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Reform effectiveness and unresolved issues in football: the case of Turkish Super League

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Abstract

Following the successful outcomes of the national team, that finished third in the 2002 FIFA World Cup, and the positive club performance in the UEFA competitions at the beginning of the new millennium, Turkish football was expected to reaffirm and further develop in the following years, exploiting also the favourable economic conditions. However, its growth and evolution did not meet the expectations, and in the latest years several managerial aspects of the Turkish Football Federation have begun to be questioned, which led the federation itself to reform football in areas such as foreign players' quota, financial requirements and stadiums. The main aim of this article is to identify and discuss these issues and how effective the reforms implemented by the Turkish Football Federation have been in the short run through the application of the historical method and the use of secondary data. Our results show that these reforms do not seem to have had a significant impact so far, and while some of them likely need more time for their effects to be tangible, the general impression is that Turkish football would need a different approach and more incisive policy interventions.

Keywords: Football, Turkey, Reforms, Foreign Players, Quota, Financial Violations, Hooliganism

Introduction

Modern football appeared for the first time in Turkish lives at the end of 19th century, when mercantile ports such as İzmir and Selanik were introduced to the new sport by British merchants, that founded the first team - Football Club Smyrna - in 1894 (1). Football became rapidly popular as it was practiced also by other ethnicities present in the country, such as Italians, Rums and Armenians: indeed, it was when Rums moved to İstanbul that football was established in the main Turkish city (1).

The first Turkish football club founded by locals, Galatasaray Sport Club, was established in 1905 and immediately followed by Fenerbahçe Sport Club in 1907 and Beşiktaş Gymnastics Club in 1910 (2). These three clubs, alongside Trabzonspor Sport Club, have historically dominated domestic competitions, as shown by Table 1. The national governing body – the Turkish Football Federation (TFF) – was instead established in 1923 and immediately became a member of FIFA.

Table 1 about here

Throughout the 20th century, both the national team and the Turkish clubs struggled to achieve international success: only in 1996 Turkey managed to qualify for the first time to the final stage of the UEFA European Championships, and no UEFA competition for club had ever been won by a Turkish side (3).

The beginning of the new millennium saw a significant improvement of the international performance of the Turkish national team and can be considered the golden age of Turkish football. In 2000, Turkey qualified for the second time to the final stage of the UEFA European Championships and reached the tournament's quarter-final; in 2002, they qualified for the first time to the final stage of the FIFA World Cup and surprisingly achieved the third place. Ten players of that team belonged to Galatasaray, that in 2000 won the UEFA Cup and Super Cup and in 2001 reached the Champions League quarter-final, leading Turkey to the sixth place in the UEFA country ranking (UEFA.com).

Therefore, Turkish football seemed to be at a turning point of its history and to emerge as the main challenger of the top 5 European nations (England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain). This growth could be further sustained by the positive economic trend experienced by the country in the first fifteen years of the new millennium: apart from the financial crisis of 2001, Turkey recorded a 7.5% annual increase in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) between 2002 and 2006 – its highest ever rate since 1960s – and

a 5% annual increase between 2007 and 2015, with the national economy that has not been particularly affected by the global financial crisis and a poverty incidence more than halved (OECD.org).

Despite these ideal conditions, Turkish football did not progress as expected and its international performance turned out to be quite disappointing. This poor on-field performance has been accompanied by a worsening of the financial conditions of the Turkish clubs and by frequent episodes of hooliganism harming the reputation of Turkish football. This paper aims to investigate the causes identified by the Turkish federation for the disappointing on-field and financial performance of the domestic football, the reform interventions designed to tackle these issues and the short-run impact of these reforms. Section 1 will briefly describe the methodology used, whereas Section 2 will show the effects of changes in the foreign players' quota, the new sanctions for financial violations and the interventions to tackle hooliganism respectively. A discussion of the results is presented in Section 3, followed by conclusions and some reflections about the future development of Turkish football.

