

Department of Political Science

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A Controversial decade of Football: an evolving industry in an increasingly complex Sociopolitical environment.

*How has the Football industry evolved from a Sociopolitical standpoint in
the last decade?*

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*Dedicated to my family,
to their successes, limitless support, and faith in my abilities.*

*To my parents,
to their miraculous and effortless contribution on making me a better man daily.*

*To my brother,
to his acting as a perpetual flame in the dark, lighting on otherwise obscure life paths.*

*Lastly to myself,
to the innate knowledge of infinite possibilities, to the harmony between balance, control, and the
dreams of a kid.*

To the dreams of that kid.

Arte et Labore.

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Introduction

The world of sports has changed significantly in the last twenty to thirty years. What was once conceptualized as a merely playful and recreative activity is now a half a trillion-dollar industry that grows steadily every year all around the world. In the late 1800s, in Europe and in the American continent, organizations started to constitute what we refer to as clubs and with the establishment of leagues and tournaments, spreading from sport-to-sport, competitions started to take shape. What is central to understand this unique industry is that passion, culture, fun and entertainment are the core elements that formed what is now a political and economic-based business. Football started to emerge in the mid-1800s in the United Kingdom as a pastime for the factory workers after their day at work and in schools and colleges for students' recreation. As Victorian Britain developed immensely through the industrialization process, urbanization and communities started to emerge. Modern football in fact, started to arise as a consequence of industrial workers having Saturdays off work and starting to practice the game for leisure watching or playing. Urban areas became rapidly key to this process as churches, trade unions and schools began to organize football teams for both young and older men of the working class. Rising wealth and increasing literacy helped the press coverage and attention dedicated to sports and thanks to the developing urban and national transport system helped both teams and spectators to travel to football games (Giulianotti, 2022).

With the growing popularity of the sport and the subsequent increasing revenues generated by the discipline all over Europe, professionalism became relevant in the beginning of the 1900s. This, thanks to the rampant globalization and industrialization process of the 19th and 20th century, helped immensely the creation of supranational organizations such as European institutions and tournaments. The need for an international structure was met in 1904 with the creation of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association or FIFA, by the football associations of Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. British nations were reluctant to join the international organization and decided to compete only in UK-based championships. This was highlighted through a couple of participations and later resignations from FIFA by the British association until 1946. In fact, when FIFA established the notorious FIFA World Cup in 1930 England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales were not invited, and missed the first three editions of the tournament. Only in 1950 England became the first British national team to participate in the competition. Obviously, this international system was highly influenced by the crises and events of the 20th century which depicted in the two world wars and subsequent cultural feelings that emerged from the conflicts. This was one of the reasons why in 1920 the British national teams renounced to their FIFA memberships after Germany, Austria, and Hungary were not expelled as a consequence of World War I.

Its beginnings already highlighted important discrepancies and tensions in the political relations between different countries and associations. The clear statement of this can be seen in the paradox of the founding nations of football, as for the United Kingdom, not sharing the regulations and not accepting FIFA's authority to join the organization. This meant that the biggest international structure for any sport at that moment lacked its main cultural identity and main competitors for the biggest competition in the world. As Europe was experiencing deep political and social changes through the early 1900s, football was mirroring these meaningful political ideologies and diplomatic tensions. As mentioned before, football is carved into regional and national culture, especially in working-class football countries like the UK ones, and this represents one of the main causes of contrast that repeatedly arose between these very different nations in arguably the most complex half a century in human recent history. As we know the British culture is famously proud and self-

centered. Nevertheless, it has never shied away from resisting to external pressure or authority. After the second world war, the sports industry as a whole started to move into a new sphere of internationalization that required a more globalized system reflecting the modern state of the international environment. The football world as a result, rapidly started to develop into a supranational scheme of federations and bodies that helped the coordination of new tournaments in all continents. Moreover, through the creation of the different football confederations in the 1950s as UEFA in Europe, CONMEBOL in South America, AFC in Asia, OFC in Oceania and CAF in Africa, it was clear that football was changing and becoming increasingly more complex and politically oriented.

Until the 1970s the sport was firmly in the hands of Northern Europeans, as the vast majority of earnings were reinvested in the major European championships and not necessarily used to expand and promote football in underdeveloped areas. This was the case even in a continent like South America where the sport was incredibly popular, but the national federations were economically disadvantaged compared to the other world powers. This progressively led to an increasing unequal system centered around few nations, but did not stop teams like Uruguay, Argentina and notoriously Brazil from rising to fame and creating a cultural movement since the early 1900s. In fact, Uruguay and Brazil incredibly combined for four of the first seven World Cup championships from the first ever edition in 1930 until Brazil's second title in 1962.

Despite the extraordinary success achieved on the pitch, the dominion of the European countries can be examined from a structural point of view as for more than seventy years the FIFA presidencies were exclusively held by England, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium. Until 1974, FIFA was more concerned to maintain their balance of power and interests over the world of football than to slowly enable minor countries to take part in the decision-making process. In fact, it presented a patrician and conservative approach focused in the biggest part on regulation and expansion of its reach throughout the world. This changed in 1974 with the election of the Brazilian João Havelange, which through the total support of non-European countries helped modernizing FIFA and moved it from a restricted club of few nations taking on decisions regarding the whole football spectrum, to a global corporation reaching new markets and goals. Under Havelange FIFA was transformed from an international gentlemen's club into a global association: through the 1970s, 80s and 90s, billion-dollar television deals and partnerships were signed with major transnational corporations. Moreover, a vast majority of earnings were now reinvested both through FIFA development projects focusing now in Asia, Africa, and Central America, and on arguably the biggest political accomplishment for developing countries being the expansion of the World Cup finals, which now included more nations and teams from outside Europe and South American elites (Giulianotti, 2022).

Football entered a new dimension through the course of the 1960-70s with the appearance of the first international stars. In fact, with the lights of George Best, Eusebio, Bobby Charlton and Lev Yashin football exploded in popularity through the image of these national heroes. Notoriously this sport changed forever thanks to figures such as Pelé, Johan Cruyff, Ferenc Puskas and Franz Beckenbauer. Obviously, it is important to mention that this process started in the decades previous to the 60s, thanks to players such as Di Stefano and Gento, which playing for Real Madrid, first started to draw worldwide attention to a sport which was starting to become global. Famously though, George Best was the first rockstar of the football world, in fact, the main difference between the early decades of the 1900s and the outburst of popularity of the 60s-70s, is that now the players are not only locally or nationally known, but have become worldwide famous celebrities. This changed the course of the sports industry forever. This process only became more relevant and more influential

as a consequence of the rampant globalization that occurred in the 1960s-70s thanks to the postwar world economic boom. Moreover, as other stars took the scene in a now world popular stage, the decades of the 80s and 90s signed a definite mark on the pop culture of the most famous sport in the world. Thanks to FIFA's efforts to expand the reach of the sport to an even more global audience, for example playing the World Cup in Mexico, Argentina and in the United States, and to the talents of the new stars such as Maradona, it paved the way for the 645-billion-dollar business that we are observing nowadays.

With the growing popularity and fame of football, the sensation that the sport was evolving but also changing its nature became clear thanks to numerous scandals that characterized the 1990s and 2000s. The sport was moving from a once local working-class cultural expression frenetically to a multi-billion-dollar business that degenerated into impeached presidencies, money-laundering accuses and numerous conflicts of interests. Notoriously, the most famous scandal regards former FIFA President Sepp Blatter and ex-UEFA President Michel Platini which have both been recently convicted for fraud after years of investigation by the Swiss authorities (Walker, 2021). As a result, they have been accused of arranging unlawful payments worth up to 3 million Swiss francs as well as fraud, mismanagement, misappropriation of FIFA funds, forgery and political bargaining in regard to football officials. This system, which for years captured the media scrutiny, also generated clear conflicts of interest among all the different layers of the industry, specifically: players, agents, television networks, competition sponsors, clubs, national bodies, continental associations, and FIFA all have diverse feelings and interests regarding the arrangement of the championships and distribution of football's immense revenues (Giulianotti, 2022).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the evolution of football as an industry in the last decade. Because the sport has changed drastically through the course of its history, it is important to understand and analyze how the industry has evolved and how could do so in the future. This paper will focus mainly on the Sociopolitical environment that defined its growth in terms of political structure and complexity of international affairs. As mentioned earlier, the football world, through the course of the decades, progressively resembled an intricate political structure more than a source of entertainment and leisure for the players and supporters. This examination will be conducted through some major events and dynamics that are key in the understanding of such political phenomena. In fact, the research will evaluate the complex relation that the World Cup currently detains and that has had in the past in regard to civil or social rights. More specifically, it will consider the tournament's editions held from 2010 to 2022 displaying the cultural differences and aspirations that each of these events presented. Ranging from South Africa and Brazil to Russia and Qatar, the paper will also focus on the political environment in which they were held, analyzing then the differences between the developing and authoritarian systems. Moreover, it will touch on arguably the most important event in the history of national championships and European football: the Superleague. It will highlight the beginnings of the proposal and the notorious 2021 project, along with the reaction of the football world, business and industry.

2. The complex relation between the World Cups and Civil and Social Rights

“[...] Try to capture the complexity of the spectacle: the performance, emotion, memory, colour, noise. Not to mention the deep structural forces of money, fame, ambition, fashion, and power that are the engine of modern sporting industry... It has all the hallmarks of war. As George Orwell famously remarked, serious sport “is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence: in other words, it is war minus the shooting.” ... Perhaps because World Cup football feeds so much on patriotism, individual talent and team coordination and strategy, and rivalries emanating from past encounters in the World Cup and other matches, it dredges the depths of emotions, scouring for the dregs of love and hatred.” (Ngugi, 2018)

Football through the generations and eras constantly represented something more than merely a physical activity. As mentioned in the previous section, being linked entirely to its people's culture and communities, automatically evokes deep emotions that are hardly replicable in a different context. It is an almost incomprehensible relation that this discipline has with his people. In fact, every fan's dream is to represent the color of his/her city – or in some cases his/her neighborhood – on a football field in front of thousands of people. This deep sense of belonging to something greater than individuals, families or even cities, develops firstly during childhood all the way to adult life, and it is handed down through the course of generations. As most of the time, people, in this case fans, are the true essence and motor of something above them and that is even more clear in such a folk sport's world where their passion really is the dynasty of the communities.

As writer Muiro Ngugi describes:

“Without such emotions, there can be no game, for what is a game without spectators? It is the collective emotional investment of fans, consummate believers in a team and the inviolability of its historical legacy, that infuse life into teams, and the game itself.” (Ngugi, 2018)

Loyalty and unconditional love for a team can be seen in different ways with regards to clubs or national teams. In fact, those two can be very different feelings and experiences. It is clear how emotionally engaging supporting a club can be, but there is something special about both representing and supporting a whole nation competing against another. It could be argued that as far as culture and participation nothing resembles better a population than national teams. There are countless examples that come to mind, as most notably the incredible love that Brazilians show to the *Seleção* or Brazilian national team. The passion they show is difficult to compare to any other sports' fanbase, because of the pride and cultural meaning that this sport generates in a country like Brazil, which became globally known thanks to football. The legendary players that worn the golden-yellow shirt are now immortal thanks to their accomplishments, their talent and style of playing. Unfortunately, it is important to mention that this uncontrolled passion can sometimes degenerate into un-worthy actions or even tragedies. This is what happened in the most famous tragedy in Brazilian sports' history, during El Maracanazo, or the final of the 1950 World Cup. After a devastating loss in the most important game of the history of the team against Uruguay, in front of an incredible record-breaking attendance of 225 000 Brazilians, Brazil held three days of National mourning and officially reported 34 suicides and 56 deaths due to cardiac arrest.

Other national teams are extremely loved by their citizens, notably England, Wales and Turkey among many. But in the case of incredibly passionate fanbases like Italy, Spain and usually

all Latino or Mediterranean fans, they are arguably the clearest examples of unconditional love and almost religious support for the game.

As writer Muiro Ngugi continues:

“Something about this game evokes a kind of supreme intensity only soccer itself is able to produce in humanity. You don’t see it in other sports like fencing, long jump, or shot put, not even in athletics. It is only football that is able to stage a month of inexplicable, contagious fever, delirium, and ecstasy...It is as if this game occupies more than the realm of a sport; it is holy communion on a global scale. Through it, the Irish, the Malays, the Mayas, the Mangbetu, the Meru, all the people of the world, commune together...” (Ngugi, 2018)

The most representative tournament in football is definitely the World Cup. This is because it resembles the purest and most genuine form of following of the sport. Supporting a club, as deep as a sentiment that it could be, may also be influenced by external factors. For example, that could be the case with the multitude of supporters that famous teams have all over the world; Paris Saint Germain, Real Madrid, Manchester United and Barcelona for instance, all share a very large section of their overall fanbase with international following. This is usually also true for less international clubs, with some extraordinary exceptions worth to be mentioned: for example, Athletic Bilbao and (to some extent) Real Sociedad are known to recruit and sign exclusively players from the Basque region of Spain and France, both for their youth academy and first team. In the case of national teams instead, it is highly improbable not to support the country of your nationality, even harder to do, is to support another national team. Moreover, it is arguably the only circumstance where there is a fully true identity of a team perfectly sharing its values, culture, language and background all the way from the manager, staff, players to the fans and all people gravitating towards the organization. This used to be the case also with clubs at the beginning of the 1900s until approximately the late 80s. In fact, there was a time where almost every team had its style of playing, philosophy and homegrown players, competing one with another trying to succeed. When facing a different team in a European competition for instance, it was tangible how different cultures approached the game in a totally unique way. This changed with the course of globalization as a macro dynamic, and more specifically to the football world, thanks to the increasing globalized transfer-market, recruiting process, international management and broadcasting of trainings and matches. In the case of national teams though, that culture of exclusivity it is still intact and provides the purest form of coalition behind a cause and intent of a whole nation. As mentioned before, in this era the winningest teams will naturally enjoy international support and diversified fanbases, while no other supporter would root for a specific nation merely because of its success on the football pitch. This is why the World Cup still retains the magic of a football that almost did not evolve through the decades. The competition is in its biggest part very similar to the first edition of 1930, and just like the legendary players of the first decades of the 1900s, homegrown talents are still representing their nation against other countries.

