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(De)securitisation and human rights: the *power games* over fans' safety and rights in European football

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that struggles over fan safety and rights, blanket bans and hosting conditions in European football provide a key site through which old and new questions about power, fragmentation and legitimacy are re-emerging in Europe today. By extending Beck's meta-power game theory, the paper contributes towards an understanding of how contestations over fans' cross-border mobility, hosting conditions and democratic participation are subject to overlapping and competing claims of authority, and involve power games between states, football authorities, clubs, supporter networks and international organisations. By mapping two power game arenas – relating to (i) blanket bans and (ii) safety and service – this paper demonstrates how European football expresses the development of new power balances and relations that transcend traditional dichotomies of national/international and public/private and proceed without fixed templates in a global age. The article adds to evolving debates on fans' rights and the (de)securitisation of football.

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Introduction

In the age of globalisation, as Beck (2005a) theorised, states, corporations, institutions and civil society movements all participate in a *meta-power game* where the ability to define the rules of (inter)national politics is at stake. In essence, Beck's theorises the increasingly open-ended and unpredictable outcomes of political contestations in time where global and domestic politics intersect, and the question of which actor that will get it their way has no predetermined answer. Crucially, it is within this setting that disputes over football fans' safety and rights have become an increasingly dynamic site for wider struggles over power and claims to authority.

However, the meanings of 'power' in these struggles have remained under-conceptualised. By doing so, this article argues that the recent and recurring issues relating to fans' safety, rights and matchday experiences in European football competitions provide a key site through which old and new questions over power, fragmentation and legitimacy are (re)emerging and being reconfigured in Europe today. Controlling the European football stadiums – as the 'great silver domes of light around the Continent' (King 2003, 259) – is the focal point of the new power games increasingly integral to football's governance, European policy and fan activist agendas.

Concerning supporters' rights, social scientists have recently pinpointed the arrival of a 'critical juncture' (Turner and Fitzpatrick 2025; Lee Ludvigsen and Turner, 2026) and 'transformative moment' (Lee Ludvigsen 2025a), whilst warning about the possibility of new fan-led initiatives becoming embedded within a framework that historically 'has not managed to maintain law and order without jeopardizing [supporters'] civil rights and liberties' (Tsoukala 2018, 155). Notwithstanding, less attention has been paid to this juncture's new structures, contestations and emerging outcomes as they play out, although several unknowns persist. This speaks to whether the current moment will actually

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result in 'transformative outcomes speaking to football's governance, supporters' rights and their democratic voice' (Lee Ludvigsen and Turner 2026, 15).

As captured by several media reports since 2022, a picture of mismanagement regularly surfaces after European football fixtures. Austin (2026) questions whether the safety conditions are 'getting worse' for travelling supporters attending European football competitions, and highlights that, for supporters, 'European away trips aren't all sunshine, sangria and singalongs'. Castle (2025) reports, with reference to crowd management problems at a Champions League fixture between Marseille and Newcastle, that 'the same problems keep cropping up'. Liew (2025) urges for a cross-border debate about the 'increasingly sinister securitisation' of football supporters and matches. Undoubtedly, these examples of journalistic accounts demonstrate an evolving situation in Europe that demands academic, and specifically, political sociological sensemaking.

King (2003) demonstrated that European football reflects its historical and contemporary conditions and trends. European football, following King, holds a special social importance, since it brings to life and expresses 'the social reality of the New Europe' (p. 259). Considering this, the above reports regarding fans' safety cannot easily, nor practically, be separated from more widespread processes, and ontological uncertainties that define today's Europe. Notably, this includes the complex relationship between Europeanisation, state power and national sovereignty (Delanty 2021), as well as the fragmentation and erosion of unity within the European community (Biel et al. 2024). It also includes broader debates regarding the politicisation of security and risk-based social control in relation to cross-border mobilities, public (dis)order, authorities' attempts to establish security and control, and these attempts' political and legal foundations (Divišová 2026; Tsoukala 2009).

Whereas independent reports (UCFL22, 2023), fan groups (FSE. 2026a) and academics (Turner and Fitzpatrick 2025) underline the need for social change and reform through a consolidation of fan rights and their democratic participation in football's governance, the current juncture exposes the absence of what Tsoukala, Pearson, and Coenen (2016, 175) call a 'clear, linear approach that is likely to guarantee effective protection of the rule of law and human rights inside and around football stadia' across Europe. Hence, notwithstanding the momentum embedded in the calls to restore a more democratic version of European football governance (Lee Ludvigsen and Turner 2026), the multi-level regulatory framework lying beneath the organisation of European level football fixtures (Tsoukala, Pearson, and Coenen 2016), involving states, clubs, international organisations, football governing bodies and supporter networks, complicates the realisation of a consistently applied human rights-based approach to football fans. Consider, for instance, the tendency of state authorities issuing blanket (collective) bans on visiting supporters (Byrne and Lee Ludvigsen 2026), which jeopardise UEFA's (UEFA 2019) regulations stipulating that away fans should be allocated five percent of the available match tickets. Meanwhile, a Council of Europe (2025) recommendation from October 2025, as made pursuant to Convention on an Integrated Safety, Security and Service Approach at Football Matches and Other Sports Events (CETS No. 218; or the 'Saint-Denis Convention'), establishes that blanket bans should only be utilised as a 'last-resort option'. In some cases, visiting fans have been allowed to travel, but met with strict conditions on their movements and modes of transport, leading to some clubs expressing their dissatisfaction (FC Bayern, 2025).

