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Becoming European through Football?

The Case of Sturm Graz

Introduction

How can leisure world experiences construct a European identity at the beginning of the twenty-first century? This is the core question of this chapter. The past decades have seen an enormous body of literature dealing with aspects of Europeanization of identities, or what can be called “becoming European.” Most of these works have a specific focus that is either based on a narrow political understanding of Europe (often limited to the European Union) or addresses elite segments of the society.¹ For the elite level, it is known that the intensified collaboration in Europe has shaped the identities and minds of the people affected.² Transnational contact and exposure, too, shape identification, although the cause of direction is not always clear: transnational interaction might contribute to a more Europeanised self-identification, but potentially, those with a more pro-European attitude tend to strive towards more exposure, as the case of student exchange programs illustrates.³

This chapter addresses some of the shortcomings of approaches that understand Europeanization as outlined above. With football fandom, it investigates a

Note: This chapter draws upon work from the EUFoot project (<https://eufoot.github.io>). I thank Alexander Brand, Florian Koch, and Arne Niemann who all contributed significantly to the conceptual and empirical work that informs this chapter.

1 Matthias L. Maier and Thomas Risse, eds., *Europeanization, Collective Identities and Public Discourses: Final Report* (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, 2003); Thomas Risse, *A Community of Europeans? Transnational Identities and Public Spheres* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); Jeffrey T. Checkel and Peter J. Katzenstein, eds., *European Identity* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Theresa Kuhn, *Experiencing European Integration: Transnational Lives and European Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

2 Michael Bruter, “Winning Hearts and Minds for Europe: The Impact of News and Symbols on Civic and Cultural European Identity,” *Comparative Political Studies* 36, no. 10 (2003): 1148–1179.

3 Theresa Kuhn, “Why Educational Exchange Programmes Miss their Mark: Cross-border Mobility, Education and European Identity,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 50, no. 6 (2012): 994–1010.

leisure world example that is not in the strict sense political and draws on masses who invest emotion, time, and money in following the sport and their team. The arena of football is heavily Europeanised, as the governance structures have been dramatically shaped through and by transnational and European influence. This leaves fans exposed to a Europeanised game and confronts them regularly with players, officials, rivals, and competitions beyond national borders. The specific research question of this essay is thus: given the Europeanization of football governance and structures, how have fan identities been Europeanised, how are they “becoming European”?

Aiming to disentangle the blurry term “identity,” a more precise and empirically applicable conceptual framework is established that seeks to capture identity as a triad of identifications, self-understandings, and groupness.⁴ This framework includes two dimensions, communities of belonging and frames of references to capture both in-group and out-group mechanisms (communities of belonging) and reference levels between the local, national, and European (frames of references) that are inherent for football. It is applied to empirical data from online discourses among and interviews with fans of Sportklub (SK) Sturm Graz, a club playing in the first Austrian league with several appearances in the qualification stage of European competitions during the past decade. It has a low share of foreign players and is located outside the top leagues of European football, thus providing a hard case⁵ in terms of case study research: If we can trace Europeanization of identification among the fans of this club, it is likely that such traces are prevalent in more Europeanised club environments.

The chapter starts with an outline of the main trends in the Europeanization of football structures and its (potential) implications on fandom experiences. Following this, the two data sources, online message boards and interviews, are described in more detail. The empirical part follows the analytical scheme of two main dimensions of Europeanised identities: communities of belonging and frames of references. It should not be expected that the national level is deemed irrelevant by the fans, but Europe is probably an important reference point as the gold standard in football. In a perspective of “becoming” European through football, regional, national, and European self-understandings and reference points are potentially intertwined.

⁴ Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 1–47.

⁵ Jason Seawright and John Gerring, “Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research,” *Political Research Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2008): 294–308.

Objective and Subjective Europeanization in Football

The backdrop of “becoming European” through football is the ongoing Europeanization of football structures and governance. In political science, “Europeanization” usually refers to domestic changes resulting from change on the European level of governance.⁶ While such a concept is useful to analyze the European Union-nation state-nexus, the analysis of Europeanization in football requires an understanding that emphasizes dynamics on the domestic level as well as cross-national activities of domestic actors.⁷ Two different strands of Europeanization have been identified⁸: first, European level pressures (i.e. action taken by the Court of Justice of the European Union (ECJ) or the EU-Commission) and attempts to initiate or influence such measures from the domestic level. They must be distinguished from a second strand of Europeanization dynamics, which is fed by transnational processes, i.e. the formation of the transnational lobby network European Club Association (ECA) or the creation of a pan-European football league system and various attempts to influence this system through transnational club cooperation.⁹ Europeanization of football can be understood as the dynamics that influence how national football cultures are Europeanised in decisive aspects of the match.

Background of Europeanization in Football

Europeanization in football has a long history reaching back to its very formation in Europe at the turn to the twentieth century. Its associations, such as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) in 1904 and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) in 1954, have been created

6 Vivien A. Schmidt, “Europeanization and the Mechanics of Economic Policy Adjustment,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 9, no. 6 (2002): 894–912.

7 Arne Niemann and Alexander Brand, “Die Europäisierung des Fußballs: Von der Umsetzung politischer Vorgaben zur Gestaltung europäischer Realitäten,” in *Europäische Sportpolitik: Zugänge – Akteure – Problemfelder*, ed. Jürgen Mittag (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2018), 167–180.

8 Alexander Brand, Arne Niemann, and Georg Spitaler, “The Two-track Europeanization of Football: EU-Level Pressures, Transnational Dynamics and their Repercussions within Different National Contexts,” *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 5, no. 1 (2013): 95–112.