This extraordinary competition that has being played for almost 100 years, has always had a significant impact on the environment surrounding the event. For decades it resembled more than just the sporting venue or entertainment. Moreover, this permits us to analyze the dynamics surrounding the contest from a sociopolitical point of view and understand how football can impact greatly the national and international setting. Doing so, the World Cups of the 2010s and Qatar 2022 are a perfect sample for us to analyze, in a rather small period of time, how this event can be crucial for social dynamics and how these different nations handled the popular sentiments or movements during the course of the tournament. The first aspect that comes to mind is the difference between these

countries' cultures and political structures. With this comes how these political systems behave in terms of human rights, women violence, freedom of speech, freedom of professing any religion and more.

2.a. World Cups in Developing countries

i. South Africa 2010

The first World Cup of the 2010s was held in South Africa, a country that has a rather distinct history in terms of social movements and rights. It is crucial indeed to mention the cultural history of this particular nation. After the first Dutch colonization started in 1652 in the Dutch Cape Colony, now Cape Town, and the South African War of 1899 ended in 1902, the country began to be under control from the British Empire in 1934 (SaHistory, 2017b). This period of British dominion ended in 1961, and the country became the Republic of South Africa. During the British rule, the notorious apartheid was established and gave life to one of the darkest segregation structures of modern politics. As the South African History Online Organization states: "From 1948–1994, South African politics was dominated by Afrikaner nationalism. Racial segregation and white minority rule known officially as apartheid, an Afrikaans word meaning "separateness", was implemented in 1948. On 27 April 1994, after decades of armed struggle, terrorism and international opposition to apartheid, the African National Congress (ANC) achieved victory in the country's first democratic election. Since then, the African National Congress has governed South Africa, in an alliance with the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions." (SaHistory, 2017a)

Because of this unique cultural background, this World Cup has served as a great way for the people of South Africa to stand together behind this very divided community and feed off on to the feeling of national pride. The difference between this edition and the past ones, was that for its first 80 years the African continent had never seen a World Cup played on its soil; for this reason, the excitement was palpable in a portion of the earth that loved so much the game of football, being the most played sport throughout the entire mainland. Prior to the competition, the appointment of South Africa as a host of the 19th FIFA World Cup, was met with widespread skepticism for a variety of reasons, most of all being safety of the fans travelling from foreign countries, commitment of the nation on founding the proper amount for the organization of the event, availability of infrastructures, public transportations and generally the misconception that an African nation would have had tremendous challenges hosting such a big event. A reflection of these doubts surrounding South Africa, were the rumors and comments that started to arise against the African organization in 2006 and 2007. It was indeed speculated that the tournament could have been moved to a different location as a consequence of these, and it had even been said that a number of FIFA executives were sceptical over the plans and pace of the preparations (Harding, 2006). In addition to this, there were fierce critics regarding what future economic profits would turn out to be after such investments and efforts. It is fair to mention that South Africa had, and in part still holds, a pretty serious housing problem and subsequently homelessness rate. It is indeed a developing country and this has not changed since 2010, more than 30% of its population is unemployed and its economy is still trying to grow consistently every year. Moreover, the criticisms were based on valid concerns and represented in part the feeling of the population that had been struggling financially for decades. In addition, South African's society had a serious issue of racism and Afrikaans population's repression, which thought it could be displayed on a stage for the world to see together with the incredibly high criminal rate in

the vast metropolis of the country. The cultural differences within the South African's society, as mentioned are one of its main characteristics and are one of its main issues.

As writers Cornel Verwey and Michael Quayle explain:

“The end of apartheid has left Afrikaners to face an overwhelming existential crisis... now that apartheid has failed, there is a general feeling of confusion and lack of direction amongst Afrikaners. This existential crisis culminates in the simple question: 'Who are we?... Afrikaners are not the only Africans and it is therefore tricky to claim an African identity while maintaining racial, ideological, and cultural purity... However, with the fall of apartheid, 'African' is now a self-selected racial classification essential to government policies such as employment equity. Therefore, the rhetorical struggle over who can lay claim to being 'African' has important consequences for defining who belongs, who deserves access to resources, and the fairness of structural redress such as affirmative action.” (Verwey and Quayle, 2012)

This is why this World Cup held such great historic relevance in a territory as South Africa. The critics regarding the organization and the vast spending on founding such event are reasonable and fair, but what sports do is to unite people and sometimes entire nations in something greater than just ourselves. It overcome prejudice, fear, differences and cultural tensions. The South African society, like others in former colonies, never experienced a true moment of coalition and still resemble a deep, white-centered political and economic structure: “However, whiteness is historically linked to privilege. Whiteness is almost universally a racial or ethnic category that also offers the opportunity to maintain this privilege. In South Africa, this privilege manifested itself in terms of both political power and economic advantage, which was reserved for white South Africans. While political power is no longer privilege of white South Africans, economic privilege continues. Although major strides have been made towards equity in the middle class, little has changed at the economic extremes. For example, in the job market, 27.9 percent of black South Africans are unemployed compared to just 4.6 percent of whites...change is slow and uneven...” (Verwey and Quayle, 2012)

In regard to the organization of the World Cup, there were high tensions between the world of football and the South African organization committee. In fact, in the couple of years prior to the start of the tournament, protests and strikes started to mount as workers working on the constructions of the new stadiums and on the renewal of all the infrastructures, were denouncing being left without salaries for months during the preparations. The total amount of strikes started to worry FIFA and South African's committees as they were potentially endangering the country's capacity to host the World Cup in 2010. In 2009, 70 000 construction workers who were working the on building of the tournament's stadiums, started to walk off their positions and stopped the constructions. Most of the workers were being paid 2500 rand (approximately \$310) a month, but in reality, the majority of the unions reported that workers were vastly underpaid (BBC News, 2009). AFP news agency later reported a union's spokesman, named Lesiba Seshoka, saying that if the government was no to intervene on the issue, penalizing the South African organization committee, they would have continued the strike into 2011. After weeks of strikes, the government finally conceded the lost wages to the worker and restored the preparations of the stadiums. These strikes created some sort of tension in the already sceptical football world and paved the way for the 2015 FIFA corruption scandal that ultimately involved also the 2010 FIFA World Cup assignation.

Although these events worried the fans and the South African population, the excitement started to rise greatly in the months previous to the competition. The streets started to color themselves with South African flags and shops, markets and restaurants began to prepare for the long-awaited tournament. When the World Cup began, hundreds of thousands of fans populated the streets of the

cities hosting the matches and shared football passion with the different supporters from all over the world. The South Africans started to blow their iconic Vuvuzelas since the opening game of the tournament, which began with one of the most recognizable goals in the history of the competition. Tshabalala's left-footed shot resembles perfectly the extraordinary event. Fans from the Netherlands, Italy, Chile, Mexico and virtually every other country in the football world, dressed up and cheered along with South Africans.

As writer Daniel Larlham reports:

“The appearance on 11 June 2010 of a rainbow nation in yellow - of bodies of all shapes, sizes, colors, and genders suited up in the yellow home jersey of Bafana Bafana - was therefore taken as an indicator of the health of South African patriotism. During the weeks that followed, further signs of a surge in *communitas* were readily apparent: South African flags hung from homes, protruded from car windows, and were energetically waved at matches.” (Larlham, 2012)

Even though for months there were intense critics on South Africa hosting the event, this seemed to be vanished as soon as the first whistle of the initial game went off. Supporters and journalists from all over the world following their national team, increasingly reported how magnificent the atmosphere and the facilities were and how generous and hospital the local population was. Archbishop Tutu said in an interview “The international media is awash with positivism about us. They really do see us as the beautiful butterfly that we have become” (Larlham, 2012). Moreover, South Africans really showed internationally what they were capable of, but also showed each other how to live better together in the same communities.

Writer Steven C. Dubin explains:

“The World Cup generated a profusion of cultural expression: exhibitions, pop culture symbols, adverts, fashion, cartoons, public art and graffiti, as well as creating a buzz within the blogosphere. Twitter's servers crashed twice from the overload of World Cup-related tweets. Culture was both carefully monitored and assertively challenged. The dominant trope of discussions throughout the event portrayed South Africans surmounting racial, ethnic, economic, and customary differences and uniting as one - the Rainbow Nation.” (Dubin, 2011)

Obviously not everyone had the possibility to watch the games of the World Cup from the stands, but a new-born sense of African pride and collectiveness joy was something really remarkable that became clear immediately through the population. After all the skepticism and critics raised by the FIFA committee members, journalists and experts, the 2010 South African World Cup was a huge success. It attracted approximately 400 000 tourists from all over the world to support their national team and generated almost 400 million dollars merely off this (Voigt, 2014). It attracted 21 major tournament sponsors and partners, and entertained the world of football in its entirety: a record-breaking 3.2 billion people tuned-in to watch the World Cup making it one of the most watched events in the history at the time, the games were broadcasted to 214 countries, and “Out-of-home” watchers of the final totaled for more than 1 billion, making it the most-watched event in the history of broadcast (Voigt, 2014). These incredible numbers did not necessarily mean that the 2010 World Cup met every objective previously indicated. As a matter of fact, economically speaking, the tournament did not create as much revenue as it was thought and certainly did not meet all the premises that were made by the South African Organization board. From an economic-oriented point of view, it could be analyzed as a rather average World Cup, where a very large initial investment of 5 billion dollars was made and only one eighth was recouped after the competition. Also, the earnings from tourism

were disproportionate in the original planning, indeed the 1.2 billion dollars thought of revenue only totaled to 600 million dollars.

In conclusion, the World Cup did not change drastically the South African economy, did not create millions of new jobs, and did not produce the 12 billion dollars predicted by the Organization board, but what it accomplished to do was to help immensely the branding of the country for example.

As we know mostly in recent times, there are a variety of new ways to capitalize on investments and the South African World Cup is definitely an example of that. South Africa emerged as one of the best hosts in at least two centuries. In addition to this, it created arguably one of the most recognizable World Cups in the history of the 100-year-old competition, being the first in the African continent. It renewed and stimulated creation of infrastructures and, thanks also to the creation of 115 000 jobs, generated an influx of almost 6 billion dollars into the South African economy, which has grown in a small percentage through the course of the subsequent years. Moreover, it boosted greatly the profits (and consequently the quality) of both the South African football league and of its women football movement. The biggest accomplishment though, has been the impact that it had on its society and communities. For once, the South African people felt like they belonged together and reinstalled the sense of national pride that had previously only met with the victory of the South African Rugby World Cup of 1995. This is indeed, the most recognizable moment in the sporting history of the country and became world-famous thanks to the Nelson Mandela involvement in the tournament. The legendary moment when the then president handed the trophy to François Pienaar, the captain of the *Springboks* (South African nickname for the rugby national team), it resembled the end of the apartheid and the peaceful coexistence of the black and white sides of the society. In addition, Mandela strongly campaigned for South Africa to be awarded as hosts of the FIFA World Cup, and had previously explained the importance of football in his life, remembering that while famously incarcerated in Robben Island prison “playing football made us feel alive and triumphant despite the situation we found ourselves in” (Peacock, 2013). With South Africa winning the right to host the tournament, an emotional Mandela raised the FIFA World Cup Trophy.

The Rugby World Cup of 1995 and the FIFA World Cup of 2010 have a lot of similarities in common, mostly through the depth of the reach that they had on the South African society and helping immensely creating a true culturally mixed identity.

Writer Scarlett Cornelissen explains how these two tournaments shaped the country’s society:

“Advocating non-racialism against the apartheid government’s racially based separate sport participation policies, these programmes tended to have a strong political and civic education... With the end of apartheid the relationship between sport, development became emphasised in different ways. Sport became an instrument to strengthen social bonds in a transitional, increasingly violence-ridden society. Through many endogenous programmes, moreover, attempts were made to use sport to engender reconciliation... Their operations have been grounded in the idea that sport offers terrain and widely disseminable instruments for the promotion of social integration and development...” (Cornelissen, 2011)

Lastly, the 2010 FIFA World Cup held in South Africa was a success: an iconic event that shaped the FIFA World Cup from then on. It did not necessarily generate as much economic content as it was thought prior to it, but it created an incredible event that will forever be recognized as an amazing achievement on behalf of the whole African continent. From the iconic Vuvuzelas and the Bafana Bafana (the ‘boys’ of the South African national team), to the Tshabalala opening goal of the tournament all the way to the colorful streets of the South African cities, the 2010 football World Cup

was loved and gave life to a very distinct experience. It immensely helped reducing social tensions and bringing back a national pride that was lost after the 1995 Rugby World Cup championship. Characterizing the beginning of the 2010s, it shaped the pop culture of the football world and brought the South African society and culture back together reinforcing its cohesiveness.

2.a. World Cups in Developing countries

ii. Brazil 2014

As the focus of the football world shifts from Africa to South America, the 2014 FIFA World Cup held in Brazil brings, as in most cases, a variety of controversies, critics, scandals and doubts. The 2014 edition of the Cup has probably the strongest political involvement in all the precedent ones of the 2000s. As the Brazilian population prepares itself for only their second World Cup ever held on their soil, the organization arrangements start to take shape. As soon as Brazil was selected as the host of the tournament for the 2014 edition, malcontent in the Brazilian communities started to rise. The main problem that the population contested was the increase in prices of the everyday commodities such as bus ferries, taxis, tickets for events and, notably in the cities or areas designed to host matches, of general goods such as groceries. The Brazilian population will then soon be economically debilitated from the organization of two other major events, the Confederations Cup and the 2016 Olympic games, which will cause enormous waves of protests and sociopolitical clashes in the subsequent years of the 2014 World Cup.

The protests started in 2011 and intensified notably in 2012 and 2013. Writer James Holston reports what occurred in the streets of Brazil during the riots:

“Every day and night massive numbers of citizens in all of Brazil's major cities and many smaller ones accepted the riotous invitation "Vem pra rua!" (Come to the street!) that was distributed through social media, held high on cardboard posters, and stamped on t-shirts. Often emblazoned on a clenched fist, the invitation became a hortatory "take the street" that individuals felt compelled to extend and multitudes to heed. Given this massive response, the call for insurgence, though suddenly answered, could only have developed out of a deep popular sense of what and how to protest. To find this "sense of the people," one needs to look at the street itself as the domain of urban insurgence.” (Holston, 2014)

The World Cup rapidly became a symbol for something distant from football. The tournament in fact, evolved into an emblem of a political stance that strongly refused the current system and demanded a change for the lower classes of the Brazilian social and economic state. As mentioned for South Africa, in most cases when such high investments are granted, it is inevitable to experience protests and malcontent from the population. Virtually every host of every so-called mega-event is prepared to tackle multiple critics coming from multiple contestants. The Brazilian case of demonstrations and public spending for the FIFA World Cup though, are an important issue that if analyzed can give a perfect insight on how these events shape society and politics.

