

# **UACES 43<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference**

**Leeds, 2-4 September 2013**

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## **Europeanization from below? Football spectatorship, mediatization and European identity**

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### **Abstract**

The ongoing Europeanization of governance structures of sport, especially football, has become one of the most fruitful avenues of social science-oriented Sports Studies. Carrying research further, we ask whether there are consequences from such altered forms of governance with regard to the lifeworlds of sports consumers. I.e. we question whether there are changes at the level of supporters' and spectators' perceptions, and in a wider sense: their identities? This question gains momentum not least against the background of manifold crises within Europe and the supposed crumbling of 'Europeanness' in times of financial turmoil, tight budgets, and enforced austerity measures .

The underlying idea is that the increasing depth and frequency of interactions related to football in Europe has already led to an incremental change of perceptions and, by that, altered the very shapes of "communities of belonging". Of specific importance, in this regard, seems the UEFA Champions League (CL), the de facto pan-European league competition of top European clubs which could be interpreted as constituting a rather stable transboundary space of action. Preliminary research so far has hinted at new forms of allegiance, orientation and networking among elite actors in the CL context. We hypothesize that the developments have also left their mark on sports fans, i.e. the main consumers of sport. In order to build a bridge between conceptual work on the Europeanization of lifeworlds and more ethnographically oriented research into incremental identity change, this paper aims to describe the UEFA Champions League as a site where a "European public football space" forms, both in terms of transboundary spectatorship and fandom as well as through the continuous creation/normalization of transnational media events, i.e. CL broadcasts.

## Introduction

For more than 15 years we can witness a growing influence of the European Union on the *governance* of football in Europe. We argue that, beyond constituting mere “governance issues”, Europeanization processes in the area of football have also set in motion dynamics of change on the level of identities. Several drivers have tentatively been identified in that respect, such as the influence of a more thoroughly Europeanized nationality regime across the (major) European leagues, with the best players often originating from other European/EU countries, or the success of the Champions League brand (e.g. in terms of match attendance, broadcasting rates, and general prestige attached to it). We hypothesize that such Europeanizing mechanisms have also left their mark on sports fans, i.e. the main consumers of that sport. In many respects, sport in general is an ideal carrier of identity change because it draws on the emotional level/investment of the respective supporters.

In contrast, however, sports as a medium for identity change has so far largely been ignored in the field of European Integration Studies. Although the wider public has already been subject to research on European-wide identity change, it is most often political opinions, knowledge of political institutions, values held as well as evaluations of the European integration process which have formed the base of empirical analysis within such identity-related research frameworks. Our project in turn is to tackle football supporters as a specific public within Europe.

Our exploratory paper attempts to further develop<sup>1</sup> a framework which relates such research to the wider questions of European identity change. Our starting point is hence to inquire into processes of a “Europeanization from below” – as against EU-induced top-down changes (see next section) –, and our main interest is in dynamics of perception, self-understandings and identity among those who follow football. Seen from this angle, the metaphor of a “Europeanization from below” points to two understandings. First, perceptual changes at the level of elites within a field of activity (here: football, e.g. officials of top football clubs which were already reported to have undergone some Europeanization of perceptions) are presumably paralleled by developments at the mass popular level, i.e. football fans and spectators (Europeanizing the field “from below” to some degree).

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of this paper have been presented at the 2013 FREE (Football Research in an Enlarged Europe)-Conference “European Football and Collective Memory: Transnational Media Events”, Stuttgart/Germany, and the 2013 Sport&EU-Conference “Sport in Times of Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities”, Kadir Has University, Istanbul/Turkey.

Second, European identity is most often researched through techniques which aim at “high politics”-issues or political knowledge(s) and opinions in general. However, we argue that lifeworldly phenomena are at least as important as strictly political issues in bringing about Europeanized identities. In that sense, our interest is not primarily directed at the eventual potential of football (and its governance corollary) to make ‘ordinary people’ more accustomed with an increasingly integrated political and societal realm (Europe/the EU) and its rules and institutions. Rather, we want to analyse whether the increasing level of interaction, club competition, peer pressure and orientation, media broadcasting and event-driven marketization of top-level football in Europe has also fostered corresponding forms of collective allegiance. In other words, has the “reality” of a Europeanization of top-level football also effected more “Europeanized” understandings and perceptions among supporters and followers?

