

Pyramid or democracy in sports? Alternative ways in European sports policies

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Abstract

When in 2005 the draft of a European Constitution failed, sport was left without any article of its own and, thus, without a legal framework on the EU level. That is why the European Commission started a process to implement legal regulation of sports nevertheless. The first official document, the *Independent European Sport Review 2006*, however, followed problematic lines of interest and power. Focusing on the field of football, it assumed a 'pyramid' as 'the European model' and proposed a monopolistic structure for EU sports policies.

This has alarmed organisations of Sport for all, and *International Sport and Culture Association* (ISCA) has called independent researchers to reflect the situation. The present critique is based on the Danish experience – the recognition of popular sports and the multiplicity of sport organisation. The alternative is between a hierarchical structure and democratic pluralism in sports policies.

Keywords

Sports policy, European Union, football, UEFA, democracy

In 2005, an attempt was made to establish a European Union Constitution. This failed because of the strong "No" votes of the French and Dutch referendums. The future of the constitutional process of the EU remains unsure.

The draft of the Constitution contained an article on sport. As the constitution project failed, sport remains so far outside the legal-political framework of the European Union. There are some observers and membership countries, which do not deplore this situation, as it means that the European bureaucracy cannot legally interfere into national matters of sport and culture. On the other hand, there are some trans-national problems, indeed.

The European Commission now tries to find an isolated solution for the implementation of European sport policies. It started a process towards a planned White Paper as a paving the way towards a sort of constitution for European sports.

The first official document of this process was the so-called *Independent European Sport Review 2006*. It was written by José Luis Arnaut following an initiative of the British minister of sports. The *Review* was supported by European sport ministers and formulated in close contact with the top organisations of football, UEFA, FIFA and other bodies of professional sport.

However, the vision of the *Independent Review* is problematic – and not at all 'independent'.

Problems in sports calling for political action

The *Review* hints at some of the problems of actual sports, which, indeed, call for a legal and political intervention on the international level. Most of these problems are connected with the commercialisation of sport:

- privatisation of television rights by certain media
- concentration of wealth in certain clubs and leagues
- club ownership by unscrupulous capital owners
- match-fixing and corruption scandals
- wage inflation on the players market
- black market for tickets

- doping
- bankruptcy of European clubs
- money laundry
- internet piracy and ambush marketing
- trafficking and exploitation of young players from Africa and South America
- an uncontrolled “player agent industry”
- under-investment in the training of young players
- illegal betting and internet gambling outside tax control.
- But also hooliganism, racism and xenophobia among supporters, sexual offences and insecurity in the stadiums call for action.

The *Review* chose to focus on football. This choice can be questioned, as it is only one segment from the broad world of sports. And still more seriously, the sector parcellation of sports along single disciplines – like football, motor race and table tennis – may be inappropriate to an efficient and democratic administration of sports.

But let us meet the *Review* on its own ‘home ground’, looking closer at the logic of football...

What is European in sports?

In order to handle the named problems of sports, the *Review* launches the question of what is specifically European in European sports. This question is linked to the proposition of a political solution, which is based on a consequently monopolistic structure of governance. Thus, in the case of football, one formal authority should be recognised and enabled to administrate the field of European football from the “top” of European soccer to the “basis” of local clubs. The football federation UEFA should

“assume full responsibility for all EU-related matters (in its...) role as official European football interlocutor vis-à-vis the EU institutions” (134).

Like UEFA for football, the governing bodies or federations of other sports should be recognised as key organisations. They should be enabled “*to speak on behalf of all interests in the game*” (30).

The centralistic and hierarchical vision of the *Review* is based on a certain assumption about what is called *the European Sport Model*. In contrast to the more commercial model of American sports, the European model is said to be “*based on social inclusion, financial solidarity and true sporting values*” (13, 140). This sounds convincing, however...