9 Brand, Niemann and Spitaler, “The two-track Europeanization of football”; Niemann and Brand, “Die Europäisierung des Fußballs.”

out of cooperation between national associations.¹⁰ Matches between clubs across countries have a tradition reaching back to occasional tours of English clubs to their central European counterparts in 1901, followed by European-wide club competitions such as the Mitropa-Cup from 1927 and the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup from 1955–1971.¹¹ The sport mirrored societal developments in politics and economics, both as a cause for cooperation (as in the case of the early transnational matches and the establishment of the associations) and conflict (as in many proclaimed “football wars” and rivalries).¹² Additionally, the game was able to go beyond political and economic borders, for instance during the Cold War, when sports events, especially football matches and organized competitions, contributed to an understanding and building bridges between East and West.¹³ Waalkes concluded that the game “follows globalization trends more than it causes them in the areas of politics and economics.” At the same time, he argues that “in the cultural realm, the global game forms a language that facilitates communication between fans of the game.”¹⁴ Europeanization in football thus has two sides: its structures follow more general Europeanization trends which strongly accelerated during the past few decades. From the perspective of the fans, these changes of the game influence their cultural experience of the game towards a way of experiencing Europe.

Contemporary Europeanization of Football Structures and Governance

Four mechanisms constitute the contemporary Europeanization in football: the regulation of player markets following the “Bosman rulings” by the ECJ in 1995, the Europeanization of match broadcasting rights, a cross-national coordination of clubs on the European level, and the development of European club

10 Philippe Vonnard, Grégory Quinn, and Nicolas Bancel, *Building Europe with the Ball* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016).

11 Vonnard, Quinn, and Bancel, *Building Europe with the Ball*; Florian Greiner, *Wege nach Europa: Deutungen eines imaginierten Kontinents in deutschen, britischen und amerikanischen Printmedien, 1914–1945* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2014), 423 f.

12 Scott Waalkes, “Does Soccer Explain the World or Does the World Explain Soccer? Soccer and Globalization,” *Soccer & Society* 18, no. 2–3 (2017): 166–180.

13 Philippe Vonnard, Nicola Sbetti, and Grégory Quinn, eds., *Beyond Boycotts: Sport during the Cold War in Europe* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

14 Waalkes, “Does Soccer Explain the World or Does the World Explain Soccer? Soccer and Globalization.”

leagues.¹⁵ These dynamics have shaped the game across the continent since the mid-1990s.

Europeanization of Player Markets

The Bosman case is the best-known case of European Union interference in football, significantly changing the rules of player transfers. The term summarizes rulings of the ECJ in 1995, abrogating the traditional system of transfer fees to be paid for out-of-contract players as it infringed upon the right to move freely under Article 48 of the Treaty of Rome and a second ruling that abolished the limit of the number of foreign players in a club's squad.¹⁶ Both practices were ruled illegal as discriminating against EU-nationals and breaching common market rules. As a result, national football associations reformed their domestic systems of transfer rules and player restrictions to be compatible with European law. These dynamics lead to the re-establishment of heterogeneous national regulations, ranging from very liberal ones (e.g. in Germany) to those just acceptable within the legal frame (e.g. Austria).¹⁷ The ruling was essential as it clarified that sport governing bodies have to follow EU free movement rights but restrictions can be justified to keep up higher aims such as competitive balance in sports.¹⁸ The implications for the player markets in Europe were enormous.¹⁹ Despite national differences, the share of non-national players across the European leagues increased significantly. Most foreign players in all European leagues are nowadays from other European countries.

15 Alexander Brand and Arne Niemann, "Football and National Identity in Europe," *Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs* 1 (2014): 43–51.

16 Borja García, "He Was Not Alone: Bosman in Context," in *The Legacy of Bosman*, ed. Antoine Duval and Ben van Rompuy (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016).

17 Arne Niemann, Alexander Brand, and Georg Spitaler, "The Europeanization of Football: Germany and Austria Compared," in *The Making and Mediatization of Modern Sport in Europe: States, Media and Markets 1950–2010*, ed. C. Young, D. Holt, and Alan Tomlinson (London: Routledge, 2011), 187–204.

18 Antoine Duval and Ben van Rompuy, eds., *The Legacy of Bosman* (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016), 2.

19 The role of the rulings as a cause for deregulation of player markets has been challenged (see e.g. García, "He Was Not Alone: Bosman in Context"), but no matter whether it was the main cause or just one important aspect within an ongoing de-regulation, the legal implications were clearly accelerating national reforms of the transfer rules.

Broadcasting

In the early 2000s, the broadcasting rights of football matches created tensions between the football associations and the European Union. The German FA (alongside the English FA) got involved in serious arguments with the Commission concerning the marketing of broadcasting rights. While the European Commission was considering the central marketing of broadcasting rights for the main football events (i.e. Bundesliga, but also Champions League matches) as a potential restriction of competition and as such against EU law, the clubs argued for central marketing as preserving the culture of equal competition within a league. Despite heterogeneous interests among the clubs – a few top clubs, especially Bayern München, Borussia Dortmund, and Bayer Leverkusen preferred decentralized marketing to maximize their own benefit – they managed to coordinate their interests.²⁰ Through a mere strategy of lobbying on the European level the final agreement saw some compromise with the EU-Commission that partly exempted football broadcasting from direct competition. This example shows that EU-level pressure spurs partial adjustment in football governance, while core policies remain intact despite their potential friction with EU legislation.²¹

European-level Club Coordination and Networks

The past two decades have seen increased transnational coordination among clubs, usually those that consider themselves to be the national top clubs. Associations like FIFA and UEFA are umbrella organizations of national football associations. They usually outbalance diverging interests of all their members with their own organizational interests. This resulted in the formation of “top clubs” from several European countries into what became known as the G14. Their main aim was to influence the UEFA and the FIFA by using pressure and their individual power position as “best-selling” clubs in European football. The compensation for players playing for the national teams led to conflicts, but above all stood the aim to reform the European club competition system, mainly the

20 Alexander Brand and Arne Niemann, “Europeanisation in the Societal/Trans-National Realm: What European Integration Studies Can Get Out of Analysing Football,” *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 3, no. 3 (2007): 182–201.

