



The Problematic Institutional Context of Greek Football and the Role of FIFA and UEFA

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Abstract

Greek football is on the periphery of European football and it frequently faces scandals and corruption issues. Also, there appears to be a correlation between the wider social and political context and football. Additionally, FIFA and UEFA arguably have contributed to the fate of Greek football. For example, in the past when the Greek government tried to intervene in football, FIFA prevented them several times with the threat of a ban. During the previous years, FIFA and UEFA decided to cooperate with the Greek government and play a more active role in Greek football. However, little has changed in the governance of Greek football. This study has examined the context, critical incidents and the role of actors in Greek football. By using the Institutional Theory approach, our analysis indicates that the institutional context is highly problematic, as the big clubs dominate the institutional mechanisms of football. Corruption appears to be deeply embedded in the structures and operations of football, while the Hellenic Football Federation is controlled by the big clubs. In parallel, there is no plan for the overall development of football, from the grassroots to the elite level. The study concludes with a recommendation for the reformation of Greek football.

Key words: Greek football, FIFA, UEFA, good governance, corruption

Introduction

Greek football belongs to the periphery of European and global football. In spite of this, Greek national team shocked the world when they won the UEFA Euro 2004 tournament in Portugal, certainly one of the major surprises in the history of football. After this success, the Greek national team managed to remain with the elite of international football for another 10 years. This was largely due to the two outstanding coaches, Otto Rehhagel and Fernando Santos. During this period, there was hope for an overall improvement of Greek football, in terms of good governance and international status. Nevertheless, over the last few years, both the Greek national team and clubs have performed badly at the international level. Additionally, there is no plan for the overall development of football from the grassroots level to the elite.

Together with scenes of riots from Greek football stadiums, matches cancelled before kick-off, attacks on referees and allegations of match-fixing has made Greek football front page news internationally. There is a constant

toxic climate on the top tier football in Greece, with long-standing hostility between the clubs, governmental interventions and recently the active role of FIFA and UEFA. Unfortunately, despite the presence of FIFA and UEFA in the governance of Greek football for the past four years, there has been no actual improvement, as will be shown below.

The purpose of this study is to explore the institutional context of Greek football; the main actors, the critical incidents and the reasons that have kept it in a problematic situation for long. Moreover, the study will examine the role of the two international institutions of FIFA and UEFA. In terms of methodology, we adopt the Institutional Theory, probably the most used and valid theory to study organisation in the context of social sciences (Greenwood et al., 2008). This approach will help us to map the major stakeholders, the dynamics between them and where the true power lies. In this context, the authors proceeded to a historical narrative, compiled from desk research on the recent history of football in Greece. This has been done through the analysis of several official reports, news articles, academic papers and online sources.

The added value of the present study is the detailed analysis of the recent history of Greek football through the lens of Institutional Theory, in a period when dramatic events took place. Relevant studies in the recent past examined the different stakeholders of football in Greece (Anagnostopoulos, 2011) and identified the main problems, such as corruption (Manoli, Antonopoulos & Bairner, 2019). However, the present study focuses for the first time in the power games between the major stakeholders, the interconnections of football with politics and most importantly the key role that FIFA and UEFA played during the last thirty years. In this context, our analysis allowed us to identify the patterns, the dominant actors and a recent shift in policy from the two international institutions.

Regarding the structure of the study, at first there is a brief presentation of the basic tenets of Institutional Theory and secondly the general context of Greek sport, in order to identify the wider environment. In the core of the study we analyse the critical periods and incidents that have shaped the Greek football system through various scandals with political and social implications. This is followed by an analysis continuing throughout the history of the several governmental interventions and the responses of FIFA and UEFA, in order to observe any recent changes in their approach. Second, it deals with the analysis of the era of FIFA and UEFA presence in Greece and the critical incidents during that period. In the discussion section, the study approaches the whole story through the lens of Institutional Theory and finally presents in the conclusion some recommendations for the reformation of Greek football.

Institutional Theory and sports organisations

Institutional Theory is one of the most prominent academic approaches to understand and study organisations. The founders of this approach are Meyer and Rowan (1977), who based their theory on Max Weber's legacy, regarding the power of bureaucracy in modern societies and particularly the two key elements; 'the complexity of networks of social organisation and exchange' and the 'institutional context' (Greenwood et al., 2008). Through the years, several studies approached the significance of the social/ cultural environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio, 1988) and institutional change (Tolbert and Zucker, 1983; Tina Dacin et al., 2002).

