

The UEFA Champions League as Political Myth: Unifying Europe or Alienating the Regular Football Fan?

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The UEFA Champions League as Political Myth: Unifying Europe or Alienating the Regular Football Fan?

Alexander Brand / Arne Niemann

Abstract

The UEFA Champions League (CL) has arguably evoked much attention, fascination as well as criticism over the years. While it quickly developed into a commercial success story and a brand name which seemed to draw financially well-endowed sponsors all too easily, it has also increasingly been criticised for its changes in format, its focus on nurturing elite clubs at the expense of grassroots football as well as already having reached some point of saturation and over-exposition towards likely spectators, fans and consumers.

Beneath this discussion of the likely sporting and commercial dynamics around the UEFA Champions League, there has always been some interest in this continent-wide competition as an engine, which supposedly makes Europe hang together more closely. In this regard, the very idea that millions of Europeans watch games – not only of their beloved clubs, not only of their respective national sides, as research and data suggest – has fascinated and inspired political and scholarly comment. Elaborating on narratives establishing, and counter-narratives undermining such positive perceptions of the CL, we aim at uncovering the potential of top-level club football competition to function as a political myth.

If it is true that Champions League finals are more prominent in the minds of Europeans than constitutional patriotism towards the EU Treaties, such unconscious identity work through lifeworldly activities becomes politically relevant. It may reach the stage of a political myth when actors refer to such presumed CL-effects on Europeanised mind-sets and deliberately enhance their importance. In doing so, they may either seek to push a European agenda or to legitimise commercial interests with reference to “the European idea”. Wittingly or not, however, they contribute to the very narrative of the Champions League as a generator of European(ised) mind sets. Countervailing forces which are to undermine this very political myth of the CL include, e.g., the growing criticism of (over-)commercialised football or the League’s presumed negative effects on the integrity of “true football”.

Against the idea of an ongoing Europeanisation of football, most recent data on football fandom throughout Europe and our own emerging research into identity effects of football fandom, we discuss the role of the UEFA Champions League as a generator of Europeanised experiences, frameworks and communities in this paper. In doing so, we are specifically interested in ascertaining whether there is a politically relevant identity-formation under way due to increased awareness of, exposure to and familiarity with European-level competition of top football clubs.

Keywords: Champions League, commercialisation, Europe, fans, football, integration

There's almost nothing bigger in the life of a football professional than to win the Champions League once. [...] The League has become a myth [...]. Even though there are formidable financial interests of associations and clubs behind this myth – the magic of sports seems to be more important to the fans.
(ZDF 2012; our translation)

We live in times in which the most wonderful pastime has morphed into mere business, into a bloated spectacle [...] without attention to the interests and desires of many fans [...]. Commercialisation cannot be stopped, unfortunately. All the more it is to be hoped that Real isn't going to undermine the myth [through winning the trophy again].
(Koenig 2017)

1. Introduction: Narratives and Political Myths¹

What is a 'political myth'? Starting from the general understanding of a "myth" as a set of ideas and narratives on the meaning of an event, or a series of events, which contain a kernel of truth, but which are, at the same time, enriched by fictional elements, a political myth seems to relate to specifically political implications of such a rendering. Accordingly, Christopher Flood (2002: 42) defines a "political myth" as narratives which establish a certain *ideologically marked* account of a

"sequence of events, involving more or less the same principal actors, subject to more or less the same interpretation and implied meaning, circulat[ing] within a social group".

The hallmark of any such ideologically imprinted account of an event, its *political* quality, if one might emphasise, is both the invitation to assent to such a reading as well as the degree of acceptance (as an essentially valid reading of events) that can be elicited among a given social group (ibid.: 44).

But this is only half of the story. Transcending this rather formalistic notion of the political qualities of such myths, one might feel inclined to ask for the functions of political myths. Assuming that these myths do not simply evolve over time, but are, at least partially, built intentionally and nurtured consciously, one cannot but miss their constitutive nature for a collective formation of meaning. In that sense, myths can be presumed to have integrative functions, whether by design or simply through their impact of connecting peoples' horizons. A more recent strand of debate in History and Cultural Studies has likewise highlighted that "collective myths" present idealised, selective accounts of something which are imagined and communicated precisely in order to, or with the effect of, constituting communities (cf. Becker 2005; Hein-Kircher 2007; Bizeul 2009).

In a similar vein, Jeremy Moulton (2016) has recently argued that the main function of a "political myth" is to shape legitimacy of some action, policy, entity or system of rules, all the while the veracity of the story told is not of central importance. What matters is, hence, to which degree this myth attains the status of dominant belief in a social group; in turn, the very level of acceptance of a myth as "valid" might be conceived of as an engine of community-building. The analytical distinction between myths and narratives, according to Moulton (ibid.), is that a myth can be thought of as a specific "extension of narratives". In what follows, we build on this conceptualisation in two senses. First, we agree with the idea that a myth is formed *after* some narratives have, at

¹ This paper had been prepared for and presented at the 12th Irsee Conference on Sports History "Political Football Myths" (16-17 Feb 2018). We thank all our colleagues in the audience who participated in the ensuing discussion for their helpful comments.

least for the time being, attained the status of well-known and largely unquestioned interpretations; if they are (almost) taken to be a matter of fact, they might, in collusion, serve to establish a myth in the minds of people. Second, we would like to emphasise the plurality of narratives existing alongside one another, also those accounts which carry the capacity to undermine the very myth because they seem to offer alternative interpretations and renderings.

In discussing the UEFA Champions League (CL) – an entity which comes with a certain appearance (image) and represents a recurrent series of events – as a political myth, we want to focus on specific renderings of this continent-wide competition in club football. While the discussion of the likely sporting and commercial dynamics around the CL may have even preceded its inception, there has also been an interesting set of assumptions underneath which seemed to present the very league as an engine that supposedly makes Europe hang together more closely. In this regard, the very idea that millions of Europeans watch games – not only of their beloved clubs, not only of their respective national sides – at the same time across Europe has fascinated and inspired political and scholarly comment. Elaborating on narratives establishing and counter-narratives undermining such politically relevant perceptions of the CL, we aim at uncovering the potential of top-level club football competition to function as a political myth.

If it is true that Champions League finals are more prominent in the minds of Europeans than constitutional patriotism towards the EU Treaties, such unconscious identity work through lifeworldly activities becomes politically relevant. It may reach the stage of a political myth when actors refer to the presumed CL-effects on Europeanised mind sets and deliberately enhance their importance. In doing so, they may either seek to push a European agenda or to legitimise commercial interests with reference to “the European idea”. Wittingly or not, however, they contribute to the very narrative of the Champions League as a generator of European(ised) mind sets.

