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Ludvigsen, J (2025) Football supporters' rights in Europe: a transformative moment or forever 'a lost cause'? International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure. pp. 1-19. ISSN 2520-8683

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Football Supporters' Rights in Europe: A Transformative Moment or Forever 'a Lost Cause'?

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Received: 7 April 2025 / Accepted: 14 July 2025
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Abstract

Over several decades, scholars have demonstrated that, across contested spaces of leisure, the policing of football supporters raises questions speaking to their human rights and civil liberties, including the right to leisure. As this article argues, the recent, separate but consistent issues at high-profile European football events (2021–24) are emblematic of this. Yet, these events have been followed by institutional discursive emphases upon the importance of supporter rights and engagement for football's future. Hence, this article contributes with an understanding of the wider macro-structures that have enabled or loom in the background of this regularized indifference towards supporters' rights in Europe. It therefore focuses on a broader context, characterized by overlapping public (dis)order fields, discursive practices, and interlinked barriers to transformation within football's political economy. As contended, these contribute towards an indifference toward football supporters' rights and leisure spaces and worlds. This reveals how long-term political, bureaucratic and commercial struggles, thus, contribute towards a contradictory position on the (un)importance of human rights and civil liberties within an important leisure context.

Keywords Football supporters · Rights · European football · Events · Leisure spaces

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1 Introduction

In London, July 2021, over 2000 ticketless supporters gained entry to Wembley stadium for the Euro 2020 final following a security breach. The official review of the disorder, however, also pointed toward organizational and policing shortcomings, including a ‘collective failure to plan for the worst case scenario’ (Casey, 2021: 122). In Paris, May 2022, thousands of supporters’ safety was jeopardized as they were trapped in the enclosed spaces outside *Stade De France* prior to the Champions League final. Many supporters were subjected to repressive police tactics, including baton strikes, tear-gas and pepper spray. The independent review of this incident concluded that the event constituted a ‘near-miss’, caused by compounding governance, operational and intelligence failures, while also acknowledging the regular occurrence of similar problems at other European football fixtures (UCLF22, 2023; Turner & Fitzpatrick, 2025). In Istanbul, June 2022, there were reports about the poor treatment of supporters attending the Champions League final between Manchester City and Internazionale. The lack of transport and travel options to and from the stadium, and limited access to toilets and drinking water meant that the event was described as a ‘dangerous mess’ (Delaney, 2023) where fans being ‘treated... like cattle’ (Boffey, 2023). In Gelsenkirchen, June 2024, similar reports, coupled with concerns of ‘dangerous overcrowding’, surfaced during Euro 2024 (Braidwood, 2024). In *The Guardian*, it was noted that, despite different symptoms, a shared feature between these four cases ‘is an apparent indifference to the ordinary fan experience, a capacity to spread misery, a very late-capitalist absence of basic human dignity at virtually every stage of the process’ (Liew, 2024). In Athens, November 2024, the heavy-handed policing – involving the use of tear-gas – of English fans was described as ‘unjustifiably dangerous’ by the Football Supporters’ Association (Sky News, 2024). Some supporters claimed they were ‘treated as animals’ outside the stadium (Steinberg, 2024).

This paper contributes with an understanding of how the regulation of one important leisure world in Europe – European football – is characterized by an expectation of disorder, and that this expectation, as argued, is aided by a set of long-term political, commercial and bureaucratic processes that contributed towards a contradictory stance regarding football supporters’ rights and their (un)importance. Indeed, as the above account demonstrates, between 2021 and 2024, recurring but inter-connected themes that have ignited political, media and academic debates relate to the poor treatment of football supporters across Europe, the ways in which their basic safety, human and civil rights have been compromised, and the emergence of serious public disorder. Though, it can be contended that these issues are emblematic of the wider, far more longstanding issue of the regular disregard of, and indifference to, football supporters’ rights in Europe (Pearson, 1999, 2005; Tsoukala et al., 2016). Concerning the latter, scholars have demonstrated that the policing of supporters in Europe – situated across spaces of leisure – routinely raises questions speaking to (dis)proportionality, the protection of supporters’ right to privacy and liberty, freedoms of

expression, assembly and movement (James & Pearson, 2015; Tsoukala et al., 2016), and their right to (safe) leisure (Webber and Turner, 2025). Football fixtures and mega-events are hence sites of leisure, wherein the right to leisure (cf. Veal, 2015) is (re)claimed and contested. They are also exemplars of how 'rulers have always tried to control [...] leisure spaces' (Spracklen, 2022, p. 286). For Tsoukala (2008), supporters' rights therefore compose 'a lost cause' that is regularly jeopardized and only sporadically defended by political and civil society actors. Despite an uptick in movements defending different social groups' human rights and civil liberties, Tsoukala notes that '[w]hen the issue is addressed at a European level, it becomes clear that football supporters are the broader, if not the sole, social group which has never enjoyed such mass support' (p. 89).