All this is significant because it illustrates how disputes over regulation, control and fan safety make visible the tensions and overlapping claims of authority that exist in European football. More broadly, it reveals the clashes and interactions between private and public, and supranational and national actors, which collectively make it hard to draw a straight line between national and international politics (Beck 2005a). Within this context, Divišová (2026, 1736) recently called for researchers to explore 'how supranational influences intersect with domestic-level factors'.

So far, however, the politics of fan safety have not been used as a case in point to conceptually understand *power* in European football's governance and beyond. Addressing this gap, this conceptual paper addresses the following research questions: what do the current contestations over fans' safety, rights and hosting conditions reveal about the dynamics of power in European football? Building upon earlier research (Lee Ludvigsen 2026; Lee Ludvigsen and Turner 2026), and drawing upon EU and European level policy documents, public statements from clubs and fan organisations, media

sources and secondary literature, the paper advances and analyses two *arenas* where Beck's meta-power game manifest itself. The paper thus contributes not solely to recent discussions on the nature of (de)securitisation of football (Divišová 2026; Turner and Fitzpatrick 2025), but to a wider understanding of governance, legitimacy and power in present-day Europe, and their implications on the regulation of public space and mobilities.

Conceptualising power and authority in the european game

In the *European Ritual*, King (2003) argued that, from the 1990s onwards, football in Europe consolidated its status as an important, transnational mechanism that sustained new economic networks of clubs and broadcasters, and new social relations and solidarities in European societies. UEFA-owned club and national team tournaments attained a status as a common reference point – a public ritual – for physical and virtual audiences across Europe who gathered *en masse* or tuned in to 'watch the same event across the entire continent' (p. 258). This ritual sliced out a unique context that brought together Europeans and conditioned a European consciousness. The practice of travelling to European cities to attend club or international competitions was quickly considered by fans as *the* premium type of football trip (King 2000) which produced, for the crowds, the 'most hedonistic experience' (Pearson 2012, 52).

However, the cross-border movement of football crowds, and their associated potential of disorder or violent clashes, has meant that the regulation of football fandom has remained, for four decades, high on Europe's political agenda (see Tsoukala, Pearson, and Coenen 2016). Here, it should be acknowledged that media discourses also have historically served to keep these issues on the political agenda and shape perceptions (Karyotakis and Zen 2025). The media representation of threatening behaviours in football have 'played an important role in relaying and eventually legitimizing claims for stricter social control' (Tsoukala 2008, 144). The positioning of European football's (de)securitisation on political or policy agendas, hence, depends partly upon the media's power and coverage. Yet, while such coverage occasionally legitimises harsher restrictions, this paper's introduction also illustrates that recent years have seen more critical journalistic coverage draw *attention to* issues of fans' safety, rights, and the need for reforms (e.g. Castle 2025; Liew 2025).

As currently characterised by transnational flows of people, European competitions' popularity is, of course, closely linked to the post-1990 dominance of free-market regimes in European football, which transformed its political and economic circumstances, and power relations. UEFA's power, as European football's governing body, has been challenged repeatedly by the concretised power of economically superior clubs who have threatened to leave UEFA's structures by, for instance, establishing a break-away league (King 2003). Meanwhile, the rise of national and pan-European fan groups (such as SD Europe and Football Supporters Europe [FSE]) throughout the 1990s and 2000s, expresses, at once, the marginalisation *and* potential counter-power of fans in contemporary football (Cleland et al. 2018). Hence, clubs, football authorities, states and fan groups are all engaged in a competition – or game – to define what the future of the European ritual should be like, and its direction (Numerato 2018). In making theoretical sense of this, it is possible to look towards Beck's (2005a) *meta-power game*, which maintains that this 'game's' dynamics are largely based on actors' available economic, legitimatory or regulatory power.

In a globalised world, Beck's (2005a) maintained that concepts of power, domination, politics and the state all needed to be rethought and redefined. This owed, partly, to the emergence of a meta-power game; defined as a 'power struggle in which the balance of power and the rules of power governing the national and international system of states are being radically changed and rewritten' (p. 52). A consequence of the globalised and de-national era, for Beck, was that the state's traditional sovereign decision-making powers were increasingly challenged by corporations, supranational organisations and civil society actors. In the meta-power game, these actors all compete for the position to define the rules and norms of (inter)national politics, the issues that should be prioritised on the political agenda, and which political or economic narratives which should be dominant. Thus, we are concerned with:

> a new space and framework for acting: politics is no longer subject to the same boundaries as before, and it is no longer tied solely to state actors and institutions, the result being that additional players, new roles, new resources, unfamiliar rules and new contradictions and conflicts appear on the scene. In the old game, each playing piece made one move only. This is no longer true of the new, nameless game played for power and domination (p. 3-4).