In contrast, some narrative constructions of the CL might also carry the potential of undermining such a (positive) myth. The starting point here is the observation that the introduction of the CL has arguably revolutionised European club football. This revolution, however, seems to have come with a huge price tag: among the concerns voiced most often are the focus on elite-level clubs at the expense of grassroots football (despite all of UEFA’s solidarity talk), all too expectable outcomes of the competition in the mid to long run and the disturbing effect of financial matters leading to an ever more intense commercialisation, on the one hand, and increasingly frequent threats of insolvency and ruin, on the other hand. Inasmuch as such narratives of disruption and malign degeneration of a once beloved game gain momentum, the political mythology of the same league-engineering integration across societies is most likely to crumble.

In what follows, we briefly try to specify the main recurrent motives and narratives that surround the CL, in the positive as well as the negative sense. Building upon this, we finally aim at looking into the potential of fan research to uncover tangible impacts of CL dynamics on the consciousness and perceptions of football fans, supporters and spectators/bystanders alike.

2. The Champions League as a (Positive) Political Myth

There is certainly no dearth of narratives surrounding the CL which explicitly or implicitly postulate that the top-level club competition is more than mere sports, in fact works as some sort of integrative engine across European societies. Even usually more critical voices have been eager to stress that the CL’s presence seems to have had a formative impact on lifeworlds throughout Europe. It is instructive in this regard to quote at length from Albrecht Sonntag, head of the year-long, continent-wide research project FREE (Football Research in an Enlarged Europe, 2012-15). In one of his FREE blog postings he alluded to the integrative impulse of the CL as follows:

“There is a lot that can be said against the Champions League rationale, its accessibility for clubs and its financial consequences on smaller leagues, but even the most nostalgic of observers will have to admit that from a purely marketing point of view, the Champions League is a formidable product. [...] [I]t was not really a new product, just a kind of extremely carefully packaged crossover of existing



formats, and consumers had not really expressed any urgent desire for replacing the good old European Champion Clubs' Cup.

But it *imposed a new 'premium' product category* with an extraordinary well-defined and well-designed brand identity [...]. Given the huge difference across the continent in time perception, especially when it comes to the definition of 'evening' or 'dinner time', the fact that the Champions League has *defined and imposed* 8.45 pm as the definitive 'prime time' of the Europe of football is a most striking example for the power of markets in setting new standards. Imagine what the reaction would be if an *MEP or European Commissioner* suggested a 'standard' time slot for, say, evening TV news all over Europe... The Champions League has created a *transnational time zone* of its own, and everybody has *accepted* its dictatorship." (Sonntag 2013; our emphases)

Note that, in the clothes of much critical wording, the CL is nevertheless singled out as a standard setter, both in terms of quality of football and as regards homogenising practices and expectations across European societies.² Even more illuminating is the hypothetical comparison to political regulation efforts aiming at some integration: whereas the latter seems bound to fail, the CL is said to have successfully established such a regime.

Even though we largely agree with scholars like Sonntag in assuming that football in general, and the CL in particular, is not merely of epiphenomenal quality for social life, we nevertheless have to be careful here. We think we have to ask ourselves how to best strike a balance between mythological elevation of the sport's and the league's importance (which Sonntag certainly cannot be accused of!) and some unfounded downplaying of football, fandom, spectatorship and league formats as "mere" leisure time, everyday activities, or "only" the regulation matter of sports bodies and agencies, and hence, all in all: rather a-political stuff.

And in this regard, one cannot but note that scholarly depictions and renderings of the CL, our own ones included, have often carried a mythical flavour. Hence, we once pitched the CL, much in line with most scholarship, as a huge commercial success story which had become, only consequentially, a focal point for the more competitive clubs in big European leagues (Brand/Niemann/Spitaler 2013: 100). What we at least implied then was that the CL's success was most probably not merely about turnover or the creation of transnational spaces of action and attention of football clubs. We also hypothesised about the effect on the consciousness of spectators, followers, attentive publics and fans in particular. Much in line with the work of Holt (2007) or King (2004), we speculated on the formative impact of the CL's presence on what is there in the minds of people, in particular of those tied to the competition through following a team or football enthusiasm more generally.

Holt, for instance, observed the branding effects and marketing strategies around the creation of the CL and concludes that it had successfully established an "image of prestige" (Holt 2007: 51) which is widely recognised throughout Europe and serves to "entrench the competition in the consciousness of European soccer fans" (ibid.: 54). King, moving significantly beyond this, asserted the Europeanness behind CL branding; according to his account (2004: 324-5), the CL package (logo, anthem etc.) comes with symbols recognised as "European" in nature – the logo designed with a nod to the EU's flag – an idea which perfectly ties in with assumptions on "emerging pan-European consciousness" or "integration" broadly conceived. The very merger of astute descriptions, fact-based arguments and politically salient implications which are at least implicitly suggested is also evident in Holt et al.:

"The UEFA Champions League is now the world's *most popular* and profitable club competition, and its final match of the 2008-09 season attracted 2009's biggest worldwide television *audience* of 109 million dedicated viewers, with 97 million looking in at the action – more than the Super Bowl. What was once a treat, an occasional mid-week black-and-white broadcast, is now *virtually a weekly fixture* for

² In an ironic twist of events, another change of format from the 2018-19 season onward heralds the end of this (presumably formative) time regime which is going to be abolished in favour of two consecutive kick-off times. It remains to be seen how much of a standardising effect can flow from this dispersion.

much of the year, in brilliant colour and with frequent replays and analysis, followed not just across Europe” (Holt et al. 2011: 6; our emphases).³

The picture that emerges is that of a continent-wide competition, packaged in a much appealing format, which is creating a “pan-European space” through football. In that sense, the metaphor of some integration engine, which seems to make Europeans more closely hang together is not that far away. Where commentators then pick up on this and occasionally imply that the CL might be providing the “emotional glue for the continent” (*emotionaler Kontinentalkitt*) of which politicians at the European-level could only dream (Kopp, 2014), the re-production of narratives fomenting some political myth is already at play. For purposes of analytical clarity, it makes sense to distinguish three recurrent narratives, which in sum establish the idea of the CL as force of (political) integration across Europe. Interestingly enough, all three of them seem to be fed by research, policy-makers as well as media commentary.