The 2014 Brazilian FIFA World Cup totaled for an unprecedented 12 billion dollars of costs. This meant exceeding the South African edition and becoming the most expensive World Cup in the history. 3.6 billion dollars were invested into the building and renewals of the infrastructures even if the Brazilian Organization committee only estimated a total expense of roughly 1 billion dollars. The enormous expenses were shared through 5 cities in which new venues were built from the ground, the demolition of the Estadio Nacional Garrincha in Brasilia and its subsequent reconstruction, and

other 6 stadiums that were almost entirely renovated. In addition to this, the organization stationed another 1.3 billion dollars for other expenses that may occur through the competition and almost 1 billion dollars for security and safety of the overall event. (Dunbar, 2014)

These incredible investments showed how once again, the committee in charge of the organization of such event, completely underestimated the potential costs that the latter could provoke. This infuriated the citizens because as the tournament got closer to its beginning, the expenses got more intense and importantly surpassed the initial budget. Moreover, even with the 1-billion-dollar security structure designed by the Brazilian government, the World Cup did encounter serious issues concerning the safety of the players and staff, workers, fans and even of its infrastructures (Morley, 2012). One of the most tragic episodes came in 2013, when the seventh worker out of the personnel of the construction centers lost its life in a fire (The Guardian, 2014). In addition to this, there were in two games invasions of fans into the dressing rooms of the teams and into the stadiums without having paid the tickets. Regarding the structural problems that the venues had, we also have to mention the deadly monorail collapse and of an also deadly destruction of a non-completed bridge in Belo Horizonte. These two fatal incidents combined for 2 deaths and 30 injuries, but most importantly infuriated the popular opinion that already saw the World Cup as a huge burden on the taxpayers. All these serious incidents came as a result of the acceleration of the processes of construction for the beginning of the tournament. Consequently, various investigations highlighted the inability of FIFA and of the Brazilian board to stick to the correct timeline and provide the right quality of infrastructures as most famously, in a video that became incredibly popular on the internet of a steel staircase ladder added to the Maracanã stadium for fans to access the stands. In the video the ladder almost collapses under the weight of hundreds of fans pouring into the 80 000 seats stadium. The footage unveils a potential catastrophe where hundreds could have easily end up injured or even worse.

Furthermore, arguably the greatest controversy and socio-political issue, represents Brazil's attitude and initiatives regarding the favelas. As a matter of fact, the Brazilian government soon after it was granted the hosting of the World Cup, announced its plans to restrict the favelas as precautionary actions in order to guarantee a safe experience to every fan travelling to the games. As in every major event, or in this case competition, the city hosting the venues tries to limit the potential dangers that a supporter could encounter; usually in other parts of the world there are other types of issues that could present themselves (Gibson and Watts, 2013). As understandable in these developing countries, as happened in South Africa or in Argentina in precedent years, the main concern is the high criminal rate and unworthy conditions of slums or favelas in Brazil. As a consequence of this, usually the measures rely on pretty much 'hiding' entire areas of the cities to the world and portray a better image to the public of the state of their communities. As reasonable as it may seem to avoid certain areas of a city, and to brand a country in the best possible way, it is also morally challenging conceptualizing a total erasure of entire neighborhoods, and in addition the restriction of the citizens of those areas to participate in the festive life that takes place alongside the venues. As more socially complex, subsequently to this initiative racism, vandalism, police brutality and police persecution increased immensely during and after the World Cup. This process has been presented by the Brazilian government as the 'pacification' policy, where the main goal was to install heavy police presence in the most dangerous favelas of the nation, in order to fight once and for all the plague of gang violence and gang control of the slums across the country (Livingstone, 2014). This has been underlined for decades as one of the biggest issues in Brazil's society, indeed these slums are in terrible conditions and are entirely ran by drug-trafficking cartels which do not allow living conditions to prosper in those areas. It is estimated that 6% of the entire Brazilian population lives in a favela, a

staggering total of 11.5 million people populating a world record 6300 favelas (Cesvi Onlus, 2022). These numbers highlight how Brazil has always been and unfortunately continues to be, an apparent modern country that in reality struggles to end a long-lasting conflict. The country is obviously in an economic, political and social crisis which matches beautiful residential areas, skyscrapers, luxurious buildings with dramatic poverty, violence and deep social conflicts.

Charlotte Livingstone analyzes the controversies that arose regarding the pacification policy:

“On the Sunday afternoon before the World Cup kick-off, activists in Complexo do Alemão were preparing their artistic protest against state violations of human rights in the favela by decorating the busy Morro do Central, one of the main roads in this large favela neighborhood in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro...It is mainly poor, young, black men who are being killed by the police under the state's Rio de Janeiro ‘pacification’ policy, which has placed more favelas under increasingly more oppressive control by Pacifying Police Units (UPP- Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora), locating them strategically in preparation for the World Cup.” (Livingstone, 2014)

She continues:

“Other than the militarization of popular spaces and the repression of critical voices, the removal of thousands of residents from low-income neighborhoods to make way for infrastructure and renovation projects is another recurring feature of the preparations host cities go through to stage these events. This is happening in Rio de Janeiro, in communities such as Vila Autódromo, just as it did in Beijing (2008 Olympics) and Athens (2004 Olympics)...Local activists are harnessing the theories of Agamben (2003) to describe Rio de Janeiro as a 'city of exception', where everything is justified in the name of the World Cup or the Olympics. At protests during the World Cup when activists critique the mispending of public funds, evictions, and police violence they attack vigorously with popular anti-government slogans and banners...” (Livingstone, 2014).

As a consequence of the government policy on controlling the potential danger that the fans may be subject to, tens of thousands of people were cleared from their houses and had to abandon the Favela do Metrô (once in the Maracanã stadium area) which was totally destroyed and even after long and intense popular opposition, 800 families lost their habitations.

The World Cup in Brazil has always been a reason for controversies and clashes, but at the same time it has a religious aura around it. Brazil is founded around football and its culture is carved into this game. Brazil indeed, started to develop as a nation around this British discipline that was brought to the shores of the South American country in 1894, when Charles Miller, son of the Scottish railway-engineer who designed the São Paulo-Santos railway, brought two footballs with him from England, and started to invite other white schoolmates in Santos to play with him (Hamilton, 2009). Charles Miller was indeed crucial for the foundation of the game in Brazil. He is recognized as the creator of the movement that rapidly caught the eye of hundreds of thousands of Brazilians, and it would have not developed the way it did if it was not for him.

Another important figure for the creation of this culture in Brazil is Oscar Cox. He was a sportsman who in 1901, arranged the first football match in the history of Rio de Janeiro which was played in the Rio Cricket club between cricket players and few tennis players playing in the club. He then arranged two matches against teams led by Charles Miller and subsequently founded one of the biggest clubs in the history of Brazil, Fluminense Football Club. Even if clubs and teams are deeply loved, the perfect identity of the country is resembled by the *Seleção* or the Brazilian national team. It is without any doubt, one of the most iconic teams ever assembled and has had incredible players that shaped the history of this country and of football as a whole. From the lights of the first almost

mythological figures of the beginning of the 20th century, such as Arthur Friedenreich (who is thought to have scored 1,329 goals and more than anyone in the history of the game), Carlos Alberto, Didi (nicknamed The Ethiopian prince), and obviously Pelé; to the more recent legends of Ronaldinho, Ronaldo, Roberto Carlos, Cafu and many more.

The nation revolves around the game; indeed, its European ancestry and south American entity formed a perfect combination of cultures that generated football's most amazing microclimate.

As very different from the South African culture and environment surrounding the competition, it became very clear that Brazil's World Cup could have turned into either an enormous success or a devastating failure. What happened is definitely a mix of the two. In fact, if analyzed from a commercial, economic and sport/entertainment-based point of view, the 2014 World Cup was an incredible success. The tournament topped the South African edition in terms of commercial earnings and FIFA reported that more than 1.2 billion people watched the final match between Argentina and Germany and that more than 3.3 billion people watched at least a minute of one match during the World Cup (ESPN, 2015b). These numbers could have also been higher if the time difference would have allowed the Asian continent to have more comfortable kick-off times. The World Cup also pervaded the internet and social media world, dominating Twitter, YouTube and Instagram's activities for the entirety of the competition (Sunderland, 2014). In terms of football performances, the edition was also unprecedented, from the record number of goals scored (171), to the underdogs like Costa Rica incredibly reaching the quarterfinals, Greece qualifying for the first time to the Round of 16, Algeria nearly beating Germany, and most famously the devastating loss of the favorites, giants and hosts Brazil in a historic 7-1 defeat to later champions Germany. Also, it is important to mention how technical or technological improvements helped the 2014 edition success, both on the field and outside of it. For instance, it was firstly introduced the use of the 'vanishing foam' for free-kicks distance and the goal-line technology. Off the field the FIFA organization committee changed the anti-doping checking system and introduced the biological passport to better analyze players statuses for the World Cup.

From a political and logistical perspective, the 2014 World Cup was a disaster. It underlined even more the nation's ambition and intentions towards a specific part of the population, and on the other hand highlighted the feelings of the Brazilian citizens, who even if undoubtedly loved the idea of having again a World Cup played on their soil, being Brazil completely attached to the football sphere, saw their neighborhoods, houses and lives completely changed, in some cases destroyed. One of the main catastrophes that the Brazilian Organization Committee underestimated, was the investment, construction and later abandonment of the infrastructures used during the tournament. These new billion-dollar stadiums were left completely abandoned after the end of the competition. As the World Cup came to an end the Brazilian population had to observe these 12 billion dollars of expenses, 3 of which were spent on the renovations and construction of new stadiums, being apparently useless for the immediate future of the country. Moreover, there were banal logistical impediments that were completely underestimated such as building a 300-million-dollar stadium in the middle of the Amazon, and that if not for the World Cup it could be hard to reach for fans in the future, which is exactly what happened to the structure. This brilliant 45 thousand seats stadium is now basically unused and hosts at most 2 thousand people during local games. It loses almost 400 000 dollars every four months if games are regularly disputed in it. This is just one of the examples that come to mind with the enormous spending that the government authorized.

It would be unfair to deny that in most cases these types of investments are really important for the sports culture of the hosting country. For instance, the Italian national team and Serie A clubs

still play in stadiums and use infrastructures that were built in preparation of the World Cup hosted by Italy in 1990 and for the 1960 Olympics. A lot of stadiums were renovated such as the Olimpico in Rome, San Siro in Milan, San Paolo in Naples and many more (now Diego Armando Maradona), and others were built from the ground. This unfortunately was not the case for Brazil, or more specifically not for every stadium. Apart from the off the field controversies though, the international fans loved this edition of the World Cup; this one has indeed been voted as the best World Cup in the history by fans. The performances and the atmosphere were characteristic of the joy that Brazilians inject into this cultural phenomenon, which is unexpected for a lot of supporters. Through the lenses of a careful analyzes it can be seen how the 2010 and the 2014 editions of the World Cup, are very similar from different points of view. In fact, they were both characterized by incredible expectations, one for the first ever African World Cup and the other for the second edition of the Brazilian soil. They were both incredible successes both on the field and, commercially speaking, off the field. Met with incredible enthusiasm by the local fans and international supporters who travelled on both occasions to a developing country, which after large investments presented amazing new infrastructures and delivered an amazingly entertaining World Cup. On the other side of the spectrum, both organizational committees spent very heavily on the preparation of the event and did not meet the economic standards that they prognosticated. They indeed, left enormous stadiums almost unused and had little care for sustainability.

Writer and researcher Jonathan Gornall analyzes the 2014 World Cup reflecting also on the 2010 edition:

“The true value of the World Cup to the countries that scramble to host it is, however, less clear. For all the pre-tournament talk of the “intangible benefits” and “lasting legacy” that would accrue ...the country is now struggling to maintain the white elephant stadiums it built. Even the government’s postmortem conceded the event had left the cash strapped nation £2bn out of pocket. Public health can also be one of the losers of a World Cup, as a 2013 study concluded after examining the impact of the 2010 tournament on attendances at emergency departments in England. Attendances as a result of assaults... increased by 37.5% on the days England played, echoing similar findings from the 2006 World Cup and a Welsh study looking at admissions following international rugby and football matches.” (Gornall, 2014)

In conclusion, the 2014 FIFA World Cup was definitely a controversial one. It resembled hope and success for the hosting national team and country as a whole, but it was clear since the years prior to the inauguration, that this World Cup would have been unique. Indeed, politics rapidly started to take the scene, thanks to the hundreds of protests all around Brazil and its favelas on how the government was handling the costs and public health or security measures throughout the nation. This tournament rapidly became the symbol of the corrupt and oppressive government that protestors were hardly fighting against. As a consequence of this, as mentioned before, police presence in the favelas highly intensified during the years prior to the tournament and studies confirm that police brutality, killings, and racial discrimination increased steadily since the Pacifying protocol (BBC News, 2015a). It is also true that intense police presence helped decreasing crime, as explained by researcher Ilaria Masiero:

“My results show that the police have a negative and significant impact on crime: the total number of offenses per day decreases by 18 percent in the neighborhoods that receive extra protection, while the number of robberies drops by 34 percent. Results show that this effect is rather local, as adjacent districts do not experience crime reductions. In addition, I find no evidence that offenders from the treated districts are displacing their illegal activities to surrounding areas, with the exception

of thieves, who seem to be spatially diverting offenses to some extent. Additional tests suggest that there is no significant temporal displacement, so that the observed crime reductions actually represent prevented—rather than temporally displaced—offenses.” (Masiero, 2020)

The racial issues, combined with the enormous spending and later abandoning of the new infrastructures, infuriated even more the Brazilian population. From a merely football-oriented point of view though, this was one of the best if not the best World Cup ever. It produced incredible moments on the pitch that will forever live in the memory of the fans that had the pleasure of witnessing them. It definitely did not disappoint the football world nor the Brazilian culture which was displayed in all its beauty and colors throughout the World Cup. Unfortunately, this edition ironically both on the field and off the field, brought back the demons of the past and scared the population on the future might hold. It eventually led to another disastrous defeat resembling the Maracanã of 1950, but this time in spectacular fashion, as indeed the defeat for 7-1 in the semifinal against Germany is the heaviest loss in the history of the Brazilian national team, and also brought tumultuous political controversies that endangered the social construct of the Brazilian political structure.

