

# EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



## **FREE – FOOTBALL RESEARCH IN AN ENLARGED EUROPE**

This is the first of three policy briefs based on findings from the FREE project. It summarises results from the project's historical, sociological and anthropological research streams.

December 2014

### **INTRODUCTION**

What does football say about contemporary European society? Is this form of popular culture a unifying or divisive factor in the overall integration between European countries and their peoples? Has football accumulated a collective memory? What trace has it left in the way people perceive each other across the continent? Has it created a genuinely transnational public space of communication and exchange? How does it influence perceptions and experiences of migration? What role do football mega-events play in this context? What are the policy-relevant dimensions of this most widely shared of all expressions of popular culture?

These are among the multiple questions the FREE Project has sought to find answers for since its launch in 2012. Designed as response to a call for innovative studies on “The Anthropology of European integration” in the everyday lives of European citizens, the project sought to produce evidence through a wide range of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

The present document is the first of three policy briefs issued by the project. It summarises results from the project's historical, sociological and anthropological research streams. In order to highlight the policy-relevant aspects of the different interdisciplinary approaches and to emphasise the link between the two sections “Evidence and analysis” and “Policy implications and recommendations”, the findings are presented under seven thematic headings in both sections.

Two other policy briefs will deal in more detail with two specific sub-topics: the feminisation of football, and football stakeholders and governance.

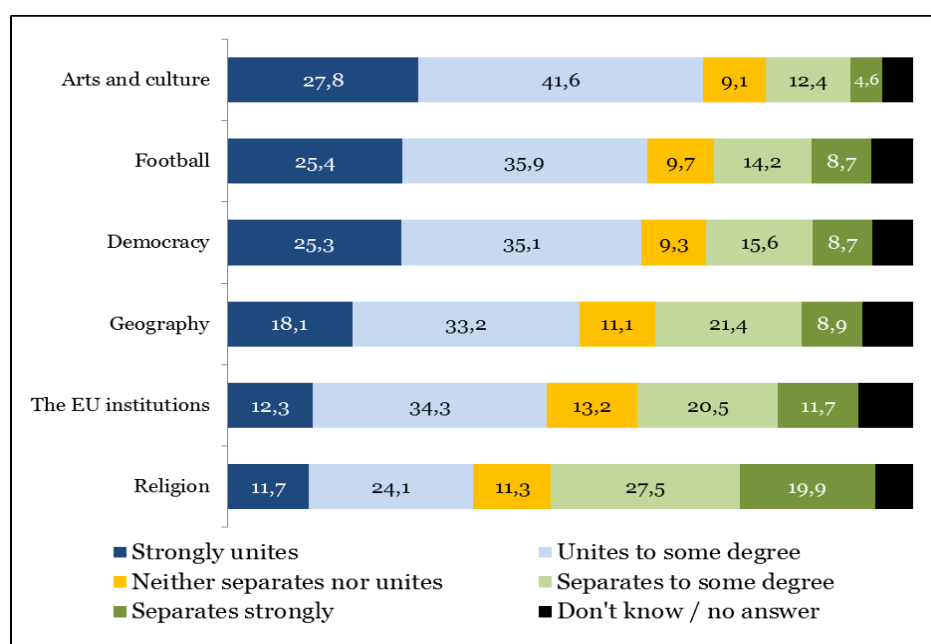
The fact that “Football is more than a game” has become a truism and no longer needs to be justified. Just how much and in what way exactly football penetrates European society has however hardly been studied in a transnational and truly interdisciplinary perspective. The FREE project’s multi-dimensional research methodology has allowed to confirm a series of hypotheses of previous research and also provided new insights on this socio-cultural phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

As we expected to find, football is important in many citizen’s everyday lives. It pervades social and cultural life on a daily basis, and even those who are not particularly interested in it can hardly escape the discourse and sociability it produces. Moreover, this is true across boundaries of age, gender, social class and geography. There is no doubt that football is not just a pastime or an attractive product of the entertainment industry, and that it provides structures of meaning to many individuals in a complex society. It helps people make sense of individual and collective belongings, and cope with the tension between forces that hold society together and developments that tend to fragment it.