The paramount societal and political importance of exploring such forms of allegiance is evident with regard to the current multiple crises of the European integration project that have also left their mark on the perceptions and evaluations of this *political* project on European citizens (e.g. Eurobarometer 2012). In contrast to that, we hypothesise that an eventual transformation of *everyday* ideas about communities and frames of references may also have important implications. If fans and spectators have gotten more used to, become more interested in and positive about, football at the European level, this might also rather unconsciously challenge prejudices and stereotypes, and foster cohesion in times of societal stress induced through the economic and financial crises, the ensuing austerity politics, and various blame games (who created the “mess” – the “lazy” Greeks, the “corrupt” Italians, the “egoistic” Brits, the “hegemonic” Germans etc.).

### **Europeanization – Football Governance and Identity Matters**

The past two decades have been marked by a growing influence of the European Union on the governance of football (Garcia 2011; Parrish 2011), be that in the form of an actor or as policy venue through which various stakeholders have sought to further their respective and specific interests. Based on that observation, we have labeled some of the concomitant dynamics the “Europeanization” of football (e.g. Niemann/Brand 2007; Brand/Niemann 2011; Niemann, Garcia and Grant 2011; Brand/Niemann/Spitaler 2012).

As by now a widely used concept, “Europeanization” back then mostly referred to domestic change as regards “policy substance” (here: the contours of sports policy through ECJ rulings for instance), instruments, institutions as well as processes of interest representation (stakeholders within the field of sports policy, how they pursue their agendas, e.g. regards broadcasting

rights) *as a result* of EU-level legislation and political decision-making (cf. Radaelli 2000; Ladrech 1994). Hence, such a more traditional take on Europeanization concerned itself primarily with questions of *where, how, why, and the extent to which* EU integration and governance at the European level precipitates domestic change in the area of football.

We argued that it is necessary to transcend (not to wholly abandon) such a narrow conception on two grounds. First, Europeanization should not – neither exclusively nor primarily – be regarded to be purely unidirectional. Rather it can be seen as a two-way-process developing both from the bottom up as from the top down. Hence, bottom-up accounts which highlight the influence of actors at the national levels, action from and within various national contexts may have exerted considerable influence on European-level developments as well. It is in that sense, that Europeanization should be conceptualized as a *mixture of downloading and uploading*, also with regard to sports and football as distinct policy fields. Second, the Europeanization of football resembles a two-track process (Brand/Niemann/Spitaler 2012) which means that next to EU-level developments there is also a sphere of change that is related to European integration in a very wide understanding, but not reducible to what happens at the EU level. Thus, we directed the attention to a transnational dimension in which actions of societal actors such as football clubs, football associations or the media (undoubtedly *within the context* of EU regulation) have contributed to the constructing of transnational spaces. Such dynamics can be labeled *crossloading*, also referred to as the ‘transnational’ dimension of Europeanization (e.g. the emergence of the Champions League and the eventual formation of transnational networks of clubs, supporters etc.).

In our analyses of German football (e.g. Brand/Niemann 2011) and Austrian football respectively (Brand/Niemann/Spitaler 2011), we have thus singled out five distinct Europeanization dynamics with different mixtures of up-, down- and crossloading:

- 1) Bosman I (the ‘nationality issue’), i.e. the formative influence of the ECJ ruling – and subsequent rulings (Simutenkow etc.) – on the composition of the respective national players’ markets and the composition of the squads, mostly in professional football;
- 2) Bosman II (the overhaul of the transfer regime), i.e. the impact of the second provision of the Bosman ruling which led to a process of political debate and re-regulation at the level of global football governance entailing a lot of activism on behalf of football stakeholders as well as national political actors, especially in the case of Germany;
- 3) Broadcasting Rights, i.e. a somewhat similar process in which some impetus at the EU level – here, the Commissions’ investigation into the practice of selling broadcasting rights collectively at the beginning of the 2000s – led to political haggling, lobbying, the formation of policy coalitions etc. and, in the end, to the closure of the case by the

Commission itself (partly because various stakeholders had been successfully presenting their arguments, partly because some concessions had been made to introduce elements of competition);

- 4) the establishment of the Champions League and, by that, the evolution of European club competition towards the formation of a *de facto* pan-European league<sup>2</sup>; as this constitutes a qualitative break with the former format of European club competition given the fairly high level of continuity, we argued transnational forces had created a space of relatively dense and regular interaction among top clubs;
- 5) parallel to that, the evolution of new forms of European transnational sports lobbying groups (in which, e.g., top German clubs were heavily involved); as we argued, this created an additional layer of Europeanization dynamics not least since frequent interaction led to a gradual/temporary convergence of the agendas of top club officials (G-14 from 2000-08, to a lesser degree its successor ECA since 2008).