In this context, the key tenets of Institutional Theory, which comes out from bibliography are: isomorphism, organizational fields, institutional logics, legitimacy and institutional change (Washington & Patterson, 2011). Isomorphism is the phenomenon which occurs when the organisation adopts the characteristics of the external environment. Here, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that the institutional context puts three kinds of pressures on organisations: coercive, mimetic and normative pressures. Coercive pressures comes from political institutions or other powerful policy makers where the organisation must comply with their rules. In contrast, mimetic pressures derive from the need to mimic others in order to adapt to the environment. Finally, normative pressures are those mechanisms which are dominant in the general context and the organisation unintentionally adopts them.

Additionally, organizational fields are those networks with stakeholders and processes, such as suppliers, consumers, agencies etc. that constitute a unified framework (Ibid). Differently, institutional logics are the wider belief systems and structures, which provide identity and meaning. For instance, Friedland and Alford (1991) identify five major institutional logics in our time: capitalism, family, bureaucracy, democracy and Christianity. Also, legitimacy is the need of every organisation to secure the approval and support of its actions from the external environment. Lastly, institutional change is a notion that also includes institutional strategy and institutional entrepreneurship, highlighting the importance of agents that can drive change.

In the sport context, Washington and Patterson (2011) have analysed the most prominent studies in sport that used Institutional Theory, identifying the application of theory's major tenets in several studies. The authors concluded by urging further elaboration of Institutional Theory through the elements of organisational fields and institutional change. In the context of football, Pouliopoulos and Georgiadis (2021) used Institutional Theory, together with a moral philosophy, to study FIFA and UEFA. Their analysis of both organisations highlighted the importance of institutional context and the role of agents, regarding good governance and organisational culture. Notably, the lack of a strict regulatory framework with powerful stakeholders and also the lack of virtuous agents inside the organisation, appear to have allowed a culture of corruption to prevail (Ibid).

The Greek institutional context and sports federations

Greece is a country with a long history and a rich cultural background. After a turbulent 20th century with the active participation in both world wars, followed by a civil war, Greece managed to become a modern state with a leading role in the Balkans and the wider area. The major challenge for Greece during the last decades was the alignment with the European integration process.

However, the adoption of some particular elements appeared to be less successful, particularly in the area of transparency and economic sustainability in the public sector. On this topic, Pappas (2013) argues that the Greek political system was a 'populist democracy' rather than a liberal democracy, while Sklias and Maris (2013) believe that "*contemporary Greece is a unique case of what could be called a mature clientelistic political system*" (pg. 161). Clientelism is defined as a system in which personalised and reciprocal relationships between specific actors create an unequal system with wider political ramifications (Lemarchand & Legg, 1972).

The modern version of this clientelistic system in Greece, has been established by the two major political parties, PASOK and New Democracy, which rotated in office for about three decades (80s-00s). The preservation of the party in power was mainly based on the spending of public money, allowing the government to preserve a clientelistic relationship with the voters. In this context, when the global economic crisis broke in 2008, it found the Greek economy unprepared and the government unable to support the economy and the labour market. Consequently, it faced a deep recession for about ten years.

Equally important, in the context of the Greek sport system, there are common characteristics with the wider political system. Papadimitriou (1998), by using the Institutional Theory approach, describes a sport system where both institutionalism and resource-dependence theory apply to the relationship between the national sport federations and the state, as the latter exerts financial and legislative institutional pressures on the former. Similarly, Henry and Nassis (1999) found a close connection between the sports policy in Greece and political clientelism. To summarise, the state funding of the sport federations was based on patronage and clientelistic relationships between the ruling party and the administration of the federations, since clientelism is a common feature in a wide range of policy fields in Greece. It worth mentioning that the same phenomenon appears also in the neighbouring Turkey, as the Turkish sport system is characterised by political clientelism and manipulation (Erturan-Ogut & Sahin, 2014). Similarly, Argentinian football is also trapped in clientelistic networks and even more in corruption and violence (Paradiso, 2016)

In this vein, we can argue that clientelism in sports is another phenomenon of 'isomorphism', as the wider political and social environment exerts coercive or normative pressures to the sport system (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In other words, the corruptive elements of the wider social and political system, were transferred also on sports systems. Nevertheless, although there appears to be a correlation between corruption in the wider social context and football, we need to be careful as corruption is not an easy concept to examine, because sometimes cause and effect are interwoven (Treisman, 2000). However, a relevant study found links between the wider culture (macro-level) with the pervasiveness and arbitrary nature of corruption in national institutions (micro-level) (Pillay & Dorasamy, 2010). For the purpose of this study, strong arguments to support the hypothesis, that the wider social and political context shares common elements with sport and football institutions regarding corruption, are presented below.