1. Methodology

This research adopts a historical case-study approach, considered by Amis and Silk (4) particularly valuable for its contribution to the evolution of sport management theory as it enables researchers to clarify important questions related to the social, political, economic, historical, and cultural factors impacting on the sport industry. This approach not only helps a better understanding of the contemporary evolution of sport management, but also potentially points to possible future changes and improvements, which are desirable qualities for sport managers (5), and, more importantly, highlights that events and crucial decisions are not merely a product of exogenous forces but of a human decision making process, so that the study of the history of a specific institution or organization is a relevant method of inquiry for sport management since every topic possesses a context or history (6).

Once identified the three main areas of reform in Turkish football in the last decade - the foreign players' quota, the sanctions for financial violations and hooliganism – secondary data from different sources have been collected to understand the rationale for the reform interventions and to conduct an ex-ante and ex-post evaluation of the situation in each of the three areas in order to analyse the effectiveness of TFF's reforms through a descriptive statistical approach.

2. Results

2.1 Foreign Players' Quota in Turkish Football

In the period between 2002 and 2015, the Turkish national team never qualified again to the final stage of the FIFA World Cup, and only twice (2008, when they reached the semi-final, and 2016) reached the final stage of the UEFA European Championships. In the same period, also the performance of Turkish clubs in UEFA competitions was not in line with the expectations: the best achievements were two Champions League quarter-finals (Fenerbahçe in 2008, Galatasaray in 2013), a Europa League semi-final (Fenerbahçe, 2013) and a UEFA Cup quarter-final (Besiktas, 2003). Consequently, Turkey dropped to the 14th place – their lowest rank - in the UEFA country ranking in 2007, and in 2013 – the best year for Turkish clubs in UEFA competitions in the period considered – they were still in 10th position, overtaken by Portugal, Netherlands, Russia and Ukraine if compared with 2001 (UEFA.com).

In 2014, Fatih Terim, the then manager of the Turkish national team and one of the historical figures in Turkish football, was the first to state publicly the need for deep reforms in the domestic football system (7). The main issue identified by the special unit created by TFF to reform domestic football was the quota of foreign players allowed to be part of a Turkish club. TFF imposed the first restriction on foreign players in 1951, when Turkish clubs were allowed to sign only one foreign player, and this quota held until 1996, when, as a consequence of the Bosman ruling that revolutionized the European football transfer market system (8), it was increased to 3+1 (three players on the pitch, one player on the bench).

As shown in Table 2, the liberalization of the athletes' labour market experienced by the European Union (EU) countries after the Bosman ruling (9,10) pushed Turkey – not an official member of EU despite a Custom Union signed in 1996 – to repeated changes in the rule regulating the foreign players' quota in Turkish football, in an attempt to preserve the international competitiveness of domestic clubs and, at the same time, the development of home-grown talent. In the middle of the 1998-1999 season, TFF further increased the foreign players' quota to five players, whether on the pitch or not (11), whereas in 2001-2002 a 5+1+2 system was introduced. According to this system, a maximum of eight players could be part of the roster of a Turkish club, but no more than five players could be at the same time on the pitch and only one player could start as a potential substitute (12). The rule changed again in the following seasons: in 2005-2006, Turkish clubs could have a maximum of six foreign players in their roster, whether on the pitch or not; in 2007-08 they went back to a 6 + 1 system (13), whereas in 2008-09 the quota was increased to eight with a 6+2 system, and in 2010-11 to ten with a 6+2+2 system.

In 2011-2012, for the first time, Turkish clubs could sign an unlimited number of foreign players, but the 6+2 system still regulated their line-up. In 2013-14 the quota was reduced again, with Turkish clubs

allowed to sign only ten players and line up six – whether on the pitch or not. In the following season the number of foreign players was further reduced, with a maximum number of eight players to be signed and a 5+3 line-up system.

