though, one should not mistake the early activism of such bottom-up actors from the field of football as having been guided by an idea of “political integration” through the back door, even though the Cold War and the “Europe of the Six” did provide a fertile context (FREE, 2015: 5). The effect of such fostered linkages among actors on the football scene, however, did amplify impulses for closer interaction and established more frequent points of contact across the continent. In this spirit, FREE was able to highlight the early emergence and lasting qualities of a collective football memory in Europe (see the contributions to Pyta and Havemann, 2015): a series of collectively remembered events and sites, which serves as a reference point beyond debates about football. As the two large-scale surveys conducted in the framework of FREE pointed out, such an instalment of a sense of common memory and shared perceptions of past European-level (football) events was much more pronounced in the attentive (fan) publics than among the wider societies included in the poll (FREE, 2014a: 11–16; FREE, 2014b: 110–111).

Not only did football hence create specific sites of memory among its followers, it also contributed to the formation of a European public sphere. In this context, FREE was able to identify the role of pan-European broadcasting and television of football events throughout the continent (FREE, 2015: 15). Inasmuch as larger segments of national audiences across the continent gathered to watch the same top-level matches – with or without their respective national champions being involved – a community of spectators formed and shared experiences

collectively. A similar effect – at least in terms of simultaneity and shared interest – could be observed as long as the Champions League imposed 8:45 pm CET as the “prime time” of European football (Sonntag, 2013) on audiences from Madeira to Zagreb.

From an ethnographic point of view, FREE was able to turn football into a fertile object of study regarding the insertion of aspects of European integration in everyday practices, narratives and rituals of belonging, self-staging, othering and stereotyping (FREE, 2015: 7). Media narratives alongside football’s mega events, such as the EURO 2012, lay bare the reproduction of otherness of the periphery of the European Union, and even vis-à-vis newly acceded member countries in Central and Eastern Europe, as a deeply entrenched cultural practice (Schwell, 2015). In turn, European (political) integration might also have moderating and normalising effects on nationalist fervour, particularly in the field of football, which otherwise would be regarded as a hotbed of rivalry and exclusivist sentiment. A case in point here is the EU-induced normalisation between Croatia and Serbia with expectations of good neighbourly relations in the context of football matches between both countries’ protagonists (Dordevic and Zikic, 2016).

Finally, as FREE elaborated on in its ethnographical stream, the integration of migrants into Europe *through* football is a lived, if often ambivalent and complex, reality. Migrants and second-generation descendants of migrants often form part of diaspora football supporter communities which establish linkages between the new places of residence and ancient “homelands”. While nostalgia might be involved, there is also strategic kinship and a constant hybridisation of identities in play, which allow people to negotiate their place between expected loyalty to a new home and the locations from where they migrated (FREE, 2015: 21). As Szogs (2017: 82–94) illustrates powerfully at the occasion of followers of Turkish clubs who live in Vienna, this amounts to a playful testing of multiple belongings and an exploration of their newfound Europeanness. It is in this sense that football acts as an arena of integration, far beyond administrative practices, such as that of citizenship and residence permits.

All in all, FREE was able to conclude that football has tangible and visible effects on European identifications among its followers. It is an issue that brings Europeans together, *in their capacity as football fans*, and it creates a common ground for discussion (FREE, 2015: 28). Europeans consider football a unifying force: fans ranked it first among several drivers of unification (76.2%), and even among the wider societies surveyed, it was considered of integrative nature by a whopping 61.3%, second only to “arts and culture”; in comparison, democracy, EU institutions and the like received much lower levels of appreciation (FREE, 2014a: 12–15, 2014b: 11–12). Most notably, football creates occasions for exchange across borders, as a stunning 63.6% of all respondents among football fans indicated that they had discussed football with someone from another European country over the course of the previous year (FREE, 2015: 29). This is mirrored by the fact that organised transnational supporters networks such as Football Supporters Europe and Supporters Direct Europe (cf. Zheng and García, 2017) are the most trusted stakeholders in the eyes of many football fans across the continent (García and Llopis-Goig, 2020a). Interestingly, the EU – however vaguely conceived – is also credited with slightly more trust regarding the “organisation of football” than UEFA and significantly so in contrast to FIFA or the national associations (García and Llopis-Goig, 2020b).

