

# What can explain the differences between European countries' public policies for sports clubs?

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## Abstract

The purpose of the article is to explain the differences in public policy for sports clubs among European countries. It uses empirical materials from the 'Social Inclusion and Volunteering in Sports Clubs in Europe' project. The comparison is based on the theory of *opportunity structure*. The political and institutional context of sports clubs provides opportunities as well as constraints within which sports clubs can act. The theories of *welfare state typology* are used to explain the differences between sports club policies. The analysis includes England, Denmark, Switzerland, Poland and Spain, which 'represent' five types of welfare state. The analysis shows that there are both significant similarities in the public policy for sports clubs among the five countries, but also differences arising from the type of welfare state that characterises each country in particular.

**Keywords:** Sports for all policy, sports clubs, Europe, opportunity structure, welfare state typology.

## Introduction

The sports policy of most European countries primarily targets sports clubs (Ibsen et al., 2016). Sports participation in voluntary clubs is expected to give greater value than sports in commercial or public organisations or self-organised sports in terms of health, social inclusion, democratic learning, etc. (Nagel et al., 2020). Although this political focus on sports clubs has been described as a special European characteristic that distinguishes sports policy from, for example, the US (Nafziger 2008), the policies vary considerably among European countries (Ibsen et al., 2016), this factor is omitted in many descriptions of sports participation in Europe (for example, WHO, 2011).

Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to describe and explain the differences in public policy for sports clubs among European countries. The starting point for the analysis is an assumption of an interconnection between public policies for sports clubs and general welfare-state principles. Therefore, the public policies relating to sports clubs in five countries – who differ in terms of general welfare-state principles – are compared.

A comparative analysis contributes to a more differentiated understanding of European sports policy, which can inspire practical policy, cf. Leipart's point that comparison serves to stimulate the imagination (Leipart, 1975, p. 159). A comparative analysis of how different countries support sports clubs can therefore be useful for individual countries in efforts to promote sports participation in clubs. Further, a comparative analysis can shed light on how sports policy is integrated into overall societal configurations and, in this context, on how sports policy to varying degrees reflects overall structures and ideals of welfare state policy.

We structure the article as follows: first, a brief review of the sports policy research, with a focus on sports for all policies, and comparative studies is presented. Secondly, we establish the theoretical framework based on the concept of the *political opportunity structure* as a basis for the comparative analysis of the public policy of sports clubs, and *welfare state typology* as a basis for the selection of

countries for the analysis and identification of key societal configurations that are assumed to have an impact on the public policy of sports clubs. Thirdly, we present why the countries were selected and how the information was collected and then analysed. Fourthly, the article outlines the sports club policies of each of the five countries. Fifthly, the similarities and differences of sports club policies of the five countries are analysed and explained by the differences between the countries in terms of overall welfare-state principles. Finally, the results are summarised.

## **Literature review**

Comparative studies in other areas of society have shown that welfare state regimes help explain the differences between countries. In this context, it is particularly relevant to refer to Salamon et al.'s statistical analysis of data from the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, which shows that welfare state regimes can explain a significant part of the variations between countries in the size of the voluntary, non-profit sector (Salamon et al., 2017).

Research in sports policy has in particular analysed elite sports policy (for example, Palmer, 2013; De Bosscher et al., 2015), including studies of megaevents and the 'dark' side of elite sports. Sports policy analyses of 'sport for all' and especially the public support for sports clubs has received comparatively little attention in research, although sports policy in a number of European countries is particularly focused on creating good conditions for sports clubs.

There are many studies of sports clubs, but most have examined the impact of sports clubs on sports participation, health, integration, etc. – that is the outcomes of sports policy. However, most of these studies have focused on the importance of organisational factors to clubs' impact (club size, structure, capacity, management practices, etc.) (for example, Nagel et al., 2020; Doidge et al., 2020). In comparison, there are relatively few studies of how the public sector supports and creates a framework for sports clubs (Skille, 2008; Stenling & Sam, 2020).

Most of the analyses referred to above are country-specific analyses of sports policy. They show how current sports policy is historically conditioned with roots dating back to the formation of the modern welfare state of the country concerned. The policy is characterised by considerable continuity, but there are also adjustments to major changes in welfare state policy, such as reduced public expenditure and the introduction of New Public Management (Fahlen & Stenling, 2015; Hoekman et al., 2018). Some analyses suggest a connection between sports policy and the political and governance discourse for the welfare state of the country in question.

The analyses of sports policy in the Scandinavian countries thus point to a connection between sports policy and the characteristic features of the Nordic welfare state model – for example, corporate governance principles (for example, Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010; Fahlén & Stenling, 2015). Similarly, analyses of several central European countries indicate that the principle of subsidiarity is also a determining principle for the public regulation of sport (van Poppel et al., 2018; Chappelet, 2010). Studies of British sports policy also point to a coherence between recent sports policy and liberal changes in British politics (Henry, 2001).