The critical analysis inspired by the TFF and the Union of Turkish clubs and aimed to identify the causes of the disappointing performance of domestic football at international level led to the conclusion that the foreign players' quota was penalizing for both the on-field and the financial performance. On the one hand, it prevented a more substantial inflow of players with heterogeneous backgrounds and skills, which could represent a positive factor for the on-field efficiency of the domestic clubs and a key factor for the development of the home-grown players, that could benefit from the competition and the daily interactions with foreign players (14, 15, 16). On the other hand, it favoured the protectionism of the home-grown players leading to an inflation of the teams' payrolls, as Turkish clubs were forced to keep in their roster a minimum amount of home-grown players, whose bargaining power consequently increased.

Therefore, TFF's decision was to adopt the so-called '14 home-grown players rule': football clubs could have a maximum of twenty-eight players in their roster and at least fourteen of them had to be eligible for playing in the Turkish national team. Consequently, the other fourteen members of the roster could be foreign players, and eleven of them could be lined up, whether on the pitch or on the bench, which means that, for the first time, all the eleven starters could be foreigners.

Table 2 about here

The new rule has been applied for the following three seasons, and, as shown in Figure 1 and 2, has produced an immediate increase in the percentage of foreign players in Turkish clubs (from 33.9% in 2014-15 to 52.9% in 2017-18) and in the percentage of transfers involving foreign players in the Turkish Super League (from 38% to 61%). Moreover, the average wage/revenue ratio has decreased from 89% in 2014-15 to 71% in 2017-18 (UEFA.com), and the average amount of money spent every year for the twenty most expensive internal transfers of Turkish players between 2015-16 and 2017-18 has dropped by 37% in comparison with the average of the previous seven seasons (transfermarket.co.uk). Although the impact on the on-field performance would require a longer period of time to be properly evaluated, so far there is no evidence of significant improvements: the national team failed to qualify for the 2018 FIFA World Cup, whereas the best achievement of a Turkish club in the UEFA competitions was the Europa League quarter-final reached by Besiktas in 2016-17.

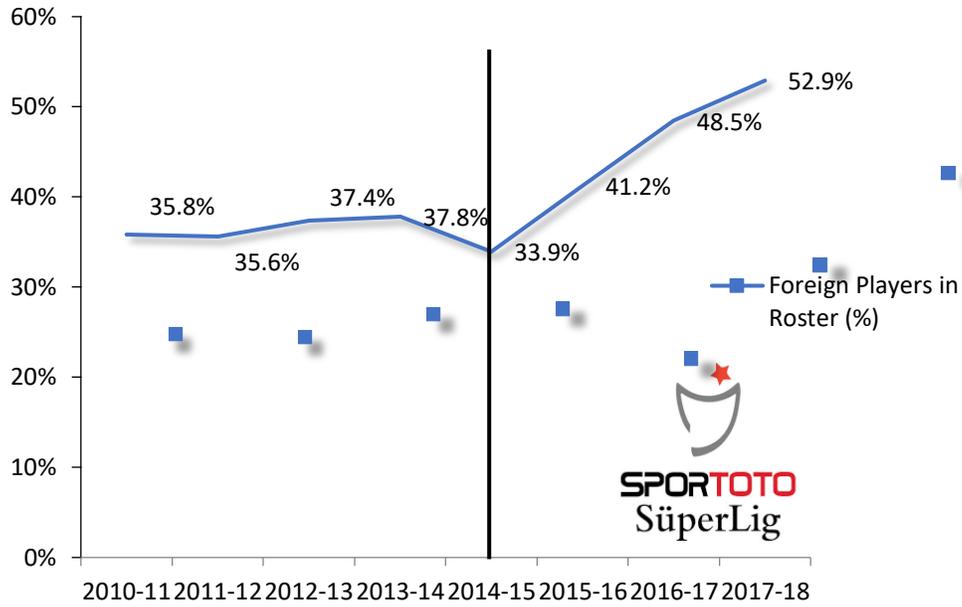


Figure 1. The Ratio of Foreign Players on Turkish Football Clubs (2010-11 to 2017-18)

