



Real European Sport Model research report Executive Summary

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The European Sport Model (hereinafter "ESM") has been understood as a defining framework for how sport is organised, governed, and practised across Europe. The model assumes that grassroots and elite-level sport are united by financial solidarity mechanisms. It builds on the principle of promotion and relegation in open competitions, and it establishes sport as a values-based activity and a critical instrument of social and public infrastructure.

However, the main observation underpinning this research is that the ESM does not holistically capture how the majority of sports are organised and how European citizens engage with physical activity. This observation has long been recognised at the highest level of European policymaking. As early as 1998, the same year and in the same report that the term "European Sport Model" is first used, the European Commission recognised that many grassroots and elite stakeholders felt unrepresented by the sports federations that claimed to speak on their behalf (European Commission, Directorate-General X, 1998, Section 3.1). In the 2007 White Paper on Sport, the European Commission acknowledged that defining a single organisational model for sport in Europe was unrealistic, given the complexity and diversity of national structures (Commission of the European Communities, 2007, p. 12).

This has spurred growing concerns and led to the research question guiding our inquiry: "To what extent does the ESM reflect the diversity of the organisation of and participation in sporting activity in Europe?" Our research finds that the current ESM does not present a cohesive framework that is representative of the depth and breadth of the realities of the organisation of and participation in sporting activity in Europe.

This headline finding is supported by four sub-findings encapsulated in each Chapter of the report:

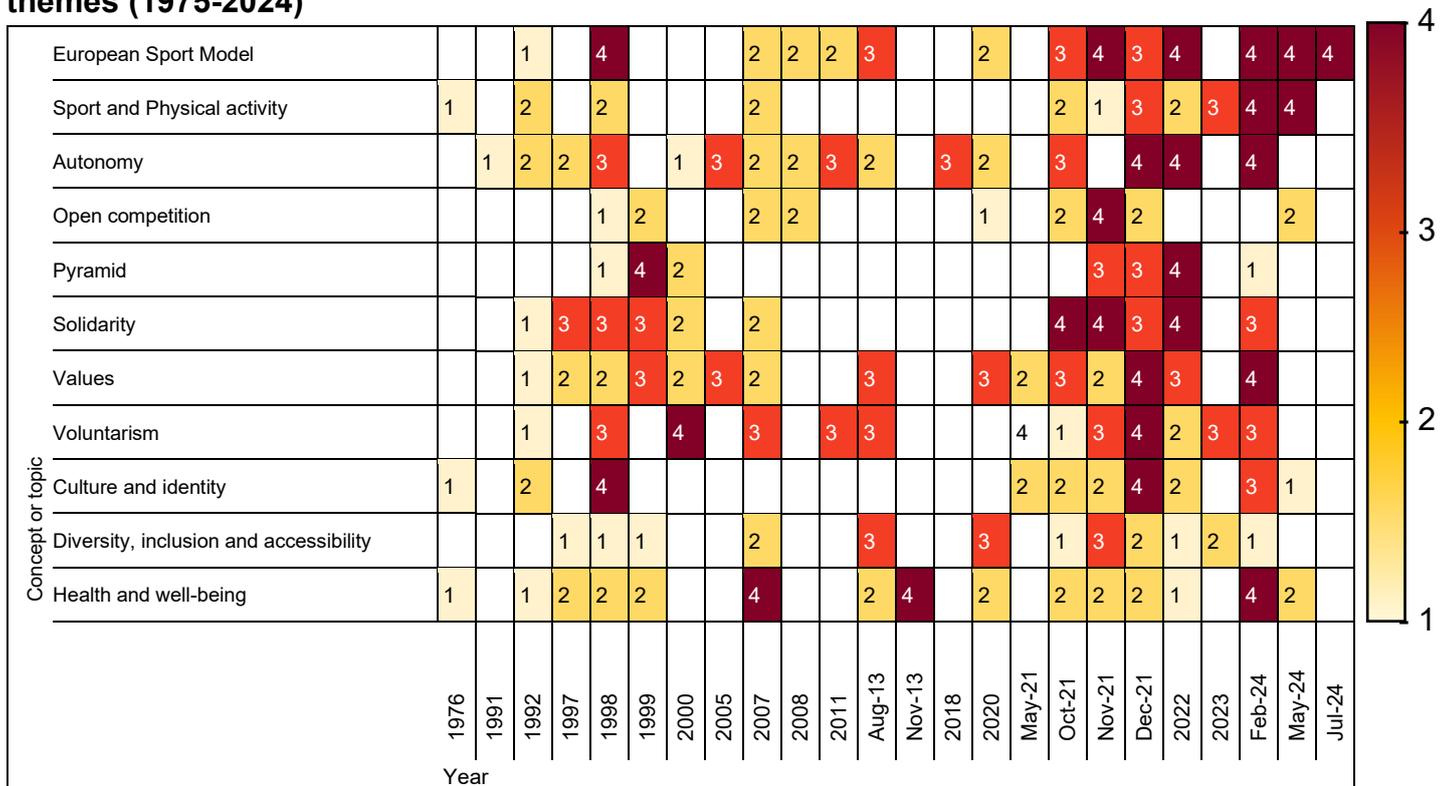
- Chapter 1: **ESM definitions and understandings of concepts and topics prove inconsistent.**
- Chapter 2: **Society-facing topics are lacking substance and assessment, while current key features lack mechanisms and measurements.**
- Chapter 3: **Mapping the relationships between civic life and sectoral contributions better capture the diversity of the organisation of and participation in sporting activity.**
- Chapter 4: **The diverse financial landscape of direct and indirect contributions to sporting activity in Europe remains largely unsupported by financial redistribution from sport governing bodies.**