The recent events reaffirm the indifference to supporters' rights, but invites a revisitation of this conundrum. On a political level, London and Paris were subject to comprehensive reviews with responsive reports (Casey, 2021; UCLF22, 2023). In the media, particularly the London and Paris cases received vast coverage. In academia, these two cases' aftermath have seen academics call for policing and legal reforms (Pearson & Stott, 2022). Regarding supporters' rights, others argue that these events constitute transformative ruptures that construct a critical juncture. At this juncture, discursively at least, supporters' rights and the need for democratic engagement with supporters are emphasized by politicians and football elites as crucial for football's future. Here, supporters are framed as 'as citizens with democratic rights and civil liberties rather than merely patrons or consumers' (Turner & Fitzpatrick, 2025, p. 28). Recently, in the context of the right to leisure, Webber and Turner (2025, p. 395) argued that supporters' own collective and democratic rights-based strategies are required 'to transform those relations of power that have come to dominate football spectatorship in the modern era'.

This paper attaches itself into this precise momentum. Yet, it primarily engages with the questions of which wider macro-structures that may have enabled, or loom in the background of these recurring cases of mismanagement and, broadly, the regular but preserved indifference to football supporters' rights in Europe, and what 'lie[s] beneath this broadly-shared stance' (Tsoukala, 2008, p. 89). As argued here, these issues must be seen as carrying some important relations to the repression of other groups in contemporary societies; especially protestors (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2012) that, similarly to football fans, is influenced by discursive and precautionary macro processes that contribute to normalized and politicized images of 'internal enemies' (cf. Campbell, 2023). The wider issue here can also not be separated fully from the commercial stakes in European football, nor the legal strategies supporters are subjected to (Tsoukala et al., 2016). Hence, unlike most of the earlier and important scholarship on the policing of football supporters and the public order, this article does not seek to analyse those policing practices occurring on the ground *during* a football fixture or protest, including the micro-dynamics of the crowd-police interactions (King, 1995; Stott et al., 2007; Brechbühl et al., 2020; Pearson & Stott, 2022).

Rather, this article contributes with a political sociological understanding of these recent organizational and safety issues, and the 'lost cause' of supporters' rights (cf. Tsoukala, 2008). It locates these in the broader context of a (i) public (dis)order field with overlapping subfields, (ii) discursive practices, and (iii) institutional barriers

and football's political economy. These, as contended, breed a broadly shared indifference to football supporters' rights. This remains significant, because it potentially constructs situations of a double dangerousness, whereby historical and current images of dangerousness attached to football supporters may impact upon the dangerous conditions and poor treatment supporters regularly in their leisure worlds (cf. Braidwood, 2024; Sky News, 2024; UCLF22, 2023). Further, this matters because it occurs *alongside* an emphasis placed on human rights and service provision in international legal texts (Council of Europe, 2016), and the associated 'discursive redefinition of supporters in the corridors of football governance' (Numerato, 2018: 92) which emphasizes the importance of supporter rights and engagement (Turner & Fitzpatrick, 2025).

2 Expanding the lens: Football, policing and public (dis)order

In order to understand, broadly, the policing of football in Europe, more specifically, the mentioned breakdowns of basic safety provisions, and how these are enabled, we are required to look beyond the on-the-day policing of the relevant event, or crowd, and its connection to the wider politics of public order and security. Most policing is in one way or another related to maintaining public order (Reicher et al., 2007). Partly for this reason, and mostly in the (crowded) contexts of protest, social movements and collective action, the policing of public (dis)order has therefore been explored through a series of studies examining policing styles and strategies of control in the face of protestors. Across diverse political systems and temporal settings, these styles often contrast each other in terms of their brutal/lenient and repressive/tolerant nature (della Porta & Filleule, 2004), and in their adherence to 'escalated force' or 'negotiated management' (Sheptycki, 2005) and to human rights standards (Reiter & Filleule, 2006; Tsoukala, 2025).

More widely, this literature reveals something important about the role, power and relationship between the state and its citizens. As Sheptycki (2005, p. 328) asserts, 'studying the relationship between policing and society, and perhaps especially the policing of public order, offers a litmus test for understanding the state of society as a whole'. One of the reasons for this, is that protestors typically and temporarily challenge the state's power. Protests are often resorted to, to put pressure on decision-makers and actors of authority (Della Porta, 2013). In Europe, protests are, however, not the only crowded phenomenon seen to potentially destabilize the public and social order.

On the national, European and EU levels (Council of the EU, 1997; Tsoukala, 2009; della Porta & Tarrow, 2012) and through mediated framings, potentially disruptive crowded events, including rock concerts, mega-events and football fixtures, are often viewed as incompatible with the preservation of public order. Across Europe, this has not solely impacted how social groups like protestors, activists, football supporters or 'hooligans' are policed, but also governed through specific legislative attempts, surveillance and social control mechanisms commonly at odds with their civil liberties and human rights (Kroijer, 2013).

However, while the policing of protest, for long, has received substantial scholarly attention (della Porta & Fillieule, 2004), O'Neill (2005, p. 32) observed that, despite an abundance of scholarship on football-related violence or disorder, 'few academic researchers have considered football policing in any detail'. Whilst O'Neill's reminder was, and to some extent still is, valid, even two decades later, it remains necessary to reconsider more recent work the area which verifies the position of the football/policing/(dis)order nexus in Europe. Whilst much of this work is UK-centred, we may observe studies from a number of national contexts, including the Czech Republic, Switzerland, Portugal, Sweden and Germany. This work can be seen to address primarily three strands concerned with (i) social interactions, (ii) specific actors, and (iii) legal regulations' (in)effectiveness.

