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'We wouldn't have missed it for the world': hosting a polycentric sporting mega event in pandemic times

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the polycentric hosting of a Sporting Mega Event (SME) in pandemic times. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 stakeholders in senior management positions who were involved in the planning, organisation, and delivery of the UEFA EURO 2020 football tournament in a sample of host cities. Three themes were developed that describe the varied perspectives of UEFA and host city representatives on how they responded to the challenge of hosting a SME during a pandemic. The first theme 'Reorienting pre-pandemic plans' presents an alternative model of tournament planning as a system of spontaneous order (Polanyi [1953] 1998), involving a large number of host cities mutually adjusting to COVID-19 policies and guidance. The second theme 'Dialogue and managing conflict' demonstrates how the usual overarching system of rules proved difficult for UEFA to standardise. The third theme 'Putting COVID-19 policies into practice (or not)' revealed that pandemic rules were not seen as useful to some fans and stadium staff, making their enforcement more difficult to implement. It remains to be seen whether the polycentric hosting of EURO 2020 will have lasting implications on UEFA's governance over SMEs.

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The Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) is the football governing body in Europe, responsible for organising international events between clubs and countries in the continent. Governing bodies such as UEFA and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the global governor of world football, 'define [their] own rules and therefore reduce the role of the state, at the same time it aims at regulating free competition in making use of the law by contesting current public legislations and in establishing its own "private" laws' (Eick 2010, p. 284). Thus, sport is a sphere of public relations with a unique mechanism of legal (i.e. European) and quasi-legal (i.e. international sport federations) regulation (Kharytonov *et al.* 2020). However, in recent years, these private laws, which Foster (2003) has referred to as *Lex Sportiva*, have increasingly been challenged by international law (Geeraert *et al.* 2015). Conflicts of interest have arisen between regulatory and commercial functions because Sporting Mega Events (SMEs), defined as ambulatory events that attract many people, with a large, mediated reach, cost, and impact on the built environment (Müller and Picles 2015), are organised locally by host cities in regionally

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specific ways (Greenfield and Osborn 2010, Pijetlovic 2018). For example, Piggitt *et al.* (2017) found a conflict of commercial interest from UEFA's sponsors in promoting unhealthy food and drink products at the UEFA EURO 2016 football tournament and urged governments to intervene in the regulation of food advertising at matches. In addition, the European Commission have imposed financial regulations on UEFA for restricting competition between teams (Serby 2016). Fans, players, and clubs have also challenged 'the hegemony of UEFA and FIFA' (García and Meier 2012, p. 361). Yet, according to Gammelsæter and Senaux (2013) little is known about how power is exercised and how influence is fostered between football organisations and public health authorities. Government departments, such as police and transport and ministries of interior and public health are not formally part of the football pyramid, as authority for regulating sport most often resides within international sport organisations themselves (Jedlicka 2018). Decentralised governance regimes have come about from a historical shift in the art of governing¹ from government to involving private or commercial entities (Beckman 2023). Sugden *et al.* (2023) aptly capture this shift for global sport, which they argue it 'is a system of governance without government' (p. 476).

In the case of the European championships, 'UEFA brings the spectacle, and the host country prepares the stage' (Włoch 2012, p. 305). In other words, the state must adhere to the conditions set by the international sports federation: that is, to sign the restrictive guarantees attached to the bid application. Indeed, UEFA's bidding document sets out a 'contractual relationship' (UEFA 2013) through which they delegate authority in the form of an explicit contract to host associations, host cities, and stadia (Geeraert and Drieskens 2015, p. 1450). UEFA leads, approves, and centrally manages the planning of the overall programme coordination and supervises the implementation of the project on site via local organising structures (LOS). The host association's staging agreement is 'privity of contract' (Blackshaw 2017), where they must provide support and execute delegated tasks from UEFA, as well as liaise with public authorities to fulfil the guarantees of the tournament.² Although elite sporting events can bring international prestige to host associations (Grix and Houlihan 2014), host cities must fulfil the guarantees in the bid requirements without anything in return (Eick 2012). As part of the stadium agreement relates to infrastructural requirements and services, national and local governments of host cities have sometimes used such events to transform public spaces (Smith and McGillivray 2020). For example, EURO 2012 saw the development of new, and renovation of existing, stadiums, as well as major improvements to road and railway infrastructure (Skorupka *et al.* 2013).