A brief history of the background of Greek football

Football, as in most countries, is the number one sport in Greece. The Hellenic Football Federation (hereafter HFF) was established in 1926; it became a member of FIFA in 1927 and was one of the founding members of UEFA in 1954. The first national division was officially established in 1927. Initially football was mainly amateur and at a later stage semi-professional. Finally, the law 789 in 1979 recognised professional football and the clubs as limited liability companies.

From the early 80s, series of issues were raised in the Greek football scene, such as hooliganism, economic scandals, and political influence. The most salient example of that period was the ‘Koskotas scandal’, which stigmatised not only Greek football, but also Greek politics. In brief, Giorgos Koskotas was a banker and the owner of Olympiakos, who embezzled a large amount of money from the Bank of Crete, in a case where even Ministers of the government were involved. Traditionally, Greek football clubs had close ties with the political parties and politicians who were willing to ‘settle’ problems that occurred for the football club, just to keep the owner and the fans-voters satisfied.

Most football clubs in Greece have used their political contacts, directly or indirectly, to avoid penalties from debts or other mismanagement issues (Dimitropoulos, 2010). Anagnostopoulos and Senaux (2011) argue that Greek football operates in a deficient regulatory framework, where the football clubs are taking advantage of their social role, in order to be financed with public monies, with the help of local authorities. Additionally, political influence in football was supported during that time by the public betting company OPAP, which was the ‘lifeblood’ of the sporting system in Greece for decades (Ibid).

Regarding the national football federation, the HFF administration was firstly controlled by the political parties, like most sport federations in Greece, as we saw above. However, as big clubs became more powerful, political parties gradually lost their influence over the HFF. In contrast with neighbouring Turkey, where the state still controls football (Koc et al., 2016), in Greece the big clubs managed to become the key agent in national football and even ‘used’ the political parties in some cases, to achieve their goals. However, as shown below, this power had been given to the big clubs, also by FIFA and UEFA, since the international institutions diminished the state power by stopping all governmental interventions to secure the ‘autonomy of sport’.

In this context, the power of the big clubs comes from the control of the president and the board of HFF. The control of the HFF was the way to control the referees and the judicial system and so gain ‘on and off the field’ advantage. As Matt Scott explained:

“the bad smell around Greek football began late in the last century, when elections to the Hellenic Football Federation board took place. An investigation into alleged bribe-taking in the vote proved inconclusive but many observers were sure that the system that allowed fewer than 60 regional councillors to vote for 15 key boardroom posts – obtained with a simple majority of 30 – was open to abuse” (Scott, 2020)

In this context, the next major football scandal was the ‘paranga’ (shanty) scandal that was revealed in 2002 on a TV show that exposed several recorded telephone conversations between Thomas Mitropoulos and other football stakeholders. Mitropoulos was a partner of Sokratis Kokkalis, the owner of Olympiakos and one of the most powerful businessmen in Greece. Mitropoulos was the man in the background, who controlled the HFF and the referees (Kapranos, 2002). Although the district attorney of Piraeus ordered the investigation of the tapes and the relevant cases, no one was convicted, and the case was closed. However, one of the referees who participated in the first division that time (1999-2001), explained that there was a ‘give and take’ relationship between the referees and the paranga (Mplounas, 2008). In fact, the referees had to favour the teams of the paranga, so as to continue to be on the lists of HFF and referee matches in the professional divisions. Otherwise, they were excluded from the lists. However, this is not only a Greek peculiarity, as referees in general know that sometimes wrongdoing is a necessary condition to progress. This phenomenon is explained by the theory of social structure, in which cultural and relational constraints influence the acts of the individuals (Moriconi & De Cima, 2021).

In 2006, clubs decided to form the ‘Super League’, following the example of the Premier League. The main scope was to maximize their profits through a more professional management and marketing of the top tier football. However, the paranga vol.2, otherwise known as the Koriopoli scandal (from korios-phone tap in Greek and Calciopoli – the similar Italian football scandal) took place some years after; specifically, in the period 2008-2011. In the summer of 2011, several transcripts of recorded telephone conversations came to light, in which football stakeholders talk about gambling, money laundering and other illegal acts. 68 people in total were listed by the judicial authorities, among them football players, referees, managers and club officials.

