

REVIEW

of Dissertation Thesis titled:

**Optimization of Management of the Professional Football Clubs in the Republic of
Turkey in line to the UEFA Criteria**

Author: Serdar Samur

Research advisor: Professor Daniela Dasheva, DSc

1. Dissertation thesis review.

Good governance is the basis for the autonomy and integrity of all tiers of the pyramid-like football system. Furthermore, it is also a way to strengthen and develop the football clubs themselves e.g. through better management and efficiency. Match-fixing, corruption scandals, money laundry, debt crises, wages escalation, deepening financial gaps between European clubs are considered to be the biggest threats to the current football world. Cooperation between different stakeholders (UEFA, National football associations, leagues, professional clubs, regulators, etc.) is extremely important for the further development of the people's game.

Facing the above challenges has prompted the UEFA's executives to react by enforcing an ambitious programme of top-down reforms that have seriously affected professional clubs since 2004. At the core of these reforms are the UEFA Club Licensing Criteria which cover five distinctive areas: sporting, financial, administrative, infrastructure, and legal. These are made mandatory for implementation by the professional football clubs throughout Europe since 2014 following a 10 years transitional period.

They aim to: (i) improve the quality standards both of club management and sporting competitiveness; (ii) make the clubs conscious to invest strategically in their youth academies; (iii) provide the clubs with robust governance models, structure and processes; (iv) make the clubs' financial operations, decision making process and control mechanisms more transparent, accountable and reliable; (v) improve the clubs' facilities and services to players, spectators, media, and business partners; and (vi) force the clubs to be responsible to their creditors by keeping good budget balances and sustainable development.

In this sense, the efforts by Serdar Samur, who has extensive experience in managing a football club in Turkey, to explore the impact of UEFA benchmark criteria on the management of professional clubs is a timely and much needed addition to practice. In accordance to the topic the author highlighted some of the most serious problems faced by

the Turkish football clubs from organizational, managerial and financial perspective. One of his main findings in this part of the thesis is the insufficient management of the majority of the clubs where the professional preparation, knowledge, skills and experience of football administrators are crucial.

The dissertation thesis is organised in 214 pages including 8 figures and 16 tables, and 3 appendixes. In developing his thesis the author used a bibliography of 96 sources. Seen from structural, conceptual, and methodological viewpoints the dissertation meets the established requirements and practices. Moreover, to better substantiate some topics and subtopics raised in the analysis the author supported them with referring to appropriate literature sources.

Serdar Samur's approach to the study focuses on unveiling the effects of UEFA criteria on the functioning and managing of professional football clubs for a sustainable sporting and economic performance. From the analysis of the problems that led to the enforcement of UEFA club criteria it becomes clear that preventing multiple ownership of clubs, linking club development to financial stability, and supporting youth players are driving motives for that approach. Furthermore, these appear to be of primary importance for Turkish clubs as well. Reasonably, Serdar Samur devoted considerable space to present current UEFA club licensing system including the application process and procedures in the light of the dimensions of contemporary processes of economic globalisation as the main driver of commercialization of the football industry.

He paid attention to the concept of contemporary football governance including the key stakeholders, their interests, internal contradictions and solidarity mechanisms to keep the integrity of the European football system. Trying to build a link between the impact of licensing criteria and their implementation and adaptation in professional club cultures the author analysed a comprehensive body of management, administration, organisational theory and behavior, human resources and business studies literature. It helped to construct his research approach to revealing how UEFA criteria have impacted the Turkish clubs. Particularly, what system, strategic, structural, functional, resource and performance transformations and adaptations this process has been accompanied with.

The thesis intended to investigate the effects on UEFA criteria on the management and sporting performance of Turkish professional clubs. For this purpose, the study is divided into five research objectives. While the first four have been completed there is no empirical evidence to support the last one.

As the thesis demonstrates the governance structures of Turkish football clubs are identical. Their organisational culture and resources, however, are diverse. Recognising these differences, we therefore assume that their governance in compliance with the UEFA criteria is too context sensitive to be applied universally across the whole population of clubs. In this respect, the implementation of the criteria can only be successful in a given context, under specific circumstances, for one given club and the longitudinal approach employed in the PhD theses seems therefore appropriate.

The conceptual orientation of the study presupposed the use of quality research methods. The author grounded his study on the development of two in-depth case studies of professional football clubs competing in Turkish Super League which is the highest tier in Turkey. In this case two out of population of 18 elite clubs were selected. They are regular participants in UEFA club competitions in the last five years. The author provided satisfactory arguments to justify the choice of the research sample by applying the “criterion sampling” method as one of non-probabilistic sampling. It is premised on the understanding of all situations that meet a set of predefined selection requirements.

The two selected clubs are used as a model for testing four research hypotheses related to the implementation of UEFA criteria on their sporting performance. However, throughout the thesis there is a lack of any statistics (trends, results, key performance indicators etc.) to support this assumption. Similarly, no adequate empirical evidence has been provided to illustrate and support the links between the sets of criteria variables and corresponding governance, administrative, organisational and management dependencies.

The design of the study entirely corresponds to the methods used. The characteristics of the study imply a process of open interpretation of empirical data. The main emphasis in choosing such an approach is the stab to understand and explain the actions and behaviour of the actors by analysing their development in specific contextual conditions. The primary research method employed to collect empirical information is the semi-structured interview. The interviewees sample includes top executives of the two selected professional clubs.