Through our analyses, another theme occasionally surfaced which captured our attention but could not really be substantiated. As we compiled some tentative evidence that the frequent interaction of club officials as well as other high ranking football functionaries might have altered their perspectives and viewpoints we asked ourselves whether such by-products of the ongoing Europeanization of football were restricted to the elite level or could be detected at the level of spectators and fans alike. That would not be a trivial phenomenon given the degree of emotional involvement of fans on the one hand as well as the sheer size of football spectatorship and fandom on the other. Hence, a promising future avenue of research would be to inquire whether the ongoing Europeanization of governance structures of football and concomitant processes of down-, up- and crossloading has also effected changes at the level of fans' perceptions and supporters' and spectators' identities.

The main underlying idea in this is that "identities" as projections of self also entail perceptions of membership (of a certain community), criteria for oneself and others to belong to this in-group (who is regarded as alien, exotic, outside etc., who not) as well as spatial concepts (what is the primary a/o preferred sphere of action, what is the main frame of reference). In that sense, it might not be trivial when German fans cheer Dutch players and accept them as "theirs" or when, as one colleague once remarked, it might be of more relevance for a Liverpool supporter what happens at Barça than what is going on in Stoke. Gradually changing perception patterns might also be indicative of an emerging collective European identity, at least the Europeanization of such identities, anchored in cultural and lifeworldly practices. In short, our

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<sup>2</sup> The mechanism is aptly explained by Pawlowski et al. (2010: 199): "Successful clubs obtain ever-increasing payouts from persistent CL appearances, which allow them to further dominate domestic league competitions, in turn increasing the probability of appearing in the CL again in the future."

idea or initial hypothesis was that certain patterns of the Europeanization of the governance structures of football – increasingly Europeanized players' markets, the establishment of a *de facto* "European league" (of top clubs) and media attention shifting to such European-level competition would also have incrementally affected the perceptions of football spectators and supporters ("from below") not just those of the officials and representatives of top clubs and their networks ("elite").

### **Europeanization and drivers of identity change**

Of the five processes of the Europeanization of football sketched above, two can be identified and singled out which might be of predominant importance as regards identity matters: the influence of a more 'European(ized)' nationality regimes across the (major) European leagues and their respective players' (and coaches') markets, and the Champions League as a European-wide competition embodying a quasi-league format. Concerning the latter, it is the relatively stable pattern of competition of top teams at the European level, also a success in terms of brand popularity and therefore match attendance, broadcasting rates, and general prestige, which interests us. In what follows, both phenomena are taken to be drivers of identity change.

On the one hand, to hypothesize about the impact of how squads are composed regarding the emergence of a more cosmopolitan "consciousness" is not novel. In their path-breaking article, Levermore and Millward already in 2007 pointed to the plausible idea that "[t]he arrival of non-national heroes potentially creates cosmopolitan Europeanization of elite local teams" (Levermore/Millward 2007: 151). If that effect really holds, we suggest that the Europeanization of players markets might also Europeanize the mindsets of the respective spectators. Note that this is somewhat different from fancying a foreign player which has of course been not unusual at European football grounds prior to the Bosman ruling as well. What we have in mind is that there could have set in some kind of a 'normalizing' effect with regard to other European players precisely in such a way that they are less likely to be regarded as foreigners/exotic players anymore. If, as we have demonstrated in the German case, the internationalization post-Bosman has effected, to a considerable degree, a "Europeanization" of players markets in terms of countries of origin, this might also have altered the way "we-ness" and "other-ness" is defined in the eyes of the spectators/fans.

On the other hand, it seems hard to overlook the success of the Champions League not only in economic and business terms (broadcasting revenues, advertisement revenues, the clubs' income structure, branding effects [Holt 2007] etc.) but also with regard to match attendance, broadcasting rates and general prestige attached to it. The latter issues being of course,

interesting from our angle, phenomena related to practices and lifeworlds of spectators. In that sense, the establishment of a *de facto* European League (as against a cup competition format) should also have left its mark on the spectators' minds. What we focus on is whether their respective frames of reference (reputational issues, national vs. European-wide competition, why is it important to qualify, where do fans look for competitor/peer clubs etc.) have been changed. Any Europeanization of identities in this case would certainly result in a 'de-privileging' of national frames.

