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INTRODUCTION



Introduction: 'A spectre is haunting European football – the spectre of a European Super League'

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ABSTRACT

Whilst there is a romantic myth that the European Cup was developed for sporting reasons, power, nationalism and money were significant factors. Since the formation of the European Cup in 1955, European competitions have grown in prestige and finances. The spectre of a breakaway Super League has been used repeatedly to assert the power of elite clubs. In 1992, the result was the Champions League which established a league format providing more televised games, more money and more opportunity for larger clubs to proceed in the competition. The threat of a Super League led UEFA to redesign the format of the Champions League to privilege larger clubs. Despite this, a Super League was still announced, before facing widespread resistance. This article sets up the special issue by contextualising the current Champions League in the aftermath of the Super League.

The news on Sunday 18 April 2021 exploded quickly, and rapidly gathered energy and momentum unlike any football news story in recent memory. Yet almost as quickly as the Super League was announced, the project faded and seemingly died (although the zombie still haunts Europe). Although the idea of a European Super League is nothing new (it was first mooted in the 1960s¹, the practicalities and political implications regarding national and international federations and confederations proved difficult to overcome. The events of 2021 were the first time that leading men's clubs had not only discussed the idea, but had actively announced their intention to break away from UEFA's European competition and establish their own privately-run tournament. The leading protagonists of the Super League, Andrea Agnelli chairman of Juventus and Real Madrid president Florentino Pérez, might have assumed they had the political connections to make the breakaway successful, partly due to the power of their clubs, but also through their membership of key institutional roles. Agnelli was a member of UEFA's executive committee as well as chair of the European Clubs Association (ECA). The ECA role was already a conflict of interest in that it should advocate the benefits of the 109 clubs across Europe, whilst the UEFA role should advocate for all clubs. Yet the key protagonists failed to take into account any backlash, and the mass mobilization of fans, players and journalists, particularly in England (where clubs signed up to the project), which led to the six English clubs pulling out, as well as across Europe (notably in Germany and France, whose clubs didn't sign up).

Whilst it may be odd to start an article about the Champions League with an account of a different competition, the Super League represents a regular trope that is used by elite men's clubs to assert their power. As the title, paraphrasing Marx and Engels², alludes, this spectre is

haunting European football and remains in place. Whereas Marx and Engels alluded to the spectre of Communism, foretelling various revolutions around the world, the spectre haunting European football is that global capitalism emerging in the form of a Super League. The spectre of a super league re-emerges roughly once a decade, as powerful clubs use it to assert and extend their power. As Hegel³ is famously misquoted as saying, “What experience and history teach is this – that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it”. Marx⁴ has also been misquoted when building on this to suggest that “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce”. As football repeats and returns to similar themes – notably a Super League – we need to learn from what has happened, and propose alternatives, otherwise we will be condemned to repeat it.

Central to the analysis of both the Champions League and the Super League is the question of power. Effectively, there is an unstable balance of power between UEFA, Europe’s governing body, and elite men’s clubs. King⁵ identified the power struggle between the FA and Football League that ultimately undermined the national team’s success, but was also the roots of the formation of the Premier League.⁶ Commercial development within football has also been driven by entrepreneurs buying, investing, and influencing clubs and governing bodies.⁷ As will be shown in a number of the articles within this special issue, this has consolidated power within a small number of elite men’s club overwhelmingly located in the “Big Five” leagues of England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain. Particularly in England, France and Germany, protests against the proposed Super League from fans focussed on the growing power of these clubs, and the increasing commercialization of the sport that is perceived to remove power away from match-going fans.⁸ Campaigners like Football Supporters Europe also highlighted that the Super League removed sporting merit from the competition.⁹ Clubs were chosen on size and wealth, rather than success on the pitch.

Significantly, the Super League was also an opportunity for UEFA and national federations to reassert its power. UEFA quickly moved to assert its power through disciplinary action against the twelve clubs that were signed up to the breakaway. As the six English clubs, Atletico Madrid and the two Milan sides publicly pulled out, this left a core of Juventus, Real Madrid and Barcelona. UEFA then moved to take legal action against them for breaching of UEFA’s legal framework. This case was dismissed by a Madrid court that suggested it contravened EU free-trade laws.¹⁰ Consequently, UEFA paused its actions against all twelve clubs, including the fines they levied on the nine clubs that quickly withdrew. The Premier League sanctioned the six English clubs, fining them £22 million that was reserved for grassroots and community programmes. Both the Premier League and Serie A also changed its statutes to ban any club from participating if they wish to join a rival league.¹¹ Paradoxically, the aborted Super League announcement reinforced the power of UEFA and national leagues.

