

Fostering Social Cohesion through International Exchange in Socio- Pedagogical Fan Work

A Policy Proposal for Similar Structures and Standards across Europe

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Disclaimer

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Further information about the research project can be found on the project website: fanzine-research.github.io.

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Summary

Football fan communities across Europe play a crucial role in shaping social interactions and identities, bridging many traditional social divides. Despite their positive aspects, these communities face significant challenges, such as cultural barriers, historical rivalries, and instances of violence. This policy paper proposes leveraging the success of socio-pedagogical fan projects in Germany to enhance international fan networking and social cohesion across Europe.

Currently, Europe is dealing with multiple crises, including Euroscepticism, anti-democratic tendencies, and nationalism. Traditional institutions that once contributed to social cohesion are eroding. However, mass cultural phenomena like football have the potential to foster a sense of belonging and strengthen social cohesion. Football fan culture, with its widespread popularity and emotional involvement, is a prime example. Yet, fan communities face internal and external challenges that hinder European exchange, such as lack of social representation, occasional violence, and language barriers.

In Germany, fan projects based on the National Concept for Sport and Security (NKSS) effectively address these issues. These projects, although affiliated with football clubs, operate independently to engage young fans, address social issues, prevent violence, and promote an inclusive fan culture. They provide counselling, political education, and opportunities for international exchange. However, funding limitations and lack of international coordination restrict their potential. The paper recommends establishing similar socio-pedagogical structures across Europe. Key strategies include:

- Highlighting the importance of socio-pedagogical fan work: Acknowledgement and appreciation for socio-pedagogical fan work and its multi-faceted value for benefitting social cohesion must be increased across Europe.
- Promoting best practices from German fan projects: The socio-pedagogical work with young fans in Germany must work as a role model, with the UEFA EURO 2024 providing a unique chance to showcase and discuss fan projects' activities.
- Supporting country-specific socio-pedagogical structures: Approaches should be tailored to the specific needs of the respective country, including its football ecosystem and fan culture, and carried out by local actors.
- Establishing formal networks for European fan projects: Drawing on the expertise and network of Football Supporters Europe (FSE), international collaboration in the form of conferences and further exchange formats is necessary to support fan work initiatives, networking, knowledge sharing, and best practice learning.
- Increasing financial support and recognition: Successful exchange among European fan work practitioners might attract, but also requires financial and institutional support from various stakeholders within and beyond the football sphere.

The recommendations are based on the research findings of the FANZinE project, carried out in Germany, Norway, Poland, and Spain, especially a representative survey with 1.760 participants per study country and a broad-ranging interview study with around 50 experts at national and European level. By implementing these recommendations, Europe can enhance social cohesion through football, fostering a stronger European identity and values. Enhanced fan work initiatives can leverage football's unifying power for positive social change and European integration, creating a more inclusive and cohesive continent.

1. Introduction

Football fan communities across Europe represent a vibrant aspect of European culture. Fans' emotional involvement with the sport and its qualities as a mass cultural phenomenon and leisure activity with an audience bridging many traditional social cleavages play a significant role in shaping social interactions and identities. However, challenges such as cultural barriers, historical rivalries, and instances of violence persist within these communities. This policy paper advocates for leveraging the success of socio-pedagogically working German fan projects and the implementation of such fan work in other countries within the domain of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA). Inspired by the German model, this can enhance international fan networking and socio-pedagogical initiatives. With support from European institutions and national football associations, the proposed measures can foster cross-country exchange and strengthen social cohesion throughout Europe.

2. Current State of Affairs

Europe – and with it, the European Union (EU) – is facing multiple crises (Riddervold, Trondal, and Newsome 2021). Euroscepticism, anti-democratic tendencies, and nationalist backlashes are general trends that threaten the project of peace and freedom. Moreover, controversial topics like military cooperation, migration, or the impending climate catastrophe provide additional grounds for deepening divides among member states but also in the general public. At the same time, institutions that traditionally contributed to social cohesion and community, like political parties or churches, are eroding, losing members and, therefore, relevance for these purposes. However, novel research shows that it is not just the political sphere or institutionally based communities that influence cohesion (Recchi and Favell 2019). Mass cultural phenomena and leisure time activities can also contribute to identification with Europe, foster a sense of belonging, ultimately strengthening social cohesion in Europe and, in turn, the European community on various levels. The cohesive potential lies in the continued, ubiquitous exposure to European stimuli when the activity takes place on a European(ised) level and in the social relations, contact, and exchange across national borders between Europeans that create knowledge, understanding, and sustainable connections. One of these phenomena, if not the most relevant, is **football fan culture** due to its widespread popularity and emotional involvement among a highly socially diverse public across all of Europe (Cashmore and Dixon 2016; Thole, Pfaff, and Flickinger 2019; Gabler 2010; Doidge, Kossakowski, and Mintert 2020). Taking up previous research that concentrates on changing perceptions and attitudes towards Europe among people following Europeanised football (FREE 2015; Niemann, Brand, and Weber 2024; King 2000, 2003; Levermore and Millward 2007; Millward 2009, 2006), the FANZinE project provides quantitative data to show a *football effect* on the emergence of shared European identity. In a representative survey, fans compared to non-fans are emotionally more attached to Europe and the EU, and they have a more positive attitude towards European integration and EU membership. Moreover, fans also have a broader understanding of Europe as they are more inclusive of countries outside the EU whose football associations are part of UEFA (Biel et al. 2024).