In the meta-power game, old/new, and national/international politics have become enmeshed and so, they cannot practically be segregated. Power also takes up different meanings. The state, for instance, retains its sovereign lawmaking capacity, but is not immune to corporations' economic power and cross-border mobility/flexibility. Interestingly, James and Osborn (2023) study of Olympic laws demonstrates precisely this point, as the International Olympic Committee's law-making powers, expressed through its charter and host city contracts, challenge the (host) state's traditional legal and political dominance.

Following Beck (2005a), civil society actors lack decision-making power, but tend to possess higher levels of legitimacy and may expose or question the contradictions of states and corporations. As is central to this paper, this balance of power between states, international organisations, businesses and civil society movements is no longer fixed. Instead, it is '*disrupted, reformulated and renegotiated during the course of the game itself*' (p. 4, emphasis added). As contended, power is no longer confined to the nation-state; whilst its dispersed and fluid nature means that the outcomes of power games cannot be predetermined and, instead, are characterised by uncertainty.

European football offers an extremely insightful empirical setting to reconsider the idea of the meta-power game because it is characterised by – precisely – states, clubs, (inter)national football authorities and fan groups, who engage in a competition about the immediate and long-term future of European football, according to their interests, priorities and types of power, capital and legitimacy (Numerato 2018; Lee Ludvigsen 2026). Whilst European football once was dominated by a system of the nation-state, national control and limited markets, the period after the Heysel disaster in 1985, where 39 Juventus supporters died during the European Cup Final in Brussels, became a turning point. Commercially, from the 1990s onwards, European football was transformed into a more de-regulated, post-Fordist space with the increased power of super clubs and broadcasters. European football reflected the wider trend whereby the international order of nation-states was challenged by transnational regimes characterised by the domination of economic networks and global cities (King 2003). As unpacked next, the post-Heysel period also saw the acceleration of an 'ever-increasing specific regulatory frame on the European and EU level' in the transnational coordination of states' attempts to control football-related violence and disorder (Tsoukala 2018, 139).

Hence, European football's commercial and security-related transformations have not only contributed to its status as a public ritual in Europe. But the organisation of, and regulation of this ritual's most essential ingredients – its fixtures and the attending crowds – have become key sites for the political and economic contestations between European football's primary actors. UEFA, international organisations, states and relevant authorities, clubs, football authorities and supporter groups all possess different types of power but participate in the same power game that emerges from the attempt to regulate European stadiums and football crowds, and the subsequent questions about who can (or cannot) attend, and under what hosting conditions. Following Beck (2005a, 2005b), the balance of power within power games is fluid. The *outcomes* of power games are renegotiated, uncertain and no longer follow a set script. Such a conceptualisation of power remains important, because while it is agreed that the question of fans' safety and rights is being renegotiated at a 'critical juncture' (Turner and Fitzpatrick 2025) and finds itself at a 'transformative moment' (Lee Ludvigsen 2025a), less attention has been paid to the emerging regulatory and institutional outcomes of this juncture, and crucially, how forms and relations of power lie beneath and mould these outcomes.

Fan safety and rights caught between transnational regimes and national specificities

To understand the tension within the regulatory and policy context that the questions around supporters' safety and rights, and states' hosting conditions emerge in, it is necessary to unpack briefly its historical and political foundations. This regulatory context emerged in a response to football

crowd violence or 'hooliganism'. It remains crucial to acknowledge that issues of football crowd violence and disorder continue to exist and trouble domestic and European football competitions (see Karyotakis and Zen 2025). Accordingly, this highlights the need for effective and sophisticated responses targeting individuals that attend football with the intention to engage in violent or disorderly behaviours (Pearson and Stott 2016). However, as Tsoukala, Pearson, and Coenen (2016) write, such responses should account for and balance the need for security with the civil and human rights of the majority of peaceful, ordinary supporters.

Whilst it, with reference to football crowd disorder and violence, is 'possible to discern a pan-European philosophy in legal and policing responses' (Tsoukala, Pearson, and Coenen 2016, 170), the rationalities behind this philosophy have been influenced by an assemblage of supranational texts and regulations, international law and Europeanisation processes (Spaaij 2013; Tsoukala 2009). UEFA was inaugurated in 1954, and by 1976, the governing body had occasionally been frustrated with the lack of action from public authorities in controlling football disorder and issued its own binding guidelines containing recommendations for the prevention of crowd disturbances (Vieli 2015). In the early 1970s, as Vieli (2015, 74) writes, UEFA also imposed disciplinary sanctions (e.g. disqualification of clubs, fines and stadium bans), while the crowd disturbances at the 1972 Cup Winners' Cup final in Barcelona led UEFA to recommend that football associations and clubs should enhance the stadium security for all UEFA competition fixtures, and announce 'that associations or clubs that failed to do so would be held responsible for any incidents'.