Such analyses of sport policy in individual countries have limited value in explaining any differences in sport policy between countries, however. They presuppose comparative analyses in which sports policy is systematically compared between different countries. The few comparative analyses of 'sport for all' that exist are primarily comparisons of countries that are similar to each other (for example, Houlihan, 1997; Skille, 2011; Vos, 2012), while there are quite a few analyses of countries

with different types of welfare state (Heinemann, 1999; Bergsgaard et al., 2007). And although both of these books refer to welfare state typologies, the theory is not systematically applied in analysing the differences between the countries studied. Although Bergsgaard et al. selects countries for the study from different types of welfare state, the analysis seeks to explain to a small extent the differences based on characteristics of the different types of welfare state, while there is more focus on government–interest group relations and coalition building.

This brief review of the literature shows that there are many analyses of individual countries' sports policy, but relatively few comparative studies of sports policy in different countries and only a few comparative studies of public legislation for and support for sports clubs.

## **Theoretical framework**

As a basis for the empirical analysis, there is first of all a need for a theoretical framework for the comparison of sports club policy, for example what needs to be more accurately compared. For this purpose, we use the concept of *political opportunity structure* which is elaborated and substantiated below. Secondly, there is a need for a theory of how welfare states differ from one another and how these fundamental differences can apparently explain the differences and similarities of sports club policy between countries. For this, a theory of welfare state typology is used.

### *Political opportunity structure*

Politics can be defined as an authoritative allocation of values for society (Easton, 1953). Specifically, policymaking in different areas of society creates both opportunities and limitations for individuals and groups. An analysis of a specific policy in an area must therefore examine the aspects of the policy that are of particular importance to those to whom the policy relates. To define this, the concept of *opportunity structure* is relevant. The term is usually attributed to Robert Merton (1995, p. 25), who defined it as 'the scale and distribution of conditions that provide various possibilities for acting individuals and groups to achieve specific outcomes'. Inspired by Micheletti (1997), the political opportunity structure in relation to the voluntary sector includes four dimensions:

- 1) *The ideals and characteristics of the state*, particularly the size of the public sector, principles in relation to the responsibilities, tasks of the public sector and the degree of decentralisation.
- 2) *The social role and legitimacy of the voluntary sector* – in general and in specific areas of society (for example, sport).
- 3) *The size and nature of financial support* from the public sector to voluntary organisations (for example, resource dependence theory).
- 4) *The nature of the relationship between the public and voluntary sectors*: How organisations are regulated and controlled, how the two sectors collaborate, etc.

The empirical analysis of each country's public policy for sports clubs and subsequent comparison are grouped according to these four dimensions.

### *Welfare state typology*

To examine and explain differences in public policy for sports club among the countries, a typology is a relevant analytical tool. On the one hand, a typology reduces the complexity of an analysis that could potentially involve countless social, economic, and political factors to explain differences in concrete policies among the countries. On the other, a typology is determined by several significant dimensions, the correlation of which determines the ideal types included in the typology.

For two reasons, we have chosen to use Esping-Andersen's famous welfare state typology (1990). Firstly, it is assumed that the defining and distinguishing elements of welfare-state types are essential to public policy for sports clubs, particularly the nature of the relationship between the public and voluntary sectors and the level of universality of solidarity imposed by the welfare state. The second reason for using Esping-Andersen's welfare state typology is that it has been an inspiration for several comparative analyses of the voluntary sector (for example, Salamon et al., 2017) and analyses of sports policy in general (Ibsen and Ottesen, 2004; Bersgaard et al., 2007). These studies indicate that the nature of the welfare state and its historical development are crucial for the size and nature of the voluntary, non-profit sector, including sports clubs and their political support.

Esping-Andersen distinguished between three main types of welfare state:

- The *Liberal welfare state* is characterised by the primacy of market solutions to welfare needs, a low level of economic redistribution, few welfare rights, and public benefits are the bare minimum and provided to those most in need (the US is the typical example but the UK has been catching up in recent decades).
- The *Conservative welfare state* is based on a historical-statist legacy where social rights are attached to occupational status, a strong commitment to family dependence and subsidiarity principles, modest level of decommodification and little focus on economic equality (Germany is the typical example but other central European countries are also included).
- The *Universalist welfare state* is characterised by a high level of wealth redistribution, universalist welfare rights, minimisation of family dependence, public institutionalised care, and high priority given to economic equality (the Nordic countries).

Subsequently, scholars have discussed how different countries fit the three types of welfare state, and some scholars have argued for other types of welfare state. A refinement is to further distinguish between two other types:

- The *Mediterranean welfare state* that has many similarities with the Conservative welfare state in particular (subsidiarity principles and family dependence) combined with some universalist schemes (education and healthcare) and liberal welfare principles (for example, private care of children and elderly) (Arts & Gelissen, 2002; Ferrera, 1996) (Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece).
- The *central-eastern European welfare state* which is a hybrid system combining elements from the past (for example, several universalist welfare schemes from the Communist era) and elements from the other two original welfare state types (Cerami, 2006; Fenger, 2007) (including Poland, Hungary, Slovakia)

Although Esping-Andersen's welfare state typology was developed in relation to social policy, we assume that the characteristics of the different welfare state types also characterise public policy for sports clubs. Among other reasons because it can be assumed that universalism principles or liberal principles of social welfare services also make their mark on how sports clubs are supported.

