SUPPORTERS’ MOVEMENT “AGAINST MODERN FOOTBALL” AND SPORT MEGA EVENTS: EUROPAN AND POLISH CONTEXTS

Abstract

The paper is an attempt to analyze supporters’ opposition to modern football, which is identified with its progressive commodification in recent decades. It examines the causes and consequences of that discipline’s drift toward the entertainment industry, for both fandom practices and local communities where football teams are rooted, as well as for sport competition in general. The article also investigates organized supporter groups’ postulates and their efforts to “restore football for ordinary people”. It seeks to distinguish the specificities of their actions both in European and Polish stadium stands. These phenomena are discussed in the context of Sport Mega Events, in particular the UEFA Euro 2012 tournament that was hosted by Poland and Ukraine.

Key words: football, fandom, commercialisation, Sport Mega Event, Euro 2012

INTRODUCTION

When Michel Platini, President of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), announced in April 2007 that Poland and Ukraine would jointly host the 2012 UEFA European Football Championship (hereafter: Euro 2012) the majority of Poles was for that idea. According to a poll conducted at that time by the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) about 67% of respondents were satisfied with the UEFA’s decision [2007: 2]. Since an event of this scale
was to be organized for the very first time in the Central and Eastern Europe, Platini’s trust in Poland and Ukraine’s ability to organize the tournament was perceived as an explicit sign of their unification with the Western hemisphere after decades of Soviet dominance. It was presented in Polish public discourse as full of unprecedented opportunities to stimulate further modernization of the country. A series of statements were made both with respect to the immediate benefits of Euro 2012 (infrastructure development, money spent by fans etc.) as well as its long lasting legacy (growing prestige of host cities, urban regeneration, increased tourism, inflow of foreign investments etc.) [Borowski 2010: 24–43; see also: Giulianiotti and Klauser 2011: 3157]. However, at the same time many voices of doubt also appeared in the media, underlining the huge costs that Poland would incur [Kowanda 2008]. They utilized research findings on the economic impact of previous football tournaments which proved that the expected profits from those kinds of events had been nearly always significantly overestimated [Horne and Manzenreiter 2006: 9].

Interestingly, less critical arguments were made regarding the foreseen impact of Euro 2012 on the transformation of Polish football itself. New stadiums and training grounds were supposed to improve players’ performance as well as increase general interest in football in the upcoming years. It was also expected that stadium stands would be modernized. This was supposed to change the negative stereotype of Polish football spectatorship which had dominated the local public discourse in recent years. The term “football fan” carries with it mostly negative connotations. Acts of vandalism, prearranged fights, and other forms of disorder stirred up by fans in and outside stadiums are extensively broadcast in the media. As a consequence, despite significant differences between supporter groups, to external observers people attending football matches are synonymous with barbarians [Sahaj 2007: 81–97]. The public expected then that the Western patterns of fandom would finally root out and eliminate physical violence, symbolic intimidation, and the intolerance demonstrated by notorious fans. However, while pre-tournament investments in security and surveillance infrastructure, together with implementation of stricter regulations concerning mass events, in fact resulted in reducing the number of excesses in stadiums, football-related offences have remained one of main issues of public agenda even after Euro 2012, as Polish hooligans have moved outside football pitches. On the other hand, the institutional changes in Polish football caused by the organization of Euro 2012 have also coincided with a substantial axiological and identity shift within supporter groups. This has led to deep ideological divisions among fan
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...communities, which are reflected in opposite attitudes towards modern football – the new form of highly commercialized and mediati...ed football.

The most spectacular manifestations of the commodification processes that football fans' protest against are Sport Mega Events (hereafter: SME), such as the Olympic Games, the Formula One races or, referring to football, the FIFA World Cup, the UEFA European Football Championship, the UEFA Champions League and, on a more diffused level, games of major European leagues [Giulianotti 2011: 3293]. Their importance is not only based on their high-level sports competition, but also on their organizational and economic magnitude, as well as global media coverage, which are being increasingly influenced by pay-per-view television channels and transnational businesses.

This article investigates, firstly, the process of football commodification and its consequences for both the professional participants of games and, above all, football fandom in both European and Polish stadium stands. It questions the changes caused by global financial imperatives in support practices, as well as the relation between football clubs and the local communities teams are traditionally rooted in. Secondly, it examines the postulates and initiatives of those organized supporter groups that resist the idea of modern football and attempt to “restore football for ordinary people”. The problems outlined are discussed in the context of major European leagues and, in particular, the Euro 2012 tournament.

WINNERS AND LOSERS OF FOOTBALL COMMERCIALIZATION

Football is widely recognized as one of the most popular sports. According to a study commissioned by the International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA), about 270 million people played football in 2006. In Europe alone there were 64 million people playing football at various levels. Ever larger crowds are reached via the media. For instance, the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa gathered half of the world’s population (3.2 billion) in front of TV-sets. Viewership of such events systematically increases every year [2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa 2010: 7].

The growing interest in football cannot be regarded merely in sport or cultural terms but also, and perhaps primarily, as a global economic phenomenon. Since the early 1990s the progressive commercialization of football (and sports in general) can be observed. It is part of a world-wide tendency to monetize all areas of social life since commodification of the aesthetic has become a key feature of the contemporary economy [D. Kennedy 2013: 139]. Similarly to other
cultural phenomena which are subject to these processes, football’s commercial
development is about adjusting sport rivalry, organizational surroundings, and
fans’ collective behaviour to free market mechanisms. It also manifests itself
in supermarketization trends, which result in transferring consumer patterns to
non-commercial areas of social life [Szlendak 2004: 58–100]. Hence, economic
profit rather than sports competition comes to determine the sense of football
teams’ existence.