First, it is commonly assumed that the regularity of interaction of elite clubs as well as the commercial success and quality of competition has led to a widening of perspectives among fans and spectators alike. Accordingly, the horizons of fans and the attention of CL viewers have shifted towards the European level with interest in European competition, in European-level competitors – as well as foreign fandom across European boundaries has become more normalised over time. Second, some scholars and commentators have mused about the emergence of a pan-European (public) space created through transnational media events and common experiences alike. And third, escalating that very logic, some zoom in on the togetherness emanating from such shared and regularised practices. According to the logic of this narrative, following a European *league* of elite clubs with rather stable participation patterns and watching games *at the same time across* European societies on a regular basis can be conceived of as some form of “lived integration” which is perhaps even more preferable, closer to everyday life and hence more authentic than homogenising regulation flowing from European-level polities.

As regards the broadening of perspectives beyond local and national frames, the pioneering work of Anthony King needs to be mentioned. King (e.g. 2000, 2003, 2004) was perhaps the first to systematically explore ideas of a growing “European consciousness” among football fans while carrying out ethnographic research on a group of locally based Manchester United F.C. (Football Club) (ManU) fans in the late 1990s. In doing so, he argued that these fans were beginning to see themselves as more European and that two main mechanisms were propelling this change. These were, first, the increased opportunity to travel across Europe brought about by the greater number of CL games which made supporters progressively see themselves as “European” in a cultural sense. Beyond that, King (2000, 2003) *suggested* that the increased coverage of all European leagues on British television made supporters more aware of other European national leagues, cities and countries and that this familiarity was also building up a European consciousness. For him, observations like the following proved instructive in this regard:

“[These fans] want Manchester and Manchester United to compete at this *emergent transnational level so that the city and club can be recognized as the equal of the other great clubs and cities in Europe*. For these men, post-national identity does not involve the elevation of their identities and interests to a supranational level but, on the contrary, an increasing devolution of interests and affiliations down to the level of the local and the urban. This local level is then re-connected into a new transnational context” (King 2000: 427; our emphasis).

Following from that, as King states (*ibid.*: 436-7), ManU fans have become more interested in the recent developments at Juve in Italy or Feyenoord in the Netherlands (20 years ago still a competitive side at CL level) instead of watching out for what was happening at Coventry next door. Indeed, much of the literature on the presumed effects of CL competition on the consciousness of fans is littered with similar analogies. Says, for instance, Richard Holt (2009: 29): “Nevertheless, the growth of European competition through the Champions League make the results of Arsenal

³ The point here, again, is not to question the veracity of the underlying facts, but rather to highlight which implications are suggested at least. In terms of veracity, more recent estimates seem to underscore that the CL finals have surpassed the Super Bowl as *the* global sport mega event (at least in the Western world), in terms of audience rates (2014: 380 mio vs. 114 mio for the Super Bowl; 2015: 180 vs. 140 mio; 2016: 350 vs. 112 mio).



relevant to supporters of Valencia, and the result of Barcelona relevant to the supporters of Chelsea". We also have to plead guilty to having contributed to popularising this narrative by quoting a British colleague more than once in working papers with the quip that through the CL, it might have become more relevant for a Liverpool supporter to watch what is going on at Barça instead of being preoccupied with the latest trivia at Stoke (e.g. Brand/Niemann 2013). What we attempted to articulate through this quote was a shared awareness of the fact that "things had changed", also at the level of supporters' perceptions, without naively giving in to any sentiment that sport had turned fans and followers into cosmopolitans all too easily. However, a widening of horizons had taken place as anecdotal evidence suggested in conjunction with other adjacent phenomena such as the increase in "foreign fandom" backed by empirical studies (cf. Millward 2011). Yet, the "Fans without borders" study of 2012, however, did not delve into explaining the drivers of this phenomenon (MasterCard 2012). According to the frames established in football fanzines such as Austria's *ballesterer*, this development/change had to be attributed to the CL, though:

"The Champions League aggrandised the identification with a second team whose jerseys could be bought at home and worn while watching the team play in a pub around the corner, whose fan one could become without ever having been to Bernabeu or Old Trafford" (Federmaier & Selmer 2013).

Critically reflecting on such interpretational work, our own and others', one cannot but miss that this has arguably fed into establishing the CL as a "political myth".

Even more so – in particular regarding the hypothesised effects on political integration – is the narrative of CL competition as a driver of the emergence of a pan-European "public space". Going beyond a broadening of horizons, the second narrative postulates that the CL was successful in creating a cross-border realm of interaction and shared experiences. In this respect, we have looked into CL broadcastings as transnational media events (Brand/Niemann 2013). Our starting point was the observation that the CL constituted a fundamental break from either tournaments of European national teams or the former European Cup-format, in the sense of having brought about a regular, and in terms of participation relatively stable, league-alike competition of *thoroughly internationalised/Europeanised* squads. Seen from this angle, any "Europeanising effect" on supporters' identities could have worked in two dimensions through the CL: as regards nationalities (shifting perception of group boundaries, commonalities; Europeanness as a matter of fact) and changed ideas about peer competition (shifting frames of reference to the European level). In other words, as we assumed, "being top", from the perspective of a fan, might not necessarily imply "for the sake of being the best representative of nation XYZ", but being the best in a *continent-wide competition of top performers*. The shift might also have included that such success is pursued not on the basis of "nationally" defined squads (as proxies for the respective national teams), but with resort to a team composed of the best players a club can sign throughout Europe (and the wider world).

All of this presumed the existence of a transnational media event (or a series of events/broadcastings) with which audiences across Europe had become familiarised. In an attempt to compile evidence from some scattered data⁴, evidence that the CL is indeed able to generate continent wide stable (if not increasing) mass appeal, we suggested that indeed, some mild transnationalising dynamics were discernible. In the German context, for instance, it can be shown that the CL had generated a stable audience for top events with viewership averaging at around 10 mio spectators. Occasionally, there were top audience shares with single CL games where no German team was involved, as in the 2008 final, which was the year's top sport event. A more recent compilation of audience shares of CL matches from 1992 to 2016, however, reveals that all of the top 10 CL games in terms of viewership in Germany saw at least one German side involved (Statista/Meedia 2016). Indeed, the CL audience rates reached their absolute peak in German TV

⁴ A remark on the quality of data is necessary here: UEFA does not publicise the audience rates regularly aside from some sporadic press releases or newsletters where singular numbers are published. According to UEFA, this limitation exists because it is up to national broadcasters/rights holders to make (commercial) use of such figures. Audience measurement in various European contexts is a commercial activity, on the other hand, with considerable prices to be paid for obtaining long-term quality data. Hence, at this point, we have to resort to data from the public domain.

in 2013 with the final between two German teams, Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund, drawing close to 22 mio viewers (broadcasting events in public venues not counted in). Hence, as we argued back in 2013, one has to be careful not to read too much of a “post-national” sentiment into CL viewership data, at least in certain national contexts and depending on the data available.

