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THE UEFA EURO CHAMPIONSHIP 2020

A path to success or a mistake in the making?

Claudia Stura, Christina Aicher, Robert Kaspar, Carina Klein, Susanne Schulz and Stefan Unterlechner

Introduction

The UEFA European Championship 2020 (UEFA EURO, 2020) is a pioneer project. For the first time, a mobile mega-event will take place over an entire continent. It will be hosted by 13 cities in 13 countries using mainly existing infrastructure, primarily football stadiums but also airports, railway stations and highways. The intent is that overall infrastructural costs should be much lower and, consequently, the pressure on each hosting city and country should be dramatically reduced (Böcking, 2012; UEFA.com, 2014; Weinreich, 2012a). In addition, it will become very difficult to host the Games from 2016 onwards, as 24 teams will then participate in the tournament. Other reasons given by UEFA refer to the 60th anniversary of the European championship, which will occur in 2020. UEFA has aimed, in this way, to bring the tournament to European fans’ front doors (UEFA.com, 2014; UEFA.com, 2016). Finally, UEFA has stressed the opportunity for smaller countries to become part of this mega-event (Weinreich, 2012b; Winkler, 2014).

Newspaper reports highlight additional reasons, however. Since this new model offers the opportunity for smaller countries to become part of this mega-event, Michel Platini, UEFA president from 2007 to 2015, aimed to reward the small eastern European countries for electing him as president in 2007 (Weinreich, 2012b). Other sources argue that UEFA’s decision was driven by the lack of bidding countries due to the increasing costs of hosting – in fact, Turkey was the only serious bidder. Since it had also bid for the 2020 Olympic Games, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced at the UEFA congress in Istanbul that it would withdraw its bid if the International Olympic Committee (IOC) granted it the Olympic Games. When Platini attempted to change UEFA’s decision date for hosting EURO 2020 to a date prior to the IOC’s decision date for the 2020 Games, IOC president Jacques Rogge intervened. Ever since, Platini has further pursued the idea of the European model (Weinreich, 2012a; Winkler, 2014).

While the reasons behind UEFA’s decision may be multifaceted, the new model has received a great deal of attention. As well as UEFA, the IOC has discussed the idea of adapting the Olympic Games to this new format, in order to make bidding and hosting more
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attractive. With its Agenda 2020, it officially opened the door for the Olympic Games to be hosted over various countries (The National, 2014).

While international governing bodies seem to find the new model attractive, the new format may also suggest negative consequences, especially for tourism. While the traditional model, with one or two hosting countries, allowed the fan to fly into the country and then continue to travel from host city to host city by local transport, the distances at EURO 2020 make this nearly impossible. Distances such as those between Bilbao and Baku and between Rome and London require travelling by air in order to move between host cities. While UEFA claim that the format is intended to increase tourism and save costs by using existing facilities (Weinreich, 2012a; Winkler, 2014), the net tourism impact for any of the 13 host cities may be small. However, research on the actual implications of the new format is very limited. Consequently, this exploratory study aims to give initial insight into the potential positive and negative effects of this new event format for the hosts, as well as insight into the opportunities and limitations it may offer in being adapted to other sport mega-events, especially future editions of the Olympic Games.

This study is based on previous research in the context of sport mega-events. Since the literature in this field is somewhat limited, newspaper articles are also included. After a brief review of existing publications on reasons, opportunities, challenges and effects of sport mega-events, especially those previously hosted in two countries, the research design is then explained. This is followed by the major findings, a discussion of their implications and conclusions.

**Why host sport mega-events? A brief review of the current literature**

In bidding for sport mega-events, cities may be driven by a variety of motivations. While reasons are multifaceted, several studies refer especially to the strength of support from governments based on political motives for using sport events as arenas to construct and present national identities (Black & Van der Westhuizen, 2004; Maguire & Tuck, 2005; Xin, 2006) as well as to enhance their countries’ image and soft power (Cornelissen, 2007; Marivoet, 2006; Roche, 2002). As a consequence, their cities receive more financial and political support than others. However, politicians justify their bids to host sport mega-events with claims that hosting the events supports or even boosts their national and local economies (Cornelissen, Bob & Swart, 2011; Cornelissen & Swart, 2006; Cornelissen, 2007; Solberg & Preuss, 2007), using economic impact studies done in advance that show economic gains (Baade & Matheson, 2016).

