Original Article

European football at the cross-roads

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Abstract:

This paper aims to provide a critical view on the recent development of club football in Europe by shedding light on social tensions behind the economic drivers and social foundations of football. The analysis starts with conceptualisation of the research problem in order to examine the developments in European football. This paper is focused on the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Champions League – the most prestigious and profitable annual tournament in Europe, which has undergone a series of rule changes in order to increase its attractiveness. The paper claims that these changes have led to a growing fragmentation of football field and that the tournament now favours the elite clubs from the richest football leagues in Europe at the cost of fairness of the competition. In other words, the trajectory of changes in European football fits well with the concept of turbocapitalism (Luttwak, 1999) which can produce deep and far-reaching (a) structural, (b) economic and (c) social consequences. Empirically, the study is based on secondary data obtained from the annual Deloitte report *Football Money League*, and results of the UEFA Champions League (UCL). The paper concludes with final remarks regarding possible scenarios of future football development.

KeyWords: football, sport, the big five, turbocapitalism

Introduction

The aim of the present paper is to examine the consequences of the development of European club football. The viewpoint of this paper is that sport is attractive because it offers fair and open competition, with unpredictable outcomes. Consequently, the more predictable the results of the league, through, for example, the design of the tournament and structural bias towards ‘the favourites’, the less it is regarded as a fair and open competition. Predominantly, global contenders emanate from five major European leagues, namely the English *Premier League*, the Spanish *La Liga*, the Italian *Serie A*, the German *Bundesliga* and the French *Ligue 1*. They are generally referred to as *the big five*. This paper is based on the Deloitte report *Football Money League*, which has been published since 1996/1997. This report is generally regarded as one of the most comprehensive sources of information about the financial condition of football clubs. To make a long story short, this study offers critical analysis of club football development, showing a growing financial hegemony of *the big five* leagues (and their leading football clubs) and the evolution of the qualification system, which is having a profound influence on the results of the UCL, gradually turning the latter into a European super-league, composed exclusively of the elite clubs from selected leagues (*the big five*). This is not only at odds with the idea of UCL’s predecessor – the European Champion Clubs’ Cup (ECCC) – but also undermines the idea of open and fair competition that should lie at the heart of any sporting tournament.

Development in European football

Since the mid-1980s, football has become a huge global business (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2016) with a prevailing role for the five major European leagues, generating annual revenues of around 15 billion euros. Football as a field or ‘recognized area of institutional life’ (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991, p. 64f) with its own specific rules, norms and patterns, had been relatively stable until the late 1980s. The symbolic shift was marked by the establishment of the UCL in 1992. The UCL was supposed to continue a long and beautiful history of European club football competition conducted under the auspices of the ECCC. The ECCC was established in 1955/1956 as a pan-European tournament composed exclusively of national champions. Although the ECCC was prestigious, the tournament had limited impact on the structure of football, as it was centred around largely autonomous national leagues. The leagues built their own rules, as well as systems of promotion and relegation (Heck, Nierhaus and Luh, 2012). But with the globalisation forces coming into play, the structure of the competition began to move its focus from the national to the European level. This social shift is not exclusive to the field of football, and can also be identified in distant but specific fields such as higher education, as well

conceptualised by Antonowicz, Pinheiro and Geschwind (2020). As they rightly acknowledge, *Unlike in the past, European competition became important not only as a source of reputation but also as a transnational business opportunity that could generate income from television rights, transnational advertisements and global (offshore) merchandising.* The denationalisation of European football opened a window of opportunity for an unlimited expansion of the fan base, which has translated into additional financial revenues (Szymański and Kuper, 2015). The total amount of revenues generated by top-10 football clubs is estimated at 6.31 billion euros (Deloitte, 2020). Moreover, football is one of the most internationalised social phenomena (Foer, 2004; Gulianotti and Robertson, 2007) and is increasingly ruled by supra-national regulations. However, global opportunities associated with participation in the European cups have gradually become available to a few select clubs which have shown themselves to be ‘successful’ at the transnational level. These clubs began to blossom by attracting a huge number of new overseas followers. They all participate in the above-mentioned *big five* (Dima, 2015) – the most prestigious, richest and most popular national football leagues. Hobsbawm (2007, p. 92) rightly acknowledges that global forces disproportionately favour elite clubs from the *big five* by giving them massive opportunities to absorb critical resources (e.g. funding, fans, talents) worldwide. The globalisation of European club football has led to a radical restructuring of the field, with the *big five* becoming its epicentre and thus outplaying other national leagues (Kentrotis, 2016). Additionally, such development benefits the selected few at the cost of the rest, as leading clubs colonise more peripheral leagues in Europe (i.e. Andrews, 2015; Armstrong and Mitchell, 2008).