Football has become, similarly to cinema, television or music, an important
part of the global entertainment industry, with footballers achieving the status
of celebrities. The growing interest of the media, which pays billions of euro to
leagues for the rights to beam their matches, and transnational sponsors, which
pay large sums to expose their brands on players’ jerseys, as well as wealthy
investors willing to take over more and more teams, have together brought
about an unprecedented inflow of money to football [Rowe and Scherer 2013].
Football clubs have been transformed into “brands” and increased their revenues
year by year [Millward 2011: 23–25]. For instance, in 2012 Real Madrid, FC
Barcelona and Manchester United reached revenues of 513, 483 and 395 million
euro, respectively [Jones 2013: 7]. It is not surprising then that players’ transfer
fees amount to tens of millions of euro and top class footballers’ annual salaries
reach up to 20 million euro.

It would seem then all interested parties benefit from big money: national
and international football associations distribute television and advertising
rights for matches; clubs spend that money on players’ infrastructure and
development; players’ wages and popularity in the media is steadily growing
and, finally, fans watch football (either live or in TV) at a higher level than
ever before. Close analysis reveals, however, that not all clubs (leagues) make
equal profit on commercialization. The interest of media and sponsors focuses
mainly on the richest clubs. In 2008 five major European leagues (the English
Premier League, the Spanish Primera División, the German Bundesliga, the
Italian Serie A and the French Ligue 1) received 88% of all revenues from TV
broadcasting and 62% of all revenues from sponsorship and advertising in
Europe [The European Club Footballing Landscape 2010: 42]. The disparity
between rich and poor leagues in this respect is growing year by year. In 2012
the Premier League authorities signed a 3.2 billion euro contract with pay-per-
view televisions to broadcast matches in the UK for three years. The biggest
winners of the campaign to attract TV stations are, however, the two current
richest clubs, Real Madrid and FC Barcelona, which receive over 150 million
euro per season. It is worth noting that the TV rights for all Polish *Ekstraklasa* matches cost 25 million euro a year [Kaliszuk 2012].

This asymmetry in money distribution leads to the preservation of disparities in the world of football between – utilizing Immanuel Wallerstein’s theory of World-System development [2007] – the core (a few major clubs) and peripheries (much larger group of poor clubs) [Kossakowski et al. 2012: 218]. It entails, in turn, the minimization of rivalry and decline of the “spirit of the game” [D. Kennedy and P. Kennedy 2013: 117]. The unrivalled spectacle of top clubs is already offered in Spain where Real Madrid and FC Barcelona have divided 16 out of last 20 championship titles between themselves (1994–2013). A similar dominance is observed in Italy (Juventus Turin, AC Milan and Inter Milan) and England (Manchester United, Chelsea London and Arsenal London).

On the other hand, the growing competitiveness within national leagues and European cups requires investments in new players, higher wages, and better infrastructure. Extensive spending leads more and more clubs to experience financial problems or even bankruptcy. In 2008 top leagues’ clubs reported bank debts and commercial loans of 5.5 billion euro. About one third of the clubs noted negative net equity (debts larger than assets) [The European Football Club Landscape 2010: 14, 70]. Real Madrid and FC Barcelona in 2011 had both the highest revenues and one of highest debts – 490 and 329 million euro, respectively [Jones 2013: 7]. For other, less recognizable, clubs, getting falling into such a financial trap usually ends with relegation to lower divisions or even termination. In recent decades we can observe a number of examples of teams that went bankrupt (Italian AC Fiorentina and SSC Napoli) or went into administration (Spanish Sporting Gijón or English Leeds United) [P. Kennedy and D. Kennedy 2013: 329].

**FROM FOOTBALL FANS TO CONSUMERS OF FOOTBALL SPECTACLES**

Commercialization contributes to the internationalization and dissemination of football. Major clubs and national associations can, similarly to transnational corporations, operate on a global scale. Not only do financial imperatives affect sport competition, but they also supersede the social dimension of sports, which manifests itself in a twofold fashion: changing the forms of participation in football events’, and pulling the clubs out of local surroundings.
Deregulation tendencies are aimed at deconstructing the nature of support practices by shifting it away from traditional modes to the new role of football consumers. The relation between the club and its fans is reduced to a seller-buyer transaction. As truly expressed by one of the directors of Manchester United, the objective is to take a fanbase “and put that into a money-making machine” [D. Kennedy and P. Kennedy 2013: 118]. Fans’ participation in football events is measured by the amount of money spent on services and merchandise rather than fanatic support during matches, which does not increase income and, on the contrary, often causes additional costs. Therefore football authorities eliminate fan initiatives that disturb the spectacle: standing seats, pyrotechnics, or choreographs [Antonowicz et al. 2012: 4–5].