From the clubs involved, Olympiakos Volos and Kavala were punished with points deduction, while Olympiakos Volos which qualified for the Europa League season 2011-12, was expelled by UEFA. Later, the prosecutor who took over the case concluded that Olympiakos Piraeus F.C owner, Evangelos Marinakis, together with the president of the HFF at that time, Georgios Sarris, and 24 other HFF and clubs’ officials and referees, were suspected of controlling Greek football by methods of blackmailing and fraud. The result was the ban of most of the suspects from footballing activity. Despite this, Marinakis and most of the other suspects were later acquitted.

Simultaneously, the HFF had to face its own internal cases of corruption. The most significant scandal was that of the ‘health card’, a program which was supposed to offer free medical examinations for all football players in Greece. The program was introduced in 2005 and although it was never implemented, the HFF paid the contracting companies until 2013. This resulted in a loss of approximately 30 million euro for the HFF. Finally, three former presidents of the HFF were handed suspended jail sentences. Another scandal was the missing 3.37 million euro that were found by Deloitte, which checked all federations’ transactions and financial operations for the years 2015 and 2016 (EPO, 2017). Deloitte’s report also included a series of loans that the HFF gave to some regional football associations, but never claimed the money back (Soccerplus, 2017).

The Governmental interventions in football and the role of FIFA and UEFA

FIFA, as the sole authority of football at a global level, using the concept of the ‘autonomy of sports’ that is respected almost everywhere, had exerted its power over national governments several times during the previous decades (Meier & Garcia, 2015; Hylton, 2017). Since access to international football is vital for national football industries, the national governments could not dispute FIFA without the risk of a ban for the national team and clubs. In this context, one of the most usual displays of the power of FIFA, was over the Greek governments. The first conflict dates back in the early 90s, when the Deputy Minister of sports that time, Giorgos Lianis, proposed a new legislation, to supervise the system of referees and the composition of sport disciplinary courts for professional football (Panagiotopoulos & Mourniakakis, in Meier & Garcia, 2015). The HFF appealed to FIFA, which had threatened Greek football with expulsion at the time when Greece had qualified for the first time in the history of the national team in the World Cup finals (USA 94). Eventually, the Greek government abandoned the plan to reform the HFF system and so FIFA and HFF won their first battle against the Greek government.

The second endeavour of a government to intervene into football matters, took place during the paranga era, in a period that mainly covers the late 90s and the early 00s. During that period, the Deputy Minister of sports, Giorgos Floridis, decided to intervene by proposing a new law for professional sport, which gave the state a supervised role in the elections of sport federations and the composition of disciplinary committees (Ibid). The HFF stood against Floridis and appealed to FIFA. In spite of this, some negotiations between FIFA and the Greek government took place; the result was the full retreat of the Greek government and the suspension of Floridis from Deputy Minister of sports in October 2001.

The next confrontation between the Greek government and HFF/ FIFA took place in 2006. The ruling party was New Democracy, the conservative party, that came into power after many years of PASOK domination. The Deputy Minister of sports, Giorgos Orfanos, prepared a new legislation in 2004, which changed the electorate system of sport federations, by increasing the number of electors for the president. However, the elections of the HFF in October the same year, were carried out using the old system and as a response the Deputy Minister stopped the state funding for the HFF (Anagnostopoulos, 2011). Nevertheless, in contrast with the other sport federations, state funding was never the main source of income for the HFF. After the Greek parliament passed the legislation which intervened in the electorate system of sport federations, FIFA gave the Greek government a deadline of 15 July 2006, to amend the legislation (Meier & Garcia, 2015). The government at first did not comply and so FIFA officially suspended the HFF on July 3, 2006. Nevertheless, once again the cost of this decision was too heavy for the ruling party to bear and so immediately an amendment passed through parliament, which excluded the HFF from the regulations about sport federations. Just nine days after the suspension, FIFA lifted the ban for Greece. In short, the Greek state had lost another battle from the HFF and FIFA.

The U Turn of FIFA and UEFA and the active role in Greek football

After the koriopoli scandal, the president of the HFF, Giorgos Sarris, who has been involved in the scandal, resigned at the end of 2014 and on 23rd of January 2015, Giorgos Girtzikis, with the support of Olympiakos, became the new president of the HFF. At the same time, the new leftist party Syriza which had just come into power, with a main objective of the exit of Greece from austerity and the fight against corruption. In this context, the new Deputy Minister of sports, Stavros Kontonis, declared his willingness to ‘clean up’ football. His first initiative was to propose a new legislation on May 2015, which entailed changes regarding acts of violence, the power of the Minister to stop the league and most notably the reformation of some procedures in the judicial system of the HFF.