Even though the Super League was a conflict between UEFA and a small number of elite men’s clubs, other power networks are also at play. As noted in the previous paragraph, one of the reasons that UEFA paused legal action against Juventus, Real Madrid and Barcelona was that a Madrid court indicated that it was against EU law. Within the world of football, another transnational body was also instrumental: FIFA. Initially FIFA tried to stay out of the conflict between the twelve clubs and UEFA. After the backlash, FIFA’s president was more critical of the clubs.¹² Infantino is keen to have a Club World Cup under FIFA’s jurisdiction, and he had already been suggesting an African Super League earlier in 2021.¹³ As the Champions League has grown, and fuelled the power of UEFA, this has come at the expense of FIFA. As former UEFA secretary general, Infantino would recognize this power, and seek to centralize power with FIFA by introducing a FIFA Club World Cup and helping dismantle UEFA’s flagship competition. To further bolster FIFA’s power, Infantino also proposed a men’s World Cup every two years. Consequently, the Super League, UEFA and FIFA are all in a competitive power play to attract the most economic resources, and consequently, the most power. The hypercommercial football market consolidates resources in fewer and fewer clubs, excluding the vast majority of fans, players and clubs across Europe.

The champions league

Whilst there is a romantic myth that the European Cup was developed for sporting reasons, power, nationalism and money were also significant factors. Even at this early stage, PSV Eindhoven, AGF Aarhus and Vörös Lobogó were invited to participate despite not being champions of their leagues, if only to ensure a sizable number of nations took part. UEFA was still in its infancy as an organization and national federations remained ascendant. Both Chelsea and Aberdeen refused to participate due to pressure from their home FAs. Formed in 1955, the European Cup became the flagship competition for UEFA who were formed a year earlier. FIFA endorsed the competition as long as national federations granted permission to the participating club; although Manchester United took part in 1956 without FA or Football League permission, illustrating the early power of some clubs.¹⁴ The economic development of some clubs, notably Real Madrid, Benfica, Internazionale and AC Milan (who dominated the early competition) also provided an incentive for the competition, as did technological advances such as new stadiums, floodlights and televisions that encouraged audiences in midweek evenings, bringing in more revenue. The two-leg, home-and-away, format of the competition also supported the wealthier teams as it gave them an opportunity to reverse a negative result in the second leg.¹⁵ By the 1970s, however, King¹⁶ identifies that economic regulation and limited television revenue restricted the opportunities of larger clubs to accumulate talent, resulting in a relatively level playing field. The result was a range of clubs winning the European Cup, including Nottingham Forest, Saint-Etienne, Club Brugge, and Steaua Bucharest; clubs who seem unlikely to win the competition again. This relative equality upset owners of the larger teams who wanted to guarantee their investments rather than simply focus on sporting success.

It's notable that the spectre of the Super League haunts Europe for the benefit of the elite men's clubs, their owners, and small number of elite male players who are overwhelmingly located in Western Europe. The spectre exists as a symbol of an alternative future that helps to exert power over fans, players, other clubs and governing bodies. It should also be noted that history does repeat itself in football. If the Super League was a farce, the Champions League was tragedy. Effectively, the Champions League was formed in order to give more power to the elite men's clubs, particularly those of the G-14 group of clubs (who were the precursor for the ECA). Led by Silvio Berlusconi at AC Milan, along with Rangers and Real Madrid (again), proposals were launched in 1988 for a Super League.¹⁷ This was used to exert influence on UEFA to change the European Cup. Berlusconi was disillusioned with the knock-out cup format of the European Cup after Napoli and Real Madrid were drawn to play each other in the first round in 1987. He argued that "The Champions Cup has become an anachronism. The fact that clubs like AC Milan can be eliminated in the first round is an economic absurdity. This is not modern thinking".¹⁸ Not only was Berlusconi worried about the likelihood of his team, AC Milan, being knocked out, he was also worried about revenue for his television channels; if the Italian team got knocked out, ratings and advertising revenue would fall. The economic focus of clubs that could attract broadcasting revenue came to dominate.