First, one strand of research emphasizes the importance of social interactions. This includes the influential work, often based on observations, exploring the causal dynamics of football crowd disorder and its (de)escalation. Commonly, it is found that when the police or stewards are perceived to act illegitimately, sometimes based on pre-conceived ideas of fans, crowd dynamics construct a social identity among supporters which can escalate disorder. Contrarily, policing interventions that are experienced as legitimate, by emphasizing dialogue, facilitation, or a low-profile, are repeatedly found to reduce level of disorder and violence (Stott et al., 2007; Brechbühl et al., 2020; Pearson & Stott, 2022). Others, similarly, have advanced micro-sociological approaches to understanding violence (Collins, 2008) and fan violence specifically, including Newson (2019) who emphasizes extreme identification processes resulting in an identity fusion among fans. This importance of (mutually) interactional models of football crowds and the police is also central to King (1995) and O'Neill (2005) who respectively demonstrate how the interactions between fans-police and within the police are significant in shaping outcomes of (dis)order. Similarly, Doidge's (2015) study of Italian football demonstrates how preconceived ideas of football supporters may shape the eventual interactions between the police and football fans, reinforcing a fan identity.

Second, scholars have tended to zoom in on the experiences of different professionals with a stake in the policing of football. Studies examine the roles, the use of discretion and perceptions of 'spotters' (Hope et al., 2023), football police officers, club safety officers (Hester & Pamment, 2020; Divišová, 2024), stadium stewards (Atkinson and Graham, 2020) and supporter liaison officers (Stott et al., 2020). Third, researchers have critically examined or evaluated the state, legal and policing efforts undertaken to secure the public order in football contexts, by questioning, *inter alia*, the effectiveness of relevant and specific measures like alcohol bans, supporter identity cards, football banning orders and all-seater stadium (Pearson, 2005; Coenen, 2009; Pearson and Sale, 2011; Testa, 2018; Webber & Turner, 2025).

The latter strand confirms, of course, that attempts to ensure public order are not territorially confined to football stadia, streets or public squares but in touch with the political and legal arenas. However, in Europe, legal understandings of the management of football-related disorder requires a transnational component (Tsoukala et al., 2016). Hence, when focused upon specific laws in national contexts, this work, like the two other strands, cannot capture fully how football policing fits Bigo's (2008a) notion of *policing at a distance*, and observation that policing activities – including

those aiming at the maintenance of public order – increasingly are made up by connections between transnationally networked institutions, and the blurring between problems of national security and public order.

As this section contends, a tendency of extant scholarship has therefore been to focus primarily on the policing styles or on-the-ground interactions between football supporters (as public order threats) and law enforcers (as public order guardians). Less is known about how the transnational, political and legal structures that lie beneath these interactions in the first place. Such contention in no way intends to downplay the importance of studies concerned primarily with those micro-interactions or ‘face-to-face contacts’ (Tsoukala, 2009) making up the policing of football. It is maintained that these insights should be complemented by analyses working to position these face-to-face interactions in the context of (trans)national converging legal responses (Tsoukala et al., 2016; Pearson & Stott, 2022), structuring processes, security and political interests and the ‘top-down’ understandings of, and discourses on, football supporters. Although in a different context, Go (2024) confirms this when demonstrating that *current* trends in militarized public order policing in the UK and US must be analysed in the context of imperial, political and economic interests that determine the transfer and import of policing practices.

Hence, one key task is to recognize ‘the political and bureaucratic interests and struggles that are likely to influence police perceptions, and consequently their handling, of behaviour that is threatening to internal security’ (Tsoukala, 2009, p. 101). In other words, which forces lie behind the organizational failures discussed previously, and the wider indifference *vis-à-vis* supporters’ rights? Expanding the lens to catch these macro-structural processes remains imperative because it is these ‘processes that determine the shaping of counter-hooliganism policies that officials on the ground are obliged to implement’ (p. 9). As such, these processes are important because they inform what occurs *within* those leisure spaces European football represents.

This proposition, therefore, holds that football policing is characterized by dual, multi-level interactions. These interactions exceed the *locations* where crowds and the police interact and clash (or not) and encompass the (trans)national interactive arenas set to life by legal, policing, security and economic structures. Hence, in examining broader forces that may have enabled the longstanding ‘indifference to the protection of football supporters’ rights’ (Tsoukala, 2008, p. 91), this article unpacks further (i) interactive and overlapping football and protest fields, (ii) discursive practices and (iii) barriers to change.

3 Interactive and overlapping public (dis)order fields

The ways in which football crowds are policed in Europe cannot be separated from how protests and demonstrations are policed (Reiter & Fillieule, 2006; della Porta and Tarrow, 2012; della Porta, 2013; Spaaij, 2013). Exemplifying this, Spaaij (2013) draws our attention to how ‘banning orders on complaint’ – regularly are applied to football supporters – have been utilized to restrict protestors’ movements. Della Porta (2006, p. 8), meanwhile, observes that ‘[z]ero-tolerance doctrines, as well as mili-

taristic training and equipment, are imported into the field of protest policing from other forms of public order control addressing micro-criminality or football hooliganism'. To fully understand the 'transnational diffusion' of these practices (della Porta and Tarrow, 2012), it becomes imperative to analyse how interactive and, occasionally, overlapping counter-hooligan and protest policing fields have shaped the approach towards football crowds in Europe, and are shaped by the development of an EU approach to public order policing (Reiter & Fillieule, 2006).