The pyramid – a monopolistic model

The description of the European model is interpreted as being expression of a pyramid structure. “Pyramid” is a keyword going through the *Review* as main argument for the recommended structure of authorities.¹ The arguments of the *Review* for the pyramid are diverse:

On one hand, the pyramid is argued for as a model of *competition*. This pyramid is going from local matches over regional and national competitions to the European top.

On the other hand, the pyramid is thought as model of (self-) *organisation*. It consists of different levels from local clubs over national leagues to UEFA.

Furthermore, the pyramid is suggested as a general picture of *human qualification*.

“The pyramid structure ... is the essence of the European Sport Model and a legacy of European sports history. The model applies for all sports in Europe ... The pyramid is formed with elite professional football at the top and an infinitely greater number of amateur clubs and volunteers at the base” (57).

The pyramid, which in the *Review* also is called the “*European football family*” (61, 135), is regarded as “*an indivisible whole*”.

And finally, the pyramid is thought as a picture of bureaucratic and *political control*. What is recommended is the

“legal protection for the pyramid structure of European football and official recognition of national sports governing bodies by the EU member states and of European sports governing bodies by the European Union institutions” (131).

The description of sports as a pyramid along the single sports disciplines, thus, confounds different levels of social activity: competition, self-organisation, qualification, amateur/professional status, bureaucratic control, and political representation. In the name of “clarity” and “efficient” top-down control, a unitary structure is recommended for European sports. It is hierarchical and one-dimensional. Like other pyramids in history, it expresses a monopolistic order.

The hierarchical concept of the *Review* was directly copied from the pyramids, which were presented in a UEFA strategy paper one year before. UEFA’s *Vision Europe* from 2005 showed in pictures both the European model as a pyramid and the “current structure of world football” as a pyramid under the FIFA top.² This model implied a claim of power – which was now affirmed by the *Independent Review*.

Contrasting experiences in peoples’ practice

This description of the world of sports by the pyramid model does not take into account the existence of a rich spectrum of football practice all over Europe.

Street football is a broad phenomenon practiced mostly by young boys in urban milieus. It is neither linked to the formal pyramid of achievement sport nor to a standardized space. With the expansion of automobilism, the playing field in the street has been taken from street football. However, public initiatives in the spirit of welfare society try to support street football by establishing simple facilities and mini-pitches in urban environments.³

People’s football on the basis of *pub teams* has been the basis of *workers’ football* as a distinctive people’s movement in the twentieth century. This has been described for the case of the German Ruhr district.⁴ Some pub teams have also developed towards professional sport, like Schalke 04.

Children’s football has passed on informal practices from generation to generation.⁵ This is what is played ‘just around the corner’ – and also endangered or expelled by the traffic power of automobilism. Its main action to shoot against a defined ‘goal’, which may be a garage door or something similar. Goal shooting is characteristic for traditional games and dominated the popular culture of play before modern sport.

Circle football is another form of popular football, often practised in urban parks. In this game, people form a circle and play the ball – often a light rattan ball – to each other, for enjoyment. The game can develop high skill and acrobatic dexterity, but it is non-competitive. In Indonesian villages, the game was a popular tradition as *sepak raga* and became a modern competitive sport in the form of *sepak takraw*, net football or foot volley. In Japan a similar popular game was by court nobility transformed into the ritual game *kemari*.⁶

Grassroots football for peace or other social aims experiments with play and game and festivity. This is living practice in Italy, where it is supported among others by *Unione Italiana Sport Per tutti* (UISP).⁷ Grassroots football with anti-racist program and low priority of record production is known among others from Norway, Britain and Germany.

Ethnic groups assemble around football as a scene of cultural togetherness. Turkish clubs in Germany as well as Surinam football in Amsterdam follow a logic, which is not oriented towards the pyramid of records, but towards identity and festivity bonding cultural minorities.⁸

Football for ethnic reconciliation works with patterns of game and fun for a bridging between different cultural groups. This grassroots work is realized by the Open Fun Football Schools in the Balkans and in the Caucasus.⁹

Pedagogical football was developed as an alternative against competitive elite sport – in quest of personal development. This way of “playing ball with your life at stake” is supported by among others the Danish Sport-for-all organisation DGI.¹⁰

Sport in connection with the *working place* is popular in different parts of Europe. In Scandinavian countries, corporation sport has a long tradition, using football as a field of togetherness in ‘enterprise culture’. This type of activity is not connected with the UEFA pyramid.

