

Enhancing Fan Participation: A Policy Proposal for Co-determination in European Club Football

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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 plays a significant role in society, providing fans with a sense of belonging and community. However, increasing commercialisation and exclusion from decision-making processes are alienating fans, threatening the sport's potential for social cohesion and identification. Data from surveys with close to 9,000 participants from Germany, Spain, Poland and Norway as well as interviews with around 50 experts in the four study countries and the European level highlights fans' growing discontent with these developments, which risks further estrangement and erosion of football's social relevance. Football's mass appeal and emotional involvement foster a sense of belonging and identification among fans, generating social capital and ultimately contributing to social cohesion. This sense of belonging is rooted in fans' influence on their clubs and the sport. To maintain this connection, fans need to be meaningfully involved in decision-making processes. Successful fan involvement can create networks of engaged supporters, enhance self-efficacy, and strengthen ties to clubs and the sport. The trajectory of professional club football in Europe, characterised by increasing commercialisation and a growing remove between football governance and participatory structures, runs contrary to fan interests, leading to feelings of alienation. Fans' lack of representation in decision-making processes exacerbates this issue, as seen in protests against investor influence or initiatives like the European Super League. Institutional structures often fail to guarantee that fans' voices are heard, further eroding their connection to the sport.

To address these challenges, this policy paper recommends the following measures and strategies:

1. Institutionalised Consultation and Decision-Making Involvement:

- Establish regular, structured dialogue between fans, clubs, and associations to facilitate mutual understanding and cooperation.
- Implement models like Germany's club-fan dialogue and the Memorandum of Understanding between the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) and Football Supporters Europe (FSE), which institutionalise fan participation in decision-making processes.

2. Legal and Regulatory Reforms:

- Mandate fan representation in decision-making structures across all levels of football governance through UEFA regulations.
- Support national initiatives like the UK's fan-led review to ensure fan inclusion in governance based on national legal frameworks outside of footballing structures.

3. Funding and Support for Fan Engagement Projects:

- Continue and expand projects like FSE's Kickoff!, which improve relations between fans and football authorities, funded through programs like Erasmus+ or by UEFA and national associations.

These measures and strategies derived from results of the FANZinE research aim to secure fans' involvement in shaping football's future, counteracting feelings of alienation, and maintaining the sport's social relevance. Through enhanced participation and engagement, football can strengthen European identification and social cohesion.

1. Introduction

Football, a cornerstone of European popular culture, thrives on the passionate involvement of fans. Despite this, current governance structures in European football clubs often exclude fans from decision-making processes, which can alienate supporters and undermine the sport's potentials for identity, community building, and social cohesion. This policy paper addresses the democratic deficit in football governance, explores successful models of fan involvement, and proposes solutions to enhance fan participation. Implementing fan-centred legal frameworks, governance reforms, financial models, and improved engagement strategies will promote a more democratic and sustainable future for European football.

2. Current State of Affairs

Football has an important role in and impact upon society. Fans exhibit strong emotional involvement with the sport and their favourite club. Crucial for their involvement are shared experiences with other fans, for example chanting, celebrating, and suffering together. Their connection to the sport and their community provides the foundation for the identifying and cohesive potentials of football and its fan culture (Stone 2007). The sense of belonging to a community of fans serves as a resource for mutual trust, practices of solidarity, and collective action. From belonging to a club, still the standard mode for inducing fandom, this community can be widened to football fans of other clubs, either in the national or even in the European context (Niemann, Brand, and Weber 2024 (forthcoming)). A European community of fans can be based on shared traits like a mutual passion for the sport, similar experiences both positive and negative, or networking, interaction, and exchange for the implementation of shared goals and the related experiences of European connection. This can increase European identification with and social cohesion in Europe. The collectivising, connecting, cohesive potential of football fandom, also on a European level, therefore has at its core the fans' connection to their clubs (Finger et al. 2023).

However, as interview data from Germany, Spain, Poland, and Norway has shown, ever-progressing commercialisation, a perceived lack of inclusion in decision-making processes, and developments detrimental to the interests of fans increasingly erode this formerly solid foundation that activates the cohesive and identifying potentials of football fan culture. A lack of representation and (opportunities for) participation prevent the experience of self-efficacy, while feelings of being left out or overlooked lead to a negative relationship towards football, the club, and a fan community. In consequence, cohesive and identifying potentials of football that can benefit social cohesion in Europe are thwarted. As these developments are seemingly progressing, football fans are likely to increasingly become estranged from the sport and their communities. This further erodes a cohesive institution in society, contributing to atomisation and individualisation, while the sport gradually loses its social relevance and is in danger of becoming a simple product for consumption devoid of positive potentials for social cohesion.