UEFA's hosting format remained unchanged until 2013 when they invited bids from member associations for EURO 2020 matches that were to be staged across 13 European countries in the summer of 2020. The multi-host city venue format of EURO 2020 was the first of its kind, as past European championships only had one or two hosts. Polycentric tournaments are those hosted in multiple sites (Ehambaranathan and O'Connor 2022). Polycentric in this sense means 'having several centres' (Etymology 2024). UEFA received bids representing 19 cities, including: Amsterdam, Baku, Bilbao, Brussels, Bucharest, Budapest, Cardiff, Dublin, Minsk, Copenhagen, Glasgow, London, Jerusalem, Munich, Rome, Saint Petersburg, Sofia, Skopje, and Stockholm. Bids were secured for three group games and one last 16 match in Amsterdam, Bilbao, Bucharest, Budapest, Brussels, Copenhagen, Dublin, and Glasgow. Three group games and one quarter-final match were to be held in Baku, Munich, Rome, and St Petersburg and the semi-finals and final games in London.

The COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 led to the postponement of the EURO 2020 football tournament from the summer of 2020 to June and July 2021. COVID restrictions on international travel and social distancing measures led to changes in the multi-host city venue format with three group games and one last 16 match taking place in Amsterdam, Seville, Bucharest, Budapest, Copenhagen, and Glasgow. Three group games and one quarter-final match were held in Baku, Munich, Rome, and St Petersburg; and the semi-finals and final games were played in London. Although EURO 2020 promotes an attractive 'polycentric event' as it was staged across multiple

European host cities, Stura *et al.* (2017) argue that this format might actually ‘impair the overall success of the tournament’ (p. 33), by way of creating new challenges in addition to those already encountered in the traditional one or two hosting formats (e.g. security and safety). Using the case of EURO 2020 football tournament, this paper examines the polycentric hosting of a SME in pandemic times.

Polycentricity

Polycentricity was first introduced by Michael Polanyi in the field of science. For Polanyi ([1951] 1998), polycentricity is a system of spontaneous order that can be contrasted with a corporate order:

Consider two small teams, say of five persons each, representing respectively examples of our two kinds of order. Let one team be the five forwards in a game of football, charging at the opposite goal and co-ordinating themselves by mutual adjustment. Let the other team be the crew of a small craft riding a heavy sea, where each man's actions are co-ordinated to the others' by the captain's commands. This gives us for comparison two cases, one of spontaneous and the other of corporate order. (p. 142)

On the one hand, in spontaneously ordered systems like the team of five forwards in football, the actions of others are conditioned rather than authoritatively controlled. On the other hand, in a corporate order, like the captain above, there is ‘one man at the top’ where the actions carried out at the base of the pyramid are ‘centrally directed’ or ‘centrally planned’ (Polanyi [1951] 1998, p. 139). The pyramid model can be extended by increasing the height of the pyramid through the addition of new tiers. The pyramid model is consistent with the governance of football more generally (Meier *et al.* 2023).

While polycentricity has since been taken up in the field of political governance (McGinnis 1999) and more recently in the governance of the international and Olympic sport system (Harris *et al.* 2021, 2023), the issue of whether polycentricity is spontaneous or not remains contested. Boettke and Coyne (2005) argue in favour of a spontaneous order ‘because we cannot know all future situations[,] that we need an institutional environment that is malleable and can handle ever-changing environments’ (p. 10). McGinnis (2005) counters this view by saying that a system can only be spontaneous ‘if one restricts that term to mean no one person or collective entity purposefully designed a system meant to operate in this manner’ (p. 169). Therefore, spontaneous order aims to ‘explain how regularities come about without recourse to any single conscious plan, whether the decision of an individual or the explicit consensus of a group’ (Luban 2019, p. 70). This is especially important for this current study given that the EURO 2020 tournament was not designed for the ever-changing circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Characteristics of polycentrism can, too, be distinguished by whether they include spontaneity. For example, Stephan *et al.* (2019) do not name spontaneity as a characteristic of polycentricity and refer to it in a limited sense, as an absence of hierarchy. We instead follow Aligica and Tarko (2012) who retain both the Polanyi-Ostrom tradition in their three key characteristics of polycentrism, which are each further elaborated through indicators that can be used in empirical enquiries. A first characteristic of polycentrism is multiplicity of decision-centres, which has three indicators: exercise diverse opinions; autonomous decision-making; and a set of common/shared or individual goals. This study will consider whether host cities had more or less autonomous decision-making in exercising diverse opinions about how the tournament was planned, organised and implemented in pandemic times. A second characteristic of polycentrism is an overarching system of rules, which has four indicators: decision centres have or do not have jurisdiction over their territory; decision centres are/are not involved in drafting overarching rules; rules are/are not seen as useful by decision-centres; and there is either consensus, individual or majority rule over decisions. We will consider how consensus was achieved between UEFA's overarching rules of the tournament and host cities' jurisdiction of local and national laws and guidance on COVID-19. A third characteristic of polycentrism is spontaneous order, which has three indicators: entry is free, merit-based, or

spontaneous; exit is free or constrained; and information is public or private. We will consider whether exit was free or constrained for host cities that could no longer host matches.