Chapter 1: ESM definitions and understandings of concepts and topics prove inconsistent.

The first area concerns consistency and comprehensibility of the ESM’s six key features over the fifty-year timeframe (1975-2024), during which European institutions have debated a potential common framework for sport in Europe. Chapter 1 analyses the six key features – autonomy, open competition, the pyramid structure, solidarity, values and voluntarism – across policy documents from European institutions, peer-reviewed articles from scholars, and broader grey literature.

The high-level analysis of consistency is summarised in **Figure 8**, a heatmap of the changing nature of the definitions and understandings over time from the policy analysis across all concepts. It includes both the six key features of the ESM and the topics inductively identified as of importance to the ESM, including culture and identity, health and well-being, diversity, inclusion and accessibility.

Figure 8: Heatmap of ratings of definitions and understandings across ESM concepts and themes (1975-2024)



The high-level conclusion that can be gleaned from **Figure 8** is that the “European Sport Model” displays very little consistency. Nearly all concepts and topics have changed significantly over time,

and not in any discernible pattern or interrelated shifts. The current understanding of the ESM largely diverges from the original ideas underpinning the development of sport in Europe. Particularly, the concepts of autonomy, solidarity, voluntarism and of sport have all moved permanently away from their original meanings.

For example, the ESM's understanding of 'sport' has evolved from a holistic approach to physical activity to a distinction between (1) formal, organised settings, which mainly focus on performance and competition; and (2) and informal, self-organised settings, which typically are a form of leisure and recreation with benefits related to health and social cohesion.

This observation could suggest the ESM and its concepts have evolved over time to reflect the ever-changing needs of citizens. The 'European Sport Model' itself and five of its six features (solidarity, voluntarism, values, pyramid, and autonomy) showcase the least consistency. The inconsistency across these concepts directly contrasts with the consistency seen across society-facing concepts like diversity, inclusion, and accessibility; health and well-being; and culture and identity. This appears to indicate that concepts that are politically charged are inconsistent, while the goals and aims related to citizens' needs have stayed relatively consistent.

Chapter 2: Society-facing topics are lacking substance and assessment, while current key features lack mechanisms and measurements.

The second area is identifying potential gaps in the ESM (Chapter 2). Like the approach to the key features, the research outlines an understanding and then challenges the ESM’s approach to society-facing topics, like sport and physical activity; culture and identity; health and well-being; and diversity, inclusion and accessibility. Despite being of critical importance to the broader scientific literature on sport, these topics remain largely unassessed by scholars in the context of the ESM.