Esping-Andersen (1990) explained the differences between welfare state types as a result of an extended historical development, where the dominant characteristics of the individual welfare state were created earlier in history. This is probably true of public policy for sports clubs more or less paralleling the development of the welfare state. The basic assumption is that goals, rules, forms of support and governance, etc., that were previously created in an area of society, will pave the way

for policy in that area of society in the future (Stinchcombe, 1965; Pierson & Skocpol, 2002; Salamon et al., 2017).

Although Esping-Andersen (1996) believes that in the long term, all welfare states will align with one of the three types, he also believes that policy choices are interdependent and influenced by choices made by others, in this case other countries, and therefore ideas and concrete policies slowly diffuse between countries. It is assumed that this is especially true of countries undergoing major changes, such as when countries change from an authoritarian to a democratic government or when countries join a formal collaboration with other countries (such as the EU).

## Method and data

The research approach of this study is based on the principles of comparison as a scientific method in which two or more cases are explicitly contrasted with one another regarding a specific phenomenon. The purpose of this method is to identify and explain similarities and differences between a few cases and, to a lesser extent, establish analytical relationships between variables, which is typically sought in quantitative studies of multiple cases (Leiphart, 1975; Azarian, 2011)

The article uses empirical materials from the EU-funded project *Social Inclusion and Volunteering in Sports Clubs in Europe* (SIVSCE) which is the first large-scale project to collect comparative data on sports clubs in Europe, completed from 2015 to 2017 (Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2016).

With the aim of representing different types of welfare state, ten countries were selected for the SIVSCE project: Norway and Denmark (Universalist Welfare State); England (Liberal Welfare State); the Netherlands, Belgium (Flanders), Germany and Switzerland (primarily Conservative Welfare State); Spain (Mediterranean Welfare State) and Hungary and Poland (Central-Eastern European Welfare State). The countries were selected on the basis of two considerations: the desire to have participating countries from different types of welfare state in Europe, and that in each country there were researchers who are conducting research into sports clubs. Out of these ten countries, five were selected for the comparative analysis in this article with the aim of including one country from each of the five types of welfare state described above (Table 1 and elaborated on in the analysis of each country). Thus, the countries used in the analysis were selected on the principle of comparative method to maximise the variation between cases on the independent variable (the welfare state typology).

Table 1. Welfare state typology and selected countries.

Country	Dominant welfare state type
England	Liberal welfare state
Denmark	Universalist welfare state
Switzerland	Conservative welfare state
Poland	The Central-Eastern Europe welfare state
Spain	The Mediterranean welfare state

The analyses of public policy for sports clubs in the five selected countries were completed in three steps as part of the SIVSCE project (Ibsen et al., 2016). Firstly, in 2015 a framework for analysing and

collecting information – based on the theory presented – was developed and discussed at a meeting of researchers in the project. The framework included clarifications of concepts and content of the four dimensions of the analysis described in the theory section.

Secondly, in 2016 a researcher from each of the selected countries ‘filled in’ information from:

- Existing relevant research, including on the relationship between the public and voluntary sectors, on the history of sport, on sports policy, on public support for sports clubs, etc.
- Policy documents on political programmes, legislation, etc.
- Supplementary interviews with employees of sports organisations and public authorities with a focus on how public support for and regulation of sports clubs works.

Thirdly, a researcher from each of the countries wrote a public policy paper for a sports club in that country, structured according to the common framework for the analysis. Then analyses and information were compared across countries. By analysing information collected in the same manner across all the participating countries, knowledge is gained about the similarities and differences in the *opportunity structure* of sports clubs between the countries and how this is embedded in the ideals, structures and historical path of the welfare state of each country.

The development of a framework for the study, the collection of information and the subsequent analysis of this were carried out by researchers from the five countries with linguistic prerequisites for reading publications and policy documents from that country and with insight into the welfare state principles and sports policy of the same country.

### **Public policy for sports clubs in five European countries**

The first part of the analysis – for each of the five countries – comprises a descriptive analysis of the public policy for sports clubs, divided according to the four dimensions of the political opportunity structures presented in the theory section:

- the characteristics, ideals, and principles in the public sector;
- the societal legitimacy of sports clubs and historical roots of public policy for sports clubs;
- the size and nature of the public sector’s financial support for sports clubs;
- the nature of the public sector’s regulation and control of sports clubs.

In the next section, public policy for sports clubs is compared according to each of the last three dimensions and, in the final section, an analysis is made of whether differences can be explained on the basis of the welfare state principles that are dominant in the five countries and described in the first dimension.

#### *England*

In England, government policies underpinned by neo-liberalist economic theory were developed from the 1980s. These assume that the most efficient distributor of resources is the market, and the role of the state should be minimised. These policies contrasted sharply with the previous period from the end of World War Two when there was broad political consensus concerning a strong welfare state. A consequence of the 1980s was a reduction in the services provided directly by the public sector. The *Third Way politics* of the *New Labour government* (from the mid-1990s to 2010) regarded the provision of public services by the third sector as a way of reducing public spending and at the same time increasing community cohesion (Lindsey et al., 2018). However, the *Coalition Government* from 2010, although claiming that removing investment from the state would engender

more voluntary activity in society, continued to outsource the provision of public services to a market of suppliers. In this context, the third sector is viewed as just another operator in the market (Lindsey et al., 2018).