Source: Transfermarkt.co.uk

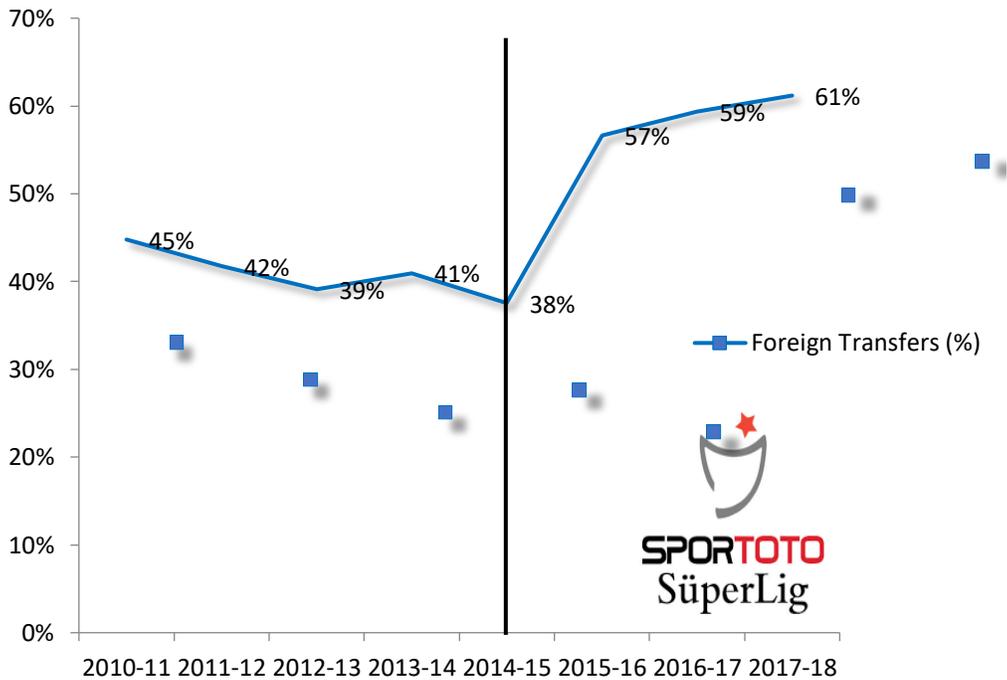


Figure 2. The Ratio of Foreign Player Transfers in Turkish Super League (2010-11 to 2017-18)

Source: Transfermarkt.co.uk

2.2. Sanctions for financial violations

The poor on-field performance of Turkish national team and clubs between 2002 and 2015 has been accompanied by a worsening of the financial conditions of the Turkish clubs: in 2015, 13 out of 18 Super League clubs were making a loss, the total liabilities of the Big 4 (Galatasaray, Fenerbahçe, Beşiktaş, Trabzonspor) exceeded 1.18 billion euros, and the average wage/revenue ratio was 87% in 2015 (51% in 2009). Moreover, Galatasaray was banned from UEFA competitions in 2016-17 for failing to meet the recently introduced Financial Fair Play (FFP) requirements for 2015-16 (UEFA.com).

The change in the foreign players' quota that, as we have seen, led to a significant reduction in the average wage/revenue ratio has not been sufficient to produce the necessary improvements required by FFP yet. Consequently, in January 2016 TFF established stricter financial requirements and heavier sanctions for financial violations aiming to stimulate a more virtuous behavior by Turkish clubs. These modifications can be summarized as follows (TFF, 2016):

- Financial statements must be presented every six months and receive approval certificate from Independent Audit Companies or Sworn Financial Advisors
- In case of delay in the presentation of the approval certificate, the club will be notified a 60-day warning: if at the expiration date the certificate has not been presented yet, the club will be punished with one penalty point
- In case of overdue debts to other football clubs, the club will be notified a 60-day warning: if at the expiration date the debts have not been extinguished yet, the club will be punished with three penalty points
- In case of overdue debts to other personnel, the club will be notified a 60-day warning: if at the expiration date the debts have not been extinguished yet, the club will be punished with three penalty points
- In case of overdue debts to Social Security Institution (SSI) and Tax Affairs, the club will be notified a 60-day warning: if at the expiration date the debts have not been extinguished yet, the club will be punished with three penalty points.

