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Impact of austerity measures on National Sport Federations: evidence from Greece

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ABSTRACT

Research question: This study sought to explore implications of austerity measures on strategies and operations of National Sport Federations (NSFs) in Greece. To date, there is limited empirical research on repercussions of economic recession on elite sport development and reactive strategies performed by NSFs.

Research methods: Quantitative data were acquired from the General Secretariat of Sport in Greece to examine allocated public funding to NSFs between 2007 and 2014. Ten qualitative interviews were also performed with stakeholders from selected sport federations and a representative from the Secretariat of Sport in order to gain insight into challenges of austerity measures and reactive strategies by governing bodies.

Results and findings: Results indicated drastic reductions in public funding between 2009 and 2014, accompanied by a parallel decline in overall medal count of national teams in international competitions. Major strategies employed by federations for dealing with the economic recession included administrative cuts, limited number of tournaments, reduced size of delegations, and utilisation of alternative sources of funding.

Implications: Empirical outcomes of the study shed light on reactive strategies and organisational reforms adopted by sport governing bodies in periods of economic hardship, as well as the role of funding policies and sport systems in elite sport development.

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KEYWORDS

Austerity measures; elite sport development; National Sport Federations; economic recession

Terms such as *austerity measures*, *financial crisis*, and *economic recession* have lately become regular headlines in print and electronic media. The international financial crisis of 2008 triggered debt issues in many countries, including Greece (Christodoulakis, 2010). To this end, the issue of *imposed austerity* as a means of dealing with financial crises is a subject of much contemporary interest, especially in the Eurozone (Sen, 2015). The economic recession within the European Union has impacted sport, resulting in gradual real-terms decrease in funding of the public sector and, subsequently, an increasing reliance on other forms of funding, such as the National Lottery (Jones, 2008).

In such environments of reduced public spending, recession, and parallel fiscal consolidation, the funding network for sport becomes relatively complex and dynamic. For instance, elite sport development has evolved into a crucial element of a country's sport system, and national federations and governing bodies are exploring opportunities for continuous investment of resources in order to develop effective sport structures and talent (Martindale, Collins, & Abraham, 2007). Current literature is devoted, in great measure, to issues related to funding strategies, elite sport development, and sport systems; nevertheless, the relationship of these three components is yet to be defined (Goranova & Byers, 2015). The public funding mechanism of sport is facing formidable challenges, a fact that often leads to wide-scale closure of sport services, transferral of physical resources to private and voluntary sectors, and reorganisation of local authority sport development units (Jones, 2008). In this era of austerity, examining reactive strategies for elite sport development due to financial cutbacks is of substantial academic interest, including meaningful practical implications for national sport organisations and sport systems. First, it is important to discuss the nature and economic consequences of austerity.

Austerity has been an on-going debate since the global financial crisis in 2008. Proponents of austerity policy present such an approach as 'a strenuous workout for a healthier future' (Sen, 2015, p. 30). Due to the current financial situation in the European Union, financial leaders and governments were forced to adopt austerity measures and policies as a way out for the depressed and heavily indebted economies of the continent. However, some economists argue that austerity is essentially anti-growth, since a reduction in public expenditure contributes to reduction of private income and increased unemployment. These two factors constitute the primary and direct results of austerity, causing losses on prosperity and leading a substantial segment of the population into extreme poverty (Marmot & Bell, 2009). Greece, for instance, is a typical case where austerity policies were implemented to remove economic and moral impropriety and reduce public debt. Overall, the complex and largely debated issue of austerity affects the sport segment as well. Austerity measures have unavoidable consequences on: (a) the current state-of-play within sport development, (b) sport policy and institutional reforms, and (c) stakeholders of the greater sport industry.

This study aimed to examine implications of austerity measures and reduced public spending on elite sport development through the case of National Sport Federations (NSFs) in Greece. In this context and guided by the resource dependence theory (RDT), the study discusses reactive strategies and organisational reforms employed by federations upon a prolonged recession and decreased public funding. The investigation was conducted through analysis of financial data acquired from the General Secretariat of Sport (GSS), as well as primary qualitative data via interviews with key stakeholders from selected NSFs and the GSS.

The present paper makes a contribution to the austerity literature, since published research concerning impacts of the financial crisis in Greece has focused primarily on the public health sector (e.g. Ifanti, Argiriou, & Kalofonou, 2013; Kondilis et al., 2013; Zavras, Tsiantou, Pavi, Mylona, & Kyriopoulos, 2012) and welfare services (e.g. Matsaganis, 2011; Matsaganis & Leventi, 2011). As far as the sport and recreation segment in Greece is concerned, a few studies have discussed consequences of economic hardship on consumers' expenditure on recreation activities (e.g. Kostakis, Papadaki, & Marketos,

2014), national sport participation rates (e.g. Balaska & Kouthouris, 2014), and sport clubs (e.g. Alexandris & Balaska, 2015). To date, there is a dearth of empirical research on the impact of austerity measures on funding processes and mechanisms of NSFs, subsequent outcomes on elite sport development, and reactive strategies employed by sport federations to cope with financial constraints due to public funding reductions. An in-depth exploration of austerity effects on the elite sport development sector is both timely and of merit. Ultimately, outcomes of this study add valuable information on the relationship between elite sport development, funding policies, and sport systems. While measures and strategies associated with austerity cutbacks continue to affect public social services, their impact on high-performance sport constitutes an important investigation for not only comprehending implications on the management of governing bodies and elite sport, but also consequences on the greater well-being of citizens through sport participation.

The paper has the following structure. First, facets of the economic recession in Greece and an overview of the country's sport governing structure are illustrated, along with a theoretical perspective on resource dependence. Then, we present financial data on NSFs and qualitative data of key stakeholders from selected national federations and the GSS. Finally, we discuss implications of austerity measures on elite sport development in Greece.

Economic crisis in Greece

Since 2009, Greece has been at the forefront of global attention due to the country's severe economic crisis. Upon a decade of rapid economic growth (approximately 4% on average between 2000 and 2008), the underlying weaknesses of the Greek economy were revealed in October 2009, when the incoming government announced that earlier financial data had been misinterpreted and mismanaged (Matsaganis & Leventi, 2011). Financial weaknesses were signified by chronic fiscal and external deficits, and an extended public debt. As a result, insecurity surrounding a potential debt crisis and rumours concerning the country's inability to address its debt obligations led to financial markets increasing spreads of Greek bonds and lowering credit ratings (Featherstone, 2011). In financial terms, an economic crisis signifies both austerity measures and economic recession (Matsaganis, 2011; Matsaganis & Leventi, 2011). In this paper, the term *austerity measures* entails policies implemented by the government in an effort to reduce fiscal deficits. On the other hand, *economic recession* implies further changes in the overall economic environment, such as unemployment and wage rates (Matsaganis, 2011).