Nevertheless, occasionally we also came across interesting and somewhat counter-intuitive figures concerning CL audiences. For instance, in the CL quarterfinals between ManU and Real Madrid in 2003, top audience rates were not only reported for Spain (8.1 mio, 54%) or the UK (10.9 mio, 45%), but also for France (6.8 mio viewers, no percentage calculated). Similarly, the Viewer Track Report 2010 presented a statistic on the CL final in 2009 which compared audience shares across national markets, with Spain, Portugal, but also Croatia in the lead. In that sense, the CL final under study generated huge interest and spectatorship in *various* European country contexts despite the fact that the teams involved did not come from the respective domestic leagues. Much the same, and again in a very anecdotal fashion, could be said about the CL group stage match between Barça and Celtic Glasgow in October 2012, which drew 7.1 mio viewers in Spain (37%), but also an impressive 1.5 mio in the Dutch market (23%, compared to a “mere” 10% increase to a 33% audience share on the next evening for Ajax Amsterdam). Hence, it did not seem too far-fetched to us that, slowly and incrementally, some pan-European patterns of CL viewership had emerged, creating a pre-stage for a European “public football sphere”.

Such talk about likely (or possibly) emerging public spaces across national borders seems to tie in perfectly with ideas on political integration. The rather surprising aspect in the cases under discussion was that it was all about football, the CL, leisure time activities such as watching sport on TV or going to a match, rather than matters of high politics, TV news or public diplomacy efforts. Certainly, there was also a fascination with the idea of these unconventional “politics” to unfold rather unconsciously and alongside the elite debates and discourses in Brussels. This fascination might explain why quite a few scholars and commentators seemed to escalate the logic of integration through the CL early on – and quite dramatically so.

Consider the following, from nowadays perspective – Brexit, Eurocrisis etc.! – markedly optimistic statement on European societies merging into one communicative space *through the CL*, of all matters! (Full disclosure: The remark is to be credited to the former Head of the EU office at UEFA, Jonathan Hill, certainly not a disinterested, neutral observer of things.) As Hill stated in 2008:

“[Through the Champions League,] we might be witnessing the gradual emergence of a European ‘public space.’ An elusive holy grail for believers in a post-national, political identity for our continent, a *European public space* involves the idea that citizens *who share concerns can communicate directly* across national boundaries. It would be absurd to suggest that the Champions League is succeeding where the European parliament has often failed, but the fact that millions of Europeans now *watch the same games at the same time must surely count for something.*” (Hill 2008, emphasis added)

And, as needs to be mentioned, Hill was not alone with such a sentiment. Already in 2003, the British *Economist* (29 May 2003) euphorically claimed to have discovered “[h]ow football unites Europe”. In this short commentary, all ingredients of the narrative depicting an emergent transnational space of interaction through football (whereas politics had failed to spur such a development) are present:

“[Europeans] still insist on speaking different languages, they read different papers, worship at the shrines of different celebrities, chortle at different television programmes. But there is one big exception. Every Tuesday and Wednesday, much of Europe's male population tunes in to watch the Champions League [...]. Over the past decade European football teams have turned into a living, *breathing embodiment of European integration*. Clubs that once recruited fans and players from their immediate neighbourhoods now scour the continent for talent and are



watched in every country. [...] Football has probably made Britons think more amicably about their fellow Europeans than anything else in Britain.” (ibid.)⁵

Even though, in the same commentary, the idea of football helping Europeans to overcome clichéd assumptions about one another is ridiculed as “romanticism”, there is a strong emphasis on the CL – and the CL in particular – as having produced the integrative glue through common practices and shared experiences. What is more, this narrative is linked to the aforementioned one on the shift in orientations and interest towards transnational (football) concerns. In some sense, the commentary in the *Economist* might only have echoed, again, King’s ideas on the growing Europeanised consciousness among those watching the CL as a regularised, normalised competition rather than a series of exotic, extraordinary event on top of the “normal national-level” competition. This hypothesised relationship had surfaced early on through statements like the one from 2000 in which King asserted that

“[t]he growing connections between the big city clubs of Europe and the increasing frequency of their encounters on the pitch, which are watched on television by millions across Europe *is an important factor* in European integration” (King 2000: 423; emphasis in the original?).

We also took some inspiration from these and similar ideas based on observations, field research and investigation; and it cannot be denied that there is a certain plausibility to them. On the other hand, in a more critical vein, the apodictic quality of some of the conclusions presented here is striking. Be it journalists (usually critical observers of the commercialisation of sports), policy officers (which can be assumed to have a stake in myth-building, if only for purposes of legacy) or scholars (partly fascinated, partly defending their object of study as non-marginal in impact): quite a few of them have, wittingly or not, contributed to the emergence of a political mythology around the CL. Admittedly, not all of them have resorted to aggrandising language such as that of the CL producing “emotional glue” for Europe or that of the league as one of the few sources of genuine “*European* enthusiasm” in the words of late Ulrich Beck (FAZ 2013). Still, a stunning observation remains: in quite a few instances, the effects postulated were mostly assumed and inferred; they turned out to be very productive as regards the said political myth, but have only tentatively been tested or proven, if at all.

3. Narratives on Champions League Realities Undermining the Political Myth

Almost from its inception onwards, the CL has also drawn a lot of criticism and negative sentiments as well. Again, it is instructive to start with scientific analysis and scholarly interpretation here to make clear that many criticisms of the CL are anchored, or could be anchored, in research.

One of the main aspects here is discussed under the headline of “competitive balance”, both within the CL as well as concerning the League’s presumed effects on national football. As Peeters (2009) has aptly demonstrated, the CL can be said to have a detrimental effect on the competitive balance⁶ at the national level (seasonal: distance between higher ranked teams and lower ranked ones; championship: degree of dominance over multiple seasons). In his study covering thirty-four national leagues over an eight-year period, he was not only hinting at sports-related aspects of multilevel competition. If national level football is assumed to have become less surprising, less exciting and nowadays leaves less room for miracle performances, it can have an ambivalent effect on the perception of the CL. On the one hand, the CL could crowd out national leagues, in terms of ascribed attractiveness and viewership; if, however, the CL is singled out as the main culprit for the

⁵ Yet, again, some studies have shown the need to qualify such assumptions, e.g. Cox et al. 2015 who conclude that CL competition has actually *sustained pervasive nationalistic discourse* in English media at least, not necessarily in fan discourse, which, however, might be shaped in turn through nationalist sentiments in media coverage.