After Heysel, the Council of Europe's (1985) Convention on Spectator Violence and Misbehaviour at Sports Events (ETS 120) rapidly entered force, in an attempt to repress football crowd violence (Tsoukala 2009), whilst illustrating how questions of security and risk management at football fixtures in Europe was increasingly shaped by 'a high degree of internationalisation and Europeanisation' (Spaaij 2013, 176). Indeed, the supranational influence and regulatory frameworks on matters of fan safety and rights originate from the regulatory regimes of UEFA, Council of Europe and the EU which have been ever evolving since the mid-1980s (Tsoukala 2009; Lee Ludvigsen 2025b). Currently, UEFA's (2019) own safety and security regulations and the mentioned Council of Europe's Saint-Denis Convention (CETS No. 218) from 2016 represent two crucial cross-border regulatory frameworks designed to shape and bring about uniformity in states, football authorities and clubs' approaches to fan safety and crowd management in UEFA-competitions and Europe, more broadly. Whilst the Council of the EU occasionally has engaged with safety matters in football through resolutions (see FSE 2022; Tsoukala 2009), Zglinski's (2025) points regarding the on-going and future role of EU in reforming football's governance are important in this context. Here, a more prominent EU involvement in the regulatory control of football, which he envisages, could serve to set minimum standards *vis-à-vis* the rights and interests of football fans, owing to its supranational influence.

This would undoubtedly feed into a more central shift, since the late 2000s, symbolised by the turn towards supporter dialogue and engagement; and the recognition of supporters as citizens with democratic rights (Lee Ludvigsen and Turner 2026; Numerato 2018). This was much aided by the Saint-Denis Convention's promotion of articles which, unlike its predecessor's repressive stance, has sought to consolidate the safety and service-provision for football spectators (Lee Ludvigsen 2025b), reflecting the notion that '[h]uman rights … apply to *all* football supporters, not merely those that government, police, judges, football authorities or the media define as deserving of protection' (Tsoukala, Pearson, and Coenen 2016, 178).

This idea, crucially, has not always trickled down, and become coherently applied Europe. In his assessment of the Council of Europe's (1985) Convention, Taylor (1986, 653) maintained early on that the convention's importance 'depends on the continued political will of each signatory nation'. Four decades later, Taylor's argument still captures precisely the tension between transnational regulatory regimes and national specificities that characterises the issues around fan safety, rights and hosting conditions in Europe. Crucially, this *gap* between transnational standards and national implementation is central for understanding the recent issues of, and contestations over fan safety, rights and hosting conditions across Europe, because it serves as a backdrop for the two arenas of power games that are unpacked next, which characterise the present-day struggles to define safety, and determine the importance of fans' rights, in European football.

Unpacking two arenas of power games

To illustrate what the current struggles over fans' safety, rights and hosting conditions reveal about the nature of power in European football, this section advances two *arenas* through which recent – even on-going – power games are taking place. The two unpacked arenas are related to the long-standing securitisation of football and thus carry a historical significance, but they can be considered up-to-date snapshots of how Beck's (2005a) meta-power game theory manifest itself in a more applied and practical setting. The two power game arenas advanced next revolve around (1) *blanket bans* and (2) the *rebalancing of service and safety*. Collectively, they contribute towards a better understanding of how power games play out in empirical settings.

Blanket bans

Recent years have seen several reports about bans on visiting supporters being issued by national, regional or local judicial administrative authorities before UEFA competition fixtures (Austin 2025).[1] Described by Football Supporters Europe (FSE) (2025) as a growing problem, these collective bans usually involve legal or statutory mechanisms or decrees that are used to prohibit whole fan groups from travelling to and attend a specific fixture, in a specific city or country (Council of Europe 2025). While this type of collective punishment is not new, and exists in domestic leagues, blanket bans and, particularly, the *politics of blanket* bans have taken on a new significance in Europe in recent years (Byrne and Lee Ludvigsen 2026) and illustrate precisely the persistent tensions between national specificities and transnational regimes. The power games surrounding blanket bans centre around the interconnected questions of 'who can or cannot attend European competitions?'; and 'who defines who can attend in the first place?'.

In April 2023, Italian authorities banned Feyenoord supporters from attending an Europa League fixture against AS Roma; a decision that was reciprocated for the return leg (Byrne and Lee Ludvigsen 2026). In October 2024, PSV (2024a) announced that the club was unexpectedly 'ordered by French authorities not to take supporters' to a Champions League away fixture against Paris Saint-Germain. Across the 2025/26 season, different authorities issued bans on PAOK FC supporters before a fixture in Rijeka; Frankfurt fans before a fixture in Naples; Ajax fans travelling to Marseille; and, Maccabi Tel Aviv supporters before a game against Aston Villa in Birmingham (Austin 2025; Byrne and Lee Ludvigsen 2026; PAOK, 2025). In other cases, visiting fans have been allowed to travel with restrictions, sometimes announced on short notice, on venturing into city centres, or on the transport they can use (Austin 2026; *Daily Mirror* 2022; PSV 2024b). For instance, FC Bayern supporters attending an away match in Paris, November 2025, were subject to restrictions on their movements and means of travel which, in turn, made the club lodge a complaint with UEFA, calling the short notice of the decree as 'unacceptable' (FC Bayern, 2025).