Method

This study consisted of semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in senior management positions involved in the organisation, planning, and implementation of hosting EURO 2020 matches. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Stirling's General University Ethics Panel. Stakeholders in senior management positions were recruited using convenience and purposive sampling approaches. Recruitment through convenience methods was facilitated by existing contacts within the research team, whereas purposive sampling was solicited by email and LinkedIn for potential participants working within LOS or stadium management. Stakeholders were provided with an information sheet and asked to complete a consent form before taking part in the interview. Thirteen stakeholders in senior management positions participated in semi-structured interviews between August and November 2021, lasting up to 90 min (average length 61 min). Ten stakeholders were purposively recruited across seven of 11 host cities (London, Glasgow, Rome, Budapest, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Bucharest), two stakeholders from UEFA were interviewed, and one stakeholder worked in a government public health agency around the impact of mass gatherings. The perceptions of stakeholders in senior management positions are important because they hold positions (managerial, operational, delivery) that are relevant to how COVID-19 mitigations were planned before, and implemented during, the EURO 2020 tournament (see [Table 1](#)). Although representatives of all host cities were contacted to take part in the study, some declined, and others did not respond, but difficulties with access is expected when interviewing stakeholders in top managerial positions ([Lancaster 2017](#)). Overall, stakeholders' seniority in SMEs equalled to 112 years' experience (Mean = 9 years; lowest = 1 year; highest = 15 years).

A semi-structured interview guide was developed by the first and last author based on our research questions, stadium guidance from UEFA, and COVID-19 guidelines and measures specific to the tournament as it was reconfigured for 2021 during the continuing COVID-19 pandemic. The interview guide consisted of five sections: 1. Background; 2. Planning for EURO 2020; 3. Mitigation measures within the stadium; 4. Outside the stadium: Travel, hospitality, and fan zones; and 5. Learning from EURO 2020. All interviews were conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams and were audio recorded with participant consent using a digital recorder and subsequently stored in a secure folder via Microsoft Teams that was only accessible to the research team. Interviews were transcribed

Table 1. Breakdown of stakeholders' host city/organisation and position.

Stakeholder	Host city/Organisation	Position (managerial, operational, delivery)*
1	UEFA	Operational
2	London	Managerial
3	London	Managerial
4	Glasgow	Operational
5	UEFA	Managerial
6	UEFA	Managerial
7	Rome	Delivery
8	Glasgow	Operational
9	Amsterdam	Managerial
10	Bucharest	Managerial
11	London	Managerial
12	Copenhagen	Operational
13	Budapest	Delivery

*Managerial stakeholders are members of UEFA and host cities who are responsible for the planning of the event. Operational stakeholders are members of host associations who are responsible for the organisation of the tournament in stadiums. Delivery stakeholders are stadium staff who are working/volunteering during matches.

by a professional transcription company familiar to the research team, with a relevant confidentiality agreement in place.

The first author first read through the transcripts repeatedly, looking for how the participants described their experiences in relation to the following questions drawn from Flyvbjerg's (2001) phronetic social science research. Flyvbjerg (2001) sets out four questions guiding phronetic social science research using the case of the Aalborg Project that concerned urban planning and policy in Aalborg city centre: 1. *Where are we going?* 2. *Who gains, and who loses, by which mechanisms of power?* 3. *Is it desirable?* 4. *What should be done?* In response to the first question, Flyvbjerg uncovered political interests were vested with private interests, and this resulted in weak democracy. The second question showed how, as a result, businesses in Aalborg tied to private interests were the winners, whereas the residents, commuters, and visitors to the city were the losers. In response to the third question, Flyvbjerg stated the development plans were neither desirable nor publicly justifiable. In response to question four, Flyvbjerg made his results public to help improve democracy over the development of Aalborg city centre. Themes were developed by noting overarching patterns in the participants' narratives with exemplary quotations from the discussions chosen to provide support for each theme (Braun and Clarke 2019). All themes were checked (Smith and McGannon, 2018) against the transcripts of all the interviews to when and whether they were shared across participants.