2.b. World Cups in Authoritarian states

i. Russia 2018

“And if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed—if all records told the same tale—then the lie passed into history and became truth. ‘Who controls the past’ ran the Party slogan, ‘controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.’” (Orwell, 1949)

It was clear from the previous two World Cup editions that the business of the football world had changed through the decades, and it has now evolved into a central mega-industry in terms of revenues and influence. As we analyzed, after the 1990s and early 2000s expansion of its international reach, football has stepped into another level of resonance. With the 2010 World Cup in fact, football had its turning point from the old to the modern concept of the sport’s identity.

The Russian edition of the World Cup had similar but different controversies from the Brazilian or South African ones. In this case, the main problems came from the political aura surrounding the organization of the tournament. Indeed, the Russian government was at the center of the whole organization of the edition and closely supervised the outcome of every small detail starting in the early stages of the voting ballots of 2009. What rapidly emerged was that the Russian federation was tremendously interested in hosting the most important football competition in the world. The president of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin is known to be a unique figure in the world of politics; indeed, he is one of the most complex characters to be analyzed in recent history. He is known to be a strong authoritarian leader that when has the opportunity to do so, relies greatly on internal instrumental propaganda to shape popular feelings and perception of his government. As on many occasions in the past, sports have been used by dictatorships or authoritarian states as an important form of propaganda. From the historic images of the Olympic games of 1936, held in Berlin by the Nazi Germany government, to the systematic use of sports by the USSR to reinforce their internal and external impression and strength. As China understood with the Olympics of Beijing 2008 these megaevents, or more broadly sports, can be in terms of public conception of governmental structures unimaginably powerful tools. As for the Olympic games held in Berlin in 1936, where Hitler virtually obliged the Olympic selection committee to select Berlin as the destination for the summer games, countless scandals erupted regarding the host selection of the 2018 World Cup. As

soon as 2009 indeed, Russia had been accused of corruption during the bidding process. Moreover, when Russia was effectively selected as the host for 2018, fierce criticism flooded FIFA's representatives, as known political repressions and controversies have characterized Russian politics for a century (Latham, 2010).

The first controversy as mentioned earlier, occurred in 2009 when the voting process started. It was thought that the Russian Federation had high interests in hosting the World Cup and presented a clear intention on achieving this. The popular malcontent started to increase in 2014 while, it is worth mentioning, FIFA was in the midst of arguably the biggest scandal in its history. As a matter of fact, the organization was already facing accusations on bribery, various corruption cases, money laundering, fraud and more. These accusations ranged from a 10 million dollars payment for the hosting of the 2010 South African World Cup, to a bribery and fraud investigation of the 2014 Brazilian World Cup all the way to the use of the RICO act by American authorities and the FBI and persecutors to investigate hundreds of FIFA representatives (BBC News, 2015b). All of this came also after the 2002 scandalous South Korea and Japan World Cup which is now known to be one of the lowest moments in the history of the competition, where at least three referees were bribed through the entirety of the tournament favoring enormously the highly unprepared Korean team, which thanks to this, reached the semifinals beating Portugal, Spain and Italy (Hayward, 2002). The 2014 and 2015 scandals came to a conclusion with the arrest of 41 FIFA representatives and most notably with the resignation of President Sepp Blatter.

Moreover, Russia proceeding with its candidacy for 2018 intensified the discussion around whether was it acceptable that a state with the regulations that the Russian Federation has, hosted a worldwide attraction such as the World Cup. Vladimir Putin responded to the accusations of corruption and bribery in a way that has often being used by the Russian government to distract its population, which is the denigration of those accusations regarding them as simply an attempt by the UK and the United States to interrupt FIFA's Russia support as a host of the edition (Rainsford, 2015). The main concern was in reality not the mere allegation of violations in the bidding process, as in fact the public opinion was mostly focused on the military conflict in Ukraine that involved firsthand the Russian government. In fact, the annexation and invasion of Crimea in February 2014¹ by the latter, was the most serious threat to the tournament's spirit and image, which relies on joy, entertainment, fun and peace. This was met indeed with enormous popular criticism all over the football world and more, firstly directed at Vladimir Putin and secondly to FIFA to rethink the destination of the 2018 World Cup. Among many people who spoke on the crisis, many British and American politicians urged Sepp Blatter and FIFA to find a solution to the evident issue that the Russian invasion caused and that should have been immediately stripped from the privilege to organize the competition.

As then Shadow Secretary of State for Health, Andy Burnham explained:

“We have had the Sochi Winter Olympics. In 2018, we are all supposedly going to the World Cup in Russia. Are we comfortable with that idea? ...Let's do something that actually the ordinary Russian on the street will understand. I can't understand how we can all say 'that's fine'. On every level we have to send a different message... We have to be prepared to take him (President Vladimir Putin) on. It is Fifa's decision but I think they need to revisit it because you can't pretend that he is part of the club, strutting the world stage, and then take steps like this which are in fundamental violation of international law.” (BBC News, 2014a)

¹ During February and March 2014, the Russian federation invaded and later annexed the Crimean Peninsula which was a Ukrainian territory.

Another critical event shaped the feeling on the World Cup that was about to be played on the Russian soil: On July 17, 2014, a passenger flight which departed from Amsterdam and was supposed to land in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), flying over the Ukrainian territory, was shot down by a surface-to-air missile carried by Russian troops during the day of the attack and fired from a pro-Russian rebel-controlled land, which also handed the launching system back to the Russian troops after the attack. In the terrorist attack all 283 passengers and 15 crew members lost their lives and infuriated the popular opinion all around the world (Wilson, 2014). This moved numerous spokesmen and politicians once again on speaking on the matter of moving the tournament from the Russian Federation. In particular the German, Dutch and British governments immediately made their stands clear, as in the case of the UK, through the Prime Minister David Cameron and the then Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg. As in virtually every occasion during these important controversies, the Russian government replied denying any wrongdoing and reporting contrasting information through its national news system compared to the Western ones (BBC News, 2014b).

As the 2018 World Cup eventually was approaching its beginning, fear spread around foreign football fans that the notorious problems regarding racism and LGBT issues would impact greatly the experience. These concerns were reasonable fears as the Russian 'regime' both in sociopolitical contexts and also specifically in football-related domains, always presented cases of homophobia and racism. This was indeed among the reasons why other national football federations and the public opinion highly criticized the Russian venue for the tournament (Lavin, 2014). A perfect example of the popular sentiment that characterizes Russian football is the team Zenit St. Petersburg, which has at the core of its fundamental values the willingness to maintain a culture of white-only and heterosexual players. In 2012 indeed fans wanted to exclude all the players that were not in line with those characteristics and the largest Zenit supporters club, released a manifesto demanding that the club represented an all-white, heterosexual team (The Moscow Times, 2012, p. 2). It specified that the acquisitions of dark-skinned players were only forced upon fans, and did not resemble the history of the club, and added that homosexual players were unworthy of their city. The shocking and anachronistic culture that is often portrayed by the Russian fans is nothing new though.

In fact, as the Moscow Times reported:

“Russia has struggled to deal with racism and violence as its stadiums prepare to host the World Cup in 2018. Black players are frequently the targets of monkey chants and some, including Anzhi Makhachkala's, Robert Carlos and Christopher Samba, have had bananas thrown at them by fans. Officials have at times shown little enthusiasm for targeting racism. When Lokomotiv Moscow fans held up a banner in 2010 thanking an English team for signing their black striker Peter Odemwingie with a picture of a banana, the head of Russia's World Cup bid awkwardly claimed they were referencing a quaint, little-used Russian expression meaning “to fail an exam.” ...Several black players have also singled out fans as particularly racist. Former Russian top scorer Vagner Love told a Brazilian newspaper in April that fans had repeatedly abused him in his seven years playing for CSKA Moscow.” (The Moscow Times, 2012)

With the 2018 World Cup into its final preparing stages, during the pre-tournament friendly games, different cases of these events took place mostly with the French national team and other teams with a high percentage of Afro-descendent players. Being football a very popular sport, in the sense of organized 'tifo' and supporters' clubs, it is sometimes challenging to abandon a deeply working-class culture that traces back to the beginnings of the sport. The world sociopolitical design has evolved rapidly in the course of the last century, but in most cases the football world, in terms more of the supporting architecture, has failed to develop accordingly. Indeed, what emerged in the

last couple of decades, is an increasing struggle for the national federations and leagues to develop a new, more inclusive atmosphere that resembles the current orientation of the world. With football being a predominantly working-class sport, these sociopolitical dynamics are exacerbated: as in authoritarian states such as Russia, some social classes are almost completely excluded from the political debate and from a foreign 'social contamination', they result being usually more resistant to change and less aware to modern social issues such as racism, homophobia and xenophobia just to name a few. As modern Russian football culture sinks its roots in the soviet era, it never separated itself from a set of retrograde conservative doctrines that still pervade the Russian politics. This was thought to be a significant problem for the upcoming World Cup and greatly worried the Kremlin which sought to benefit from the world-famous event, in terms of global perception and likeability of the Russian federation. What emerged was a feeling of uncertainty on whether the Russian supporters would behave according to the Kremlin's will, and in some way 'sell' a good image of Russia to the West.

These concerns were well founded as the Guardian analyzes in the months prior to the beginning of the World Cup:

“Racist and homophobic chants are on the rise in Russia before the World Cup finals... a report found there has been a spike in the number of discriminatory chants heard inside stadiums in Russia, many of which are being used for games during the World Cup, beginning on 14 June. The research ...noted more monkey chants, neo-Nazi songs and anti-Caucasian chants, with 19 cases in the 2017-18 season compared to two last season and 10 the season before. Victims included players from the French national team, who were targeted with monkey chants during a game against Russia in March, and the Liverpool youth player Bobby Adekanye, who was racially abused by Spartak Moscow supporters. The Russia national team goalkeeper Guilherme Marinato, a naturalised citizen born in Brazil, was twice targeted by Spartak fans calling him a monkey. The report also notes a worrying prevalence of homophobia, which it claims is a relatively new form of discrimination inside Russian stadiums, where fans are now labelling opponents “gay” as a means of abuse more often than ever before.” (Kelner, 2018)

As it is fair mentioning that this has been mirrored from other European club supporters and leagues, as for example the notorious cases of racist abuses directed at Dani Alves during the World Cup, Balotelli throughout his career and Koulibaly in Italy, the habit of discrimination takes shape from a state-led homophobia and demonstrates that homophobic, racist and xenophobic beliefs are deeply grounded among many Russian fans.

What actually happened at the 2018 World Cup is indeed more complex. This because, with the start of the tournament, the at first tense atmosphere rapidly dissolved into cheers and enthusiastic tifos. Fans, as usually happens through the course of the tournament, populated the streets of the areas surrounding the stadiums and crowded the FIFA stands. Supporters from all over the world travelled to Russia and sold out 98% of the venues during the games of the competition (Morgan, 2018). The critical reception of the Russian World Cup was incredibly positive and became instantly a massive success. The Russian Organization committee invested a record-breaking 12.3 billion dollars on incredible infrastructures and 16 stadiums, 13 of them completely built for the occasion (Smith, 2018). These beautiful venues accompanied by free new trains and other transportation means, had a great impact on every fan attending the games and caught the eye of every journalist or critic as an enormous achievement. With all of this being true and worth mentioning, the FIFA tournament did little to nothing to assist arguably the worst human rights crisis in Russia since the age of the Soviet Union. Indeed, it did not even remotely address the issues of anti-LGBT laws, the repression of

peaceful demonstrations and the notorious restraints on freedom of speech. Moreover, working conditions during the preparation of the stadiums and overall venues were in the biggest part incredibly challenging and almost inhuman. The most criticized element was the unsupervised hiring of more than one hundred North Korean workers that were reportedly working in conditions similar to slaves or hostages. In addition to this, at least 21 workers died in the constructions and one North Korean worker was found lifeless inside of a container right by the Saint Petersburg stadium. Moreover, the North Koreans working in Russia resulted in a use of forced labor because the North Korean labor suppliers had to redirect the vast majority of their wages directly to the North Korean government also violating U.N. sanctions (Human Rights Watch, 2018). After these findings, FIFA President Gianni Infantino failed to address properly the critical situation, did not disclose whether the workers in Saint Petersburg were fairly waged, and did not criticize the Russian organization committee for these serious human rights violations.

What emerged during the World Cup, appeared to be that the Russian Federation willingly laid a veil of protection in the form of structural propaganda, in order to mislead the public attention and redirect it to the football achievements and beauty on the pitch. As a confirmation of this, multiple sources from around the world reported that the Russian Interior Ministry ordered the national news agencies and the police authorities not to report negative news and to portray the most positive image of the country possible for the entirety of the FIFA World Cup (South China Morning Post, 2018). In addition to this, in the months preceding the beginning of the tournament, the United Kingdom and the Russian government came to a political and diplomatic clash regarding the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal². The attempted killing of the agent of the British intelligence and former Russian military general and of his daughter, resulted in a significant rise of tension between the two countries, especially because the attack occurred on English soil. The Royal Family, all ministers and British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, declared their intentions on not visiting the country nor attending football matches as well as ceremonies on the Russian soil. The popular opinion accused Russia of using the World Cup, as it accrued on many occasions throughout history, as a Trojan horse that displays a spectacular event hiding from the general attention paramount social and political misconducts. Vladimir Putin as a response though, denied once again the accusations and addressed through Russian media the population, discrediting the ‘unacceptable’ and ‘hateful’ allegations (Harding, 2018).

As the World Cup went on, it completed a very successful run with the surpassing of the previous editions both in terms of paying spectators at the venues, viewers at home and total revenues. The 2018 edition was a roaring and popular success in terms of commercial achievements, and every fan that traveled to the Russian cities to support its national team was quite impressed with the breathtaking experience. What emerged then, was a peaceful and very enjoyable occasion for the football beauty to deliver its magic on the biggest stage in the world, combined with an incredible commercial success. Moreover, as the people got together to celebrate this beautiful display of sports triumph from all over the world, a peaceful social affinity emerged towards fans coming from the Western societies and Russians or Eastern populations.

