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A roundtable discussion on the politics of EURO 2024: a collective commentary

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ABSTRACT

Every European Football Championship raises a host of important political questions. Euro 2024 in Germany was no exception in this regard, as this commentary demonstrates. This roundtable discussion – in form of mini essays – reconsiders this politicized event. Indeed, this collectively written commentary involves short, but sharp insights from five scholars aiming to provide a responsive account of politically significant moments or trends at before, during and in the immediate aftermath of Euro 2024. By exploring important questions relating to, *inter alia*, nationalism, security and safety, sustainability, and children's rights – in Euro 2024's context – it is hoped that this commentary paper will offer something to future discussions concerning Euro 2024, European football and sport mega-events more widely, and, finally, socio-political processes in contemporary Europe.

Introduction – political football at EURO 2024

Between 14 June and – 14 July 2024, Germany staged the 17th edition of the 2024 Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) European Football Championship in men's football (Euro 2024). The tournament itself was won by Spain, who defeated England 2–1 in the final. The 'Euros' – constituting one of the largest sport mega-events worldwide – raise a host of socially, culturally, economically and politically important questions. Indeed, the tournament represents a site for expressions of national identity and supporter feelings of patriotism which have become distinctive features of international football tournaments.¹ Since its foundation in 1958, the tournament has expanded on multiple fronts – notably, the number of competing teams, its commercial and global sponsorship activities and the influxes of supporters and visitors attending stadiums and fan zones across the host cities.² Indeed, UEFA announced after the Euro 2024 group stage that 3.3 million people had attended the official fanzones across the host cities.³ Whilst Euro 2024 both as a football and political event, thus far, has received some scholarly attention,⁴ this collaborative commentary article, containing insights from five scholars, adds to this.

However, rather than providing *tangible* conclusions from a tournament which upon writing has only just ended, this collective commentary – taking shape as what may be best described as an inter-disciplinary roundtable discussion in a textual or an essay format – generates responsive,

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reflective and analytical snapshots from Euro 2024. It discusses some of the key social and political trends identified and observed by the authors before, during and after Euro 2024, including topics speaking to, amongst others, securitization, nationalism, political expression and conflict, human rights and sustainability and climate change. Overall, it is hoped that this commentary will contribute to future discussions about Euro 2024 and this tournament's connection to wider European football, other sport mega-events and European politics in a time of conflict, instability and flux on the continent.

From repression to service, from principle to practice? (Jan Andre Lee Ludvigsen)

The securitization of sport mega-events remains a topic of enormous socio-political significance.⁵ Subsequently, it was unsurprising that 'security' and 'safety' were again heavily discussed pre-Euro 2024. Examples of this included stories about how Germany was boosting its security; and the 'high-risk' fixture between England and Serbia in Gelsenkirchen where, reportedly, one measure to maintain the public order, was to only serve 'low-alcohol' beer for attending spectators.⁶ Newspapers also reported on police knowledge sharing and training exercises to prepare for different scenarios of football-related violence, whereas the Interior and Community Minister, Nancy Faeser, stated that Germany was 'very, very well prepared' but admitted that hundred percent safety could never be guaranteed in the face of insecurity.⁷ Importantly, this is not exceptional. Reports and public statements about security measures enacted to address safety risks, following Boyle and Haggerty,⁸ constitute a normalized, pre-mega-event ritual.

However, another type of story is also becoming more commonplace. Again – at a large-scale European football event – it was reported how organizational and logistical problems impeded supporters' enjoyable experiences. On the night of England versus Serbia match (16 June), it was reported that large numbers of supporters were unable to access transport to and from the stadium, alongside issues of over-crowding and potentially dangerous bottlenecks caused by the inadequate public transport opportunities for supporters leaving the stadium.⁹ The English fans' embassy released a statement concerning 'serious issues' stemming from the lack of signage, lightening and volunteers that could aid supporters.¹⁰ As *The Guardian*'s Jonathan Liew wrote, this epitomized a wider tendency in Europe, whereby football fans too often are treated as a 'security threat, an enemy army to be defended against, rather than human beings trying to get to a football game'.¹¹

Yet to comprehend the present-day issues of security and safety in European football, we must rewind to France's Euro 2016, which was also the location for the opening ceremony – in Saint-Denis, outside Paris – for the Council of Europe's Convention on an *Integrated Safety, Security and Service Approach at Football Matches and Other Sports Events*. Currently, the Saint-Denis Convention, as it is often called, has been ratified by 29 states including Germany, and 10 countries have signed it.¹² Importantly, though, the internationally and legally binding convention symbolized the move away from its precursor: the convention from 1985 covering sporting events, opened shortly after the Heysel tragedy characterized by a narrow focus on the risks of football-related violence and its repression.