Formed in 1992, thirty years before this article was written, the Champions League emerged at a particular moment in European football. The same year, the Premier League was formed after the top division elite men's clubs formed a breakaway league, away from the Football league that had ran league football since 1888.¹⁹ The league was organized and administered by a new company controlled by the football clubs who retained the majority of the income generated by the top division, rather than sharing it across the four divisions. Television revenue was also instrumental in this transformation. Rupert Murdoch wanted to use football as a "battering ram" to get his new satellite television channel, Sky, into people's homes.²⁰ From the initial television package of £304 million for the rights to Premier League, media deals now total over £5 billion. Similar increases have occurred across Europe, particularly in the Top Five leagues. Once revenue accrued from participation in the Champions League is added to this, clubs from those leagues can

accumulate the best players and compete more regularly in UEFA's competitions, thus accumulating more resources (and power).

Whilst the Champions League (and elite national leagues in general) have retained and grown the power of elite men's clubs, the competition has also bolstered the power of UEFA. When the European Cup was formed in 1955, UEFA was only a year old. Competitions were not only a *raison d'être* but a form of income generation. As with FIFA, organizing and marketing a flagship competition helps generate income and power.²¹ As of 2020, the Champions League generates 68.1% of UEFA's revenue (UEFA, 2020). This increases to 87.9% with the addition of its other men's club competitions of the Europa League (the Europa Conference hadn't been added at this point). UEFA's international men's competition, the European Championships, only generates 11.5% and the women's Champions League 0.23%. The growth of club football, and the relative prestige of the Champions League – particularly as many of the elite men's clubs have accumulated the best players from around the world – ensures that clubs have grown in power in parallel to that of UEFA (at the expense of national federations and leagues, and to a lesser extent, FIFA). The result is that clubs still retain the political and economic power to control the organization of European football.

Despite the growth in power of both UEFA and elite men's clubs, there has been a fragile accord between them. The spectre of a Super League has been frequently invoked in order for elite clubs to extract more revenue from the competition. As King²² identified in relation to English football, the power struggle between the FA and Football League undermined broader football development; this ultimately contributed to the formation of the Premier League.²³ As Berlusconi demonstrated before the formation of the Champions League, a breakaway Super League helps keep UEFA in check, and also helps them lobby for changes that guarantee income for the larger clubs. Seedings and coefficients have been introduced to prevent larger clubs being drawn against each other early in the competition. The Champions League was configured as a league in order to give the larger clubs an opportunity to progress (richer squads will have more opportunities to win games in a league format than a knock-out competition), and also provides more television revenue through more games. As larger clubs progress, they generate more television revenue. This effectively facilitates the richest clubs concentrating and accumulating more playing talent, more exposure to television markets, greater likelihood of tournament success and further commercial revenue generation.²⁴ Greater success in the Champions League ensures more strength in national competition, and consolidating hegemonic clubs in each league, thus ensuring access to subsequent Champions Leagues (and the revenue it brings).

Despite the relative success of the larger clubs, the ECA still lobbied for more. Formed from the G-14 group of clubs that lobbied for the Champions League, the ECA expanded this initial list to include 234 clubs. Ignoring the winners of the European Cup in the 1970s and 1980s (like Nottingham Forest, Hamburg and Steaua Bucharest), the G-14 was overwhelmingly based in Western Europe and of clubs that were deemed financially large at the time. The G-14 was originally formed in 1998 and comprised of AC Milan, Ajax, Bayern Munich, Borussia Dortmund, Inter, Juventus, Liverpool, Manchester United, Marseilles, Paris St Germain, Porto, PSV Eindhoven. Four new members were added in 2002: Arsenal, Bayer Leverkusen, Lyon and Valencia. The ECA was formed in 2008 as a merger of the G-14 and European Club Forum and recognized as the sole body representing clubs by UEFA. Representatives of the ECA sit on UEFA bodies, including the UEFA Executive Commission, Club Competition Committee and Licensing Committee.²⁵ This gives ECA members a significant voice within the structures of power in UEFA. The emergence of a subset of powerful clubs clearly indicates an attempt to counter the power of UEFA. Clearly UEFA sought to neuter this power by bringing the clubs under their umbrella. Yet, the inherent conflict of interests was exposed during the Super League announcement. Andrea Agnelli is chair of Juventus, a club that has been in his family since 1923, and primarily serving their interests. He was also chair of the ECA, whilst also sitting on the UEFA Executive Committee as an ECA representative (lobbying for ECA members), for an

organization that should represent all of European football. Whilst wearing these three metaphorical hats, he was negotiating with owners of other leading clubs to form a breakaway Super League that served neither UEFA nor the ECA.