In May 2010, Greece was placed under the supervision of the European Commission, the European Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The government signed the Economic Adjustment Program and its revision in autumn 2010 (Zavras et al., 2012). Moreover, the Greek government agreed to borrow 110 billion euros in May 2010 and an additional 130 billion euros in February 2012 from the IMF and the Eurozone to finance the country's debt. The IMF's loans to Greece were accompanied by austerity measures, cutbacks in public services, deregulation of markets and professional services, and privatisation of state-owned enterprises and properties (Kondilis et al., 2013). The financial crisis affected major segments of the Greek economy, with the unemployment rate reaching 25% in 2015 (Ferreira, 2015). High unemployment rates lead to reduced income levels,

loss of prosperity, and a substantial portion of the population living in extreme poverty (Marmot & Bell, 2009). Today's data indicate that the crisis is still severe with multiple negative implications on the Greek society, especially related to the public health profile of citizens with lower socio-economic status and overall health equity (Zavras et al., 2012). Amartya Sen, the well-known professor of economics and philosophy at Harvard University, purported that approximately six years after the beginning of the economic recession (i.e. 2009), the continuous shirking of the Greek economy, mainly under the influence of austerity, has created the most unfavourable circumstances possible for major institutional reforms in the country (Sen, 2015).

Sport industry and governance in Greece

The sport industry in Greece constitutes a relatively small segment of the overall economy. According to the European study on sport as an economic activity, which was commissioned by the European Commission and the Directorate-General Education and Culture (2012) and carried out in 2011–2012, the share of sport-related value added for Greece was 1% for the narrow definition of sport, 1.44% for the broad definition of sport, and 0.36% for the statistical definition of sport. This was below the EU average (1.13% and 1.76% for narrow and broad definition, respectively). The narrow definition of sport incorporates all activities that are inputs to sport (i.e. all goods and services which are necessary for doing sport) plus the statistical definition, which includes the organised sport associations and facilities (e.g. sport clubs, public sport venues, sport event organisers, etc.). The broad definition of sport entails all activities requiring sport as an input (i.e. all goods and services related to a sport activity, but without being necessary for conducting sport) plus the narrow definition. Sport-related value added (direct effects) in Greece amounted to 1.74 billion euros according to the narrow definition, and 2.52 billion euros according to the broad definition of sport. In terms of employment, direct sport-related employment accounted for 56,226 persons according to the narrow definition and 70,878 persons with respect to the broad definition. Pertaining to the statistical definition, sport-related employment was 19,594 in 2012 (European Commission, Directorate-General Education and Culture, 2012).

In terms of sport governance in Greece, the GSS is housed under the Ministry of Culture and Sport and is the leading governing entity regulating and implementing the national sport policy (Figure 1). Main objectives of the Secretariat include: (a) development and implementation of the national sport policy, (b) promotion of mass participation sports, (c) management of public sport facilities, and (d) funding of sport federations. The GSS supervises the NSFs, the bodies responsible for developing and promoting a particular sport regionally, nationally, and internationally. Based on the annual national budget, the Secretariat allocates certain amounts to federations, which in their turn finance sport clubs and associations (Alexandris & Balaska, 2015). The main criterion for budget allocation on behalf of the GSS relates to the success of the clubs in promoting *sport for excellence* (i.e. number of elite athletes).

The Greek sport governing system suffers from a lack of (a) detailed policy formulation by the government; (b) strategic approach to the planning and promotion of elite, mass participation, and recreation sports; and (c) performance review for public funding

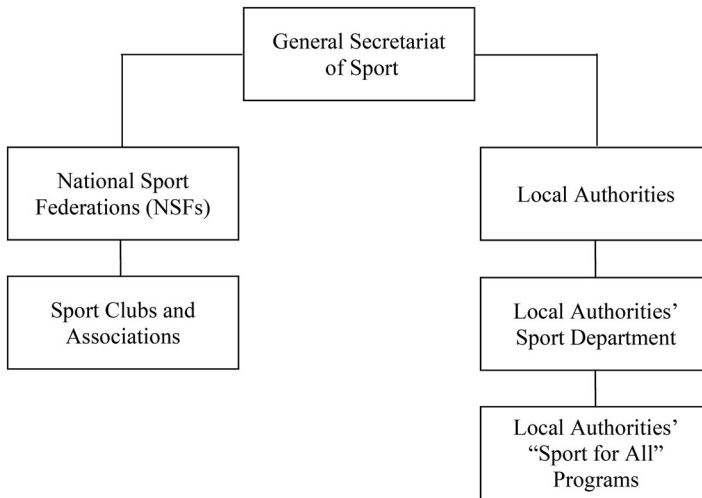


Figure 1. The Greek sport governing structure. Adapted from Alexandris and Balaska (2015).

strategies (Alexandris & Balaska, 2015; Balaska & Kouthouris, 2014). Indeed, for many years the above institutional environment paved the way for NSFs to adopt a revenue structure solely dependent on public funding with limited resources and uncertain market orientation (Papadimitriou, 1998). The government agency (i.e. GSS) promoted a mentality in which prevailing rules and norms of the sluggish public sector were channelled to the governance frameworks and management actions of NSFs, shaping their behaviour away from productive marketing activities. Institutional theory defines this type of organisational behaviour as *institutional isomorphism* by arguing that organisations operating within an environment of similar imposing requirements and expectations related to funding are anticipated to adopt analogous managerial actions and governance frameworks (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Resource dependence and NSFs

The new economic landscape in Greece, characterised by drastic cutbacks in public sport funding, challenges the NSFs to seek new strategies for responding to resource uncertainty. The RDT offers an appropriate theoretical platform for understanding organisations' behaviour operating in environments with shifting sources of funds. Based on the main tenet of RDT, entities' survival depends primarily on their ability to secure and maintain resources and manage associated dependencies (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Similar to non-profits in other sectors, for NSFs to accomplish their mission tangible and intangible resources are required (Morrow & Robinson, 2013). These may derive mainly from three sources: state activities, commercial activities, and private contributions (Froelich, 1999). Traditionally, Greek NSFs have heavily relied on public funding for their operations, and, thus, engaged in managing complexities related to state dependency.

