
THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF UEFA FINANCIAL FAIR PLAY

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AIM OF ABSTRACT - RESEARCH QUESTION

With the 2013/2014 season onwards, Union of European Football Associations' (UEFA) Financial Fair Play (FFP) fully came into effect. Among other things, FFP demands from clubs to operate within their own revenues in order to counteract the increasing over indebtedness in European club football.

The scholarly assessment of FFP mainly focuses on the outcomes of this regime and represents a mixed picture: while some authors (e.g. Franck, 2014) are in general favourable, others raise concerns both from an economic as well as legal perspective (e.g. Peeters & Szymanski, 2014). Yet while the potential impacts of FFP have been thoroughly assessed, there is scarcity of research on the genesis and backgrounds behind the implementation by UEFA.

Schubert & Könecke (2015) conceptualised the development of the FFP policy and indicate that during the last decade the rising indebtedness of clubs as well as their dependence on private benefactors were increasingly regarded as illegitimate. The authors posit that with the growing problematisation of these circumstances the recognition as a problem gradually increased and intensified the pressure for action on UEFA, who eventually announced FFP in 2010. The present paper provides an empirical proof of this conceptualisation and traces the origins of FFP by analysing the discourse in the run up to the passage of FFP. In particular the research answers the questions, which conditions were regarded as illegitimate by whom and how these were turned to a social problem and hence a matter to remedy for UEFA.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Ontologically, social problems are oftentimes approached either from a realist or constructivist perspective. Instead, we adopt a critical realist and thus more pragmatic approach in our discourse analysis by focusing not only on interpreted practice, but also incorporating context. As discourses are always

embedded in given social structures, a mere focus on the discourse is not deemed adequate. We acknowledge the influence of discursive events which provided actors with relevant 'resources' (Schetsche, 2014). However, we posit that it is more important how actors make sense of it and thus argue that the social definition and not the objective character of the situation decides whether a condition becomes a problem or not. Hence, we argue that the rising indebtedness of clubs as well as their increasing dependence on private benefactors were a necessary, but not sufficient requirement for the successful development of the FFP policy. In particular, we adopt an approach as outlined by Schetsche (2014) and trace the 'career' of the named conditions as social problem and identify major story lines and discourse coalitions as well as strategies employed by crucial actors.

METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS

Since social problems nowadays usually attain their validity through the dissemination in mass media, we analyse media outlets of major English and German newspapers in the decade before the enactment of FFP in 2010. The two countries were chosen as they represent two opposite poles among the big-5 leagues in Europe: While the neo-liberal approach in England led to an increasing indebtedness of clubs and has turned the Premier League into a melting pot of wealthy club owners, German Bundesliga clubs in general managed to sustain relative good financial health due to strict regulation (e.g. the 50+1 rule preventing any investor taking major control of a club). Data collection was enhanced by the Lexis-Nexis database, which allows remote online access to digital content of the newspapers. To meet demands of triangulation, the data sources were enriched by relevant outlets of major stakeholders (e.g. UEFA, EU institutions). Data analysis and coding procedure roughly follow the procedure for thematic analyses as suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006) due to its compatibility with our theoretic assumptions.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The reconstruction of the problem discourse that culminated in the enactment of FFP allows to identify powerful protagonists as well as their communicative strategies. Strong discourse coalitions were formed around powerful storylines – such as the narrative of traditional sporting values in European football being undermined by financial forces as well as the stigmatisation of making debts as 'cheating' – offering a convenient reasoning for crucial actors to strategically position themselves as moral authorities and to push through a favoured policy approach. The results will help to better understand the dynamics of policy-making in European sport, thus not only yielding interesting theoretic insights but also management implications for national and supranational sport organisations and club managers alike.

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