² Sergei and Yulia Skripal are respectively a former Russian military intelligence officer, who later worked as a double agent for the British intelligence in the 1990s and 2000s, and his daughter.

As Russian writer and researcher Irina Kobrinskaya details:

“A failed attempt was also made to organise a boycott of the World Cup in Russia in order to spoil the Kremlin’s efforts to use the World Cup to improve Russia’s image in the world. But in any event, despite many fears and concerns in Moscow, the World Cup went very smoothly and proceeded in a democratic as well as popular way. Also, it is unlikely that this was part of the Kremlin’s plans, but a July Levada Center poll showed a significant boost in positive attitudes toward the West after the World Cup – positive sentiments toward the United States, for example, jumped to 42%, up from 20% in May.” (Kobrinskaya, 2018)

While social tension apparently remained calm and controlled throughout the World Cup, in reality what transpired was an intensive effort by the Kremlin to suffocate protests and discontent through the use for the first time in a century of Cossacks, a famous paramilitary soldier army that fought in Donbass and helped seizing Crimea, that was reused during the World Cup on Russian civil soil. For instance, a week prior the competition started, just before an anti-Putin demonstration, Cossacks took control of Moscow’s main square and engaged in a violent clash with the peaceful protesters which totaled to 719 arrests and several hospitalizations (Carroll, 2018). Finally, with the excitement of the World Cup in place for a month, Vladimir Putin and the Russian government passed the highly unpopular pension reform hoping to diminish as much as possible public attention and political focus on such matters. For instance, the day chose by the Russian federation for its announcement was the opening day of the 2018 World Cup. It received an intense popular opposition and backlash, but with protests banned for the duration of the competition and later the Covid-19 pandemic, the law stayed in place. This event once again reinforced critics and believes of the Western governments on the Kremlin’s intention on covering up crucial social and political issues, through the success and importance of the FIFA World Cup.

In conclusion, football in the recent editions of the World Cup has evolved into an even more important source of revenue and political attention. With this, countries can both benefit from its earnings and impact greatly the culture of their nation. What emerged from the 2018 FIFA World Cup, is a two-faced identity that perfectly resembles the Russian culture. It is indeed, arguably one of the most complex cultures in the world that repeatedly revolves around its European and Asian locations, its Western and Eastern nature, and traditionalist and modern believes. This is clearly highlighted by the prominent veil of racism and homophobic culture that lies over Russian football, opposed to the modernity of the infrastructures and beauty of the stadiums, by the enormous success of the FIFA World Cup both from a commercial and sporting point of view and the significant number of serious scandals that this presented. From the use of forced labor concerning the North Korean workers, through the deaths on the constructing sites, the Russian government’s strategy to hide and suppress revolts, protests and negative news through the media and how the Kremlin handled international scandals that were touching Vladimir Putin’s nation. All of this was carefully managed by Russia through Putin’s hands and influenced from the beginning the popular view and perception of both the country to the world and the issues to its population.

As in most cases, when crucial social disputes are at stake, oppressive leaders seek to distract the people with an extraordinary spectacle and a marvelous display of grandness. It is a recurrent procedure that dates back to the ancient times, as for instance in the Colosseum games and subsequent festivities, or more recently Soviet and Nazi rule. This has always been possible thanks to the structural use of propaganda that is at the heart of the substantial disparity between the Russian and the Western societies. It is finally formidable, and at the same time disquieting, the resemblance between the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the 2018 Russian World Cup, as Germany invaded Poland 3

years and 1 month after the conclusion of the games and Russia invaded Ukraine 3 years and 8 months after the end of the football competition.

2.b. World Cups in Authoritarian states

ii. Qatar 2022

As the 2018 World Cup ended, the game of football appeared distant from what it once was, and with it its most identifiable scenery. Through the last three editions and twenty years, something broke. It seemed to be a reality not correspondent to the popular pastime that entertained working-class laborers after long shifts in Victorian Britain, but in like manner strikingly distant from just the 2006 and 2010 World Cups. Undoubtedly, somewhere among this period of time, an unfamiliar shadow settled at the heart of football and specifically at the soul of the World Cup, which once was the purest form of identity and belonging, and now lucidly mirrored its corruption and moral pollution.

The presence of politics, economic power and complexity in the diplomatic terrain forging the FIFA organization, has distanced its representatives from their duty of enabling the football world and game to thrive. As much as the South African and Brazilian editions of 2010 and 2014 portrayed football popular joy and excitement (bearing in mind the political tensions in Brazil), so the Russian and Qatari World Cups exhibited political interference and substantial fraudulent advocacy. What appears to be significantly altered is what lies at the heart of the game: the passion and expectation of an entire country, or even more, of the entire football world, which is now morally obliged to focus primarily on the scandals surrounding the committees.

As suggestive and potentially memorable, the first World Cup belonging to the Arab world appears to be extremely complicated for a variety of reasons and definitely not fans-oriented. While the South African edition, enriched the football world immensely from a cultural, popular and passionate perspective, thanks to its unveiling of an entire continent's unconditional love for the game, the Qatari one already seems slightly missing the target. The Brazilian World Cup left an entire country in tears after the devastating 'modern Maracanã' but displayed also arguably the most football-adoring nation both fighting for its rights and faithfully embracing only the second World Cup on its soil. The passion of the fans undoubtedly permitted the African continent as well as the South American country to fully experience historic editions that will be remembered through time. Whether the Arab state will be able to do so is unclear. What is evident though, is the potential that this World Cup holds. Indeed, this could very much be the greatest edition in the history of the tournament, and that is because of its unusual and appealing cultural background, undiscovered football identity, suggestive locations and maybe most importantly unmeasurable riches that the land holds. The economic power that Qatar possesses, is necessarily a source of expectations in terms of the potential beauty of infrastructures, stadiums and cities. The different reigns of the middle east, such as the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are well known for their incredibly luxurious cities and display of wealth. This is undeniably intriguing for both football supporters and for the football industry. The racing industry has long taken advantage of the opportunity to invest in the middle east, when in 2004 Formula 1 established its first grand prix in Bahrain. Five years later, in 2009 Abu Dhabi was added and now followed by Qatar and Saudi Arabia in 2021. Thanks also to this, the Formula 1 business, brand and status has grown drastically in the last two decades.

It is then clear why FIFA, UEFA and virtually the entire world of football is anxious to invest in the ‘golden’ deserts of the Middle East, which are entirely unexplored even for the most popular sport in the world.

Curiously, the Arab presence on football’s European soil is nothing new. Started in 2008 with the acquisitions of Manchester City FC by a Saudi Arabian consortium headed by Sheikh Mansour, and in 2011 with Paris Saint-Germain’s Nasser Al-Khelaifi, chairman of Qatar Sports Investments. Following these two major turning points in European football, a long list of clubs from all over the continent were purchased in the early 2010s: Hull city Tigers, Malaga CF, Everton, Sheffield United, Aston Villa and most recently Newcastle United (Nawar, 2021).

The Orient business evolved drastically in the past 50 years but really skyrocketed in the past two decades. This flourishing is resembled by the increasing international events held in the Middle East as for instance the 2020 Dubai Expo, the 2022 Qatari World Cup, the four F1 Grand Prix throughout the region, the 2022 Davis Cup’s 5-year-deal with Abu Dhabi and the 2019 Europa League final held in Doha, Qatar (Akkas, 2021).

As the football world started to approach this new market, numerous scandals started to emerge rapidly. The first issue rose with the previously mentioned 2009-2010 bidding scandal of the 2018 Russian and 2022 Qatari World Cups (having them been chosen at the same time). Russia as well as Qatar were accused of bribery and corruption to FIFA’s representatives, and in relation to those accusations, different committee members were suspended, and the righteousness of the two Eastern countries to host the two events was harshly contested (ESPN, 2015a). Some inspections also found evidence that Qatar hired a former CIA officer named Kevin Chalker, working currently as a private contractor, to gather information on the rival bids and plans for the hosting of the event and influential FIFA officials who eventually decided the winner in 2010 (Suderman, 2021). In addition to this, the football world had to react to a singular event in the lights of the first ever winter World Cup. The tournament will indeed be played from November 18th to December 21st and did not particularly appeal to the supporters which will have to see their relative national leagues paused for more than a month. This apart from the inconvenience of extending the championships significantly, also entails a serious potential danger for the players in terms of injuries, fatigue and pressure. They will be forced to play a very high number of games in a span of only 34 days, after which they will have to return to their club teams and perform at a high level for arguably the most important task, which is competing nationally. Undoubtedly though, after being awarded the rights to host the World Cup, the winter period could have been the only solution to the issue of extreme heat that the country faces during the summer season. In fact, the vast majority of the fans and of the journalists of the football world highlighted the remarkable difficulties that such organization would cause, as well as the flaw in the principle of hosting a summer-oriented tournament in such countries in the first place, being football and outside sport with obvious weather restrictions.

The first serious widespread criticism arose because of Qatari’s cultural attitude towards human rights, LGBT policies and its diplomatic crisis. Qatar is a unitary state in the form of an absolute monarchy, and as in most of the Arab, Muslim and Islamic territories freedom of speech as well as many other rights are not valued accordingly to the UN (United Nations, 2022). The Qatari government has always been a valid example of this. For instance, women and homosexual citizens are bearing most of the social burden as for example it could be argued being shown in the use of the Hijab, a variety of veils used in women dressing (also in Qatar) and the infamous law on LGBT rights (Human Dignity Trust, 2022). This last, states that male homosexuality is illegal and that is punishable with a reclusion of three years in prison, but sentences include a maximum penalty of

death by stoning. Additionally, the Qatari government does not allow people in Qatar to campaign for LGBT rights, carry symbols or flags such as the rainbow emblem in public, or display in any way appreciation or backing of the LGBT movement (Human Dignity Trust, 2022).

Writer Abdullahi A. An-Na'im describes the issues of human rights development in Arab countries:

“External problems of the Arab human rights movement in its relationship to its general societal and intellectual environment are reflected on its inability to broaden its influence among civil society at large keeping itself relatively isolated among small groups and activists. To diminish its political isolation, the movement must be able to develop a discourse that takes due account of the cultural and contextual specificity of the region without undermining the universality of human rights. A distinctively regional human rights discourse should, for example, address the problematic relationship between international standards of human rights and prevalent understandings of Islam region.” (An-Na'im, 2001)

He continues:

“Another type of conceptual difficulty that is particularly troubling to the Arab human rights movement is how to deal with ideological groups which seek to manipulate the process of democratization and protection of human rights in order to seize political power without genuine commitment to these values.” (An-Na'im, 2001)

FIFA expressed how they acknowledged the issue of inclusivity and participation of every fan to the Qatari organizational committee and government, and both reassured that every supporter is very welcome at the venues of the World Cup, but to avoid public demonstrations and displaying of homosexuality activities in order to respect the country's culture. Because of this, different players and teams, as well as the majority of fans across the world asked firmly for Qatar to revert the zero-tolerance of homosexuality law in order to host the World Cup. No juridical adjustment has been made as of today.

In 2019 allegations of serious fraud, manipulation of contracts and fundamental breaches in legal regulations, emerged directly from a member of the Australian organizational committee (Australia being one of the countries bidding to host the 2022 World Cup), which accused the Qatari state-owned news giant Al Jazeera, of paying 100 million dollars to FIFA to influence in their favor the 2022 World Cup's bid, and of secretly offering of another 300 million dollars in terms of broadcasting rights for the competition (The Times, 2019). In addition to this, the state of Qatar offered 480 million dollars more to FIFA, three years after the initial bid and totaled for a staggering 880 million dollars offered directly to the organization to manipulate the selecting process for the World Cup. The bonuses and transactions were made possible through the involvement and knowledge of Jérôme Valcke, who was FIFA's secretary general at the time, who later was eventually banned for nine years from football being found guilty of corruption (Ingle, 2019). This was just the first of the numerous issues that arose regarding the founding of the FIFA tournament, it appeared as that the Qatari government had a more complex ambition than merely hosting the World Cup.

It appears that, as a matter of fact, the Gulf state for the arrangements of the competition is going to spend from 150 to 300 billion dollars (TASS, 2021), (USA TODAY Sports, 2019), (Gregory, 2013). That is an impossible effort for a competition that previously saw its peak at 12.3 billion dollars in 2018. Those figures are as shocking as crucial. Obviously, they mirror an unprecedented will by Qatar to display an image of the country throughout the world that would potentially change the course of its near future. The government has indeed various aims, as probably the goal to surpass

other Middle Eastern neighbors in terms of revenues and relevance, further their political interests and reach in the West and cement their status of world power and focus of the East (Mcevoy, 2022). In fact, eight luxurious stadiums have been built from the ground up as well as an entire city called Lusail hosting approximately 250 000 residents and worth a total of 12.7 billion dollars of investment (Gulf-Times, 2018). These stunning expenses are more than welcomed by FIFA and the football world, as they enormously benefit the organizations and the progress of the game, but what also transpires is how difficult it appears to be for governmental bodies to regulate appropriately on how these transactions are collected and whether they follow the correct regulations.

As exciting and unprecedented the economic fortunes of Qatar appear to be, dramatic human rights violations must be highlighted in extent. Moreover, the most touched-on crisis regarding the 2022 FIFA World Cup is the labor force exploitation's tragedy. This competition has tirelessly profited on the migrant workers population that are part of the Kafala system in Qatar. This construction sponsorship-system is notably taking advantage of workers of all ages and countries that are contracted by large international companies operating on Middle Eastern territories. It has been reported by an extraordinary number of sources that the labor force in the deserts of the Persian Gulf is kept in unworthy conditions, obliged to work continuously for days, extremely underpaid, virtually held hostage by the sponsors (which are the respective companies writing the contracts) possessing the workers' IDs, do not have access to health systems and cannot refer to any trade union in order to protect their rights (Montague, 2013). Moreover, in Qatar there are hundreds of thousands migrant workers predominantly from Asian nations such as Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, which are effectively working in slave-like conditions and systematically abused.