With the mounting criticism of growing disproportion in the European football, UEFA, as the body responsible for governing the Europe-wide competitions, attempted to introduce several measures to ease progressive fragmentation of football field. As Preuss, Haugen and Schubert (2014, p. 33) claim, *by involving budget constraints put on clubs, FFP [Financial Fair Play Regulations] may lead to unintended or even adverse effects as indicated by some of the obtained results* as well as initiatives aimed at bypassing these regulations. The press reported numerous cases of breaching FFP, but until very recently big clubs have avoided serious consequences. The spectacular two-year ban from participation in the UCL and harsh financial fine¹ imposed on Manchester City became the first such penalty. Notwithstanding the ‘fair play’ rhetoric of UEFA, establishing the UCL significantly increased financial rewards for the top clubs, contributing to the institutionalisation of a new transnational league (Menary, 2016). For the less privileged others from more peripheral leagues, a long pre-elimination structure was established in order to minimise the probability of reaching the UCL group stage. By achieving this, UEFA managed to maintain the myth of the UCL remaining a ‘competition of league national champions’, but still clubs from peripheral leagues rarely reach the group stage. Only exceptionally do they reach the latter stages of the UCL competition, because the qualification mechanisms are used to maintain and even reproduce the existing hierarchy. Therefore, this situation only perpetuates the existing inequalities and widens the gap between big football brands and the remaining clubs.

This analysis is based on a qualitative study, but also uses numeric data to illustrate field dynamics in football. It uses *Football Money League* as a primary source of financial data on football leagues and clubs. The report has been published since 1997/1998 (released in early February of each year) by the accounting and consulting company Deloitte, and contains a ranking of [football](#) clubs by revenues generated from football operations in the most recently finished season. Attracting attention of an accounting company can also be seen as a turning point in the history of football, because football clubs have started to be examined and ranked exclusively as business organisations. Traditionally, clubs were perceived through the lenses of sport performance, which was essential, but the commodification of sport (Vamplew, 2018) gradually changed the balance. The publication *Football Money League* is interlocked with the arrival of football turbo-capitalism (Luttwak, 1999) which stems from asymmetric opportunities caused by the de-nationalisation of football. The latter triggered rapid economic growth of football as a business (Panfil, 2016), with unequal distribution of money and popularity (celebrity culture, see more: William, 2006), which has far-reaching consequences for the structure of competition in European clubs.

Football (financial) oligopoly – the empirical evidence

The financial situation of football clubs presented in Graph 1 shows that, as the UCL was established, the aggregated revenue of the top-10 clubs in the 1997/1998 season was estimated at around 578.2 million euros, which is less than the budget of the seventh richest club in the 2020 financial ranking of football clubs (Deloitte, 2020). Moreover, it is important to note that since the first report was published, there have been no clubs from outside the *big five* among the top-10. In addition, over these years only one, or maximum two, football clubs appeared among the top-20; to add insult to injury, no clubs from outside the *big five* have climbed into the top-20, and in the report of 2020 only four appear in the top-30. This best illustrates the dominance of the *big five*, additionally reproduced by a specific qualification system aimed at minimising the possibility of big football brands failing to qualify for the group stage of the UCL, as mentioned above.