However, much like European politics and society, football fan communities also face various challenges, preventing European exchange among football supporters. These can be either internal, like a lack of social representation, occasional violent tendencies, or political extremism, or external, including language barriers, historical rivalries, cultural differences, or simply a lack of opportunities for contact and exchange across borders.

Both types of challenges are addressed by the work of the 70 established German fan projects based on the National Concept for Sport and Security (Nationales Konzept Sport und Sicherheit (NKSS)). These socio-pedagogically working institutions, which are associated with but not formally part of football clubs, especially engage young fans to address social issues, prevent violence, provide positive orientation and work towards an inclusive fan culture. German fan projects operate as mediators between football clubs and supporters, offering critical services such as political education, conflict resolution, and organised visits to historical sites like former concentration camps. These projects serve as invaluable points of contact for fans grappling with social issues while promoting the unifying and

positive aspects of football culture. Through their activities, fan projects contribute to democratic engagement of fans as citizens, enable political and football-based participation of a diverse public, and ultimately contribute to cohesion around their associated club, in Germany, and potentially Europe. Germany has pioneered socio-pedagogical work through fan projects, headed by the coordinating body, the Koordinationsstelle Fanprojekte (KOS), and the umbrella organisation, Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Fanprojekte (BAG). However, the experts across all four countries in the interview study of the FANZinE project repeatedly point out that analogous structures are largely absent in most European countries. Hence, besides the lack of sufficient funding, KOS, BAG, and individual fan projects also struggle to establish international partnerships for meaningful collaboration. Nevertheless, their stated ambition is the promotion and transfer of the concept of statutorily regulated fan social work into other European countries. The deficit of networking frameworks for socio-pedagogical fan work restricts the potential for collaborative efforts to foster social cohesion and combat negative attitudes within football fan communities that would benefit young football fans in particular. Establishing and improving similar structures to those successful in Germany across Europe represents a viable strategy for sustainable improvement to reap additional positive effects, also through the promotion of positive images of Europe and a desirability to belong to a European collective not just of fans but of citizens.

To foster the establishment of socio-pedagogical fan work across Europe, Football Supporters Europe (FSE) should be a central partner with its expertise in European fan structures and its institutional recognition. FSE understand itself as the democratic voice of football supporters across all UEFA member associations, ranging from individuals and local fan groups to national organisations such as KOS. FSE is an independent and self-organised body. As FSE has a [Memorandum of Understanding with UEFA](#) and [Observer Status with the Council of Europe](#), the organisation is formally recognised for representing millions of supporters to advocate fan issues such as maintaining sporting merit in European competitions, protecting domestic football or defending fans' rights and lower ticket prices. While FSE is not specified in socio-pedagogical fan work, the organisation opens up access to fans and, in the broadest sense, fan (work) structures across Europe.

Moreover, the proposed expansion of socio-pedagogical fan work must account for the distinct nuances of each country's fan culture and footballing ecosystem. Based on the lessons and successes of German fan projects, KOS together with FSE can urge the EU and national governments, UEFA and national associations, and football clubs all over Europe to support an inclusive and interconnected network of socio-pedagogically working fan projects. Maintaining the independent character of fan projects in the implementation of similar structures is paramount. It accounts for fans' demand for independent representation and sovereign structures beyond the control and influence of clubs, associations, or governments. Furthermore, it lives up to the social relevance of football and fans by granting them separate structures. Thereby, football and fan culture can be harnessed through independent efforts to nurture enduring social relations and exchange, creating international understanding and a sense of belonging, ultimately enhancing overall social cohesion across the continent.

