**Breakaways or crossing borders: what is the future of European football?**

With the game at an inflection point there comes a warning that ‘in a few weeks’ time its future is going to be pretty dark’

The delegates filing into a conference room in central Brussels could not have missed the huge multishaded mural, a block further down Rue de la Loi, that read “The future is Europe”. They took their places and for the next two hours heard panellists discuss what, in a football context, that future should look like.

Closing the discussion was Javier Tebas, the La Liga president and perhaps the most divisive administrator in the modern game. “If this association is not strong,” he told the 104 clubs and 15 league representatives who had made the trip, “then in a few weeks’ time the future of European football is going to be pretty dark.”

Tebas was speaking at a forum held by the Union of European clubs (UEC), which was created this year in an attempt to address a lack of representation for non-elite sides. Some of those present were signed-up members; others, including five lower-ranking Premier League clubs and two of their Championship peers, were in town on a try-before-you-buy basis.

They heard Tebas, a rare high-profile voice pushing back against football’s money-driven juggernaut or a rabble-rouser with multiple axes to grind depending on who you listen to, lament that football has ignored existential challenges. “We need to face up to them or there’s going to be no way out,” he concluded.

Prophecy or hyperbole? Perhaps it is somewhere between the two. It remains to be seen whether Tebas and UEC, whose activities he has part-funded, can wield any serious influence but they have earned their hearing through the acknowledgment that European football is at an inflection point.

The sport lacks a coherent answer to the money and extraordinary spending power, concentrated in England and a handful of isolated citadels such as Munich and Paris, that stratifies it further each year. The sanctity, competitive balance and commercial viability of domestic leagues around Europe, and so the prospects of the vast majority of its clubs, are in greater jeopardy than ever.

The urgency in Tebas’s oration owed largely to the twitching corpse of the disastrous [Super League project](https://www.theguardian.com/football/2021/apr/22/how-european-super-league-crashed), whose only remaining advocates in public are Barcelona and Real Madrid. Its proposed closed-shop format was headed off quickly in 2021 but the outcome of its case before the European court of justice (ECJ), challenging Uefa’s monopoly on creating and organising competitions, remains pending. Many observers had expected it to be handed down by September but a ruling will come no earlier than December.

European football’s doors would be blown off if [Uefa](https://www.theguardian.com/football/uefa) lost. Few expect that to happen but the length of the wait has sparked suggestions that, as a minimum, the verdict may offer oxygen for a fresh breakaway attempt in future. A22, the company behind the original Super League concept, radically altered its proposal last year to suggest a league of 60 to 80 teams with promotion and relegation between divisions along with a bolstered solidarity payment model for non-participants.

Its ideas have gained sympathy in some boardrooms beyond England, whose wealth-fattened top sides are generally content with the Champions League reforms that headed off the Super League project. Given the previous failure, though, it is hard to see it developing enough credibility to be the party that breaks the status quo.

Regardless of the ECJ’s conclusion, there are plenty on the continent who expect a fresh Super League attempt, from one angle or another, is a matter of time. A worst-case scenario may be that the Saudi Pro League grows in stature and financial clout to an extent that bounces some of Europe’s grandees into a new breakaway.

In the meantime, more than one other case affecting European football’s structure is being brought through the lawyers Dupont-Hissel, whose co-founder Jean-Louis Dupont was involved in the landscape-altering [Bosman case](https://www.theguardian.com/football/2015/dec/12/jean-marc-bosman-players-rights-20-years) 28 years ago. The most eyecatching of those has been raised by the Luxembourg club Swift Hesperange, who claim geographical limits on domestic competitions are a breach of European Union law. Essentially, it is a case for cross-border leagues spanning multiple, neighbouring countries.

Cross-border leagues are, to an increasing number of stakeholders, the most credible and practical solution. Combining the better teams from nearby countries would, in theory, improve their competitive edge for continental football and create a spectacle more conducive to generous broadcasting deals.

The disparity between prize money from European competitions and the slim pickings offered to the rest in, for example, Serbia ensures clubs such as the 1991 European Cup winners, Crvena Zvezda (widely known as Red Star Belgrade) – who then operated in a fiercely contested Yugoslavian league – cannibalise almost everyone else back home.