21 Arne Niemann and Alexander Brand, “The Impact of European Integration on Domestic Sport: The Case of German Football,” *Sport in Society* 11, no. 1 (2008): 90–106, see 100–101.

Champions League, to the benefit of the top clubs.²² G14 eventually dissolved in 2008, but the transnational club coordination aside from national associations remains intact – in the bigger and more encompassing European Club Association (ECA), which despite its c. 200 member clubs merely represents the top clubs and their particular interests.²³

European Club Competitions

The evolution of the year-old competitions between European football clubs into a *de facto* league system of the Champions League (CL) and the Europa League (EL) is probably the most visible and approachable sign of Europeanization in football. The competition replaced the European Champion Clubs' Cup in 1992, now allowing multiple clubs from national leagues to participate. Europe's strongest national leagues can provide up to five teams for the competition. A positive perspective on this development emphasizes its unifying function: a transnational media event with a Europeanised spectatorship could create transnational narratives and a sense of belonging. Games like the quarter-finals, semi-finals, and finals attract spectators way beyond the home countries of the respective participating teams.²⁴ An opposing perspective highlights the detrimental effects of the CL on competitive balance in the national leagues.²⁵ It connects the CL with a growing split between a small group of powerful elite clubs, mostly from a few (West-)European leagues, and an increasing number of smaller leagues, where the national competitions get destroyed through the influence of the European super league.²⁶ Both perspectives suggest relevant implications

22 Matthew Holt, "The Ownership and Control of Elite Club Competition in European Football," *Soccer & Society* 8, no. 1 (2007): 50–67; Jürgen Mittag, "Europäische Sportpolitik zwischen Wachstum und Differenzierung: Entwicklungslinien, Analyseperspektiven und Erklärungsansätze," in Mittag, *Europäische Sportpolitik*, 13–49.

23 Berndt K. Keller, "Sectoral Social Dialogue in Professional Football: Social Partners, Outcomes and Problems of Implementation," *etui (European Trade Union Institute) Working Paper* 04 (2018), accessed October 16, 2020, <https://www.etui.org/publications/working-papers/sectoral-social-dialogue-in-professional-football-social-partners-outcomes-and-problems-of-implementation>.

24 Arne Niemann and Alexander Brand, "The UEFA Champions League: A Political Myth?," *Soccer & Society* 21, no. 3 (2020): 329–43.

25 Thomas Peeters, "Broadcasting Rights and Competitive Balance in European Soccer," University of Antwerp, Department of Economics Research Paper 9 (2009), accessed October 16, 2020, <https://ideas.repec.org/p/ant/wpaper/2009009.html>.

26 Niemann and Brand, "The UEFA Champions League: A Political Myth?."

of the Europeanization of the competitions for supporters and their experience of the game.

The quick review of four important contemporary dynamics of Europeanization in football shows that essential structures in the governance of football have been influenced by European integration. This is both caused by actors on the domestic level, the clubs and club associations, and the European level, the ECJ and the EU-Commission, as well as by transnational realms of actors, especially the football clubs organizing themselves across borders to overthrow “official” lobbying ways through the national associations.

Subliminal Identification with Europe in Football

The potential impact of Europeanization dynamics on fan experiences can be summarized as follows: the aftermath of the Bosman rulings accelerated the Europeanization of player markets. A European, sometimes even an international, squad is the norm in most clubs and there are many indicators to believe that this does not infringe on the ability of fans to identify with “their” team.²⁷ The development of the European club competitions to a *de facto* European league system influences the match experience of football supporters: they are frequently exposed to competitions between foreign clubs and clubs in their domestic league (either their own club or their club’s main rivals). This suggests that the elaborated Europeanization influences not only the structure of domestic football structures, but also fandom.

Early on researchers identified a growing “European consciousness” of football fans in England. King explored the idea of a growing “European consciousness” amongst a group of Manchester United fans.²⁸ He argued that these fans begin to see themselves as more European, as the increased opportunity to travel across Europe brought about by the greater number of CL games made supporters progressively see themselves as “European.” Also, the increased coverage of European leagues on British television made supporters more aware of other national leagues, and therefore also cities and countries. Millward found that Liverpool F.C. fans were identifying with Europe as a competitive football space, while

²⁷ David Ranc, *Foreign Players and Football Supporters: The Old Firm, Arsenal, Paris Saint-Germain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

²⁸ Anthony King, “Football Fandom and Post-national Identity in the New Europe,” *British Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 3 (2000): 419–42; Anthony King, *The European Ritual: Football in the New Europe* (London: Routledge, 2003); Anthony King, “The New Symbols of European Football,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 39, no. 3 (2004): 323–36.

Oldham Athletic F.C. supporters – a team in the English lower divisions – did not express such self-understandings.²⁹ His works indicate that especially unofficial, “societal” mechanisms, such as i.e. travel or online message board discussions, can foster identification with Europe. Levermore and Millward conclude that football and the organization of pan-European club competitions is a master example of a pan-European identification area.³⁰

Football officials have also been studied. Brand and Niemann established evidence for a changed mindset of football officials due to the ongoing Europeanization of governance structures.³¹ They suggest that frequent interaction of club officials may have altered their perspectives, e.g. in terms of increasingly looking at European competitors instead of national ones, and by forming alliances across borders. Officials have understood to organize and lobby beyond national borders, both through their national football associations and the UEFA but also using cross-national networks with other clubs.³² Mittag has investigated the development of cross-national club coordination between self-proclaimed top clubs. He traced how these clubs have formed a sustainable transnational organization during the past two decades, acknowledging that common interests of similar clubs (i.e. in financial or competition aspects) across national borders begin to outweigh national interests among clubs from the same country.³³

The examples suggest an effect of trans-border activities on perceptions and articulations of football fans. The focus on football fans allows the evading of some problems inherent in the existing research. First, the focus on football fandom allows one to study “everyday life” activities – unlike rather elite focused topics such as job mobility among the more educated strata of society. Second, the focus on subliminal articulations avoids studying conscious identity concep-

29 Peter Millward, “‘We’ve All Got the Bug for Euro-Aways’: What Fans Say about European Football Club Competition,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 41, no. 3–4 (2006): 375–93; Peter Millward, *Getting into Europe: Identification, Prejudice and Politics in English Football Culture* (Saarbrücken: VDM, 2009).