This shift towards market-oriented football also significantly influences the relation between a club and its local milieu. It is worth underlining that football started to gain its mass popularity in the early twentieth century, when the rapid development of industry attracted inhabitents, i.e. crowds, to urban areas. Workers and their families, being uprooted from former habitats, were looking then for new identification. That gap was often filled by local football teams [Connelly and Williams 2000]. Nowadays the dominating financial rules “dismantle” the integration power of football in local communities and create individualistic consumers of sport, who gather once in a while only for the purpose of watching a football spectacle. Typical of the most recent modern times, “inclusive fan communities” are being replaced by “affiliation groups”, which are ruled by principles characteristic of late modernity [Antonowicz et al. 2011: 114].

The growing distance between football clubs and their fans is a core issue in Richard Giulianotti’s [2002: 33–37] typology of contemporary spectators. He differentiates the “traditional” or “hot fans” and the “cool” or “post-fans”. The “traditional spectators” have “a long-term personal emotional investment in the club” which is also strengthened by “a conscious commitment to show thick personal solidarity”. They are culturally “contracted” to the club, which manifests itself as “a live experience, rooted in a grounded identity”. The relationship between these fans and their favourite club is similar then to relationships between a family or friends. The “hot fans” oppose, however, the distant (often in both spatial and emotional terms) postmodern “cool” or “post-fans”. The latter fans’ intimacy with the team is not as deep as that of the “traditional” fans, as they are driven by the “hyper commodified” and mediatized forms of consumption. The reference points of the “cool” fans’ identity are embedded in the symbols of contemporary celebrity culture [Wagg
et al. 2009: 78]. Similarly to “post-tourists” [Urry 1990: 11] they peregrinate across state borders to “collect” new sport-related experiences. These post-fans are consumers of world-recognized football “brands” and follow them around the globe only so long as their team can win. Their interest in a particular club is often shifted to another team as soon as ‘their team’ is out of the running and a new favourite starts to achieve success.

It seems, however, that it is too early to announce the capitulation of the “old” football culture. Football, similar to other social phenomena such as education, cannot be abstracted out of its social context and simply transplanted to the rules of the market without creating problems [D. Kennedy and P. Kennedy 2013: 118–119]. This is mainly due to the ‘traditional’ fans, whose attitudes and values, in fact outdated during the time of postmodernism, inevitably clash with the fandom cosmopolitism of present-day sport consumers. “Traditional” fan culture is rooted in a bygone era, when individual and collective behaviour was much more determined by tribalism, strong social control, and hierarchy than it is today. While “old” fandom participation enforces uniformization and subordination of members rather than individualization and democratic decision making, in return it guarantees equal status and a sense of belonging [Antonowicz et al. 2011: 114–118]. Since the club, with its emblem, colours, and history is an element of sacrum in the “traditional” fan’s life, it gives a sense of being part of a community of followers. Referring to Thomas Luckmann’s concept, these fan groups bring more to mind “communities of the invisible religion” rather than ordinary consumers [Antonowicz and Wrzesiński 2009: 129].

Consequently, it can be stated that stadium stands have become one of global arenas of confrontation between the world of “traditional” values, identified here with the “old-type” football and its spectatorship, and the world of commerce [Antonowicz et al. 2011: 138-139; see also: Giulianotti and Robertson 2004: 546]. One of the first supporter groups that vocalized their discontent with too far-reaching changes in this domain were AS Roma’s ultra fans1. In their manifesto they called on other supporters across Europe to unite against the common enemy: “The future has been decided already: it belongs to the moderate fan. There’s no room for ultras... [UEFA authorities] don’t want any more active supporting, but

1 Unlike other fans, the ultras’ attachment to the team is expressed in extensive stadium activity, focused on vocal support, showing banners, using flares, and delivering elaborated choreographies with the aim of creating a specific atmosphere which helps their own players and intimidates the opposing team and its fans [Sahaj 2012: 39–40]. The ultras identify with a particular style of dress, values and, most importantly, place (stands at the stadium), which is recognized as a place of “no limits” by other fans [D. Kennedy 2013: 132–133].
the kind of participation you can find in a theatre or at the cinema. These men
don’t understand that for us our teams are a faith, that their symbols are tattooed
on our arms and that their shirts represent our cities. All the ‘curva’ of the world
should [act] together against this factory football” [AS Roma Ultras 2006; see
also: D. Kennedy 2013: 144–145].

The fans’ opposition to the unfavourable transformation of contemporary
football manifests itself under the slogan Against Modern Football, one which
popped up in European stadiums for the first time in the mid 2000s. Despite
this recent manifestation of opposition, as early as late 1960s fans in England
expressed their disillusionment with football commercialisation, including the
rising ticket prices, professionalisation of players who had distanced themselves
from their working class background, and the increasing importance of the
“transfer market” in football [Taylor 1971: 363; Millward 2011: 49–51]. Still,
the present fan mobilisations seem to be more intense and diffused. Irrespective
of the political opinions and existing animosities between fan groups, they have
started a Europe-wide campaign to reverse the “degradation” of football which,
they claim, has turned it away from its roots when it was “an egalitarian means
of entertainment” for ordinary people and an important part of the local working
class culture. In particular they oppose, firstly, the macro-scale tendencies
of commodification in European football, including: dictates of sponsors and
pay-per-view broadcasters, unfair distribution of revenues from TV rights,
irrational transfer bids and wage hikes resulting in a lack of players’ attachment to
a team, as well as major shareholders looking to pass debt onto clubs. Secondly,
the “traditional” fans’ anger is pointed towards various regulations that restrict
access to their clubs, for instance: rapid increase in ticket prices, games played
at non-traditional times, limited influence on clubs’ management, or rigorous
security and surveillance measures taken against fans actively supporting their
clubs in stadium stands.

