

Towards pluralism in European sports policies

Critical notes on the *Independent European Sport Review 2006*

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.

As the draft of the Constitution contained an article on sport, sport remains so far without any legal-political framework inside the European Union. That is why the European Commission now tries to find an isolated solution for the implementation of European sport policies. The so-called *Independent European Sport Review 2006* aimed at paving the way towards a sort of constitution for European sports. Its vision is problematic – and not “independent” at all.

What is European in sports?

The review hints at some of the legal and more-than-legal problems of actual sports. 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 “home ground”, looking closer at the logic of football...

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 pyramid – a monopolistic model

The centralistic and hierarchical vision of the *Independent 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 interesting description is, however, 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 (13, 17, 35-37, 57, 62, 66, 71, 130-131). 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.

Contrasting experiences

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

- Street football has been a broad phenomenon of young boys during long time without being linked to the formal pyramid of achievement sport.
- Popular football on the basis of pub teams has been the basis of workers’ football – as in the German Ruhr district.
- Children’s football has passed on informal practices from generation to generation.
- Grassroots football for peace experiments with play and game and festivity – as in Italy.
- Football for ethnic reconciliation works with game patterns like in the Open Fun Football Schools in the Balkans and in the Caucasus.

It is just this diversity in popular practice, which constitutes the basis for the special popularity of football – for instance in contrast to handball, which is much more bound to a certain set of rules and organisational framework.

Sport for all, nor the experiences of non-monopolistic sports policies in different European countries, nor does it correspond to the needs of democracy in sports.

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 since the early history of modern sports. It 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 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. Danish legislation in the field of sports makes up a dual system. On one hand, the law on elite sports is 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, while the *Scottish Association of Local Sports Councils* (SALSC) represents the activity of sport associations on the local level, mainly in Sport for all. 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).

Italian sports are subjected to 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.

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

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.

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 explorative 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.

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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