30 Roger Levermore and Peter Millward, “Official Policies and Informal Transversal Networks: Creating ‘Pan-European Identifications’ through Sport?,” *The Sociological Review* 55, no. 1 (2007): 144–64, see 149 ff.

31 Brand and Niemann, “Europeanization in the Societal/Trans-National Realm”; Niemann and Brand, “Die Europäisierung des Fußballs.”

32 Niemann and Brand, “Die Europäisierung des Fußballs.”

33 Mittag, “Europäische Sportpolitik zwischen Wachstum und Differenzierung: Entwicklungslinien, Analyseperspektiven und Erklärungsansätze.”

tions only.³⁴ In line with the approach of Brubaker and Cooper, who replaced the term “identity” with three specific concepts, “identification,” “self-understanding,” and “communality, connectedness and groupness,” the empirical work focuses on elements in discourses which are less conscious and subliminal.³⁵

Case, Data and Analytical Scheme

The existing work on how football fans imagine Europe indicates that the Europeanization of the sport structures has left a mark on its fans. At the same time, most of the ground-breaking work focuses on English football fans. While English clubs have an extraordinary rich history of participation in European competitions, it seems reasonable to shift the focus to fans that cannot take European matches as a matter of course. How are their self-understandings related to Europe? This essay focuses on fans of the Styrian football club SK Sturm Graz 1909. The following section elaborates the case and the reason for this choice as well as the data of the empirical analysis.

A Summary of the Case

The Austrian Bundesliga is not very Europeanised, both regarding the player market and the participation of its clubs in European competitions. Its share of non-Austrian players is relatively low compared to many other European first leagues. The average share of foreign players in the past five seasons was 27%. This puts the league in the lower quarter among UEFA members’ first leagues. The league ranks number 12 in the UEFA country ranking. The rank is based on the results of all associations’ clubs in the five previous Champions League and Europa League seasons. The rankings determine the number of places allocated to the respective league in forthcoming club competitions. Rank 12 allows for two clubs to start in the CL qualification round and for three clubs to start in the EL qualification.³⁶

³⁴ Steffen Mau, *Social Transnationalism: Lifeworlds beyond the Nation-State* (London: Routledge, 2010), 115–123.

³⁵ Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity.’”

³⁶ Own calculations based on data from [transfermarkt.at](https://www.transfermarkt.at). Data based on the seasons 2013/14–2017/18, as of July 18, 2018. Information about the UEFA country ranking from <https://www.uefa.com/memberassociations/uefarankings/country/#/yr/2020>, accessed January 30, 2020.

The Europeanization mechanisms, as discussed above, especially the top-down pressure resulting from the ECJ rulings regarding the organisation of the player market, have been accepted by the Austrian association rather unwillingly. The league and the football association adopted a special fund that allocates financial means to the clubs based on the minutes that Austrian players play in the national competitions. The regulation requires a limit of non-Austrian players to be eligible to the fund.³⁷ This mechanism was introduced as a reaction to the Bosman ruling and the increase of foreign players in the top leagues of the country. It has been identified as legally “somewhat dubious” as it “introduces at least an incentive to discriminate between Austrians and EU-nationals.”³⁸ Consequently, the share of foreign players dropped since the introduction of the mechanism in 2004 from 41% to the aforementioned 27% in 2017/18.³⁹

SK Sturm Graz is a football club located in Graz, Styria. The club has played in the first Austrian league since 1965 and has regularly participated in European competitions (at least at the level of qualification matches) throughout the past.⁴⁰ It can be considered a representative club for the Austrian Bundesliga in its share of foreign players. On average throughout the past five years, the squad had a share of 26% non-Austrian players, 55% of them from European countries (EU-28 and EEA countries). In the context of the other Austrian clubs, where the minutes played by Austrian nationals are a relevant measurement for receiving financial benefits, the club reached very different stages, ranking between fourth place with a share of 83% Austrian players during the first half of the 2016/17 season and second last with 60% by the mid-point of the 2019/20 season.⁴¹

37 Oefbl.at, “Zuschauer, Österreicher-Topf & Spielfeldreporting – Organisatorischer Rückblick auf die Herbstsaison 2019,” accessed January 30, 2020, <https://www.oefbl.at/oefbl/re-daktionsbaum/news/zuschauer-oesterreicher-topf-spielfeldreporting-organisatorischer-rueck-blick-auf-die-herbstsaison-2019/>.

38 Alexander Brand, Arne Niemann, and Georg Spitaler, “The Europeanization of Austrian Football,” in *Transformation of European Football: Towards the Europeanization of the National Game*, ed. Arne Niemann, Borja García, and Wyn Grant (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 171–186, see 177.

39 Brand, Niemann, and Spitaler, “The Two-Track Europeanization of Football”; Barbara Liegl and Georg Spitaler, “Between Trans-Nationality and Identity Politics: Austrian Migration Regimes and Professional Football (1945–2008),” *SWS-Rundschau* 49, no. 2 (2009): 234–55.