At first, the HFF refused to comply with the new rules and specifically with the reformation of the judicial system. As a consequence, Kontonis decided to contact UEFA and in fact opened a channel of dialogue with the general secretary of that time, Gianni Infantino. Finally, Girtzikis, the president of the HFF, negotiated with Kontonis

and decided to accept the rules of the Deputy Minister, regarding the judicial matters. In other words, the Deputy Minister of sports gained his first win over the HFF.

The second battle between Kontonis and the HFF began after the decision of the Minister to cancel the Greek cup and impose heavy fines on the clubs, after another chaotic derby between PAOK and Olympiakos on March 2, 2016. According to the HFF, this was clearly governmental intervention and so FIFA gave a deadline of April 15, 2016 to restart the Greek Cup, threatening to suspend the HFF. However, Kontonis stood his ground and called FIFA and UEFA to negotiate the restart by deciding on some rules for the reformation of the HFF. The two international institutions were not hostile this time and decided to send Konstantinos Koutsokoumnis, the president of the Cypriot Football Federation to Greece, as an official representative.

Koutsokoumnis, as a Greek-Cypriot and therefore familiar with the peculiar Greek football context, found common ground with Kontonis. As a result, on April 12, 2016 Koutsokoumnis met with Kontonis, who agreed to restart the Greek cup, while the FIFA representative committed himself to initiate infringement procedures for the harmonisation of the HFF's regulatory framework, according to that of FIFA and UEFA. After the meeting, Koutsokoumnis argued that the priority of FIFA/ UEFA was to reform HFF's code of conduct and to help Greek justice on the issue of the prosecutions of HFF officials about mismanagement issues (tvxs, 2016).

In this context, on August 25, 2016, the decision of the Greek court to prosecute the president Girtzikis, together with other members of HFF, for the health card scandal, led Koutsokoumnis to make the surprising declaration that "the state's laws are above the laws of a federation" (Kathimerini, 2016). Thus, Girtzikis resigned due to the judicial procedures for the health card and the elections of the HFF for the new administration were about to be held in October 2016. However, FIFA and UEFA decided to take more drastic measures for the reformation of Greek football and play a more active role. As a matter of fact, Fatma Samura, the General Secretary of FIFA, in a letter on October 31, 2016 informed the HFF that the FIFA council on the 14th of October, had decided to appoint a normalization committee in the HFF until May 2017, when the proper electoral procedure for the new HFF administration could be organised (FIFA, 2016).

The main goal of the normalization committee would be to run the daily operations of the HFF and to reform the relevant regulations, to bring them in line with FIFA standards (Ibid). The composition of the normalization committee included mainly technocrats and chosen by Koutsokoumnis. However, some of the new members were people affiliated with the ruling party Syriza, another sign that Koutsokoumnis and Kontonis had a relationship of mutual trust.

The (not so) new era

Kontonis was the first Greek Minister of sports who achieved a victory against the HFF and this success allowed him to be promoted to Minister of Justice in the government reshuffle of November 2016. However, the new era with the normalisation committee was not so 'normal'. Firstly, the crime of arson was committed on the house of the head of refereeing; Giorgos Mpikas, in Northern Greece. Similarly, another member of the refereeing committee also faced an attack on his house. Some months later on May 6, 2017 the Greek cup final between PAOK Thessaloniki and AEK Athens turned into a fiasco, as the fans of both teams rioted and fought against each other and the police. The normalization committee was severely criticised for the organisation of this game.

Nevertheless, the term of office of the normalizing committee in the HFF was extended, by the decision of the Bureau of the Council of FIFA on May 2017 (FIFA, 2017). FIFA decided to change the initial decision, due to delays in the alignment of the Greek sports laws with the FIFA regulations. Finally, the elections in the HFF were held on the 18th of August 2017 and Evangelos Grammenos became the new president with the support of PAOK Thessaloniki and AEK Athens. However, FIFA and UEFA continued to have a supervising role in Greek football, through a supervision committee. Additionally, the Portuguese Melo Pereira was appointed head of the referees, as a foreigner who could secure neutrality between the big clubs.

A few months after Grammenos took office as president of the HFF, he received an envelope containing a bullet on 28th December 2017. With regard to the on-field action, the first season with the new administration was also full of problems. The initial incident took place during the traditional derby between PAOK and Olympiakos in Thessaloniki, a crucial match as PAOK was close to the title after 33 years. However, the match had to be abandoned before kick-off, as the Spanish coach of Olympiakos, Oscar Garcia, was hit by a paper roll which thrown by a fan. PAOK accused Garcia and Olympiakos for 'shadow play', but finally PAOK lost the game in court and was penalised with a three points deduction and the next game to be held behind closed doors.