3. The Social Relevance of Football

Football as a mass cultural phenomenon and leisure activity that is shared by an extensive, socially diverse audience across Europe has unique potential to contribute to social cohesion. Furthermore, fans are heavily emotionally involved in the sport and their favourite club, they feel a sense of belonging to a community of fans that oftentimes transcends club or even national boundaries to a European level. Given the significant identifying potential of football, its fandom can be viewed as "an extension of the self" (Doidge et al. 2020). The value of football for emotional and social involvement is not only directed at the club but at the communities surrounding it, leading to a sense of belonging and identification which provide football fans with orientation and knowledge about themselves as well as their peers in an increasingly complex world. Membership in these communities shapes fans' values, attitudes, and perceptions. As research of the FANZinE project shows, this sense of belonging transcends club and country borders, as more than 35 percent of fans feel part of a European football fan community. The representative survey data even indicate a football effect beyond the sport as fans hold significantly more positive attitudes regarding several markers of European identification (Biel et al. 2024).

Recognising the social relevance of football means securing these identifying potentials, in turn acknowledging that identification and emotional involvement mandate a certain participation of fans in their clubs, the community surrounding it, and the sport more general. Fans identify with their club and others based on shared experiences and narratives surrounding match attendance, chants, club colours and more. Interactions and exchange with other fans are furthermore paramount for unfolding football's identifying potentials (Winand et al. 2021; Cleland et al. 2018). The strong tie of fans to their club and football more generally not only denotes that they feel part of a fan community, but that they consider themselves as an essential stakeholder of their club and the sport itself. The supporters reinterpret the central role of football in their everyday lives (Stone 2007) by assigning fans (themselves) a central role in football: fans want to play a part in the sport and its development. On the most basic level, the feeling of being able to influence their team's performance on the pitch still is the reason for many supporters to attend a game in the stadium. "Football belongs to the fans", is a well-known saying not just among fans themselves. Fans want to have a say in their club and in football more generally. The causal connection here is that representation of fans leads to participation in the scope of the possibilities allotted to them. Seizing the opportunity to participate will bring them into contact with other fans which creates networks of involved fans.

Seeing the results and successes of participation leads to a feeling of self-efficacy. The importance of continued engagement and sustainably connecting fans to the sport and other engaged fans must not be underestimated. The efforts for more effective lobbying, expression of and cooperation towards common goals, and joining forces for increased representation have led to the establishment of representative fan networks in a variety of UEFA countries as well as on the European level with Football Supporters Europe (see below). In consequence, both the emergence of networks as well as the feeling of self-efficacy contribute to cohesion among fans and a sustainable future of the sport regarding their involvement. The sense of belonging is heavily facilitated by fans influence on the sport, because engagement fosters developments which they positively identify with and want to belong to. Experiences of successful involvement, bottom-up initiatives and fan political engagement are conducive for motivating fans to stay involved and the creation of fan networks. The feeling of self-efficacy furthermore strengthens their ties to their favourite club and the community of fans, while preventing or at least alleviating effects of or decelerate progressing alienation from their club, the sport, and in consequence the general community of fans. Without the experience of self-efficacy, the positive potentials of football and fandom beyond the sport itself – stronger identification with Europe and the EU benefitting European social cohesion – are also in danger. Alienation between fans and European football therefore negatively impacts the relationship between fans and Europe more generally.

4. Obstacles and threats

However, fans' connection to the sport, their sense of belonging based on engagement and involvement with the sport is increasingly under threat. The interview data from the FANZinE project according to which fans increasingly feel that the trajectory of professional club football in Europe runs contrary to their interest, estranging them from their object of identification, complement similar survey findings. The quantitative data highlights significant concerns among fans regarding the current state of professional club football in Europe. The mean score for the perception that UEFA club competitions are too exclusive is 5.45 on a 0-10 scale, indicating a moderate level of agreement. However, there is a stronger consensus on other issues, with mean scores of 6.41 for the damaging effects of inequalities, 7.24 for the excessive influence of commercial interests, and 7.28 for the prevalence of corruption in governance (also on 0-10 scales). These results suggest that fans increasingly feel alienated by the trajectory of European club football, which they believe is diverging from their interests and values.