In 2000, King hypothesized that "[t]he growing connections between the big city clubs of Europe and the increasing frequency of their encounters on the pitch, which are watched on television by millions across Europe is an important factor in European integration" (King 2000: 423). Although we generally share this impression, we would like to put a question mark behind the statement and instead ask first, how and in what ways European integration is affected.

It seems to be the case that fans and spectators throughout Europe assign a high level of attractiveness to the Champions League. In a (non-representative) poll in 2011, more than 50.000 readers of the German sport magazine "Kicker" rated the Champions League of comparatively very high attractiveness: It got a 1.47 on a 6-point scale with "1" being the highest score possible (interestingly, the ascribed attractiveness has not always been on that level, in the first season, the respective value was 2.8!). For the British context, again Levermore and Millward have analyzed viewpoints of Liverpool supporters in the mid-2000s. Their findings indicate that at that point Liverpool fans not only stated that their "aim" for the club was to qualify for the Champions League, but that such articulations were occasionally coupled with comments that only competition at the CL-level would mean to be among the ranks of the "big clubs" (Levermore/Millward 2007: 151). Hence, in terms of reputation, to be on board in the European club tournament is regarded as a must, being one of the *European* (not "just" the British) powerhouses is deemed important. Although one should be careful not to attach too much weight to such statements they might nevertheless be indicative of the trend that the Champions League might also have an impact on how fans (of top teams, to be precise) perceive their club and the game in general, but also how they approach the wider social context ("Europe" might be, from the standpoint of such a British fan, more acceptable, albeit in a fuzzy manner, if club competition at the European level is deemed a must in terms of reputation as well).

Last but not least, our hypothesis that the aforementioned Europeanizing mechanisms have also left their mark on sports fans, i.e. the main consumers of sport, is grounded in the assumption that such developments are hardly trivial or politically of lesser importance. To the contrary, it is

precisely the context of such ordinary, lifeworldly activities, in which identity dynamics occur, often with lasting repercussions. In many respects, sport and especially football seems to be an ideal carrier of identity change because it draws on supporters' emotional investment, which has been regarded as important in socialization and norm/value changing processes. As fandom research states: "[f]andom matters because it matters to those who are fans... [it is] more than the mere act of being a fan of something: ... it is a collective strategy, a communal effort to form interpretive communities" (Gray et al. 2007, 1p.).

### ***Europeanization from below? Fandom, Spectatorship & Identity***

In what follows, we sketch our definition of identity (and dimension of research related to this), show how our foray into European identity matters differs from what is commonly being done in political science-oriented research into European identity and argue for a rather broad notion of "football fandom" for the purposes of our research.

As identity issues always present a slippery slope, it is necessary to start with a solid definition of the phenomena to be researched. As Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 6-8) argue, the very term 'identity' needs to be unpacked in order to come up with an analytical construct amenable to social science. According to that logic, a first (partially) substitute term would be 'identification' with the advantage that it invites social scientists to specify the social actors who do the identifying (ibid: 14). They also argue that identifications (self and categorisation by others) are contextual and may vary between situations. The second identity-substitute they offer is 'self-understanding': it is suggested that this notion captures its distinctly tacit qualities by recognising that self-understandings are formed through discourse and inform actions (ibid: 18). The third alternative is 'commonality' which is to denote similarities within social groups, promoting 'a feeling of belonging together' (ibid: 20). The three identity substitutes proposed by Brubaker and Cooper – (collective) identifications, self-understandings and (perceived) commonalities – seem to be especially useful for grounding our research.

In a similar vein, Eder has developed a sociological notion of 'group identity'; he defines group identities as "*collectively held self-understandings which are grounded in frames or narrative constructions delineating the boundaries of a network of actors*" (Eder 2009; emphases added). From such a definition two basic questions can be derived for our purposes. First, what are the main frames a/o narrative constructions pertaining to football fans across Europe? Or, rather more specific, do fans and spectators also command Europeanized frames of reference? (More specifically: Where is peer competition located – at the national or at the European level? *Why* is European competition deemed important? Are European-wide networks formed? Are there Europeanized patterns of regular fan travelling?)

Second, is there *also* a “Europeanized” definition of “*communities of belonging*” rather than a purely national one? (i.e.: Are national demarcations vis-à-vis players, fans etc., giving way to other forms of boundary work?)