That game was the match against AEK Athens and the result would have probably determined the title. Strangely, the initial decision for closed doors was overturned just the night before the match and so PAOK was to face

AEK Athens with a full stadium. The result was 0-0 until PAOK scored a late goal. The players of AEK Athens asked the linesman to call an offside and the referee changed the initial decision and disallowed the goal. PAOK players and fans started to protest and after some minutes the owner of PAOK, Ivan Savvidis entered the pitch furiously, with a gun in the back of his trousers; the incident went viral.

PAOK was penalised over the next days in the courts and AEK Athens won the Greek championship that year. In the meantime, the Greek government suspended the Super League, as usual, for a while. Along with this, the Chairman of the FIFA monitoring committee in Greece at that time, the Austrian Herbert Hubbels, recommended the suspension of the HFF from FIFA membership with a letter to the FIFA member associations committee (gazzetta, 2018). However, FIFA rejected his recommendation and the Greek Super League restarted after some time.

The season 2018-2019 was not going to be easier for the supervising committee. Firstly, the referee Athanasios Tzilos was attacked and seriously beaten by masked men outside his house, on December 19, 2018. The Greek Super League was suspended once again, while the referees went on strike in protest. The attack on the referee Tzilos was the 27th on a referee in Greece since 2009 (Warsaw, 2018). For this reason, the head of referees Melo Pereira, decided to appoint foreign referees in the derbies between the big clubs. At the end of the season, PAOK Thessaloniki finally managed to win the title after 34 years.

The next season, 2019–2020, started with growing hostility between Olympiakos and PAOK and particularly between the two owners. The rivalry between Marinakis and Savvidis goes beyond football, as both men own businesses and media companies, so they were rivals in business and also at a political level. In this context, ‘One channel’, owned by Marinakis, in early December 2019 exposed an alleged huge scandal in football, namely the dual ownership of PAOK and Xanthi F.C by Ivan Savvidis, with both clubs in the Super League. Savvidis and PAOK denied the allegation, while the committee of professional sports took up the case.

Some days after on the 27th of January 2020, the committee of professional sports met and decided to recommend the relegation of both PAOK and Xanthi F.C, for bending ownership rules. PAOK accused the committee and in particular the Deputy Minister of Sports, Lefteris Avgenakis, who had decided the composition of the committee, for an arranged vote to favour Olympiakos. PAOK fans protested fiercely against the decision, threatening to ‘split Greece into two’ (Georgakopoulos, 2020). Finally, the government responded with a legislative initiative that replaced severe penalties in issues like this, with just a points deduction. In this regard, PAOK were docked seven points and Xanthi F.C twelve points. PAOK appealed against the initial decision of dual ownership in CAS, which on July 10, 2020 decided to overturn the seven-point deduction and upheld the case back to the HFF. Finally, early in February 2021, PAOK was acquitted from the appeals committee of the HFF.

On the 25th of February 2020, the president of UEFA Aleksander Ceferin, visited Athens at the invitation of the Greek Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Mitsotakis asked UEFA and FIFA, to draft a memorandum of understanding with the two international football institutions, which would allow Greek football to deal with the long-standing problems. The two men agreed to a close collaboration and the first output of the memorandum would be a report, prepared by FIFA and UEFA, with recommendations that would help Greek football to overcome problems and challenges. Finally, the report was delivered in October 2020 and included a series of recommendations regarding the HFF’s governance, professional football, disciplinary matters, refereeing and other issues.

A few months later, the iconic captain of the Euro 2004 Greek national team, Theodoros Zagorakis, became the president of the HFF and after a series of negotiations, the HFF General Assembly accepted all recommendations from FIFA/UEFA report. The new administration under Zagorakis and the new governance system that HFF adopted, gave a great deal of hope for Greek football. However, on the 8th of September 2021, Zagorakis resigned from the presidency of HFF just a few months after he had taken over, for the reason that he could not lead a real reformation process for HFF. Therefore, the vicious circle of Greek football seems to be continuing.