EUFOOT: zooming in on shifting identities among football fans

The project *The Identity Effect of Europeanised Lifeworlds: Becoming European through Football*²⁵ explored the importance of football fandom as a set of everyday activities and practices for the formation of a European identity. Its comparative design included eight select clubs

and adjacent fan scenes in four countries (Austria, France, Germany and the UK/England). The cases had been purposefully sampled to cover three nested contexts of football spectatorship: the country, the league and the club level. On the country level, the attitude towards Europe and the European Union in the respective embedding public as a potentially shaping force led to the selection of two more Eurosceptic and two more Eurofriendly cases. The chosen football leagues differed regarding the internationalisation/Europeanisation of the player markets, whereas two clubs from different brackets of national competition in each country were selected. The latter was to secure variation in how normal or exotic participation in European club competition was deemed from a fan's point of view (Brand et al., 2022).

Results from the project's multi-layered research efforts – qualitative discourse analysis of fan articulations in online message boards, a quantitative survey of approximately 3000 fans in the four selected leagues/countries and close to 80 in-depth interviews with purposively sampled fans from all fan scenes – confirmed the relevance of the football-related exposure and experiences to fans' identifications with Europe. Both the shape of the player market and a club's level of participation in European competitions partly explain how intensely fans associate themselves with or dissociate themselves from a European space of action and attention. In contrast, the wider public opinion, in particular in its more openly political aspects, was less powerful in explaining differences across fan communities throughout Europe.

However, more individual-level factors also matter. Quite diverging patterns of identification with Europe as the natural football habitat (normalisation of Europeanised players' roosters, expectation of or longing after frequent participation in the Champions League, etc.) and "European football" being rationalised as hyper-commercialised, partly inaccessible event alien to the "true spirit of the game" do co-exist in the same fan communities. It is in this sense that the structural Europeanisation of football may not only contribute to fans "becoming European" but might also foster divides between fans and their clubs (cf. Weber et al., 2020).

As EUFOOT's results indicate, identity formation among football fans is a spatial process in which both the Europeanisation of football and the locality of the clubs play a huge role. In comparison, the national level seemed to move more to the background. With but a few exceptions, even fans of national champions with frequent appearance at the European top level do define their main rivals, at least to some extent, as locally or regionally grounded. In a similar vein, interest in signing the best players from all over Europe often goes hand in hand with the appreciation of local talent. However, the analysis of online message board discussions of fans revealed that the degree of exposure to Europe via football influences *how* fans attribute meaning to the European level of football (Weber et al., 2021). Even in the case of a club unlikely to participate in European competitions – arguably a fairly widespread condition for supporters throughout Europe – the very context of a heavily internationalised/Europeanised player market in the home league such as in the English Premier League seems to contribute to a normalisation of Europe among fans. Increasingly Europeanised squads have mildly triggered more inclusive perceptions of the in-group, with the home league not primarily regarded as a place over-populated by some "suspicious others" (e.g. foreign players who may crowd out home talent).

In comparison, clubs in the French and Austrian leagues with comparatively less Europeanised player markets have bred more and more openly articulated appreciation for (national and) local talent among fans. The construction of in-groups and out-groups with regard to a European vs. a national belonging hence seems to be strongly influenced by the amount of exposure to a Europeanised player market. Especially in the Austrian league, where special regulations enforce the contracting of Austrian players, local belonging and a decisively local identity of the clubs are of utmost importance to the fans (Weber, 2020; Weber et al., 2021).

The references to European competitions among fans are also shaped by the exposure and potential opportunities to participate in such games with their own club. The fans from the two investigated Austrian clubs⁶ establish a narrative of European competitions as a distant place that is difficult, if not impossible, to reach. Whether such a narrative yields positive or negative attitudes towards the European level, however, varies across the fan communities: for some, such competitions, including the accompanying travel to European destinations and exposure to other clubs and countries, are a pipe dream. Others emphasise the negative aspect of a European closed shop and instead establish local and regional references for their fandom (Brand et al., 2021).