Sports clubs started to develop in the late 19th century. Formal sport and competition between clubs was promoted as morally uplifting recreation for the urban masses (Nichols & Taylor, 2015). However, the clubs can be regarded as part of the 'mosaic of local civic institutions that developed in nineteenth-century Britain'; a legacy of which has been that 'voluntary action in Anglo-Saxon countries is still enshrined in a powerful liberal ideology that continues to celebrate voluntarism as autonomous and jealously defends its arm's length relationship from government' (Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001, p. 812). Value judgements carrying over from the 19th century that sport is intrinsically 'good' have continued to influence public policy.

There is little direct public sector support for sports clubs. A sports club may register as a charity, which entitles it to a concession of 80% on its rates paid to local government, provided it owns its own buildings or grounds. A special legal identity of a 'Community Amateur Sports Club' gives similar benefits to being a charity. About 57% of clubs use public facilities, and 90% of these have to pay a fee (Nichols & James, 2020). The constraints on local government budgets have led to their leisure facilities being run on a more commercial basis with reduced subsidy, and the management of many being contracted to trusts (Nichols et al., 2020). This means that the hidden subsidy of clubs through preferential rates for facility use is being reduced. Clubs are able to apply for grants directly from Sport England – which is a *non-departmental public body* – that are associated with particular government policy objectives, such as promoting sports participation by under-represented demographic groups. Many of the grants are small and given directly to the sports clubs.

There is little government control over sports clubs. Sports clubs retain and value their independence and may be seen as a vehicle for government policies but are not well integrated into their implementation (Harris et al., 2009). Sport England supports clubs directly through material on its website, to which clubs have free access. Clubs have to work within regulations governing broader society, for example, health and safety regulations regarding food preparation and child protection. (Nichols et al., 2005).

### *Denmark*

Firstly, the Danish welfare state is characterised by a public sector that makes up a relatively large share of the total economy; relatively high welfare benefits; and a relatively sizeable redistribution of wealth (Greve & Jespersen, 2019). Secondly, the most important welfare benefits are based on universalist principles, meaning that everyone, regardless of status and finances, is guaranteed a public pension, free access to education, free treatment in hospitals, etc. Thirdly, the public sector both finances and produces most public welfare services. The voluntary, non-profit sector is relatively large, however, and there is a long-standing, historical tradition of collaboration between the public and voluntary sectors. Fourth, the public sector is characterised by a significant decentralisation of publicly-defined tasks to the municipalities.

The basic conditions for sports clubs are guaranteed in the constitution from 1849: 'The citizens shall be entitled without previous permission to form associations for any lawful purpose'. Since the early stages of organised sport in Denmark, the government has supported voluntary sports organisations and clubs. From 1849 to 1945 this support was limited, but from 1945 to 1970 there was a sharp rise in government support for sport, combined with relatively little political involvement in the field. The Act on Spare-time Education was passed 1968, which instructed local municipalities to grant voluntary cultural and recreational associations (the vast majority of which were sports clubs) and

the free use of public facilities. The principles of these acts have, with minor adjustments, remained in place since their creation (Eichberg & Loland, 2010).

The most precise purpose of public support for sport clubs is stated in the Act on Spare-time Education, which states that municipalities are obliged to provide support for spare-time/recreational activities in an association with the aim '*... to promote an understanding of democracy and active citizenship*'. However, in the political rhetoric, public support for sports clubs is usually legitimised by its value for health, social prevention and learning of norms and values in society (Ibsen, 2012).

Approximately 80 percent of total public expenses for sport come from the municipalities, and these expenses primarily target sports clubs. The municipalities are obliged to support sports clubs financially or indirectly by making facilities available if they meet certain requirements laid down in legislation. The act ensures that voluntary sports clubs can access indoor and outdoor facilities owned by municipalities (free of charge or for a minor fee), that they can be reimbursed for two-thirds of the cost of renting private facilities, and that they receive economic funding, which accounts for a small share of the economy in most clubs, however.

Despite the existence of this legal basis, the degree of governmental intervention is limited. Sports clubs must meet only a few requirements to be eligible for subsidies and gain access to publicly owned facilities: The club must be democratically organised; it must have a non-profit purpose in accordance with the purpose of the act; and it must provide a statement about the club's financial situation. The public sector respects the self-determination of associations, even if they receive public funding. Politicians almost refuse to interfere and make demands on sports clubs and organisations.

### *Switzerland*

The main characteristics of the Swiss welfare state are the state's limited responsibility and a low level of wealth redistribution. An important feature of the Swiss political system is direct democracy and the principles of subsidiarity and autonomy, which involves the independent, autonomous performance of tasks, actions, and solutions to socio-political problems wherever possible. Only when this is not possible, or in the event of significant barriers and problems (such as market failure or non-profit failure), do public policy and the respective institutions provide subsidiary support (Helmig et al., 2011). Consequently, the public sector in Switzerland is relatively small compared to other countries (Helmig et al., 2017), whereas voluntary organisations play an important role.

Associations in Switzerland have always been regarded as a partial substitute for public initiatives (Stamm et al., 2015), and sports clubs and other associations are a, to some extent, private – but officially encouraged – alternative to public intervention (Nagel et al., 2019). Sport clubs are the main promoters of recreational sport in Switzerland, but the government supports sport clubs because of their positive social effects. Thus, the social relevance of sports clubs has deep historical roots, and clubs are still 'supposed to fulfil several welfare functions in the context of health promotion, the socialisation of children and adolescents and social integration' (Stamm et al., 2015, p. 408).