⁶ This finding is corroborated by the study of Pawlowski et al. (2010) on the effects of the 1999-2000 reforms of the payoff structure of the CL on the big five European leagues.

slow decay of once beloved national-level competition, a decidedly negative narrative might emerge as well.

In a similar vein, Haugen and Solberg (2010: 533) have focused on the CL as the main driving factor behind the rampant “financial crisis in European football”. Using statistics and a game theoretic approach, they highlighted that the growing levels of indebtedness (and dependence on volatile external investment) as well as the rising numbers of insolvencies can be attached to what they term the “cost push effect” behind the drive to qualify for the CL as the means to finance a club’s budget or to become/remain competitive.

Real-life stories of “financially asphyxiated” clubs abound and illustrate this relationship aptly: Malaga CF, for instance, was reported to be in dire need to reach the CL group stage in 2012 merely to avoid bankruptcy and to survive financially (SBD 2012a), with Lille desperately hoping to “win the Euromillions” only a few days later since the paycheck for reaching the group stage had already been integrated in the running budget (SBD, 2012b). Such matter-of-life-and-death stories might also have a thrilling effect on the audience and could increase the attractiveness of CL competition in the eyes of those who follow in the short run, without doubt. The more this kind of stories pile up, though, and the more clubs encounter severe financial troubles, fall behind their once national competitors, the more business narratives dominate the sports coverage, the more this might also nurture the resentment of people primarily interested in football, their club or some sort of diversified competition. Again, inasmuch as notions of degeneration and allusions to disruptive qualities of CL-level competition gain the upper hand, the myth of the league as an integration engine is dismantling.

Our research so far suggests that there are largely two (clusters of) narratives which have emerged and solidified over the years and which do *not* present the CL as a “positively integrating force”. On the contrary, according to those two strands of interpretation, the CL is but the harbinger of unwanted change that effectively undermines the integrity of much esteemed values and sport systems. There is, first, a strand in the mounting debate on the commercialisation of sports in general, and football in particular, which zooms in on the CL as either the root or at least the embodiment of all evil undermining the appeal of sports. This is particular the case concerning a perceived growing disconnection between elite clubs in the CL and the rest. Related to this is, second, the narrative on the CL as the grave digger of “traditional football” in the sense of undermining still valued aspects of the game such as surprise (outcome), authenticity (not only show) and accessibility (affordability).

There is no denying that the CL itself is a competition in which commercial interests and motivations (clubs, players, agents, UEFA, TV broadcasters, sponsors etc.) played a huge role from the very beginning; in fact, key drivers were pushing for the overhaul of the traditional European Champions’ Cup (cf. García 2011: 37-8). Only consequently, narratives which seek to single out the CL as the main culprit for all sorts of problems and perceived deformations of modern football, pick up ideas of (hyper-)commercialisation and the resulting disconnect between regular CL participants (teams and their followers), the leftover national competitors, and “smaller European football systems”⁷ (cf. Giulianotti & Robertson 2009: 68). Clothed in an analytic argument, Giulianotti and Robertson have offered what amounts to one of the most full-blown criticisms of the CL as epitome of a “diffusion of American sporting culture” to Europe which is to remake the latter according to an “Americanised model of profit maximization” (ibid.: 53).

The resulting mechanism of dividing European football clubs in a top-level, first-class, elite group of ever interacting and competing clubs, on the one hand, and many peripheral regions, leagues and clubs feeding this elite competition, if connected to the CL at all, on the other, has been aptly explained only recently in a long piece in the *New York Times* titled “When champions league cash tilts the playing field” (Smith 2018). Looking at “lower” leagues such as the ones in Greece, Belarus, Switzerland and Croatia, the article purports the view that the CL in fact destroys healthy and often much esteemed national-level competition across Europe. What is left is, first, third-class rivals of some disconnected national powerhouse eventually making it to the CL ranks and, second,

⁷ The interesting counter-argument that in particular the smallest leagues across Europe, the ones in Andorra, San Marino, Luxemburg and the like, might disproportionately benefit from their inclusion in the CL qualifying rounds is rather buried in scholarly journals and only rarely discussed (cf. Menary 2016).



quite a few semi-peripheral clubs which never aspire to compete in the CL, but merely to get the most exposure in some CL matches for marketing their talented young players to elite clubs. According to this narrative then sport under the conditions of CL competition has become a mere business window for many clubs in Europe, if they are still connected to the elite system at all.

The idea of the CL as a positively integrating force, gluing spectators and supporters to the cause of European-level competition, seems absurd from this angle, since it is precisely the CL which is regarded as the main culprit for the denigration of conditions in domestic leagues and as regards one's own beloved side (if it does not rank among the elite clubs). This self-selecting mechanism is, as everyone would agree, a result of a specific payoff structure of CL monies; how much leeway the UEFA would have to reform this structure without risking yet another breakaway league is contested, though. And so clubs, leagues and the organising association seem to be locked in a situation which is set to produce much hardship, bring frustration and eventually turn enthusiasm into disinterest, according to this narrative. The main mechanism undergirding this malaise is aptly described by Smith while looking at the situation in Greek football:

“Every year — until this year — Olympia[k]os has seemed to pull a little farther ahead. Every championship means another year in the Champions League, another multimillion-dollar payday from UEFA, another set of signings its supposed rivals cannot hope to match. It is *locked into a cycle that almost guarantees* success [...]. The problem is not that a team is rewarded for its success — that is only natural — but in the aggregate effect. The prize money for making the Champions League group stage makes success the following year more likely. Over several seasons, it makes it all but certain. The money serves to *establish, and then entrench, a dynasty*” (ibid.; emphases added).