Results

The results present three themes that are structured in relation to Flyvbjerg (2001) phronetic social science research. The first theme, 'Reorienting pre-pandemic plans', is a thematic response to the first question: 'Where are we going?' The second theme, 'Dialogue and managing conflict', is a thematic response to the second question: 'Who gains, and who loses, by which mechanisms of power?' The third theme, 'Putting COVID-19 policies into practice (or not)', is a thematic response to the third question: 'Is it desirable?'

Re-orienting pre-pandemic plans

Flyvbjerg's (2001) first analytical question, '*Where are we going?*', was helpful in organising the first theme, given how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the 'normal' planning of the tournament. At the start of 2020, host countries were well into the implementation phase for the tournament as originally envisioned and 'were really close to the moment where we should actually hand over the key to UEFA for the set-up of the tournament. So, we were almost at the finish line' (Stakeholder 9, Amsterdam). However, the disruption of 'the pandemic ... stopped the tournament ... we got the postponement, and everything was settled, and it became Euro 2021' (Stakeholder 12, Copenhagen). The pandemic was totally unanticipated 'because nobody did let's say foresee ... to organise such a major sporting event as the pandemic scenario' (Stakeholder 8, Glasgow). Here, we see the makings of a spontaneous order as the tournament was not designed to take place in a global pandemic. There was then a reconfirmation process through which host cities were presented with an ultimatum, 'we [UEFA] told them [host cities], "Listen, if you want to be out you can be out. There would be no compensation, there would be release of your obligation"' (Stakeholder 6, UEFA). Consequently, some host cities could no longer commit to hosting the tournament:

We started with thirteen countries but then we had, we had Brussels they [were withdrawn] ... before the announcement and then ... Bilbao, we went to Seville so still stay in Spain ... We just reshuffled Dublin, within we distributed the matches between London and St Petersburg but nevertheless all the other, all the other countries and cities and stadia, they were keen to continue. (Stakeholder 8, Glasgow)

Re-entry into the tournament was free as each host city could freely decide to enter and others could not prevent this. Exit from the tournament was at the expense of the host city. Despite the

pandemic's disruption, hosting was still considered 'a big honour, so yes, we wouldn't have missed it for the world' (Stakeholder 9, Amsterdam). Indeed, EURO 2020 was considered of national importance to 'the Romanian Government [who] put this event in a government decree ... in terms [of] national importance and public interest' (Stakeholder 10, Bucharest). COVID-19 took centre-stage in planning; it began 'to dominate almost every meeting that we were having around the delivery in 2021' (Stakeholder 2, London), particularly on 'monitoring the specific rules adopted by each of the countries ... entry requirements ... quarantine requirements ... levels of vaccinations amongst the population of those countries ... different types of vaccines or tests' (Stakeholder 5, UEFA). In the summer of 2020, a COVID risk assessment methodology was developed by UEFA in collaboration with the World Health Organisation:

The beginning of December [2020] we had the first assessment, so we have asked them 'Okay using this Risk Assessment tool the mitigation measures, the outcome of your discussion in your taskforce, in December on the best of your knowledge what could be the capacity and the mitigation measures for the summer [of 2021]?' ... (I) n the course of the Christmas break [2020] this is when the variant of the virus came up, South African, UK one and so on and obviously this had a very negative impact on these assessments, the outcome of the assessments so we had to do another ... basically, every month we asked them to do another assessment with the same tools. It was important for us that we used the same tools so you could really compare from country to country, and you could standardise the information and the results. (Stakeholder 6, UEFA)

By having more autonomous decision-making, host cities became a multiplicity of decision-centres for 'reorient[ing] all the plans and the strategies for the pandemic conditions' (Stakeholder 10, Bucharest). The fragmentation of UEFA's corporate order became noticeable in test events before EURO 2020. For example, the quarterfinals of the UEFA Champions League, a high-profile annual club football competition in Europe, took place behind closed doors in August 2020 in Portugal. The 2020 UEFA Super Cup, which is competed by the winners of the UEFA Champions League and the UEFA Europa League, took place in September 2020 in Budapest and was 'the first major event [since the pandemic began] I would say worldwide that we brought 18,000 people to the stadium' (Stakeholder 1, UEFA). Host cities also took varying approaches to the return of fans to football stadia. The Danish Super League, the highest level of football in Denmark, undertook 'the first trial [in June 2020] ... for the Danish Football League and that model then became the basis of the whole reopening of the country' (Stakeholder 12, Copenhagen). The semi-finals and final of the Football Association (FA) Cup, an annual knockout football tournament in England, took place in front of 20,000 fans at London's Wembley Stadium in April and May 2021 as part of the 31-pilot sporting and cultural events of the UK Events Research Programme (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2021). These events were said to provide some 'hope that we would then be able to build on that based on what we learned and what we found out from those early games' (Stakeholder 3, London). Despite these test events, EURO 2020 was itself seen as 'a bit of a pilot for the different countries' (Stakeholder 5, UEFA). Indeed, the tournament's exclusiveness politicised debate, 'Why can football do this and we cannot do smaller concerts, small events? So, they got a lot of debate on that level because this was purely political, but politicians said this is a once in a lifetime ... football EURO is the biggest thing' (Stakeholder 12, Copenhagen).