The Saint-Denis Convention advocates a 'pan-European' security philosophy that, on face value, remains more focused on the provision of hospitality and service, and dialogue with supporter groups and local communities, both of which are defined as key stakeholders.¹³ It maintains that, by creating welcoming atmospheres, it is possible to reduce the prospects of disorder. By encouraging international collaboration between stakeholders,¹⁴ the Convention builds on evidence from extant research on the management of football crowds which highlights that good communication and dialogue between fans and policing actors often bring about good, ordered and hospitable outcomes.¹⁵ Though, the Saint-Denis Convention's *existence* does not mean its principles are always adhered to at football events across Europe. Indeed, its principles still need to be transferred into the practices of police, stewards and event organizers. Two years ago, the potential distance between principle and practice was powerfully demonstrated at another UEFA-event which,

coincidentally, was staged in Saint-Denis: the 2022 Champions League final, where some fans were tear-gassed by riot police, and many fans were denied access to the stadium and contained outside the turnstiles under chaotic conditions. Whilst highlighting the non-compliance with the Saint-Denis Convention, the commissioned review and following report examining the poor treatment of supporters concluded that the failings could have caused a disaster and held UEFA responsible.¹⁶

While the two football events differed, the reports discussed above, about supporters having to endure poor conditions and transport possibilities alongside long queues and potential overcrowding risks contrast the Saint-Denis Convention's principles – especially the embedded emphasis on providing welcoming, safe environments in the public spaces that supporters are present within upon travelling to and from the stadia. This section's departure point, therefore, is that while news stories appear to focus on 'risk' fixtures or supporters, typically involving a minority of spectators, it remains crucial not to forget that a *key challenge* within the security imperative at European football events emerges from the need to provide supporters not solely with security and safety, but with service measures. This was laid out in the landmark convention launched almost a decade ago, whose practical implementations in country-specific contexts warrant future research prior to forthcoming European football events.

On politics and football (Anastassia Tsoukala)

It is broadly acknowledged that, from the nineteenth century onwards, the emerging concept of nation was also normalized by the association of nationalism with sport passion at the occasion of international sports tournaments. Thenceforth, national teams' performances were inextricably linked to respective nations' ideological and/or geopolitical power, and international sports tournaments were the stages for this power to be widely projected.¹⁷ Across time, the intrinsically political *raison d'être* of these tournaments became obvious in many cases, such as the 1934 and 1978 World Cups, and the 1936, 1980 and 1984 Olympic Games. Yet, contemporary international football tournaments are marked by the ambivalent stance of their organizers, who seek to both preserve implicitly the political nature of the events and formally depoliticize them under the banner of no politics. National anthems and the display of flag colours on football players' uniforms are thus taken for granted. Similarly, fans bearing flag colours on their faces and clothes, and waving national flags are seen as part of a joyful apolitical football crowd. Nationalism-fuelled clashes between rival fans are presented as condemnable violent politicization of an otherwise peaceful apolitical event. This apparently irrational definition of the political cannot be fully perceived without its corollary, that is, worldwide consent. In fact, FIFA and UEFA's no-politics rules only target disruptive political acts or speech likely to create tension at the international level and, hence, entail financial prejudice. It is telling that Palestinian flags displayed by Moroccan football players at the Qatar World Cup 2022 were not seen as political symbols to be clamped down by FIFA.

Given this regulatory frame, UEFA's ban on Merih Demiral for his goal celebration with the far-right grey wolf salute at the Austria-Turkey match was certain. What is interesting is that Demiral's gesture was planned beforehand because he wanted, above all, to show he was proud of his Turkish identity.¹⁸ In so doing, he disregarded sport interests at stake to privilege instead the implicit political ground of the tournament, that is, exaltation of nationalism. In the same vein, when Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan condemned Demiral's ban, he evoked sport celebration of national identities: 'Does anyone say that the Germans have an eagle on their jerseys? Does anyone say that the French have a rooster on their jerseys?',¹⁹ and cancelled his scheduled visit to Azerbaijan to attend the match with the Netherlands, thus showing that he also ranked nationalism first.