Faced with new transnationally fluid threats towards the Cold War's end, including hooliganism, terrorism, public order and drug trafficking (Bigo, 2008b), police cooperation in the EU grew and became increasingly formalized in the 1980s and 1990s, assisted by the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties of 1993 and 1997 (Reiter & Fillieule, 2006). Public order policing, accordingly, was quickly considered one important field for the acceleration of EU policing cooperation. Against this backdrop, and growing concerns about serious disorder at transnational protests or international football tournaments, an EU approach towards public (dis)order became concretized in the late 1990s (Reiter & Fillieule, 2006). This approach, however, reveals blurred lines between the counter-hooligan and protest policing fields.

These became apparent when the European Council passed a Joint Action on 26 May 1997, on law, order and security that covered both football matches and protests. Building upon earlier counter-hooliganism initiatives, the Joint Action bundled together a selection of collective behaviours deemed to be potentially threatening (Tsoukala, 2009) that warrant policing that aiming to maintain law and order. This included protests and demonstrations, but also leisure contexts like sporting events and rock concerts (Council of the EU, 1997). The Joint Action set out that member states should share information if sizable groups potentially posing a threat to law, order and security were travelling to another member state to attend an event. This document also stated that a reliance on liaison officers could assist this information provision and sharing (Council of the EU, 1997).

Further, revealing the adherence to a pre-crime logic of security, emphasizing the anticipation of future events (Zedner, 2007), shared information was to include details on the 'group in question, routes to be taken, means of transport, and so on' (Reiter & Fillieule, 2006, p. 150). Over the next years, the EU also adopted a series of handbooks, relating to both protest and football fixtures of an international significance (Mojet, 2005; Krøijer, 2013). These sought not just to facilitate or advance information-exchange, but to harmonize the policing of crowds within EU member states (Tsoukala, 2018). Within this wider public (dis)order field, EU institutions therefore played roles as 'certifying agencies, legitimizing the new forms of policing through their endorsement' (della Porta & Tarrow, 2012, p. 139).

Following these EU level developments, we may see, in terms of the counter-hooliganism field, the roll of out *inter alia* football policing experts, national football information points (as a 'pan-European network specifically with information-exchange prior to international matches), enhanced surveillance of both pre-defined 'risk' and 'non-risk' (or ordinary supporters), and various forms of administrative banning orders aiming to restrict supporters' freedom of movement and, sometimes, proceeding on suspicion rather than evidence (Bigo, 2008a; Spaaij, 2013; Tsoukala, 2009, 2018). To borrow Bigo's (2008a) term, these compose quintessential exem-

plars of (public order) policing at a distance, as the specific procedures and technologies take aim at the movement of individuals before they enter a particular territory.

Importantly, this enabled a situation where surveillance not only became ubiquitous but was ‘being turned into a limitless social control tool that target[ed] indistinctively known troublemakers, risk supporters and normal football spectators alike’ (Tsoukala, 2018, p. 145). As Tsoukala argues, these trends are even more worrisome when these practices, which at times threaten supporters’ civil liberties and their right to privacy, expand and are used for other matters beyond the case of football. This is confirmed and visible in the context of protestors who, within the EU, who at times have been subjected to practices either originating from the counter-hooliganism field, or set alive in the two fields concurrently, showing their blurring and overlapping nature. This includes, *inter alia*, ‘spotters’ tasked with identifying potential public order threats among protestors (Reiter & Fillieule, 2006), cross-country data banks and information exchanges prior to protest and the utilization of police from different countries during a protest (della Porta & Tarrow, 2012; della Porta, 2013).

These convergent practices may be explained by the interaction and overlapping counter-hooliganism and protest policing fields. However, as argued, beyond representing a rather static process of intra-state or inter-governmental policy-transfer, what can be seen here is that political and bureaucratic interests dictated the definition and classification of insecurity and transnational threats to the public order. However, these directives, as della Porta and Tarrow (2012) highlight, are influenced by a top-down theorization that ‘football hooligans’ and ‘protestors’ share similarities – a stance failing to account for the diverse and complex make-up of protest and football crowds alike, and the ever-changing nature of protest, violent fandom and football supporter cultures. Despite this, and the absence of an agreed-upon academic or legal definition of ‘hooliganism’, the interaction and overlaps between the two fields in question here proceed on a steadfast assumption that football crowds and protestors, both separately and in tandem, compose a security threat to EU’s internal security (Tsoukala, 2009) and thereby are ‘potential enemies’ (della Porta & Tarrow, 2012, p. 141) whose rights can be jeopardized.