Dialogue and managing conflict

Flyvbjerg's (2001) second question, '*Who gains, and who loses, by which mechanisms of power?*', was relevant for organising the second theme as it captures the dialogue between UEFA, LOS, and host cities' national and local governments in the lead up to the rescheduled tournament. Working groups facilitated dialogue between 'the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Interior, the city, and the host association' (Stakeholder 6, UEFA). Host cities had jurisdiction over their own decision centre for 'find[ing] the right balance between making this [the tournament] as safe as we could but also taking the necessary risk to actually allow a decent number of spectators to make it the largest sporting event [in pandemic times]' (Stakeholder 12, Copenhagen). UEFA had 'four different

operating plans' (Stakeholder 2, London) that varied from 'M1 [Measurement 1] to M4 which [ranged] between closed doors and full stadium' (Stakeholder 3, London). One working group structured their discussion around two sets of rules, 'the usual rules, the rules regarding pandemics, and there were the requests from UEFA' (Stakeholder 10, Bucharest). The 'usual' stadia rules were those in place for organising tournaments before the pandemic. Stadia footprints were compromised because 'we have never planned to have a stadium thinking about, you know, a 1.5 meter of social distance' (Stakeholder 8, Glasgow). Consequently, the operational setup had to be different, and this sometimes led to diverse opinions between host cities and UEFA. For example, the Glasgow LOS commented on the lack of food and drink concessions available at Hampden Park:

UEFA obviously didn't like that because we were closing the concourse, closing the concessions ... a lot of UEFA sponsors and brands are food and drink, so they weren't getting the chance to sell their products in the stadium ... So, there was a big conflict there in terms of the twenty five percent [capacity] against what we are permitted to do within SG02 [Sports Ground Safety Authority guidance] ... So, that was a real bone of contention for a lot of reasons, and it was a hard one to get into [with] UEFA because all the other [i.e., stadia] events were operating concourses. (Stakeholder 4, Glasgow)

The pandemic mitigation rules often mirrored local government legislation. For example, '[UEFA] did not have any policy for testing or vaccination. They said that it is your job' (Stakeholder 10, Bucharest). Governments were involved in the drafting of rules regarding pandemics and had the authority '[to] stop just in one moment the access to the stadium' (Stakeholder 10, Bucharest). Host cities' goal of protecting public health meant that they 'had to continually say to UEFA: this is what you can [and] this is what you cannot do' (Stakeholder 4, Glasgow). Local authorities' approval 'was key ... otherwise we couldn't move forward and implement and operate at the stadium and oversee the measures on site' (Stakeholder 8, Glasgow). UEFA had to follow public health guidance in accordance with national legislation:

The Danish Authorities said we are the only one allowed to do recommendations in Denmark so UEFA cannot do that. So, we had to do our own posters, with the graphics of the Health Authority and for UEFA it was face masks [that] were the main thing and the Health Authority said 'no that's not the main thing. The main thing is distance and not sneezing etcetera, a face mask is the lowest priority'. So, we needed to redo, for instance, all that guidance part, that it needed to be what the Danish Authorities said ... so then UEFA said, 'That's fine but then you need to provide all that material', which we then did. (Stakeholder 12, Copenhagen)

The variation between public health guidance issued by the host cities' local and national governments conflicted with UEFA's usual overarching system of rules for organising tournaments. One stakeholder observed, 'they [UEFA] of course want more or less and sort of generic like, they always want to have more of the same journey for them in every stadium and in every country' (Stakeholder 9, Amsterdam). Consequently, there were requests from UEFA for exemptions to local legislation where host associations would make 'a business case as to why that had to be an exemption. We would show how we would do that from the operational plans and then that approval for exemption could happen' (Stakeholder 4, Glasgow). The request for such exemptions signifies how EURO 2020 was 'a special moment [because] ... the rules [were] just for this competition' (Stakeholder 10, Bucharest). Otherwise, some stakeholders thought that UEFA ran the risk of 'being overruled by the government' (Stakeholder 6, UEFA). Yet, UEFA 'were always pushing for higher capacities' (Stakeholder 3, London):