Despite the expansion of the G-14 into the 234 clubs of the ECA, the winners of the Champions League are overwhelmingly derived from those original 14 clubs – the only addition to that list is Chelsea (and Manchester City were included in the Super League discussions). The subgroup of powerful clubs was brutally exposed in the Super League announcement. And despite the resignation of Agnelli from both the ECA and UEFA Executive Committee, powerful subgroups remain. Internal politics and Machiavellian machinations are likely to account for the inclusion and exclusion of certain clubs in the Super League. It is probably not a coincidence that PSG did not agree to be part of the breakaway competition, and subsequently, PSG owner, Nasar Al-Khelafi, replaced Agnelli as chair of the ECA. Whilst the ownership structure of German clubs meant ratification would have been difficult, Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, chair of Bayern Munich, and former chair of the ECA has been appointed to UEFA's Executive Committee. Effectively, the power has shifted from a Juventus-Real axis to a Bayern-PSG axis. Again, there is an internal subgroup of powerful clubs. The inherent conflict of interests remains, and other important stakeholders, like fans, remain outside of decision-making (or even observatory) status.

The existence of the powerful subgroups, the G-14 in all but name, within the UEFA decision-making structures ensures that the Champions League has continued to be pushed in a direction that benefits the larger, wealthier clubs. Seedings and coefficients ensure that the larger clubs, from the larger leagues (overwhelmingly based in Western Europe) are provided more games to ensure their progress and guarantee television revenue. The expansion of the Champions League from simply being national champions to include clubs placed 2nd, 3rd and 4th means the larger clubs can continue to take part in the lucrative competition without winning the league. Despite these continued “refinements”, the larger clubs retained the spectre of a breakaway league, and pushed for more revenue. Prior to the Super League announcement, UEFA was in negotiation with stakeholders, principally the ECA, to reformat the Champions League to introduce more matches, increasing television revenue. From the 2024–2025 season, the Champions League will be reformatted around the Swiss Model. This means removing the mini-league format of the Champions League and introducing a single league where teams will play up to 12 games (an increase of four games). In total, there will be 225 games rather than 125, so a significant increase in television revenue, and this will require four additional match-days (with repercussions for national leagues). More matches means a higher likelihood that clubs with deeper squads will be able to finish higher up the league and qualify for the knock-out part of the competition, increasingly the likelihood that the larger clubs succeed. Furthermore, clubs weren't included simply on performance in their domestic leagues, but also two places have been introduced for clubs based on a coefficient calculated on their relative performance over the previous five years. This was one of the concessions to try (unsuccessfully) to prevent a Super League and keep the big clubs happy, particularly the Big Six in England who are all vying for four Champions League places. And despite these continued concessions from UEFA, the larger men's clubs were still not happy.

The recurring theme that emerges in this article is the importance of television revenue to the power of clubs and competitions. This is not simply the sizable figures that are paid for exclusive rights, but a capitalistic symbiotic relationship between clubs, sponsors, governing bodies, betting companies, media organizations and global finance. Wider media exposure provides a larger audience for governing bodies' and clubs' corporate partnerships. Sponsors and betting companies promoting football throughout the week help ensure a continued interest for the sport. Alongside these corporate interests, various media maintain focus on the game by news stories about match reports, transfer talk, controversies and gossip in newspapers and on news channels, which help fuel interest in the live matches and highlights packages that are also supported by sponsors. This symbiotic relationship is necessary for clubs, and their owners in particular, as they continue to accrue resources to fund their playing squads, and for the profit and kudos their owners desire.²⁶

Consequently, when their profit is threatened, these owners will draw on the power they have built through these symbiotic relationships in order to maintain their economic power.

The super league

Throughout this article, the official title of the Super League has been used. In the UK, this has been transformed into the European Super League or ESL for short. Adding the prefix “European” seriously distorts the focus of analysis. Whilst these clubs are currently residing in Europe, it is not true to say that the Super League is a European Super League. Elite men’s football, particularly in Europe, has been global since the economic transformation of the 1990s.²⁷ Fan groups exist in towns and cities around the world. Players from across the globe ply their trade in the various leagues. And fundamentally, clubs are owned by global entrepreneurs. The exceptions are invariably club or national regulations-specific. The “German model” ensures that 50% plus 1 share of members own a club, meaning there have been limited opportunities for foreign owners to exploit clubs financially or politically. The three leading names in the Super League are also notable for the specifics of their club. The Agnelli family, who established and control Fiat, have owned Juventus for nearly a hundred years²⁸. The club confers prestige and power on the family, and consequently it is unlikely for the Agnellis to cede control²⁹. Milan and Inter were only divested from Berlusconi and Moratti due to financial issues. The other exceptions to the rule are Real Madrid and Barcelona, who are also exceptions to the 1990 Sport Law that changed football clubs from mutual associations to businesses. Barcelona and Real remained controlled by socios (members), meaning regular presidential elections, rather than foreign investment. In light of these restrictions, both legal and familial (in the case of Juventus), it is clear why Juve, Real and Barca might want to find alternative ways of financing their clubs.