Based on RDT, there are two pivotal implications for Greek NSFs from the continual imposition of the austerity environment. First, it is imperative to consider diversifying

their resource acquisition strategy to secure vital resources for survival in the years ahead (Froelich, 1999; Malatesta & Smith, 2014). Malatesta and Smith (2014) discussed a number of potential strategies adopted by public and non-profit organisations operating in resource-scarce environments including mergers and acquisitions, joining an association, forming alliances with partners, co-optation, and contracting. Second, NSF's intentional managerial action towards resource diversification needs to be accompanied by in-depth understanding and management of the organisations' dependency relationships associated with existing and new streams of resources (Bingham & Walters, 2013). With few exceptions (Bingham & Walters, 2013; Morrow & Robinson, 2013), available empirical evidence regarding the extent to which sport organisations diversify their revenue streams in tight fiscal landscapes is scarce. The present study builds upon the core tenet of RDT and explores the effects of austerity on alternative revenue strategies adopted by Greek NSF's in their effort to ensure survival and concurrent fulfilment of their mission and goals.

Elite sport development context

The growing interest in elite sport policies, programmes, and performance at the international level make studies on strategies and policies pertaining to elite sport development particularly interesting, since state agencies invest considerable public resources on this sector and exert pressures for tangible results. Often, NSF's acquiring medals in international competitions and achieving success are considered results capable entities and ranked high for public funding. For several countries, including Greece, the Olympic Games and world championships represent the so-called moment of truth in terms of testing the efficiency of federations' policies and programmes, as well as showcasing their sport achievements and policy effectiveness to the local and international audience.

Relevant literature and practice has acknowledged that following a more strategic approach with emphasis on inputs, throughputs, and benchmarks regarding elite athlete development may increase the chance of success in international competitions (De Bosscher, Shilbury, Theeboom, Van Hoecke, & De Knop, 2011). Therefore, strategic management based on certain key performance indicators has become the norm in funding processes of sport organisations (Jones, 2008; Robinson, 2004). Jones (2008) noted that despite the widespread application of performance management in sport, there still needs to be an alignment between targeted objectives, prioritising of goals, quantitative data (e.g. participation rates), and justification for specific actions. To this end, a research team introduced the Sport Policy Factors Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS) model to fill the gap in the literature in regards to key factors determining international sporting success (De Bosscher, De Knop, Van Bottenburg, & Shibli, 2006). According to this model, a series of factors grouped into nine pillars are explored for potential importance for success in elite sport. Factors include financial support, talent identification, coach provisions, training facilities, national and international competition, organisation, sport participation, structure of sport policies, and scientific research (De Bosscher et al., 2006, 2011).

It is worth noting that a number of broadly accepted assumptions on how public funding can lead to success through efficient elite development systems, as well as

implications for elite success when sport participation is not receiving adequate public support, remain empirically unaddressed. For instance, Green (2004) contended that talent identification might be of less importance in elite success if the greater sport system offers adequate provisions for training, incentives, and athlete support. Sam (2012) argued that performance-based public funding for elite sport in New Zealand is associated with unintended consequences such as less innovative federations and tight control over sport. Nevertheless, in some countries (i.e. Australia, Canada, UK, New Zealand) issues related to efficient elite sport policies have resulted in an increase of direct state intervention on elite sport development, and strengthened the interdependence of resources between sport governing bodies and state agencies (Green, 2007; Sam, 2012). While effective elite sport development models are still under exploration and state intervention in the sport sector is on the rise, decreased government funding often reflects a deliberate political change towards confined public support in sport and in charity organisations (Bingham & Walters, 2013), especially in countries under austerity measures. Consequently, sport entities face a new fiscal reality with multiple resource dependencies and associated complexities.

As in the case of Greece and similar to other European countries (e.g. UK), sport is delivered primarily through four sectors: local government, educational institutions, voluntary, and private. In terms of the 2011 Greek national sport policy, a total of 51 sports and their corresponding federations were categorised within five major categories: (a) sports of national priority ($n = 9$), (b) sports of national interest ($n = 8$), (c) sports of state support ($n = 7$), (d) sports based on private initiatives with targeted state support ($n = 11$), and (e) sports based on private initiatives with recognition ($n = 16$; 'National sport policy', 2011). The GSS has implemented 12 specific criteria for category placement of sports which, among others, include: (a) sport tradition, (b) compatibility with Greek culture, (c) popularity levels and growth rates, (d) organisational quality, (e) actual sport performance and projected success in international level competition, (f) organisational transparency, and (g) investment in mass sport participation ('National sport policy', 2011).

Public funding of elite sport in Greece has been a fragmented and complex issue, often characterised by ambiguous evaluation processes of sport performance (Papadimitriou, 1998). By collecting insights from key stakeholders associated with the Greek elite sport delivery system, this study is bounded to shed light on organisational and financial issues and challenges for NSFs, which are contextualised within severe austerity measures. We focused primarily on federations as they constitute the main delivery mechanism for achieving outcomes in the elite sport realm, an area that has been of high prominence in the sport-related public discourse in Greece for a number of years prior to and after the Athens 2004 Olympic Games. To this end, we systematically explore not only the extent of public funding reductions to federations by the Greek government, but we also delineate strategies adopted by these organisations to survive in a highly uncertain environment with limited resources. The qualitative nature of this paper inhibits generalisation of conclusions on the efficiency of applied strategies and provisions relative to elite sport development and management. Nonetheless, outcomes might be of importance to NSFs in other countries and sport contexts facing similar resource constraints, as well as for enriching discourses on elite sport systems, which are highly dependent on public funding.

Methods

Research design and data collection

In order to perform an in-depth investigation of austerity implications on the sport sector, we focused on national federations and the elite sport development system in Greece. Research objectives were addressed in an exploratory manner by compiling data from two different sources. First, we acquired financial data from the GSS to examine the allocated public funding to NSFs between 2007 and 2014. Aggregated financial data indicated the highest portion (90% in 2013 and 2014) of the public funding pertaining to elite sport performance was directed to federations within the two first categories of the Greek national sport policy (i.e. sports of national priority and sports of national interest, labelled *category A* and *category B*, respectively). Therefore, the sampling frame of the study was centred on the 17 NSFs collectively representing the highest state-funded sport organisations.