¹ More about the case of Manchester City <https://www.ft.com/content/48c7435e-540e-11ea-8841-482eed0038b1>

Graph 1. Cumulative Revenues of Top-10 Football Clubs (in billions of euros).

Secondly, Table 1 shows that the financial hierarchy has also remained almost unchanged over the studied period. In Table 1. we present the standings of the top-10 clubs from the first and the last edition of Deloitte's *Football Money League* (1997/1998 and 2020). It is visible that these football clubs, often regarded as 'big brands', have maintained their top positions, with only two exceptions: Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain. Both clubs are typical examples of foreign takeovers, with injections of significant amounts of cash, thus leading to an 'artificial' leap to the top of the financial hierarchy in European club football. This phenomenon, referred to as the 'sugar daddy' effect (Preuss, Haugen and Schubert, 2014, p. 43), is a direct result of winning overseas investors with almost unlimited financial resources. The two above-mentioned examples only prove that it is almost impossible to climb to the top of the ladder without any form of financial doping.

The third characteristic stemming from this data is that even within the financial elite, the clubs from the very top are growing faster than the rest (i.e. top-20). On average the revenues of the richest club are approximately four times higher than those of the club ranked in 20th position. The further down the financial table we go, the clearer it becomes that the gap between the top clubs and the clubs from semi-peripheral leagues (Dutch, Portuguese) is only growing. In other words, European football as a field is becoming more fragmented and dominated by the leading clubs from the *big five* leagues.

Table 1. Financial hierarchy of top-10 clubs in 1997/1998 and 2020 (in millions of euros).

	Club	Revenues 1997/1998 (m€)	Revenues 2020 (m€)
1	FC Barcelona	58.3	840.8
2	Real Madrid	86.6	757.3
3	Manchester United	105.5	711.5
4	Bayern Munich	79.5	660.1
5	Paris Saint-Germain	-	635.9
6	Manchester City	-	610.6
7	FC Liverpool	54.5	604.7
8	Tottenham Hotspur	-	521.1
9	Chelsea	75	513.1
10	Juventus	66.4	459.7

Such fragmentation of football field raises a serious question about consequences for the fairness of the competition. Naturally, it is difficult to imagine formal oligopoly in football, since sport, as such, rests upon open and free competition. But if we can use oligopoly more as a metaphor in order to illustrate the situation in football in Europe, we might recall the classic definition of oligopoly (Clegg and Bailey, 2008, p.878), where a small number of firms (albeit none of them alone) have significant influence on the market. While football as a market is growing, a disproportionally-large stake of this growth has profited a select number of (already affluent) football clubs. As a result, not only does their financial position become stronger, but also their political position. The analysis of changes in the seeding system in the UCL provides empirical evidence that it evolved from a competition of national champions into a European super-league only for the select few football clubs from the most affluent leagues. The rules of the game have been adjusted to favour the favourites, making them strongly interested in advocating such a system. Although fully understandable from the economic point of view, it leaves serious doubts about the fairness of competition.

Let us then examine the structure and results of the most prestigious and profitable competition – the UCL. The success of a competition depends on its design (Szymański, 2003), and indeed the most prestigious annual football tournament in Europe has been the subject of substantial structural changes. Since the early 1990s

1990s two major trends can be identified. First, European club football, steadily but gradually, has been taking the shape of a league, moving from (typical for the ECCC) a knockout tournament towards amore league-type competition. The expansion of the round-robin group stage could be measured by the growing number of clubs playing in the group stage (16 – 1994/5; 24 – 1997/1998; 32 – 1990/2000). A larger number of clubs translates into more matches between qualified teams, bigger revenues and, consequently, greater chances of attracting talented players. In other words, the growing scale and importance of a European competition has become a major driver for the transformation of European football (Mittag and Legrand, 2010).