Discussion – Corruption as the dominant tenet in Greek football

The academic literature is rather poor regarding the institutional context of Greek football. However, from the few relevant academic studies, we can find useful insights, to support our analysis. In this context, Anagnostopoulos (2011) examined the stakeholder management in Greek professional football, based on the Mitchell et al. framework, which identifies the most salient stakeholders in a football context. The author presents the prominent stakeholders, such as organising bodies, sport clubs, local authorities, supporters clubs etc. and their attributes, without identifying the most influential. From our analysis, comes out that the dominant actor in the Greek football is the big clubs and particularly their owners.

The owners of the clubs, who also own media, businesses, have political connections and control the HFF, as shown above, they have managed to diminish the power of the rest of the stakeholders and create for themselves the dominant role in Greek football. Particularly, the owners of the big clubs (Olympiakos, PAOK, AEK and Panathinaikos) own also big media companies, meaning that the press is also partly controlled by the clubs. Additionally, the organised supporters' groups of each club, are also controlled by the owners. It worth mentioning that despite most of these supporters declare an anti-capitalist spirit; the leaders of those groups usually have a very good relationship with the wealthy owner of the club (Zaimakis, 2016).

From an Institutional Theory perspective, we can argue that the big clubs exert coercive pressures on the HFF and Greek football's stakeholders in general, as coercive pressures are derived from power relations and political structures (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983). Usually, coercive pressures comes from governmental or regulatory bodies, but could also come by any actor strong enough to impose its will on the other stakeholders (Washington & Patterson, 2011). Furthermore, the autonomy that FIFA/UEFA demanded for football and the constant loss of power from the government, allowed the big clubs to seize the opportunity and become institutional entrepreneurs and thus; 'actors who changed the institution' (Battilana et al., 2009).

The great power of big clubs in Greece is not a unique phenomenon as "*there is evidence of power being transferred from associations and leagues to clubs*" (Hamil et al., 2010, pg. 403) also in other European contexts (Garcia, 2007; Holt, 2007). This was demonstrated recently also in the European top level football with the ESL break-away attempt, that was finally unsuccessful. However, it seems that the Greek case is one of extremes, in terms of the power of the big clubs and extent of corruption. For instance, Manoli, Antonopoulos and Bairner (2019) argue that corruption in Greek football is not just an aberration, but rather the norm. The authors identify three major corrupt practices in the Greek football, i.e. match-fixing, ticket tricks and fake tax and insurance certificates. Ticket tricks and fake documentation are usual practises of the clubs, according to the researchers, which take advantage of their political connections, to gain or save money illegally (Ibid).

Match fixing is another long-standing problem in Greece. According to Andreff, the main reasons for match-fixing are: a) exploitation of players (low wages or non-payment), b) an official corruption context and c) large illegal gambling networks (Andreff, 2016). In the Greek context, the most likely reason is the second, as the whole system is characterised by immoral practices and a culture of corruption. As evidenced also by studies in other football contexts, match-fixing as corruption phenomenon is rather caused by corrupt networks and not by individual characteristics (Moriconi & De Cima, 2021). The first reason, i.e. exploitation of players, is mainly a problem in the lower divisions in Greece, where most clubs face financial problems and players are susceptible and need to find an alternative source of income, even one which is illegal. For instance, in the second professional division (football league) there were reports recently that 75% of the matches were fixed for betting (Nicholson, 2018).

Additionally, Manoli and Antonopoulos studied the 2011 koriopoli scandal and their conclusion was that the 'paranga – criminal organisation' changed Greek football in two ways. Firstly, it minimised the uncertainty of outcome and resulted in the favouring of some clubs, to the detriment of others, in both sporting and financial terms (Manoli & Antonopoulos, 2015). Secondly, it had established an autonomous system that ruled football, much like a mafia-style organisation (Ibid). In this context, match-fixing was rather the norm in Greek football and clubs almost expect to be involved in this, in order to survive, especially during a period of economic hardship.

Again, from the lens of Institutional Theory, the isomorphism phenomenon defines the relationship between the wider socio-political system and football. The interrelation between politics and football is so strong in Greece, that even politics have turned towards 'footballisation' (Zaimakis, 2016). Particularly, corruption, clientelism and polarisation are dominant elements in both platforms, politics and football. As shown above, the HFF administration traditionally develops a clientelistic relationship with the big clubs in a 'give and take' relationship, while simultaneously there is always a toxic hostility between the clubs. Therefore, the HFF's role in practice is to participate in the power games between the big clubs and not to run the game properly.