In an interesting twist, fans and followers of big league-big city clubs throughout Europe, with a huge media cross-national media presence and routine participation in top-level competition, may have indeed shifted their attention and also their rivalries somewhat to the European level. This might be due to the perceived lack of true domestic competitors (such as in the case of Germany's Bayern Munich). Alternatively, it might also be the case that a once locally and regionally anchored rivalry has nowadays been transposed to the European level. Arguably, this seems to be true for many Manchester United supporters, who seek to challenge their traditional counterparts of ManCity and Liverpool but with reference to superseding them *at the European level*, not “only” nationally (Weber et al., 2020). One of the most interesting insights in this regard is that the idea of representing one's home nation in Europe seems to have become less important in this than being the best in a meritocratic selection process.

Conclusion

Where does this all leave us? Football is certain to be not only interesting from a wider sociological or sport studies perspective or as an industry, which is a lucrative business and marketing opportunity. It is a field which draws in masses of people from all segments of society, engages them in the context of leisure time (much time, money and emotions are being invested), and arguably contributes to shaping their worldviews and patterns of identifications. It does so largely unconsciously, yet with powerful and pervasive force. As football throughout Europe has integrated to a considerable extent over the last two and a half decades (structural Europeanisation), fans, supporters and followers have responded to this, though not in uniform fashion. Exposure and access to Europe via frequent competition of one's own team has begat some normalisation of Europe as the “natural” frame of reference among fans. Depending on how thoroughly a squad of a club one is following, or the domestic player market in general, has been Europeanised, the importance of nationality might vary. This also paves the way for more inclusive conceptions of the in-group and hence potentially also appreciation for more Europeanised communities of belonging. This is supported by the insight that football has the potential to inspire continent-wide collective memories and networks of cross-boundary collective action. It is in this sense that empirical results demonstrate that there have been effects of normalisation of “Europe” in the minds of those people who follow football and that this happened because they are fans.

Two caveats, however, are in order. First, how much of such football-related attention towards the European level (and even appreciation of Europe, not to speak of EU institution and politics) really spills over into more conscious political attitudes still needs to be ascertained. In the case of many English football fans, for instance, it is no contradiction to act as a fan in a “European frame of reference”, with a fairly Europeanised notion of in- and out-groups, and nevertheless to blame the EU for all sorts of ills. In a similar vein, Austrian fans remote from

European competition and focused on “regional” identity anchors and talent playing for their club may at times define their home region in a transboundary fashion, including portions of Italy or the Balkans, which seems to defy crude nationalism. Second, one crucial aspect for the “European football experience” (to break up formerly national thinking boxes) is that it remains accessible and not completely detached from the everyday experiences of regular Europeans. The more ideas of yet another Champions League reform favouring the already richer clubs from the big-5 leagues (or the formation of a breakaway Super League) take hold, the more European football risks alienating fans in significant numbers. In a similar vein, the more European football – from other leagues or top-level club competition – vanishes from free TV or other publicly accessible and affordable media and online streams, the less of a *shared* and appealing mass experience it will become over time.

Notes

- 1 The first three paragraphs of this section draw on Brand et al. (2021).
- 2 The G-14 included representatives of initially 14, and later up to 19, top-level European clubs from the big-5 leagues (Spain, Italy, England, France, Germany), plus the Netherlands and Portugal. It existed from 1998 to 2008, a decade in which it exerted considerable pressure on UEFA to reform its competitions. In 2008, it was disbanded, as the European Club Association (ECA) was formed. The latter has been significantly more inclusive, with more than 200 clubs being represented in it, although the clubs from the big-5 leagues were able to secure a formative impact on decision-making.
- 3 This section builds on Weber et al., 2020: 299–302.
- 4 <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/290805/reporting> [as of 03–09–2021].
- 5 <https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/386268084> [as of 03–09–2021].
- 6 We included Sturm Graz (as national champion) and Wacker Innsbruck (as, then, relegation battler) to secure variance in terms of fan perceptions. We decided not to include any club from Vienna in order to control for “metropolis effects”. In a similar vein, we also de-selected Red Bull Salzburg due to its specific investor-driven governance model, which arguably also has a formative impact on the fans it can attract.

