



EUROPE IN TRANSITION

# Football, Power, and Politics in Europe

The German Case in  
Comparative Perspective

---

Timm Beichelt

palgrave  
macmillan

# Europe in Transition: The NYU European Studies Series

Series Editor

Martin A. Schain, New York University, New York, NY, USA

This series explores the core questions facing the new Europe. It is particularly interested in studies that focus on such issues as the process and development of the European Union, shifting political alliances, military arrangements, the impact of immigration on European societies and politics, and the emergence of ethno-nationalism within the boundaries of Europe. The series includes both collected volumes as well as monographs.

Timm Beichelt

# Football, Power, and Politics in Europe

The German Case in Comparative Perspective

palgrave  
macmillan

Timm Beichelt  
European University Viadrina  
Frankfurt/Oder, Brandenburg,  
Germany

ISSN 2946-3637 ISSN 2946-3645 (electronic)  
Europe in Transition: The NYU European Studies Series  
ISBN 978-3-031-55165-9 ISBN 978-3-031-55166-6 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-55166-6>

Translation from the German language edition: “Ersatzspielfelder - Zum Verhältnis von Fußball und Macht” by Timm Beichelt, © Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2018. Published by Suhrkamp Verlag. All Rights Reserved.

The original submitted manuscript has been translated into English. The translation was done using artificial intelligence. A subsequent revision was performed by the author(s) to further refine the work and to ensure that the translation is appropriate concerning content and scientific correctness. It may, however, read stylistically different from a conventional translation.

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2024

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG  
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction: Football as a Symbolic Space of Possibility</b>	<b>1</b>
	<i>References</i>	13
<b>2</b>	<b>Subjects in the Field of Football: Preference Formation in the Pre-Political Space</b>	<b>17</b>
	2.1 <i>Constant Vigilance</i>	22
	2.2 <i>Unconditional Competition</i>	30
	2.3 <i>Internalized Desire for Success</i>	39
	<i>References</i>	46
<b>3</b>	<b>Politics Beyond Political Institutions: Football as an Organizational Field</b>	<b>51</b>
	3.1 <i>Football Politics: The Institutional Structure</i>	56
	3.2 <i>Football and State</i>	65
	3.2.1 <i>Football and State I: Societal Integration</i>	66
	3.2.2 <i>Football and State II: Subsidization Through Stadium Construction</i>	68
	3.2.3 <i>Football and State III: Safety in the Stadium</i>	71
	3.3 <i>Conclusion</i>	73
	<i>References</i>	77
<b>4</b>	<b>Football Politics and Commerce: Testing the Public Welfare Orientation of Football</b>	<b>83</b>
	<i>References</i>	101

<b>5</b>	<b>Community Building in the Context of Hyperliberalization: An Inherent Contradiction?</b>	105
5.1	<i>Groups in the We-Perspective: Integration as Management of Diversity</i>	106
5.2	<i>Fickle Community Building: French and German Perspectives</i>	114
5.3	<i>Groups as “Others”: Football Fans and Violence</i>	123
	<i>References</i>	138
<b>6</b>	<b>Internationalization of Football: In Fatal Proximity to Autocratic Practices</b>	145
	<i>References</i>	156
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusion: Football as Selective Homeland</b>	159
	<i>References</i>	164
	<b>Wikipedia-Einträge Deutsch / Englisch</b>	167
	<b>Index</b>	171



# Introduction: Football as a Symbolic Space of Possibility

Power holders in the field of football are in this book denominated as “khozyains”. The Russian word “хозяин”<sup>1</sup> originates from the Russian economic culture and refers to an owner or manager of means of production, who is characterized by a number of properties: a pronounced judgment, pragmatism, care for subordinates. An ethical way of life is also seen as a property of a khozyain, but as he shields his own group from others, what is seen as ethical by the in-group may well be condemned by others. The term khozyain was created in agriculturally shaped Russia during the times of serfdom, but underwent a reinterpretation in the first decades of the twentieth century by thinkers of Eurasianism. Nikolaj S. Trubetskoy and Petr N. Savitskiy developed the ideal image of ideocracy, in which “members of a leading layer are connected with each other by a common worldview, by a common sentiment” (Trubeckoj 2005). Savitskiy coined the term of Khozyain rule (хозяйнодержавие), in which a

---

The majority of this manuscript was written in 2017 and 2018, in a sense at the peak of the political significance of German football. Since I think the core statement of the manuscript still holds five years later, I have only sparsely added new material and sources.



caring exercise of power by the Khozyain also received a political dimension (Sawitskij 1925). Until today, the ideal image of a strong man who enforces the primacy of the community with repressive methods, thereby bundling political and economic resources and thus balancing the power claims of various elite groups against each other, is cultivated in Russia.