Despite the lack of direct, far-reaching intervention, sport clubs are effectively supported by public authorities. The promotion of sport is a politically legitimate order, manifested in the 'federal law for promotion of sport and exercise' established in 2012 (Nagel & Zwahlen, 2016). This legal framework for sport policy supports private initiatives in sport, particularly those of sport federations and clubs. However, the national government and the agency responsible for administering the development of national sports policy, the Federal Office of Sport (FOSPO), have no direct legal obligation to sport



clubs or vice versa, apart from the national Youth and Sport programme (J+S). Within the J+S programme, the FOSPO distributes over CHF 100 million a year to clubs engaged in the promotion of youth sports. The funding promotes courses, events and camps for children and adolescents.

The municipalities provide sports facilities and make these available to sports clubs and individuals at concessional rates. Furthermore, local municipalities often pay some form of lump sum to sports clubs. The cantons support the construction and maintenance of sport facilities in the municipalities, and the sport clubs themselves, using profits from lotteries. Furthermore, they fund training courses, sport equipment, sport events and support for young talents.

Swiss law has few prerequisites for establishing a club: it must be a voluntary organisation with a democratic structure, and its members must share a common goal. The club must also be non-profit. Swiss Federal law obliges the federations, cantons, and communities to stipulate the conditions that facilitate participation, integration, and equal opportunities in social life for everyone, particularly for those with low income, an immigrant background or a disability, although there are no national programmes to support the participation of these target groups. The relationship of the national government to sports clubs is limited, however.

### *Poland*

The development of the welfare state in Poland is the result of both a continuation of welfare principles from the communist era and reforms inspired by liberal and conservative welfare state principles in particular. The communist state was based on universalist welfare-state principles which provided employment, housing, public pension, free healthcare, etc., even if reality was not aligned with these ideals (Cerami, 2006; Hemerijck & Ferrera, 2009). Due to various, mostly political, and financial, circumstances, many reforms were not implemented until the late 1990s, which combined elements of all welfare-state types in Esping-Andersen's typology. The labour market, unemployment policies and the pension system have developed from universal towards more conservative welfare-state policies. The healthcare system has been liberalised, but the aim of the reform was to provide universal, decentralised, and efficient health care, which is free of charge. Education in public schools is also free, and family benefits became universal as well, but due to the rising costs of the welfare state, a reform resulted in means-tested, income-based family benefits.

In Poland, independent sports clubs emerged in the late 19th century (Chelmecki & Wilk, 2013). From 1945, the country had to rebuild after WW2 and, up until the establishment of the third Polish republic in 1989, sports policy was controlled by the Communist party. In the late 1990s, although certain sports structures were formally independent of the state, the autonomy of sports clubs was limited in practice due to the lack of their own facilities or infrastructure (Krawczyk, 1997). The constitution of the Republic of Poland (1997) guarantees that 'public authorities shall support the development of physical culture, particularly amongst children and young persons'. The Act on Sport (2010) specifies that 'sports activities shall be conducted, in particular, in sports clubs', but there is no specific regulation or policy targeting non-profit sports clubs (Piątkowska & Gocłowska, 2016).

Sports clubs in Poland mainly focus on promoting and developing sports for all and sports for children and young people (Piątkowska & Gocłowska, 2020). Sports clubs are expected to contribute to public welfare – foster health promotion, social integration, democracy and volunteering (Piątkowska & Gocłowska, 2020).

Although there is no direct policy targeting sports clubs, they are supported by national and local authorities by the commissioning of sport-related programmes for which sports clubs can submit tenders. In many cases, sports clubs have free or discounted access to sports facilities, as most of

these facilities are at educational institutions and local sports centres. In addition, the income of organisations whose statutory objectives consist of activities in the fields of, inter alia, physical education and sports is exempt from paying corporate income tax.

The Constitution guarantees freedom of association which is defined as ‘a self-governing, lasting (membership) organisation, formed of free will and with a non-profit motive’. Associations must register with the regional Registry Court. However, if a sports club wants to become a beneficiary of targeted budget funds from a public programme, it must be a non-profit association operating for at least three years and have a statutory objective to promote sport among children and teens under 18.

### *Spain*

Spain’s welfare state dates from the last stage of Franco’s dictatorship when the industrialisation process led to a relative increase in social spending, although at the time it lacked orientation towards a universalist perspective (González & Taboadela, 2020). With the transition to democracy, an inclusive and redistributive social security system was agreed upon, as well as significant increase in personal income taxation. This was the basis on which the Spanish welfare system developed, with extensive healthcare, education, and pension coverage, but with limitations in other areas, closely linked to the ideology of the government in power and an expansive and universalising dynamic. The 2010 recession led to a drastic reduction in social policies (except pensions), and accentuated the bias in favour of the elderly and the duality between stable and precarious workers (González & Taboadela, 2020).

In Spain, the first sports clubs were established in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. When the Franco regime (1939–1975) took power, sport was no longer part of civil society, and it became assimilated into the structure of the state. Since the 1990s, sports clubs have grown in importance and gained autonomy within the Spanish sports system, despite the state’s unquestionable dominance as a supplier and financial backer of numerous sporting activities.