**Economic effects – costs and benefits**

However, ex-post economic impact studies show different results. In fact, many post-event studies have shown that costs were mostly underestimated and benefits overestimated (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006; Preuss, 2004). For example, from 1968 to 2012 all Olympic Games cost more than estimated. On average, the costs were 150 per cent over the originally estimated budget, relating mainly to the general infrastructure, such as transportation and housing, and sport infrastructure, as well as operational costs, including administration, opening and closing ceremonies, and huge expenses on safety and security (Baade & Matheson, 2016).

In fact, safety and security measures have become major concerns in organizing sport mega-events. For example, Yu et al. (2009) highlighted three risks to a mega-sport event in the case of the Olympic Games in 2008 in Beijing: crime, such as kidnapping, petty theft, rape or internationally organized crime, socio-cultural sabotage and terrorism. The latter had
already been especially addressed with regard to the Olympic Games; the IOC had already adapted their security standards against international terrorism (Coaffee, Fussey & Moore, 2011). For this reason, it is not surprising that the costs of security and safety have increased significantly. For example, security costs for Athens’ Games in 2004 surpassed $1.6 billion, and they have remained nearly this high (Matheson, 2013). Similarly, in the case of EURO 2008, the host countries greatly increased their financial investments to secure these events, which led to the two countries making certain arrangements, for example visa agreements (Klauser, 2011). How the security standards would have to be adapted for polycentric events had to be uniquely addressed.

However, a positive effect of hosting mega-sport events was found to be an increase in tourists’ overnight stays (Schmidt, 2012). Indeed, Szymanski (2002) pointed out that increased tourism is often the only economic benefit for the host countries in the years after the event is held. Similarly, Solberg and Preuss (2007) claimed that hosting major sport events can cause positive shifts in tourism demand on a long-term basis. Yet the researchers also pointed out that investments in the tourism sector seem to vary. For example, while the majority of Polish companies did not make specific investments in EURO 2012 (Wasilczuk & Zawadzki, 2013), China’s private sector invested strongly in the tourism sector when preparing for Beijing 2008 (Sands, 2008). Nevertheless, even if expenditure in the tourism industries were to rise significantly due to a mega-event, additional revenues accrued might not counterbalance the host’s investment costs (Solberg & Preuss, 2007) and, because of non-local capital owners, the money generated would be unlikely to re-circulate through the local economy (Matheson 2013).

Rütter et al. (2010) identified positive impacts of Euro 2008 on the job market in Austria and Switzerland but also pointed out that the number of new jobs provided due to the event was much lower than expected. Similarly, Baumann, Engelhardt and Matheson (2012) reported increased employment overall from the 2002 Olympics, but only within 12 months following the event. Overall, the economic impact appears to be limited. Preuss (2004) found that many mega-sport events only cover the operational costs but not the investment costs. For example, several stadiums have not been used in a profitable way after hosting mega-events (Schmidt, 2012). Since UEFA claimed that the format was intended to increase tourism and save costs by using existing facilities (Weinreich, 2012a; Winkler, 2014), these aspects were addressed in our study.

Social impacts

Research on the effects of sport mega-events on hosts has rarely focused on social aspects (Fredline, 2005), yet social impacts are often said to be another positive effect of hosting sport mega-events. Aside from an increase in soft power, sport mega-events often increase the number of members in sport associations (Schmidt, 2012) as well as increasing social capital and enhancing socialization (Baumann, Engelhardt, & Matheson, 2012). They may heighten the hosts’ local and national citizens’ feelings of shared experience and collective solidarity (Taks, 2013). Experiencing a euphoric atmosphere collectively creates a sense of community and meets the need for identification. For example, hosting the World Cup in 2006 contributed to strengthening the sense of community and national pride among German citizens and improved relationships between people of different ethnic origins (Ohmann, Jones & Wilkes, 2006).

However, events have also been found to have negative effects on their host citizens. For example, researchers have identified displacement or removal of local residents to clear space
for the sporting venues, an exclusion of local resident participation due to high costs, or an increase in the crime rate (Fredline, 2005; Getz, 2005). News reports from recent sport mega-events, such as those in Brazil or China, have sadly confirmed these consequences. So it may be likely that those aspects may affect the sense of community identification as well as the atmosphere during the event. How different the atmosphere can be in two host countries during the same sport mega-event was demonstrated by Hellmann’s (2012) report from the European Football Championship 2012 in Poland and Ukraine. While Poland’s citizens and guests experienced a very positive atmosphere, this was not the case in the Ukraine. The author offered the explanation of Ukraine’s domestic crisis at that time as well as difficulties with the coordination of the event between these two countries. However, it remains unclear how this spirit and sense of community could be preserved if the event were to be split between several countries (The National, 2014). Since Preuss et al. (2010) pointed out that the atmosphere is crucial in the success of a sport mega-event, and social impacts may vary due to the unique characteristics of the event (Fredline, 2005), the authors also considered this aspect in the present study.