Khozyains can be found in Russia, and in many other places, including the world of sports. In fact, Putin and other post-Soviet leaders often portray themselves as rulers who are interested in sports and actively participate in them. Putin appears as a judoka and ice hockey player. Belarusian President Lukashenka also plays ice hockey, Chechen President Kadyrov appears in a football jersey. But why is it sport, and often enough football, in whose vicinity authoritarian ruler figures place themselves? Is the slipping into a sports shirt about appealing to the audience through supposed (or real) athleticism? Is participation in friendly games with celebrities a ritual in which like-minded favorites can subtly be given an opportunity for subordination? Are major sporting events intended to secure internal and external power?

These motives of sports-related politicians and khozyains will be discussed on the following pages. Not only in Russia, but far beyond, a type of politician has gained importance in the last two decades, in which a latently authoritarian worldview, ethnically nativist tendencies, and unprincipled pragmatism combine. Even beyond authoritarian spheres of rule, the question of the relationship between football and power arises precisely where football politics and the particular interests of football political actors conflict with democratic norms.

Organized sport, and football in particular, offers a suitable field for political practices that unfold beyond political-institutional paths. There is a striking discrepancy between the societal and economic importance of football and the indirect and weak access rights of the state. Football is by no means apolitical. It is often attributed with an emancipatory potential. In the sense of a grassroots movement, practices associated with football are suitable for pushing back societal discrimination and the economization of the lifeworld (Kuhn 2011). Some circumstances from the history of football also serve as evidence of societal rebellion against authoritarian rulers. A recurring example is the quiet resistance of some protagonists of Argentine football against the military regime in the late seventies (Archetti 2006). Sport is attributed an important role in the symbolic equality of the sexes (Markovits and Rensmann 2010),

and it can in divided societies have a conflict-reducing effect (Sugden and Haasner 2010).

Despite these important examples, many observers do not see football as an area that helps values such as equality, tolerance, or generally an authentic life. Professional football is too dominated by commerce, there are too many examples of political cronyism with authoritarian rulers. Despite elaborate campaigns, football stadiums are still considered places of homophobia and often also of violence. With its focus on profit and due to many informal and often opaque power structures, organized professional sports have created a business model that is compatible with the patterns of autocratic rule.

When the circles of professional sports and political exercise of power meet, the picture is thus unclear. On the one side, we find sports as a cultural practice initially distant from politics, on the other we find the instrumentalization by political actors. On the one hand, there are productive communal forces with an identity-forming function, on the other exclusion. Here the integrative power of sports for the community is invoked, there sports are condemned for their potential to let societal and political conflicts break out. How can we make sense of this confusion of empirical observations and normative statements? This is the underlying question of this manuscript. Its goal is to put the contradictory phenomena of contemporary football politics into context.

Throughout the book, football is seen in several ways as a substitute playing field (“Ersatzspielfeld” in German). The metaphor can be found in the 2013 published *History of the Football Bundesliga* by Nils Havemann. Similar to the present text, the substitute playing field becomes a place where “central political, economic and social conflicts can be fought out in a form easily accessible to the masses” (Havemann 2013, 15). However, I use the term in contrast to Havemann with explicit reference to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the “field”. The football field encompasses and refers to various arenas in which sports politicians, club and association representatives, journalists, and also fans interact with each other (see below). Football is therefore to be understood as a field in which specific rules and norms exist with a societal dimension. Football also provides a space for social action for non-footballers. In addition, football serves as a projection surface for societal interpretations that do not necessarily have to do with the sport.

One of the core theses of social-theoretical football research is that the sport offers society a chance to break established rules and playfully

question conventions. Football introduces chance into an overregulated life and thus provides practices to alternatively shape the prevailing culture (Gebauer 2016). With this perspective, a relieving function is attributed to the sport. Regardless of whether we think of football with or without connection to questions of political power, we can assume that societal conflicts are sublimated through sport and play. Where in late modern service societies many milieus are factually segregated from each other, a classless fan community meets in the stadium or at public viewing.

