

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* followed, however, 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 alarmed organisations of Sport for all, and *International Sport and Culture Association* (ISCA) 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. An alternative became visible between a hierarchical structure and democratic pluralism in sports policies.

Meanwhile, the European Commission published its *White Paper on Sport, 2007*, which - though conservative in character - avoided the monopolistic pyramid structure. A sharp reaction from the international interest organisations of Olympic sport and soccer shed light on the fundamental character of this conflict.

Keywords: Sports policy, European Union, football, UEFA, democracy

Conflicts are often more illustrative than the ritual expressions of agreement and harmony in politics. In the *White Paper on Sport* for instance, which was published by the European Commission in July 2007, one could find a rather conservative narrative on sports. It started by a quotation of Pierre de Coubertin, referred to "a central role for sports federations" as it was laid down in the Nice Declaration of the EU, underlined the societal role of sports - health, education, citizenship, and social inclusion - acknowledging the autonomy of sporting organisations and the specificity of sport, and ended by a follow-up through structured dialogue with the Olympic and other sport organisations.¹ There seemed to be no problem.

Immediately after the publication of the White Paper, however, the *International Olympic Committee* (IOC) and the *International Football Federation* (FIFA) joined in a sharp attack against the sports policy of the named European document, which had been published the same day:

"The White Paper is structured in full contradiction with the actual architecture of the Olympic movement, ignoring in particular the regulatory competences of the International Federations, the division of responsibilities between the latter and their European Confederations, the global nature of the issues and challenges currently affecting sport as well as the solutions which are today necessary." ²

The aggressive tone of the attack was unusual. It contrasted in language and substance the diplomatic style, which the organised Olympism normally cultivates. What the united interest organisations of Olympic sport and world soccer were especially "disappointed" about was that the European White Paper avoided to recognize "*the central role (...) of the sports federations (governing bodies) in organising, regulating and promoting their respective sports*". The question of ownership and organisational power in the field of sports was raised.

The way of constitutional work

The White Paper process had its background in the long-term work on a European constitution.³ In 2004, an attempt was made to establish a European Union Constitution on the basis of the Treaty of Nice (2001). This failed because of the strong "No" votes of the French and Dutch referendums of 2005. The future of the constitutional process of the EU became unsure.

The draft of the constitution had contained an article on sport. As the constitution project failed, sport remained - as before - outside the legal-political framework of the European Union. There were some observers and membership countries, which did not deplore this situation, as it hindered the European bureaucracy from legally interfering into national matters of sport and culture.⁴ On the other hand, there were some trans-national problems, which had to be recognized.

The European Commission tried after 2005 to find an isolated solution for the implementation of European sport policies. It started a process towards the White Paper, which should pave 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, with UEFA, FIFA and other bodies of professional sport.

However, the vision of the *Independent Review* soon showed as being problematic - and not at all 'independent'.

Problems in sports calling for political action

The Review hinted at some of the problems of actual sports, which, indeed, called for a legal and political intervention on the international level. Most of these problems were 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 called for action.

The Review chose deliberately to focus on football. This choice could be questioned, as football is only one segment from the broad world of sports. And indeed, there were critical voices also from the side of Olympic sport. And more fundamentally, the sector parcellation of sports along single disciplines - like football, motor race and table tennis - can be seen as being inappropriate to an efficient and democratic administration of sports as a whole.

But for a closer analysis of international sports politics it might be illustrative to meet the *Independent Review* on its own 'home ground', looking closer at the logic of football itself...

What is European in sports?

Besides the named problems of sports, the Review launched the question of what was specifically European in European sports. This question was linked to the proposition of a political solution, which was 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" (p.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" (p. 30).

The centralistic and hierarchical vision of the *Review* was based on a certain assumption about what was called *the European Sport Model*. In contrast to the more commercial model of American sports, the European model was said to be "based on social inclusion, financial solidarity and true sporting values" (pp. 13, 140). This sounded humanistic, and yet, at a closer look, the argument revealed a power strategy.

The pyramid - a monopolistic model

The description of the European model was interpreted as being expression of a pyramid structure. "Pyramid" was a keyword going through the Review as main argument for the recommended structure of authorities.⁵ The arguments of the Review for the pyramid were diverse: From the basis of body-cultural practice, the pyramid was argued for as a model of *competition*. This pyramid was going from local matches over regional and national competitions to the European top.

At the same time, the pyramid was thought as model of *organisation* and self-organisation. The pyramid of sport consisted of different levels from local clubs over national leagues to UEFA.

Furthermore, the pyramid was suggested as a general picture of *human qualification* with particular historical root.

"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” (p.57).