**Methodology**

This exploratory study has aimed to answer the main research questions: what positive and negative effects may the EURO 2008 Championship imply? Which opportunities and limitations may it be suggested could be adapted to other sport mega-events, especially future Olympic Games? To gain an in-depth understanding of the problems and opportunities that can arise, a qualitative research rationale was chosen and purposive sampling was necessary. Since many different stakeholders are involved in organizing such an event, the authors interviewed experts from different fields. For example, individuals in leadership positions within sport organizations as well as within main sponsors of the European Championship in 2008 were included. Additionally, sport journalists were included who were involved in the European Championships in both 2008 and 2012 and various Olympic Games, together with experts from the safety and security sector, such as a safety representative for major events of a federal Ministry for the Interior who had hosted a previous EURO. Other interviewees included experts from umbrella organizations in organized sport who have worked with athletes, visitors or in venue management during past sport mega-events, such as EURO 2008. Finally, since fans are also affected by this future model of co-hosting, the authors also aimed to include the perspective of the spectators and interviewed Austrian fans who attended the European Football Championships in 2004, 2008 or 2012. In summary, 18 experts were intervieweed to tackle the research questions from different perspectives and gain insights on various positive and negative consequences that might be offered by this new format.

The interview guide was developed based on findings from previous studies of mega-sport events with more than one host, such as the European Championships in 2008 and 2012, as well as on newspaper reports. Themes addressed included the following different categories: image, atmosphere and attractiveness for sport tourists, safety and security, economic benefits, especially tourism, and challenges and opportunities relating to marketing efforts. For example, Klauser (2012) reported on issues around the security concept at the UEFA European Football Championship 2008 in Austria and Switzerland. This led to the question: how can a security plan be developed for a multinational event? In addition, several questions concerning short-term and long-term effects on tourism or destination image of a host city were based on findings from Solberg and Preuss (2007). The interview questions were primarily open-ended.
The semi-structured interviews were conducted between March and December 2015. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face in a private and comfortable atmosphere, or via telephone or Skype, and lasted between 20 minutes and one hour. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and a thematic analysis was conducted with the most important facts highlighted. Primary codes were set up in accordance with findings from former studies. In addition, inductive coding was used to explore aspects that were not present in previous empirical research. In a second coding cycle, final codes were set up. To establish causal relationships, pattern matching was applied.

Internal validity was ensured through interviews using multiple sources of evidence, and a detailed research protocol ensured that the data collection procedure could be repeated and would provide similar results. The authors ensured inter-coder reliability by coding the same units of text, comparing their results and reconciling any discrepancies through discussion.

Results and discussion

This study’s findings and discussions of the results are structured in accordance with the identified major themes. This section starts with the new event format offering new opportunities to host for smaller countries, followed by results on financial aspects, explaining the major findings in relation to the potential costs and benefits. Findings in relation to social aspects, in particular, the event spirit and the feeling of community are described next. Finally, findings relating to public screening and sponsoring are addressed.

Enabling the opportunity to host sport mega-events

Cities often have different resources available for bidding for the hosting of sport mega-events. Some cities get more support from their own government than others. This can be seen as the result of local political interests and the decision-making of international power networks in sport (Borgers, Vanreusel & Scheerder, 2013). Similarly, most interviewees stated that politicians have different interests in hosting sport mega-events according to their political intentions, and consequently support their cities’ interest in bidding more or less financially and politically. In addition, smaller countries are sometimes simply not capable of hosting these events for financial reasons. However, in the case of the new format, as the majority of the interviewees perceived it, small countries may get the opportunity to bid, due to a smaller requirement for financial resources. Likewise, Winkler (2014) claimed that with this innovative polycentric concept, small cities like Copenhagen or Glasgow would get the opportunity to host these events, since the costs would be split between all hosts. Thus, the new concept offers new opportunities especially for small cities. However, as several interviewees pointed out that it may also imply that if a country only hosts one or two competitions of a multinational event, the support of its government would be marginal.

Financial costs and benefits

Major sport events often facilitate new investments. While the Olympic Games in 2008 in Beijing led to major investments in the private sector (Sands, 2008), such as the construction of additional hotels, the majority of the interviewees also stated that it is more likely that hotels and other businesses would not increase their investments if a multinational sport mega-event took place for only two or three days in their respective towns because the
number of guests would be limited and the event would be short. However, all interviewees agreed upon the issue that major sport events also often require expensive investments in sport facilities as well as in non-sport, city-related infrastructure – regardless of how long the events take.