The main reason why The Super League is not “the European Super League” is that the clubs are already global, and there is nothing within the remit of The Super League that restricts it to Europe. Whilst the clubs that signed up to The Super League are currently based in Europe, there would be nothing to stop the clubs playing in different cities around the world if a self-administered break-away league permitted it. This could happen on a rolling basis – as has been proposed in 2008 with Game 39 in the Premier League, with Super Coppa Italia matches (which have been played in Libya, China, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the US), the Supercopa de España (which has been played in Saudi Arabia and Morocco), or the Trophée des Champions (held in Canada, Tunisia, Morocco, the US, Gabon, China, Austria, and Israel). Elite competitions have been looking to global audiences this century, and there is nothing to suggest that the Super League would not operate in the same way. If the Super League had been permitted to continue, then matches would have been changed to suit a global audience, and ultimately be moved to different cities in order to build that fan base.

The Super League symbolized the continued global expansion and economic accumulation of elite men’s clubs. As indicated earlier in this article, since the 1980s, owners of leading clubs have sought more power and revenue for their clubs, permitting greater accumulation of playing talent, thereby ensuring continued success in national leagues and participation in the Champions League. In the 1990s, King³⁰ identified the hegemonic position of “The Big Five” (Liverpool, Manchester United, Everton, Arsenal and Tottenham) that led to the breakaway Premier League in 1992. Similarly, the hegemonic G14 group of clubs, the precursor to the European Clubs Association, lobbied UEFA over the Champions League. Even though these elite men’s clubs continued to win concessions from UEFA in order to reinforce their hegemonic position within Europe, they continued to want more.

The Super League exposed the financial black hole that many elite clubs operate within. The covid pandemic has also hit clubs as it affected their matchday revenues. But other factors are also affecting clubs, including financing television deals, to restrictions on foreign investment. Despite the global success of the Champions League and individual clubs, their success has been built on significant debt. Covid has significantly impacted the short term finances of clubs, and some, like

Barcelona, are publicly struggling. The current situation is dominated by Manchester City, Paris St Germain and Chelsea who are all owned by petrochemical states or individuals and are the few who have spent heavily on players (in the cases of Jack Grealish and Romelu Lukaku €100 million fees) and Lionel Messi (€25 million signing on fee and €25 million/year).

When the Big 5 leagues are considered (and the original teams approached for the Super League were from the Big 5), the financial issues, concerns and debt vary by league. For example, in case of Italian Serie A, *Gazzetta dello Sport* reported in March 2021 that clubs in Serie A are in debt to the tune of €1.4 billion – double the amount it was ten years ago³¹. Only Fiorentina, Napoli and Cagliari weren't in debt in that moment. Inter – owned by Suning in China – have been massively impacted by the diktat from the Chinese government to withdraw foreign investment. Despite winning the scudetto from Juve last season for the first time in 9 years, this season they have to reduce their spending – hence the sale of Lukaku. Whereas in August of 2021, La Liga signed a deal with a private equity fund, CVC, worth €27 billion. This gives CVC a 10% share of the league, whilst also giving an external body some power within decision-making³². The deal gives CVC 11% of television rights for 50 years. It should also be noted that the Bundesliga rejected a deal with CVC³³, and in this context is crucial to add that the Bundesliga (of the top five leagues) appears to be operating differently, with clubs no amassing huge debts. That said, Schalke managed to accumulate €217 million in debt before getting relegated.

