

[Comment] Does Europe need a policy on sport?

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - It happens quite often, but not always so visibly, that European decisions have an impact on everyday life. An important and recent example lies in the agreement last week in Lisbon on the Reform Treaty, where a small decision illustrates a very big point.

The subject is sport. Sport is visibly a European activity – think of all those people crowded round TV sets on the night of big European matches – but both president of the International Olympic Committee Jacques Rogge and UEFA President Michel Platini have expressed concern about the way in which the EU might get involved in regulating it.

The proposed Reform Treaty includes sport as a matter in which the Union might "support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the Member States". Is this simply a Brussels power grab?

British Eurosceptic think-tank Open Europe suggests so. They fear that the new treaty "could, for example, mean the EU setting wage and transfer caps for professional football", which for them is a reason to reject the treaty. But I don't think that is the right way to look at things.

The crucial thing to realise, as many Eurosceptic critics appear not to have done, is that the EU has a policy on sport already. The single market that swept away national borders in economic life swept away borders in sporting life, too. In the eyes of the present treaties, professional sport is an economic activity and should not be subject to the kind of national protectionism from which the rest of the European economy is spared.

But is professional sport simply an economic activity? After his recent victory over England, the Dutch manager of the Russian football team, Guus Hiddink, was asked about the "football industry". It's not an industry, he said, it's a game.

The central notion in European economic life is that of competition. It is the same notion in football, but that competition does not take place without respect for national borders. There are some European trophies, it is true, but there are also national leagues and cups to be won.

It is generally recognised that the top European club teams are the best in the world, better than most national teams, but not many people want to see them take over the whole of the professional game. Football is matter of identity, not only of money. The EU has got to take this into account, too.

The European Commission published a White Paper in July to explore how this might be done, but the Reform Treaty would take this a step further. And this extra step is definitely needed.

For if you look through the Consolidated Treaties that govern the EU at present for the five letters "sport", you find 26 mentions of "transport", one mention of "passport", but not a single one of "sport" itself. Doesn't that say everything about the development of the European Union so far?

Economic and political priorities have dominated, leaving social and cultural concerns way behind. With the Reform Treaty, the latter will start to catch up.

And I think this is actually the heart of the debate. The argument about the Reform Treaty is not about what it says but about what it is for. If objections to the treaty were really based

on its text, those objections would not be based on so much selective quotation. The Open Europe example I quoted above neglects Article 148 of the Consolidated Treaties which is quite clear that any resulting European laws may not involve "any harmonisation of the laws and regulations of the Member States". So, no European regulation of wage caps and transfer fees.

But, as I wrote, the detailed wording of the new treaty isn't really what's at stake. The point is that as the EU takes on greater ability to consider factors other than the purely economic, it becomes more like a normal system of government and less like an international economic regulator. Most people in Europe want to see European decisions reflect the diversity of European interests and not only the commercial ones.

If sport is one of the factors that is uniting Europe, then Europe needs to return the compliment. It needs to give a higher priority to those aspects of life that cannot or should not be quantified in monetary terms. The provisions of the Reform Treaty will enable the EU to do this better than before. Its opponents should think again.

The author is director of Federal Union

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