While UEFA chose the new format to enable the host cities to save costs (Weinreich, 2012a), many interviewees’ perceptions were that using sport facilities and infrastructure that already existed would save some costs, but it would not be enough. The hosts would still have to modify existing facilities as well as construct new buildings. Indeed, the experts agreed that this new format would also require expensive investments in sport facilities as well as in non-sport, city-related infrastructure and emphasized that these investments would need to fit into the city’s long-term plan in order to make the event economically successful for the host. Hence, using permanent locations, awarding two Euros in a row to the same host or applying a rotation would also reduce investment costs in sport facilities (Baade & Matheson, 2016).

In previous years, the costs of safety and security have increased significantly, especially due to the risk of terrorism (Yu, Klauser & Chan, 2009). Consequently, the interviewees emphasized an increase in complexity of the overall safety concept. An adapted security plan would have to be developed. The EURO 2020 security plan will need to be one common concept that all hosting countries agree on. However, due to the countries’ different laws and regulations, it will most likely be a difficult process. In addition, as the interviewees perceived, the security concepts will have to meet the minimum security standards imposed by the umbrella organization, such as UEFA. It will most likely vary between the hosting countries, whether they implement the minimum standards or exceed them. Similarly, Klauser (2012) identified differences in the implementation of the security concept between Austria, an EU-member country, and Switzerland, a non-EU member, when they hosted the European Football Championship in 2008. For example, while the use of drones was allowed in Switzerland, it was not allowed in Austria. Furthermore, Switzerland used mobile fingerprint identification systems for better surveillance, while Austria did not. In addition, Switzerland’s refusal to implement the EU Schengen agreement on European cross-border police cooperation increased the overall complexity of the safety operations.

One may argue that costs of security measures will be lower with the new format since the risks are diversified, but only a few interviewees predicted that this would be the case, with resulting lower security expenditures for the individual countries. On the contrary, most experts stressed that the risks could be higher at a multinational event because there would be more locations to attack. Hence, the costs of security and safety would still be high and could even exceed London 2012’s costs of approximately €1billion or Sochi 2014’s €2 billion (Spiller, 2015). In summary, the experts agreed that the security topic would be an important and sensitive issue in organizing a multinational event.

The IOC and other international sport confederations argue that this new format promotes sustainability (Der Standard, 2014). However, most interviewees had serious doubts about this reasoning. Aside from investments in facilities and infrastructure, the new format creates the need to transport athletes between venues in different countries, thus also losing the important athlete experience of a single Olympic village. In addition, while China demonstrated that the Olympic Games can be a reason for investing in environmental technology, these findings show that the investments would be divided among all hosting countries. Consequently, they would most likely be rather small in each hosting country and not comparable with China’s long-term investment in transportation, urban renewal, high technology and sport facilities in Beijing, such as installing solid waste processing facilities.
Overall, the experts agreed that the hosting countries would most likely argue that their events were sustainable, for political or image reasons.

**Benefits for destination branding and tourism**

Overall, the interviewees agreed that the new model could mean a financial loss for the hosts. The only economic benefit would most likely be increased tourism in the host cities on a short-term basis. Similarly, Preuss et al. (2010) identified short-term positive impacts of the Euro 2008 for the tourism sector in Austria, such as an increased number of overnight stays the following year. While Solberg and Preuss (2007) suggested that hosting major sport events could also cause positive shifts in tourism demand on a long-term basis, several interviewees pointed out that an event lasting two or three days might not increase the destination brand significantly, even though global exposure would seem to contribute to tourism demand.

However, the polycentric model may offer several benefits – not only to reduce investment costs in sport facilities, but also to increase the destination brand and loyalty if any of the following ideas are considered: first, the usage of permanent locations; second, awarding two successive Games to the same host; or, third, designating a few venues that are used in rotation (Baade & Matheson, 2016; Kaplanidou, Jordan, Funk & Ridinger, 2012). In conjunction with a marketing strategy, the destination brand “Europe” with its cultural richness could be developed and, consequently, destination loyalty and tourism could be increased. That way, as the majority of the interviewees stated, the diversity of locations could increase the attractiveness of the tournament for the sport tourist. If the infrastructure, border control and customs are well coordinated, it may be possible that a multinational polycentric event can contribute to a stronger European identity. However, if organized poorly, the attractiveness could be reduced due to much greater logistical demands.