Bibliography

- Baker, T. A. (2017). ‘It was precious to me from the beginning’: Material objects, long-distance fandom and home. *Soccer & Society* 17(1): 1–16.
- Billig, M. (1995). *Banal nationalism*. London: Sage.
- Börzel, T. A. (2002). Member state responses to Europeanization. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40: 193–214.
- Boyle, R. (2015). Battle for control? Copyright, football and European media rights. *Media, Culture & Society* 37(3): 359–375.
- Brand, A. & Niemann, A. (2007). Europeanisation in the societal/trans-national realm: What European integration studies can get out of analysing football. *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 3(3): 182–201.
- Brand, A., Niemann, A. & Spitaler, G. (2010). The Europeanization of Austrian football: History, adaptation and transnational dynamics. *Soccer & Society* 11(6): 761–774.
- Brand, A., Niemann, A. & Spitaler, G. (2013). The two-track Europeanisation of football: EU-level pressures, transnational dynamics and their repercussions within different national contexts. *International Journal of Sports Policy and Politics* 5(1): 95–112.
- Brand, A., Niemann, A. & Weber, R. (2021). Pipe dream or closed shop? Experiencing the champions league from the side lines. Submitted for inclusion in a special issue of *Soccer & Society*, forthcoming.
- Brand, A., Weber, R. & Niemann, A. (2022). Football and European identities: Which conditions shape whether football fans attain a more Europeanised mind-set? “Europeanisation of identities through everyday practices”. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Special Issue, forthcoming.

- Bullough, S. (2018). UEFA champions league revenues, performance and participation 2003–2004 to 2016–2017. *Managing Sport and Leisure* 23(1–2): 139–156.
- Commission of the European Communities (COM) (2007). White paper on sport, COM (2007) 391 final, COM: Brussels.
- Cram, L. (2001). Imagining the Union: A case of banal Europeanism? In *Interlocking dimensions of European integration*, ed. H. Wallace, 233–236. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Delhey, J. (2005). Das Abenteuer der Europäisierung. *Soziologie* 34(1): 7–27.
- Dordevic, I. & Zikic, B. (2016). Normalising political relations through football: The case of Croatia and Serbia (1990–2013). In *New ethnographies of football in Europe. People, passion, politics*, eds. A. Schwell et al., 39–54. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Fox, J.E. & Miller-Idriss, C. (2008). Everyday nationhood. *Ethnicities* 8(4): 536–563.
- FREE (Football Research in an Enlarged Europe) (2014a). *Survey of football in European public opinion (CATI)*. Mimeo.
- FREE (2014b). *European football fans survey (Online)*. Mimeo.
- FREE (2015). *Project final report*. Report to the EU Commission, FP7-SSH-2011-2 (SSH.2011.5.2-1).
- García, B. (2007). UEFA and the European Union: From confrontation to cooperation? *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 3(3): 202–223.
- García, B. & Llopis-Goig, R. (2020a). Club-militants, institutionalists, critics, moderns and globalists: A quantitative governance-based typology of football supporters. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 55(8): 1116–1135.
- García, B. & Llopis-Goig, R. (2020b). Supporters' attitudes towards European football governance: Structural dimensions and sociodemographic patterns. *Soccer & Society*, published online: 9 July.
- García, B. & Meier, H.E. (2017). Global sport power Europe? The efficacy of the European Union in global sport regulation. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 55(4): 850–870.
- García, B., Olmeda, A.P. & González, C.P. (2011). Spain: Parochialism or innovation. In *The transformation of European football*, eds. A. Niemann, B. García & W. Grant. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Geeraert, A. (2016). *The EU in international sports governance. A principal-agent perspective on EU control of FIFA and UEFA*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Geeraert, A. & Drieskens, E. (2015). The EU controls FIFA and UEFA: A principal-agent perspective. *Journal of European Public Policy* 22(10): 1448–1466.
- Geeraert, A. & Drieskens, E. (2017). Normative market Europe: The EU as a force for good in international sports governance? *Journal of European Integration* 39(1): 79–94.
- Grant, W. (2011). England: A liberal model under challenge? In *The transformation of European football*, eds. A. Niemann, B. García & W. Grant. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Hanquinet, L. & Savage, M. (2013). *The Europeanisation of everyday life: Cross-border practices and transnational identifications among EU and third-country citizens: Europeanisation and globalisation*. EUCROSS Working Paper 6.
- Howell, C.E. (2004). *Developing conceptualisations of Europeanization. Synthesising methodological approaches*. Queen's Papers on Europeanization, No. 3. Belfast: Queen's University of Belfast.
- Izquierdo, S.M. & Troncoso Ferrer, M. (2014). Football broadcasting business in the EU: Towards fairer competition? *Journal of European Competition Law & Practice* 5(6): 353–363.
- Kedzior, M. & Szcapanik, R. (2011). Poland: New shape, same old problems. In *The transformation of European football*, eds. A. Niemann, B. García & W. Grant. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Keller, B.K. (2018). *Sectoral social dialogue in professional football. Social partners, outcomes and problems of implementation*. etui Working Paper 2018/04. Brussels: etui.
- Kerr, A.K. & Emery, P.R. (2011). Foreign fandom and the Liverpool FC: A cyber-mediated romance. *Soccer & Society* 12(6): 880–896.
- King, A. (2000). Football fandom and post-national identity in the new Europe. *British Journal of Sociology* 51(3): 419–442.
- King, A. (2003). *The European ritual: Football in the new Europe*. London: Routledge.
- King, A. (2004). The new symbols of European football. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 39(3): 323–336.