These considerations tie in with the theses of Johan Huizinga, who in his 1938 published book *Homo Ludens* pointed out the character of the game as a “cultural factor”. The great Dutch cultural historian had pointed out the close connection of cultural life with myth, cult, and thus playful action: “Culture in its original phases is played. It does not originate *from* play, like a living fruit from its mother’s womb, it unfolds itself *in* play and *as* play” (Huizinga 2004, 189). On this basis, Huizinga develops a tableau that identifies various game elements in modern culture: in business, in modern art, in science, in politics, and in war. In all these spheres, game elements are indispensable to bridge the duality inherent in human life between seriousness and fun, between tension and relaxation. The game enables social learning by opening a sphere beyond ordinary life. The game “stands outside the process of immediate satisfaction of necessities and desires, indeed it interrupts this process” (ibid., 17). Through these properties, societal conflicts can be vicariously played out in the game and suppressed emotions can be lived out alternatively on a limited playing field.

It is obviously controversial whether modern sports and especially highly professionalized football can still be assigned to the sphere of play. Huizinga diagnosed as early as the thirties of the last century that in sports the game is always taken more seriously and therefore loses that playful character that could be attributed to it in earlier epochs (ibid., 213). Thus, he early on lodged a complaint that today permeates every fan forum and basically represents a consensus there. Commercialization and the sell-out of football to business interests are the factors that take away the playful lightness from football (Rasch 2014).

The complaint that modern sports contain too much seriousness and too little play, is hard to counter. Who would want to deny that in contemporary football everything is geared towards unconditional success? However, Huizinga does not conclude from the accurate diagnosis that the playful root of sports can be completely neglected. Rather,

he speaks of a “confusing insolubility of the problem of play or seriousness”. The culture, which is “founded in noble play”, also knows game rules that in politics or even in war “give form and content to the primitive game of prestige”. In politics, therefore, practices such as “challenging and provoking, threatening and insulting the opponent” are to be attributed to the “spell of the game”. The connection of culture, politics, and play thus presupposes “a certain self-restraint and self-control, a certain ability not to see the utmost and highest in their own tendencies”. Culture wants “still to be played in a certain sense in mutual agreement according to rules” (quotes *ibid.*, 227–29). And so modern football is interesting for us precisely because it can say something about the boundaries of moral norms where it leaves the sphere of the superfluous.

But how are sports and society connected, and how do politics and power play into this interrelationship? A conventional concept of politics does not seem particularly suitable to capture the aspects of power exercise relevant in football. State actors, for example in governments or parliaments, play only a limited role in steering football. On the one hand, this is due to the autonomy of sports, which in democratic societies is derived from the freedom of association and protects the pursuit of private goals. On the other, central power instances of football, for example the World Football Association FIFA or the European Football Association UEFA, act in a transnational context. The political settings and legal orders to which organized football has to submit are by no means established. According to their statutes, the associations are not really obliged to serve the common good<sup>2</sup> and move quite consciously in the gray zone between association and entrepreneurship. Therefore, their actions can only be influenced with difficulty by elected actors. Political control can only take place to a very limited extent in the context of transnational football.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to understand football and its social impacts as a space devoid of politics or power. If politics is understood as the “authoritative distribution of material and immaterial values in society” (Easton 1965, 50), it is quite obvious that community-related sentiments must also be counted among the immaterial values. And indeed, there is relevant research that establishes a connection between successes in football and collective feelings of happiness. It positively affects self-esteem to appear as the host country of a major sporting event (Kavetsos 2012). This result is accompanied by the anecdotal observation that football successes such as the German “Miracle of Bern” (1954) or

the French World Cup title in 1998 have led to waves of societal euphoria. In Germany, a few years ago, Norbert Seitz pointed out striking parallels between sporting successes and political developments (Seitz 1997).

Football is therefore relevant for societal self-understanding in a political sense. At the same time, established approaches from government or governance research are not well suited to illuminate an area that regulates itself far from established political institutions. Therefore, as already indicated, I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's field approach for further analysis of the political concerns of football. This is characterized by the fact that political subjects are not primarily captured via a given institutional order, but are considered in relation to conflicts in an arbitrarily structured social order. "Fields" are then seen as "arenas of production, circulation, appropriation of goods, services, knowledge and status" in which actors accumulate or monopolize different types of capital (Swartz 2013, 35).

In the field of football, which I will henceforth refer to in reference to Bourdieu, the most important types of capital can be found side by side in an almost exemplary manner. Economic capital is found in clubs, sponsors, and associations. One does not even have to think of state-owned funds that invest in European top clubs. Even the market value of the poorest team in the German Bundesliga is in the tens of millions. Cultural capital, which Bourdieu links to education and training (Bourdieu 1982), has also made its way into football over the last few decades through youth training and general professionalization. In Germany, it is considered a great exception if a national player has not previously gone through the training system of a Bundesliga club or the German Football Association (DFB).