To the extent that UEFA's no-politics rules do not apply to nationalism, all Turkish arguments were grounded on the assertion that the grey wolf salute is a historical and cultural symbol, hence compatible with conventional nationalism. Turkish Football Federation President Mehmet Buyukeksi thus considered Demiral's ban to be 'unjust, unlawful and unfair' for 'the gesture

made has no political significance and has symbolized Turkish identity for centuries'.²⁰ To confirm this thesis, thousands of Turkish fans made purportedly the gesture while marching in Berlin and at the match with the Netherlands.

The grey wolf salute is indeed an old cultural symbol but it has been reappropriated by the Grey Wolves, a violent far-right group closely affiliated with the ultranationalist far-right Nationalist Movement Party in Turkey. The group is banned in several countries, including France, while the wolf hand gesture is banned in Austria. In 2021, the European Parliament called on EU member states to designate it as a terrorist group. Dissociating the symbol from its present political connotation cannot then but bring to mind similar efforts produced by neo-Nazis to dissociate the swastika, which is also an ancient symbol, from fascism.

What lies therefore beneath the controversy in question is not the allegedly unacceptable interference of politics with football but the definition of the dividing line between acceptable and unacceptable perceptions of nationalism in relation to football. For, in all cases, international football tournaments are not just football.

'The politicization of football tournaments and fandom continues' (Joel Rookwood)

The draw for the group stages of major international football tournaments is often eagerly anticipated, not just by the players and fans of the teams involved, but also by host nation(s) tasked with securitizing these mega-events. Previous tournaments and related qualification matches have seen rival nations compete at diplomatically sensitive junctures, with politically charged fixtures sometimes resulting in conflict.

In Europe, some contests between post-Socialist and post-Soviet states have proven problematic and controversial, notably in the Balkans.²¹ 2014 World Cup qualification matches between Serbia and Croatia saw fan disorder. A Euro 2016 qualifier between Serbia and Albania was abandoned after a drone was flown into Belgrade's Partizan Stadium carrying a flag depicting so-called 'Greater Albania', a conceptual state formed from all territories where ethnic Albanians live.²² The banner was pulled down by Serbia's Stefan Mitrović, as punches were exchanged between players, followed by a pitch invasion and crowd violence. The politically charged atmosphere reflected the tense relationship between Serbia and Albania, connected to the Kosovan conflict.²³

Since the men's European Championships was extended from 16 to 24 teams in 2016, the likelihood of rival teams drawing each other, and of opposing fans clashing, has become increasingly problematic for event organizers and security personnel. Fortuitously, fixtures at Euro 2024 generally fostered collaboration over confrontation, with many matches bringing together sets of fans who share common enemies.²⁴ That said, several games assumed political dimensions, with expressions and interactions circulated on social media. Before their respective contests, Slovenian and Serbian supporters chanted 'Kosovo is the heart of Serbia', whilst Croatian and Albanian fans joined in expressing opposition to Serbia's president, Aleksandar Vučić.²⁵

Russia was also central to some political expression and fan conflict at Euro 2024. FIFA banned Russia from international football competition following its invasion of Ukraine in 2022,²⁶ but references to Russia continued. Ukrainian players and Polish fans protested against Russian aggression, whilst Georgian supporters conveyed opposition to Vladimir Putin, with Romanian fans taunting Ukrainians with expressions of support for the Russian president.²⁷ Fans often oppose political protests at mega-events,²⁸ yet the politicization of football tournaments and fandom continues.

Euro 2024 saw a highly anticipated tournament debut for Georgia, with the team exceeding expectations, scoring in all four fixtures and progressing from Group F following a 2–0 defeat of Portugal. The optimism surrounding the greatest result in Georgia's history contrasted sharply with a political crisis which has divided the country. After a controversial new 'foreign agent' law was passed in May, some of the largest protests and police crackdowns of Georgia's modern history marred the build-up to Euro 2024. The country's ruling party portrayed the legislation as an attempt

to enhance the transparency of Georgia's media organizations and non-governmental groups, but critics framed it as a stealthy means of turning Georgia into a pro-Russian state.²⁹ After the legislation was passed, Georgian striker Budu Zivzivadze expressed opposition to 'everything that takes Georgia to Russia'.³⁰ The turmoil and the tournament raised important national questions concerning whether Georgia, as a former Soviet republic, should look to Russia for its future, or to Europe.