These new regulations have certainly had an immediate impact on the general financial performance of Super League clubs, as in 2017 only nine clubs were in loss compared to thirteen in 2015, but has still not contributed to the improvement of the financial situation of the Big 4, whose total liabilities increased by 24% between 2016 and 2018 (www.kap.gov.tr). Not surprisingly, all the Big 4 were under a certain

type of settlement regime at the start of 2018-19 in relation to FFP: Besiktas was under a mere settlement regime, whereas Fenerbahçe and Trabzonspor were under settlement regime with transfer restrictions and the limitation on the number of players in the List A for the UEFA competition they took part in, and Galatasaray under settlement regime with a fine of 6 million euros and the limitation on the number of players in the List A (UEFA.com).

2.3. Hooliganism

Hooliganism has been a constant plague of Turkish football, as pointed out by Ozbay et al. (17) and Keddie (18) that analysed the historical motivations of such phenomenon. The period between 2002 and 2015 saw an intensification of violence episodes linked to football (18). In the 2003-04 season, a Karşıyaka fan was murdered during the first round match of the Turkish Cup, and Gaziantepspor's fans set a stand on fire during a match against Fenerbahçe. In 2009-10, during the Fenerbahçe-Galatasaray derby, an assistant referee was struck by a lighter thrown from the stands, whereas in 2012-13 a 19-year-old student was stabbed to death on the day of another Istanbul derby between Fenerbahçe and Galatasaray just because he was wearing a Fenerbahçe shirt. In 2013-14, Besiktas' midfielder Manuel Fernandes was kicked to the ground by a pitch invader during Besiktas-Kasimpasa and Galatasaray's forward Burak Yilmaz suffered a serious face injury when he was hit by a pocketknife thrown from the stands during the match against Çaykur Rizespor (18).

This violence escalation led the Turkish government to introduce the so-called *Violence Law* in 2011 (17), whose full implementation did not occur before 2014. Inspired by similar legislation implemented in England, France, Italy and Switzerland, the *Violence Law*'s main aim was to make stadiums safer places. Therefore, Turkish stadiums are now required to include at least two waiting (or detention) rooms and control rooms with security cameras accessible by police and private security, and all their seats have to be numbered. Moreover, weapons, explosives, other inflammables, drugs and alcohol are banned from stadiums, and club officials and fan representatives are required to assist police and private security. Finally, starting from 2014-15, all tickets are sold through an electronic card, the so-called *Passolig*.

Passolig is compulsory to attend a game and embodies also the fans' personal information, that is stored by TFF and shared with the Ministry of Finance and Internal Affairs. Those producing, selling or possessing fake e-tickets will be sentenced up to 4 years. More in general, a felony against the *Violence Law* may result in an attendance ban, and the banned person must report to the nearest police station at kickoff and one hour after the game has started.

Figure 3 shows that *Passolig* has had an immediate negative impact on Turkish football stadium attendance in the first two seasons after its introduction. The average capacity utilization dropped from 46% to 25% (UEFA.com) mainly because of the fans' diffidence towards the perceived commercial nature of the electronic card, as the personal information embodied in it could be accessible to third parties. Attendance has then started increasing in 2016-17 and reached the pre-*Passolig* level in 2017-18, which proves that Turkish fans have now accepted the new rule that, however, has not contributed to a significant reduction of the hooliganism episodes.