When FIFA and UEFA decided some years ago to play a more active role in Greek football, there was a glimpse of hope that the international football institutions would finally deal with those chronic weaknesses and establish a proper institutional context. However, despite the presence of FIFA and UEFA, the toxic climate is still prevalent, attacks on referees and other scandals take place frequently, while the HFF is still controlled by the big clubs. Additionally, the performance of the Greek national team and the Greek clubs in Europe is even worse than used to be five or ten years ago. More importantly, there is still no actual plan or strategy for the development of Greek football, in terms of grassroots and overall development.

FIFA and UEFA could have played the role of the institutional entrepreneur in Greek football, as they did in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where they managed to facilitate the reformation of the mismanaged local football institutions (Cooley & Mujanovic, 2015). Although the Greek context might be more complex from that of Bosnia and Herzegovina, FIFA and UEFA failed to reform Greek football, while from the beginning it was a “*growing feeling throughout Greek and European football...that vested interests will not allow this to happen*” (Nicholson, 2017). What happened was that in the first phase of the FIFA and UEFA presence in Greece (October 2016–August 2017) when the normalizing committee was running the HFF, the members of the committee were just playing the role of ‘pacifier’ and ‘facilitator’ and not the role of a committee that would reset Greek football. During the second phase (August 2017–2021), FIFA and UEFA remained basically as ‘observers’ and their main concern was just to avoid violent incidents in the stadia (Sabrakos, 2020).

However, it worth mentioning that since refereeing is one of the major problems in Greek top-tier football, the appointment of foreign referees in the derbies and with a foreign head of referees had a positive impact. Particularly, with the foreign referees in the derbies, there were three different cup winners and champions over the last seasons (AEK, PAOK and Olympiakos), which is rather uncommon for the Greek top-tier football.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine and identify the institutional context of Greek football. A major finding is the deep interconnection of Greek football with the wider social and political context. Particularly, there is a traditional clientelistic mentality in Greek political and social life that affects sports and football. Therefore, scandals with political implication, abuse of power and corruption, very often characterise the governance of Greek football. Additionally, it can be argued that FIFA and UEFA contributed to the perpetuation of this situation for two reasons. Firstly, when the Greek government tried several times to regulate the HFF, regarding judicial and refereeing issues, FIFA and UEFA stopped them with the threat of a ban for the HFF. Obviously, the Greek governments could not take the risk of a potential ban, as the expulsion of the Greek national team and the Greek clubs from the international tournaments, would have been a heavy price to pay. Secondly, when FIFA and UEFA finally decided to cooperate with a Greek government and play an active role to change Greek football, their contribution was rather politically oriented and diplomatic.

Through the years, the big clubs became the dominant actor, while FIFA and UEFA were unable or unwilling to help the HFF and Greek football in overall, escape. As it is shown clearly in this study, the culture of corruption is deeply embedded in the structures and mechanisms of Greek football, making it impossible for those who participate in this corrupted system, i.e., the clubs and the HFF, to initiate a real reformation process. In this context, it appears that institutional entrepreneurship from the agents of that system cannot be a possibility, within the current circumstances. Therefore, only an external intervention from a powerful institution or policy-maker who exerts coercive pressure, could change the institutional context and the relevant corrupted institutional mechanisms.

In practice, our study indicates that the HFF must somehow be disconnected from the big clubs. It is not only that the top-tier football is corrupt and dysfunctional, but the entire football pyramid needs reformation, from the grassroots to the elite level. In this context, FIFA, UEFA or the Greek government, should force the HFF to design and implement a national reformation plan, similar to that of Belgium’s pioneer projects (De Knop et al., 2004; Van Hoecke et al., 2009), based on education, good governance and total quality management. In parallel, the disconnection of the HFF from the big clubs, will allow the HFF as organisation to focus and devote all resources to this project. Finally, if the big clubs must run the top-tier football on their own, maybe they could come to a common agreement and introduce some new institutional mechanisms that will create a less corrupt system.

In conclusion, the institutional context of Greek football appears to be a unique case of institutionalised corruption, with the connivance of FIFA and UEFA. From an academic perspective, there is a thin line between the Greek institutions and their tendency to corruption and the role of FIFA and UEFA on the preservation of this problematic system. In general, the interrelationships between the different institutional logics are far from straightforward and simple in any system (Gammelsæter, 2010). In any case, as our study indicates, Greek football appears to be in a dead end and only drastic institutional changes could give hope for a less corrupt system. Overall, although this study examined solely the Greek case, it could be used as a potential template for studying other national contexts. Particularly, our findings demonstrate that Institutional Theory serves well as a framework for mapping the institutional context, the dominant stakeholders and the stance of FIFA and UEFA in case of a problematic national football context.

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