Blanket bans in European football express a set of renewed power dynamics. First, against a globalisation discourse which often emphasises the eroded nature of the state's power in the face of international institutions (Beck 2005a), it can be argued that blanket bans symbolise a *reassertion* of the state's territorial authority in the face of longstanding but evolving trans- and supranational frameworks (Byrne and Lee Ludvigsen, 2026). Second, they render visible the non-convertibility of economic capital in the face of territorial sovereignty. While King (2003) saw Europe's 'super clubs' as *the* most dominant forces of European football, the power games surrounding blanket bans show that even clubs, backed by wealthy owners, have limitations to their power. For instance, when the French Interior Ministry banned Feyenoord supporters from attending the club's fixture in Lille (January 2025), the Dutch club acknowledged their disappointment with the decision but also emphasised that the club had no other options than to accept the outcome (*Reuters* 2025). In relation to the ban of Eintracht Frankfurt supporters travelling to Naples, in October 2025, a club official also drew attention to how clubs unilaterally affected by blanket bans had no means, through UEFA's regulations, to counter or offset banning decisions (*The Independent* 2025). Yet, in some cases, clubs have successfully challenged bans. Whilst Sevilla successfully appealed a ban served on their fans before a Champions League tie against Lens in December 2023, the ban was overturned just hours

before kick-off, causing disruption to supporters (*Daily Mail* 2023). The ban of PSV supporters travelling to Paris was also overturned by a judge, but PSV opted to not send its supporters over the lack of fan safety guarantees and remaining restrictions, including 'an area ban and [on] the freedom to express yourself as a PSV fan' (PSV 2024b). These examples are politically significant. Crucially, they suggest that the power games that emerge around blanket bans follow no standard templates or formulae, and identifying 'what 'victory' and 'defeat' mean' becomes a difficult task (Beck 2016, 151). The power games' outcomes are characterised by an open-ended nature through, *inter alia*, acceptance, appeals, reciprocal action or new conditions for visiting fans' attendance.

The decisions by state authorities to issue blanket bans on visiting fans – commonly justified in the name of public security and safety – have been widely contested and opposed by other actors in European football and not just by affected clubs. Bans issued by relevant public authorities could undermine UEFA's (2019) own regulations, which qualifying clubs must adhere to, holding that visiting clubs should be allocated tickets equivalent to five percent of the total stadium capacity (see Article 19). Unsurprisingly, thus, UEFA has reacted by warning about the dangerous precedent blanket bans could set for European competitions (*Times of Malta* 2023). The governing body also possesses what Włoch (2013, 303) calls the 'UEFA trump card' – the ability to revoke highly sought-after hosting rights or relocate fixtures – which underscores how economically significant actors' power derives partly from 'being in a position to *leave* the relevant national territory' (Beck 2005b: 150),

At the 2026 UEFA Congress in Brussels, UEFA President, Aleksander Ceferin, acknowledged the match-day challenges which supporters face in Europe, highlighting the counter-productive nature of authorities acting unilaterally and approaching visiting fans as a problem to be removed (quoted by FSE 2026b). Supporter groups, too, have expressed frustration with how blanket bans by public authorities undermine UEFA regulations (Austin 2025). FIFPRO Europe, an organisation representing professional footballers, also called for Council of Europe to reconsider blanket bans, stressing that such bans should be 'avoided wherever possible' and that the absence of away fans in stadiums jeopardises the football competitions' integrity (FIFPRO 2024).

In the face of some states' decision to ban visiting fans, the Council of Europe unanimously adopted Recommendation Rec (2025)1 in Strasbourg, on 6 October 2025. The recommendation made pursuant to the Saint-Denis Convention, and concerns the use of collective bans against travelling fans in football, establishes that blanket bans should only be utilised by authorities under 'exceptional circumstances' as a 'last-resort option'. It also acknowledges that blanket bans may potentially infringe on individuals' human rights, including the rights to freedom of movement, liberty and security (Council of Europe 2025). The recommendation, moreover, calls for '[n]ational legislation on exclusion from sports events [to] prioritise individual accountability over collective restrictions, ensuring that sanctions are targeted at those responsible for disorderly conduct', and for states to 'establish transparent legal frameworks that define the criteria and procedures for imposing collective bans, ensuring due process and the right to appeal' (Council of Europe 2025, 3). In September 2026, UEFA (2026) emphasised that '[s]upporters have the right to travel to and attend football matches and follow their teams home and away, while respecting applicable laws and regulations', while confirming their endorsement of Recommendation Rec (2025)1.

FSE (2026a), which for long have opposed blanket bans, and had advocated for the recommendation, described it as a 'major milestone', and drew attention to its (sub-)political significance, since it was the 'first time that a civil society organisation has initiated a recommendation'. Yet, FSE also issued an important warning that captures the tension of European football's power game, highlighting that, despite the recommendation's existence, its practical application depends upon national governments:

> The question now is how committed each of the Council of Europe member states are to safely welcoming and hosting away fans by following the recommendation. FSE is working with other key stakeholders to keep them aware of their commitments and ensure they do (FSE. 2026a).

Overall, blanket bans constitute an important arena that manifest Beck's (2005a) meta-power game. This game cannot be dissociated from a broader discussion of territory, sovereignty and power, as

states, clubs, fans, and football authorities all struggle over who can determine who gets to access football fixtures and competitions. As this section demonstrates, blanket bans render it visible how UEFA can determine the rules that clubs must adhere to but lack the power to instruct states on how to handle crowds during fixtures staged on their territory (Taylor 1986). The Council of Europe (2025) recognises this, too, emphasising that state parties retain the authority to 'determine their legal frameworks and national policies' with due regard to human rights.