The quantitative data were complemented by semi-structured interviews performed with key stakeholders from selected federations, as they allowed for contextualisation of the quantitative information. This study was underpinned by a constructivist mode of inquiry in order to capture different experiences and perceptions of NSFs stakeholders. Implications of different perceptions were then examined and meaningful interpretations were performed (Patton, 2014). Semi-structured interviews were adopted for their flexibility and potential to capture perceptions and experiences of key actors in the national sport system. Interviewees included prominent board members of larger and smaller NSFs ($n = 3$), national coaches ($n = 3$), administrative staff ($n = 3$), and a state official from the GSS (see Table 1 for participants). A total of 10 interviews provided insight into challenges and consequences of austerity measures on the sport system, as pertained to federations and elite sport. In terms of sport representation, six interviews were conducted with employees associated with federations from category A (i.e. aquatics, athletics, basketball, football, gymnastics, handball, rowing, sailing, and volleyball) and three from category B (i.e. canoe kayak, cycling, judo, table tennis, taekwondo, tennis, weightlifting, and wrestling).

Initial contact was established with individuals from the GSS and NSFs following a purposive snowball sampling procedure. The goal was to secure a representative sample characterised by diversity in terms of federation size (i.e. larger vs. smaller) and position of respondent (i.e. board member, administrative, and coaching staff). Overall, nine

Table 1. List of respondents (in alphabetical order by sport).

NSF	Position status	Gender
Aquatics	National Coach	Male
Athletics	National Coach	Male
Canoe Kayak	Administrative Staff	Female
Cycling	Board Member	Male
Handball	Administrative Staff	Female
Rowing	Board Member	Male
Sailing	National Coach	Male
Table Tennis	Board Member	Male
Volleyball	Board Member	Male
GSS ^a	Board Member	Male

^aThe GSS does not constitute a NSF.

federations are represented in the current sample (i.e. aquatics, athletics, canoe kayak, cycling, handball, rowing, sailing, table tennis, and volleyball). Due to the continuing budget reductions and the financial situation in Greece, participants demonstrated interest to share their thoughts on operations and challenges for their individual organisations. Constant assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the data collection process and were instrumental in securing respondents' genuine feedback and personal stance relative to the purpose of the study. Interviews were conducted between September and October 2015 either in person or via phone, were digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

The interview guide aimed at uncovering issues and challenges associated with decreased public funding and the overall context of elite sport in Greece. Sample questions included: 'What are the consequences of public cuts on your federation relative to elite and grassroots sport participation?', 'What kind of strategies have been adopted by your organisation to deal with budget constraints?', and 'What are some key risks and opportunities associated with funding changes within your federation?'. Respondents were encouraged to address the impact of the 2009–2015 recession on their federation's operations and strategies. Probing with follow-up questions varied upon answers from respondents. Data collection was completed when saturation was realised based on interview outcomes and study objectives.

Data analysis

For the data analysis, a purpose-specific coding scheme was developed and crosschecked for consistency. Specifically, open, axial, and selective coding were employed for identifying key themes across transcriptions. Authors reviewed the data to identify specific strategies pertaining to NSFs' response to drastic and repetitive reductions in annual state subsidies. As far as data organisation is concerned, we first present quantitative information on sport federations' funding, followed by qualitative data organised in three categories: strategies, opportunities, and risks.

Findings and discussion

Quantitative output

Based on the national sport policy and federations' constitutions, organisations may employ a range of funding sources; however, the majority of NSFs rely on state funds to cover a high percentage of their total expenses. As mentioned before, the GSS is responsible for allocating funding and supervising performance and legal compliance. Categories A and B within the national sport policy encompass the largest federations and obtain the highest portion of sport-related public funding. As depicted in [Table 2](#), the contribution of the Greek government for Category A reached its peak in 2009 (37.8 million euros), shortly prior to the introduction of austerity policies. Aquatics, athletics, basketball, and football are the NSFs consistently receiving higher amounts of public funding. Due to the economic recession, the government initiated continuous cutbacks in high-performance subsidies, which in the case of the aforementioned four organisations have been

Table 2. Public funding for Greek NSFs of national priority (2007–2014).

NSF	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Aquatics	5,600,000	5,400,000	5,400,000	5,091,000	4,800,000	4,063,160	2,897,800	1,471,000
Athletics	8,600,000	8,600,000	8,400,000	8,250,000	7,350,000	5,487,170	4,400,000	2,570,500
Basketball	5,272,000	6,000,000	5,800,000	5,500,000	4,900,000	4,141,000	2,520,000	2,029,200
Football	0 ^a	0 ^a	6,000,000	4,800,000	3,500,000	500,000	850,000	710,500
Gymnastics	2,200,000	2,317,800	2,200,000	2,000,000	1,700,000	1,814,660	1,275,900	1,200,000
Handball	2,800,000	2,800,000	2,800,000	2,700,000	2,200,000	1,405,500	1,151,600	936,500
Rowing	1,350,000	1,370,000	1,320,000	1,320,000	1,320,000	773,200	885,000	917,400
Sailing	1,850,000	1,900,000	1,830,000	1,372,500	1,165,000	556,000	615,000	525,500
Volleyball	4,300,000	4,500,000	4,100,000	3,800,000	3,000,000	2,426,300	1,400,000	1,664,100
Total	31,972,000	32,887,800	37,850,000	34,833,500	29,935,000	21,166,990	15,995,300	12,024,700

Note: Amounts are reported in euros.

^aThe football federation was excluded from public funding due to disputes over the organisation's constitution.

particularly impactful since 2011. The extent of the reduction of public funding is estimated at 68.2% for category A between 2009 and 2014 (Figure 2). Notably, state funding does not depend on specific measurable annual goals, albeit the NSFs that achieve high world rankings and medal counts tend to attract comparably greater public resources.

A similar trend is evident in public funding decline of federations classified in category B (i.e. sports of national interest). Eight sport organisations relying heavily on public resources for their sport development have also experienced drastic budget cuts. As shown in Table 3, public investment in this group reached its highest point in 2007 (11.6 million euros). Cycling, weightlifting, and wrestling are the NSFs attracting the highest funding in this category. Once more, these organisations were obligated to operate in 2014 with 63.8% less public support compared to 2009 (Figure 3).