The growing role of the UCL draws attention to the qualification system, which is driven by economic and political goals. It consecutively supports teams from *the big five* (see: Dagaev and Rudyk, 2019). Laszlo Csato (2019, p. 14) analysed the most recent reform (2018/2019) and found *that only one team among the 43 considered has benefited from the reform, but nine clubs have lost more than one million euro in expected prizes*. This stays in line with numerous other studies that show that the UCL is increasingly becoming a playground for the leading European leagues, disembarking from its original idea of a tournament of national champions. Thus, the combination of the rapid financial growth and favourable seeding system has led to a situation whereby the last club playing in the UCL finals from outside of *the big five* was FC Porto, which beat AC Monaco in 2004. In fact, since the reform of the UCL (1996/1997), the winners have come from only four countries: Spain (11), England (5), Italy (3) and Germany (3). Such a trend is very unlikely to change, as in the current season (2019/2020) all clubs which have qualified for the last 16 stage come from *the big five*, only reproducing the existing hierarchy and legitimising the qualification system. This contributes to further fragmentation of football field in Europe, effectively turning the UCL into a tournament for elite clubs, even though it is built on the myth of open competition.

Quo Vadis football?

The study shows that the football field is gradually becoming fragmented and benefits the select few, at the cost of sustainability of football development. European football is rapidly approaching the dangerous, unsporty, idea of pan-European leagues, which will facilitate further acceleration of turbocapitalism (Luttwak, 1999) in football. The gradual de-nationalisation of club football opened an opportunity for larger (and more influential and richer) clubs to play more games (against other big clubs) regardless of their country of origin. Unlike in the past, European competition has become important, not only as a source of reputation, but also increasingly as a business opportunity which could generate income from: (a) TV-rights; (b) transnational advertisements; and (c) global merchandising (Evens and Lefever, 2011). This is due to the fact that de-nationalisation of European football provides a highway for almost unlimited expansion of the fan base, which translates into additional financial revenues. It is widely acknowledged that football is one of the most globalised social phenomena (Foer, 2004; Gulianotti and Robertson, 2007) and is often linked to the process of Europeanisation (Missiroli, 2002). The latter refers to a growing role of all-European regulations and the rising power of European institutions in setting the organisational rules of game.

Based on the financial reports, we can state that *the big five* leagues are becoming increasingly richer and politically more powerful, gradually taking a hegemonic position in European football. They not only use that position to influence financial regulation, and the seeding system in European club competition etc., but they also tend to monopolise media broadcasting, draining smaller national leagues of both human and financial resources. In major American professional leagues (which are often presented as role models), various compensating mechanisms are deployed, such as capped salary or a drafting system, which support teams from the bottom of league tables. This is clearly not the case for European football, with financial and structural regulations inevitably leading to oligopoly and undermining the founding idea of sports, by protecting the major competitors rather than the fair competition itself. The outcome of such policy is predictable and the list of winners of the UCL says it all. As mentioned above, since 1997 (when the new rules were established) only one club from outside *the big five* has played in the final (FC Porto in 2003). Secondly, the commodification and globalisation of football discussed earlier has led to a transformation of football clubs into commercial brands and turned fans into customers. This process has already been widely discussed in the literature (William, 2006), but in the long term such development – celebrated by many – undermines the magic of football fandom, with its focus on loyalty, emotional attachment and even scarification. There is a sharp distinction between fans and customers, with the latter being primarily interested in consumption and satisfying their own needs, while fans tend to be orientated towards contribution, as they feel a part of their club. Thirdly, football was born and developed as a social phenomenon, deeply embedded in local environments. Historically, both players and fans were recruited from neighbourhoods; later only fans remained local, while most recently (particularly in club brands) neither the players, nor the fans, must have local links. This remains at odds with traditional football culture, which contributes to the sense of togetherness in local communities. Clubs took their names from cities and districts (or related industries) and they have been strongly linked to local communities, serving as a source of local pride. They mean a lot to local people and become an important part of their identity, helping to build a sense of togetherness in a local community. Of course, this is changing, as most club brands now seek followers