Last but not least, *traditional folk ballgames*, which have historically been the forerunners of modern football, are living practice in different parts of Europe. *La soule* is an ancient game in Brittany (France), played between villages across the landscape. It is still today popular as a local festivity and affirmation of rural Britton community.¹¹ Similar games are played in some British towns. The most famous is Ashbourne Shrovetide Football, called “one of the world's oldest, largest, longest and maddest football games”. It is documented as early as 1349 and is famous for its violent dynamics all through landscape and water. Games of this type manifest local identity – rural or urban – combining festivity and ritual encounter with popular culture and competitive game, again far from the pyramid of professional soccer.

The quality of football as a contribution to local bonding and to bridging between different cultural groups has also been used by international exchange. In development cooperation between Denmark and Tanzania, for instance, football and *ngoma*, local traditions of song and dance competition, have been supported side by side.¹²

It is just this diversity in popular practice, which constitutes the basis for the special popularity of football among the many different ball games. Handball for instance contrasts by being much more bound to a certain set of rules and organisational framework.

Some of the named game practices were supported or sponsored by UEFA or national football organisation from the ‘pyramid’. However, the multiplicity of popular football in itself follows patterns which are different from hierarchical sport. Popular football does not only constitute ‘the basis’ on a lower level of achievement, but represents other model – sometimes alternative models – of football practice. This demands recognition by sports policies.

Recognition of diversity in national sports policies

The question of *recognition* is the reason, why the model of the pyramid is problematical on the level of sport policies. The hierarchical thinking is not appropriate to recognize the visions of Sport for all, nor does it correspond to the needs of democracy in sports. That is why the experiences of non-monopolistic sports policies in different European countries have to be taken seriously.

Recognition means: *Sport for all* or what in different countries is called popular sports, broad sports, folk sports, people’s sports, sport in popular culture or grassroots sports, is not only the basis of the one top-controlled sport, but it constitutes *another* model.¹³ This is true since the early history of modern sports. Folk football does not only consist of competitions on lower levels than the top elite, but it follows *other* logics of the game, of social inclusion and democratic self-organisation.

In some European countries, this otherness has been recognised by different forms of *pluralism* in national sport policies. The different logics of elite sport and of Sport for all have given birth to separate organisational bodies, and the fundamental differences are recognised by applying differentiated laws and policies on sports.

Danish sports are characterised by the existence of different national organisations. Only one of them is based on the governing bodies of the single-sports (*The National Olympic Committee and Sports Confederation of Denmark*, DIF), as it is proposed by the *Independent Review*. The other is based on local and regional cultural communities and on Sport for all (*The*

Danish Gymnastics and Sports Associations, DGI). A third and minor organisation represents corporation sports (*The Danish Federation of Company Sports*, DFIF). Both DGI and DFIF are far from the pyramid model. The organisation of elite sport is placed in a further institution, *Team Danmark*.

This multiplicity of organisations is mirrored by diversity on the level of legislation. Danish legislation in the field of sports makes up a dual system. On one hand, the law on elite sports is placed under the ministry of culture, and on the other hand, the law on “people’s education”, which regulates ‘broad sports’ in the municipalities, is under the responsibility of the ministry of education.

Scottish sports have a dual structure, too. The *Scottish Sports Association* (SSA) represents the governing bodies, corresponding to Danish DIF and the UEFA-model of the *Review*. In contrast, the *Scottish Association of Local Sports Councils* (SALSC) represents the activity of sport associations on the local level, mainly in Sport for all. It plays together with the Danish DGI. Also here, a third body is remarkable, the *Scottish Games Association* (SGA) representing the Highland Games as a special cultural feature of traditional sports in Scotland – and in the world.