Drastic reductions in public investment associated with elite sport occurred parallel to a declining performance demonstrated by Greek national teams in major sport events, such as the Olympic Games. The Greek delegation was the largest ever (i.e. 426 athletes) in the Athens 2004 Games and managed to step on the podium 16 times. Since then, the size of the Greek Olympic delegation was reduced to 156 participants in Beijing resulting in four medals, and down to 103 participants in London 2012 harvesting a mere two medals. The association of elite performance with public funding and government involvement is apparent in the growing literature dedicated to sport policy and elite sport development (e.g. De Bosscher et al., 2006, 2011; Sam, 2012). There is increasing evidence that nations investing heavily on high-performance sport both with resources and effective elite policies have considerably higher chances of success at the international level (De Bosscher et al., 2006). The SPLISS model attempts to encapsulate both inputs (what is spent) and processes (how resources are exploited) within elite sport policies, and to establish relationships to outputs pertaining to performance in international sport events (De Bosscher et al., 2006, 2011). Outcomes of our study indicate public expenditure on elite sport has drastically declined over the period of 2007–2014. Thus, negative implications of austerity are manifested in regards to national teams' performance and medal count in international sport events.

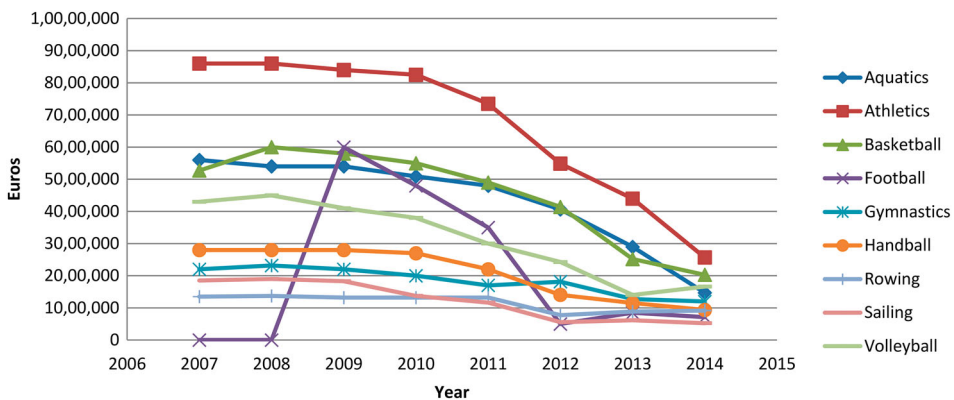


Figure 2. Public funding for Greek NSFs of national priority (2007–2014).

Table 3. Public funding for Greek NSFs of national interest (2007–2014).

NSF	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Canoe Kayak	1,050,000	1,050,000	1,000,000	850,000	650,000	678,000	250,000	315,500
Cycling	1,800,000	1,800,000	1,750,000	1,575,000	1,350,000	1,400,000	707,000	838,900
Judo	1,150,000	1,050,000	900,000	700,000	700,000	556,000	370,000	360,000
Table Tennis	850,000	750,000	720,000	750,000	635,000	550,000	417,600	389,900
Taekwondo	1,300,000	1,300,000	1,250,000	740,000	650,000	500,000	260,000	314,300
Tennis	1,150,000	1,100,000	1,050,000	900,000	765,000	740,000	498,500	498,500
Weightlifting	2,000,000	1,100,000	1,500,000	1,256,000	1,150,000	850,000	564,000	545,000
Wrestling	2,300,000	2,350,000	2,100,000	1,650,000	1,400,000	1,400,000	965,800	939,400
Total	11,600,000	10,500,000	10,270,000	8,421,000	7,300,000	6,674,000	4,032,900	4,201,500

Note: Amounts are reported in euros.

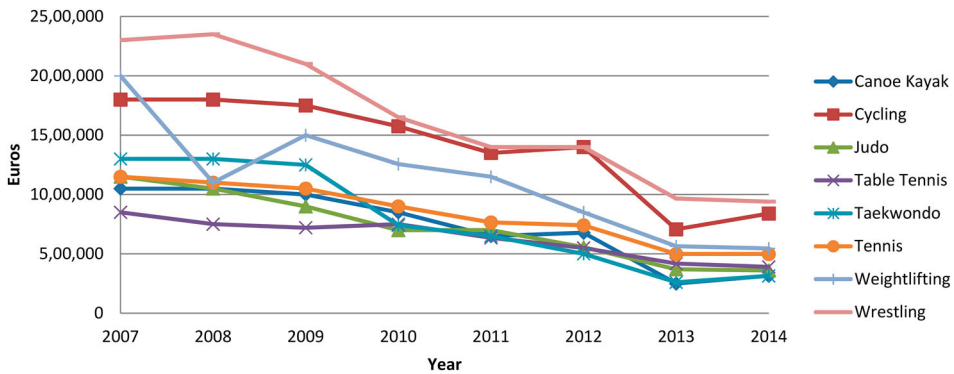


Figure 3. Public funding for Greek NSFs of national interest (2007–2014).

Qualitative output

Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants from NSFs and the GSS, the following parts illuminate impacts and strategies adopted as a response to the severe funding cuts. These results are presented under three headings associated with budget constraints and reduced public funding for federations: strategies, risks, and opportunities.

Strategies

Budget constraints associated with reduced public spending have led federations to adopt various strategic reforms in order to remain viable in times of financial hardship. The following set of qualitative data illustrates major decisions of NSFs which are consistent with Graddy and Morgan's (2006) definition of strategy which is viewed '... as a stream of decisions that guides an organisation's alignment with its environment and shapes its internal policies and procedures' (p. 610). These strategies are discussed under three sub-themes: (a) service reduction and prioritisation, (b) traded services, and (c) operating efficiency.