in Asia's and the Middle East's more affluent and populous regions, from which they can generate significant financial revenues. Such global popularity benefits only a tiny minority of European football – mainly large brands from *the big five* – which again reproduces these clubs' hegemonic position. The three aforementioned developments pose a serious threat to the future of football. Its transformation into global entertainment, with the help of mass media, can boost the popularity of the clubs, but it will most likely attract 'glory seekers', who are lured by success and celebrities on and off the pitch. However, this affection could be short-term and easily disappear. Should the success pass, clubs, just like commercial brands, could easily follow the likes of Nokia, Kodak or Blackberry, losing their hegemonic position and share of the market. The customers of these companies, without hesitation, simply walked away to their competitors, as they were offered more attractive and fashionable alternatives. Football clubs – both socially and financially – have been relatively stable due to the loyalty of fans and a predictable level of financial revenues (Brzeźniak, 2018, p. 11). Given the loosening ties with the local fans (and their irrational loyalty) and the fostering of relations with those attracted (or disappointed) only by results, football could turn not only into a business, but also into an element of 'casino capitalism' (Strange, 1986).

Conclusions

The study shows that the design of European club football, historically driven by the unpredictability of sport competition and loyalty of fans, who stand behind their clubs regardless of their performance, becomes a form of oligopoly, which in the long term can undermine its development. A growing gap between *the big five* and the rest of the European football clubs calls for action from transnational actors (UEFA) to restore fairer competition in international club football. It raises a significant question, already discussed by famous sport economist Stefan Szymański (2006, p. 207), whether to *protect competitors or competition? Protection of competition means allowing firms to do what they see is in the best interests of their business, i.e. their customers, even if this causes their rivals to go bankrupt. Protection of competitors means ensuring that certain firms stay in business, regardless of whether the consumers would choose to buy the product in the absence of protection.* The development of European football shows that football authorities are struggling to find a good solution, but tend to lean towards supporting major competitors, as if the future of football in Europe relies on the popularity of the big clubs. The establishment of three European competitions, namely the UCL, the League of Europe and the Europa Conference League, will emerge (starting from 2021-2022). Undoubtedly, the structure of European tournaments is driven by economic and political priorities, although this is rather not the right direction. The biggest beneficiaries of such structural development will, once again, be the most affluent club brands, which will use it as a window of opportunity to multiply their financial revenues and strengthen their hegemonic position. These three European competitions will facilitate the international aspirations of less affluent leagues (e.g. Lithuanian, Latvian, Albanian) and provide them with an opportunity to compete on a pan-European level, while keeping them away from the major, luxurious, highly-profitable and globally popular UCL. This idea shall be revised and reviewed against the aims it is supposed to serve.

It is understandable that big clubs do not want to play against small and unknown rivals because only the clashes of the giants attract global audiences in considerable numbers. Therefore, they show little interest in playing against any clubs from outside *the big five*, perhaps with the exception of a few football clubs with an outstanding history, such as Ajax Amsterdam, PSV, FC Porto or Benfica Lisboa. The design of the qualification system has already made the composition of competitors in the group stage relatively predictable due to unhidden bias towards teams from *the big five*. This bias is perpetuated by limiting access to the lucrative competition for those who are not particularly welcome with open arms, namely the clubs from the peripheries of European football. Football authorities tend to act in favour of big competitors and stimulate the unconstrained growth of club brands, which will be at the cost of smaller clubs and leagues, which lose their best players, coaches and increasingly also (new) fans, who are being socialised to fancy football brands. Perhaps in the short term such development will generate financial revenues for UEFA and big brands, but inevitably it will benefit only the select few. On the other hand, the football field will become even more fragmented and structurally segregated. The three layers of European competition will allow those club brands to outshine the rest of the football community in regard to the level of financial revenues, global popularity and performance on the pitch. Undoubtedly, this will produce more matches between the big clubs and football celebrities will have frequent opportunities to play against each other. Inevitably, it will attract great global interest, also of those who normally do not follow football. This translates into big money from TV rights, commercial partners who pay for regular global outreach, and millions of new followers on social media. However, in the long term it could damage football, which originally emerged as locally-based, free and inclusive competition (with a lack of specific equipment, designed to be played almost anywhere) between clubs and with their local heroes.

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