After the adoption of the Spanish constitution in 1978 – which allows the 17 regions of Spain to promote sports – the country saw a rapid increase in sports legislation at regional level. By the 1990s, all 17 of Spain’s regions had adopted their own sports laws, with specific provisions on sports clubs in decrees, plans, and programmes. A new Sports Law passed in 1990 defined sports clubs as private associations whose purpose is to foster participation in sporting activities and competitions.

The state is not merely an ancillary promoter of the clubs’ activities because it is also involved in providing a wide range of opportunities for the practice of sports (Burriel & Puig, 1999; Llopis-Goig & Vilanova, 2015). By law, town councils serving populations of more than 20,000 inhabitants are under an obligation to provide sports services for their citizens.

While the regions’ autonomy renders any generalisation difficult, they manage their own support services for sport, provide regional funding to clubs and federations, construct facilities, organise competitions, and support training and research. The regions have annual calls for proposals to which the sport clubs and sport federations can present their projects to obtain a grant.

Municipalities invite clubs to respond to annual open calls for proposals to subsidise the activity of the sports clubs. Municipalities also construct and meet the running costs of local facilities. In 2018, 81% of total public expenditure for sport came from the municipalities, 13% from the regions and 6% from the central government (CSD, 2020, p. 69).

The awarding of a grant is not always guaranteed, and the amount depends on the financial resources of the regional or municipal government. The criteria for funding will vary – but could

include the number of teams a club has, the promotion of women's sports, participation in public campaigns, etc. In so doing, the municipality allocates funds to sports clubs which contribute to its objectives.

### **Comparison of the sports-club policies of the five countries**

This section compares the public policy for sports clubs in the five countries. First, public policy for sports clubs is compared. Second, an analysis is made of the interconnection between welfare type and sports club policy. Finally, the limitations of the analysis are discussed.

#### *Differences and similarities in sports club policy between the five countries*

In the theory section, political opportunity structure was defined by four dimensions. This section compares sports club policies in terms of the second, third, and fourth dimensions, while the first dimension is used to explain the differences.

#### *The societal role and legitimacy of sports clubs*

Across the five countries, public support for sports clubs is legitimised by a belief in sport as intrinsically 'good', which contributes to public welfare. All five countries have a political priority to increase participation in sports and promote social integration of physical inactive and socially vulnerable groups. In most instances, however, this is expressed in broad terms, with a scarcity of concrete policies and plans. In Switzerland, Poland and Spain, sporting participation is a 'right' or a goal enshrined in the constitution, sports acts, or decrees. However, specific rules for public support for sports clubs is laid down in legislation in only Denmark and Switzerland.

Sports clubs are organised as associations. All the five countries have 'freedom of association' and there are small differences in the understanding of what an association is. Only if the association receives public support must it be approved, but the requirements are small, primarily being that the club must be democratic and non-profit. There are significant differences among the five countries on the sports clubs' relation to the public sector, however.

In England sports clubs are in principle '*separate and independent*' of the public sector – enshrined in a liberal ideology where sports clubs value their independence. Sports clubs are seen as a vehicle for government policies, but the clubs are not well integrated into the implementation of these policies.

In Denmark, sports clubs are both '*integrated and independent*'. On the one hand, it is the primary sports policy goal to promote participation in sports clubs, and this is supported by legislation that provides clubs with significant public financial support and access to sports facilities free of charge. On the other, sports clubs have a high degree of independence from the public sector, the financial support is almost exclusively non-targeted, and politicians refrain from making clear demands on sports clubs.

In Switzerland, sports clubs are a '*independent substitute*' for public initiatives based on principles of subsidiarity. The promotion of sport is mandated by federal law as a political and public obligation, obliging federations, cantons, and communities to define the terms and conditions that facilitate participation, integration, and equal opportunities for all people. But the sports clubs are tasked with achieving these goals in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity.

In Poland, sports clubs are '*dependent implementers*' of political goals for sport. Poland's constitution states that public authorities must support the development of physical culture, particularly amongst

children and young persons. Laws and strategies have been enacted setting out how to achieve this, but sports activities are expected to be carried out by sports clubs in particular. There is no specific regulation or policy targeted at non-profit sports clubs, however.

In Spain, sports clubs are also '*dependent implementers*' of public sports policy. Legislation defines sports clubs as private associations whose purpose is to promote one or more sports, and foster participation in sporting activities and competitions. But the public sector is not merely a promoter of the clubs' activities because it is also involved in providing a wide range of opportunities for sports practice. Since the 1990s, sports clubs have grown in importance and gained greater autonomy, despite the state's dominance as a supplier and financial support.

#### The nature of the public sector's financial support for sports clubs.

In all five countries, many sports clubs receive some form of public support, directly or indirectly. The extent and nature of public support varies considerably, however. Public support for sports clubs consists of a) providing sports clubs with access to sports facilities; and b) providing financial support for the activities. Most sports clubs are heavily dependent on sports facilities. The primary difference among the countries is whether sports clubs have free access to sports facilities or must pay a rental fee, in whole or in part, to use publicly-owned facilities. With regard to the direct public financial support, one can distinguish between 'basic grants' without specific requirements for the use of the grant, and 'targeted grants' where the financial support is given for specific purposes.