Service reduction and prioritisation. Participants unanimously agreed that severe financial cutbacks in NSFs' public funding obligated organisations to immediately explore cost cutting strategies. Right after the first and second wave of public expenditure reductions (in 2010 and 2014, respectively), federations were vulnerable due to their increased reliance on public resources. Interviewees highlighted various strategies used to manage the economic downturn. These strategies pertained mainly to elimination or reduction of specific activities and services for elite sport such as (a) reduced size of national delegations, (b) stringent eligibility criteria for supporting athletes, (c) termination of athlete support programs (e.g. medical services), (d) reductions in technical staff and coaches and inability to replace retiring administrative staff, and (e) cancellation of regional and local tournaments. The above constituted common and immediate response measures by NSFs to the continuous funding cuts. As participants indicate below, the majority of the typical activities and professional services provided to elite athletes have been significantly reduced:

There is no national coach any more. All coaches left three years ago. Our sailing athletes need to find their own coaches, and a medical team does not even exist. (National Coach, Sailing)

Scientific supervision of the swimming national team has been demolished. There is no exercise science or sport psychology staff members, we only have two doctors. (National Coach, Aquatics)

The repercussions are immense. We had to make difficult decisions, especially concerning our national teams. We did not participate in the 2013 Euro League, which harmed our international rankings. (Board Member, Volleyball)

Apparently, limited financial resources have also affected the development of respective sports beyond the elite level. An experienced staff member with the canoe kayak federation brought to surface the inability of the organisation to support the promotion of the sport through educational programs in schools and club teams due to restricted funding. As illustrated in Table 2, the federation's annual funding was reduced by more than 50% between 2013 and 2015.

Interview data further suggested that NSFs have reshaped their priorities in terms of offered services in either mass or elite sport. The initial flexible model adopted by federations prior to the recession with allocating public resources in various directions at the local, regional, and international levels is no longer sustainable in the austerity era. Most federations had to perform harsh strategic decisions on how to refocus scarce resources and accomplish tangible goals, while maintaining admittedly lower expectations for international success. This strategy is supported by the growing literature favouring the adoption of targeted funding approaches to winning medals (De Bosscher, Birgham, Shibli, Van Bottenburg, & De Knop, 2008).

Traded services. Results from the interviews provided ample evidence to support Parnell, Millward, and Spracklen's (2015) contention that austerity measures are not aimless figures, but have direct consequences on people's lives. Radical cutbacks of Greek public spending in sport initiated in 2010, and expected to continue beyond 2015, implied drastic changes to federations' budget structures. As a response, NSFs have moved towards alternative revenue streams and traded activities; namely, charging for provision of services to sport clubs and individual participants. Consistent with the RDT, a number of NSFs within our sample have responded to the economic hardship by seeking alternative sources of funding, such as exploitation of commercial activities. This service marketisation strategy is popular within NSFs in the UK, as organisations exploit membership, events, and sponsorship as sources for generating required funding for their operations besides public funding (Morrow & Robinson, 2013).

Eight of the nine sampled Greek federations have adopted similar service marketisation strategies through implementation of charges to sport clubs for: (a) referee services and event participation costs and (b) athletes participating in tournaments and national championships. In some cases, elite athletes are burdened with covering their own expenses for participating in international competitions, with cost coverage stemming from family and friends. This clearly signifies transition of costs associated with sport provision from NSFs to member clubs, and, eventually, to family budgets, as the following participants illustrate:

Now in every sanctioned swimming competition, athletes have to pay 10 euros to participate. (National Coach, Aquatics)

We had to make tough decisions in order to survive. We transferred significant costs such as referee fees, transportation, issuing new athlete licenses, etc. to our clubs and families. This resulted in burdening financially our club members. (Board Member, Volleyball)

We transferred the financial burden 100% to local clubs and parents ... Whoever can afford it will participate in our events. The question is how far parents can take this. (Board Member, Table Tennis)

This principal survival-oriented strategy is adaptive to the environmental stimuli of less available public resources for sport due to austerity. Paradoxically, most organisations have maintained existing fee structures for their members (i.e. local clubs and participants) instead of exploring innovative and less costly ways of supporting them during financial hardships. As an example, community sport trusts in the UK have reacted to the financial uncertainty by intensifying their fundraising activities including voluntary funding, summer school coaching schemes, and income from charitable activities (Bingham & Walters, 2013).

Operating efficiency. Our analysis indicated that federations had not only to reconsider their strategic direction, but also past practices for more reflective spending patterns. As publicly subsidised non-profit organisations, Greek NSFs had not experienced institutional pressures for enhancing internal efficiency through planning and essential performance control prior to the recession (Papadimitriou, 2007). Additionally, Greek federations had not been subjected to hierarchical interventions aligned with the national sport policy and contracts for predefined sport performance and resources. This was clearly confirmed by the GSS representative, who was asked to report on the Secretariat's strategies and expectations for investing in elite sport:

The GSS national sport policy is not clear today, nor has been in the past. As a government agency, we are interested in mass participation sports, but also the number of medals in international competitions. The new government has announced some new measures for sport development, which still remain unspecified. (Director, GSS)

Imposed austerity cuts were consistently perceived by interviewees as an external, intense stimulus to further explore ways for restructuring and implementing cost-efficient strategies. To this end, interviewees reported various reformations on service delivery mechanisms such as merging regional offices, relocating events for less cost, and upgrading information technology applications for reducing competition-related expenses. Notably, the representative from athletics stated most of their national championships take place in Athens for transportation cost savings. However, concentration of sport events in a single geographical area prevents development and representation of the sport in other parts of the country. Further harsh decisions affected internal organisational processes of NSFs such as elimination of departments and offices or inability by the federation to sign contracts for required outsourced services.

Risks

Major changes in funding processes of Greek NSFs have created a number of risks, often leading to fundamental adjustments and innovative practices. Respondents shared their

sentiments of uncertainty and fear concerning the systematic degradation of the elite sport system in the country. A number of risks were highlighted including: (a) marketisation effects, (b) impact on elite sport performance, and (c) organisational dysfunctions.

Marketisation effects. As previously discussed, lack of public resources has forced federations to introduce fees for their services, which impacts member clubs and participants competing in sanctioned events. Beyond this fact, interviewees pointed out the social groups that do not have access to sport services at the grassroots level due to their inability to pay their dues at local clubs. Besides registration fees, clubs have increased the range of services subject to additional commission mainly in relation to tournament participation (e.g. registration, transportation, accommodation, etc.). Interviewees consistently characterised this approach as creating social disparity and limiting accessibility to sport for low-income families and unemployed parents. The Board Member from the Volleyball Federation alluded to this matter:

Unfortunately, there are many social groups that are not able to pay the club fees so their children can practice their favorite sport. It is mostly unemployed and low-income groups that choose to cut off sports for financial reasons ... This is where the government needs to promote its social welfare.