UEFA basically came in February, March [2021] and said that unless you have twenty five percent capacity you can't open your stadiums. (Stakeholder 4, Glasgow)

We had UEFA pressuring or pushing us to try and achieve as higher attendances as possible and their request was always for a minimum of 25% in the stadium. They saw that as a bit of a golden number that they wanted to try and reach, for stadiums to look effectively – look good on TV. (Stakeholder 2, London)

Local governments were also reported to be under pressure from politicians:

Two days before the first match the politicians came back and said, 'Instead of the approved 15,900 spectators, you can now do 25,000' two days before the first match ... we suddenly didn't have an official social distancing policy anymore. (Stakeholder 12, Copenhagen)

Here, despite the shared goal of staging the tournament, we see UEFA's goal in trying to retain a competitive advantage in the staging of the tournament. Some countries' rules however were less restrictive: a stakeholder from Hungary, for example, said 'the government rules were actually less hard or less rigid than the UEFA rules. It wasn't really a concern' (Stakeholder 13, Budapest). Ultimately, stadium agreements were only approved once there was consensus between host cities and UEFA, 'the local authority ... signed off and ticked off' (Stakeholder 3, London) and they were then 'presented to our [UEFA] Executive bodies on several occasions for their validation and approval' (Stakeholder 5, UEFA).

Putting COVID-19 policies into practice (or not)

Flyvbjerg's (2001) third analytical question, '*Is it desirable?*', is helpful for organising the third theme as it considers the practicalities of putting COVID-19 policies into practice (or not) during the EURO 2020 tournament. Mitigation measures, such as proof of vaccinations and/or a negative lateral flow test, social distancing, hand sanitisation, and mask wearing were 'customised per country or per stadium' (Stakeholder 6, UEFA). Information on mitigation measures was publicly communicated in advance of matches 'to make sure that people, guests, spectators whoever is attending an event is really aware of what the requirements are' (Stakeholder 7, Rome). Spectators were signposted to mitigation measures via stickers and posters inside and outside stadiums:

So, the COVID messages for us and reinforcement of the rules ... we had an average between 5,000 and 10,000 COVID stickers in each venue ... so, you had A1, A0 posters as you were coming in obviously at the gates. You then had A1, A2 sizes around the concessions, you had A3 sizes inside the toilets. You had the staff A3 size in every area that staff was working. (Stakeholder 1, UEFA)

Mitigation measures were differently applied across host cities due to differences in local and national government policies and legislation. For example, in England proof of vaccination and/or a negative lateral flow test was considered 'the main mitigation measure that was implemented, that we were basically testing or ensuring that people had been vaccinated prior to entry into the stadium' (Stakeholder 2, London). However, host cities exercised different approaches to testing. For example, 'St Petersburg did not test anyone, so they were testing the staff and the broadcasters, but they were not testing the fans that were coming to the stadium' (Stakeholder 6, UEFA). Bucharest reportedly had more problems with testing their own staff than they did with fans, 'We have problems with our own staff, staff that are going in contact with the public. So, we do not want to jeopardise ... because we do not have our own family tested' (Stakeholder 10, Bucharest). The authenticity of tests was also highlighted as a problem: 'It was not verified against your identification. You could turn up with Joe Bloggs's lateral flow test result and show that to the stewards and gain access to the venue' (Stakeholder 2, London). Stadium management and staff were said to have:

... the right to deny access to the stadium to people who refuse to comply with the measures which are applicable. We would have the right to remove those persons from the stadium as well, despite the warnings [for those] who do not comply with the measures at the stadium ... not only the spectators but guests, teams, referees, those who were not complying with the measures could have been removed from the competition. (Stakeholder 5, UEFA)

Yet, in some circumstances COVID-19 measures were not fully enforced by stadium staff and stewards, 'We wouldn't go and move two people if they were standing having a drink next to each other and not more than a metre apart, we wouldn't go and move them apart' (Stakeholder 3, London). Another said, 'So, we made a call with the Police that we would not be going in to enforce COVID mitigation when there was potential for that to increase disorder' (Stakeholder 4, Glasgow). There was also a lack of enforcement during goal celebrations:

After each goal, no, we didn't intervene ... people were in a festive mood ... If it's only a couple of minutes, I think it doesn't, I think it's not recommended to intervene ... then maybe for a very short, a very limited time, for a goal they were together, I think maybe it was not, not thought worth intervening. (Stakeholder 8, Glasgow)

Organisers took a pragmatic approach to mitigation where they understood that many would not comply:

Well, how reliable is it that people are going to comply with that? So, not shouting at a football match. Well, if this is your life's dream to go to [the] most important match and you are going to support your club or your nation, it's no fun is it, if you don't – why would you bother to go to the live match if you didn't want to get swept up in the atmosphere and be able to express that in some way? So, to be honest, compliance is not going to be high. If you do insist on compliance, you are going to change the nature of the event. (Stakeholder 11, London)

People are here, they have probably been to the pub, they are singing songs, they are there to enjoy themselves and the mask just becomes a hindrance, let's be honest with you, if you want to sing a song at a football match, they are not going to sing it with a mask on ... the requirement to wear a face mask was always there to remind people that we are not back to normal yet. It wasn't ever going to save the day. Everyone wearing a mask at the stadium wasn't going to stop COVID from happening. (Stakeholder 4, Glasgow)

Instead, compliance was measured in accordance with what was considered 'compliant in terms of [a] football audience' (Stakeholder 4, Glasgow):

It's difficult with the nature of football fans sometimes, that they don't want to comply and sometimes if you go in heavy-handed, you can create much bigger issues than what you were trying to counteract, so there is a fine balance between implementing the rules and keeping the balance and the safety and the integrity within the stadium really. (Stakeholder 2, London)

But as the tournament progressed, it was reported that 'everyone was almost of the opinion that COVID is finished' (Stakeholder 2, London). This might also be due to the UK Events Research Programme that 'had [the] flexibility to change it [mitigation measures]' (Stakeholder 3, London). Consequently, the rules were not seen as useful and became even more difficult to implement as the tournament moved towards its climax: 'The final was a challenging final and brought about a number of COVID cases' (Stakeholder 3, London). The consequences of the potential spread of COVID within the stadium was played down by another stakeholder who encouraged a 'wider population perspective that will be of greatest concern ... ninety thousand in the stadium, that is ninety thousand out of sixty million [referring to the population of the UK]. It's a drop in the ocean' (Stakeholder 11, London).

Discussion

The polycentric hosting of EURO 2020 was a system of spontaneous order in reorienting the tournament during pandemic times. Host cities became a multiplicity of decision-centres, rather than merely gatekeepers (i.e. bidders), as seen in past tournaments. Bidding to host SMEs is considered one of the 'trump cards' of UEFA over national authorities (Włoch 2012) and is more reflective of Polanyi's ([1951] 1998) corporate order. However, in this study host cities had more autonomous decision-making for calculating the 'necessary risk' of what was deemed to be a 'safe' COVID-capacity based on the epidemiological context of each host country (e.g. rates of infection, testing, and vaccination uptake). COVID-19 policies and guidance became a legal obligation for UEFA and host associations. It is this spontaneous order that distinguishes EURO 2020 from other polycentric SMEs.

The multi-host city venue format proved difficult for UEFA to standardise the overarching rules of their 'monopolised product' (Eick 2010). Polycentric hosting challenged UEFA's 'blue-print governance model of a one-size-fits-all' (Andersson and Ostrom 2008, p. 79) approach to SMEs. The European wide event meant that UEFA had to let go of their status as global governor, as in polycentric governance 'there is no single source of authority' (Cairney 2022, p. 52). Consequently, there were some disagreements between UEFA and host cities. Clashes

have featured in previous tournaments because of an 'asymmetrical power dynamic between the event organizers and the city' (Hagemann 2010, p. 734). According to Lienhard and Preuss (2014, p. 105), UEFA faces a conundrum as they are the 'guest [that] cannot rule a country'. Despite this, football fans seem to be more sceptical of a hands-on approach to football governance by national governments (García and Llopis-Goig 2021). In this study, there was a tension between public and private interests of host cities' jurisdiction over public health and UEFA's desire to still ensure the tournament was economically competitive. Host cities were also said to be 'pressured' to achieve a minimum of 25% of the maximum seating capacity. However, according to Freeburn (2019), pressure from international federations 'is not genuinely consensual [but] is "forced"' [p. 185]. FIFA have previously used threats of suspensions to enforce the compliance of national Football Associations and public authorities (Meier and García 2015). Yet, a unique finding of this study is that national governments confronted UEFA with threats of stadium closure if COVID-19 guidance was not followed. This marks a change from previous tournaments where 'the state [has been] completely excluded from the negotiations, as [it is usually only] deemed a matter between a national football federation and its superior organization' (Włoch 2012, p. 307).