Similarly to Serie A, Ligue 1 has also encountered financial problems. At Christmas last year, the league's €3 billion television deal evaporated as Mediapro (who were in partnership with BeIN and Canal+) collapsed³⁴. Amazon won some of the rights, but Canal+ and BeIN are in dispute, with BeIN also pushing for payments from Canal+³⁵. Effectively, these legal and financial issues will reinforce uncertainty of Ligue 1 contracts. And the Premier League is not exempt. Premier League clubs are in debt to the tune of £3 billion³⁶. Last year, Manchester United and Liverpool proposed a reorganization of the Premier League, including reducing the league to 18 teams, and giving the Big Six (and West Ham, Southampton and Everton) a great voice. This would free up the fixture calendar for more European fixtures and lucrative global matches.

The champions league special issue

Considering the above context, historical, cultural and economic, we would like to present this special issue reflecting on the 30th anniversary of the Champions League since its formation in 1992. We have identified certain themes across the various articles, power, hegemony, marginalization, Europeanization, and narrative construction (for owners, brands, and players); readers will undoubtedly spot others. The articles come from a range of disciplines, including sociology, business, media, philosophy, law, economics, management, marketing and political science, which shows the important interdisciplinary work that can be undertaken by using the ontological object of football for analysis. This section will provide an overview of the articles that follow, following the themes of the hegemonic centre based around the winners of the Champions League, Super League and clubs in the Big Five leagues, to the periphery and those leagues which are highly unlikely to have a winner of the Champions League. It will then move to the Champions League's facilitation of narrative construction, notably around sponsors and players.

Contrary to specific political agendas insisting on the conceptual separation of sports and politics, sports scholars have long established that marked with unequal power dynamics (between actors in different roles, nations, genders, ages, ethnicities, races, etc.) sports is inherently a political field. And as the articles in this issue show, reflecting on the Champions League is simultaneously a reflection on some of these inequalities. For example, in their article on competitive “[im]balance and dominance in the UEFA Champions League”, Ramchandani, et. al. state that the domination of the CL by a privileged minority is harming the competition whereby the situation has worsened with Fair Play regulations – allowing readers to think through notions power and domination in conversation with potentially divergent descriptions of fairness and fair competition. The authors

warn that worsening balance here might lead to “the threat of a breakaway European Super League” to which other authors in the issue have raised legal and ethical challenges.³⁷

Valenti, et al. use similar conceptual tools such as competitive balance and domination to demonstrate that the kind of inequality described by Ramchandani et. al. manifest across other social dimensions, namely as they transfer to and impact the women’s champions league. They argue that the “long-established financial and sporting inequalities” of the men’s game are being transferred to women’s football as more clubs begin to establish women’s sections resulting in the decline of “outcome uncertainty”. The article thus allows readers to think critically about the proliferation of women’s teams since this development while it might seem to mend imbalance in football in general can work in the opposite direction to increase inequality on another level if it is carried out through the replication of existing hierarchies.

Zeische tackles the question of power and domination by investigating how it figures into fan experience and UEFA’s related role. This article disentangles UEFA’s conflicting role whereby on the one hand there is an effort to “sanitise and commodify the game” thus effectively excluding large groups and practices of fandom and on the other hand the UEFA seems to adopt a discourse of fan inclusion by recognizing and endorsing fan organizations like the FSE or SDE. Zeische argues that the goal here is to maintain the status quo thereby allowing readers to think through how unequal power dynamics manifest this time in relation to sports governance, organizational legitimacy, and fandom.

The larger theme exploring power dynamics pertaining to the Champions League manifests on a more particular scale whereby tensions within Europeanization and the phenomenon of marginalization begin to emerge. As several pieces in this issue show, conversations around the Champions League necessitate a discussion of European football and therefore Europe including questions around how Europe comes together as a political and social ideal. As Lopez Frias et al. have explained, football has contributed to Europeanization but it has been this very contribution that has highlighted tensions both in the sphere of football and in the project that is Europe. Thus, this article which explicates legal and ethical challenges around the potential formation of a European Super League, drawing on sports philosophy and sports law, offers a depiction of the larger social and political stakes involved in negotiations and practices around ideals associated with Europeanization – such as solidarity, community and shared interests. In a similar vein, Ünsal brings together discussions of competitive balance together with that of Europeanization and Europe as an entity to argue that UEFA’s payment policies have over the years harmed competitive balance resulting not in unification but fragmentation due to increasing inequalities in power. Similar to Ramchandani et. al. and Lopez Frias et. al. Ünsal also highlights the potential of a looming European Super League and its implications.