Potential repercussions pertain to physical activity for the masses and public health issues. Evidence indicates that the current economic recession and parallel austerity are likely to have a significant impact on social determinants of health (Bloomer, Allen, Donkin, Findlay, & Gamsu, 2013). A recent study in Greece provided strong evidence of the association of self-rated health with the economic crisis and several demographic, socio-economic, and disease-related factors (Zavras et al., 2012). The authors argued that 'the growing burden of chronic diseases is accelerated by the current economic crisis due to the adoption of unhealthy lifestyles, which further hinders economic growth and development' (Zavras et al., 2012, p. 209). Eventually, participation constraints of the public by NSF-related programmes create a vicious cycle in terms of societal health issues, identification of youth talent, and revenue generation for NSFs.

Impact on elite sport performance. Results revealed the growing inability of federations to provide adequate services and support to their national teams. Based on interviewees' perspectives, NSFs have been gradually restricted in their obligation to compose national teams, offer essential coaching and technical services, and support athlete participation in international competitions. According to two interviewees representing rowing and cycling, repetitive absence from prominent competitions due to financial constraints has resulted in penalties from international federations and declining international rankings. One respondent provided a forewarning regarding potential social effects created from lack of resources for supporting elite athletes or developing role models for youth. Yet, others underlined that NSFs have been unable to run talent identification programmes, and that motives for elite sport participation are not as attractive as in the past. Ultimately, such risks are expected to have long-term consequences on sport development at the elite level. Our interviewee from the rowing federation characteristically stated:

Repercussions of the economic crisis have not fully unfolded. But we see them through the parents. Our national team is rapidly shrinking; we constantly lose potential youth talent. In 2010 we took rowing to its highest point, now we are in a downfall. The future is not promising with 40% reduction in our public funding, and the consequences on developmental categories, which are the future of the sport, are irreversible.

Besides the undermined capacity of NSFs to construct efficient pathways to elite performance, it is noteworthy that the majority of interviewees regarded elite sport as high priority of the federation's mission, along with administrative viability. To this end, additional scrutiny and justification of operational costs and expenditures has replaced older routines. This has resulted in stricter eligibility criteria for participating on national teams and confinement of international delegations to the absolute minimum in order to match resource availability. For some NSFs, talent identification is no longer systematic and limited opportunities are offered to promising athletes in international competitions. The following interviewees describe provisions that place an emphasis on salvaging international sport performance during austerity:

In the past we would go to registered clubs for talent identification. Now it is vice versa: when we do test events for the national teams, we invited clubs to bring along any potential talents; that is all we can do. (Administrative Staff, Canoe Kayak)

Our goal setting has changed concerning elite sport performance; we only participate in a few selected events compared to previous years. We choose the events based on the rankings required for the Rio Games without any back up plan in case we do not achieve expected results. We take a lot of risks now. (Administrative Staff, Cycling)

Interestingly, only two federations identified opportunities for survival during the recession through reassessment of their strategic focus from the elite to the mass participation and amateur level. The canoe kayak acquired the rights to promote to the public a new sport called stand-up paddle, and has partnered with local organisations to secure sport service provision and additional revenue streams.

Organisational dysfunctions. NSFs have responded to their confined public funding with reducing expenses and terminating services and activities. Gradual elimination of internal operations also poses risks on the promotion and management of the sport concern. Respondents reported significant lack of administrative staff to support day-to-day operations. The impact of the crisis on service delivery mechanisms is apparent through increased pressure on staff, delays in labour payments, overtime, and temporary postponement of internal operations (i.e. public relations, finance). As an illustrative example, the table tennis interviewee shared the fact that for three months per year the staff works once per week, which saves the organisation 20,000 euros. Most federations have reacted to continuous underfunding by discharging contract staff in both administrative and technical domains. Cost reductions at the organisational level affects the efficiency of NSFs, while undermining legitimate democratic procedures for conducting board meetings for elections or other procedures due to inability of members to travel to the federations' headquarters.

Opportunities

Beyond unsteady funding conditions, interviewees acknowledged a number of actions employed by their federations which mirror strategies for sustainable survival. Larger organisations (e.g. athletics) reported increased activity in sponsorship and development of income sources from investing gradually in mass participation sport events such as the Athens Classic Marathon and Run Greece initiatives. These events have recovered a large portion of lost public subsidies, confirming the main RDT tenet that organisational survival is linked to balanced dependencies for resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). The coaching staff member from athletics stated:

We have been active in securing sponsorships in a professional manner and creating new revenue streams through the Classic Marathon and other events. The sponsorship plan has brought in annually 2.4 million euros.

Other NSFs reported that due to the crisis they had to capitalise on partnership strategies, whereby they gained access to extended resources associated with local organisations (e.g. municipalities, non-profit entities) in terms of sharing facilities, resources, and co-staging regional tournaments.

The necessity to rethink sport delivery and maintain aspirations for international success has also activated key stakeholders within the Greek sport system. Similar to the British Olympic Association (BOA), which initiated the Financial Times Stock Exchange-BOA partnership scheme in 2007 to create access to alternative critical resources for NSFs (Morrow & Robinson, 2013), the Hellenic Olympic Committee (HOC) has recently taken the lead in developing talented athletes for the Rio 2016 Olympic Games and beyond. The HOC programme entitled *The road to Rio* has rekindled hopes for an aspiring pool of Greek athletes who may eventually qualify for the event. A board member from the rowing federation noted 'six out of their eight athletes within the rowing national team secured their participation in Rio thanks to the specific HOC program'. In a similar vein, the table tennis federation annually develops 14 self-funded open tournaments in regions throughout the country relying exclusively on the support of local clubs and regional agencies.

Lastly, another pivotal positive impact identified consistently by interviewees was an increasing demand for sport participation at the grassroots level during the recession. Respondents reported a higher demand for their sport in the form of registered club athletes, number of tournaments and national championships, and, to a lesser extent, in the formation of new clubs as registered federation members. We asked participants to offer potential explanations for this phenomenon in the austerity context. A few pointed out the utilisation of sport by parents as a resource to engage their children in sport activities or the provision of high quality sport services. Others alluded to exceptions in sport clubs' fee reductions, which have made sports like swimming attractive to potential participants. The aforementioned surprising evidence warrants further systematic examination given the lack of social welfare and support by the government for sport development, as well as the diminishing disposable income of Greek families and unemployed citizens.