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

Competitive pyramid, organisational pyramid and the pyramid of qualification created together a hierarchical picture. From this it was concluded that the pyramid should function as a model of bureaucratic and *political control*. What was recommended was 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” (p.131).

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

The hierarchical concept of the *Review* was directly copied from the pyramids, which had been 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.⁶ This model implied a claim of power – which was now affirmed by the *Independent Review* by applying it to the EU-political level.

Contrasting experiences in peoples’ practice

The description of the world of sports by the pyramid model did not take into account the existence of a rich spectrum of football practice all over Europe.⁷

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.⁸

People’s football on the basis of *pub teams* has been the basis of *workers’ football* as a distinctive popular practice in the twentieth century. This has been described in details for the case of the German Ruhr district.⁹ Some of the original pub teams have later developed towards professional sport, as it was the case with Schalke 04.

Children’s football has been passed as informal practice from generation to generation.¹⁰ This is what is played ‘just around the corner’. Also this field of practice was endangered or expelled by the traffic power of automobilism. The main action of children’s football is shooting 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.¹¹ It is, however, not at all harmless but can be marked by a sharp gender unbalance.¹²

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 practiced among the court nobility, which transformed it into the ritual game *kemari*.¹³

Festive children’s football is often played in a variation of mainstream forms together with parents in events like school festivity, birthday party or local neighbourhood gathering. But this form, which is typically integrated into festivities, is characterized by the absence of strict rules, of strict limitations in space and time, and by fluctuating participation on both sides. Though the competitive engagement may be high, it is not the result that counts, but togetherness in encounter.

Beach football has developed as a popular activity of its own character, in its special coastal environments and different from soccer by more than the sanded ground. Tendencies can be registered to streamline this as a sport, parallel to beach volley. However, it is still the vast majority of players who practice beach football as non-formal popular practice.

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).¹⁴ Grassroots football with anti-racist program and setting a low priority of record production is known among others from Norway, Britain and Germany.

Other local forms of football are reported from France. Without political program, young people meet in self-organized local competitions to play football independent of any superstructure.¹⁵

Ethnic groups often 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.¹⁶

Football for peace and reconciliation works with patterns of game and fun for a bridging between different cultural groups who have been traumatized by civil war and similar ethnic conflicts. This grassroots work is among others realized by the Open Fun Football Schools in the Balkans and in the Caucasus.¹⁷

Pedagogical football is oriented towards the quest of personal development was developed as an alternative against competitive elite sport. It is practised as a form of social-bodily learning, not dominated by the production of results. As a way of “playing ball with your life at stake”, pedagogical football is supported by among others the Danish Sport-for-all organisation DGI.¹⁸

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.¹⁹

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.²⁰ 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.²¹

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 - and Fascist traditions

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.²² 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.

The organisational system of Danish sports is 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 was proposed by the *Independent Review* as normative model for the future European sport system. One other organisation 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 in Denmark 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” regulates ‘broad sports’ in the municipalities under the responsibility of the ministry of education.²³

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 *Independent 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. SALSC works 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*, among these the *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, which was in 2006 renamed as *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 stroke down against the rich diversity and autonomy of the gymnastic movement (*Turner*), the workers' sport movements and the confessional sports organisations and formed a unitary National Socialist sport organisation. The central structure was after 1945 continued both in West Germany and 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 monocracy.

Diversity, opposition and separation of powers - 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.²⁴ The pyramid contradicts this picture. The hierarchical logic is oriented towards efficient governance and clarity of top-down control, not towards the expression of contradiction and conflict.

At some few places, the *Independent Review* itself remarked 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)” (p.64).

But the solution was searched inside the pyramid of single-sports competition, not outside. This could not convince, 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 referred to certain difficulties of governing bodies like UEFA to separate regulatory and commercial functions. The mix of these functions may lead to an abuse of power (pp. 69-70). Indeed - as a rich literature of investigative journalism has shown - international organisations like FIFA and IOC have currently been tempted by this type of mix - and experienced a consequent corruption, which was not accidental, but structural.²⁵ So far, no solution inside the systems has been convincing.

In the general theory and practice of democracy, the democratic principle of separation of powers is understood as fundamental. In sports policy, however, it meets some problems. It may be named here and there (Review p. 58), but it is rarely taken seriously. If powers should be separated in sports, 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* was far from independent, but expressed the interests of the UEFA/FIFA connection. It followed closely the UEFA strategy from 2005.

Who should represent sports?