40 Martin Behr, *Wir sind Sturm! 100 Jahre Grazer Fußballgeschichte* (Graz: SK Puntigamer Graz, 2008).

41 Oefbl.at, “Zuschauer, Österreicher-Topf & Spielfeldreporting – Organisatorischer Rückblick auf die Herbstsaison 2019”; Bundesliga.at, “Halbzeitbilanz der Tipico Bundesliga,” accessed October 17, 2018, <https://www.bundesliga.at/de/redaktion/news/17-18/tbl/halbzeitbilanz-der-tipico-bundesliga/>.

The case selection thus allows us to analyze fans of a club that has a history of participation in European competitions though playing in a league where national belonging – at least on the level of the team roster – is institutionally reinforced and financially rewarded. At the same time, the league is not among the big European football leagues and operates rather at the margins of European football. This provides potential access to fans who are potentially influenced by contradicting mechanisms that foster both European self-understandings and national or domestic emphasis. The empirical material will show how both aspects influence the articulations of the fans.

Database

The data used in this chapter is based on two sources: it draws on discussions in the Sturm Graz subforum on the online message board www.austriansoccerboard.at during the seasons 2017/18 and 2018/19 and on interviews with Sturm Graz supporters conducted in January 2020. Both text corpora have been analyzed using qualitative content analysis and a deductive coding scheme that is based in the two dimensions “communities of belonging” and “frames of references” (see below).⁴²

As for the online message board, threads were sampled according to the following. A full text search using meaningful terms such as “Europa,” “Champions League,” “Europa League,” “UEFA,” and their different abbreviations has been applied to identify topics of interest. These topics cover three strands of discussion:

1. Discussions about rivals and competition: the threads have been selected into the corpus based on a random sample of matches across the two seasons. Additionally, a thread discussion about the club in Europe has been analyzed.
2. Transfer discussions: two threads explicitly relating each to one transfer window during the two seasons 2016/17 and 2017/18 have been analyzed.
3. Travel and ticketing discussion: *travel and ticketing both for home and away games, in the national league and European competitions is the third type. Here, fans discuss ticket offers and searches as well as information about the organization of travel.*

⁴² Margrit Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2012).

In total, 6,768 posts in ten threads in the online message board have been included in the analysis.⁴³

The database further consists of ten interviews, each of about one hour. The participants were recruited through social media, during test matches and using snowball sampling techniques. The final interview partners were selected to cover a maximal range of age, fandom intensity (frequency of visiting matches and involvement in fan activities), and their general attitude towards player transfer and competitions.⁴⁴ All interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire around the issues of rivalries, national and European competition as well as player transfers. The semi-structured approach allowed the focus on these pre-selected issues while there was enough room for individual narrations and specific topics that arose during the interview. The data was transcribed and analysed using qualitative content analysis.⁴⁵

Analytical Scheme

To catch the subliminal and subtle articulations and self-understandings that football fans express with regards to Europe, the empirical material will be analyzed by using a coding scheme consisting of two analytical dimensions: “communities of belonging” (COB) and “frames of reference” (FOR). “Communities of belonging” include in-group/out-group phenomena, perceptions of “foreignness” and delineations vis-à-vis other groups. In contrast, “frames of reference” refer to the attractiveness assigned to different forms of competition (national vs. European level), the reasons for such peer orientation (being top or being a national representative), and the normalisation of “going to Europe,” i. e. travelling for football matches and experiencing Europe this way (see Table 1).

⁴³ See Appendix, Table 1.

⁴⁴ For an overview of the relevant characteristics see Appendix, Table 2.

⁴⁵ Jochen Gläser and Grit Laudel, *Experteninterviews und qualitative Inhaltsanalyse als Instrumente rekonstruierender Untersuchungen* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009).

Table 1: Analytical framework with the two dimensions, communities of belonging and frames of reference.

Dimension	Category	Aspects
<i>communities of belonging (COB)</i>	Inclusion and exclusion	In-group and out-group phenomena, targeting fans, players, and other actors
	Relations among fans	Coalitions and networking with fans across clubs and borders
	Encoding of events in narratives	Narrations related to event creating community and discord
<i>frames of reference (FOR)</i>	National competitions	Relevance and perception of national competitions
	European competitions	Relevance and role of European competitions (representation vs. competition)
	Context of competitions	Rivalries, travel, as well as watching and attending matches

Communities of belonging addresses dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, understandings of in-group and out-group as well as the process of identification and accompanying narratives. As a category, “communities of belonging” is used to summarize the different ways in which football fans perceive and articulate their “sameness.”⁴⁶ This concept addresses what makes the distinction between “us” and “them,” how groups are constructed and what constitutes “the other.” The aim of the analysis is to understand whether fans articulate their belonging primarily in national contexts and references or whether and how they refer to Europe as an idea or a community. The second aspect of the concept, communities of belonging, is the relationship between fans across teams and across countries. The aim is to understand the interactions, references, and allusions between fans (either of the same club or of different clubs) to grasp their sense of belonging. The third aspect of communities of belonging is the collective remembrance of events. How do certain events trigger or foster a narrative and how are such narratives shaped by European or national aspects? The work seeks to identify events that are the source for such narratives and the aspects of communities and belonging.

Frames of reference include articulations of attention resulting from actions (following football events, travel activities, tourism in the context of away games, network building). This dimension incorporates national competitions, European competitions, and the relation between these two. The first aspect of frames of

⁴⁶ Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” 7.

reference is the appreciation of national club competitions. The aim is to capture how the supporters perceive national competitions. This includes the activities that are related to experiences of match days and the investment that is connected to such activities. The second aspect of frame of references are European club competitions. The aim is to understand whether the supporters perceive the European club competitions as normal or extraordinary, both with regards to the own club and in general. It should also be analyzed how and why participation in a European club competition is considered important. The third aspect focuses on the attractiveness of the different competitions. These questions are analyzed with a focus on the relation between the two levels of competition, national and European.