### 1. Unity and Europeanness

As the findings from the quantitative survey with the general public reveal, football, rather than being considered a divisive force of rivalry among Europeans, is clearly considered a uniting factor for Europeans, including those who do not have a particular interest in the game. More so in any case than political institutions, geography or even democracy! It is evidently part of the “arts and culture” nexus which is perceived as a pillar of Europeanness.

Figure 1: “In your opinion, to what extent do the following things separate or unite Europeans?”



Unit: percentage. Base: total number of respondents (n = 7 252) / Source: FREE CATI Survey (2014).

On the other hand, the commodification of football, fostered over recent decades by an understanding of football as an economic sector and the liberalisation of the European football market, has produced a growing discontent and disappointment among those who declare being interested in football (a part of the population that varies between 40 and 70 per cent across Europe). Among the reasons for discontent, provided by those who declare “having previously been interested” but being “no longer interested” in football, “money” is by far the most important predictor. Such disappointment is likely to reduce in the long run the above-mentioned impact on unity and Europeanness.

<sup>1</sup> For a summary on the project’s overall research methodology and the different surveys carried out, please refer to the section “Research parameters” on page 7.

## 2. Memory and History

The quantitative data shows that the generation below 25, generally reputed to have little knowledge of historical dates and events, performs remarkably well on sites of football memory, not only on their own country but also on other countries.

The qualitative work on the history of European football and the collective memory it produces has shown that the role of civil society in creating the Europe of football is underestimated. UEFA especially has been poor in communicating about its historic achievement of creating European competitions. General awareness is low about how this “Europeanisation success story” was realised from below by civil society (“bottom-up”), rather than from the top (by political institutions) and deserves to be fostered.

In a wider perspective, the research initiated by FREE on the specific case of transnational football memory strongly suggests that the transnational memory produced by popular culture in general has not been sufficiently taken into account by traditional historical research.

## 3. Transnational communication

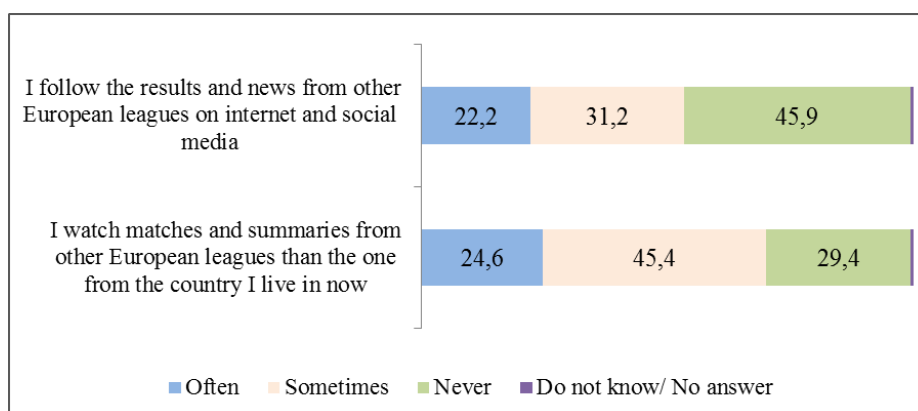
Football is an ice breaker and topic of exchange across borders, between Europeans of different origin, age, gender and social class. It is a key issue for establishing common ground from which to proceed in dialogue. Football increasingly provides connection between people from different countries, even for individuals who do not necessarily have access to other experiences of transnational encounter (such as European mobility programmes or international tourism).

Table 1: “Have you discussed football with somebody from another European country?”

In the previous 12 months	Country of residence						Total
	France	Germany	Poland	Spain	Turkey	UK	
Yes	47.6	70.3	47.5	69.8	55.5	81.1	63.6
No	52.4	29.7	52.5	30.2	44.5	18.9	36.4

Unit: percentage. Base: total number of respondents / Source: FREE ONLINE Survey (2014).

Figure 2: Transnational interest in football



Unit: percentage.  
Base: respondents who love or like football (n = 3 738) / Source: FREE CATI Survey (2014)

There are, however, fault lines between Western and

Eastern Europe. In the FREE surveys, Polish football fans and the Polish general public are showing very significant differences with the rest of the countries under investigation (see tables below under point 6).

Moreover, qualitative research suggests that Western knowledge and appreciation of Eastern football was actually higher during the times of the Iron Curtain than in a united Europe. Today’s top-flight professional football in Europe is less geographically and culturally inclusive in an East-West perspective than it used to be in previous decades.