Given that these fields, both separately, and convergently as an overarching public (dis)order field, have emphasized social control over civil liberties and human rights across decades, it must therefore be considered to represent a key force breeding indifference towards supporters’ rights. Regarding the protest policing field, della Porta (2013) and Reiter and Fillieule (2006) agree that the mentioned turn towards pre-emptive logics has been accompanied by a vague commitment to the protection of citizens’ and protestors’ democratic rights. As mentioned, longstanding and similar concerns have been expressed in European football’s context (Pearson, 2005; Tsoukala et al., 2016). Still, international organizations’ and states’ targeting of known and potential ‘troublemakers’ – including ordinary supporters – have regularly been at odds with civil rights and human rights. Here, the former is ‘those rights, freedoms or liberties granted by the state to its citizens’, and the latter refers to ‘those rights that are granted by supra and international conventions and declarations to all citizens’ (Coenen et al., 2016, p. 4). One on-the-ground consequence of this has been that law enforcers all too often favour approaches that, similarly, violates ‘[the] rule of law and supporters’ civil rights and liberties [which] came to be seen as the only efficient

weapon against violence and disorder inside and outside stadia' (Tsoukala, 2018, p. 156). The consequences of this on 'ordinary fans' are summarized by Tsoukala (2010, p. 53), who submits that:

CCTV cameras installed in football stadia monitor the behavior of troublemakers, rowdy football supporters, and ordinary football fans alike, while the collection and exchange of intelligence in case of international tournaments extend well beyond known and potential troublemakers to include even ordinary football supporters wishing to attend these sports events.

Taken together, this remains significant because, with reference to those incidents cited earlier – especially Paris, Gelsenkirchen and Athens – it is argued that the physical conditions, lack of hospitality and service, and confrontative and heavy-handed policing that supporters endured on the ground cannot be regarded solely as isolated incidents that are divorced from the wider EU juridico-political structures, which, since their formalization, have not only contributed to, but normalized a twofold top-down stance contributing to the make-up of football spectatorship as a 'constrained leisure activity' (Webber & Turner, 2025). This stance holds onto, first, that supporters must be bundled together with other collective, transnational, public order and (internal) security threats like protestors. Second, that supporters are a 'threat to public order [...] that requires both innovative new laws and policing strategies to prevent them from engaging in violence or disorder', although football-related incidents are on the decline or involve a minority of supporters (Tsoukala et al., 2016, p. 177).

4 Discursive practices

It is not merely the interactive fields that have enabled a situation where football supporters' rights routinely are sidelined. This public (dis)order field is also underpinned by discursive practices which articulate a supposed, intrinsic incompatibility between supporters and law and order. By accepting that discursive practices hinge upon, and reinforce relations of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1972), the relevant discursive practices and strategies, coming from politicians, football experts and journalists legitimize those measures taken to curb football-related disorder and violence (Lee Ludvigsen, 2025b). Essentially, they hold together the perpetuated image of football supporters as a population whose rights, comfort and safety can be reasonably undermined.

Scholars have examined how journalistic accounts of 'hooliganism' across Europe, often containing quotes and statements from law enforcers or football and political authorities, emphasize the phenomenon's dangerousness, while invoking powerful metaphors like 'invasion', 'riots', 'disorder' and 'disease' for descriptive purposes (e.g., Pearson, 1988; Tsoukala, 2011). A key tendency within mainstream media coverage of football crowd violence has been the focus on law and order, whereby images are constructed of 'violent football supporters as a serious threat to the social and moral order of society' (Spaaij, 2011, p. 128). Yet, accepting the existence of a symbiotic relationship here, a more complex appreciation of the discursive practices at play becomes possible when substituting the unit of analysis from journalistic depictions with experts' and politicians' statements.

Historically, a case in point here is Margaret Thatcher's speech in the House of Commons shortly after the Heysel tragedy in Brussels. Referring to violent supporters, she remarked that 'these violent people must be isolated from society' (The Guardian, 1985 cited in King, 1998, p. 78). Speaking to journalists in Downing Street, Thatcher also explained her intention to implement harsher measures to eradicate 'football hooliganism', including a supporter membership card and alcohol bans. Violent fandom was also compared with violent situations of picket lines and in Northern Ireland and described as a 'disease of a prosperous society' (The Guardian, 2010[1985]). Hence, although there are important distinctions between attending a football game (as a consumerist practice, albeit with occasional in-stadium protests) and the essentially political act of a protest (or attending a picket line), Campbell (2023) showcases how football fans – like trade union movements, and protestors – were similarly subjected to politicized discursive exercises in the UK, which constructed them as 'enemies within'. Such narratives, ultimately, contributed to ideas of football fans an internal security threat that, increasingly, crossed borders for, and potentially disrupted, international fixtures.

Throughout the 2000s, political discourses similarly framed 'football hooliganism' in terms of 'thuggery', while football officials of national and European bodies utilized metaphors such as a 'scourge', and suggested that 'hooligans' are unbalanced individuals (Tsoukala, 2009, p. 126). Yet, beyond these metaphors and practices of othering, these discursive practices have also included victim-blaming and deflection strategies (Rookwood & Hoey, 2024; Lee Ludvigsen, 2025b). When the disorder and chaos struck outside *Stade De France* in May 2022, this was quickly attributed to late arriving supporters – as displayed and broadcast globally on the giant stadium screens by UEFA and reinforced by French authorities. As Scraton (2023, p. 28) writes, the 'immediate response of the Paris police was to defend deployment of riot police'. In the aftermath, French authorities and FA suggested that the disorder was also caused by ticketless supporters and counterfeit tickets. The French Interior Minister, Gérald Darmanin, cited up to 40,000 fake tickets and a 'massive, industrial-scale ticket fraud [which] caused Liverpool fans to turn up en masse' (quoted in BBC, 2022). The sports minister, Amélie Oudéa-Castéra, contended that Liverpool FC had failed to control its supporters, by 'letting its supporters out in the wild' (quoted in Politico, 2022).