Regionalized Europeanization among Sturm Graz Supporters

The analysis reveals two aspects of “becoming European” among Sturm Graz fans. First, they see a limited capacity of their club to perform on the European level. This is embedded in the self-understanding of being an underdog among European football leagues. Europe, in relation to their club, is prevalent in remembrances of “good old times,” mainly the exceptional success of the club in the CL in 2000/01. Second, Europe comes into play with a focus on the regional context. The special relation of both the city of Graz and the club with former Yugoslavia and the Balkan countries is emphasized by the fans.⁴⁷ Thus, on the level of self-understanding, a regionalised Europeanization is visible among the fans. These two aspects connect to the analytical dimensions of communities of belonging and frames of references in different aspects.

Communities of Belonging: Local Embedding within Europe

The message board talks of the fans indicate that they perceive their club as a top club in an underdog league. A widespread attitude is that the club is among the

⁴⁷ This reflects a wider societal trend and may not be seen as a pattern limited to football only. The fans mirror the longstanding historical connections of Styria, in particular the city of Graz, and subsequently the club with the Balkan area, reaching back to the beginning of the twentieth century. (Cf. Anita Ziegerhofer and Roland Radlinger, *Vom Rand ins Zentrum Europas: Die Geschichte der Steiermark ab 1918: analog und digital erzählt* (Graz: Leykam, 2020)). This shows how football is socially embedded in its locality, but it also reproduces its surrounding social world.

top clubs within the Austrian Bundesliga, but that it cannot compete with European top elite clubs. Before the first match in the European competition, this perspective is expressed as characteristics of an underdog self-understanding. It sets the boundary between themselves as a passionate (though not necessarily successful) club and the successful clubs as influenced by international money: “Stirring up Europe as an underdog, the name says it all, Sturm Graz against the power of the bloody capitalist clubs, the international corporations and oil sheikhs, with passion and a fighting spirit.”⁴⁸

But while this pre-match attitude indicates that fans assume being able to compete on the European level, even if they are not a favorite, the self-image in more generic discussions about transfer markets conveys that they feel rather like an outsider on the European football level, where the rules are made to fit the top clubs: “Unfortunately, we as small nations can’t really make the rules of the game – an unsuccessful politician once said: He who has gold makes the rules – I don’t think that was meant for us.”⁴⁹

While these expressions highlight an attitude towards European football that locates Austrian football on the outside, their community of belonging is by no means national. The fans’ in-group and out-group formation has a regional focus stretching beyond national borders. The local (or regional) connection to players with origins in Graz and Styria is heavily emphasized. During a discussion about legal restrictions that apply when contracting under-18 players, the local integration of young players is emphasized. The self-understanding that other European leagues might be more interesting for good players is seen as reason to emphasize regional belonging in educating young players: “I think, ESPECIALLY for players from our own academy, who live here with their parents, attend school, i.e. have their life here, it should be possible, for a club that provides football training, to enter into a long-term (i.e. 5-year) contract with the player.”⁵⁰

This writer connects a self-understanding as being in a minor league with a demand for regional connection. Similar expressions of a locally embedded self-understanding are prevalent in the interviews. The local connectedness is relevant as it might guarantee stability in the squad and make players stay longer due to their regional connection: “A regional footballer, a Styrian [...] who comes from the national league and who is able to establish himself and

48 Quote from the discussion thread: Sturm in Europa. See appendix for links to all threads. All quotes translated from German by the author.

49 Thread Wintertransfer 17–18.

50 Thread Wintertransfer 17–18.

plays once and then really is awarded a place in the team, he won't go away so quickly."⁵¹

This demand for a regional connection should not be misunderstood in a tribal sense. Another fan emphasizes that he is not interested in the nationality or a possible migration background of the players, but the local connection to the club is relevant for him: "Where they actually come from in the sense of migration background, I don't care at all, just to state it clearly, but it would be important that they were trained in the club. Whether they have an Austrian passport or not, is not even second, but last, of interest for me."⁵²

Another fan re-emphasizes this non-tribal regional connection, extending it to the Balkan region:

Sturm is a showpiece that has a very, very long history with players from the Balkans, a very successful history with players from the Balkans, and coaches from the Balkans, so it's certainly not impossible that there are some of us and our fans who care a lot about that. Personally, I always like to see Styrian talents in the squad, of course, but whether or not they are from Austria is not important for me.⁵³

This special connection to the close-by Balkan countries is not limited to football, as another fan extended it to the whole city as she elaborates the specific role of Ivica Osim as trainer for the team.

I find this background very, very exciting [...] to come from a Balkan country, to come from ex-Yugoslavia, to come from Bosnia and then to be a coach of a team like Sturm for so long and so successfully, especially in a city like Graz, where a lot of people live who fled from the Balkan wars, it has a very special touch for me and a very integrative touch actually.⁵⁴

Even though not all fans are so decisively denying the significance of nationality, there were only a few references that addressed the need for Austrian players. These comments highlight a predominantly instrumental motivation for national belonging. As the specific regulations in the Austrian Bundesliga award money to clubs based on the share of Austrian players, this regulation influences what fans consider relevant for the squad. When explicitly asked whether it matters that a player is Austrian or not, a fan emphasized the related financial interests of the club:

51 Interview Sturm Graz fan (2).

52 Interview Sturm Graz fan (3).

53 Interview Sturm Graz fan (5).

54 Interview Sturm Graz fan (6).

No, that doesn't make any difference to me [whether someone is Austrian, R.W.], it's just that because of the legionnaire regulation for TV revenues, the places for non-Austrians are more or less limited for a club like Sturm, that's why there's something like this, that you always have to think about who you can get with a non-Austrian passport.⁵⁵

Another fan argues pragmatically, even beyond financial considerations. For him, it is imperative to employ the best players no matter where they come from, despite financial losses. In his opinion, it is more important to compete successfully both on the national and European level: "So if there are three or four players from abroad in the starting line-up, but they are the best players, I'd like to see them. I wouldn't say no to that, I'd give up a little bit of the money [from the TV revenues for Austrian players, R.W.], with good league positions and European successes we'll get it back."⁵⁶

The communities of belonging of the Sturm Graz fans are thus located between the regional and the cross-national in Europe. They focus on their region, but do not limit their self-understanding to national borders except for practical reasons.