In accordance with RDT, the prolonged economic recession in Greece has triggered strategies towards alternative means of funding and resource dependencies particularly in the sport sector. Notably, Greek NSFs have started reconsidering their operations and initiating new sources of revenue either by engaging in commercial activities or/

and by cultivating new strategic co-alliances in the realm of sport development, facilities, and event management. On the other hand, Froelich (1999) pointed out that some of these funding strategies (e.g. commercial activities) might be causes for alarm, since there is no evidence about their potential long-term impact on the organisation's mission, structure, and performance.

Concluding remarks

The study revealed a number of issues that may be of concern for the future of elite sport development in Greece. In terms of the financial implications of austerity measures on elite sport development, results indicated that state funds on elite sport have drastically declined over the period of 2007–2014 (approximately 68.2% for sports of national priority). This resulted in a notable decline both in elite sport performance, as demonstrated by medal count in international sport events (e.g. Olympic Games), and the sport talent identification process alike. As interviewees purported, the majority of NSFs relied (and most are still relying) on governmental funding to cover their organisational and operational expenses.

The study also showcased the relevance of the RDT for future survival of Greek NSFs. Consistent with the theory, findings illustrated that a number of federations have started to exploit alternative sources of income. As proposed by the RDT, organisations should diversify their resource acquisition strategy by looking for additional revenues such as commercial activities and private contributions (e.g. sponsorship). Furthermore, some NSFs have started to adjust to the new economic reality by developing strategies to reduce their costs. Cutting costs are mainly related to support services for athletes (e.g. medical services, number of coaches), staging sport events (e.g. cancellation of tournaments), size of sport teams (e.g. condensed size of delegations), and operational costs (e.g. organisational restructuring, administrative cost). Such tactics have helped NSFs to survive through a sustained period of economic hardship. Although inevitable, they may also have had a negative impact on elite sport development. Gradual decrease in government funding for elite sports in Greece supports Bingham and Walters's (2013) research, which suggests that in countries under austerity measures there is a deliberate political change towards confined public support in sport and charity organisations.

Opportunities for sustainability of federations were also identified; these prospects shed a light of optimism on elite sport development within the country in the framework of a challenging economic environment. It is worth noting that for an extended period of time, Greek NSFs have been functioning with guaranteed public resources, which were awarded with no conditions or predefined performance standards by the state agency. Indeed, these organisations were enjoying freedom in regards to resource allocation and needs prioritisation (Papadimitriou, 2007), to the extent they had assimilated ways of functioning typical to the sluggish public sector. As service non-profit entities with high dependency on membership fees and public funding, federations have no alternative other than to respond instantly and efficiently to austerity policies.

While cutting costs represents the typical approach in dealing with limited public funding, the success of strategic initiatives implemented by a few federations in order to find alternative sources of income illustrates a more optimistic perspective, in line with RDT propositions. To this end, a number of Greek federations have employed a long-

term plan towards attracting commercial sponsors. However, adopting a systematic marketing approach to their sport services and tournaments is a fundamental prerequisite for establishing viable sponsors. It is apparent from our study that most NSFs are still lacking such an approach. The athletics federation within our sample is a representative success story of significant financial contribution provided through sponsorship channels. Generating income through additional charges to sport clubs for sport event and administration services is the second source of external income for NSFs. Herein lies a cultural issue of the contemporary Greek society, since such an approach is not likely to be embraced by the traditional Greek sport administration system whereby services have been always offered at no cost. Nonetheless, the fact that federations have started to transition towards fee-based services may be a stepping-stone towards a financially sustainable and viable model. Simultaneously, sport clubs have also adapted to the new requirements and started to generate additional income in order to address their operational costs and become less dependent on public funding. As a result, fees have been introduced for young athletes and recreational sport participants when using club-related services (e.g. camps, tournament participation, etc.). Once again, this new approach seems to be inevitable for sport clubs' survival.

Synergistic partnerships with local authorities and non-profit associations to develop joint actions (e.g. co-staging regional sport tournaments, utilisation of sport facilities) were regarded as particularly effective in the economic recession (Froelich, 1999; Malatesta & Smith, 2014). While most of the aforementioned strategies might be considered best practice, it is pivotal federations and sport clubs emphasise their social welfare, so that sports are accessible for all citizens irrespective of their financial status. There is a potential risk that lower socio-economic classes and disadvantaged groups (e.g. unemployed) might be constrained from accessing sport services due to the introduction of sport participation fees. As the majority of respondents noted, it is timely and of importance that sociocultural objectives of sport participation become an integral component of the government, federations, clubs, and local authorities. Ultimately, this may have a positive long-term impact on elite sport development.

A final point that warrants further investigation relates to the trend towards an increased demand for sport participation at the grassroots level (both for competitive and for recreational sports). Remarkably, such an increase is unexpected considering elevated membership costs, fee-based services for sport club members, and reduced purchasing power of the Greek society due to salary cuts and unemployment. This unprecedented growth of sport club participation constitutes the stepping-stone towards development of the sport segment in Greece in the midst of austerity measures. It also showcases that a new organisational and managerial mentality is in place for NSFs. Concurrently, there is a need for retrospection relative to the current sport development system, which traditionally has emphasised elite sport against mass sport. In conclusion, it is imperative that sport federations and clubs in Greece continue to invest in marketing-driven directions to create an attractive environment for commercial sponsorship acquisition.

Directions for future research

This study examined the impact of austerity measures on elite sport development in Greece by focusing on larger federations and sports of national priority and interest.

Further research needs to be conducted with smaller governing bodies and less popular sports. Academic studies could also examine the impact of constrained government funding on other dimensions of the Greek sport system such as sport participation in the context of local authority sport programmes, membership of amateur/non-profit sport clubs, number of athletes in the grassroots sport development programmes, and employment opportunities and conditions in the sport industry. There needs to be additional research on the potential impact of austerity policies on the private sport sector in Greece including health and fitness clubs, private organisations providing indoor and outdoor sport services, participatory outdoor sport events (e.g. running, open water swimming, mountain bike), and ski resorts. Identification of best practices by different sport entities at the public, private, and local levels may assist in the development of an effective national sport policy and strategy in the country. Finally, cross-cultural and comparison studies with European countries of similar financial circumstances (e.g. Iceland, Spain, Portugal) could provide knowledge on national policies, organisational structures, growth mechanisms, business strategies, and prevention tools for dealing with sport development issues in environments and periods of financial downturn.

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