Interestingly enough, it seems to be the case that such notions of a broken system with the CL supposedly “killing football” (Campbell 2004), the “greed of the rich” seemingly having spoilt the competition forever (Scherer 2016) and commercialisation-cum-Americanisation (Wilson 2007) are rather staples in academic literature and media commentary. Fanzines only occasionally seem to join the chorus asserting that the CL “will continue to be a force of destruction at an ever faster pace”, having already contributed heavily to a “completely dysfunctional system which has effectively destroyed competition” (Biermann 2016). Frequently, fanzines and fans/spectators as well as sportspeople and fan networkers seem to offer a slightly less doomsday and more ambiguous narrative when criticising the CL. According to their narrative, the CL might still be depicted as effectively undermining many valued aspects of the game such as surprise (outcome), authenticity (not only show), and accessibility (affordability). However, most criticisms are rather directed at how the CL is structured and organised at the moment, not the League as a fact nor the events produced through it (nor necessarily its more commercialised aspects in principle)⁸. To give an example, the often-narrated threat of an ever more insurmountable core-periphery structure due to the CL⁹ is certainly also informing much of the debate in organised fan networks and even players' lobby groups. Hence, when the FifPro (International Federation of Professional Footballers) stated publicly in 2016 that they “want as many players and fans as possible to enjoy competitions such as the UEFA Champions League” and that hence “access must not to be restricted to the fans of a small oligarchy of clubs” (SBS News 2016), they rather articulated a growing unease

⁸ In a telling paragraph of its retrospective on “20 years of modern football”, the German fanzine *11 Freunde* argued back in 2012 that football had transformed from being run-down, disrupted by violence, lame as a game and often lackadaisically broadcasted on TV to being “hip” and more appealing in many ways, with the CL having played an important role in this conversion (Biermann 2012).

⁹ A similar sentiment was echoed by the British fanzine “When Saturday Comes” in a polemic in October 2014 related to core-periphery structures within the CL or European club competition more broadly conceived: “In reality, there are still three European tournaments. The unnamed one involves less-heralded clubs targeting the Champions League group stage as an end in itself and famous clubs far enough outside the monopoly to know the semis are their limit. The likes of Arsenal and Schalke are in the latter category; Maribor, BATE Borisov, Ludogorets Razgrad and Apoel Nicosia are this season's filler. [...] The Europa League's reduced status is sad but the clubs you've never heard of, locally sourced advertising and half-empty stadiums viscerally echo the mystery European club football has lost. It eases the drudgery of the weekly routine.” (Anderson 2014)

about the disconnection between the haves and the have-nots instead of assuming that the bonds between elite and non-elite clubs and their respective followers had been broken already.

Prominent in this kind of statements is the metaphor of a “*healthy* competition” and, following from that, criticism of “*unhealthy* developments” in recent European top-level football (which could in principle be corrected, nevertheless). Hence the words of the spokeswoman for Football Supporters Europe (FSE) at the occasion of some elite clubs toying again with the idea of a European Super League in 2016: “From the perspective of many football fans ... there is nothing healthy in a one-sided development leading to big clubs getting more and more money whilst the smaller clubs lose out” (quoted *ibid.*). It is not by chance, then, that FSE’s criticism of the CL and UEFA in particular is more subdued than the critique of some *Ultràs* staging a protest “against modern football”. Tellingly enough, FSE, while being a critical observer, also acts as an advocate on behalf of fans travelling to away games throughout Europe at the same time and is actively attempting to lobby UEFA on ticketing prices (cf. the “*Away Fan at European Competitions*” survey launched in 2017).

Similarly and in an interesting twist, one of the most widely publicised campaigns of supporters “against modern football” used a *CL match*, and by proxy European-wide broadcasting, as its stage. In 2013, Ajax fans protested at the occasion of playing against Manchester City at home with clearly visible banners and signs criticising foreign investors and lavish money as well as exorbitant ticket prices which are hardly affordable to the average supporter; yet, these spectators were only fined by UEFA “for provocative and inappropriate” messages afterwards. The ambivalence here consists in the fact that the fans did attend a CL match, in fact did not protest the CL as such, but rather publicly stated their resentment towards some aspects of (over-)commercialisation to which the CL has evidently contributed.

As a matter of fact, such an ambivalent, almost “schizophrenic” posture does not seem to be uncommon among football fans across Europe and within debating circles of supporters and fanzines. Emblematic is the following commentary titled “*Schizo*” from the German monthly *11 Freunde*, perhaps the most widely read football fanzine in Germany. The author argues that

“[o]n the one hand, there is the sad fact that fantasy clubs fed by fantasy billions distort any fair competition. The sad fact that the Champions League has not only widened the gap between the bigger and smaller, richer and poorer clubs but essentially cut them off from one another. The sad fact that the Champions League has become the most boring competition of all. Because it is the ever-same rooster of teams which compete. In the semi-final stage, at the latest, surprises are denied access,”

only to then take a sharp U-turn arguing that, on the other hand, one has to be honest that quite often watching CL games “... is a lot of fun” (Behnisch 2017; our translation). The fun-component, or rather the appeal of the CL, is then described in terms of the competition’s inner dynamic to push teams to perform, to see players pushing the limits, to watch in real time how miraculous goals are scored and eventually some surprise outcome might happen despite all structural constraints.

Such ambiguous accounts, as well as the campaign of the Ajax supporters sketched above, are illuminating because both renderings foreground some of the negative aspects which characterise the second critical narrative: lack of championship competition and resulting boredom as well as lack of affordability/access for the regular fan in particular. Observed from a distance, both criticisms also seem to formulate specific expectations which the CL as such *could* (and sometimes even does!) match. Hence, what we can see at play is some oscillation between resentment and fascination fed by undeniable appeal of the competition. It is in this sense that the second counter-narrative is less fundamentalist than the first one on commercialisation in general. Moreover, it contains a kernel of appreciation which ties in perfectly with many supporters’ and football fans’ practices who seem to take issues with the over-emphasis on the business side of things, the money-making surrounding of the CL, all the while tuning in the broadcasted games and flocking



to the stadium (if possible, when affordable) because of the attractiveness and high quality of the supposedly “rotten” competition.¹⁰

4. Fans and Spectators as Judges: Unifying or Alienating?

One of the most exciting and pressing questions, still largely unanswered, is to what degree such narratives – reconstructed here from a dozen speech acts, linked to scholarly research and opinionated commentary – really resonate with the lifeworlds of the core target audience of the CL mythology (in case it actually exists). Aside from some ethnographic research, mostly in the British and Scottish contexts, snippets from interviews, observations and occasional articulations in magazines and media, not much evidence has been collected so far on the much hypothesised effect of the CL on fans’, supporters’ and consumers’ perceptions, understandings and eventually emerging Europeanised horizons, pan-European spaces and spheres and finally: European integration through football at the Champions League.

