

## Agenda-setting in an era of austerity: An analysis of European Union sport policy

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Synopsis:

Abstract:

**AIM OF PAPER - RESEARCH QUESTION:** With the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 the European Union (EU) has been granted a direct competency in the area of sport with Article 165 TFEU, which provides the option, if not the obligation, of devoting Community resources to sporting actions. While the genesis of EU sport policy has been thoroughly examined (García and Weatherill 2012) little research has addressed the aftermath of this landmark agreement. Accordingly, the paper explores the institutional negotiations which saw sport included in the Erasmus+ programme, the new 2014-2020 EU programme for education, training, youth, and sport. Sport's inclusion in Erasmus+, as a tangible new budgetary commitment, represents an intriguing case insofar a number of EU programmes had to accept cuts or zero-growth as part of the EU's wider austerity measures. Moreover, the negotiations of the new EU sports programme coincided with the negotiations of the EU multiannual financial framework with calls to reduce the EU budget by multiple Member States (eg. United Kingdom, Sweden, the Netherlands). Thus, this paper's aim is to explore how, in an era of financial crisis and against the dominating discourse of EU austerity, a new programme on sport was created and, furthermore, how it received a larger budget than first proposed by the European Commission.

**THEORETICAL BACKGROUND:** The article uses agenda-setting theory as a conceptual framework to guide the analysis, especially as developed for the context of research on the EU (Princen 2007).

**METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS:** The research approach is inductive, seeking to contribute to existing theoretical debates. In

order to identify the intervening processes (George and Bennett 2005) the paper employs process tracing and present careful descriptions (Mahoney 2010) relying on written sources and interviews with policy-makers. Empirically the paper makes use of official documents from EU institutions during the policy-making process and 25 semi-structured interviews with representatives from the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council.

**RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS:** The results indicate the European Commission was able to overcome blockades by framing sport initiatives as part of the wider agenda on economic growth through education, training and participation in grassroots sport, thus obtaining an increased, multi-annual funding stream for this new policy area. The results indicate that, despite the danger of over stretching, agenda-setting can be a useful conceptual framework to explore incremental policy changes in the agenda of the EU that are not necessarily radical decisions. The results suggest that practitioners seeking to overcome obstacles caused by austerity measures should seek to frame sport as a solution to economic growth, whilst recognising that EU agenda-setting dynamics are likely exceptionally suited to this strategy, considering the centrality of the internal market to the EU's remit (Princen 2011).

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