Different field work actions around the particular event of Euro2012 in Poland and Ukraine not only showed to what extent stereotypes are abundant and persistent, but also how such events may contribute to put some of them into question or invalidate them. If top-level European football however is increasingly monopolised by Western clubs, football’s potential impact on what can be named the “persisting mental fault lines on the continent”, i.e. the East-West and North-South divides, will be lost.

#### 4. Migration and Integration

The FREE research reveals that national football teams do have an influence on how integration of ethnic minorities is perceived by the general public, especially in receiving countries with strong immigration (i.e. mainly Western Europe). Citizens agree massively (more than two thirds) that such players “make an important contribution to the social integration in the countries they play for”.

*Table 2: “Players with migrant background in national teams make an important contribution to social integration in the countries they play for.”*

	Country									Total
	AT	DK	DE	FR	IT	PL	ES	TR	UK	
Strongly agree	42.9	23.9	60.6	18.9	20.2	5.4	16.7	9.0	19.2	24.6
Agree	39.3	52.2	19.4	55.7	35.4	30.0	58.8	47.9	52.0	42.0
<i>aggregate agree</i>	<i>82.2</i>	<i>76.,1</i>	<i>80.0</i>	<i>74.6</i>	<i>55.6</i>	<i>35.4</i>	<i>75.5</i>	<i>56.9</i>	<i>71.0</i>	<i>66.6</i>
Neither agree nor disagree	8.6	9.8	9.6	2.8	2.6	40.9	3.7	12.2	8.8	10.0
Disagree	4.3	7.6	2.8	17.7	8.9	10.4	13.2	23.5	12.9	12.3
Strongly disagree	1.4	2.2	3.9	3.9	10.8	3.4	2.3	3.4	3.0	4.4
Don't know / NA	3.5	4.3	3.7	1.0	22.1	9.9	5.3	4.0	4.1	6.7
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

*Unit: percentage. Base: total number of respondents (n = 7 252) / Source: FREE CATI Survey (2014)*

For migrant football fans – no matter whether 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation migrants – football provides a public space where hybrid belongings and flexible loyalties can be displayed. This is shown by the ethnographic field work carried out within FREE. Football fandom bridges cultural divides and offers migrants a chance to “gain agency”, in other words: to have the possibility to act and influence the world around them, and to counter experiences of contempt and earn respect.

#### 5. Mega events

Mega sport events are never limited to sport. As the FREE field work in Poland on the organisation and heritage of Euro2012 has confirmed, such events are also ideological tools in the hand of various stakeholders. Football events of that size today invariably trigger controversial public debates on larger issues of economic and social development, and last but not least, issues of democratic governance. Field research suggests that attitudes in host countries (including potential ones) to previous and forthcoming mega events are evolving, especially with more demand towards greater sustainability and accountability.

Mega football events have also become, due to the widespread development of public viewing and fan miles, very particular occasions of exuberant display of national feelings of belonging and symbols. As the FREE research in both qualitative field work and quantitative surveys suggests, however, such displays of nationalism during major international football events can no longer be interpreted in a simplistic manner. Rather than simply finding an outlet for emotions that are off-limit or proscribed in everyday life, contemporary individuals use them to negotiate complex and flexible loyalties and belonging. In the vast majority of the public, football does not produce exclusive nationalism, but helps individuals integrate complementary layers of identity.

#### 6. Turkey

In this important field of popular culture that is football, Turkey is definitely not an outlier. On the contrary, football shows that Turkey is very well integrated to Europe. It is perceived by both Turks and others as a natural member of the European football community. Turkey has a high mobility of players and coaches, a high level of transnational support among fans, a high level of football consumption and social interaction. Football allows Turkey to be a “normal” European country, and the high importance of football in Turkish society is positively perceived within the European football community.

Table 3: Frequency of talk about the following topics with friends (responses “often” and “always”).

	AT	DK	DE	FR	IT	PL	ES	TR	UK	Average
Sports	29.8	46.2	53.4	41.2	24.1	8.7	43.9	33.5	51.6	36.9
Economy	22.3	30.4	37.4	37.3	44.2	5.1	54.2	35.8	35.6	33.6
Politics	24.8	35.9	42.0	29.1	35.3	10.1	38.2	33.8	24.0	30.4

Unit: percentage. Base: total number of respondents (n = 7 252) / Source: FREE CATI Survey (2014)

Table 4: Do you follow men's football at the competitive levels I will read now?