To further understand where scientific assessments are lacking, the research considered the six key features and categorised them by function. As shown in **Table 6**, the high-level finding is while each ESM key ‘feature’ is a concept, not all concepts have associated mechanisms for implementation, and even fewer have associated measurements. Where measurements do exist in the cases of autonomy and voluntarism, their efficacy in evaluating the concept proposed remains unassessed.

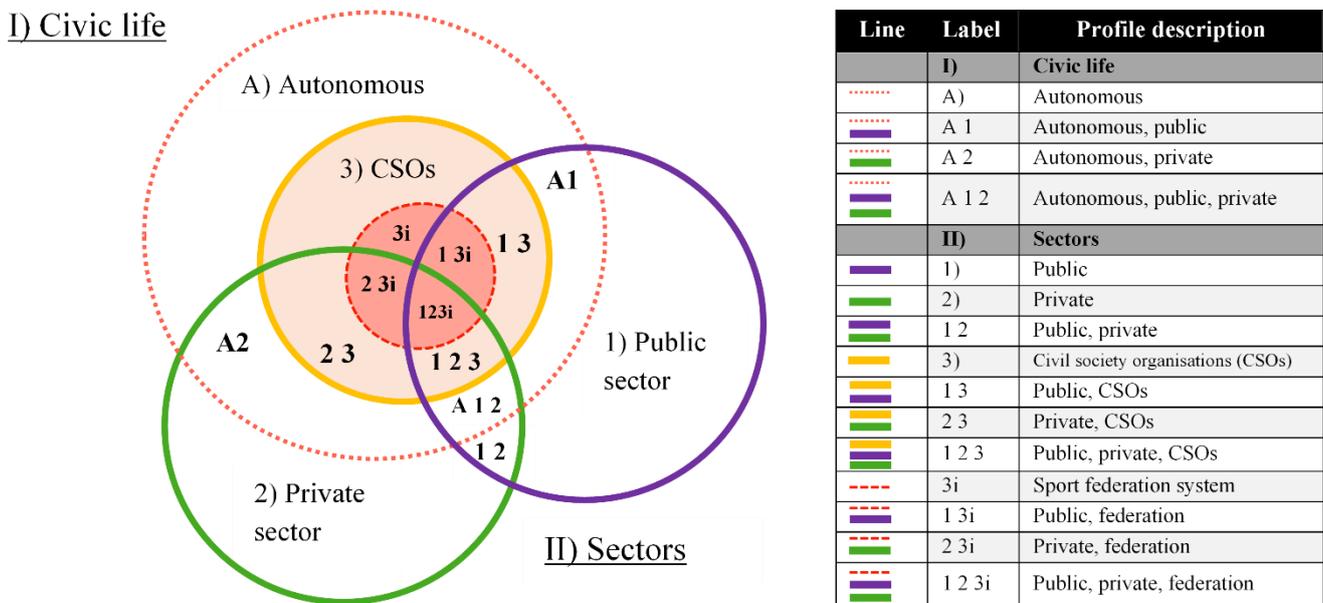
Table 6: Summary of literature review findings across six ESM features

	<u>Concept</u> <i>Abstract idea or principle</i>	<u>Mechanism</u> <i>Concrete implementation action(s)</i>	<u>Measurement</u> <i>How concept(s) or mechanism(s) are evaluated</i>
Key features of the European Sport Model	Autonomy	None	Good governance indicators; but applicability is not tested
	Open competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotion / relegation Questionable applicability of financial redistribution 	None
	Pyramid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hierarchical governance Questionable applicability of financial redistribution 	None
	Solidarity	Financial redistribution	None
	Values	None	None
	Voluntarism	Volunteers, but interpretation of concept as meaning a ‘workforce’ is questionable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantitative measures of quantity of volunteers and hours, interpreted through economic measures Volunteer satisfaction and retention surveys

Chapter 3: Mapping the relationships between civic life and sectoral contributions better captures the diversity of the organisation of and participation in sporting activity.