In England more than half of the sports clubs use public facilities, but there is no legislation giving clubs the right to access facilities. Most sports clubs pay a fee for to use facilities, and the preferential rates for facility use have been reduced in recent decades. The public funding for sports clubs is primarily 'targeted grants'. There is little direct public support for sports clubs, but indirectly some of the clubs benefit from being registered as a charity which provides certain benefits in terms of taxation and public charges.

In Denmark, most sports facilities are owned by the municipalities, which are obliged to give sports clubs access to facilities free of charge. Municipalities are also obliged to pay most of the expenses for the use of private sports facilities. The public financial support is primarily 'basic grants'. Sports clubs have a statutory right to public support for activities for members under 25 years of age, but the public funding accounts for a small share of the economy in most clubs.

In Switzerland, municipalities provide sports facilities and make these available to clubs at concessional rates. Public financial support to sports clubs is primarily 'targeted grants', but municipalities often pay some form of lump sum to sports clubs and fund training courses, sports equipment, sports events and young talents. The national government has no legal obligation to sport clubs or vice versa, apart from a national youth and sport programme.

In Poland, most sports facilities are owned by the public sector. In many cases, sports clubs have free or discounted access to facilities. The financial support is 'targeted grants'. Sports clubs are supported by national and local authorities by commissioning sport-related programmes for which sports clubs can submit tenders. In addition, there is an exemption from the corporate income tax for income of clubs whose statutory objectives consist of sports activities.

In Spain, the municipalities construct and meet the running costs of local sports facilities. The financial support is 'targeted grants'. The regions have annual calls for proposals to which the sport clubs can present their projects to obtain a grant. Similarly, the municipalities invite clubs to respond to annual open and competitive calls for proposals to subsidise the activity of the sports clubs.

### Public governance and control of sports clubs

In all five countries, the local level of political administration has the greatest responsibility for sports club policies, while links between the state and the local sports clubs are non-existent or weak. Compared to public institutions, sports clubs are not subject to top-down management in relation to political goals and priorities. Most clubs depend on various forms of public support, however, which means that they must adapt to requirements from the public authorities. The public management and control of the sports clubs is partly about whether the public support is a 'right' laid down by law and the extent to which public support is linked to specific requirements.

In England, public support for sports clubs is not regulated by specific legislation which obliges the public sector to support sports clubs. In addition, there is little control of sports clubs and few requirements for clubs that receive public support. But the clubs must work within regulations governing society in general, such as health and safety regulations on food preparation and child protection. But this is no different from the other countries included in this analysis.

In Denmark, public support for sports clubs is regulated by legislation that obliges municipalities to provide financial support and make facilities available. However, the same law protects the clubs against municipal interference in what the clubs offer of activities, how they use the public support, etc., and associations need to meet only a few formal requirements (democratic governance, non-profit and an ideal purpose) to be eligible for support.

In Switzerland, the form of funding and financial support of sports clubs is the result of the traditional idea of subsidiarity and autonomy. Action by public institutions is always taken at the most local level possible. Therefore, the relationship of national government to sports clubs is limited.

In Poland, significant public control of the sports clubs continued after the formation of the third Polish republic in 1989. Although certain sports structures today are formally independent of the public sector, the autonomy of sports clubs is limited in practice for reasons such as not having their own facilities. If a sports club wants to become a beneficiary of targeted budget funds, it must be a non-profit association, it must have operated for at least three years and its statutory objective must be to promote sport among children and teens.

In Spain, the autonomy of sports clubs has increased over the past two decades, but the public sector still exerts great influence over the clubs because they depend on public support. This means that the clubs must conform to the requirements set out by municipalities and regions to be eligible for public support from annual calls.

### *Coherence between welfare state type and public policy for sports clubs*

The comparison of the public policy for sports clubs in Denmark, England, Switzerland, Poland and Spain identifies many common features: A strong belief in the social value of sports and especially sports clubs; the freedom to form sports clubs independent of the state; the favourable treatment of sports clubs in public support for the promotion of sports participation; sports clubs' access to public sports facilities on favourable terms; public support for club activities; the decentralised management of public support as well as the relatively limited public control of the clubs. This is in keeping with the analyses of the countries' sports policy, referenced in the literature review and the few comparative studies of sports policy (Heinemann, 1999; Bergsgaard et al, 2007). But the analysis also shows that within each of the dimensions of the political opportunity structure, there are a number of differences that are attributable to the ideals and principles of the prevailing welfare-state model in the country in question.

In England, the sports club policy is not statutory, and public support is minimalist. The clubs can use publicly owned sports facilities but must pay part of the rental cost, and normally they do not receive direct financial support. If they do, this is in the form of 'targeted grants'. Overall, the characteristics of the policy correspond to the characteristics and principles of the liberal welfare state model, which assumes that the most efficient distributor of resources is the market, and the role of the state should be minimal. This confirms previous studies of British sports policy (Henry, 2001).