	AT	DK	DE	FR	IT	PL	ES	TR	UK	Average
FIFA World Cup	48.2	68.1	82.2	62.9	53.7	37.6	67.3	40.7	66.1	58.5
UEFA European Championship	41.8	65.9	68.2	43.4	37.5	27.2	63.1	43.2	57.8	49.8
UEFA Champions League	42.9	40.7	64.5	40.8	36.6	24.6	59.2	40.9	53.7	44.9
National Championship	37.9	46.2	58.8	41.0	43.3	18.6	57.6	39.1	48.2	43.4
UEFA Europa League	29.3	29.7	45.3	32.5	30.5	17.9	49.1	28.5	41.7	33.8
Local/Regional levels	27.7	31.9	31.1	24.2	13.1	9.8	27.2	10.0	43.0	24.2
Other European championships	19.3	27.5	19.1	29.3	16.7	8.1	52.7	15.3	27.0	23.9
Other continental championships	6.4	11.0	8.9	19.5	12.1	5.1	21.8	8.2	18.7	12.4
I don't follow at any level	36.9	25.3	8.4	29.9	26.8	48.8	23.7	28.8	23.6	28.0

Unit: percentage. Base: total number of respondents (n = 7 252)

## 7. Socialisation, physical activity and well-being

The FREE research shows that football socialisation begins extremely early in life across all countries, both as spectator sport and as practice. It is very often linked with family traditions and the local environment. Football enters the lives of individuals at a time of formation of ethical attitudes, fundamental social values and norms; and commitment to clubs and the game itself generally remain stable for very long periods. Its educational potential, in combination with its essential simplicity, cannot be overestimated.

Table 5: Age of commencement of watching men's football.

	Country of residence						Total
	France	Germany	Poland	Spain	Turkey	UK	
Under 6 years old	24.5	32.9	30.4	43.8	49.6	39.1	37.2
Between 6 and 12 years old	58.8	53.9	56.0	45.4	42.6	50.1	50.8
<i>aggregate under 12 years old</i>	<i>83,3</i>	<i>86,8</i>	<i>86,4</i>	<i>89,2</i>	<i>92,2</i>	<i>89,2</i>	<i>88,0</i>
Between 13 and 20 years old	15.1	10.6	12.6	9.7	6.4	9.0	10.3
Between 21 and 40 years old	1.1	1.8	0.8	0.5	1.0	1.2	1.2
Over 40 years old	0.2	0.7	0.2	0.2	--	0.2	0.3
Not interested at all	0.3	--	0.2	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.3

Unit: percentage. Base: total number of respondents / Source: FREE ONLINE Survey (2014)

Football not only contributes to physical but also to mental well-being. Both quantitative surveys and qualitative field work with supporters clearly confirm that for many individuals the most important aspect of well-being provided by football is its social dimension. They also show that the local level of social identity is more important than the national level. These dimensions will be further developed in the forthcoming policy brief on football stakeholders and governance.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy implications and recommendations directly refer to the evidence listed in the previous section:

### 1. Unity and Europeanness

- ➊ Rather than consider professional football a predominantly economic activity and grassroots football a healthy sport practice, policy-makers, especially legislators, should be aware of the larger socio-cultural impact that football of all levels has on how citizens perceive and understand what “makes” Europe.
- ➋ The growing disappointment with the commodification of football should be taken very seriously by governing bodies and institutional policy-makers. Awareness should be raised that treating football as a purely economic activity may turn out to be counter-productive in the long term. (Further aspects of ownership will be developed in more detail in the dedicated FREE policy brief on football stakeholders and governance).

### 2. Memory and history

- ➊ Football history is popular; it is accessible “history in the making”. The research findings suggest that the growing availability of international football memory thanks to YouTube, Twitter and other networks will even increase the density of shared memory and establish links across generations. But this phenomenon goes beyond football. In the digital age, popular culture is capable of producing a transnational memory shaped by people, not institutions (in other words: a bottom-up memory). This deserves to be researched in more detail and larger scope. Historians should be encouraged to focus on such issues through pertinent calls for proposals. Relevant research projects should be actively supported within the scope of Horizon2020.
- ➋ On a more general note, the use of social media and new technology turns out to be particularly widespread within the football community, which makes these channels efficient for campaigns to raise awareness on issues of social and political concern.