- Kuhn, T. (2015). *Experiencing European integration: Transnational lives and European identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lehmkuhl, D. & Siegrist, O. (2011). Switzerland: Professionalisation and internationalisation, courtesy of the EU and UEFA. In *The transformation of European football*, eds. A. Niemann, B. García & W. Grant. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Levermore, R. & Millward, P. (2007). Official policies and informal transversal networks. Creating 'pan-European identifications' through sport? *The Sociological Review* 55(1): 144–164.
- Mau, S. (2010). *Social transnationalism: Lifeworlds beyond the nation-state*. London: Routledge.
- Millward, P. (2006). 'We've all got the bug for Euro-aways': What fans say about European football club competition. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 41(3–4): 375–393.
- Millward, P. (2009). *Getting into Europe: Identification, prejudice and politics in English football culture*. Saarbrücken: VDM.
- Millward, P. (2011). *The global football league: Transnational networks, social movements and sport in the new media age*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Mittag, J. (2018). Europäische Sportpolitik zwischen Wachstum und Differenzierung. In *Europäische Sportpolitik: Zugänge – Akteure – Problemfelder*, ed. J. Mittag, 13–49. Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- Mutz, M. (2015). Transnational public attention in European club football. *European Societies* 17(5): 721–746.
- Nash, R. (2000). Globalised football fandom: Scandinavian Liverpool FC supporters. *Football Studies* 3(2): 5–23.
- Niemann, A. & Brand, A. (2008) The impact of European integration on domestic sport. The case of German football. *Sport in Society* 11(1): 90–106.
- Niemann, A. & Brand, A. (2020). The UEFA champions league: A political myth? *Soccer & Society* 21(3): 329–343.
- Niemann, A., García, B. & Grant, W., eds. (2011). *The transformation of European football: Towards the Europeanisation of the national game*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Parrish, R. (2003). *Sports law and policy in the European Union*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Parrish, R. (2011). Social dialogue in European professional football. *European Law Journal* 17(2): 213–229.
- Pawłowski, T., Breuer, C. & Hovemann, A. (2010). Top clubs' performance and the competitive situation in European domestic football competitions. *Journal of Sports Economics* 11(2): 186–202.
- Pyta, W. (2015). Introduction: Football memory in a European perspective. In *European football and collective memory. Football research in an Enlarged Europe*, eds. W. Pyta & N. Havemann, 1–17, London: Palgrave.
- Pyta, W. & Havemann, N., eds. (2015). *European football and collective memory. Football research in an Enlarged Europe*. London: Palgrave.
- Ranc, D. (2012). *Foreign players and football supporters: The old firm, Arsenal, Paris Saint-Germain*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ranc, D. & Sonntag, A. (2011). France: A case of UEFA-isation? In *The transformation of European football*, eds. A. Niemann, B. García & W. Grant. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Robertson, R. (1992). *Globalization: Social theory and global culture*. London: Sage.
- Robertson, R. (2009). Differentiation reductionism and the missing link in Albert's approach to globalization theory. *International Political Sociology* 3(1): 119–122.
- Sandvoss, C. (2012). Jeux sans frontières? *Politique Européenne* 36: 76–101.
- Schmidt, V.A. (2002). Europeanization and the mechanics of economic policy adjustment. *Journal of European Public Policy* 9(6): 894–912.
- Schwell, A. (2015). Offside. Or not quite: Euro 2102 as a focal point of identity and alterity. In *The European football championship: Mega-event and vanity fair*, eds. B. Alpan, A. Schwell & A. Sonntag, 22–53. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Sonntag, A. (2013). 8:45 – The European hour. Blog entry. available at: <https://free.ideasoneurope.eu/2013/09/17/845-the-European-hour/>.
- Steger, M.B. & James, P. (2011). Three dimensions of subjective globalization. *ProtoSociology* 27: 53–70.
- Szogs, Nina (2017). *Football fandom and migration. An ethnography of transnational practices and narratives in Vienna and Istanbul*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