EUROPEAN FANS’ STRUGGLE WITH “MODERN FOOTBALL”

Despite the fact that the struggle between the commercial practices and
policies of modern football and the world of “traditional” fans takes place
throughout the whole of Europe, its intensity and forms significantly differ in
particular countries. Controversies surround, among others, the issues of strict
fan surveillance, expensive tickets, stadium relocations, limited involvement of
fans in clubs’ management, and clubs’ takeovers by foreign owners. Since there is
a large body of research in this domain both in Polish and, particularly, European sociology, only selected conflict areas will be discussed in the following sections of this paper.

English stadiums, for decades famous for their atmosphere and fandom practices (chants, flags, banners and other fans’ attributes), which then diffused all over Europe, have been totally transformed. This process began at the time of Margaret Thatcher’s government in the 1980s, when safety standards for stadiums were significantly tightened. This was a consequence of a series of tragic events involving English hooligans during matches in Bradford (56 deaths), Brussels’ Heysel (39 deaths) and Hillsborough in Sheffield (96 deaths). Although it later turned out that these tragedies were also the result of the police negligence, they legitimized the implementation of legal acts aimed at controlling supporters. As critics have noted, the sinister figure of “hooligan” that dominated the public discourse in the UK at that time became a useful tool for the Iron Lady to restrict civil liberties for all fans. In order to achieve that aim, Thatcher’s efforts were particularly focused on “exchanging” fans’ structure. A number of innovations were implemented on stadiums, including: removing standing-rooms and fences separating the stands from the pitch, introducing CCTV and fan cards with seats assigned to identify the crowd, as well as high fines, bans for match attendance, or imprisonment for unjustified invasion of the pitch [Kosiorek et al. 2011: 390–392].

The new regulations imposed on football fans in England were adopted across Europe in the following decades. Today they are the key issue driving European supporters’ opposition to modern football. This particularly concerns the battle of the ultras to express themselves and exert influence on match day. As noted by David Kennedy [2013: 141]: “It is felt also that under the veil of the battle against hooliganism fans are being denied the public space to air grievances on the direction of the club and, indeed, to voice concerns on wider social matters”. One of the disputes is about the freedom to watch matches in a standing position, which enables spectators to better experience spectacle. This is particularly visible in the English Premier League where, as noted above, all-seat stands have already been built in the 1990s. Local fans even organized countrywide protests but, despite gaining support from the Liberal Party, the existing rules have been maintained. Furthermore, fans across Europe also organized two large “Eurostand” protests, in 1998 and 2008. They were a message to the public to demonstrate the changing nature of football. Nowadays, the only major European league where supporting a team in a standing position is still allowed is the German Bundesliga. They also oppose the rules banning the usage of pyrotechnics and other choreographic features during matches, which were implemented by football authorities under
the veil of protecting fans’ health and providing them comfort. Fans, however, claim that using flares makes the football matches more attractive [Antonowicz et al. 2011: 133–134]. Another meaningful example is the Tessera del Tifoso, the controversial fan identity card for away matches that was to be implemented by the Italian government in order to tackle stadium disorder. The main aim was to monitor and restrict fans with orders banning them for previous stadium-related offences. Interestingly, the Tessera could be also used as a payment card for match tickets and club gadgets. The latter feature was then highly opposed by supporters, who believed the card had been created to make profits for banks and clubs rather than prevent stadium violence. Supporters’ doubts and claims have been advocated by public rights’ defenders, who criticized the ability of commercial groups and the police to access sensitive private information. Therefore, just before the card was to be finally applied in 2010, fans gave up on battles with rival groups to stand against the common enemy: the authorities and their efforts to secure control ultra activities. In November 2009, about 8000 ultras from all over Italy gathered in Rome to oppose the introduction of the Tessera [D. Kennedy 2013: 140–141].

The progressive commercialization of football has further accelerated the “exchange” of audiences, and thus fandom patterns in stadium stands. This has been mainly fostered by the clubs’ pricing policies. Rising ticket prices are not only aimed at bringing in higher revenues, but also at eliminating troublemaking fans and those fans-consumers whose income is too low to attract advertisers. As a result football matches in the late twentieth century began to become available only to the few. One of the most evident examples of opposition to this process has been the establishment of the supporter-owned club AFC Liverpool (AFC stands for “Affordable Football Club”) in 2008, by the fans of Liverpool FC. As emphasized by the co-founder, Alan Perry: “Many people have been priced out at Anfield (stadium of Liverpool FC). I do not blame the club, their prices are low compared to other Premier League clubs. They are just too much for a lot of us” [Conn 2008].