These deflection strategies and numerical figures were quickly countered by supporters, mobile phone footage, journalists and other politicians (Rookwood & Hoey, 2024). They were also later disproved by the Independent Panel Review's report (in February 2023) which concluded that '[the] assertions concerning huge numbers of supporters trying to gain entry without valid tickets have been wrongly inflated and exaggerated' (UCLF22, 2023: 18), and that there was 'no evidence of an abnormally large number of "ticketless supporters" or supporters with invalid tickets' (p. 18). Reinforcing the importance of positioning the treatment of football crowds in the context of political and bureaucratic interests (Tsoukala, 2009), the Panel also found that the policing approach was based upon inaccurate estimates of, and a preoccupation with, supporters posing a potential threat to public order (UCLF22, 2023: 14).

However, although above claims were disproved, the discursive practices *still existed* and required a lengthy investigation to be formally refuted. In the absence

of evidence, the alleged dishonest and disorganized practices of the 'fraudster', 'late arriving' and 'ticketless' supporter were still pinpointed as the causes of the disorder. The discursive practices here, therefore, represent something more than mere linguistic acts (Foucault, 1972). The social position of, and frames used by the enunciators reveal a wider system of knowledge and power – and the attribution of blame cannot necessarily be separated from those historically-anchored 'criminalised visions' of football fans (Numerato, 2018) or beliefs that football crowds are 'inherently problematic' (Pearson, 1999) which have been conditioned for decades.

Whilst the *Stade De France* case was characterized by the presence of public disorder, the relative absence of disorder, meanwhile, may be attributed to enhanced security measures like temporary border controls and policing, rather than well-behaving supporters. For example, following Euro 2024 in Germany, Interior Minister Nancy Faeser stated that: 'There were significantly fewer security incidents and offenses than our security authorities had expected beforehand at an event with millions of people [...] Above all, the very high police presence across the country was decisive in this' (quoted in the Independent, 2024).

Taken together, it is argued that these discursive practices contribute towards football supporters' status of what Tsoukala (2025), in her study of police brutality in Greece, conceptualizes as an 'undeserving sub-population'. Concerning the policing of protest, she argues that discursive strategies were used to present 'peaceful students... as dangerous protestors, who "deserved" the use of force for they did not abide by police orders' and could not possibly be seen as legitimate victims of forceful policing (p. 119). Seemingly, a similar pattern routinely emerges in European football contexts. Here, the undeserving nature of football supporters means that their rights and experiences *can* be met with indifference from law enforcers and event organizers (e.g., organizational issues have continued after the UCLF22 report); or where inadequate policing, as shown, is rationalized by supporters' alleged involvement in fraud or inability to follow directives (e.g., turning up on time; not turning up without a ticket). This indifference is illustrated by the fact that, aside from the heavy-handed *policing* fans were subjected to in Paris, other dysfunctionalities demonstrating their 'un-deservingness' included the few transport possibilities, signposts and directions, lack of access to water and toilets within confined concourses, and '[t]icket scanners [that] were faulty and ineffective' (Scraton, 2023: 27).

A paradox therefore emerges. Discourses on the 'undeserving' football supporter co-exist with newfound discourses and initiatives that emphasize supporters' rights and democratic engagement (Turner & Fitzpatrick, 2025). As unpacked next, these maintain that supporters *deserve* engagement, hospitality, inclusivity and welcoming atmospheres.

5 Barriers to change

Following the organizational and safety failures at the showpiece events at Wembley (2021) and *Stade De France* (2022), Turner and Fitzpatrick (2025, pp. 27–28) convincingly argued that *English* football stands at a 'critical juncture' resting on the emerging regulatory regimes centred upon 'consolidation of the rights and demo-

cratic participation of supporters in the governance and safety-security nexus of English football'. Stretching this proposition beyond English football, the political and institutional admittance of the need for change is also identifiable on the European level. Ziesche (2023, p. 558) reaffirms this, but also warns that aspirations towards more supporter rights and fan-dialogue have a tendency to be 'predominantly symbolic in nature and mostly concerned with keeping the product "tidy"'.

The chaos outside Wembley and *Stade De France* led to separate independent reviews, culminating with the publication of two reports with recommendations for change (see Casey, 2021; UCLF22, 2023). It is telling here that the post-Paris report, despite focusing on the Paris final, asserts that there is evidence that 'similar problems, particularly regarding policing and access for disabled supporters, *are regularly experienced*, though to a lesser scale, by supporters attending other UEFA governed fixtures' (UCLF22, 2023, p. 205, emphasis added). This report also listed 21 recommendations for improving safety at future (European) events but cites an 'unfortunate feature' of many inquiries – that is, 'when they report, the process comes to an end, and recommendations are soon forgotten and not actioned' (p. 18).

In light of UCLF22 (2023), and just one month prior to the Istanbul final, UEFA (2023) therefore announced an action plan for the safeguarding of supporters at UEFA finals. Yet at the 2023 European Football Fans Congress, UEFA's president had to acknowledge that he was aware of the issues reported from Istanbul and that these would be addressed (FSE, 2023). Hence, while UEFA and other political actors appear to recognize the need for change, and discursively emphasize that the position of *supporter rights* and *engagement* within these changes, this section argues that macro-structural barriers impeding these changes exist in form of the politics of security, and football's neoliberal political economy.