One prominent figure in football governance tells the Observer that, by 2030, he expects there to be six or seven major leagues – perhaps those in England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Turkey – complemented by a clutch of regionalised divisions. While there is no unanimity inside Uefa, it is understood it would not be closed to such schemes if a region presented a coherent, agreed-upon plan. Perhaps this change could be wrought without recourse to court cases and perhaps it would reduce any appetite to break away among traditional powers who lack access to Premier League-style bounty.

The idea has hurdles to overcome. Football remains an inherently conservative place and those who have climbed to lofty positions in existing structures are often reluctant to dilute their influence. But the topic arises with increased frequency behind closed doors and notional plans have already been mooted for several regions.

A hypothetical model could involve the leading teams in multiple domestic leagues over the first half of a season merging to compete among each other during the second, retaining the original competition’s vitality. If clubs and countries can be convinced that joining forces would not affect an individual nation’s number of European places, enough appetite for the principle exists.

A low-risk area to trial such a system could be the Baltic countries, which draw some of the continent’s lowest crowds but would be energised by semi-frequent, consequential clashes between sides from Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius.

Cross-border football is not a new concept: there have been studies for a “BeNeLiga” in Belgium and the Netherlands for some years, as have plans for a league that united Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In the Balkans, political tensions seem the main barrier to a plan that would make economic sense while a “Royal League” in Scandinavia flopped in the 2000s because it was not linked to European qualification and nor was the need to restore small- and medium-size countries’ fortunes as pronounced.

It would address problems that do not purely affect minnows or faded powers. The Bundesliga, whose clubs rejected a €2bn sale of media rights to private equity investors in May, inspires fiercer supporter loyalty than any setup in Europe but Bayern Munich’s 11-year title winning streak serves nobody while the Premier League and its £5.1bn TV deal surges ahead. It is with a straight face that a figure with close interest in the system suggests the Bundesliga should consider, like a number of lesser leagues, splitting into top and bottom halves after Christmas so that Bayern spend less time facing cannon fodder.

The pressure on football’s calendar, exacerbated by the [Champions League’s expansion](https://www.theguardian.com/football/2021/mar/13/new-look-champions-league-pointless-waste-of-time-agnelli-swiss-system) from next season and the prospect of a 32-team Club World Cup, brings added concern about its future shape. Those tournaments will be lucrative for the few who enter them while others watch on. Steve Parish, the Crystal Palace chairman, cut an incongruous figure in Brussels alongside clubs who earn a fraction of the income a mid-table Premier League side enjoys but that did not make his emphasis of the point less important.

“There’s nowhere else to go,” he said. “We’re down to a minimal number of [calendar] slots for a viable domestic league. Everyone is mindful of where the next attack will be and: ‘Are they going to shrink the league?’”

The threats are real. Another is the influence of state-owned clubs, a situation one senior executive in England says football has “sleepwalked into”. Failure is not an option for Manchester City or Paris Saint-Germain, whose president, Nasser al-Khelaifi, is also chairman of the European Club Association (ECA). The same will soon apply to Newcastle and they will not be the last. Khelaifi was influential in nixing the Super League but other nation-run entities may not be as considered in future.

With one eye, Parish’s peers outside the continental tournaments scour their surroundings for danger. With another, they look for ways to manage their destiny in the here and now. One of the primary arguments espoused by Tebas and the UEC is that the ECA – the sole organisation recognised by Uefa and Fifa as representing the continent’s clubs – is weighted inordinately towards the elite and wields a dangerous level of influence inside Uefa, particularly within the governing body’s all-powerful club competitions committee.

They feel Uefa winning the Super League case would, although the preferable outcome, only enhance the status quo. The UEC wants a seat at the table to itself, although the prospect looks remote and the ECA has worked swiftly to assimilate a number of new members of lesser stature in recent months.

In February, a withering dispatch from the ECA railed at A22’s “alternative reality”. Tebas, who has a long-running feud with Khelaifi, might reflect that both sides at least have one common enemy. “We have to fight, we have to be organised,” he told the crowd in Belgium’s capital. The battle for European football’s future may only be warming up.

By Nick Ames