Another issue that raises sharp controvery is the uncontrolled acquisition of clubs by wealthy (and often anonymous) investors. Probably the most spectacular case is Chelsea FC, taken over in 2003 by Russian business tycoon Roman Abramovich. He quickly made that average Premier League club into one of the most successful European teams. On the other hand, recent European football history also provides examples of billionaires (with particular interest from Arab sheiks) that treat “their” club as another expensive toy. Clubs are managed instrumentally, as a mean of obtaining speculative profits by passing down debts onto clubs, rather than making investments to achieve new titles.
Therefore supporters actively resist new shareholders by establishing their own football representations. Another initiative was undertaken in 2002 by the fans of London’s Wimbledon FC. Following the club’s bankruptcy, supporters did not accept the new owners’ decision to move the club out of London and change its name to Milton Keynes Dons FC. They set up their own AFC Wimbledon, which started to play matches in the ninth division. They also forced the owners to pass all Wimbledon’s trophies on to the new fan-owned club. Another, perhaps the most audible set of protests, were raised in 2005 by Manchester United’s fans, who opposed the new owner, American billionaire Malcolm Glazer. Despite winning new titles, the club quickly got into financial difficulties, hence the fans accused the owner of getting it into debt and diverting money from its bank accounts. They also complained about the lack of democratic rules in managing the club, rules which did not take into account fans’ opinions. Therefore, being in fear of losing “the soul and character” of their beloved club, they founded their own team – FC United of Manchester, which began to play in the tenth league. Today the new club’s matches attract several thousand supporters [D. Kennedy 2013: 142]. An even tougher struggle was experienced by the fans of Austria Salzburg. This Austrian football club was taken over in 2005 by the world’s largest producer of energy drinks – Red Bull. The new owner completely broke with the club’s decades-long traditions and announced the establishment of a new entity called “Red Bull Salzburg”, with the drink’s logo and colours in the club’s emblem. Since the company’s marketing strategy is based on promotion through sport, it invests not only in football (it also owns another four “Red Bull” clubs on four continents), but also in the Formula One (two teams) and in a number of extreme sports events (X-Fighters series). Despite the new entity’s successes in the Austrian Bundesliga, the fans did not accept it and reactivated the club under the traditional name “Austria” to play matches in the lowest league. Austria’s matches are now attended by up to two thousand people. The list of clubs secured by fans from bankrupt or unreliable owners is much longer, including Bulgarian Botev Plovdiv, Czech Bohemians Prague, as well as Polish Lechia Gdańsk, Pogoń Szczecin or Hutnik Nowa Huta (Kraków).

Some other “positive” results have occurred in fans’ struggles to influence their club’s governance. This is one of the main issues on organized supporters’ agenda in Germany. Regulations of the DFL, operator of the German Bundesliga, require majority ownership of football clubs by its members (the 50+1 rule) [Merkel 2012: 371]. This rule is aimed at preventing takeovers of clubs by commercial parties or wealthy people. Furthermore, the league authorities also protect clubs’ finances by imposing strict restrictions on their debts and footballers’
wages. As a consequence, *Bundesliga* is currently the most competitive of the top football leagues in Europe (there have been five different title winners since the 2003/2004 season, a result unprecedented in other major leagues) with its clubs in good economic condition. However, in recent years large shareholders and sponsors have been increasing the pressure on league members to abolish the ownership rule and to deregulate the existing financial limitations. They argue that this would enhance larger investments in football and, in turn, enable the *Bundesliga* to compete with English and Spanish leagues on equal terms. They also have been lobbying to increase the prices of match day tickets and the role of pay-per-view television on the local broadcasters’ market. Interestingly, they also claim that the present regulations fall afoul of EU laws on trade and competition. The German supporters’ reaction to the proposed changes was immediate. They started to put pressure on football authorities to preserve the status quo in club governance. A series of stadium protests under the slogan “50+1 Muss Bleiben” (50 + 1 Must Remain) have been organized. As a consequence the planned changes have, for now, been tabled [D. Kennedy 2013: 142-143].

**POLISH FANS’ MOVEMENT AGAINST RESTRICTIONS ON EXPRESSION IN STADIUM STANDS**

In the context of the constant crisis of Polish football, both in sporting and financial terms, the allegations of excessive commercialization would seem, at first glance, completely unjustified. Would not fans in Poland dream of their clubs defeating millionaires such as FC Barcelona, Manchester United or, to be more realistic, Shakhtar Donetsk? However, the *Against Modern Football* movement also has its followers in Poland. For even in the Polish Ekstraklasa, which suffers from underinvestment, a series of attempts to implement the corporate market model in governance of football clubs can be observed. Clubs also follow the Western path and try to transform the structure of their own supporters. And they meet up with resistance.

The most vivid example is the case of Legia Warsaw. After the takeover of the club by the ITI media conglomerate in 2004, the new owners quickly came into long-lasting conflict with supporter groups over, as they announced, ‘notorious offences’ caused by hooligan groups (the so-called pseudofans or kibole) during matches. Indeed, Legia’s supporters are perceived as one of the most violent and troublemaking groups in Europe. The club implemented a series of restrictions on fans, including bans for match attendance for participation in prearranged fights
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(ustawki) with other clubs’ fans, chanting offensive and racist songs or lyrics, and
conducting pyrotechnic displays, ending ultimately in their withdrawal from the
stadium stands in 2012. However, it seems that the efforts of Legia’s authorities
efforts were not only aimed at fighting hooliganism. As Michał Syska [2010]
suggests, the main objective behind them was to fill the new Legia stadium, that
was built at that time by the city council, by replacing troublesome spectators
with middle-class consumers. In order to secure sufficient revenues, the club
significantly increased ticket prices and launched advertising campaigns targeted
at people who were not so much keen on football as potentially interesting for
advertisers. It turned out in the end that Legia’s authorities did not succeed.
The fans’ solidarity in boycotting home matches forced the owners, threatened
with empty seats, to make concessions and re-open the stands in 2012. Today’s
cooperation between the club and supporters, although still very harsh due to
new disorderly conduct on the part of the fans, has helped gather one of the most
numerous crowds of spectators in Polish stadiums.