Bangladeshi researcher Nandita Farhad, through her paper called "Report: Behind the Mask of the FIFA World Cup 2022" analyzes in dept Qatar's exploitation:

"...Therefore, they are recruiting hundreds of thousands of workers to complete these tasks. However, these workers, who mainly come from South Asian countries, are poorly paid and often mistreated. In a country where the Gross National Income per capita is above US\$ 80,000, the migrant worker on an average wage earns around US\$300 a month. Migrants live in filthy surroundings and have limited access to health and safety protection, which cause accidents at work, some of them are fatal. Migrants in Qatar are prohibited by law from creating or joining trade unions and cannot raise their voice to demand for better conditions. This is a complete violation of the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining...In spite of claiming their commitment to CSR, these corporations, in reality, do very little to protect and ensure human and labour rights for migrant workers, particularly when it comes to the supply chain issue." (Farhad, 2013)

As a consequence of this structure, one of the most catastrophic human rights tragedies has emerged in the last decade, thanks to the preparations of the World Cup (Pattisson, McIntyre and Mukhtar, 2021). It has been widely reported indeed, that more than 6 500 workers have died from the beginning of the constructions in 2010, for a variety of reasons such as high falls, extreme heat, starvation, suicide, heart failures and fatigue (Morin, 2013). As the Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the International Trade Union Confederation all denounced, this is because of the large number of projects that Qatar has in program and the employment has the impossible job to fulfill the obligations of building an entire city, building 8 stadiums from the ground, hotels and public transportations, all without any proper protection of human rights (Human Rights Watch, 2019). In addition, it is probable that, having the Kafala system contracted as of 2022 more than a total of two million migrant workers according to the Human Rights Watch, the number of deaths could be even higher as some insights speculate of 8 000 to 10 000 deaths (Pattisson, McIntyre and Mukhtar, 2021).

Researcher Shahrukh Khan briefly analyzes the Kafala system:

“...The entire system in fact contradicts Qatari labor laws, and though it is supposed to provide a balance between the employers and the employed, it places a disproportionate amount of power in the hands of the employers and nationals of Qatar. This connection between the employers and the employed is the core essence of the kafala system, but it is now being criticized as slave-like and oppressive.” (Khan, 2014)

This human rights crisis has led the vast majority of the popular opinion to protest against the Qatari 2022 World Cup. In the football world, most notably the club Tromsø IL based in Norway, openly criticized the organization referring to its inhuman preparations, as well as the Norwegian Football Federation and the German football association. The Norwegian club went as far as calling for a boycott of the 2022 World Cup (Tromsø IL, 2021). No other team or federation expressed themselves apart from the ones mentioned.

In conclusion, while this edition of the World Cup originally held enormous potential as far as cultural enrichment of the football world, unexplored beauty and a further expansion of the world's most famous sport, the economic gains and political issues obscured completely the light of the game itself. It is crucial indeed to remember what the goal of the World Cup is, and who is trying to entertain. In fact, football is a game created to delight the fans, and this competition in the specific, should be founding itself on bounding, peace, joy as once-rival supporters now stand together to support their country. Instead, as often in recent times, the focus is entirely directed to other factors leaving, as this edition specifically highlights, the rightfully heirs of the game completely unrepresented and restricted from their game. What transpired from the years prior to the inauguration of the 2022 cup, is a sense of general chaos; from the scandals of corruption in the bidding process and successive win in the hosting of the tournament (thanks to the ‘donations’ of almost 1 billion dollars to FIFA by the Qatari government), to the decision of moving the World Cup to the winter season in order to avoid the extreme heat of the summer, all the way to the LGBT restrictions and, most importantly, the tragic deaths of the thousands migrant workers. This 2022 FIFA World Cup preparations were ultimately a disaster and a tragic human catastrophe. From a sociopolitical point of view, it highlighted how far the Middle East, in this case Qatar, really is in terms of social development, human rights and basic human needs compared to most of the civilized societies. Most of this is possible thanks to draconian cultural as well as political dynamics, as a deeply oppressive and conservative Islamic society is governed by a stringent absolute monarchy. Qatar was seen by many as the opportunity to reverse a deeply-rooted extremist society, which is a characteristic of far too many countries in the East. Qatar had the opportunity to open the Arabic culture to the Western fans travelling from foreign countries and to the most important competition in the world, and to build a legacy of a modern Middle East through the eyes of the billions watching from far. What it eventually did was completely the opposite. It focused merely on impressing the future spectators with luxurious views and infrastructures, amusing them with extreme wealth and leaving no sociopolitical mark on its society. On the contrary, it reinforced the extremist perception of the country and culture without leaving any space for modernity and progress.

Once the most spontaneous and pure form of football there was, the World Cup now has its integrity and values completely corrupted by the economic fortunes that this competition brings to the French-Swiss organization. As scandals and legal infringements often occur in companies across the world, especially in multi-billion-dollar corporations, FIFA has failed to investigate and overcome the unprecedented crisis of dying laborers working on infrastructures and venues that will hold the FIFA competition. This is a purposefully effort by the organization to undermine a crucial issue in

order to not impact the outcome of the tournament and consequently the economic revenues that it generates, having it not addressed nor distanced itself in any way from the point at issue.

One laborer dying for the construction of a football stadium is enough, more than 8 000 workers losing their lives on the construction of football venues for an entertainment event (working also in inhuman conditions for months) is a global humanitarian crisis. Or at least it should be. In fact, it hasn't been talked about enough and this is not acceptable.

3. The European Super League

“Contrary to what we, the people, have been told, we are the power; we have supreme authority because we are the masses and true power always resides with the masses, never with the global elite who, by their very nature, have always been a vulnerable minority and will always continue to be...As long as the masses realize that, of course.” (Morcan, 2014)

As the football industry is effectively launched into a new sphere of economic profits and worldwide attention, which has been growing steadily since the 1990s, it is lucidly the most important sports environment in the world, thanks to the effort and skills of FIFA to attract new investors and markets. The four World Cups previously analyzed give us a clear insight on the evolution of the football world having them had a central role in the most impactful decade of the industry. As mentioned in fact, there is an important increase in revenues, attendance and worldwide spectators through every edition of the World Cup as well as increasing expenditures and investments. This is evident with the enormous difference between the South African edition of 2010 and the Qatari World Cup of 2022, where the African nation pledged a total of 5 billion dollars (to make it the then most expensive edition ever) and the Gulf state which is going to spend somewhere between 150 and 300 billion dollars. This incredible development has been seen throughout the most popular sports in the world thanks to the economic growth that characterized the 20th and 21st century. If we were to analyze indeed the American market, we would immediately discover that the major leagues of the continent have witnessed the biggest development in their history in the last 2 or 3 decades, seemingly to the football world. That is notably because of the global attention that the sports industry has generated in recent times, while in the previous half of the 1900s was not necessarily deemed as a fertile economic ground for billion-dollar investments and profits. Surely though, these modern and astonishing figures that the *beautiful game* generated, underline what a rampant economy the football business has become. This as mentioned, also mutated to some degree the nature of the sport, not of the game, but of the organization and political environment surrounding it. As moral and legal corruption took the scene predominantly in the last decade, the economic interests of the FIFA and UEFA representatives altered the soul of the sporting performances. In 2021 the moral and economic pollution of the sport became clear through the monetary aims of the club owners. Indeed, the perfect resemblance of the modern vision that the industry and its multibillionaire proprietors have of the game of football, is the concept behind the European Super League (ESL).

3. The European Super league

a. Origin of the proposal

As the football world started to take shape in the 1950s and 1960s, various tournaments and organizations mutated through time. The UEFA Champions League was founded in 1955, and helped creating a new supranational structure of the game which was only nationally oriented until this point. The competition is now one of the biggest events in the world and draws the attention of billions of fans globally. The once Champions Cup and then rebranded in 1992 as Champions League, has been undoubtedly one of the two most successful ‘hits’ of football’s history, perhaps second only to the World Cup, because of the beauty of the matches and the brand-new opportunity until 1955, to play among champions of every European league. Through time though, various changes and criticisms arose mainly from the club owners who denounced the structural immobility and limited economic benefits of the competition. As the revenues of the industry grew steadily, so did the aspirations of the clubs to earn increasingly more in terms of broadcasting agreements, television rights, competition

prizes and publicity. Moreover, in the last two decades, also thanks to the countless scandals regarding the FIFA and UEFA administrations, increasingly more fans and owners harshly criticized the structure and philosophy of the UEFA competitions, even when restructured as on some occasions, adding also another European cup called UEFA cup, born in 1971. That is why in 1968 the first ideas of a new European super league started to emerge, firstly from the hands of then UEFA's general secretary Hans Bangerter (King, 2021). He intended to add a new competition replacing the Champions League (then Champions Cup) to favorite the spectacularity of the matches but did not gain the consensus of the popular opinion which perhaps preferred a modernization of the already existing competitions. As the idea remained virtually immobile for two decades, it started to regain some attention during the 1980s and culminated in 1987 with the official statements by Milan, Glasgow Rangers and Real Madrid on the intent to form a new exciting super league based on team's successes (Glanville, 1988). As again the concept failed to appeal the football world and infuriated UEFA, which stated that any team plotting on contributing to the creation of the new league would have been completely denied the access to any UEFA competition, in 1991 the project got abandoned and sanctions were applied to the three teams. In 1994 new concepts of the Super League were secretly designed by Ajax, Bayern, Manchester United and Barcelona, which wanted to replace the Champions League and create a second tournament called the ProCup intended to replace the UEFA cup, all with a North American-based sports system (The Independent, 1998). As in the previous occasion, the idea was strongly opposed by UEFA and this time FIFA, and soon abandoned in order to avoid significant sanctions by the organizations (Djazmi, 2017).

In addition to this, the Premier League started conceptualizing a well-known interest to host a league game in the United States or in different continents, in order to capitalize on appealing new markets; nothing was officially organized, but English clubs started playing a multitude of summer friendly matches all over the world. Moreover, Real Madrid's president Florentino Pérez, who always expressed his will to create a European super league, started to secretly organize once more a North American system league which would have resembled the structure of the basketball EuroLeague and Formula 1 for example. These two systems are very lucrative and functional organizations, but obviously rely on completely different dynamics. From this point of view, the Real Madrid's owner mirrors the figure of Silvio Berlusconi, former President of the Italian Council and owner of AC Milan. In fact, Berlusconi started immediately expressing interest in the creation, and specifically heading, of a new super league which would be focused on teams' prestige and incredible economic benefits.

As writer Thomas Hoehn, reflects on the topic in his book 'The Americanization of European Football' as early as in 1999, is very interesting to have a direct reference on the view and feeling of the 1990s compared to the modern one, also regarding regulations at a national and European level. He explains:

"The fundamental question is whether this compromise represents an equilibrium or whether tensions in the present system of open multiple league structures will continue to drive clubs towards a true European Superleague, possibly with a hermetic structure. European competition authorities have become increasingly interested in the commercial organization of sport, and of football in particular. The European Commission has queried the arrangements between governing bodies and external marketing organizations, broadcasters or sponsors several times over the last year. Formula One, sponsorship agreements of the Danish tennis federation, and the allocation of tickets to the 1998 Football World Cup are just three examples of cases where the Commission has launched major investigations or made high-profiled interventions." (Hoehn, 1999)

What is also important to underline, is the cultural and social weight that these decisions have on the European societies. As mentioned few times previously, the football industry is notably different from any other business that club owners may hold, this is because of the cultural relevance that this sport, and subsequently the city teams, have represented for the last two centuries for the populations. In addition to this, those decisions have enormous repercussions on tens of thousands of jobs, families and on entire neighborhoods and cities. Moreover, as occurred in the 1990s and in the future examples of the Super League tentatives, one of the reasons why the experiments failed is because of the overall social refusal of such structure and organization. The latter would have undermined the significance of the work that had been done in the first years of the 1990s to restructure the English first division (with the creation of the Premier League in 1992), the new edition of the Bundesliga in Germany and of virtually every single league in Europe, because it would have destructed the structural scheme that enables the smaller teams and provinces to benefit from the leagues above them.

3. The European Super league

b. The 2021 project

At the end of the 2018 season, rumors of the reinitiating process of a new European coalition through a brand-new league, started to spread worrying the whole football world. Various teams from Italy, Spain and England started discussing the potential of a breakaway league where economic revenues would have improved enormously as well as international appearance and recognition. The project as happened in the past, was a consequence of a pretty consolidate format of the Champions League that did not particularly appeal the clubs' owners, which sought out a new opportunity for the teams to grow financially and from a branding perspective. With the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, the process accelerated significantly and undisclosed teams were regularly meeting in secret to discuss the specifics of the potential super league. It is safe to say that for clubs and ownerships this would have been a once in a lifetime business opportunity, as the biggest sport in the world would have a single recognizable entity in the form of a league. As for basketball is the National Basketball Association (NBA), for American football is the National Football League (NFL) and for baseball is the Major League Baseball (MLB), this would create an individual stream of games, content, economic profits and immediate identification of the sport in the league.

The economic potential of the league is unmeasurable, as it is not referable to any other sports organization as far as global reach, history of the clubs, monetary power and relevance of all teams and players. This indeed, attracted countless investors from all over the world, ranging from European corporations to American giants such as J.P. Morgan which offered a backing of 5 billion dollars to subsidize the creation of the championship (Hoare, 2021). As Coronavirus hit the world, and subsequently football in 2020, teams started to experience serious economic contractions and leagues started to diminish revenues enormously with entire championships delayed, games suspended for months and a total immobilization of the industry. In addition, for more than a year after the Covid restrictions were lifted, as for instance quarantine, games were being played behind closed doors and restricted clubs from earning tens of millions of dollars. Teams such as Real Madrid, Barcelona and Tottenham Hotspur rely heavily on their stadiums and facilities to generate a big stake of their earnings, because of the dimensions of the clubs and of the infrastructures. Specifically, Barcelona even being valued at \$4.76 billion, currently has a gross debt of \$1.4 billion, Real Madrid more than \$1 billion and Tottenham Hotspur's net debt stands at around \$822 million (Hoare, 2021). As for

Tottenham and Real Madrid, they seriously suffered from the lack of games and obviously fans at their stadiums for different reasons. The Spanish club being so heavily in debt (as in reality most of the clubs are) count on everyday revenues to successfully repay it. While Tottenham on the other hand, had just built a stunning brand-new 1-billion-dollar stadium and facilities, which relied seriously on games and competitions as a stream of income (BBC News, 2021b).