In this respect, there were good reasons for the European White Paper of 2007 not to follow the pyramid model proposed by UEFA. Surely, the White Paper referred to the *Independent Review* in a footnote and named the “*pyramid structure of competitions from grassroots to elite level*” as one feature of the specificity of sport. But it avoided proclaiming the pyramid as a principle of organisation, power and control.²⁶ On the organisational “European Sport Model” it concluded that

“In view of the diversity and complexities of European sport structures it (the Commission) considers, however, that it is unrealistic to try to define a unified model of organisation of sport in Europe.”²⁷

By this central sentence, the White Paper took distance towards the proposition of the pressure-groups of top sport. This decision seems to have been the main object of the sharp critique of IOC and FIFA, which are just working for the named type of unification.²⁸

Which consequences the cautious avoidance, practiced by the European Commission, will have in the future, remains an open question. The pressure groups of international Olympism and of professional top sport will - as they have threatened - continue their lobbying efforts, and in the longer run they even may succeed. However, the conflict of 2007 illustrated the existence of deep contradictions inside the world of sports.

The question of who represents sport on the European level remains a tricky matter. The White Paper proposed an EU Sport Forum, which should annually gather “all sport stakeholders”. It named five groups of “actors in this structured dialogue”

- European sport federations

- European umbrella organisations, notably Olympic and Paralympic Committees and non-governmental sport organisations
- national umbrella organisations for sport and Olympic and Paralympic committees
- other actors in the field of sport represented at European level, including social partners
- other European and international organisations, in particular from the Council of Europe, the UN, UNESCO and WHO (p.18).

This enumerating selection has somewhat bureaucratic character giving priority to existing (international) organisation and to the established structures of competitive sport in its Olympic form. This formal-administrative approach does not solve the more fundamental political question of representation in sports.

A proposition, which would be more consequently alternative to the power concept of UEFA, FIFA and IOC, could be developed on a dual or - maybe more balanced - a tripartite basis, representing the diversity of sports and body cultures in European civil societies and their different ways of self-organisation. Such a representation - which could take some inspiration from Danish, Scottish and other sports-political structures - could consist of

- the *governing bodies of the single sport disciplines* like football (UEFA) and their Olympic and other umbrella organisations, speaking for the sport of competition and for the professional elite
- the confederations of *Sport for all*, speaking for the broad activities of the grassroots, representation of health sport, corporation sports, play-and-game movements and others
- and third partners, representing the *cultural and social* values and contexts of sports like UNESCO, WHO, landscape planning and ecology, social partners, sport journalism etc.

This structure could also ensure that important fields of movement activity, which so far have been “homeless” in many of the established systems of sport administration and which yet have importance for the current agenda of health and culture in movement culture, may find their appropriate 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, ecology, tourism etc.

Anyway, there is a connection between sport-political representation and the diversity of body culture in people’ s life. The representation of sports should not be left to bureaucratic organisations of power, but it should mirror the internal multiplicity and contradictions inside people’ s movement practice.

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

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¹ Commission of the EC 2007.

² IOC-FIFA joint declaration 2007.

³ For this process and its contradictions with their background in diverse national sports cultures see Moreau 2007.

⁴ About this Danish position in conflict with the French position see Moreau 2007.

⁵ Arnaut 2006: 13, 17, 35-37, 57, 62, 66, 71, 130-131.

⁶ UEFA 2005: 28 and 32.

⁷ Mindegaard 2007.

⁸ Jarvie 2003, Janssens 2004.

⁹ Lindner/Breuer 1978.

¹⁰ Dietrich 1984.

¹¹ Eichberg 2008b.

¹² An illustrative case from children of the immigration minority in Sweden is told by Dovborn/Trondman 2007. However, the case is interpreted and political conclusions are drawn according to the top-down educational logic of the Swedish welfare state.

¹³ Yamamoto 2004.

¹⁴ Sterchele 2007.

¹⁵ Fodimbi 2000: 158-60.

¹⁶ Blecking 2001 and 2006, Crum 1999/2001.

¹⁷ Gasser/Levinsen 2003, Levinsen 2000-2004, Sterchele 2004.

¹⁸ Nielsen/Rasmussen 1999.

¹⁹ Eichberg 2007a.

²⁰ Moëlo/Le Bihan 1986.

²¹ Eichberg 2008a.

²² Eichberg/Kosiewicz/Obodyňsky 2007.

²³ Ibsen/Eichberg 2006.

²⁴ Though different historical changes and especially a certain pressure from the side of the state made that sports in Sweden, Norway and Finland were re-modelled into monolithic unitary organizations.

²⁵ Well-documented works of investigative journalism were presented by Andrew Jennings from Great Britain, Thomas Kister and Jens Weinreich from Germany, and Lars Werge from Denmark.

²⁶ Commission of the EC 2007: 13.

²⁷ Commission of the EC 2007: 12.

²⁸ For a critique of the White Paper from another side, from European folk sports, see: *JUGAJE Info* no. 16, November 2007, European Traditional Sports & Games Association.