If concerned, then, with how the critical juncture on fans' safety and rights is playing out, it may be argued that new outcomes are characterised by the continued tension between transnational regimes and national specificities, legal and security cultures. Whilst these are *far from new*, the blanket bans – as a key arena of power games – reveal the renewed significance of this tension, and the conditional nature of both economic, regulatory and legitimatory power in contemporary Europe. In turn, this demonstrates the arena-specific emergence of what Beck (2005a) called *paradoxical alliances of opponents* – as actors who possess diverse priorities and otherwise might criticise each other (like fan groups, clubs and UEFA) temporarily align and enter an 'issue-based coalition' (Beck 2010) by calling for the same action (i.e. the end of blanket bans).

The quest to rebalance service and safety

A second arena through which European football's power game are currently manifested concerns supporters' dissatisfaction with the hosting conditions that, particularly visiting supporters regularly encounter upon match attendance. More broadly, this captures the fan experience, and the efforts to strengthen the Saint-Denis Convention's service and safety pillars, which collectively sit next to the third, often predominant, security-pillar. At stake here is the potential *de-securitisation* of football (Numerato 2018). De-securitisation, alongside authorities' emphasis of more dialogical governance, encompasses the struggle to translate the view holding that supporters should principally be viewed as a 'peaceful social group' (Tsoukala, Pearson, and Coenen 2016, 177) from the discursive and policy levels into practice.

Several institutional developments and responses demonstrate the ongoing politicisation and social transformations around hosting conditions, service and safety in European football. This includes a 2026 recommendation (*T-S4 Recommendation (2026)2*) from the Committee of the Saint-Denis Convention – the committee overseeing the convention's implementation across signatory states. The recommendation, which follows the 'Balance S4' joint project of the EU and the Council of Europe, sets out to rebalance the three pillars with the overarching aim of fostering a 'human-rights-based approach to managing football events and other sports events' (Council of Europe 2026). The much-discussed Champions League final in Paris, in May 2022, and the subsequent independent panel report which described the events outside *Stade De France* as nearly catastrophic, also made twenty-one recommendations for improving fan safety in Europe (UCLF22, 2023). In the action plan responding to this report, UEFA (2023a) subsequently confirmed its desire to act on the relevant recommendations, confirming its commitment to improving the 'welcoming, service-oriented and inclusive experience for all supporters attending its finals'. Moreover, a Council of the EU resolution adapted October 2022, seeking to legitimise the Supporter Liaison Officer role required by UEFA (FSE 2022),[2] must similarly be considered a politically reflexive move that revisits football's security cultures and the criminalisation of fans (Numerato 2018). Importantly, as this section contends, what this set of institutional developments and assurances reveal is not solely how the current critical juncture (Turner and Fitzpatrick 2025) or 'transformative moment' concerning fans' safety and rights (Lee Ludvigsen 2025a) is playing out; but the persistent power struggles over who defines what a safe, human-rights-adherent and de-securitised version of the 'supporter experience' is – and its implementation.

Historically, infringements on football supporters' civil liberties and human rights have been met with limited concern by political or civil society actors (Tsoukala 2009). It must also be acknowledged that poor hosting conditions or inadequate supporter experiences constitute longstanding sites of contestations in European football. Already in the early 2000s, Giulianotti (2003, 212) observed that – upon awarding tournaments or finals to host cities – 'UEFA should insist that supporter experiences

are enhanced', suggesting that '[a] more proactive, positive welcome on public transport into the city and across the city centre should await arriving supporters'. Pearson's (2012) accounts from various 'Euro-aways' also detail episodes of what could be categorised as inadequate service, including heavy-handed policing, long overcrowded queues to enter the stadiums, and hour-long 'holdbacks' after the final whistle. However, as this paper contends – and alluded to in the introduction – the inconsistencies in countries' hosting conditions and commitments to welcoming experiences for visiting supporters have assumed a new political significance *after Paris*. The period between 2022–2026 has rendered increasingly visible the incoherent application of transnational standards and aspirations.

This is exemplified by the reports about travelling fans enduring, *inter alia*, limited access to toilet facilities, invasive body searches, the confiscation of everyday items, and restrictions on their movements, transport and clothing (Austin 2025, 2026; PSV 2024b). Issues relating to the policing of football crowds have been reported, through the media, from fixtures in France, Turkey, Switzerland and Portugal (Buckingham 2026), and as mentioned, led to affected clubs expressing their dissatisfaction (FC Bayern, 2025; Newcastle United 2025). Commenting on the situation in European football, FSE's Executive Director, Ronan Evain, said: 'We see a number of governments wanting to show muscle, and football fans are an easy target' (quoted in Austin 2026). As argued, despite the consensus on the need for social change and reform, the fragmented nature of authority, split between sovereign states, football authorities, EU and European level actors, and fan networks, shapes how transnational regulations, commitments and standards regarding service, safety and rights are implemented. Importantly, the future and desired changes to emerge from, for instance, UCLF22 (2023) and T-S4 Recommendation (2026)2, are still reliant on states' authorities and law enforcers who, ultimately, enforce these policies and regulations on the ground. Seemingly, the UCLF22 (2023, 18) report acknowledges this dynamic, conceding that 'an unfortunate feature of many inquiries and reviews [is] that when they report […] recommendations are soon forgotten and not actioned'.