Players and coaches are today stars with a fascinating effect on fans or spectators. Consider that the German national team was received for an audience by Pope Francis in November 2016 on the occasion of a test match against Italy in Rome. Seven of the ten most popular Twitter profiles in Germany in 2017 had a direct connection to football.<sup>3,4</sup> *Footballers* or football clubs are also among the leaders in Facebook profiles: Cristiano Ronaldo (approx. 120 million fans), Real Madrid, and FC Barcelona (each approx. 100 million fans) occupy top positions (Statista 2017b). The nine most popular Facebook profiles in Germany all have a football connection (Statista 2017a).

Of course, these figures do not directly imply political influence. However, it becomes clear that football can play a major role for the value

system of public life. This is particularly true, if we stick with Bourdieu, because of the perhaps unique ability of football to accumulate economic and social capital and convert it into symbolic capital—thus condensing the individual types of capital into societal recognition and social power, thereby gaining general societal reputation (Bourdieu and Passeron 1973; Bourdieu 1998).

In his writings on the analysis of political power exercise, Bourdieu does not orient himself on institutional structures, but examines discursive practices in specific fields. Politics take place when actors challenge or question an existing social order (Bourdieu 2013). This initially unspecific statement about the circle of political actors becomes an advantage when we move in a diffuse and apolitical field. This is the case in football politics. Many actors, who set general rules regarding the distribution of material and intangible values, are not in their positions due to political selection criteria. This includes for example football managers or journalists, who are equipped with economic and symbolic, but not political capital.

At the same time, the field of football is clearly defined on the one hand, but very variable in its intangible references on the other. Football politics include a comparatively narrow circle of legal rules, e.g. in competition law or doping prevention. Due to its great societal importance, areas such as football reporting in the media (e.g. due to the license fee-financed public broadcasting), the fight against societal violence (e.g. in dealing with violent fan groups) or societal integration (e.g. due to the membership of non-Germans in football clubs) are politically relevant. Actors with political intentions in the field of football are therefore concerned with gaining not only political power, but also with the accumulation of economic, social or symbolic capital.

But let's return to the figure of the *khozyain*. *Khozyains* are not only found in the regimes of post-Soviet politics but also in the field of football. Anyone who has even half-heartedly dealt with football will immediately think of relevant names. Under Silvio Berlusconi, AC Milan developed into one of the first addresses of European football in the nineties, which explained his popularity in Italy. The Soviet-Ukrainian coach Valeriy Lobanovskiy not only invented an admired and quickly copied football style with Dynamo Kiev in the eighties and nineties, but also intervened in all club affairs. The same applies to the Scot Alex Ferguson at Manchester United and the Frenchman Arsène Wenger at Arsenal London, who were shaping figures of the renaissance of English football since the late

nineties. The manager and later president of FC Bayern, Uli Hoeneß, dominated his club. He even ran the club from prison, where he was incarcerated between 2014 and 2016 for tax evasion. The term *khozyain* can also be applied to football officials, e.g. the Brazilian João Havelange or the Swiss Joseph (“Sepp”) Blatter, both long-time presidents of the World Football Association.

As already shown in the concrete naming of *khozyains* in the political sphere, this list also shows certain deviations from the ideal figure. Not only Uli Hoeneß came into conflict with the law and had to grudgingly accept subordination under the legal system. Havelange and Blatter were also accused of large-scale corruption and fell from grace at the end of their careers. Silvio Berlusconi escaped prosecution by fleeing forward, always getting himself elected as a deputy or prime minister whenever things got tight, and from then on enjoyed immunity. His alleged offenses also had to do with football, as the tax evasion was attributed to him in connection with media, whose economic success was based on the broadcasting rights to football games. Other strong men in football, such as the Ukrainian patron of Shakhtar Donetsk, Rinat Akhmetov, even had to deal with allegations of being part of organized crime.

Thus, in the field of football politics, we can observe a whole collection of powerful leading figures whose societal (and thus symbolic and political) power is derived, among other things, from their ability to generate a large resonance beyond football. And yet the *patrons* naturally only represent a certain section of football. As a club and team sport, football is imbued with egalitarianism. The audience and especially organized fans often even maintain a ritualized distance from the supposedly omnipotent figures of football. After all, fans come from all different milieus, appear in different degrees of organization and with different motives, thus in principle representing a mirror image of society as a whole. While professional football is organized patriarchally from above, it represents egalitarian diversity from below.