First, the mentioned designation of football crowds as a threat to Europe's internal security is not only a move that enables stricter legal regulation, but one that obstructs a coherent realization of those discourses on rights–and dialogue-based approaches towards supporters. This is because of the *proximity* of these discourses and football policing to the *politics* of security. Therefore, while initiatives like Supporter Liaison Officers (SLOs) and more pro-active recognition of supporters' organizations as dialogue partners (Numerato, 2018) reveal the contours of a more democratized politics of security, the potential activation of the 'security trump card' (Zedner, 2005) can still be utilized to suppress public debates on security. This confines political debates to the 'behind-the-scenes considerations between hard-to-find "security professionals" of all sorts, who enjoy special authority and whose knowledge production and negotiation practices are difficult to read and challenge by lay persons (Hagmann et al., 2018, p.8). One consequence of this is that law enforcers' and security professionals' authority and assessments are 'taken for granted even when they are refuted by other evidence, while critical voices denouncing the inefficiency of these policies are being marginalised' (Tsuokala et al., 2016, p.172).

Numerato (2018, p. 94) is alive to this, noting that a primary reason why the minority of football supporters across Europe who have critically sought to limit, change or regulate existing security measures, have only enjoyed limited success is 'recent macro-social developments', including the mentioned pre-emptive logic of security (Zedner, 2007). Hence, despite the intensions for a greater facilitation of supporters'

rights, including the provision of hospitality, service and welcoming atmospheres (Council of Europe, 2016), any potential deviation from, or potential failure to meet these standards can be explained in terms of the contradictory position of football supporters as a group to be provided with security, but concurrently composes public order and internal security threat. In turn, this yields an opportunity to legitimize or, at least, rationalize, recurring issues of excessive policing event (mis)management and organizational failures since, against security, 'individual claim[s] to liberty cannot compete' (Zedner, 2005: 513).

Second, and far from playing an inactive role here, European football's neoliberal political economy must be considered. This is illustrated by a decades-long search for untapped markets and profitable milieus, and has consolidated the power of UEFA, elite clubs, sponsors and broadcasters. Notably, on the European level, a restructuring ensuring additional fixtures under the UEFA banner can be witnessed. Whilst evident in international football, this is mostly visible in club football, where UEFA's Champions League, Europa League and new Conference League run simultaneously and engage over 150 European clubs in nearly 400 fixtures each season. These commercial trends are not isolated from the policing of supporters, as they provide 'hooligans [the] opportunity to challenge their opponents even in the most distance locations' (Antonowics & Grodecki, 2025: 10).

It could be contended, however, that the commitment to commercial interventions has not run parallel to ensuring the commodity in question is satisfactory, or of a higher quality (indeed, *The Guardian's* Jonathan Liew [2022] remarks: 'In what vision of consumer capitalism are the premium customers penned in like animals?'). As the compounding organizational and safety issues at several showpiece football events illustrate, European football's neoliberal logic of expansion, even if reduced to a case of a 'package' sold to 'consumers' (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2010), proceeds on a basis where many of those purchasing the product are simultaneously seen as a 'potential security threat' (Numerato, 2018), hence met with indifference or viewed as 'undeserving' of even basic or consistent customer service and standards.

We can question, then, *why* football supporters 'continue to consume football even when the "commodity" proves to be an "unsatisfactory" or unsuccessful one' (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2010, p. 193). As Fitzpatrick (2024) highlights, although a minority of supporters are politicized activists who may actively campaign against football's policing, legal and security measures, these are outnumbered by supporters displaying 'market realist' tendencies. These might be aware and critical of football's free-market forces, but possess a pragmatic and 'at times reluctant, acceptance of the commercial reality underpinning the neoliberal logic of contemporary football' (p. 8). Expanding this notion, this section argues that these levels of acceptance also stretch to football's policing and regulation. Indeed, James and Pearson (2015) capture this logic, highlighting how an '*expect and accept*' culture exist amongst supporters, who have become normalized to intrusive policing practices, which is considered a normal aspect of the match-day experience:

Football supporters appear more likely to tolerate and normalise intrusive and sometimes aggressive public order responses as part of the "match day experience" whereas the use of similar policing tactics against political demonstrators is more likely to result in legal challenge. Why this is the case is unclear: protesters may be

more politically inclined to challenge the authorities than those assembling “merely” for socio-cultural reasons, *or alternatively the historical regularity with which football fans have been subjected to confrontational policing may have led fans to normalise these tactics* (p. 4).

Significantly, this element of normalization driving forward an unlikeliness to legally challenge inadequate policing cannot entirely be separated from the market-induced compliance, nor those interactive fields and discursive practices unpacked above. In this view, market forces, political discursive and policing strategies, endorsed by sovereign prohibitions, seemingly intertwine to express a form of disciplinary power (cf. Foucault, 1979) that prescribes and moulds pragmatism toward, and compliance with the free-market and security hegemonies. Serious safety or organizational deficiencies that, in other contexts, would result in legal challenges, boycott or abstinence may thus become routinized as part of the match-day or leisure *experience* that is capitalized on, ever-expanded and empowers European football’s hegemonic actors. A paradox is thus that this relative tolerance displayed by many supporters towards football’s free-market and security hegemonies may, in itself, be a barrier to the realization of a more rights-compliant, democratic supporter engagement, and the counter-power of supporter organizations who pressure, or interact with, football and political authorities.