3. The Role of International Exchange

Encouraging cross-border interactions among football fans is instrumental in fostering mutual international and interpersonal understanding. Knowledge about and understanding of other countries, cultures, and citizens leads to a breaking down of stereotypes and decreases prejudice that may arise from historical rivalries or cultural differences. Based on mutual contact and exchange, the in-group to which individuals feel a sense of belonging is widened following the recognition of similarities regarding fandom like shared passion for the sport and their respective clubs, significant emotional involvement and resulting activities, support, or values and attitudes (Allport 1954; Tajfel and Turner 2001; Gaertner et al. 1993). Resulting in-group bias, positively perceiving and favouring members of one's own in-group over that of the corresponding out-group, negative stereotypes and prejudice are reduced further. International exchange initiatives facilitate direct engagement between fans from different countries, allowing them to share experiences, learn from one another, and develop relationships or even friendships beyond national borders. These interactions promote a sense of shared identity as Europeans, transcending nationalities and national frames of reference, therefore contributing to a

broader sense of belonging and unity within the continent reflected in strengthened social cohesion. In turn, this is beneficial for progressing European integration based on public support for the European project – it means a stronger and more resilient Europe in the face of a multitude of challenges and threats on different levels, as well as a positive perspective for the future of peace, cooperation, and freedom for the continent.

International exchange programmes also play a crucial role in promoting European integration by highlighting common interests and values among diverse fan communities. By participating in activities together, such as attending matches, organising events, creating meeting spaces, collaborating on community projects, or educational visits to memorials or similar sites, fans can build bridges and strengthen the social fabric of Europe. This type of engagement fosters empathy and respect for cultural diversity, ultimately contributing to a more cohesive and inclusive European society by promoting these European values. Socio-pedagogic fan work in all aspects is particularly relevant when it is directed at adolescent football fans to bring them into contact with these values at a young age, fostering their European mindsets early on.

4. Socio-Pedagogical Fan Work

German fan projects serve as exemplary models of effective socio-pedagogical approaches within football fan communities (Kotthaus, Schmidt, and Templin 2021; Gabler 2017). A big emphasis of their work is put on youth engagement, recognising young fans as key stakeholders in shaping the future of fan culture, football, and – ideally – Europe and European society. Fan projects actively involve youth in constructive activities, either related to football fandom or using fans' investment for their club and community as a point of contact, such as art projects, community events, or educational activities. Thereby, fan projects provide an alternative to negative behaviours and empower young people to become positive influencers within their fan communities and outside of it in their everyday lives as citizens and members of the general public.

German fan projects exemplify effective socio-pedagogical approaches, focusing on youth engagement, social problem-solving, and non-confrontational violence prevention through sport-centric engagement and educational offers for youth and young adults in the scope of active fan scenes and Ultra groups at German football clubs across various levels of the German footballing pyramid. One key aspect of socio-pedagogical fan work is its focus on social problem-solving and conflict resolution. Fan projects in Germany function as mediators between clubs, fans, and authorities, working to establish constructive dialogue and mitigate tensions, also addressing issues such as discrimination, violence, or anti-social behaviour within fan scenes. Through dialogue, education, and collaborative initiatives, fan projects work to promote a culture of respect and tolerance among supporters, effectively playing out as a social path to violence prevention, which contributes to a safe and constructive football experience for all. Consequently, fan projects facilitate participation, and promote diversity in fan structures and beyond.

Moreover, German fan projects represent non-confrontational violence prevention work by organising educational trips to historical sites like former concentration camps, promoting awareness and reflection among fans. These initiatives encourage critical thinking and foster a sense of responsibility among fans to uphold the values of respect and solidarity in their interactions, promoting positive values of tolerance, diversity, and open-mindedness. In this regard, fan projects contribute to democratic engagement and political participation. Additionally, they create and offer opportunities for international (youth) exchange, providing increased opportunities for continued contact and the development of transnational networks based on social relations, providing social capital as an important precondition for identification and increased cohesion.

In summary, socio-pedagogical fan work conducted by fan projects in Germany exemplifies a holistic approach to fan engagement, emphasising education, community-building, and conflict resolution within fan communities. It is made possible because of their sovereign structures which generates trust among fans and creates an environment that accounts for fans' demand for representation and recognition of their (social) relevance. By prioritising youth empowerment and promoting positive behaviours on the one hand and working towards international exchange and understanding on the

other, fan projects contribute to a more inclusive, responsible, and reflected fan culture that can serve as a model for similar initiatives across Europe.

Effective fan projects contribute to

- violence prevention through positive engagement, democratic engagement and participation,
- increased contact and social relations across national borders among a diverse public,
- international understanding, inclusion, and a sense of belonging,

which lead to

- increased identification with Europe and European values,
- positive perceptions of European community membership,
- strengthened social cohesion transcending fan communities based on fans as citizens.

5. Strategies for Improvement

Combined, implementing structures of socio-pedagogic fan work similar to the German fan projects across Europe, equipped with sufficient funding, legal and ideational support by all relevant actors, is a big step towards successfully unfolding and harvesting the potentials that football and its fan culture possess. Strengthening social cohesion in Europe then is a result of creating opportunities for peaceful international exchange and addressing existing challenges in structures of organised fan culture. To address existing gaps, we recommend a variety of measures that, taken together, will establish the structures and cooperation we regard as beneficial to both European football and European society.