One early exception to this is the study by Koenigstorfer et al. (2010) who investigated the *perceived* competitive balance, i.e. how much the perception of such a healthy competition impacted on the ascribed attractiveness of several league formats, among them the CL. According to this study, perceptions of competitive balance matter a lot, in particular for fans of star clubs, in terms of assigned appeal. Any trends regarding such perceptions among fan audiences, however, were not reported (nor investigated) in that study. The recently published German survey “Situational Analysis Professional Football 2017” (Situationsanalyse Profifußball 2017, see FC PlayFair 2017), conducted by FC FairPlay e.V. (Association for Integrity in Professional Football) in conjunction with the leading German sports journal “Kicker”, contained a small section on the CL, but with arguably limited reach (German football fans) and at least partially non-representative character.¹¹ Interestingly, some of the results seem to match the aforementioned mixed-motive structure of fan perceptions quite nicely. For instance, despite all criticism and a largely absent perception of the CL as an “integration engine”, fans noted the CL’s appeal due to “cool matches” and the “best players performing” at this competition (ibid.: 10). Such praise is, though, overshadowed by strong sentiments about the lack of competitive balance, rising inequalities and the resulting two- or three-tier structures in football (ibid.); only consistently, the CL is later on included (rank no. 7) in the list of top 10 factors undermining the integrity of (German) football, and mostly so for the effects of its payoff structure, with a notable variation of perceptions between supporters of elite/star clubs and other fans (the latter ones object more intensely) (ibid.: 40).

Across Europe, however, there is only one survey to our knowledge so far which has undertaken to elucidate the perceptions of Europeans, and of football fans throughout Europe, on football-related matters respectively: the FREE Survey “Football in European Public Opinion” (FREE 2014a, b). Much has been said on the excellent pioneering work of FREE – Football Research in an Enlarged Europe, sponsored under the 7th Framework Programme of the European Commission from 2012 to 2015. Among the main ground-breaking results of this collaborative project is also some interesting data on perceptions of the CL, even though this aspect was admittedly not the focus area of inquiry of both large-scale surveys¹² conducted (private communication with FREE Head Coordinator Albrecht Sonntag).

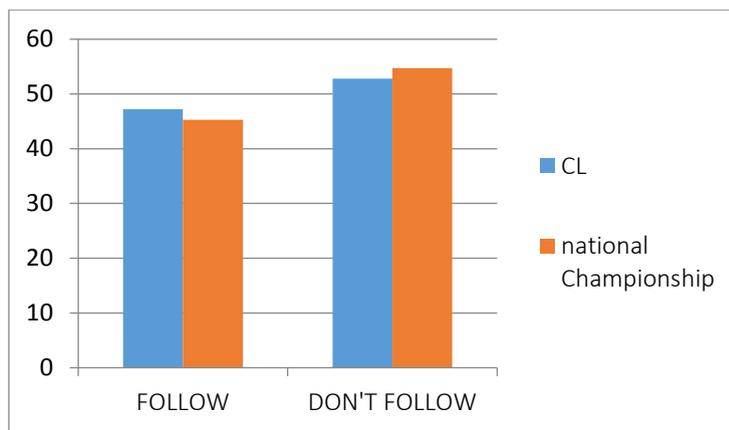
¹⁰ See also the discussion and the fans’ voices reported in Giulianotti (2005). Several of the surveyed Scottish football fans at least implicitly, assigning CL matches a high appeal (even though the CL might be crowding out local football). Exemplary is the following quote: “A lot of folk are fed televised football. They have Sky television, so they get Spanish games, Italian games, the English games are usually of a pretty good standard. Then there’s European Champions League games that are on live with high quality players all the time. And then they look at what’s on offer at Pittodrie [Aberdeen’s home stadium], and they say, ‘No.’” (ibid.: 392).

¹¹ While the survey was answered by more than 17.000 participants, the focus groups were based on work with only 25 subjects.

¹² The representative, European-wide (across nine European country contexts spanning the whole of Europe), the CATI survey was answered by more than 7.000 respondents, football fans and non-football fans alike; results were then weighed to assure unbiased results (FREE 2014a). The non-representative

Among the most interesting results in general, even though no separate CL effect has been controlled for, was that in the survey of Europeans (fans and non-fans), a total of 61,2% of all surveyed stated that “football – to some degree or strongly – unites Europe” (ibid.: 52), which brought football in close range to arts and culture, the most unifying bond in the perceptions of people, and way ahead of democracy or EU institutions! In that sense, there is by now evidence for some “integrative” and “unifying potential” of football, at least if one is to argue that in order to work, the idea must resonate with people. Interestingly as well, this position – football as a unifier – reached majorities in eight out of nine country contexts surveyed (Poland being the exception, and Denmark ranking no. 1 with close to 75% agreement – interesting again, since Danish clubs do not compete that often in the CL-arena). This high level of appreciation is all the more stunning since only 51,5% of respondents identified themselves as interested in football or being fans (ibid.: 56).

Also impressive is the number of people following football at the CL-level, even more so when compared to the number of people following football in the national context throughout Europe (ibid.: 58).

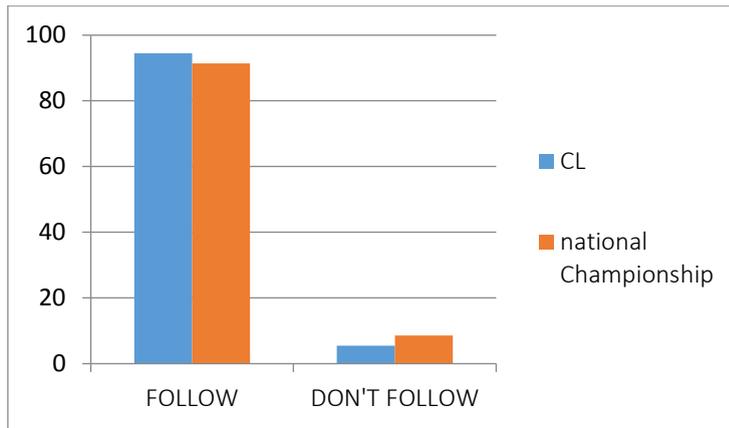


What the data seems to suggest is that, across European societies, the CL is even followed by slightly more people than national tournaments are; this is a result which runs counter to many intuitive assessments and all the more so if one takes into account that these are representative samples of whole societies, not only football-affine audiences. In any case, the CL – despite all criticisms and the negative narratives notwithstanding – seems to have true potential to draw mass attention across the continent. In this regard, the high levels of interest in the CL in Germany, Spain and the UK (but not in Italy and France!) are rather commonsensical, whereas fairly high levels of interest in Austria, Denmark and Turkey (ibid.) invite more hypothesising, aside from proxy effects, e.g. the Danes having a penchant for British football. Finally, FREE asked about the degree of interest and involvement with the CL, producing some solid evidence of a general familiarity, here measured in the number of 70,5% of all Europeans who have ever watched a Champions League match (ibid.: 46) paired with a comparatively low level of more detailed knowledge: only 38% of respondents thought they knew the winner of the CL trophy last year with the number surprisingly dropping to 7,4% when being asked which country that club was coming from (ibid.). But certainly, this is rather an indicator of ignorance than of post-national sentiment.