This contrast, which distinguishes and relates various actors to each other, can be seen as constitutive for the field of football. Without strict hierarchy, economic potential and sporting know-how, no sporting success will occur. Without a correspondingly interested audience, actors with economic capital would hardly have incentives to invest money and time on a larger scale.

But what ensures the continuation of this cycle? Why is football in Europe and not only in Europe such a great fascination? In the following,

I advocate the thesis that football serves the function of reconciling opposing social forms of life and positions (Beichelt 2016). These consist of ways of life that individuals or subjects develop or have developed in response to the demands of late modernity. Industrialization, urbanization, scientification, and other forms of rationalization of the world force the individual, on the one hand, to constantly accept new challenges in order to become or remain a respected member of society. School and education no longer serve only as the basis for a fulfilled life, but as preparation for a profession and its successful practice. In the context of division of labor, individuals thus fulfill economic functions for society as a whole. It is one of the classic theses of sociology that this leads to additional expectations being placed on the individual, e.g. the demands for willingness to work and mobility increase.

The consequences of division of labor and social differentiation do not automatically lead to isolation and atomization. Quite the contrary, forms of reciprocity can also emerge. Durkheim refers to such positive obligations to the rules and the law of modernity as “organic solidarity” (Durkheim 1996 [1930]). Through them, it is ensured that society as a whole can benefit from the blessings of an economy increasingly focused on value creation. The rationalization of human life thus leads to the emergence of collective forms of society. Only in this way can the new means of production, which are closely linked to trade and collective trust, be effectively utilized. In this way, industrialization and economic division of labor are a central prerequisite for the formation of social organizations based on reciprocity and solidarity (Deutsch 1953; Tönnies 2010).

While these processes condition each other at the macro level, they pose significant challenges for the individual at the micro level. The stronger the compulsion to constant economic availability—to mobility, to further qualification and professional self-realization—the more difficult it becomes to fulfill such conditions that go hand in hand with the cultivation of collective or solidary practices. Communal identity, as demanded in traditional forms of life such as family or church communities, are difficult to reconcile with hypermobility and lifelong reorientation. The stronger the incompatibility, the higher the risk of exhaustion or fatigue (Ehrenberg 1998).

My thesis now is that football—or the practices taking place in the field of football—helps to cushion these demands on the individual. Above all, it offers a stage on which *conflicting impulses* can be processed. Modern



football has high qualities as a projection surface for life paths of self-realization. Individual football stars—see Twitter, Facebook, etc.—are highly idealized when they engage in activities beyond the football field. Cristiano Ronaldo maintains his own fashion and perfume lines, which underline a certain ideal of masculinity. Lionel Messi, who was treated for short stature as a teenager, supports vulnerable children and adolescents with his own foundation. The German national player Jérôme Boateng designs and sells elegant glasses. Mesut Özil had several girlfriends over the years who were no strangers to the tabloid press. All of this has an effect insofar as it provides role models for the individual life development of young men. These help to fill the almost inevitable gap between the societal expectation of individual distinctiveness and the limited potential for actual self-determination.

On the other hand, football also offers many points of contact for the cultivation of communal life practices. The organizational form of teams, which compete with each other and encounter each other with specific identities, provides a rich symbolism of community. And numerous are also practices of football that tie in with feelings of community and solidarity. “The Mannschaft” (“the team”) was a protected trademark of the German Football Association from 2015 to 2022 and was staged with a sophisticated advertising and communication strategy. The title of the German football magazine *11Freunde* is a reference to a well-known youth book from 1955 (Drechsel 2008). And FIFA also sets an emphasis on social responsibility and community with its slogan “For the Game. For the World” used since 2007 (FIFA 2007).

Love, friendship, and community represent possible authentic goals within the football field. Analogous to the individualistic motives, however, they become important primarily as projections. Traditional communal instances such as the church or family have been known to be under pressure for decades. This also leads to the loss of those arenas where individuals can retreat when they want to escape the pressure of individual realization. Here, as many documents attest to the affection of football fans for their clubs, an identification with supposed subjects of football can arise. As it says on the homepage of Borussia Dortmund: “Borussia Dortmund receives real love from its fans. Because BVB is, like them, deeply rooted in the culture of its hometown and Dortmund and the Westphalian province: straightforward, unadorned, combative”.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, football is to be understood as a “Hidden Game” (Blutner and