- Velema, T.A. (2018). A game of snakes and ladders: Player migratory trajectories in the global football labor market. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 53(6): 706–725.
- Velema, T.A., Wen, H.Y. & Zhou, Y.K. (2020). Global value added chains and the recruitment activities of European professional football teams. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 55(2): 127–146.
- Vonnard, P. (2020a). *Creating a United Europe of football. The formation of UEFA (1949–1961)*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Vonnard, P. (2020b). Gathering Europe in football: UEFA, the development of European Football and the Cold War. *STADION* 44(1): 34–60.
- Vonnard, P., Quinn, G. & Bancel, N. (2016). *Building Europe with the ball*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition.
- Weber, R. (2020). Becoming European through football? The case of Sturm Graz. In *Reconsidering Europeanization: Ideas and practices of (dis-)integrating Europe since the 18th century*, eds. Greiner, F., et al. Berlin: Oldenbourg/De Gruyter.
- Weber, R. (2021) Banal Europeanism? Europeanisation of football and the enhabitation of a Europeanised football fandom. *Sport in Society*. doi: 10.1080/17430437.2021.1893697.
- Weber, R., Brand, A., Koch, F. & Niemann, A. (2021). Europeanised identifications among football fans. The analysis of discussions in online message boards. SSRN-Online Paper. available at: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=3806348>.
- Weber, R., Brand, A., Niemann, A. & Koch, F. (2020). Non-elite conceptions of Europe: Europe as reference frame in English football fan discussions. *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 16(3): 293–319.
- Weber, R., Brand, A., Niemann, A. & Koch, F. (2021). Cosmopolitans and communitarians. A typology of football fans between national and European influences. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. doi: 10.1177/10126902211028147.
- Young, C., Holt, D. & Tomlinson, A., eds. (2011). *The making and mediatization of modern sport in Europe: States, media and markets 1950–2010*. London: Routledge.
- Zheng, J. & García, B. (2017) Conclusions: The rising importance of supporter activism in European football. In *Football and supporter activism in Europe: Whose game is it?* eds. B. García & J. Zheng, 277–286. Basingstoke: Palgrave.