Georgia's national identity and political structures are shaped by geopolitics. Bordering Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia and Turkey, Georgia also has three autonomous regions: Adjara, on the Turkish frontier, and the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia located on the Russian border. Conflict in the latter territory, especially during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, has strained relations in the region.³¹ Turkey were Georgia's first opponents at Euro 2024. The nations share a 170-mile border, including the frontier with Adjara, which has been an autonomous republic within Georgia since 1991. Particularly seen in the context of Georgia's other disputed entities, this longevity is not thought to reflect fundamental antagonism between Georgia and Adjara, but instead represents a long arc of how some states in the international system manage regional differences through the negotiation of autonomy.³² Turkey beat Georgia 3–1 in Dortmund's *Westfalenstadion* in a game heralded as one of the most memorable fixtures of the group stage. It was also marred by fighting between Georgian and Turkish fans before kick-off, which may reflect concern about growing Turkish influence.³³ Security personnel were slow to intervene, as they were when faced with repeated pitch invasions throughout the tournament, some of which compromised player safety.³⁴

The influx of growing numbers of visiting supporters at football mega-events saw crowd disturbances in some stadiums and especially in city centres at Euro 2024. Such issues were noticeably absent within fan zones, which often serve as relatively secure facilities. These installations were popularized at Germany's 2006 World Cup, following the singular park erected in Lisbon at Euro 2004.³⁵ However, some Euro 2024 fan zones, such as those in Cologne and Düsseldorf, were too small to cater for the number of fans present. This led to overcrowding, security concerns and fan disturbances at their periphery, some of which took on political dimensions. As well as the recurrent transport and congestion issues, Euro 2024 exposed the correlation between event securitization, problematic interactions and political expression.

Euro 2024: a potential shifting of the dial for children's rights protection? (Seamus Byrne)

Euro 2024 was significant in that it represented a tangible, and potentially consequential, step forward for the protection of children's rights, as enshrined within the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) [1989] within the context of a sport mega-event. In responding to the consistent calls for greater respect for human rights to be centralized, as part of the bidding and hosting of a sport mega-event, the genesis of which can be traced back to the 2011 promulgation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights,³⁶ Euro 2024 were momentous in that respect for 'universal human rights, including *child rights*'³⁷ were set out within the tournament bidding requirements. This distinct reference to children's rights by UEFA, as the owner of the Euros, therefore, possesses the capacity for the Euros to emerge as a pan-European sporting structure in which respect for children's rights can become a more visible mainstay within the preparatory, operational, and infrastructural context of the world's thirds largest sporting event. Indeed, when considered against the backdrop of previous sporting events hosted by UEFA, namely the 2022 Champions League Final in Paris, which led to systemic and catastrophic organizational failures such that the very safety of children, amongst others, was severely impaired,³⁸ the necessity to embed respect for children's rights becomes apparent.

However, the true test of any outward and objective commitment to respect children's rights pursuant to the CRC lies in the detail and the manifestation of that commitment in terms of

subsequent policy formulations. And whilst the abovementioned tournament requirements signify a welcome step forward for children's rights protection, subsequent declarations by UEFA were somewhat muted in their reference to children's rights. For example, the *Human Rights Declaration for UEFA EURO 2024*, jointly issued by UEFA and the German Football Association, in November 2023, made no explicit reference to children's rights or the CRC.³⁹ Although highlighting the obligation of the event organizers to respect international human rights law, the failure to explicitly refer to children's rights, or the CRC, marginalizes, if not negates, important children's rights standards, from the operational and legal reach of the event organizers. For example, the CRC sets out several significant and bespoke procedural requirements pertaining to children. These include the child's best interests principle under Article 3 CRC,⁴⁰ and the rights of children to express a view in matters which affect them under Article 12 CRC.⁴¹ Both of these requirements demand specific action to be taken by domestic authorities to ensure genuine adherence to such obligations. For instance, authorities must weigh up competing objectives and pursue a course of action which ensures that the child's best interests are upheld, while simultaneously, in matters which affect children and young people, they should be afforded the opportunity to express their views on such issues. Within the Euros' context, issues relating to stadia construction, control and entry, in conjunction with how local communities are affected by the hosting of the tournament, are but a few issues in which the child's best interests principle, and their right to be heard are engaged. More widely, they indicate the distinct human rights requirements which are particular to children and young people within international human rights law. Therefore, the need to consistently highlight children's rights law, not least to ensure the detailed procedural protections which it enshrines, becomes apparent.