The special feature of Denmark's sports club policy is that all clubs have a statutory right to access to public facilities, to be reimbursed for most of the clubs' expenses for private facilities, and public support for activities for children and young people is provided as 'basic grants' according to objective criteria. This is in keeping with the principles of the universalist welfare state. Welfare benefits are relatively high, based primarily on universalist principles. But unlike the major welfare areas, where it is primarily public institutions that provide welfare benefits, voluntary associations are responsible for this in sports. This confirms previous studies of sports policy in Scandinavian countries (Ibsen & Ottesen, 2004; Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010; Fahlén & Stenling, 2015).

Sports clubs in Switzerland do not have a statutory right to public support, which is primarily 'targeted grants', but some of the support from the local municipality is a 'basic grant' of sorts, and public sports facilities are available at concessional rates. Sports club policy is implemented at local level wherever possible, except for two federal programmes. These characteristics of sports club policy are in keeping with the main principles of the conservative welfare state model based on the principles of subsidiarity, that non-profit organisations provide the welfare, and need-determined public support. This confirms previous studies of sports policy in central European countries (van Poppel et al., 2018; Chappelet, 2010)

Sports club policy in Poland aims to achieve the state's overall goals for sports, set out in both the constitution, legislation and strategies. However, the clubs have no statutory right to support which depends on 'targeted subsidy' from sport-related programmes for which clubs can submit tenders. But most sports clubs have free or discounted access to sports facilities. This combination of policies corresponds with policies in both Switzerland and Denmark, similar to the mix of welfare-state principles that characterises the Polish welfare state today.

Sports club policy in Spain is also based on legislation, decrees, plans, and programmes at national, regional and local levels. The municipalities construct and meet the running costs of local sports facilities, which the clubs have access to at concessional rates. However, the clubs have no statutory right to support, but can apply for 'targeted grants' at annual open calls for proposals which aim to meet the state's goals for sports. This reflects the general features of the modern welfare state in Spain. On the one hand, a political desire for the public sector to play a leading role in society, as is known in the universalist welfare state. On the other, a sharp reduction in recent times in the public sector for economic reasons with an adaptation to welfare state principles in the conservative and liberal welfare state.

The analyses of the five countries show both continuity and change. In Denmark and Switzerland, the basic characteristics of sports club policy have not changed for several decades, but this is also true of the welfare state policy in general. Unlike these two countries, there has been a considerable movement from the universalist principles in England to the liberal welfare state principles. And sports policy seems to have kept up. In Poland, parts of the sports club policy are a continuation of some of the welfare state structures and principles that characterised the communist era, but the policy is increasingly influenced by the liberal and conservative welfare-state ideals which currently characterise the general welfare-state policy in Poland. In Spain, there has been an increasing

liberalisation of sports policy with greater autonomy for the sports clubs, but the policy remains marked by the policy in the first decade after the end of Franco's dictatorship, where the new democratic government wanted 'a government in power' and a large public sector. This broadly aligns with comparative studies of the development and integration of the voluntary, non-profit sector into public policy (Salamon et al., 2017).

European collaboration and the member states' increasing interdependence have led to greater uniformity in some areas of society in recent decades, and welfare systems have become more alike (Esping-Andersen, 1996). Within sports club policies, this seems to have happened in Poland and Spain, which is related to the two countries' shift from authoritarian to democratic societies, and the analysis suggests that the sports club policy in these two countries can be explained in part by policy diffusion. But in Denmark, England and Switzerland there has been no such adaptation of policy to a common European 'standard'.

### *Limitations*

The analysis shows that the overall ideals and governing principles of the welfare state are probably interconnected with public policy for sports clubs. The analysis has some limitations that the reader should be aware of, however. Firstly, it characterises sports club policy in all five countries, that it primarily occurs at a decentralized level, which has a relatively high degree of freedom to formulate policy in the field. It would have been desirable if the analysis could have been based on a data collection from a representative sample of local public authorities in all five countries. Secondly, although the selected countries 'represent' the different welfare state types, a generalisation of the findings to other similar countries must be made with reservation. Thirdly, one must be careful to understand the interconnection in terms of causality in the sense that the overriding welfare state policy has been decisive for sports club policy, although the reverse is unlikely. The coherence between ideals and principles in welfare state policy and sports policy can certainly be linked to historical roots for the development of the welfare state and its relations to the voluntary sector, which more thorough historical studies can identify. Fourthly, the study is limited by being unable to draw any conclusions about the outcome of a specific sports club policy, such as the number of sports clubs and members and clubs' social inclusion. However, a study of the impact of the different public policies for sports clubs presupposes a quantitative research design with a larger number of countries.

### **Conclusion**

The comparison of public policies for sports clubs in Denmark, England, Switzerland, Poland and Spain identifies many common features but also a number of differences, which are primarily attributable to ideals and principles of the prevailing welfare state model in the country in question. This is especially true of England, where sports club policy follows the principles of the liberal welfare state model; Denmark, where sports club policy has many common features with the principles of the universalist welfare state model; and Switzerland, where sports club policy is aligned with the principles in the Swiss version of the conservative welfare state model. In the two last-mentioned countries in particular, sports club policy has been relatively stable for several decades. It is more difficult to connect the sports club policy in Poland and Spain with the welfare state models of the two countries, but the specific policies in these two countries seem attributable to a combination of a continuation of forms of government from the former authoritarian regimes, an imitation of forms

of support from other European countries as well as an adaptation to the dominant principles of the welfare state model established over the course of three decades.

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