On April 18, 2021, the day before a UEFA meeting focusing on the modernization of the Champions League of the following years, Florentino Pérez released a statement declaring the creation of the European Super League (ESL). Twelve of the biggest European teams were part of the creation process, headed by Real Madrid's president and followed by English, Italian and Spanish clubs. These were respectively Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United, and Tottenham Hotspur from the English league, Inter, Juventus, and AC Milan from the Italian one and Atlético Madrid, Barcelona, and Real Madrid from the Spanish division (Hoare, 2021). Florentino Pérez and Andrea Agnelli underlined how the new competition would bring unseen excitement and quality of matches, while enjoying significantly improved economic profits. It is also not a surprise that the vast majority of the presidents are American businessmen owning the teams involved in the project.

The model that the two club owners wanted to adopt was, as mentioned, the American sports structure, which relies entirely on franchises-jointed commercial agreements, use of fixed contracts limits with players, combined with other ideals of 'fair' measures historically in place in the US system. These measures are technically applicable also to the European football scheme, even more so in a Superleague created purposefully for the occasion. The main issue though, rises with the fundamental concept of the 'rotation' or 'cycle' that the American system relies on. Indeed, its greatest characteristic is the continuous change in terms of strength of teams and players allocations. This is entirely based on the Draft and Free Agency concept which are unapplicable and 'alien' to the European continent and more so to the football world. In the United States weaker teams receive the first few picks of the Draft, which is the selection of the best College and High School players in the world, organized by the league. This creates a continuous stream of new players coming to the clubs reinforcing the weakest and, only after, the strongest ones. Moreover, it relies on possible trades of these so-called picks of the Draft and players of a different team. This would be impossible in European sports where there is no connection between school or university athletics and teams, and where sports are not played at all in the academic structures (with some few exceptions). The Superleague would resemble also the 'closed' structure of the American leagues, which rely on the same teams competing every year against each other. This clearly ensures reliable revenues and steady profits for owners. Though because of this, the Super League structure would have represented a fundamental break with European's football history, which for more than 130 years, followed the 'pyramid' structure³ that ensures any team, through on-pitch success, can reach for the top prizes (Ahmed, 2021).

³ The pyramid scheme represents the structure of different league divisions in place in European football since the late 1800s. In every country indeed, there is a first to usually fourth or fifth professional leagues where teams play according to the relegation and promotion concept.

What transpired immediately, is how the league's plan was to sell billions of dollars thanks to the TV rights and sponsorships and how the connections between the American owners and the European football world took a definite turn in 2021 after decades of premeditation

“...Just as the Jacksonville Jaguars compete every year in the NFL, so, in the Super League, would Liverpool. Which is a club, not so coincidentally, that is owned by Fenway Sports Group, the American organization that also controls the Boston Red Sox, which plays in the closed MLB. Arsenal is owned by Stan Kroenke, who also owns the Los Angeles Rams, Denver Nuggets, and Colorado Avalanche. The Glazer family owns Manchester United—and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Elliott Management, a U.S. hedge fund, owns AC Milan. An American bank, JP Morgan Chase, is providing financial backing for the Super League”. (Gregory, 2021)

The new league was supposed to be played mid-week, then not replacing national championships nor the Champions League. As UEFA and FIFA obviously did not approve the league, they refused to allow those teams to participate in national competitions as well as in the European ones, which immediately left the ESL without a clear intent on how to structuralize itself and what it revolved around. From its beginnings the European Super League did not appear very clear in its organization. One aspect though seemed to be appearing again on the football stage: monetary gains and worldwide attention was continuously the predominant topic of discussion, not the fans nor the stakeholders or communities that shaped the clubs, but the foreign investments and potential ROI (Return on Investment) that football held.

As analyzed earlier, the political sphere of the game has evolved significantly throughout the last decades. In most cases in fact, the proposals by the owners of the teams were often a mere strategy to induce the UEFA commission to restructure the various tournaments for economic purposes. Used as ‘threats’ by the different clubs, it created a sort of diplomatic tension between them and the football organizations. This was thought to be broadly under control by the supranational committees which undermined the potential danger that these private and secret alliances would bring to European football. Understandably, as happened in the past 50 years, it was largely thought that the conversation around this breakaway league would have never turned into serious action by the owners and clubs, thanks mostly to the practical difficulties of the organization process. In the second week of April 2021, when the rumors of the creation of the Superleague became reality, the football world was shocked as much as UEFA and FIFA.

3. The European Super league

c. Reactions

With the announcement made in April of the official establishment of the breakaway league (ESL), the world had to watch probably the most bizarre weeks in the history of football. What occurred during these few days was unseen in a European sporting environment, especially of the relevance of this one.

Immediately after the announcement, thousands of fans took the streets to protest in virtually every city that had a football team involved in the league. Millions of fans across the world harshly opposed themselves to the creation of such competition and asked for the owners and clubs to be banned from the championships and to be distanced from the game (Ibbetson, 2021). Every single entity in the world of football and not, seemed to condemn and refuse the creation of a Superleague, which would have implied way more than just modifying football seasons. Ranging from fans,

politicians, governments, UEFA and FIFA, players, managers and commentators, expressed their incredible discontent (in the case of some commentators and fans more a feeling of rage) and the ESL as well as directly owners of the teams involved received an unprecedented backlash in a matter of hours (Clark, 2021), (Solhekol, 2021), (Stone, 2021)⁴. From Macron, to Draghi all the way to Boris Johnson, European leaders denounced this cartel of 12 teams that tried to create a monopoly on a sport that apparently did not and still does not accept an oppressive hold by the club presidents (Reuters, 2021), (Barron's, 2021).

What appeared to be even more singular than the protests of other fans and teams, was the immense opposition that the league received from the own supporters of the clubs involved in the creation of the ESL. Indeed, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester United and Barcelona fans immediately stormed the headquarters or the stadiums of their cities, to ask for the resignation of their own presidents (Clark, 2021), (Eurosport, 2021), (BBC News, 2021a). What this meant, was that the move initiated by Florentino Pérez and later Andrea Agnelli was entirely driven by economic purposes and potential returns, not by any mean out of a will to further the development of the sport. The entire structure was revolving around greed, selfishness and avarice and it is not a coincidence that the vast majority of the owners of the clubs were already hardly criticized by their supporters, as for instance the Glazers (owners of Manchester United), John W. Henry (owner of Liverpool FC) and Stan Kroenke (owner of Arsenal FC) who sustainedly received critics from their fans on how they appeared distant regarding their interests.

Moreover, one of the most shocking and singular happenings was the complete not understanding by the players and managers of the developments occurred during this week, culminating also in them condemning in multiple cases their clubs' decision on live TV and press conferences. They in fact, were not informed by the owners as they secretly discussed and decided the creation of the Superleague without communicating any information to the direct protagonists of their company. What emerges again is how this move was not a football driven decision, but merely avidity for economic gains.

This decision by the teams involved, or better owners, would have had so many challenges, as mentioned earlier, that it would have been very difficult for it to function. It would have destroyed the pyramid structure that football revolves around, which is the basis for competition and sports more broadly. In practice, if this Superleague would have been created it would have killed completely hundreds of football clubs around Europe. All the teams laying beneath the ones that were self-selected into the league, would have seen their profits decimated as worldwide fans would have stopped watching national leagues, and turning to the ESL as their main if not only focus. If this would have been devastating for the existence of smaller organizations in the first divisions of Spain, Italy and England, it would have been even more so for the second or third divisions that are at the core of the pyramid. This is why the scheme is necessary. Its function is indeed to trickle down the earnings from the best teams to the smallest, and subsequently from the top divisions to the lower ones. Moreover, the feeling that this precarious organization left in the people that had to witness its lifetime and generational club shifting completely away from its fans, was a sense of mistrust and anger that, still to this day, brings the supporters to harshly criticize the presidents at the head of English clubs (as it was the English league definitely the most in danger in terms of future existence).

What in a sense amazed and infuriated the commentators, as famously Jamie Carragher, Gary Neville, Michael Richards, Thierry Henry and Roy Keane at Sky Sports UK, was the complete

⁴ There are hundreds of articles on the overall backlash, so I just decided to pick the ones more meaningful in terms of UEFA, FIFA, the UK government and the teams.

lacking of organization, understanding of the possible backlash and communication by the ESL board which was intended to keep its secretness and plans for itself. It is now part of football history the famous speech that Gary Neville, former Manchester United captain and legend, gave live on Sky moments after the announcement of the Superleague was made.

Here is an extract of the condemnation that he made to the league owners and clubs themselves:

“The proposal will get kicked out because the fans will hate it, the governments will hate it, FIFA will hate it, UEFA will hate it, the Premier League have come out already and say they hate it, you'll hate it, I'll hate it. And they are so disconnected from reality to think they could put this forward at any time, let alone now. Honestly, I'd say I've got no words for them but I've had a lot of words. I said during the game that I thought the clubs that signed up to it should be deducted points, that includes this club [Manchester United] - the club that I love and I've supported all my life. But I'm ashamed of them, absolutely ashamed - for two reasons. Firstly, that they would want to sign up to a competition that is franchise football essentially, with no promotion or relegation, almost like that right to play the biggest games all the time - that's not the ethic and ethos Manchester United was built on...And the timing is my second point. So Man Utd as a football club to vote for this is disgusting. The timing of it, the midst of a pandemic, in the midst of an economic crisis, not just in football but in this world, to demonstrate greed rather than compassion is an absolute shocker as far as I'm concerned.” (Neville, 2021)

As also the other commentators and former players mentioned earlier, representing respectively Liverpool, Manchester United, Manchester City and Arsenal, criticized immensely the proposition of the league, the world of football held its breath for hours trying to understand what the outcome could possibly be for their beloved leagues and clubs. What is fundamental to underline in the words of Gary Neville is the timing of this project. This came in fact in the middle of the Covid pandemic where in the UK and in all Europe, the population was struggling immensely as millions of people lost their jobs and experienced severe economic constrictions. This did not stop by any mean the thought of dismantling entirely the European leagues and destroying not only the favorite pass time of millions of people, but as mentioned earlier also destroying the virtually only source of income for thousands of people, families and neighborhoods. Apart from the complete lacking of understanding of the European society, culture and specifically football structure, what emerged is the humane detachment that those presidents showed towards the game and its people and revealed the true interest which has always been a merely economic one and that was simply latent in the previous years.

As crucial concepts of the American league system were completely ignored, such as the exploitation of College and Highschool talents through the Draft and of the trades between teams, both resulting in an efficient way of reshaping the teams' strengths throughout the table, and moral understanding of the world's struggles were not taken into account, the complete fracture between fans and owners was inevitable. The Superleague founders failed to understand how crucial these teams are and have been for two centuries for their communities. They are conceived as a religion, a credo and an integrate part of their families and lives. That is obviously more important than economic gains, which are also not going to benefit necessarily the community around the club, but merely the owners and immediate protagonists of the project. They failed to understand that Everton FC is rooted into the culture and history of Liverpool since 1878, they failed to address how Manchester is a working class city that is carved into its two football clubs and it will always be that way, they failed to realize how much Barcelona means for the Catalunya region as they face the eternal battle for independence against the once Spanish reign, and finally they mistakenly underestimated the link

between football, its culture and the working class fans that ironically were the most impacted by the Covid pandemic.

As mentioned earlier, teams and more specifically teams' boards insisted on how the economic crisis that followed the Covid 19 pandemic, was the main cause for this 'inevitable' choice to form a new league that would foster the deeply contracted funds of the clubs. They explained how the 'devastating' year that these companies faced during the stoppage of the leagues and championships enormously damaged the economics of football. That being obviously true and clear to the fans, unfortunately this incredible economic crisis was apparently quickly forgotten by the clubs, as in the summer of the same year (2021) as well as the one in 2022, the reality appeared to be somewhat different. In fact, what emerged just weeks after the shocking revelation of the plans to form the notorious breakout league, clubs from all over Europe scrambled, as in every transfer window, to buy the best players from teams all over the world. This ironically, saw the teams that were theoretically most impacted by the pandemic spending the most outstanding figures, compared to the clubs that fiercely refused to join the outrageous ESL which spent notably less compared to the previous transfer sessions. Indeed, the smaller clubs, whom in reality effectively had to burden the costs of the unprecedented economic contraction, had to limit their expenses and to opt for youth development, players growth and low budget transfers in the search for 'hidden gems' in the transfer market, instead of the regular heavy spending on known talents. What resulted from the 2021 transfer market was a worldwide total spending of 4.7 billion euros, and even if it definitely decreased from the year prior's total, falling by as much as a third from the pre-pandemic figures in 2019, this was not by any mean a consequence of a parsimonious approach by the biggest clubs and founding members of the Superleague. In fact, only the English clubs spent more on international transfers than those of any country and completed seven of the 10 biggest international deals in 2021. (MacInnes, 2022)

These immense expenditures included Romelu Lukaku's 115 million euros transfer to Chelsea from Inter, Jadon Sancho's 85 million euros move from Borussia Dortmund to Manchester United, and lastly and most notably Jack Grealish's 118 million euros move from Aston Villa to Manchester City. As a consequence of this, English clubs' spending totaled for 1.39 billion euros, and outspent by 400 million euros the second-highest spenders, Italy. (MacInnes, 2022)

In addition to this, the following summer the transfers increased even more and highlighted the discrepancies between the statements made in 2021 regarding the Superleague and the actual economic realities of the football superpowers. During the summer 2022 window, clubs from only the top five leagues Europe shelled out roughly 4.47 billion euros. The combined total spending of the Bundesliga, La Liga, Ligue 1 and Serie A combined for 2.2 billion euros in the summer. Premier League clubs, 6 of whom wanted to join the ESL, have spent 2.1 billion euros alone. (Kozłowski, 2022)

Moreover, this transfer window in particular saw an exorbitant spending on stars, as in the case of the pursuit by Real Madrid to purchase France's jewel Kylian Mbappé, with an offer of 160 million dollars to Paris Saint-Germain in addition of an unprecedented contract offer that would have made the 23-year-old the highest paid player in its history. The offer foresaw a signing bonus of almost 170 million euros, a net salary of more than 32 million euros every season and complete control over his image rights. (Sky Sports, 2021) This was a staggering economic commitment for a team that was supposedly in financial crisis and economic restrictions. The Spanish team was in the end not successful in acquiring the French superstar but promptly opted for a new French wonderkid in the form of Aurélien Tchouaméni who was acquired for 100 million euros. Real Madrid was not alone though, as Barcelona spent more than 150 million euros, and all the top 6 English clubs spent more

than 100 million euros including the incredible Manchester United 240 million euros and Chelsea's commitment of 280 million euros worth of transfers. (Bonn, 2022)

In conclusion, 2021 was definitely one of the strangest years in the history of football. The sport took a significant blow from various points of view. The economic reality of smaller clubs and provinces had been incredibly challenged by the outburst of the Covid pandemic. Teams which rely on daily income, match attendance, shirts sells and matchday earnings saw themselves being stripped by their sole source of lifestream in a matter of weeks. The immense obstacle that coronavirus represented for the football industry is a definite certainty. What is largely a construct of pure greed and dishonesty is the representation of a reality which pictures giant companies, as the twelve founding members of the European Superleague, that see themselves as worldwide leaders in the sports industry, apparently struggling to find solutions for their short and long run sustainment. The truth is that these companies produce revenues of hundreds of millions of dollars every year and, even if in truth harshly impacted by the health crisis of 2020-2021, can still rely on enormous amounts of wealth that will continue to flow in the hands of the owners and boards. As mentioned earlier, bigger teams are more in debt compared to smaller ones, we have indeed analyzed the situation of Tottenham and Real Madrid as well as the one of Barcelona, where these three giant companies alone total for a staggering 3.5 billion euros worth of debt. What is also true though, is that the debt that smaller teams face is potentially fatal as they can not guarantee a significant revenue year in year out. Their surviving is almost entirely based on their performances on the pitch, and without a league to play or without a potential promotion to the league above them to achieve, these smaller companies are stalled in a serious crisis in which they struggle to even pay monthly salaries to their players. What the twelve clubs who founded the ESL did, is portraying a reality that just was not. They purposefully pictured a necessity out of the breakaway league, as their 'only way to survive' the global pandemic. Their plan in truth was simply and merely to take this once in a lifetime opportunity to join a closed football league, which as mentioned resembled the American system, in order to maximize their profits and skyrocket their company's value.