The fan survey conducted alongside, much to our surprise, confirmed the slight preference for following the CL over following the national championship (FREE 2014b: 24-5):

online survey targeted football fans in particular and recruited 17.500 respondents of whom more than 8.000 completed the full survey. Data cleaning resulted in a focus on six country contexts (FREE 2014b).





Feeding into the narrative of the CL as an appealing competition, majorities of football fans also rate the quality of football shown in the CL higher than that played by national teams (which still very often draws larger audiences, on the other hand): a total of 56,7% of all respondents of the online survey find CL-football more attractive (in terms of quality) than the one played by national teams, with some considerable variation between countries/respective national teams presumably (among German fans, only 43% shared that opinion, whereas 63,8% of the UK respondents agreed, after all; *ibid.*: 60, 143).

Where is this leading us? The formidable FREE-project has opened a window into fan research, the role of football in European integration broadly conceived, and hinted at CL-related dynamics. Still, if one is to come back to the narratives surrounding the CL – positive ones aiming at, or contributing to, the emergence of the CL as a political myth (the integration engine); negative ones carrying the potential to undermine that very myth (commercialisation killing the game, undermining the integrity) – much more work needs to be done in order to illuminate how much such narratives resonate in wider fan audiences, how they link to their experiences, how fandom and interest in watching European-level top competition is feeding back into cross-boundary sentiment and structures.

Our own research project – *The Identity Effect of Europeanised Lifeworlds: Becoming European through Football?* (Niemann/Brand 2016; to be started in early 2018; financed by the German Research Foundation) is expected to make a contribution here. While we have worked on the Europeanisation of football for more than a decade now, so far we mostly aimed at describing the impact of the CL and concurring dynamics (organised interests at EU-level, lobbying, networking, dense interaction among club officials of elite European clubs etc.) as some form of Europeanisation cross-loading (cf. Brand/Niemann/Spitaler 2013; for a brief overview: Brand/Niemann 2013: 3). This could also be labelled a form of “elite Europeanisation” precisely because we focused our efforts much on club and association officials and their interactions with EU-level political institutions. Much in that vein, we so far only hypothesised on the plausible expectation that Europeanising mechanisms through the CL could also have left their mark on fans. As we stated in 2014,

“increasingly Europeanised players’ markets, frequent club competition at the European level and its continent-wide broadcasting could have already had some effect on perceptions of fans and spectators. In that sense, it might not be trivial when German fans cheer Dutch players and accept them as ‘theirs’” (Brand/Niemann 2014: 3-4).

Our interest is hence in making transparent whether there are indeed gradually changing perception patterns among fans, spurred not least by the CL and its corollary of dynamics, also the very narratives sketched above which seek to present the CL in a specific light. Such changing perception patterns, as we argue, might also be indicative of an ongoing Europeanisation of people’s identities, due to their capacity as fans and followers, and, hence, of a politically relevant identity change anchored in cultural and lifeworldly practices.

What seems pretty evident from our perspective is that the CL mythology (the idea of an integration engine) as such is not brainwashing fans and supporters – if at all, it might stabilise and channel experiences. Thus, from our perspective, what needs to be investigated is how fandom

experiences and exposure to football events in leisure time change perceptions, rather unwittingly and in any case more subtly than can be caught by the language of “political integration” or “pan-Europeanism” (as a political project). For this purpose, we have proposed to explore two identity-dimensions among European football fans and spectators: “communities of belonging” and “frames of reference”. “Communities of belonging” refer to in-group/out-group phenomena, perceptions of “foreignness” and delineations vis-à-vis other groups. Here, one would have to look at fans’ reactions to the Europeanisation of players’ markets (normalisation or “foreignness” still as a hot topic?) as well as at the overall level of interaction and networking of fans and spectators across borders.

“Frames of reference”, in turn, include 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 eventual normalisation of “going Europe” (Millward 2006), i.e. travelling at the occasion of football matches and experiencing Europe all along that way.

The CL is an important aspect in this complex, of course. In our research project, it makes multiple appearances with the following three ideas being the most important. First, we will investigate perceptions and articulations of fan scenes in four different country contexts and within each country with two contrasting clubs/fan scenes at hand – one regularly competing at the top European level, i.e. the CL, one from the lower ranks of the top national league (Niemann/Brand 2016: 10). The logic behind this case selection follows the presumption that, if there is a discernible socialising effect due to being (permanently) in/out of CL competition, it must become visible through such paired comparisons. In other words, we assume that fans and followers of CL performers have a more Europeanised mind set, by and large, than supporters of mere (bottom) national competitors.

Second, in our method mix, qualitative discourse analysis will play an important role, with all challenges to be reckoned with in ascertaining meaning from football fan discourse (see the discussion in: Brand/Niemann 2014). Our strategy of tracing Europeanisation in articulations includes the purposive sampling of threads (blogs, message boards) and articles (fanzines) with CL-related vocabulary employed as search terms guiding the selection of material. In other words, we assume that talk about, debate on, eventually linking up to the narratives and myths sketched above will (de-)select the pieces of discourse for us, helping us to find relevant material.

Third, we also plan to conduct surveys among football fans, but compared to FREE among much more selective, targeted audiences and with a more specific set of items. Skimming the list of survey questions, quite a few of them appear to be linked to how fans perceive the CL in particular, e.g. on the ascribed attractiveness, the reasons for fancying or withholding affection for CL competition, the time spent on watching and/or keeping oneself informed on European-level competitions, the degree of emotional involvement at several levels of football competition and practices of fandom beyond mere following a side (networking, travelling, also across Europe). It is in this sense that our upcoming research, while perhaps not constructed around the idea of the CL as a political myth, is nevertheless certain to provide this debate with much more empirical grounding.



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