

Sport&EU Workshop: The EU and the Governance of Sport, Policy and Perspectives. University of Chester, 6-7 July 2007

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KEYWORDS

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The Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences and the Chester Centre for Research into Sport and Society at the University of Chester hosted the second annual workshop of the Association for the Study of Sport and the European Union (Sport&EU) entitled 'The EU and the governance of sport: policy and perspectives'. The event was organised and sponsored jointly by the Centre for the Study of International Governance (CSIG) at Loughborough University, Sport&EU and the University of Chester. 1

The workshop had a truly international flavour, bringing together 20 academics and practitioners from six different European countries with the aim of assessing the role and possible contribution of the European Union to the governance of sport. The timing of the debate could not have been better, as four days after the workshop the European Commission adopted its White Paper on Sport, which features a full section (almost one third of the document) dedicated to governance issues. 2

The CSIG and Sport&EU were pleased to welcome Alex Phillips, Head of Professional Football Services at UEFA, as guest speaker. Alex Phillips presented himself as a 'first and foremost a football person who is worried for the future of the game'. In his opening speech, he launched the debate by explaining UEFA's perspective on a democratic and transparent governance structure for European football. He stressed that governing bodies have a duty to care for all levels of sport, not only the professional side. Alex also recognised the responsibility of these bodies to ensure proper representation and consultation among stakeholders. 3

The workshop was mainly dominated by two themes: the application of EU law to sport and the dilemmas of sport governance and sport policy in a global and commercial environment. 4

In the legal department, Alfonso Rincón (CEU-San Pablo University, Spain) drew the delegates' attention to the contradictions of the European Court of Justice in the handling of sport related cases. Rincón analysed the extent to which the so-called *sporting exception* could be recognised in the case law of the Court. He did also argue that several u-turns of the Court in this respect might have had negative consequences for public authorities and sport governing bodies due to a lack of clarity in the criteria guiding the application of European law to the sports sector. Alexandre Mestre (PLMJ law firm, Portugal), on the other hand, focused on the application of Competition policy to sport, advocating for clearer guidelines that could facilitate governing bodies' regulation of sport. 5

The extent up to which the EU can help to raise governance standards in sport focused much of the delegates' attention. Roberto Branco Martins (ASSER Institute, The Netherlands) explored the possibilities of collective bargaining between the employers and employees in the football sector under the umbrella of the European Commission. He suggested that the Social Dialogue could deal with issues such as the transfer system, match calendar, nationality quotas and player release for national team duty. The debates identified two problems for the Social Dialogue to work effectively. First, the representativeness of the social partners, especially in the employers' side (who represents the employers? Is it clubs, leagues, federations?). Second, the extent to which social dialogue could lead to regulation on issues beyond its remit without giving due consideration to interested third parties (e.g. doping regulations, match calendar or release of players to national teams). 6

It was evident in the discussions that the study of sport and sport policy in the European Union needs to deal necessarily with a multiplicity of actors and venues. This is due to the very nature of sport and the EU as multilevel, international and multidimensional systems of governance. So far, much of the academic research has focused on the EU level. In this regard, Borja García (Loughborough University, UK) considered the evolution of the relationship between UEFA and the European institutions from confrontation in the 1990s to co-operation *for the good of the game* nowadays. García argued that the involvement of the EU in sport represents both a challenge and an opportunity for sport governing bodies. The EU has facilitated the transformation of the traditional vertical channels of authority in the governance of football, but it is also providing tools for UEFA to manage the new demands of stakeholders in the regulation of the game. 7

Simona Kustec-Lipicer (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia) complemented the Brussels-centric focus of the 8

workshop with her paper on multi-level governance and the Slovenian contribution to the European Commission White Paper on Sport. Despite the intervention of EU institutions, sport remains a competence of Member States and, as such, research needs to deal with systematic comparison not only across countries, but also among different sports, as well as in relation to supranational levels and their policy processes.

It is necessary not to treat sport as a single homogeneous entity. To that extent, despite being relatively football-centric, the workshop provided a wide range of views clearly stressing both the differences and the interconnections of the professional and grassroots levels. James O’Gorman (Staffordshire University, UK) explored the possible over regulation of grassroots football by the English FA. The solidarity principle between professional and grassroots sport, which is supposed to underpin the European Model of Sport, was identified as another challenge for sport governance and public policies. 9

One of the most interesting points of the workshop was the contribution of football supporters’ organisations, which tend to be sidelined in these debates. Dave Boyle (Supporters Direct) and Steven Powell (Football Supporters Federation of England and Wales) contemplated the growth of EU policy on sport as an opportunity for supporters to become increasingly involved in debates surrounding the future of professional football. It remains to be seen whether it is feasible to extend this participation throughout Europe as the engagement of civil society differs quite a lot across the continent and football is another example of this. 10

The conclusions of the workshop illustrate the maturity of sport as a research area within European and even international studies. Richard Parrish (Edge Hill University, UK) highlighted the seriousness of the academic work and the advance of the discipline. The study of sport and the EU has gone from a mere recompilation of EU sport-related decisions to open debates about governance, regulation, civil society participation or europeanisation. During the workshop, delegates stressed the need for further and comprehensive research in this area. Both academics and practitioners agreed that the governance of sport in Europe is becoming a crowded and complicated environment, in which rigorous research is needed to inform policy choices that too often seem to be based on personal beliefs or ideology. More information about the workshop can be found at www.sportandeu.com/workshop 11