Mihail’s article focusing on the “symbolic Europeanisation of Romania’s football bosses” engages with dynamics around questions of Europeanization helping readers to think critically through the very social and political ideals surrounding the European project as Lopez Frias et. al. begin to discuss. This article establishes Europeanization as a source of symbolic capital and displays the context and social, political, and economic stakes around what accomplishing this mission can entail for “the bosses” of football in a country like Romania and its tenuous relations to the entity and idea of Europe. By analysing the most popular sports daily in Romania, Mihail argues that participating in the CL provided social legitimacy when other social and historical dynamics played out as way to question that legitimacy on the basis of immoral economic practices.

As mentioned above, thinking through the Champions League, its role in and relations to the idea of Europe and Europeanization bring forth a discussion pertaining not only to inclusion but also to exclusion and marginalization. Brand, et al.’s article focuses on fandom in Austria with a view as to account for the experience of such exclusion and marginalization as it strikingly unfolds within the centre of Europe and among discourses

of Europeanization. The authors argue that fans of Sturm Graz and Wacker Innsbruck are rather removed from the Champions League not necessarily fuelled by a sense of national marginalization but because the “(semi-)peripheral” standing of Austrian football can cast the CL as either a “pipe dream” or as an “over-commercialized” and introverted phenomenon belonging to a top elite. As such, the article allows us to gather precisely how what might seem like marginalization in the abstract is accounted for and experienced on the ground by these fan groups.

It’s also important to recognize that there are other actors within the Champions League, and this permits the creation of narratives. For sponsors, as Beek and Derom identify, brands have the opportunity to partner with the competition and reach a global audience. This can have a lasting legacy, and may undermine future commercial recognition. Similarly, players can also create a legacy as they impose themselves on games. Doehler focuses on a case study of Roy Keane’s performance in 1999 semi-final versus Juventus. The case of Keane demonstrates that Champions League – despite its hegemonic and commercialized character – should be also regarded as an arena of heroic and timeless sports appearances.

The future

Despite UEFA’s attempt to placate the owners of this sub-group of the ECA, these concessions are likely to entrench the inequalities of the Champions League. We predict that rather than increasing the opportunity for a wider range of clubs to win the competition, it will entrench the power of the elite clubs. Consequently, as Hegel and Marx inferred, UEFA is condemned to repeat history and the spectre of the Super League will re-emerge. So what future is currently available? The Super League brought the current situation into sharp relief. The owners of European elite men’s clubs are planning a global future, and one that does not consider the implications for smaller clubs in their own leagues, let alone the rest of Europe (or the world). They are planning a world of franchises with star players, global television deals, and probably global matches.

In keeping with the refrain of this article, the spectre of the Super League will continue to haunt UEFA and the Champions League. The ever developing political economy of global football will see the Super League re-emerge in various potential ways, or used as an attempt to leverage more power and money for the elite clubs. Where Marx and Engels suggested it was the spectre of Communism haunting Europe, in reality it is the spectre of neoliberal capitalism that haunts football. Consequently, the desire for profit and power will push elite clubs for more control and continue to exacerbate the divisions in European football. The hegemony of elite clubs will be maintained through the consent of marginalized clubs, as well as UEFA, politicians, sponsors and media. Those slightly on the edge of the Champions League core, like Porto, Ajax and Olympiakos, will have more power than they think. They may push to be part of the core and try and get some scraps of the imagined riches of a super league, or they could push for more equality, giving them more opportunities for success on the pitch.

The early days of the Champions League, and their breakaway self-administered leagues like the Premier League, were supported by new media companies.³⁸ Deregulated television, like Sky, Kirsch and Mediaset, all helped fuel the demand for football. Other startups like ITV Digital and (more recently) Mediapro have tried to invest and collapsed. In some cases these companies tried to vertically integrate clubs into their companies like Silvio Berlusconi and AC Milan, and Sky’s failed takeover of Manchester United. Now state-owned media companies like BeIN Sports could exert an influence, especially as petro-states have invested in Paris St Germain, Manchester City and Newcastle United. Chinese technology brands are emerging as corporate sponsors³⁹ and may also utilize their power to support a breakaway league. Whilst similar US technology companies, like Facebook, Google or Apple are not sponsoring football (yet), Spotify has signed a lucrative deal with Barcelona and Amazon have started investing in the Champions League and Premier League.⁴⁰