Returning to Beck (2005b: 150), who argued that the meta-power game of global politics concerns the 'power to change the rules of the national and international power relation', this section contends that the arena in which hosting conditions, fans' safety and rights are being reconfigured in serves as a crucial site that is characterised by the continued tension between national authority and Europeanisation. Though this arena also reveals a reassertion of national authority or outlooks, this does not automatically translate into a process of de-Europeanisation (Delanty 2021). Indeed, in the face of the policies designed on the EU and European level, states retain control over their own legal frameworks (Council of Europe 2025) and the 'final decision-making authority' for fixtures staged on their territory (Austin 2026). Yet, this does not render the supranational regulative regimes obsolete, since they still represent 'competent frameworks' (Taylor 1986) normatively aiming to recalibrate safety and service in European competitions. This longstanding tension – arising from how the 'old territorial and the new deterritorialized power game are overlapping, contradicting and penetrating each other' (Beck 2005b: 151) – has renewed its visibility in the 'post-Paris' epoch, and clearly constitutes a defining feature of this article's two power game arenas.

However, the struggle for definition over what a safe, human rights based and de-securitised version of football means, crucially, is not solely shaped by institutional texts and recommendations, but by developments on the sub-political level too. The increased centrality of hosting conditions for visiting supporters on the political and institutional agendas, crucially, is relational to, and parallels fan activism agendas. Whilst club-specific supporter groups have publicly called for a better treatment of travelling supporters (Lee Ludvigsen 2026), such calls co-exist on a pan-European level, as illustrated by the 2025 European Football Fan Congress in Malmö, where a panel including speakers from FSE, UEFA, clubs and FAs was titled 'European away days: Joint solutions for improving safety and service'.[3] Moreover, it can be suggested that some fan groups' exposure to the risk of inadequate service and safety in European football may compose a shared experience, that potentially can develop cross-border solidarities (King 2003; Lee Ludvigsen 2026). This demonstrates the close link between institutional agendas and fan activist agendas and their mutual interdependence. This remains significant because it exemplifies how civil society actors' power within the meta-power game depends not only on any potential 'success' in reversing policies they disagree with, but from their abilities

to set their opponents up against each other (e.g. UEFA and states), raise public awareness about injustices and insecurities, and to mobilise around 'common goods' (Beck 2010), including improvements to safety and rights.

Still, supporters' power also depends upon access to European football's political structures, which relies on *recognition* from other players of the game (Cleland et al. 2018). Whilst politically engaged supporter groups cannot speak for all subsets of fans (Numerato 2018), examples of this include FSE and UEFA's Memorandum of Understanding, which reaffirms that a shared priority is to 'safeguard and enhance [the] fan experience while attending football matches in UEFA and national team competitions […] and the development of structured fan dialogue policies at national level across Europe' (UEFA 2023b). The two organisations' 'visiting fans sector working group' set up to improve conditions for travelling fans (FSE 2025) similarly reflect a broader dynamic of the meta-power game, insofar as all actors depend 'on forming coalitions if they want to see their goals realized' (Beck 2005a: 288). FSE's goal of a future where 'supporter rights are fully respected across Europe' (FSE 2026a), thus, demands both critique *and* collaboration. Whilst FSE's legitimacy as a defender of supporter rights is integral here, its level of participation in the arena where a safe, de-securitised fan experience is prefigured is concurrently not unrelated to the recognition afforded to it by other players, notably UEFA and Council of Europe.

A decade after Tsoukala, Pearson, and Coenen (2016, 176) call for football supporters to actively get involved in the defence of their rights, and 'assume their responsibility in what, by definition, must become a collective struggle to restore declining democratic governance in Europe', recent fan mobilisations have, with some success, linked issues of football-related safety, policing and securitisation to more universal discourses on democracy, participatory governance and human rights (Numerato 2018; Lee Ludvigsen 2026c). Notwithstanding, the quest for an equilibrium between security, service and safety is currently characterised by the relational nature of reflexive institutional responses and critical fan engagement, and their limitations – when isolated – in ensuring a more consistent and service-based supporter experience across Europe. Significantly, this demonstrates that in the power game arena where the de-securitisation of football currently is being (re)negotiated, no actor can achieve their goals in isolation. Therefore, the trajectories that each actor pursues become 'locked together in such a way that collaboration and domination start to resemble two sides of the same coin' (Allen 2008, 161). This point remains important because it enriches recent discussions on football's securitisation and its positioning between domestic and European regulations (Divišová, 2026).

Conclusions

Globalisation and the perceived globality of risk have reconfigured the distinction between national and international spheres, creating a new '[h]azy power space of global domestic politics' (Beck, 2005, xi). Accordingly, this article has questioned what present-day struggles over fans' safety and rights in European football reveal about this (glocalised) power space and its dynamics. Against this background, this article argues that the cross-border significance of football-related disorder and violence risks and its side-effects, including implications upon ordinary fans' safety, rights and experiences (Tsoukala, Pearson, and Coenen 2016) have transformed European football competitions into a key site where old and new questions over power are (re)emerging in present-day European societies.