Highlighting the relevance of socio-pedagogical fan work: Collaborative efforts are needed to elevate the importance of socio-pedagogical fan work for social cohesion. As fan projects in Germany have proven highly successful on a national basis, internationally similar structures and standards would enable these positive effects on the transnational European level. Emphasising the value of socio-pedagogical fan work in preventing violence, confrontation, and a wide range of other social issues from discrimination to anti-democratic tendencies, while at the same time fostering democratic engagement, participation, promotion of diversity, and political engagement, is crucial for garnering support from stakeholders. The relevance and success of socio-pedagogical fan work furthermore hinges upon the independence of their structures which need to be maintained.

Promoting best practices from German fan projects: The pioneering approach of socio-pedagogical fan work in Germany deal with social issues of young fans to prevent violence, provide positive orientation and work towards an inclusive fan culture. The UEFA EURO 2024 in Germany offers a prime opportunity to showcase the success of the fan projects. This event can demonstrate the impact of fan work on social cohesion and provide a platform for international dialogue and exchange. Therefore, the tournament and the accompanying programmes and offers to fans organised by the fan projects represent a unique chance to highlight the successes and the relevance of fan projects' work to fans and professionals from 23 other UEFA countries.

Supporting country-specific socio-pedagogical structures: The experiences of historical developments, existing structures, and relevant successes from past and present of the German model provide essential insights to develop fan work structures across the continent. However, such activities must acknowledge the disparities between Germany and other European countries to create socio-pedagogical approaches that are both run by local, independent organisations and tailored to national particularities, including, on a lower level, the respective football ecosystem and fan culture. Examples of the implementation of similar structures exist in Switzerland (Fanarbeit Schweiz) and Poland (Kibice Razem). They furthermore highlight the importance and the subsequent success of adaptations of the German model to national particularities like increased volunteer work or a younger target demographic. And while the topic has received high political attention in France, there remains a lack of organised representation, further highlighting the importance of a professional structure.

Establishing formal networks for European fan projects: As the example of FSE shows, international collaboration is needed for effective fan initiatives, networking, knowledge sharing and best practice learning across borders. In terms of socio-pedagogical fan work, a European Conference

on Fan Work could function as a kickstart opportunity for KOS and BAG to present and promote the German model of fan projects. Building up on the existing fan structures of FSE and the international contacts of German fan projects, the conference could boost brainstorming and further exchange formats to create awareness for the preventative nature of fan work. Examples of successful networking and Europe-wide conferences in the scope of football professionals exist in the fields of club management or Supporter Liaison Officers – the latter position having been made mandatory by UEFA with the 2012/13 season.

Increasing financial support and recognition: A European Conference on Fan Work and further exchange formats are likely to increase tangible interest for the fan work among relevant stakeholders to secure economic and ideational support, also beyond the football sphere. At the same time, the establishment of formal networks for mutual learning among European fan work practitioners needs financial and institutional support of major stakeholders from the very beginning. Any idea of a cooperation in socio-pedagogical fan work in different European countries can be inspired by the experiences and evolution of FSE. The organisation is nowadays recognised as the European representative body for fan interest, receiving core funding by UEFA, but also financial project support by the EU, national and local politics, as well as from (inter)national football governing bodies and football clubs. Related to the financial aspect are acceptance and preservation of the structure's sovereignty to account for fans' social relevance and their right to independent representation and organisation. Funding and other supporting entities need to be open to co-existing sovereign structures. They must not expect their interests to be promoted through socio-pedagogic fan work, but rather value these structures and their work as an end in themselves and recognise their positive effects on individual fans, football fan culture more generally, and even society as a whole. (Financial) Support then becomes an expression of appreciation and recognition of the social relevance of the sport.

6. Conclusion

Investing in European fan work initiatives fosters active and positive fan cultures, enhancing social cohesion and countering division. By leveraging successful German approaches and fostering international collaborations supported by political institutions, as well as football governing bodies and clubs, Europe can harness football's unifying power to strengthen European identity and values.

Key recommendations:

- Establish professional structures of fan work based on the German model of fan projects adapted to national particularities across all UEFA nations.
- Create platforms for regular formal and informal exchange among fan work professionals to leverage knowledge sharing and best practice learning.
- Secure legal foundation, institutional support, and sufficient funding to create tailored structures for sustainable successes in fan work and international exchange.

Enhanced fan work initiatives contribute to a more inclusive and cohesive Europe, leveraging football as a tool for positive social change and European integration. Collaborative efforts among stakeholders can maximise the impact of fan-driven interventions in promoting social cohesion across diverse European contexts.

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