What makes the Polish supporters’ scene quite specific, however, is the fact
that modern football is identified mostly with strict security regulations on “active”
supporting rather than with commercialization processes as they are perceived
by fans in England or Germany. This does not mean that Polish football fans are
not affected by increasing ticket prices (on the contrary, as proved above) or the
almighty role of owners and sponsors. In fact there are many recent examples of
clubs going bankrupt because of unreliable owners (Pogoń Szczecin, ŁKS Łódź),
or of teams being relocated to other cities (Dyskobolia Grodzisk Wielkopolski).
However, what unifies all organized fan groups in Poland are the existing
limitations on fans’ expression during matches. This manifests itself in home-
spun slogans “Piłka nożna dla kibiców!” (Football for the fans!) and “Stadion
to nie teatr!” (Stadium is not a theater!) being chanted at every level of football
competition. Fans argue that taking into account the poor performance of both
the Polish national team and local clubs, the ultras’ activities on match day
(chanting, banners, flags, flares etc.) remain the biggest attraction of football
events, enhancing new fans to visit stadiums. What’s more, clubs like Lech
Poznań or Legia Warsaw often financially support ultra groups in their activities
aimed at increasing the attractiveness of football spectacles [Sahaj 2012: 46–47].

The main controversies surround the problem of using pyrotechnic displays
during matches. In the beginning of the second millennium the usage of flares was
banned due to, as explained by the football authorities and police, security reasons.
Thus, fans attempted to resist the restrictions and organized the “Ultraprotest”
during one of the league rounds in 2006, when hundreds of flares were used to
interrupt the matches. This was the manifestation of their opposition towards *modern ultras*, identified with stadiums without the active involvement of spectators. In the years following, visitors at Polish stadiums could witness other attempts to use flares. Despite the advocacy of flares by many football-related groups, including players, journalists and even Zbigniew Boniek, the present Chairman of the Polish Football Association (*PZPN*), both the state and football authorities have not decided to legalize their usage. The Act on Mass Events of 2009 defines a wide range of penalties for the use of flares, on both fans (bans for match attendance) and clubs (closure of particular stands or even whole stadiums).

Another manifestation of supporters’ struggle to freely express themselves at stadiums is their opposition to restrictions on presenting “controversial” or “politically incorrect” banner messages. Football authorities, together with the police, attempt to monitor all messages displayed during matches. Their efforts are connected with UEFA’s regulations in their fight against racism and extremism in stadium stands. In fact, on a number of occasions the Polish ultras have presented banners that either directly, or in a hidden manner, referred to Nazi/fascist, anti-Semitic or racist ideologies (e.g. Lechia Gdańsk’s supporters presenting flags with Rudolf Hess and a white person humiliating a black slave, or Resovia Rzeszów’s fans showing a banner with a caricature of a Jew). Interestingly, unlike many *ultra* groups in the West (one may mention just the fans of St. Pauli Hamburg, Livorno or Celtic Glasgow), organized supporter groups in Poland are almost entirely dominated by right or far right-wing ideology. They also display comments on current politics in Poland (mostly against the Polish government) and foreign affairs (banners such as “Kosovo je srbija”), historical events (Legia Warsaw’s fans’ displays concerning the 1944 Warsaw Uprising), or even greetings to their imprisoned colleagues. However, the football authorities’ struggle to combat forbidden symbols and messages often leads to distortions. For instance, in September 2009 Lechia Gdańsk’s supporters presented a black and white banner with the message “17.09.1939. The fourth partition of Poland” (referring to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact). Despite the publicly expressed support from representatives of political parties and associations of WWII veterans, the *Ekstraklasa* operator fined the club [Sahaj 2012: 41–44].

Polish fans’ anger is also targeted at restrictions on their ability to travel to watch away matches. Due to the frequent excesses of football hooligans, either on their way to opponent teams’ stadiums or during the games [Sahaj 2007], the match organizers often decide not to let other teams’ supporters (guest fans) in their stadiums. In this context, the supporters argue that despite the number of new venues built and security measures implemented after Euro 2012, there are only
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a few clubs in Poland that host guest fans. A leading example in this respect is Widzew Łódź which, due to security restrictions imposed by the police, has not opened its stands to guest fans for more than two years. Going to away matches is, however, considered by the ‘genuine supporters’ as the most important proof of their loyalty towards their own team. It is worth mentioning that Polish football fans are perceived across Europe as among those most dedicated to their clubs when it comes to attending away matches. The fan leaders of Lech Poznań, Legia Warsaw, Ruch Chorzów or Widzew Łódź are able to gather up to 2000-3000 supporters to follow their teams’ games in other cities. A spectacular example of supporters’ attachment to their club was the approximately 6000 Wisła Kraków fans who travelled to Rome to see the match with Lazio in the UEFA Cup in 2003.