**The spirit of one scattered community**

Crucial to developing the destination brand “Europe”, as well as the success of the mega-sport event, is the atmosphere at the venues and the feeling of “one community”. While research has shown that many past mega-sport events created euphoria, national identification and pride as well as a sense of “we” and one community (Sands, 2008), most interviewees predicted that in the case of the new format, the spirit and flair might get lost. Additionally, the majority stated that the sense of community among the athletes would probably decrease and the existence of one Olympic village would become uncertain. Similarly, Simeoni (2014) raised the question whether the athletes might find themselves in Olympic isolation with the new format, situated in different countries without contact with other athletes from other disciplines.

Several interviewees further claimed that social media activities would not be able to reduce the feeling of distance between people. While social media may elicit emotions and link people to a certain degree, it might not replace the feeling of solidarity and community that emerges when people come together at major sport events. The IOC members had a similar debate during the Olympic Agenda 2020 meeting in September 2014. While they found no solution as to how the Olympic atmosphere could be preserved with the new format (The National, 2014), the majority of the interviewees’ perception was that a common cultural programme by all hosts might help to create a sense of solidarity. The hosts could present themselves together to show cultural similarities and differences. However, most
interviewees also claimed that even though the competitions would take place in different countries, all sport contests would be connected to each other due to the presence of the coherent marketing efforts. Hence, the consumer would perceive the tournament as a whole sport event with a consistent image.

**New format, new issues – public screening and sponsoring**

Alongside the key findings, the majority of the experts suggested that the new format would influence the popularity of public screenings and, to a certain degree, create new difficulties with regard to sponsoring. Since the competitions would take place in various locations, and people from several countries would most likely not travel between them, public screening events would not bring together as many different people as they have done with the current models of one or two hosts.

In addition, most interviewees pointed out that the new format would be less attractive for representing national or local sponsors, since only a few competitions would take place at one venue and, hence, fewer people could be reached. As a consequence, the official sponsors may limit their hospitality and other marketing activities to a few locations, such as those where the finals take place. Moreover, local and national businesses would most likely not be interested in advertising outside of their markets, where they are unknown. Even many international companies may not do business in these 13 countries. In such cases it would be more efficient to pick other events to address their specific target markets. However, the interviewees also stated that big international companies whose target markets are spread over these 13 countries could probably address a much larger audience with their marketing activities since viewer ratings (broadcasting) may increase. Finally, the interviewees referred to the importance of the spirit at international sport mega-events, which they usually use intentionally to reach their target audience. They stressed that the lack of community spirit and euphoric atmosphere could potentially hinder the marketing activities of any company.

**Conclusions**

Since the research to date on the prospective positive and negative impacts of polycentric events is very limited, this study gives some initial insights into the possibilities and limits of hosting sport mega-events in more than two countries. Contrary to the benefits that UEFA claims for this new event format, this study shows that the coordination of a major sport event in the new format may entail several potential difficulties, such as the highly complex creation and implementation of a safety and security concept. In addition, the new format might mean the potential loss of the euphoric atmosphere, spirit and sense of community. It would affect both athletes and spectators, hinder the marketing activities of the sponsors and, consequently, impair the overall success of the tournament. However, the interviewees also pointed out that under certain circumstances this format offers the opportunity to develop the destination brand “Europe” and, consequently, destination loyalty and tourism could be increased. In this case, organizers and hosts may have to think about new ways to create an unforgettable atmosphere and to promote positive social impacts that fit the unique characteristics of the new event format.

Finally, while UEFA stresses that a major advantage of the new format would be the use of existing sport venues and infrastructure, the interviewees stressed that expensive investment in sport facilities and infrastructure (UEFA.com, 2014) would be needed, since existing
facilities would have to be modified and in some cities new venues would have to be constructed. Furthermore, contrary to the reasoning of UEFA, the experts stressed that it was a misconception that the new event format would be sustainable. Due to the challenges discussed, it is not surprising that several countries do not support the co-hosting idea. For example, the bidding committee for the Almaty 2022 Olympic Winter Games was not willing to split the sport event over a larger geographical area (Bisson, 2014).

Overall, while UEFA has praised the new event format as a path to success with multiple benefits, this study shows that the new event format might be neither a success nor a mistake in the making, but seems to retain several issues familiar to hosts of sport mega-events in the traditional format with one or two hosts. In addition, this format will cause several new challenges that need to be addressed in order to make the event successful. However, while this study has given an overview on the implications of the new format, the findings need to be addressed in more depth in future studies, relating them to particular events and their specific characteristics. Moreover, an evaluation of the UEFA European Championship 2020 would reveal further important insights into the opportunities and limitations of this new format and show whether a truly European feeling may develop as a result of hosting a tournament across an entire geographical area.

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