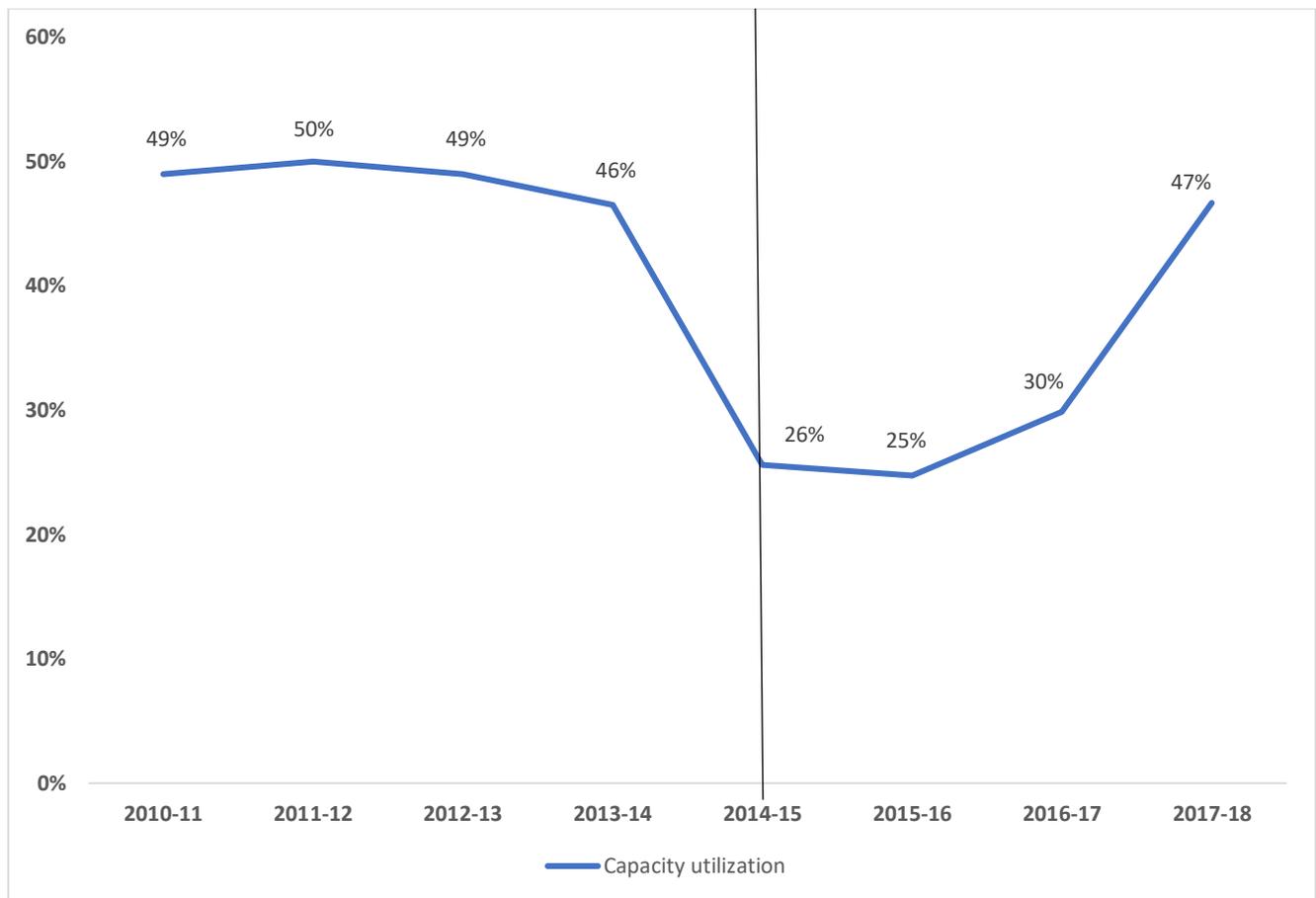


Figure 3. The effects of Passolig on attendance (2010-11 to 2017-18)

The lack of official data from the Turkish government and TFF does not allow a thorough analysis, but the most serious incidents occurred in the four seasons since the introduction of *Passolig* show that hooliganism is an issue far from being resolved, which pushed Ulker, a major Turkish manufacturer of food products and one of the largest sports sponsors in the country, to withdraw their funding from football after investing €190m in 10 years (19). In 2014-15, in Trabzon, just a few hours after the game against Rizespor, Fenerbahce's bus was shot at; in 2015-16, Eskisehirspor's fans set fire to parts of their

own stadium and invaded the pitch, whereas in 2017-18 the derby between Fenerbahçe and Beşiktaş was abandoned after Beşiktaş' coach Şenol Güneş got injured by objects flung from the stands (18). All these episodes show that also this reform has not proved to be particularly effective in the short run.