The main merit of the interview, as justifiably used by Serdar Samur, is that it allows for focusing on the specific object under scrutiny and extracting interpretation of processes, events, actions and context through preliminary chosen topics, hypotheses or questions. Besides, quality information on a given topic can be clarified and elaborated by asking additional questions.

The analysis of empirical information presented in section III reveals diverse interpretations by the club executives under scrutiny. Here the author demonstrated good

analytical skills by applying the UEFA licensing criteria framework as a tool for screening the changes in the strategic and operational management of Turkish Super League top clubs. Moreover, the framework itself can be considered a well integrated system of KPI for measuring sporting and financial progress of professional football clubs. The analysis also gives some clues about the scope of various value, structural, administrative and financial transformations that have been occurring in professional clubs triggered by UEFA requirements.

They concern specific components of the Turkish top clubs – organisational values, personnel, in-house administrative systems, processes, structures, strategic planning, marketing operations, decision making and control mechanisms, technology and partnerships with both internal and external stakeholders. Such profound changes imposed by outside stimulus (UEFA), however, are not unproblematic as they require the inculcation of behaviour and management style compatible with contemporary corporate business culture and, at the same time, implementing sport-specific good governance principles. The necessary changes that Turkish clubs should undertake in order to meet UEFA criteria should not however be regarded as a move between two destinations (e.g., from a bureaucratic to fan-centred system) but as a transformation, akin to a discovery process, involving the interaction between all three levels of contexts and the role of agents (club executives) in interpreting and constructing change.

And, as the analysis demonstrates the clubs and their top executives engendered contradictory reactions. One of the contributions of the study, *inter alia*, is the demonstration how the UEFA rules created, on the one hand, a universal objective environment and subjective interpretations by the clubs as key stakeholders, on the other. This means that the Turkish Super League clubs will follow different developmental paths and need different organisational capacities not only to meet these criteria but being successful in achieving their sporting and economic performance results as well.

Also, I find very useful from both theoretical and practical perspective the analysis of the Turkish professional clubs through the lens of the conceptual management framework consisting of labor (skilled players), capital (economic resources), land (sport facilities), and enterprise (club management system). It clearly classifies nowadays professional clubs as business-like companies where strictly business principles, strategies and rules apply to football structures, processes and cultures. Here it is worth mentioning the fact that the author has discussed the interplay between the achievement of sporting successes and economic stability as a two-way interdependence and how the UEFA criteria impact on it. Throughout

the analysis, however, there is a repetition of the same information from the tables into the text.

As a supranational body UEFA has a mandate for action to impose its licensing benchmarks on the professional clubs which are the lowest tier in the self-regulating football pyramid. In reality, this is exercised through the notion of trusteeship that is, the intent of UEFA to further the capacities of clubs which are regarded the primary actors in producing the most lucrative football properties – the Champions League and League Europe. The rights over these events are the core source of UEFA's both structural and economic power and the European governing body has been intervening with empowering of the football clubs.

Highlighting the complex relationship of club capacity and sporting performance it should be stressed that this connection is not necessarily straightforward (more capacity for fulfilling UEFA criteria does not always equal better performance and an excessive focus on performance can undermine a club's core capabilities) and as the dissertation unveils this is the case of the Turkish clubs. The results presented in the analysis and supported by some of the findings infer that applying the UEFA criteria was not enough to guarantee a long standing stability and sporting successes of the football clubs. In doing so, they need to build up capabilities to act strategically; to adopt clear business principles and tailored management models; to develop and sustain individual and organisational abilities; to survive, grow and diversify; to adapt to their context gaining legitimacy, support and position; and to achieve coherence by dealing with both their commercial and social functions.

The dissertation ends with meaningful and corresponding to the research objectives findings including support or rejection of the four formulated hypotheses, as well as practical recommendations and suggestions for further research. The latter, however, are not well argued and some, for example, IV.4.1 calling for the use of quantitative tools to get more trustworthy results could lead even to worse effects. The author also suggests a multidisciplinary approach to investigating the management of professional football clubs, which supports calls by other researches.

2. Publication activity.

To meet the established requirements, Serdar Samur has submitted two papers on different aspects of his PhD thesis published in the proceedings of international research conferences, as well as a book dedicated to football management. The produced abstract of the dissertation work also meets all the requirements, stems from and has an intrinsic connection with it.

3. Scientific contributions.

The scientific contributions of the dissertation can be classified as follows:

1. Operationalisation of the impact of the UEFA's five categories criteria on the core dimensions of club management through the lens of system approach.
2. Introduction and implementation of the components of effective management in a specific football context – strategic management (visionary and development strategies), governance (structure, power relations, rules), operational management (administration, technology, networking).

4. Conclusion.

Drawing on the above-mentioned, I think that the dissertation thesis is a pioneering stab in the endeavor to modernise and improve the management, governance and performance of the professional clubs in Turkey in line to continuously raising standards imposed by the main European football governing body. In this sense, the dissertation has its merits and practical contributions, and I would like to propose to the Scientific Jury to award Serdar Samur the education and scientific degree 'Doctor of Philosophy' in the professional field of 7.6 Sport.

8 June, 2016

Reviewer: 

Associate Professor Ivan Sandanski, PhD