In that sense, our project is about employing a decidedly lifeworld-bounded perspective (the second meaning of “from below”) as against the bulk of recent European identity research which focuses on strictly political issues only (see for the latter, e.g. Checkel/Katzenstein 2010). In other words, the difference of our approach taken here is that it is not the formation of – in a stricter sense – transnational *political* identities or identities that are *geared towards the political institution or the political integration project of the EU* which are of interest. Such research (sort of a growth industry lately, not least in the wake of the constitution process, growing levels of Euroskepticism and diverging elite and popular conceptions about the course of European integration) usually shares a commitment to rather traditional political questions:

- research into the potentials for a common European identity grounded on shared values, normative ideas and convictions (see the discussion in Kaelble 2010: 203pp.) or shared ethical self-understandings (Kantner 2006); these studies nevertheless focus on *immediately politically* relevant aspects such: who belongs to the community, on which values shall a European legal and political framework be constructed;
- explorations of the public identification with Europe are more often than not directed at the “identity potential of the EU” (Gillespie/Laffan 2006: 143pp.; Fligstein 2010; Sackmann 2011), i.e. they usually seek to determine the degree to which publics do *identify with the political project*, institutions and symbols of the Union on the base of Eurobarometer data;
- examinations of the eventual emergence of a European(-wide) public sphere as an infrastructural base for a collective identity have tended to look for the convergence of *news agendas, political coverage and frames* that are covered by mass media throughout Europe (Koopmans/Staham 2010; Risse 2010: 113-119, 127-156).

Against this background it is not too far-fetched to state that explorations of a European identity so far focus predominantly, if not exclusively on perceptions, knowledge and evaluations of rather strictly political issues. In contrast, our focus is on changing spatial orientations, notions of inside/outside, frames of reference etc. in a field of *leisure-time* activities, ‘low politics’ in that sense. Framed as juxtaposition, one could hence ask: *Which issue happens to be more in the minds of Europeans – constitutional patriotism towards the Community Treaties or Champions League finals?*

Another asset in this regard is the fact, established through a body of research in Sports Studies and History, that “football cultures” usually exhibit heavily nationally pillarized structures,

especially regarding the cognitive dimension. If the emergence of pan-European tournaments of top clubs, of competition patterns in the European realm and of networks as well as organizations at the European level has a “normalizing effect”, i.e. if it has become *normal* to watch competitors at the European level, to be interested in sports policy at the *European* level and to *form networks* at the European level etc., we could have detected identity change under rather adverse circumstances, i.e. a hard, or least-likely case (cf. Odell 2001).

For our purposes, we have so far used the terms “fans” and “spectators” interchangeably. This is not to deny or ignore that there is a bulk of literature which shows that things are far more complex (and some degree of differentiation between different segments of people interested in football seems intuitively necessary). Hence, we are aware that it is common in the academic literature on football and sport (fandom) in general to distinguish between types of followers. Giulianotti (2009), for instance, differentiates between supporters/fans and followers/flâneurs, mostly on the basis of varying degrees of emotional involvement. Werron (2010) distinguishes opportunists, fans, experts and *eventhusiasts*, a typology based on certain expectations held by different sport publics. Only lately, Pearson (2012) has invented the term “carnival fan” in order to summarize the results of his ethnographic work into specific segments of British football fans. He also argues that this is a categorization geared toward capturing a certain function of fandom for fans. In what we are aiming to do, we would reserve the terms “fan” and “spectator” as short cuts for all sorts of fans including occasional, non-hard core fan types which are nevertheless reached through transnational media events (broadcastings of events). Consequently, our research is not primarily interested in internal differentiations among football fans but in subsuming all those as forming the (potential) research group which are drawn in by football events.

### **The UEFA Champions League as Transnational Media Event(s)**

As has been argued above, the UEFA Champions League (CL) can be singled out as a particularly fruitful arena of Europeanization. That is, it is the result of ongoing attempts of societal actors in the area of football to create a transnational framework (crossloading) as well as it arguably effects what people – officials, clubs’ reps, players, coaches, media, fans, spectators – do, think and how they situate themselves strategically. What is more, and a fundamental break from either tournaments of European national teams or the former European Cup-format, is that the CL has established a regular, (in terms of participation:) relatively stable, league-alike competition of *thoroughly internationalized/Europeanized* squads.

Seen from this angle, any ‘Europeanization’ (under the identity perspective) could work in both dimensions through the CL: as regards nationalities/boundaries and peer competition/frames of reference (through a de facto-league format). In other words, “being top”, from the perspective

of a fan, might not necessarily imply “for the sake of being the best representative of nation XYZ” but being the best in a continent-wide competition of top performers. It might also include that such success is aimed at not on the basis of “nationally” defined squads (as proxies for the respective national teams) but with resort to a team composed of the best a club can sign throughout Europe (and the wider world). A third aspect of interest is that the CL is arguably a thoroughly mediatized (series of) event(s) which *regularly* draw(s) *mass* audiences. In other words, the CL is a site where Europeanization and mediatization merge.