Media companies can provide the financial backing for breakaway leagues, but these competitions also need players. Football agents may provide the influence on players to supplement these leagues. The rise of the agent is reflective of the neoliberal development of European football⁴¹. Their extensive networks provide opportunities and power for the agents⁴². The seeds are potentially there. Kia Joorabchian established Media Sport Investments to co-own players, and was connected to Corinthians in Brazil. Whilst third-party ownership was banned by FIFA, a law-change (or loophole) may challenge this. Agents also have connections to media, such as Pini Zatavi who co-owns Charlton, the media company that owns the television rights for the Israeli Premier League. Agents can also influence clubs in other ways, as inferred from Jorge Mendes' connection to Wolverhampton Wanderers.⁴³

Much of the space for development of breakaway leagues will depend on the regulatory space from supra-national bodies like FIFA and the EU. FIFA played an ambiguous role when the Super League was announced, and they eager to expand their power by having a Club World Cup, as well as supporting an African Super League earlier⁴⁴. As mentioned earlier, FIFA's power struggle with UEFA drives this. FIFA's quest for more power and revenue could derail the Champions League. The EU also has a role to play. EU law fundamentally deregulated the labour market through the Bosman ruling.⁴⁵ Real Madrid and Juventus are challenging the legitimacy of UEFA by suggesting they are a cartel and looking for the European Court of Justice to rule.⁴⁶ If the court finds in favour of the clubs then this would undermine the entire European model of sport. Potentially, the Super League clubs might play a political game and seek support from EU politicians to implement a breakaway league. It is for this reason that Football Supporters Europe launched *Win it on the pitch* to use the European Citizens Initiative to call on fans to petition the EU to maintain the European model of sport, whilst recognizing the social value of sport and to give fans a voice. Ultimately, the spectre of the Super League will keep haunting European football as powerful clubs seek to expand and maintain their hegemonic position.

Notes

1. King, *The European Ritual*.
2. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*.
3. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*.
4. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.
5. King, *Why England Lose*.
6. King, *End of the Terraces*.
7. *Ibid.*; Sugden and Tomlinson, *FIFA and the Contest for World Football*; Millward, *Global Football League*; Doidge, *Football Italia*.
8. See eg. Cleland et. all. *Collective Action*.
9. Conn, Groups Condemn European Super League plans; FSE, FSE condemns European Super League plans.
10. Stone, "European Super League".
11. Edelmann and Sinnott, "English Premier League announces sanctions"; Warshaw, "Juve face expulsion".
12. Auclair, "Infantino's double game".
13. *Ibid.*
14. King, *The European Ritual*.
15. Glanville, *Champions of Europe*.
16. King, *The European Ritual*.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. King, *End of the Terraces*; Millward, *Global Football League*.
20. King, *The European Ritual*.
21. Sugden and Tomlinson, *FIFA and the Contest for World Football*.
22. King, "Why England Lose".
23. King, *End of the Terraces*.
24. King, *The European Ritual*; Frias et al., "Whose interests?"; Ramchandani et al., "You can look, but don't touch"; Valenti et al.; "The impact of 'super clubs' on uncertainty of outcome in the UEFA Women's Champions League" Ünsel, "The UEFA Champions League"; all in this issue.

25. ECA, *Annual Report 2020/21*.
26. King, *End of the Terraces*; Doidge, *Football Italia*.; Mihail, “Let us prepare for the Champions League!”.
27. King, *End of the Terraces*; Millward, *Global Football League*; Giulianotti and Robertson, *Globalization and Football*.
28. Doidge, *Football Italia*.
29. Ibid.
30. King, *End of the Terraces*.
31. Calemme, Serie A’s financial disaster.
32. Jolly, “Spain’s La Liga agrees €2.7bn deal”.
33. Agini and Wiggins, “Bundesliga clubs vote”.
34. White, “Ligue 1 clubs stare into financial abyss”.
35. Ward, “BeIN taking Canal Plus to court”.
36. Syzmanski, *Money and Football*.
37. Lopez Frias et. al., “Whose interests?”.
38. King, *End of the Terraces*; King, *European Ritual*.
39. Kleinmann, “Why are Chinese tech brands flocking”.
40. Sweney, “Amazon close to deal”.
41. Kelly and Chatziefsthathiou, “Trust me I am a Football Agent”; Rossi, Semens and Brocard, *Sports Agents and Labour Markets*.
42. Widdop, Parnell and Asghar, “The ‘Networked’ rise and power of the Football Super-Agent”.
43. Bezants, “Wolves” relationship with agent Jorge Mendes’.
44. Auclair, “Infantino’s double game”.
45. King, *European Ritual*.
46. Warshaw, “Super League vs UEFA”.

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