

UEFA: Soccer Above and Beyond the Political Divide

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ABSTRACT

The Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) was founded in 1954. Composed of national football (in the international sense, i.e. soccer) federations, the organization's purpose was to galvanize football on a European scale by putting into place competitions, standards, and training programs and, more recently, development programs. During the Cold War, UEFA became a place where football managers, players and fans from East and West could meet. As its activities expanded, a growing distinction has grown up between its members since the Wall came down, due to marketing and business's increased influence on the game.

Before World War II, a first European men's football community sprang up around international matches between clubs or national teams, as well as the annual congress of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the international organization founded in 1904. Although the war did not entirely interrupt their dealings, some European leaders came up with the idea of establishing a regional organization. That project paired well with demands that were also being expressed at the time by soccer associations in South America - a continent where football has been very popular since the early 20th century - for regionalization within FIFA.



Illustration 1: Draw for slots in a European competition, photograph, March 1967 (Vienna). Source: UEFA image archive.



Illustration 2: UEFA's current logo, which highlights the territory where the Union is the governing body of football. Source: UEFA image archive.

Galvanizing European Football Exchanges (1954-1961)

In June 1954, nearly two dozen national associations came together to establish the bases of the Union des Associations Européennes de football (UEFA), which was officially created in October of that year. Its goals were to facilitate cooperative endeavors between its members (one national association per country), to defend European interests within FIFA, and to promote the development of football in Europe.

Unlike other European organizations founded around that time, UEFA stood out for the fact that it included members from both sides of the Iron Curtain. There are several reasons for that singularity: the long-standing tradition of exchanges within European football; UEFA's participation in a broader dynamic of reorganizing FIFA, and football authorities' deliberate strategy since the period between the two world wars, which strove to rein in politicization of the sport and which the concerned nations' diplomatic corps went along with.

Despite its humble beginnings, – the administrative structure was modest and some adjustments between partners were needed – the fledgling organization was still able to pick up and run with the idea of a European competition for over a dozen major European clubs that was presented to them by a group of sports journalists. Indeed, as early as the 1955-1956 season, UEFA launched the European Cup (C1), which was the main European men's football competition for over 30 years (until it became known as the Champions League, in 1992). UEFA then created the European Nations Cup (now called the UEFA European Football Championship) and began to consider taking care of other elements of European football (particularly those concerning refereeing, training trainers and the sport's relationship with the then-nascent media of television). In the early 1960s, the organization stabilized: it acquired permanent headquarters in Bern (Switzerland) and could boast 33 member nations.

The European Football Organization Comes into Its Own (1961-1991)

In addition to managing new continental tournaments – such as the UEFA Cup Winner’s Cup (C2), created in 1961, that would, over the years, subsidize its endeavors – the Union established various activities, including training sessions for both trainers and referees, and symposiums for the general secretaries of member associations.

But the expansion of UEFA’s authority also occurred by handling relations with other European bodies. Negotiating for broadcasting rights (both live and pre-recorded) for European competitions required frequent meetings with the European Broadcasting Union (EBU, for Western Europe) and the International Broadcasting Organization (IBO, for Eastern Europe). In that capacity, UEFA acted as a platform for strengthening ties between the heads of the EBU and the IBO. In addition, unofficial discussions were held with the European Economic Community (EEC) as early as the late 1960s in order to adapt football to the free-movement-of-workers provisions established by the Treaty of Rome (1957).

New prerogatives emerged in the early 1970s, mostly concerning women’s football and the creation of a third European club competition, the UEFA Cup (C3). They also involved the new formula of the European Nations Cup, which became a championship in 1980.

Although with the passing of time UEFA established a monopoly in terms of regulating European football, from the mid-1980s, it also had to face new challenges. After the Heysel Stadium disaster during the C1 final in Brussels (1985) – in which the Union would be found responsible in a Belgian civil court – it had to take measures to increase safety in stadiums. It would then be confronted with Europe’s geopolitical reconfiguration, while being subjected at the same time to pressure from the top European clubs, which wanted to intensify the game’s commercial and marketing aspects.

Reconfiguring Football Governance on the Continent (1992-2022)

In the 1990s, the collapse of the Eastern “bloc” and the breakup of Yugoslavia provided the Union with over a dozen new members. That influx complexified its governance and increased administrative tasks. But the creation of an Eastern European Assistance Bureau, also – and above all – reflected the transition towards the “market economy” of a vast football space, which until then had been ruled by other laws, that the elite leaders and UEFA administration had been striving for. In the meantime, the number of UEFA employees had passed the milestone of one hundred, and many of the Union’s executives benefitted from professional training in management, marketing and law.

Football was in fact entering a new, more commercialized phase that was symbolized by the transformation of the European Champion Clubs’ Cup into the UEFA Champions League (1991-1992 season). An increase in the number of matches and skyrocketing broadcasting rights, which were auctioned off to private television channels that were competing with each other: the new format maximized revenue, providing a solution to the larger clubs’ grievances.

Alongside that, the heads of UEFA and the European Union (EU) found a compromise that enabled the world of European football to gradually come to comply with European Union measures about the free movement of workers. It still took a decision by the Court of Justice of the European Union to bring the agreement into effect (the 1995 “Bosman ruling”). From that point on, bonds between UEFA and the EU were strengthened, and Brussels began to pay more and more attention to the sports sector.

Armed with an administration department of over 300 employees, in the 21st century, UEFA continues to be the defender of football in this part of the world. Nonetheless, over the last two decades, new European football organizations (club associations, leagues) have emerged; pressure from the larger clubs to preserve their dominant position in the European competition system could challenge UEFA’s power in the long term. The idea is all the more relevant in that, unlike their predecessors in the 1950s-1970s, UEFA’s current leaders are no longer focused on European football’s solidarity and unity. Their stance should be seen in terms of the context of international relations and differing sociological profiles, as well, undoubtedly, of the lack of a genuine European policy for this sport.

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