“Mediatization” – in a rather comprehensive understanding the long-term-process of an ever increasing influence of the media and their logic on societal phenomena<sup>3</sup> – is hence crucial for our argument in two respects. First, it signals that football events at the top level of European club competition are not solely watched and followed by those who attend the matches at the stadium or those who fancy a certain club. The extensive broadcasting of CL games throughout Europe (and the wider world) to the contrary draws huge audiences and, through this, creates something similar to a European public space.<sup>4</sup> Second, the regular broadcasting of CL matches – and not exclusively matches in which sides from the respective national contexts participate – may have effected a certain normalisation of football competition at the European level. Consequently, a CL game is it not the extraordinary event such as the World Cup but a regular feature of football spectators’ lifeworlds. As Jonathan Hill, ex-head of the EU Office at UEFA, remarked in 2008:

“[Through the Champions League,] we might be witnessing the gradual emergence of a European ‘public space.’ An elusive holy grail for believers in a post-national, political identity for our continent, a European public space involves the idea that citizens who share concerns can communicate directly across national boundaries. It would be absurd to suggest that the Champions League is succeeding where the European parliament has often failed, but the fact that millions of Europeans now watch the same games at the same time *must surely count for something*” (Hill 2008; emphasis added).

But what exactly does it count for? In what follows we present some scattered evidence<sup>5</sup> that the CL is indeed able to generate continent wide stable (if not increasing) mass appeal. Beyond

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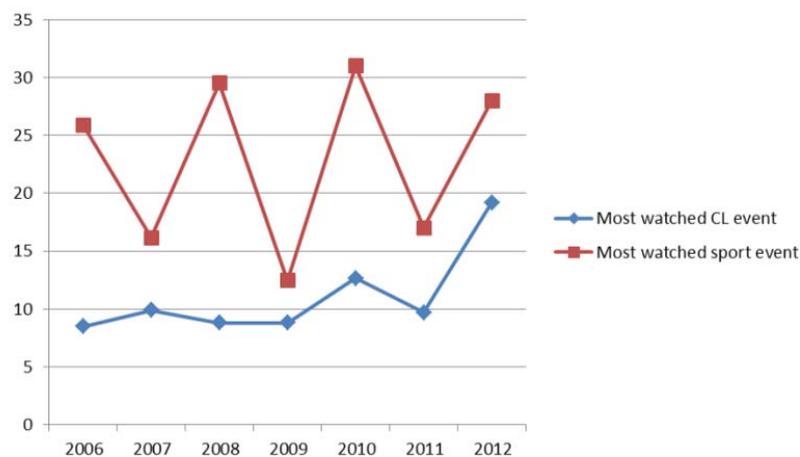
<sup>3</sup> See on a recent review of the uses of the concept: Strömbäck/van Aelst (2013). Most studies in Media Science, however, decidedly focus on (1) (rather strictly) *political* phenomena (elections, party politics etc.), and (2) on various “media logics” arguably transforming traditional political practices and structures. See exemplary: Zeh/Hopman (2013).

<sup>4</sup> This is somewhat underscored with regard to the amount of *interaction* in social networks at the occasion of single CL games. UEFA has commissioned research into Twitter-, Facebook- and other communications during and around CL finals 2012 and 2013 which shows that such events indeed have a social, interactive quality. They are not merely broadcasts passively consumed by people scattered across societies in Europe.

<sup>5</sup> At this point, some words on the quality of data are necessary: UEFA does not publicize the audience rates regularly aside from some sporadic press releases or newsletters where singular numbers are published. As UEFA

that, the very contours of such “mass appeal” are interesting in itself, since they seem to be not reducible to any “nationalist flag waving”, i.e. high audience rates are not just reported in certain country contexts when a team of the respective domestic league is involved.

A look at the German context is instructive. The German Working Group on Audience Shares (AGF) regularly compiles data on the most watched events in German TV. On the basis of their annual reports, it is possible to compare the most watched CL events (per year, blue line in graph 1) and the most watched sports event per year (red line). The graph below shows at least two things: From 2006 to 2012, the CL generated a stable audience for top events, which was nevertheless smaller than that for single events (2006, 2010: World Cup games with German participation; 2008, 2012: European Cup games with German participation). Still, top CL events were (not ‘the extraordinary’ events but regular features) drew a stable audience around 10 mio viewers. Second, and more interestingly, in 2008, the top CL audience share peaked with a game where no German team was involved, i.e. a CL game *without* German participation was almost as attractive as the top sport event in TV this year.