This consequently hampers the benefits of football fandom for identification, belonging, and cohesion. This observation is confirmed by recent fan protest against specific developments in the sport, like those against the project of an exclusive European Super League (Meier et al. 2024), or against investors in the German Football League (DFL) (Ford 2024). These protests can be regarded as an expression of fans' discontent with developments in professional European club football, as well as a manifestation of their feelings that the sport is developing away from their interest. The fact that they

carry out these protests both inside and outside of the stadium confirms that they did not have sufficient opportunities to voice their concerns and demands in regular, institutional committees. Decisions about the development of football and their favourite clubs were being made without granting them the opportunity to weigh in. This has become an increasingly prominent motif in professional club football in Europe.

Admittedly, there remains an established member-based club structure in many European countries. The most prominent regulation is arguably the German 50+1 rule, which interviewees frequently highlighted as a role model, especially in the interviews outside Germany. However, these structures apparently do not guarantee fans' voices being heard nor their involvement in developments that affect their interests. This contributes to the feeling that decisions about them are being made without them. The German case of course cannot simply be transported into other countries. And regarding the increasing pressure on and progressing erosion of the model through allowed exceptions and attempts efforts to challenge the status quo with the argument for required increased international competitiveness, the future of 50+1 is far from secure.

In other countries, the situation has deteriorated even further to the point where fans' co-determination in their clubs has been eroded almost completely. This development is reinforced by investors and owners coming into or buying entire clubs, sometimes even changing club crests or colours, the selling of stadium naming rights, etc. This affects crucial points of reference for fans' identification. Investors and owners are furthermore buying majority shares to allow for complete decision-making power, consequently eradicating regular co-determination of fans. Consequently, they do not even have to consult fans. The underlying primacy of commercial progress and profit maximisation in many cases is contrary to fans interests when it mandates decisions like the ones described above. Potential sporting success that commercial success might bring along can – if at all – only partly alleviate the negative impact on identification and senses of (non-)belonging, weakening communities, collective experiences, cooperation, and in consequence social cohesion. It has even led to fans completely turning away from their favourite club and towards amateur football, or even founding their own clubs (Brandt and Kurscheidt 2022).

Furthermore, these developments do not only concern the level of clubs, but they also unfold on the level of national and European leagues and associations. Here, fans have even less direct connections and influence, although they do join forces to express and work towards common interests and goals, exemplified by the European fan organisation Football Supporters Europe (FSE). The emergence and establishment of FSE can be regarded as another, and seemingly successful attempt at keeping or regaining influence over the sport and its future development. FSE attempts to create a coalition that cannot be ignored by clubs and associations based on its representativeness, size, and voice. However, participation and involvement are far from guaranteed, progress takes a lot of time and is hard-won. Additionally, organised structures of similar size are rarely found..

5. Measures and Strategies for Improvement

At the heart of any relevant improvement in this area lies the recognition of football's social relevance, the individual and collective importance for the fans, and working towards securing its continuity or even strengthening it. This is closely related to moderating developments that create negative perceptions and feelings of being left out on the side of the fans. A key recommendation to achieve this would be sustainable, regular, and institutionalised consultation of fans on all levels of the footballing pyramid, combined with the actual integration of these consultations' results in processes of decision making, or granting fans' equal positions in decision making committees. Securing the social relevance of football for its fans by permitting them co-determination regarding the future of 'their' sport guarantees a sustainable development of football in Europe. The possibility to realise the sports potentials for European identification and social cohesion as well as that of its fan culture lies in it bridging many traditional societal cleavages and connecting diverse people, publics, and populations across all of Europe past established political or geographical boundaries.

An important first step towards improvement concerns the general relation between fans on one side and clubs or associations on the other. The above-described developments have contributed to a consolidated antagonism between the two sides. This potentially prevents constructive cooperation, as fans perceive their counterparts as always working against them, while they are regarded as counterproductive or even destructive from the other side. A dismantling of stereotypes could be achieved through contact and dialogue, opening avenues for discussion and potentially future collaboration.

Institutionalised Consultation and Decision-Making Involvement: The establishment of equitable formats of dialogue for transparent communication of interests would create mutual understanding and regular exchange. This could serve the normalisation of exchange between the relevant actors. A successful example of such a format is the fittingly named [club-fan-dialogue in Germany](#), structured formats of dialogue between clubs and fans which have been part of the DFL's licensing regulations since 2021, providing this institutionalised exchange with legal gravity (see below). This format serves as a critical element of robust, ongoing communication between clubs and their supporters. Its inclusion in the licensing guidelines ensures that clubs maintain a regular and binding exchange with fans, discussing a wide range of topics that affect the fan community. This setup aims to create a structured dialogue where fans can express their interests and opinions directly to the club management, fostering a deeper connection and understanding between both parties. Interviews confirmed that the format is generally regarded as beneficial by both sides. Consequently, it could serve as an example for other countries – particularly because of the regulatory foundation. The consultation of fans is a first step and that expresses appreciation of their role and importance. The institutionalised inclusion of fans in committees and ideally decision-making structures facilitates experiences of self-efficacy, strengthening fans connections to other fans, the clubs, and the sport in general. For those fans who do not have a vast interest or resources to get involved, clubs should create low-threshold modes of involvement, for instance through topic-specific surveys. Generally, the exchange regarding a specific topic or development might prove particularly beneficial as all sides can set their expectations and discuss internally, providing a solid foundation for purposeful deliberations.