In contrast to the Danish and Scottish cases, *Italian sports* are subjected to only one central body, the National Olympic Committee (CONI). This centralism is inherited from the Fascist state sport. It is, however, contested by a multiplicity of Sport-for-all associations. The *enti promotori*, like *Unione Italiana Sport Per tutti* (UISP), represent the associational principle in Italian sports, Sport for all and its cultural-political multiplicity.

Also *German sports* are subjected to one central organisation, now called *Deutscher Olympischer Sportbund* (DOSB, German Olympic Sport Federation). This structure is a heritage from the era of fascism, too. It was realised after 1933 when the Nazi authorities acted against the rich diversity and autonomy of the gymnastic movement (*Turner*), the workers’ sport movements and the confessional sports organisations. The central structure was after 1945 continued also in the communist GDR.

The pyramid is, thus, not a democratic model, but rather a heritage from the age of Fascism and from Soviet state monarchy.

Towards democracy in sports

Democracy, in contrast, is characterised by establishing a framework for the expression of *diversity and opposition*. This is the basic understanding of democracy in the Nordic countries where sport historically rose from diverse social and popular movements. The pyramid contradicts this picture. The hierarchical logic is oriented towards efficient governance and clarity of top-down control, not towards expression of contradiction and conflict.

At some few places, the *Independent Review* remarks the existence of contradictions:

“At all times it is necessary to balance the power of money (the elite professional sector) and the power of numbers (the grassroots sector)” (64).

But the solution is searched inside the pyramids of single-sports competitions, not outside. This is not convincing, as the named unbalances – as well as most of the problems earlier quoted – have arisen under the responsibility of just the UEFA pyramid. The pyramid is not a means to solve the problems – it is the problem itself.

The *Review* also refers to difficulties of governing bodies like UEFA to *separate regulatory and commercial functions*. The mix of these functions may lead to an abuse of power (69-70). Indeed – as a rich literature of investigative journalism has shown – international organisations like FIFA and IOC have demonstrated temptations of this type. And so far no solution inside the systems has been convincing.

If one takes seriously the democratic principle of *separation of powers* (58), some more convincing solutions must be proposed than just some institutional reforms inside UEFA.

It has to be concluded that the so-called *Independent Review* is far from independent, but expresses the interests of the UEFA/FIFA connection. It follows closely the UEFA strategy from 2005.

A plural representation of sports?

An alternative proposition could be to develop a dual or – better – a tripartite representation on the European level. It could consist of

- the *governing bodies of the single sport disciplines* like football (UEFA), speaking for the sport of competition and for the professional elite
- the federations of *Sport for all*, speaking for the grassroots
- and eventually a third partner, representing the *cultural* values and contexts of sports.

This structure should also ensure that important fields of movement activity, which are “homeless” in many of the established systems of sport administration, should find their place. This concerns especially:

- *dance* and similar forms of creative movement culture
- *play and games*, especially the traditional games living in many European regions
- *outdoor activities* with their important connection to landscape planning, tourism etc.

Diversity, grassroots activities, and self-determination bottom-up make up the essence of democratic life in sports. They call for an adequate representation also on the European level.

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¹ Arnaut 2006: 13, 17, 35-37, 57, 62, 66, 71, 130-131.

² UEFA 2005: 28 and 32.

³ Jarvie 2003, Janssens 2004.

⁴ Lindner/Breuer 1978.

⁵ Dietrich 1984.

⁶ Yamamoto 2004.

⁷ Described in a recent paper of Davide Sterchele.

⁸ Blecking 2001 and 2006, Crum 1999/2001.

⁹ Levinsen 2000-2004, Sterchele 2004.

¹⁰ Nielsen/Rasmussen 1999.

¹¹ Moëlo/Le Bihan 1986.

¹² Eichberg 2008.

¹³ Eichberg 2004.