As mentioned, this league would have been a certain success, as it would have represented the sole focus of the football world, displaying every week the most famous teams and subsequently the most famous players one against each another, without any other competitor to share the enormous endorsement, sponsorship and television deals that were already interested in the business. The economic benefits would have been limitless, this is doubtlessly true, but not for the football business, not for the communities around the clubs, not for the football movement, but only for those twelve teams in the league and those who then decided to participate afterwards. Not only this potential treasure would not have been available for other clubs and realities not involved in the project, the ESL would have actively destructed the football world as we know it. It would have enriched immensely the founding teams and not in any way the 'leftovers' clubs competing in the original national championships (actually impoverishing them, cutting revenues to the national league). What failed to be address is that fans do not necessarily care about transfer market spendings or club's wealth, they simply seek to witness their team perform accordingly to their expectations. This obviously in most cases requires teams to find expensive new talents in the market sessions, but the figures spent by the clubs are not what is relevant to the supporters. Moreover, following the economic concept of currency and value of goods, if every individual inside of an economy becomes richer, in this case every team in the ESL, the relative value of the currency or goods diminishes accordingly. This means that, enlarging every club's budget and value, would have not mattered in the transfer market at all. It would have only meant higher spendings, higher fees and higher monetary trades. Leaving teams in the same exact situation in which they were before. The number of players would

have remained the same and this new and richer business, would have probably benefited only the players, who would have received unrepresented salaries, and their agents who profit in percentage out of the transactions.

This complex structure would have in the end not benefited in any way the fans nor the system itself, as hundreds of teams all across Europe would have been dismantled. The pyramid system would have stopped existing, and the necessary trickle-down movement of the earnings would have completely stopped.

In the end thanks to the efforts of the fans, the only true protagonists of this sport and industry, this existential menace for the football world was heroically stopped from becoming reality. The outburst of negative comments and backlash that the ESL members received is incomparable with any other scandal or misjudgment by FIFA, UEFA or any other entity. What has to be understood is that football teams belong to their communities and cities. They belong to their supporters that follow them on the road in away games, they are carved into their neighborhood's history and culture. They can not and will not be stripped away from their roots of sociopolitical national battles, as in the case of Glasgow with the ever-lasting clash of the city's derby or 'Old Firm' dating back to 1888, between Celtic which is Glasgow and Scotland's symbol of Christianity and Rangers which represents Glasgow's and Scottish Protestant working class. This is the case for every country in Europe and in the world. Argentina in South America is another example. It hosts indeed, every year arguably the most amazing and fiercely contested derby in the world: The Superclásico. This derby is much more than just a game between two clubs from Buenos Aires, in fact the two iconic clubs Boca Juniors and River Plate, represent respectively the fight between the working-class dockland area of Buenos Aires, and River Plate's affluent district of Núñez in the north of the city. It is the sociopolitical clash between the local Italian immigrant community as for Boca, and River Plate's fans nicknamed 'Los Millonarios' upper-class support base. (BBC sports, 2002)

Football is not centered around economic profits and revenues. This is because football teams were born as working-class recreational clubs, not franchises as in the case of the United States. This is why it would be totally unthinkable for a team to be moved from one city or region to another, as it happens frequently in the American leagues. This is because in America clubs are companies and are viewed, again, as franchises, not differently from any other investments that their owners hold. Just two seasons ago, the NFL football team once Oakland Raiders became the Las Vegas Raiders, after being moved to Los Angeles from 1982 to 1994, and then moved back to Oakland in 1995 until 2019. (Levi, 2020) This is just one of the countless examples that the American sports industry presented in the course of the last century, in which teams are being moved from city to city just to exploit a potential economic benefit in a different profitable environment ⁵.

Lastly, as the football world and industry evolved enormously through the last century and brought amazing development to the movement, it also brought a significant mutation, to some degree, to the nature of the sport itself. As mentioned earlier, the game was not the most affected by this, but the political environment and organizations surrounding it. As analyzed in depth, moral corruption and economic exploitation became the principal focus of the club owners and became apparent through the course of the already historic week of April 2021. The monetary forces, driving the presidents to endanger the overall structure of the football world, underlined clearly the modern

⁵ Other recent examples just in the NFL are: the once St. Louis Rams that played in the homonymous city between 1995 and 2015 before relocating back to Los Angeles where they used to play between 1946 and 1994. In addition to this we can observe the case of the once San Diego Padres which played in Florida between 1961 and 2016, before relocating also to Los Angeles, where the team was founded but played only one season in 1960.

vision that this industry and of some of its protagonists share. The hypocrisy of the statements regarding the necessity of the ESL and of the economic backing that the latter would have brought, was quickly after revealed, as a consequence of the multi-billionaire investments that the same clubs carried out. As smaller clubs and realities to this day still struggle financially as aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. As Gary Neville famously said, club presidents are just custodians of the team, the people are the true owners, and this will always be.

“Forget the owners. They have nothing to do with this football club (Manchester United). They're just custodians. The fans that come into this ground that supported this club for 100 years are the people that matter... forget the owners - they have nothing to do with this football club, in terms of the actual history of the club and the long-term future, they'll be gone. They're just passengers in the night, as far as I'm concerned.” (Neville, 2021)

Conclusions

As analyzed through the paper, the football world is a complex and far-reaching environment which does not affect only its supporters or its protagonists. Indeed, it has gained in the course of the 20th century, and even more so in the 21st, an enormous resonance in the spectrum of politics, sociology and economics. As of crucial importance for cultures around the various continents, the game has stretched its appeal and passion through different societies, backgrounds and cultures. What emerged in the last century is how this game is by all means the world's game. This surely thanks to the competitions that bring multiple different cities or countries to clash one against another.

There are obviously different realities throughout the world, and all bring something different to the football industry and culture. In the beginnings of the sport, which was perceived and intended simply as a recreational discipline for laborers in the mid-1800s, we saw how Scottish and later English societies developed around their neighborhood stadiums and beloved clubs. Later, towards the end of the 1880s we analyzed how Europe started laying the foundations for the current structure of national championships, first European competitions and international matches. In a matter of two decades virtually every country in Europe already set up clubs and tournaments. South America quickly followed this process in the beginning of the 1900s as football was brought by European immigrants as for Italians, Germans and most importantly, Scottish and then English citizens. Crucial figures for the South American football birth are identifiable in the Scottish man Charles Miller who first introduced the city of Sao Paulo to the game, and English man Oscar Cox who is believed to be responsible for the first game of football in the history of Rio de Janeiro in 1901, when he invited other white members of the Rio Cricket club to compete against each other. This followed by the foundation of the Fluminense Football Club, which is still one of the biggest clubs in the history of Brazil. It is clear how the industrialization and globalization processes, which escalated immensely in the 20th and 21st century, helped developing the game throughout the world and the industry. This happened steadily throughout the decades of the 1900s, and undertook a vertiginous increment by the 1980s-1990s and 2000s.

Football is broadly a sincere and truthful reflection of the world's society, more specifically it gives clear insights on both national cultures, norms and customs and international traces or patterns of macro political and social changes. Moreover, the perfect way to analyze the development of the football industry is through the economy of the game and its best tournaments. The most popular competition that football holds is undoubtedly the World Cup. This as mentioned, evokes historic cultural legends in the lights of for example iconic national teams, as for Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina, Italy, Germany, England and many more. But also, extraordinary players that marked an era of the game such as Pelé, Maradona, Baggio, Beckenbauer, Ronaldinho, Totti and currently Ronaldo and Messi just to name a few. The World Cup represents much more than the most popular competition on the planet. Indeed, it marks generations of young supporters and cultural history. An example of this could be the Italian success in 1982, which flourished once again the Italian football movement and marked a generational turning point, coinciding symbolically also with the end of the Years of Lead.

The World Cup saw its effects on the hosting nations in full display in Asia and Africa. After the infamous 2002 Japan and South Korea edition, even if now considered as the lowest point in FIFA's history (which will probably be surpassed by Qatar 2022), the Asian movement has experienced a significant growth in terms of infrastructures and players development. That is easily recognizable through the enormous investments that the Chinese first division produced, or the number of quality

players approaching Europe to play overseas, South Korean Heung-min Son on top of all. Africa saw a very similar development after the South African World Cup of 2010. In fact, African national teams have definitely grown in terms of quality of the game and have produced even more skillful players compared to Asia, having the former a greater footballing culture which traces back to the 1970 or 1980s. The Black continent have produced some of the most gifted players in the history of the game as for George Weah, Yaya Toure, Didier Drogba, Samuel Eto'o, Roger Milla, Abedi Pele and Emmanuel Adebayor. Recently thanks to the incredible development of the movement after the 2010 World Cup, we have witnessed a new generation of great African talents capturing the scene: Sadio Mané, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, Gervinho, as well as northern Africans Mohamed Salah and Riyad Mahrez. This is not only thanks to the improved coaches, or infrastructures coming from the significant investments of the World Cup. Indeed, this also is a consequence of the attention that talent scouts and teams in general dedicate to a new movement galvanized by the hosting of such event. This has not necessarily been the case for Brazil or Russia, as obviously these two nations are well known and integral parts of the football structure.

What is important to underline is that football's impact is limited. Its reach is significant, sometimes even crucial for a society, but the sport's aim is not to apport political and structural changes to the physiology of a nation or continent. Its aspirations are to entertain, to deliver the best experience possible to the supporters and citizens of a determined region. That is what sports represent. That is how sports succeed in remaining spontaneous and detached from political and economic affairs. That at least should be. It is clear in fact, how that unfortunately is no longer the case, and in truth has not been for a while. As the whole industry advanced into a new sphere of popularity and financial wealth, something changed. This moral and juridic pollution started to appear in the 1970s uncoincidentally and rose steadily in the core of the FIFA and UEFA organizations throughout the next decades. The evident outcome of these fraudulent administrations are the numerous scandals that involved the two main political governing bodies of football. This chaos of corruption and bribery has contaminated the industry and the football world, and is now governed by club owners who unfortunately behave accordingly to this poisoned system.

What could be done is break the vicious cycle through honest, clear and thoughtful planning of a sustainable industry which would benefit enormously the game, communities and movement as a whole. The culture of football can be enriched, and the business still holds incredible untapped potential, which could be exploited by touching new continents and realities as in the case of the Middle East with the latest World Cup. Once again though, this incredible opportunity has been wasted by the humanitarian catastrophe of the Qatari exploitation of hundreds of thousands of laborers through the Kafala system. This led to the deaths of at least 8 000 workers, as the Middle East firmly once again maintains its distance from the modern and civilized world. As FIFA stands unbothered by this unprecedented crisis, the football world is left dealing with matters of almost genocide stature, matters that do not regard football fans or entertainment in general. They should not and must not, but in modern times incredibly do.

The reach that this sport has is important. It modeled countries that were not close to the discipline in origin, but grew with and thanks to it. This is Brazil for instance, which did not have a direct link to the sport and experienced its beginnings later than the European clubs. It is safe to say that Brazil now revolves around the game of football and prospered from it. In this case the sport succeeded in influencing immensely the culture of a nation. This is Uruguay, who has a population of 3 and a half million people, and has immense pride for his national team and incredible footballing talent production and culturally depends on the sport. We can find various similarities for example with the club of Villarreal, which with a population of 50 000 people, formed one of the best teams in Spain

(winning in 2021 the Europa League, and reaching the semifinals of the Champions League in 2005 and 2021) and created a vital heritage of social connection with the game. We can observe a similar outcome as the African and Asian continents, even if on a smaller scale, on what the United States have experienced since hosting the World Cup in 1994. Indeed, the American movement is growing significantly every year and it is not a coincidence that will be hosting the World Cup again in 2026 (along Canada and Mexico).

As mentioned, football is not the answer for political structural changes. Football can help national sentiment and unity. It can tackle differences, racism and bigotry. In the end it can also influence the culture of a population. It must though act in terms of development and future benefit for the industry, not greed and vile monetary aims. The example of the Superleague is a physical reference of what could destroy this beautiful stream of life that runs through neighborhoods and cities since the mid-1800s. This source of happiness and pride must be protected by vulgar intents of maximizing profits as only aim. National and supranational political organizations must be involved more in the business of FIFA and UEFA in order to oversee labor contracts, monetary activities and health of the industry as a whole.

If legality, sustainable business and ethical or moral integrity are results of a utopian conception of corporate business, as they doubtlessly should not be, let alone of the multi-billion-dollar-industry that football represents, then protection of the fans, their passion and their heritage from this poisoned business is imperative.

They should never ask themselves if it is morally acceptable to support their club or national team as this takes part to tournaments corrupted and contaminated by deaths of innocent people building football stadiums.

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