The third area proposes an updated and validated framework to capture the diversity of how sporting activity is organised and practised in Europe. As shown in **Figure 14**, the Relational European Sporting Map seeks to visualise the overlap between civic life and the public, private and civil society organisation sectors to capture how sporting activity is not only organised but also experienced by participants. This framework represents a key shift by refocusing the debate from organisations to an underlying common denominator: sporting activity.

Figure 14: Relational European Sporting Map



Vandenberg, L., & Riquier, O. (2026). *From the European Sport Model's Pyramid to a Relational Map of Sporting Activity*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

This framework was validated through an in-person facilitated pilot survey with 100 participants. The results of the survey were that every sporting activity presented and described to the researchers could be understood by one of the 12 possible profiles outlined. The following results present an example per profile, based on the in-person facilitated survey.

- **A** - Autonomous sporting activity that uses only the citizens' own resources and/or settings. A common example included self-organised running at home on a personal treadmill.

- **A-1** - Autonomous sporting activity that uses 1) designated public resources and/or settings. A common example included self-organised cycling in designated cycling lanes.
- **A-2** - Autonomous sporting activity that uses 2) private resources and/or settings. An example was self-organised exercise at home that relied on a paid mobile application to define the exercises.
- **A-1-2** - Autonomous sporting activity that uses 1) designated public AND 2) private resources and/or settings. An example included a triathlete who uses a public university's track and pays a private gym membership to access a swimming pool.
- **3** – Sporting activities that are organised by a civil society organisation and uses only the CSO's own resources and/or settings to deliver sporting activities (e.g., member-funded with household contributions only). An example included an employee at a civil society organisation who plays football as part of a work league, using facilities available through their employer.
- **1-3** - Sporting activities that are organised by a civil society organisation and uses 3) the CSO's resources and/or settings (e.g., member-funded with household contributions only) AND 1) designated public resources and/or settings to deliver sporting activities. An example included a beach volleyball player who uses public volleyball courts as part of a civil society organisation's volleyball league.
- **2-3** - Sporting activities that are organised by a civil society organisation and uses 3) the CSO's resources and/or settings (e.g., member-funded with household contributions only) AND 2) private resources and/or settings to deliver sporting activities. An example includes an equestrian who is a member of a civil society organisation for horseback riding and rents time at a private boarding stable.
- **1-2-3** - Sporting activities that are organised by a civil society organisation and uses 3) the CSO's resources and/or settings (e.g., member-funded with household contributions only) AND 1) designated public AND 2) private resources and/or settings to deliver sporting activities. None of the survey participants themselves fit this profile; however, the researchers were told of an example of a civil society organisation for children that organises play activities in public playgrounds using equipment financed by the private sector.
- **3i** - Sporting activities that are organised by a civil society organisation within the sport federation system and use 3i) resources and/or settings supported by members (e.g., household

contributions) and/or the federation system (e.g., solidarity payments). An example includes a kayaker who is a member of the national federation of the International Canoe Federation but only kayaks in public rapids, which are public access and are not maintained for the purpose of kayaking and therefore do not meet the criteria for a designated public resource or setting (a '1' profile).

- **1-3i** - Sporting activities that are organised by a civil society organisation within the sport federation system and use 3i) resources and/or settings supported by members (e.g., household contributions) and/or the federation system (e.g., solidarity payments) AND 1) designated public resources and/or settings to deliver sporting activities. An example includes a football player who is a member of an organised football federation and plays on public football pitches.
- **2-3i** - Sporting activities that are organised by a civil society organisation within the sport federation system and use 3i) resources and/or settings supported by members (e.g., household contributions) and/or the federation system (e.g., solidarity payments) AND 2) private resources and/or settings to deliver sporting activities. An example includes a karateka who is a member of the World Karate Federation and trains at a private dojo.
- **1-2-3i** - Sporting activities that are organised by a civil society organisation within the sport federation system and use 3i) resources and/or settings supported by members (e.g., household contributions) and/or the federation system (e.g., solidarity payments) AND 1) designated public resources AND 2) private resources and/or settings to deliver sporting activities. One example includes a squash player who competes in their national federation for World Squash and utilises both public and private squash courts in their country to practice.