Frames of References: Underdog Football in a Regionalized Europe

Regarding the frames of references, the Austrian Bundesliga is the main reference frame, but coming with a negative attitude about the league not being very valuable. Limited financial and infrastructural opportunities are frequently mentioned, with many references to clubs that are perceived as top clubs with prestigious names, better infrastructure, and more money.⁵⁷ The interviews reiterate such a perspective. Fans argue that this division in football makes European football less relevant for them in terms of a competition worth taking part in:

Champions League, Europa League [...], it's not really interesting for me now. Simply because in the Champions League you can see it now, all the clubs in the round of sixteen come from the top five nations, in the European club rankings. There's no variation anymore, simply because the top clubs are already drifting so far away from the rest. A club from the Ukraine, Turkey or Austria can never keep up with clubs from Germany, England, Italy or something like that, so it's just not attractive for me anymore.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Interview Sturm Graz fan (1).

⁵⁶ Interview Sturm Graz fan (4).

⁵⁷ See various posts in the thread "Sturm in Europa 2018/19."

⁵⁸ Interview Sturm Graz fan (4).

Another fan elaborates why he is not interested in participation in the European competitions, as this would always remain occasional and mean lost matches. This negative attitude towards the top European league comes along with the fear that the club would lose its character when being too successful on the European level: “To go back to the successes we had back then, to win the group or to be promoted, I think that is completely unrealistic and I don’t know if I would want that for my club today, this kind of success, because it always also implies a kind of distance to the values of your own club – and you can see this with all the clubs that play up there a lot.”⁵⁹

As a result, fans see the main potential for success on the national level. They value a national win (league champion or cup win) more than playing on the European level. But not all fans share a negative attitude towards European competitions. While the CL is generally seen as out of reach and a closed doors event for a few clubs, the EL is seen as a potential alternative. This shows that the negative attitude towards the CL and what fans associate with “European football” does not scale their football interest down to the national level. The self-understanding as a European underdog is reflected in positive references towards the minor European leagues, as the same interview partner argues:

From a fan’s point of view, I think the Europa League is the more exciting competition and I’m actually looking forward to this Europa League 2, this third competition, because I believe that this is a great opportunity for many traditional clubs that are no longer at the top of the league for various reasons to present themselves internationally [...] I believe that the potential in these other European Cups is immensely greater than in the Champions League.⁶⁰

Other fans are more positive about the CL. Playing here is seen as an exceptional opportunity for travel. The discussion about a qualification match against Ajax Amsterdam underlines this perspective.⁶¹ In that sense, the match is predominantly seen as an extraordinary event, while some see it also as a chance to represent Austria and increase its five-year UEFA coefficient.⁶²

One fan emphasized such self-understanding of playing in a minor league and refers to the interest in European competitions. Despite being unrealistic, the top of European competitions is still referred to as the preferred occasion for fan travel:

⁵⁹ Interview Sturm Graz fan (5).

⁶⁰ Interview Sturm Graz fan (5).

⁶¹ Thread 2. Qualirunde Champions-League: Ajax Amsterdam – SK Sturm Graz.

⁶² Thread Sturm in Europa 2018/19.

It would be nice if we'd play in a European competition, don't talk about a title anyway, but it would be nice to play in Europe, just because of the travels, so I would like that again, to travel somewhere with Sturm [...] so if I had the choice between titles in Austria or European competitions, I'd prefer European competitions. Of course, if we win a title, we're automatically set in the group stage in Europe, but in principle I'd prefer the second.⁶³

This indicates that football matches are understood as an opportunity to travel around Europe. This is both normalized, as it states that the fan would take up the travel, but also shows how exceptional the European competitions are compared to the average national league matches.

The cross-border regionalisation is visible also within the frames of references and related to travel. Fans describe how their football travel focuses on the neighbouring countries, often as a result of short travel distances and easy access to matches. While several fans express support for clubs in the Italian Serie A, the interest in smaller leagues in neighboring countries is more remarkable. As the following quote shows, this interest is directly motivated by regional connection and short travel distances:

Yes, I already have a good knowledge about the leagues that are located around Austria, I always check whether I could watch a match somewhere. Also, when I make an away trip to Altdorf, I maybe also try to see a game at St. Gallen, its just across the border, and also Slovenia is half an hour south of the border, there you always get to watch games.⁶⁴

The fan connects his travelling across the borders close by to his own team. For him, cross-border rivalries are potentially relevant in the context of European competitions: "So I don't go to clubs that don't interest me sports-wise, but when I go to Maribor, for example, I'm very interested in how they play, because I can compare between Austria and Slovenia, why they get into the group stage of the Champions League and we don't, what they do better and so on."⁶⁵

Other fans emphasize their interest in Eastern European football, too, connecting football and their travel experiences with the area as such:

It was very fascinating for me in the beginning, [...] the big stadiums, the big clubs, the clubs that really attract the large masses, that has shifted very much now also to clubs and stadiums that have special characteristics and for me, especially the East has become very exciting and I find it very exciting again and again, and I always find it very exciting to simply travel to countries where completely different circumstances are a matter of course

⁶³ Interview Sturm Graz fan (8).