That said, we may observe that some critical supporters in Europe have tried to enforce social change by reframing, or defining themselves as ‘consumers’. Doing so may provide supporters with ‘more recognition and legitimacy’ for their specific campaigns while strengthening the articulation of football fan consumer rights in relation to policing and security issues (Numerato & Giulianotti, 2018, p. 346). Thus, whilst elite football’s context remains unique, the question of how individuals purchasing admission in other consumer and leisure contexts (e.g., music festivals, concerts, other sporting events) challenge unsatisfactory (even unacceptable) treatment, and might frame themselves in terms of their role as a consumer, still serves as an interesting point. The critical engagement of a minority of fans with their sport’s governance and power structures is not limited to football (Numerato, 2018) and exists in, for example, ice hockey, where ‘sports fans [are] caught between the roles of public citizen and loyal fan or sports consumer’ (Norman et al., 2015, p.20). In this respect, it could be argued that further comparative work could reveal patterns of (dis)continuity and empirically affirm *which* consumer re-framing strategies that may generate social change in commercialized sports landscapes.

Overall, the wider sociological context surrounding the endemic indifference to supporters’ rights and high-profile cases of event mismanagement and heavy-handed policing (UCLF22: 2023: 205) reveals important barriers to change. Despite aspirations of greater consolidation of supporter rights and engagement, the nearness of these normative ideals to the domain of security means that limitations upon supporter engagement and rights, or justifications for their incoherent realizations, can easily be activated by the employment of the security ‘trump card’ (Zedner, 2005). Meanwhile, the advances of global capitalism have meant that European football’s ever-expanding political economy has elevated a situation where widespread acceptance and normalization exist within the ranks of supporters. Therefore, should the commodity of football be unsatisfactory; even unsafe or dangerous – the fact that

supporters are 'both resistant towards, and compliant with' football's free-market hegemony (Turner & Millward, 2024, p. 7) might serve to halt, not unlock, alternative futures.

6 Conclusion

This article's scene-setter described several serious cases involving mismanagement and/or inadequate policing at recent high-profile European football fixtures. These remain important in isolation, but as argued, they are also emblematic of a historically significant indifference towards, or weakening of football supporters' rights in Europe (Tsoukala, 2008; Tsoukala et al., 2016). Therefore, this paper's aim was not to determine the causal factors of these specific organizational and safety failures but, instead, to employ these as illustrations of, and entrees for the reading of the wider indifference toward football supporters' rights and experiences across spaces of leisure in European football.

This is regularly demonstrated through inadequate or heavy-handed policing, poor event management and service provision, or even serious public disorder. Whilst the literature on the policing of football crowds has often, and constructively, explored this by emphasizing interactional models (King, 1995; O'Neill, 2005; Stott et al., 2007), this article maintains that such work must be supplemented by analyses that predominantly is concerned with the wider macro social and political structures that enable not only these recurrent acts of event mismanagement and failures, but the longstanding indifference to, and imbalance of supporters' rights.

By developing an analysis that essentially zooms out, this article has unpacked how (1) overlapping public (dis)order fields, (2) discursive practices and (3) security-related and political economic barriers to change, that are inter-connected and historically-rooted, continue to influence the contemporary policing of football supporters in Europe. As argued, these processes also contribute towards and uphold the widespread indifference to supporters' rights – and speak directly to the 'long-term failure to incorporate the democratic voice of fans in the event management of football' (Turner & Fitzpatrick, 2025, p. 37).

Despite a momentum – especially post-Wembley and post-*Stade De France* – of political and institutional discourses that accept the need for greater democratic engagement with supporters, and a greater respect for supporters' rights (Turner & Fitzpatrick, 2025; Lee Ludvigsen, 2025a), the symbiotic set of transnational, legal, political, security and neoliberal forces unpacked above, as contended, hegemonically bundle football supporters together with wider collective and transnational public order and internal security threats, sustain the image of the 'undeserving' football supporter, and place limitations and contradictions upon claims for supporters' rights. In turn, this contextualizes why (re)interpretations of supporter rights '[seem] to stop at their own door' (Ziesche, 2023, p. 557). This paper, thus, holds a broader significance since it reveals how, faced with security and public order challenges within leisure settings, long-term political, bureaucratic and commercial struggles intersect to create a contradictory stance on the (un)importance of human rights and civil liberties.

This article contributes to, and bridges closer together, three strands of social scientific literatures. First, it contributes to literature on the policing of football crowds, and secondly, to insights on regimes of social and legal control of supporters across Europe (Pearson, 1999; Tsoukala, 2009). Third, these insights are put in conversation with research in leisure studies and the sociology of sport on the nexus between football's neoliberal power structures, governance and supporters' quest for greater dialogue and engagement regarding safety and security matters (Numerato, 2018; Turner & Fitzpatrick, 2025) in football's 'constrained leisure spaces' (Webber & Turner, 2025). In making these contributions, the article stresses that the recent, serious organizational and safety issues at European showpiece football events between 2021–24, are emblematic of wider indifferences *vis-à-vis* supporters' rights, and cannot be divorced from the wider politics of public (dis)order, security, the political economy of sport and leisure.

Author Contributions JL wrote the manuscript.

Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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