EURO 2012 AS A CONFRONTATION BETWEEN “REAL” AND “OCCASIONAL” SPECTATORS

The main arena of the latest struggles against modern football in Poland became the UEFA Euro 2012. As part of Poland’s preparations for the tournament, hooligan offences were defined, both in Poland and abroad, as serious threats to the successful accomplishment of that SME. Thus the organizers were focused on diminishing possible unpalatable excesses on the part of those groups by intensifying security measures, introducing changes in the law, and media campaigns against football-related excesses. As it turned out, with the exception of a few hooligan incidents mostly between Polish and Russian fans, the Euro 2012 ended up peacefully. It must be noted, however, that the organization of the European Football Championships in Poland has affected not only the troublemakers, who were forced to move outside stadiums, but also other organized supporter groups. In opposition to the tournament’s organizational and financial imperatives, the “traditional” fans have experienced a significant axiological and identity transformation that finally enabled them to make a clear distinction between themselves and the much more numerous “occasional” fans. In the sections below the “traditional” supporters’ reactions to the Euro 2012 are discussed.

As noted by Piotr Majewski [2012: 8–9], despite initial general enthusiasm caused by the UEFA decision on organization of the Euro 2012 in Poland and Ukraine, not all Poles later perceived it as an event that would positively change the country and its inhabitants. Within the ethnographic research that attempted to track the potential consequences of Euro 2012 for Polish culture, Majewski
distinguished three main attitudes of Poles towards this tournament: (1) fully affirmative attitude, shared by those who perceived Euro 2012 as a grand opportunity for Poland’s civilizational progress and economic and infrastructural modernization, and positive promotion abroad; (2) as a further step towards “normality”, defined as a chance to experience and learn the Western way of life thanks to organization of a globally recognizable event, and thus to diminish the existing civilizational differences between Poland and Western democracies; and (3) negative or very pessimistic attitude.

The “Eurosceptic” attitude applied mostly to the “traditional” fans or the “ethnofans”—who stressed their Polish specificity. As defined by Krzysztof Jaskułowski and Piotr Majewski, the “ethnofans” perceive themselves as genuine football fans and patriots, and the only ones who “seriously” manifest attachment to both football (clubs) and the nation.² Their fanatic practices associated with participation in football *sacrum* are seen as the only appropriate form of supporting favorite teams [Jaskulowski and Majewski 2012: 43–45]. Therefore, they intentionally differentiate or ‘emancipate’ themselves from the masses of ‘occasional fans’ who embrace SMEs such as Euro 2012. In fact, the actual tournament itself enhanced this self-organization process within Polish football spectatorship. The already existing divisions between hooligans and ultras on the one hand and ordinary consumers of football on the other hand have significantly deepened.

“Ethnofans” intentionally differentiate themselves, and thus underline their own subjectivity, from the *pikniki*, who are believed to be the main consumers of commercialized football or, in Giulianotti’s terms, an exemplification of “post-fandom” [2002]. “Real” supporters stereotypically identify them as over-dressed (wearing ridiculously large hats and too many scarves, blowing a plastic trumpet) fans in their 40s-50s who attend football matches, along with others mass sport events depreciated by “traditional” football fans such as volleyball or ski jumping competitions, just for fun (hence the derisive terms *pikniki* or *Janusze*, implying

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² Piotr Majewski and Krzysztof Jaskulowski also defined the second group as “Eurosceptics”, negatively oriented towards Euro 2012. They were the so-called “rebels” (*kontestatorzy*) who protested, under the slogan of “Bread Instead of Games!”, against hosting the event based on unjustified economic reasons and, on the other hand, its potentially high social consequences. The members of this group had in general leftist or anarchist views and included, for instance, feminists who opposed the patriarchal nature of Euro 2012, alterglobalists fighting with multinational corporations, or socialists opposing exclusion of the weak and the poor. This group is not however the subject of this analysis as it did not recruit its members from organized football fan groups (that are being dominated by right or far-right ideologies) [Jaskulowski and Majewski 2012: 43–44, 51].
they attend such events as they would attend a picnic or other leisure event). Since the “authentic” fans control the stadium stands and they are the only authorized representatives of the club’s supporter community to external parties (the club, football authorities etc.), the type of supporting activities preferred by pikniki are totally rejected or even eliminated [Sahaj 2012: 34].

What’s even more important, pikniki are accused of being ‘occasional fans’, fascinated by mass sport events and orientated only towards being entertained during matches, visiting new stadiums and favourable final results of a team, rather than, as the “ethnofans” see themselves, dedicated to the national team/club “for better or worse” and able to sacrifice for it (e.g. to go to an away match in another city or part of Europe). Furthermore, “ethnofans” claim that contemporary national team fandom (either Polish or any other European team) is wholly dominated by the “post-fans”. Therefore, they are afraid that the vision of team support promoted by the football authorities and mainstream media threatens their “traditional” fan practices, as well as attitudes and values that are based on local loyalties. Hence, they conceived Euro 2012 – and other football SMEs dominated by occasional fans - as an attempt to marginalize and push the “real” supporters beyond the pale of public discourse [Jaskulowski and Majewski 2012: 43–46].

What needs to be particularly underlined is the specific collective identity narration presented by the opponents of Euro 2012. They perceive the pikniki’s relation to the Polish nation as ungrounded, or even false, as their Polishness is limited only to “flagging” during the matches. The post-fans’ support for Polish national team is thus understood as another manifestation of, utilizing Michael’s Billig concept, “banal nationalism” [1995: 6–8]. The carnival-like and ludic form of exposing national symbols and gadgets by pikniki is seen as an insult to other members of the nation. Consequently, the “ethnofans” believe that Euro 2012 was in fact an “anti-Polish” tournament, where sacred national symbols and values were profaned by consumerism and pseudo-patriotism. Furthermore, their opposition towards the ‘national team’ matches is also fostered by the multinational character of such teams, which they claim has not much in common with “real” representation of the Polish nation. Since 5 out of the 23 members of the national team on Euro 2012 could barely speak Polish (they were born outside Poland) the “ethnofans” could not identify with them. As a result, they avoid national team’ matches and stick to their local teams, which they perceive as uncontaminated by commerce and Western trends [Jaskulowski and Majewski 2012: 46–47].