Moving forward, although Euro 2024 is to be commended for its inclusion of respect for children's rights within the tournament bidding requirements, it is perhaps too early to extol or eulogize the tournament's commitment to the rights of children and young people. In this regard, further scholarly attention, and in particular future empirical analyses, is required to truly unpack the impact of the tournament on children's rights. Further academic attention is required to highlight the institutional requirements in terms of children's rights training and awareness-training within UEFA itself, to ensure that respect for children's rights in genuinely effectuated and mainstreamed within and across the entirety of the organization. If Euro 2024 is truly to signify a shifting of the dial for respect for children's rights within a mega-event context, then outward professions of commitment to such standards must be matched by internal institutional initiatives which indicate that assurance.

Is it possible to host the 'most environmentally sustainable ever' men's Euro? (Walker J. Ross)

Given the three planetary crises humanity faces, it is encouraging to see greater focus on creating sustainable and adaptive sport events as a product of better understanding the bidirectional relationship of sport the natural environment.⁴² This men's Euro 2024 tournament provides an interesting case study of the environmental relationship sport has via both directions.

As part of the tournament hosting strategy, UEFA published a comprehensive environmental, social, and governance strategy, which highlighted environmental efforts based around climate actions, sustainable infrastructure, and a circular economy.⁴³ These efforts sought to reduce the carbon footprint via match clustering, encouraging the use of public transit, use of existing infrastructure, resource efficiency upgrades to infrastructure, circular economic principles, and the creation of a climate fund for amateur football. These are welcome efforts which may make this tournament one of the most sustainable *attempts* at a large-scale sport event – though it should be expected that all subsequent editions of large- and mega-sport events ought to be increasingly sustainably planned.⁴⁴ Germany does have some advantages in hosting sustainably due to its pre-

existing football and transportation infrastructure as well as hosting in one geographically-unified location.

A report from the Öko-Institute pre-tournament estimated that the Euro 2024 would have generated approximately 500,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions.⁴⁵ This is more than was reported for the men's UEFA Euro 2020 tournament (218,000 tonnes), but this is deceptive when considering that COVID pandemic impacts meant limitations of supporter attendance. The same fluke in environmental performance was noted for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games being one of the 'most sustainable' in execution due to the pandemic despite presenting plans for arguably the least sustainable Games since the 1990s.⁴⁶

There is rightful environmental criticism to offer when tournament qualifying stage is not included in such footprint calculations,⁴⁷ the scale of the Euro tournament has expanded significantly since its beginning,⁴⁸ and there is continued expansion of UEFA club competitions, all of which increase the environmental impacts from travel.⁴⁹ There are transportation shortcomings around participating teams and UEFA as some flew to matches from their training camps rather than using rail and bus which were promoted to supporters (despite the best efforts of, for example, the Netherlands team trying to use rail to reach their matches).⁵⁰ For both UEFA and the teams, there is the continued acceptance of fossil fuel and automobile sponsorship.⁵¹

Euro 2020 was also spread across the entire European continent; so it should be considered an expectation for a host Germany to perform better environmentally in these circumstances given its smaller geographic footprint in comparison. The next two men's Euro hosts are spread across the United Kingdom and Ireland in 2028, and Italy and Türkiye in 2032, which will demand air travel and greater environmental impacts than that of the 2024 edition. Thus, it is difficult to suggest that this will be the most sustainable ever Euro tournament as it has likely not achieved that result compared to the earliest editions and may not achieve it in the near future with multi-site hosts. While sustainability measures taken may be the best yet, Euro 2024 may not merit an award for lowest overall environmental impact. Beyond the Euro, it certainly does not require much imagination to see how the men's FIFA World Cup in 2026 across North America will fall short on travel sustainability as well.

This Euro 2024 also saw impacts of the environment on the event. Most notably, it was observed in the lightning and rain delay to the Germany-Denmark match which required the match to be suspended for 25 minutes.⁵² This was not the first Euro to be interrupted by such weather, but the well-understood consequences of climate change mean that such interruptions may become more common in the future. Organizers, teams, and the media may need to include plans for these delays moving forward. Additionally, while the German climate was manageable at this time of year, a future tournament across Italy and Türkiye may not be as forgiving. Climate adaptation measures are a necessary component of future planning and will require efforts beyond currently accepted sustainability strategies.

Notes

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31. Rookwood, 'Statehood, nationalism and separatism'.
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