While some of the key dynamics and issues discussed in this paper are not fundamentally new; it is argued that they have taken on a new political significance, and become increasingly visible or exposed, in the period between 2022 and 2026. Since 2022, media accounts have highlighted worrying safety conditions for football fans at European fixtures, underlining also the need for a transnational debate on the securitisation of football fixtures (Austin 2025; Liew 2025). Scholars have proposed that a new critical juncture has been triggered in European football, where the future of fans' safety, rights and citizenship is being figured out (Lee Ludvigsen and Turner 2026; Turner and Fitzpatrick 2025). However, what remains unclear is the tentative, actual and emerging outcomes of this juncture, and how forms and relationships of power shape these outcomes. To clarify this, this article employs Beck's (2005a) theory of the *meta-power game*. In this game, the balance of power between state, business and civil society actors is being re-written, as these actors find themselves competing for the ability to dominate and define the political agenda's rules, norms and prioritisations. Central here is Beck's idea that the

power balance between the mentioned actors no longer is fixed nor divided between distinct global/national spheres. Hence, potential answers to the questions of 'who gets it their way?' – or, as Beck put it, 'who wins?' (p. 249) – are marked by an unpredictability and open-endedness. In light of recent issues, disputes and mobilisations over fan safety and rights and hosting conditions for travelling supporters, this article advanced two *arenas* through which the meta-power game manifest itself in current, empirical settings. The two power game arenas concern (i) blanket bans of away fans and the (sub-) political attempts to (ii) de-securitise football by consistently implementing more human-rights-based approaches to football events, and collectively express three key dynamics of high sociological importance.

First, in the two arenas, Council of Europe Recommendation Rec (2025)1 and Recommendation (2026)2 represent two new, transnationally significant responses to European football's (de)securitisation. However, their short-and long-term legacies, to paraphrase Taylor (1986) will depend on countries' political commitment. As Numerato (2018, 92) reminds us, 'deliberative politics' at the European level have a tendency to bring about marginal changes at national levels. Thus, these institutional responses open up a *new chapter* in the historically-rooted tensions between European regulatory regimes and national specificities in football.

Second, the two arenas underline how power games follow no standard formula but are re-written on-the-go. In the game of interdependencies and trump cards (e.g. fixtures *require* territories; UEFA *can* reassign fixtures elsewhere; clubs *may* 'break-away'; and fans possess legitimatory power, and to a degree, consumer power), new alliances, alignments, strategies and priorities emerge from, and shape, the politics of blanket bans and de-securitisation. Hence, the nature of economic (clubs), decision-making (state), regulatory (supranational) and legitimatory power (fan organisations) is conditional, reaffirming that no single actor 'can achieve their goals … *on their own*' (Beck 2005a: 288, original emphasis).

Third, blanket bans on visiting fans, new regulatory recommendations and fan agendas demonstrate the continued, blurry boundaries between international and national politics. These blurry boundaries, however, are *not* synonymous with a displacement of the state's significance. In some cases, as the two arenas show, it is possible to detect a reassertion of the state's territorial and sovereign powers when faced with the challenge of controlling the intersection of public order, borders, mobility and public spaces in the context of football competitions. This matters because it nuances Beck's suggestion that the *nation-state* becomes a site for *transnational politics*. Crucially, UEFA-competitions, issues of blanket bans and hosting conditions reveal that, occasionally, transnational sites and regimes –that is, transnationally regulated UEFA-owned competitions defined by its associated cross-border (fan) mobilities–become a site for national politics and periodic reminders of the state's traditional powers.

Overall, this article advances recent debates on the securitisation of football in national and European contexts (Lee Ludvigsen and Turner 2026; Turner and Fitzpatrick 2025; Divišová, 2026). It contributes towards an understanding of how different power forms and relations play into the ongoing transformations in football. However, the paper's relevance is not confined to the study of football stadia and crowds, because it yields an insight into how power is operationalised in the regulation of public spaces and transnational flows. Theoretically, the article takes Beck's (2005a) meta-power game into new grounds. While demonstrating how this game occurs in 'issue-based' arenas, it also contributes with new examples to his conceptualisations of territorial and de-territorial tension, the emergence of unexpected alliances of opponents, and the (counter-)power of civil society actors in global politics. Future work should extend these conceptual relations even further, by exploring other power games in European football. This includes *#KeepFootballHome* mobilisations over domestic league fixtures staged abroad, and disagreements over dynamic ticket pricing. Beside (de)securitisation, these currently define football's political and activist agendas.

Notes

1. Not to be confused here with the disciplinary sanctions that UEFA may impose on home/away fans, nor with individual (fan) banning orders.
2. SLOs are intended to act as a bridge between supporters, clubs, UEFA and other stakeholders (see Lee Ludvigsen and Turner 2026).
3. See: https://www.fanseurope.org/news/effc-2025-more-nations-more-supporters-more-representation/.

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