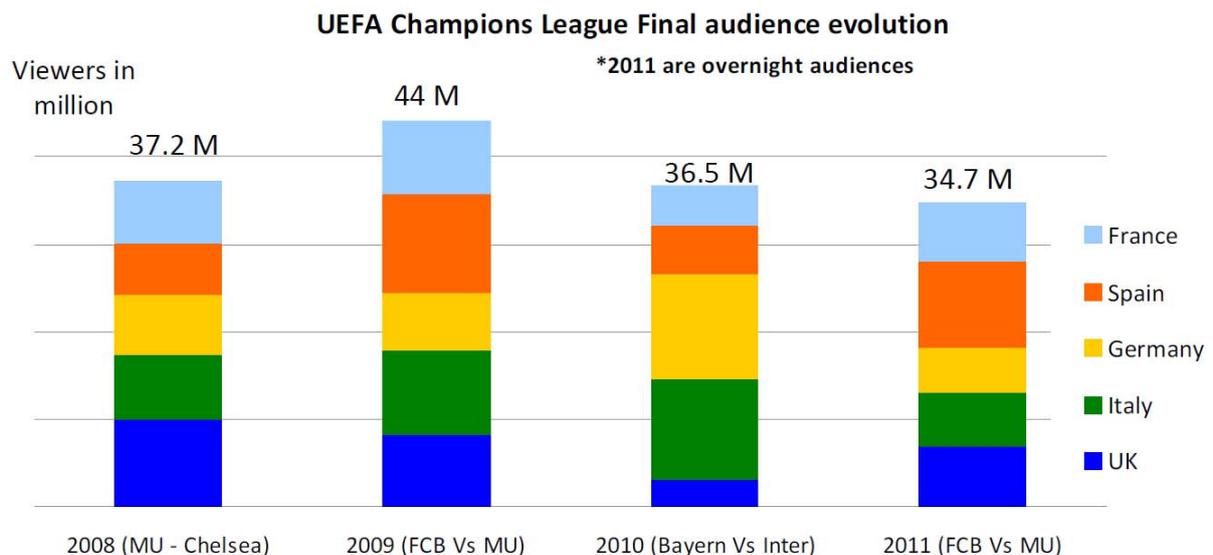
Still, one has to be careful not to read too much of any “post-national” sentiment into this. When the CL audience rates according to the AGF data peaked in German TV in 2012, it was the final *in Munich* (Germany) between Chelsea and Bayern Munich (a German side) which drew a “sensational” audience share between 50 and 70% (between 15 and 19 mio Germans who watched this game at public viewing sites not counted in). Even more pronounced was this

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argues this is because it is up to national broadcasters/rights holders to make (commercial) use of such figures. Audience measurement in various European contexts is a commercial activity, on the other hand, with considerable prices to be paid for obtaining long-term quality data. Hence, at this point, we have to resort to data that is in the public domain.

trend in 2013, when in an all-German final a record number of 22,5 mio Germans tuned in (almost 1 mio through pay-TV, but public viewing *not* counted in, see: bvb.de 2013).

Nevertheless, occasionally one comes across an interesting and counter-intuitive figure concerning CL audiences. Even back in 2003, in the CL quarterfinals between ManU and Real Madrid, top audience rates were not only reported for Spain (8.1 mio, 54%) or the UK (10.9 mio, 45%), but also for France (6.8 mio viewers, no percentage calculated). Similarly, the Viewer Track Report 2010 presented a statistic on the most watched sport events globally in 2009, rating the CL final as No. 1 with a total audience of 206 mio worldwide. In terms of audiences shares compared across national markets, Spain won but Portugal and Croatia finished second and third, respectively. In that sense, the CL finals generate huge interest and spectatorship in various European country contexts despite the fact that the teams involved were not from the respective domestic leagues. This phenomenon is also captured by data compiled and published through eurodata.tv (see below): There is a huge, relatively stable, and non-nationally oriented audience for CL events throughout Europe:



from: Eurodata.tv (2011)

Such patterns cannot only be found at the occasion of finals and semifinals, though: At the CL group stage in October 2012, the match between Barça and Celtic Glasgow drew 7.1 mio viewers in Spain (37%) but also an impressive 1.5 mio in the Dutch market (23%, compared to a “mere” 10% more, 33% audience share, the next evening for Ajax Amsterdam).