### 3. Transnational communication

- ➊ Intellectuals and policy-makers sometimes tend to smile at football’s capacity to establish sociability and influence national stereotypes in a positive manner, but it is important to realise that the transnational bridge-building potential is a rather unique asset and deserves to be preserved. The current monopolistic tendencies – the ever stronger cartel of Spanish, English and German top-flight clubs in European competitions – represent a serious threat for the transnational inclusiveness of football, a precious achievement of the last sixty years.
- ➋ The survey evidence suggests that Poland occupies a particular place in Europe, both geographically and, in recent years, also economically. In the FREE survey, the focus of which guaranteed very spontaneous and unbiased responses in the seemingly “harmless” field of popular culture, the Polish respondents clearly stand apart. It should be investigated whether the considerable differences between respondents from Poland and Western countries are characteristic for countries from Central and Eastern Europe or whether Polish society has indeed a unique profile.

### 4. Migration and Integration

- ➊ Policy-makers should not hesitate to use high-level football players with migrant background that play for the national team of their destination country consistently as role-models and ambassadors for policies favouring the integration of ethnic minorities.
- ➋ Policy-makers should not distrust but facilitate migrant football fandom. On a local level, organised football fan communities should not be met with distrust but encouraged for their contribution to integration. On an international level, football-related cross-border mobility should be facilitated.



## 5. Mega events

- Supranational sport governing bodies should not ignore controversial debates in host cities of mega football events. They are understandably eager to have the best possible conditions for such events, but rather than try to impose them on states and cities, they should see the political debate that today is inevitably provoked locally, as an opportunity to develop, in their own long-term interest, both attitudes and practices of fairness, sustainability, and social responsibility. They should have the impact and long-term heritage of mega-events assessed by independent research groups with the aim of continuously improving their own practices.
- Policy-makers should refrain from actively promoting transnational/European football teams. They should resist the temptation to interfere with (discursive) supranational social engineering in a competition environment that is framed by national cultures but that allows individuals to adopt critical distance to national symbolism and identity markers.

## 6. Turkey

- Turkey is a natural and perfectly integrated member of the European football community. Attitudes and behaviour patterns have clearly converged with the European mainstream over the decades. Policy-makers should note that this convergence contradicts argumentations about Turkey being essentially different from, or culturally incompatible with, other European countries.

## 7. Socialisation, physical activity and well-being

- Football's high educational potential, both as practice and as spectator sport, cannot be overvalued. Policies and programmes should provide optimal conditions for the training of qualified youth football educators and support.
- Football contributes to mental well-being, but its outstanding spectator sport qualities seem to eclipse the incentive to practice in certain countries. European programmes providing incentive for physical activity should be particularly targeted on those countries.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The FREE Project has brought together scholars from very different academic backgrounds - sociology, anthropology, history, gender studies, political sciences - with the explicit objective to produce genuinely interdisciplinary research that interconnected a range of research methods in the most appropriate way.

Data collection included both various qualitative methods of investigation and several quantitative surveys. The evidence provided and analysed in this policy brief was produced by a range of complementary research activities, especially:

- Historical desk research on primary sources (archival data);
- Sociological field work (in-depth interviews with individuals and/or groups);
- Ethnographic field work by researchers (participant observation on various occasions and different settings between 2012 and 2014) and participants from the football-interested public (audio-visual field diaries, in selected countries);
- Quantitative online survey (non-representative, attentive public with an interest in football), carried out in 8 languages between September 2013 and February 2014 and receiving a total of 17 516 responses out of which 8 299 respondents completed all questions;
- Quantitative CATI survey (representative population samples in all target countries), carried out in 8 languages by sub-contractor BVA (Paris) in December 2013 and covering a total of 7 245 respondents.

The target countries concerned by the quantitative surveys were Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

Project name	Football Research in an Enlarged Europe (FREE)
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Further reading	Already published online working papers on <a href="http://www.free-project.eu">www.free-project.eu</a> . Forthcoming FREE book series published by Palgrave Macmillan (2015)