⁶⁴ Interview Sturm Graz fan (4).

⁶⁵ Interview Sturm Graz fan (4).

[...] From this point of view it is above all Eastern Europe that I find incredibly exciting and really, all the way from the Baltics to the southeast, and of course the entire Balkans.⁶⁶

The analysis of the frames of references shows that the pattern of a regionalized Europeanization is also reflected in how the fans refer to the different leagues on different levels. While the main frame for potential success is the national level, European football remains a dream. At the same time, current European top football is critically assessed, and more regional and cross-border references are made towards leagues and clubs in neighboring countries.

Conclusion

This chapter started on the assumption that the Europeanization of football structures has left its mark on the identities of its fans. We discussed the main developments of accelerated Europeanization in football and their impact on the experience and attitudes of fans. The case of Austrian Bundesliga club SK Sturm Graz supporters served to illustrate how Europe is mirrored in fans' perceptions and how it might contribute to them "becoming European."

The fans showed a dominant self-understanding that is regional, but European. The results demonstrate a regional perspective of the fans that incorporates a non-national, border-crossing Europeanised view on how they see the game and their own role in it. This is described as "regionalised Europeanization": they are "becoming European," but in a regionalised sense: while they have a strong local and regional focus on the city of Graz and the Styrian area, they cross national borders within the larger region of neighboring countries. Their references to Austria and national belonging remain cursory and are often driven by pragmatism.

At the same time, the fans' view on the Europeanization of the game is ambivalent. While they use football to cross borders and to travel in the region, some express decisively negative attitudes towards the Europeanization of the game as commercialisation. Their self-image as underdog in the European football space is combined with a very critical opinion of European football as a closed circle of rich clubs which can afford the best players on the transfer market. It remains important to note that these negative attitudes are not anti-European or re-emphasising the national as a positive alternative to such commer-

⁶⁶ Interview Sturm Graz fan (5).

cialised football. The fans' critical perspective remains a European one but focuses on European football that is perceived as less commercialised.

The case study focused on fans from a club that plays in a football league which is less Europeanised than the top leagues on the continent. They do not rank among the top10 leagues in the UEFA rankings and the percentage of domestic players is rather high. The club's participation in European competitions has been limited recently to qualification matches. This makes the club a hard case for the Europeanization of fans' self-understanding, as they are less exposed to European football via their club. Despite that, the influence of European football on the self-understanding and perception of fans is evident.

The potential implications of the work are that the role of leisure world experiences is relevant for our understanding of the Europeanization of individual minds. The results indicate that "becoming European" should not only be understood as a generic identification with "Europe," but might take the form of a more complex picture of cross-border and transnational identifications with regions in Europe. Local connections seem to remain important, but this locality is not limited within national borders. The added value of this work is to show that leisure world experiences of Europe provide a good example for such a regionalised Europeanization, as especially in this case uncomplicated travel opportunities make regionalized cross-border activities more likely.

The impact of leisure world related activities on the political sphere remains subliminal in the data. Both online message board discussions and interviews revealed that travelling and easy access to European destinations are key to the cross-national experiences of the fans. Such travelling across the continent and of visiting matches in foreign countries would be more problematic without European Union regulated basic freedoms. The fact that these topics are not relevant for the fans emphasizes that they are taken for granted. This does not assure a general pro-European attitude in a strict political sense, but it shows that the conditions in Europe, especially freedom of movement, became the norm, even though they are predominantly used when borders are nearby.

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Appendix

Table 2: Overview of online message board posts used in the analysis.

Thread name	Posts	Url
Rivalry		
19. Runde Graz vs Red Bull Salzburg, 11.12.16	189	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/109561-19-runde-sturm-graz-vs-red-bull-salzburg/
20. Runde SV Ried – Graz, 17.12.2016	234	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/109623-20-runde-sv-ried-sk-sturm-graz/
Graz – RB Salzburg, 25.02.18	578	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/113141-24-runde-sk-sturm-graz-rb-salzburg/
FK Austria Wien – Graz, 17.12.2017	498	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/112720-20-runde-fk-austria-wien-sk-sturm-graz/
Ajax vs. Graz, CL Quali, 25.07.18	426	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/114667-2-qualirunde-champions-league-sk-sturm-graz-ajax-amsterdam/
Graz – Larnaca, EL Quali, 09.08.18	735	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/114729-3-qualirunde-europa-league-sk-sturm-graz-aek-larnaca/
Sturm in Europa 2018/19	743	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/112738-sturm-in-europa-201819/

Table 2: Overview of online message board posts used in the analysis. *(Continued)*

Thread name	Posts	Url
Transfer		
Sommertransfers 17/18	180	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/109905-sommertransfers-1718/
Wintertransfers 17/18	2,238	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/111822-wintertransfers-1718/
Travel		
Zuschauer/Tickets	947	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/113689-zuschauertickets/
Total	6,768	

Table 3: Overview of interviews used in the analysis.

No.	Gender	Age	Interview length	Fandom intensity	General attitude to player markets and competitions	Education	Current work status
1	male	34	62"	high	cosmo	higher ed.	unemployed
2	male	62	54"	medium	cosmo-commu	basic ed.	pensioner
3	male	28	35"	medium	cosmo	higher ed.	working
4	male	22	54"	high	cosmo	basic ed.	student
5	male	31	68"	high	cosmo	higher ed.	working
6	female	31	61"	medium	cosmo	higher ed.	working
7	male	63	43"	medium	communitarian	basic ed.	pensioner
8	male	45	55"	high	communitarian	basic ed.	working
9	male	49	60"	medium	communitarian	basic ed.	working
10	female	70	46"	high	cosmo	basic ed.	pensioner