The above discursive practices concerning the “better” and “worse” or even “real” and “false” Polishness of footballers and their spectators are determined
by primordialism, one of the arguments in any discussion on nation building. It implies that national identity is a function of initial, inherent and inalienable biological features (such as blood, kinship) and/or socio-cultural features (culture, language, religion, customs etc.) [Szwed 2005: 316]. This approach, however, has been rejected by major theorists of nationalism, who claim it is excessively underpinned on socio-biological assumptions and does not comply with external determinants of identity such as social interactions or institutional context (as in the presently acknowledged concept of the liquid and socially negotiated identity) [Brubacker 1998: 20–21].

Furthermore, it seems that the conservative attitude of “ethnofans” can be interpreted as a specific attack not only on modern football itself, but also on westernization of the Polish culture, which is perceived as a serious threat. They criticize the popcultural and globalizing changes in today’s Poland (and on a global scale as well), which are dominated by business-oriented, ephemeral, and cosmopolitan “anti-values” [Jaskułowski and Majewski 2012: 46–47; Sahaj 2012: 31–32]. In this context the “ethnofans” present themselves as the last defenders of Polishness - the national culture as well as the lofty values that are passing away in, as they claim, today’s depraved world.

**CONCLUSIONS**

During the last three decades European football has faced progressive commercialization, a process which is being propelled by the increasing interest of media, advertisers, and transnational sponsors. The observed changes in football have a multidimensional impact on sporting rivalry, the nature of support practices, as well as the position of clubs in their local surroundings. It appears that despite the enormous inflow of money into football, not all clubs (leagues) benefit from it. The unequal distribution of money from TV rights and advertising leads to the preservation of disparities between the few rich clubs (or leagues) and the much more numerous groups of poorer teams. When it comes to the condition of football spectatorship, the process of deconstructing the “traditional” modes of team support to the new role of consumer-like fans is visible. On the other hand, clubs are growing more distant from their traditional backgrounds. They are not any more purely providers of joy and a source of positive affiliation for the locals, but also profit-oriented brands.

These football-related phenomena are being increasingly opposed by spectators across the whole of Europe. Under the slogan Against Modern Football
they are making an attempt to bring football back to its egalitarian roots. The form and intensity of fans’ engagement in this respect differs in particular countries. The above research findings reveal that the areas of conflict in Western Europe, which was the first to face the consequences of football commodification, are very broad. Organized supporter groups oppose the uncontrolled power of club owners and sponsors, lack of democratic procedures in clubs’ management, increasing ticket prices and rigorous surveillance measures taken against fans attending matches. In general terms their struggle can be interpreted as an example of the global conflict between the two value systems: the “old”, based on local/national loyalties and personal linkages; and the “new” system predominated by cosmopolitanism and market imperatives.

What makes Polish organized fan groups quite specific in this context is the fact that in the beginning they identified modern football mostly with restrictions on their means of expression in stadium stands, restrictions that had been imposed under the veil of preventing disorderly conduct (e.g. the ban on presenting “politically incorrect” banners, using flares, displaying choreographies etc.). However, as a consequence of Poland’s hosting the UEFA Euro 2012 tournament, the security and surveillance measures were significantly tightened to prevent possible excesses by Polish hardcore fans. This was perceived as another attempt to marginalize them and replace their “authentic” fan practices with modern football consumer behaviors. In contrast to these ‘occasional fans’ (pikniki), who despite their “banal nationalism” dominated in the Euro 2012 stadiums, traditional fans “ethnofans” see themselves as genuine patriots, who can express their sense of belonging to the Polish nation in a true manner. Unexpectedly then, the tournament has become a battlefield of the two opposite visions of Polishness – the “real” and “false” (also reflecting the similar ideological division that is a core issue within the Polish political discourse).

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Marcin Gońda

RUCH KIBICOWSKI ‘AGAINST MODERN FOOTBALL’ A WIELKIE IMPREZY SPORTOWE: KONTEKSY EUROPEJSKIE I POLSKIE

Streszczenie

W artykule omawiany jest ruch sprzeciwu kibiców piłki nożnej wobec “nowoczesnego futbolu” (modern football), który utożsamiany jest z postępującą w ostatnich dekadach komercjalizacją tej dyscypliny sportu. W tym celu, po pierwsze, dyskutowane są przyczyny i konsekwencje tego procesu dla praktyk kibicowskich, społeczności lokalnych, z których wywodzą się kluby piłkarskie, oraz samej rywalizacji sportowej. Po drugie zaś, przedstawiane są postulaty zorganizowanych grup kibiców w Europie i Polsce na rzecz “przywrócenia piłki nożnej zwykłym ludziom”. Zjawiska te omawiane są w kontekście turnieju Euro 2012 – pierwszej Wielkiej Imprezy Sportowej organizowanej w Polsce i na Ukrainie.

Słowa kluczowe: piłka nożna, kibicowanie, komercjalizacja, Wielka Impreza Sportowa, Euro 2012