And finally, even the all-German final 2013 drew an impressive audience in Europe outside Germany: Audience research estimates give the number of 63,7 mio viewers throughout Europe, i.e. almost twice as much outside Germany who watched a CL final with two German sides competing (bvb.de 2013). Hence, it does not seem too far-fetched to really speak of European(ized) mass publics for CL games, although much more systematic data is needed to really make the case.

### **Researching Fandom and Spectatorship Dynamics**

But how then to research identity among football fans and spectators, especially when one is interested in any Europeanization of identities? This could easily be labeled the 1.000.000-€-Question. Most basic, as we approach the issue as one of *perceptions and self-understandings*, we have to focus on instances of articulation. Mainly two types of data spring to mind (on their combined use in analyzing identity dynamics, see Risse 2010: 34p.): discourse analysis (here, primary of chat forums and other fan publications, online or in print) and survey/interview research (among selected fan groups).

The general argument of their usefulness regarding the football/identity nexus has already been established.<sup>6</sup> As Millward's account (2011: 76pp.) underlines, analyzing chat forum contributions might offer valuable clues on how supporters perceive themselves in relation to the club<sup>7</sup>, the game in general and the wider social context. Levermore and Millward (2007: 153) have even made clear that the examination of messages in e-message boards might be helpful in elucidating whether "forms of European(ized) consciousness" have already seeped into fan discourse. This is, as our preliminary research informs us, a very rosy view of things which cannot easily be generalized.

There is, for instance, far less discussion of either EU-legislation and -policymaking (ECJ rulings, not least Bosman), which otherwise seems to have become part of common sense *folklore*) in such chat fora than we had expected. In addition, European-wide developments such as the Financial Fairplay-Debate hardly seem to spur debates online. (In one chat forum of Bayern Munich, the German team with the most continuous attendance at CL-level, Financial Fair Play

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<sup>6</sup> However, see the more cautious approach taken by Pearson (2012).

<sup>7</sup> A counter hypothesis might be that increasing levels of commercialization, part of which we dubbed elements of "Europeanization", have led to more localized, more de-internationalized (=criticism of the "modern football" as some ultras would say) forms of support. However, as Kuper and Szymanski put it in their famous book "Soccernomics": "Spectators vote with their feet. It's certainly not the case that millions of them are abandoning the Premier League because the money offends them. Based on the evidence of what they go to watch, they want to see the best players competing against each other. Many people will say they find Manchester United evil. Not many seem to find them boring" (2009: 177). In that sense, it appears to us that counter movements so far have not gained enough momentum to outweigh Europeanization/commercialization.

has a small thread with 7 entries throughout the last 1,5 years; ECJ's Murphy ruling, hotly debated in the quality press last October, seems almost a non-topic according to our research so far).

In the wider context of debates on Champions League-related issues, only meagre results turned out as well. What is more, they need to be interpreted and contextualized heavily. Hence, if we find in one chat forum (of Man City supporters) a thread on the attractiveness of the Champions League, title "Do we really want Champions League"<sup>8</sup> and the first entry starts with the utterance:

"What is the attraction [sic] of being involved with those cheating bastards from mainland Europe?"

– what to do with this? On one level, it completely contradicts our expectations (a result, nevertheless), but again, it is only a single utterance. Others respond:

"Money, recognition, best players in world playing for your team, but I get your point it is sad to watch at times and pure money driven."

Again, a heavy dose of contextualization would be necessary to relate such utterances to identity questions.

But what, if relevant material is to be unearthed, are articulations and expressions which would be of interest to us? What is (European) identity-relevant, what are Europeanized narratives and meanings attached? Here, four motives spring to mind: 1) cases where competition is not solely/primarily interpreted in national(ist) terms = also *peer competition* instead of mainly nationalist stereotyping & flag waving (who are deemed the 'others' and why?); 2) articulations which show a certain normalization of (interest in) European-wide competition, where European competition is not anymore regarded as an 'extra' to more important national competition (what are the priorities from the perspective of fans and why?); 3) articulations which depict 'going Europe' as source of indulgence (cf. Millward 2006); and finally 4) reflections about the composition of squads (where the respective qualities, not nationality of players involved, becomes the leading topic).

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://smf.citymanacs.com/forum/index.php?topic=20994.0>

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