Another successful example of inclusion of fans in future developments of the sport on the highest level is [the Memorandum of Understanding \(MoU\) between UEFA as the European football governing body and FSE as the European representative body of football fans signed in 2023 by the two parties](#). The agreement sets out to enhance fan experiences at UEFA matches, integrate supporter liaison officers more effectively, and develop structured fan dialogue policies at the national level throughout Europe. This partnership aims to ensure that fan perspectives are represented in the decision-making processes of European football, emphasizing UEFA's commitment to the values of open competition, financial solidarity, and the cultural and social roles of football. It institutionalised their cooperation and mandates FSE participation in all relevant decision-making committees, with UEFA committing to increased dialogue with fans. If actually implemented, this could be a model on other levels as well, namely the dialogue between national associations and fans, or clubs and fans. Of course, this does presuppose the existence of representative fan organisations. Nevertheless, an application of this model on other levels would also benefit the European arena, as interests could be better formulated and communicated from one level to the other.

Legal and Regulatory Reforms: Based on their experience with the MoU and FSE and the regulatory capacities on the European footballing pyramid, UEFA is the relevant institution to mandate the inclusion of fans in decision making structures across all its members and therefore all clubs in professional European club football, analogous to the now mandatory nature of the club-fan-dialogue in Germany as the DFL introduced it to club licensing regulations in 2021, making it a necessary requirement for professional football clubs in Germany to take part in regular league competitions. This would vastly improve the situation for fans inclusion in structures. Much like the introduction of mandatory Supporter Liaison Officers (SLOs), it would improve club-fan-relations and enable constructive dialogue in a situation dominated by antagonism. The relevant people from both sides could furthermore be brought into contact with the help of UEFA to exchange mutual learning and best practices in the scope of a yearly congress, similar to the first SLO workshop held at the UEFA headquarters in 2024. This would also enable the involvement of international experts in relevant decisions to use their expertise across national borders. A directory of international experts could be

created at UEFA as a point of contact for national associations and clubs regarding issues such as accessibility.

Another example of integration of fans in relevant decision processes to prevent confrontation are the [English fan advisory boards](#) and the fan-led review, both serving the consultation and co-determination of fans on the level of clubs and national football more generally. While nationally specific, the [fan-led review](#) installed by the British government in particular is the most ambitious development regarding involvement of fans in decisions about the future of football, as it was specifically created to serve this purpose. The project induced a review process of football governance in England which was centred around fans' perceptions and demands through the creation of a structure with a panel of experts at the core, that granted the opportunity to all organised fan groups to voice their opinion. The results of the review were then translated into concrete recommendations by the review chair. Whether this model can be transferred to other national contexts remains to be seen. However, it can be regarded as the prime example of fan inclusion and should serve as such for other countries and potentially the European (EU) level.

Funding and Support for Fan Engagement Projects: Lastly, projects like FSE's Kickoff! project that sought innovative ways to improve relations between national associations and national fan organisations should be continuously conducted. Much like Kickoff!, these projects need funding. One potential source for that funding, as was the case with Kickoff!, can be Erasmus+. Other funding sources could come from UEFA or national associations. It should be in the interests of these actors, as fans turning away from professional club football would ultimately also damage the sport and not serve their interests either.

6. Conclusion

These measures and strategies would guarantee fans' involvement in relevant decisions, shaping developments of the sport up to actual co-determination of the future of football. This would counteract feelings of being left out and becoming estranged from their sport, thereby securing the continued social relevance of the sport for its diverse audience of fans. Through this co-determination, fans could furthermore secure their own role and participation in the sport and its future development. In consequence, the very foundation of connection and cohesion, the identification with the sport and various levels of community emerging from/surrounding it are maintained, leading to the possibility of unfolding football's potentials on a European level through participation, networks, and exchange. In total, this could lead to a strengthening of European identification and social cohesion through football and its fan culture.

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