Stadium management took a pragmatic approach to implementing mitigation measures, which may have, at times, been at odds with local and national government legislation. This is consistent with fieldwork supporters in Purves *et al.* (2023) study, where significant variation was reported in the implementation of mitigation measures inside stadia at UK-hosted EURO 2020 matches, leading to increased risk of virus transmission. This study provides further insight into how mitigation measures were shaped by stakeholder working groups involving host cities' local governments and host associations. However, some measures were exempted from national legislation as EURO 2020 was part of the UK Events Research Programme. UEFA was keen for higher attendances at showpiece matches as they are, after all, 'private companies making a huge revenue on their monopolies' (Cope 2015, p. 169). Consequently, many stakeholders commented on how fans often got swept up in the atmosphere or emotion of the event which meant that members of the crowd often disregarded the measures in place. The tone of the quotes suggests that the pandemic rules were not seen as useful to some fans, and this was almost to be expected given the nature of football fandom. There were also seemingly informal decisions made that aggressively imposing the regulations might have had worse consequences than the risk of virus transmission. Lack of intervention in a system of spontaneous order might have been an attempt to avoid a 'destructive influence' (Polanyi [1951] 1998, p. 80). The disciplinary power of the 'Panopticon' is illuminating here, as 'its strength is that it never intervenes, it is exercised spontaneously and without noise, it constitutes a mechanism whose effects follow from one another' (Foucault [1975] 2020, p. 206). However, a key difference between the Panopticon of the prison, where wardens were *not* seen in the central tower, and football matches, is that stewards *are* seen. The undisciplined fan exposes inadequate security and safety surveillance inside stadiums and reinforces the need to review stewarding and fan behaviour following the disorder of the EURO 2020 final (Casey 2021).

The lack of adherence to mitigation measures coupled with increased stadia capacity, particularly towards the end of the tournament, might also signal a breakdown in polycentricity. According to Aligica and Tarko (2012), one of the dangers of a breakdown in polycentricity is that it can lead to chaotic and violent anarchy in the system. While there was not a breakdown in the multiplicity of decision centres, there is evidence of a breakdown in the overarching system of rules, particularly with the disorder towards the end of the tournament. Stadium rules and mitigation measures were continually changing throughout the tournament which might have resulted in them no longer being considered legitimate, making their enforcement more difficult to implement. Thus, as Polanyi ([1951] 1998, p. 193) points out, there is no guarantee of a desirable result in any such system of mutual adjustments.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated a break in the ‘normalization’ (Foucault [1975] 2020) of past European tournaments due to the local specificities of COVID-19 restrictions in each host country. While UEFA had decided on EURO 2020’s polycentric multi-host city format in 2013, they did not foresee the COVID-19 pandemic’s spontaneous implications on its governance surrounding the tournament. Thus, UEFA’s corporate order (Polanyi [1951] 1998) became untenable given public health is a governmental matter of concern. The design of sport stadia and the management of their crowds has already been identified as a key part of security and safety governance of SMEs (Klauser 2013). Yet, in times of pandemic the polycentric hosting format increased risk of infection for players, fans, administrations, organisers, and broadcasters (Ehambaranathan and O’Connor 2022). In response to Flyvbjerg’s (2001) fourth question on phronetic social science (‘What should be done?’), we recommend others to consider whether there are changes to the corporate order in the planning, organisation, and implementation of future polycentric SMEs (e.g. FIFA World Cup 2026). If it returns to the status quo, then the spontaneous order of EURO 2020 is a ‘Frankenstein monster of [the pandemic’s] own creation’ (Polanyi [1951] 1998, p. 134).

Notes

1. The ‘art of governing’ was invented in the Classical Age where forms of government consisted of apparatuses and political institutions (Foucault [1999] 2016). The general technique of government by political institutions was of a disciplinary nature and used as a measure of their functioning and effectiveness. This resulted in what Foucault ([1997] 2020) calls a ‘normalizing society’ in which ‘the norm is something that can be applied to both a body one wishes to discipline and a population one wishes to regularize’ (p. 253).
2. UEFA (2014) published an evaluation report of the cities who bid to host EURO 2020. The report covers several guarantees on Vision, Concept and Legacy; Social Responsibility and Sustainability; Political Economics Aspects; Legal Aspects; Stadium; Mobility; Accommodation; Event Promotion; and Commercial Matters.

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