The proposal and testing of this new framework aim to guide conversations and provide individuals and organisations alike with the tools to map their activities and self-advocate.

Chapter 4: The diverse financial landscape of direct and indirect contributions to sporting activity in Europe remains largely unsupported by financial redistribution from sport governing bodies.

The Relational European Sporting Map framework is tested and applied to the concept of solidarity and the mechanism of financial redistribution. Case studies of fourteen organisations in eight different countries showcase the diverse reality of the profiles of activities offered and the breakdown of organisational finances across the types of contributions and sources of contributions. In terms of sources, the cases underline the importance of contributions from households and the public sector. The cases also highlight the diversity of the type of contribution, including both direct (funding) and indirect (resources and settings) contributions.

Analyses of the financial redistribution of profits from sport governing bodies demonstrate the contributions from elite-level to the grassroots sports are not universal and vary in amount. In terms of solidarity payments at the international level, only 0.2% (13.75 million EUR) of the Union of European Football Associations' (UEFA) annual revenue in the 2023/24 season (6.8 billion EUR) is mandated to be distributed to grassroots sport. At the national level, as shown across five Danish national sport federations in **Table 16**, international solidarity schemes contribute very little to grassroots sport and public subsidies are required.

Table 16: Contributions to grassroots levels from Danish national sport federations (2024, in EUR)

	Football	Handball	Cycling	Volleyball	Badminton
Total revenue	83.466.399	11.831.470	7.557.438	2.365.391	6.438.894
Annual report indication of the amount of funding to the grassroots level	9.444.578	1.636.414	395.558	444.683	740.014
# of participants in grassroots (national registration figure)	393.466	117.004	40.671	20.315	107.424
Per participant contribution (total funding divided by # of participants at grassroots level)	24.00	13.99	9.73	21.89	6.89
Income from national public subsidies	4.115.663	3.699.948	2.463.542	882.492	2.199.251
Income from international subsidies	4.527.041	291.044	--	--	--
Funding for grassroots minus national subsidies	5.328.916	-2.063.534	-2.067.984	-437.809	-1.459.237
% as part of total revenue	6%	--	--	--	--
Per participant contribution (EUR, non-national subsidies to grassroots level)	13.54	-17.64	-50.85	-21.55	-13.58

This application of the Relational European Sporting Map framework and associated analyses helps us understand the mechanism(s) and measurement(s) of the key feature of solidarity. The mechanism of financial redistribution does not function universally. A critical variable affecting this mechanism appears to be the revenues of a given sport discipline from centralised broadcasting rights. However, high revenues from private sector sources like broadcasting partners do not guarantee effective redistribution. More critically, financial redistribution contributes little to the financing of grassroots sport even when it occurs. This finding challenges the ESM's assertion that financial flows in sport rely on the pyramid structure and the dual role of sport governing bodies as regulators and commercial entities with monopolies over centralised broadcasting rights.

In terms of measurements, these analyses highlight the difficulties of obtaining consistent and transparent data from sports federations. The lack of universal data reporting standards and measurements makes an already complex and diverse landscape of direct and indirect contributions extremely difficult to trace and compare. This intransparency could prove to be a significant obstacle to evidence-based solutions and policies.

Looking forward

With this research, we hope to contribute to evidence-based policymaking affecting the organisation of and participation in sporting activity in the European Union and beyond.

We hope that the new Relational European Sporting Map framework we present can facilitate a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the realities of sporting activity in Europe. This framework can help individuals and sport organisations advocate for their needs, ensuring the range of activities offered and financed reflect recent lifestyle trends and new expectations among the population. In doing so, it can also help policymakers design policies that are responsive to these needs and the practice of all forms of sporting activity, including self-organised sport.

Moreover, we hope this research points towards new research avenues and spaces where stakeholders could be engaged, including representatives from the public, private and civil society sectors involved in organising and financing sporting activity. In doing so, this research invites all stakeholders to shape a diverse European Sport Model that is as inclusive and representative as the continent it aims to serve.

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