3. Discussion

Following the successful outcomes of the Turkish national team and clubs at the beginning of the new millennium, Turkish football has not developed as expected, considering also the favourable economic conditions. The short-run effects of the reforms implemented since 2014 in order to re-boost Turkish football do not seem to be very significant so far.

The increase in the foreign players' quota is probably the policy change that needs more time to have tangible effects and, consequently, to be evaluated, as it aims to impact on the on-field performance of clubs and national team. However, increasing the foreign players' quota without investing at the same time in the development of youth academies could turn out to be ineffective. The models to follow should be Netherlands, Portugal and Belgium, whose leagues cannot be compared to the top 5 European leagues in terms of attractiveness and visibility, but that are acknowledged as countries particularly capable of nurturing and developing domestic talent. The consequences are a good – sometimes high – competitiveness of clubs and national team and a healthy financial situation of the clubs themselves, that increase their profit through the sale of the home-grown players to the European big clubs. Setting a budget share to be invested in the development of the youth academies as a compulsory requirement for all the Turkish clubs could then be beneficial in terms of both on-field and financial performance, as it would stimulate clubs to be financially virtuous through a positive approach and not only by making the sanctions for violations more severe, especially if we take into account the currency and debt crisis hitting the country in 2018. On top of that, Turkish clubs should imitate the three above-mentioned countries also in terms of foreign players' acquisition and buy young talent from peripheral leagues to develop and re-sell to the European big clubs rather than continuing to buy players in an advanced stage of their career from the top 5 European leagues. As regards hooliganism, it is probably the toughest issue to tackle, as violence is endemic to Turkish society, as highlighted by Keddie (18). On top of that, some fan groups are associated with political movements, that often use football as a means for their anti-government protests. Therefore, it is not surprising that *Violence Law* and *Passolig* have had so far a very limited effect, and their implementation would definitely benefit from a more peaceful social climate.

Conclusions

Even though at the beginning of the new millennium Turkish football seemed to emerge as the main challenger of the top 5 European nations, sustained also by favourable economic conditions, its development in the following years did not meet the expectations, which led the Turkish Football Federation to identify and critically analyse three main reform areas: the foreign players' quota, the clubs' financial behaviour and hooliganism.

So far, the reform interventions have been not very effective: a) the increase in the number of foreign players allowed per team has not contributed to a better performance of Turkish clubs in the international competitions; b) more severe sanctions for financial violations have not led to a substantial improvement of the financial situation of the Big 4, that were under a certain type of settlement regime at the start of 2018-19 in relation to FFP; c) the introduction of *Passolig* has not prevented the occurrence of serious incidents in Turkish stadiums.

Even though the TFF's reform effort is appreciable, a different approach would probably be needed: taking inspiration from nations such as Netherlands, Portugal and Belgium, an incisive policy aimed to invest in the development of the youth academies could be beneficial in terms of both on-field and financial performance. As regards hooliganism, it is probably the toughest issue to tackle, as violence is endemic to Turkish society and some fan groups are associated with political movements: therefore, any reform effort risks to be ineffective without a more peaceful social climate.

Applicable remarks

1. TFF may set a budget share to be invested in the development of the youth academies as a compulsory requirement for all the Turkish clubs.
2. Turkish clubs should modify their approach: they should nurture and develop home-grown players and buy young talent from peripheral leagues to develop and re-sell to the European big clubs rather than continuing to buy players in an advanced stage of their career.

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Table 1. Domestic Honours of the Turkish Big 4.

| Trophy | Galatasaray SK | Fenerbahçe SK | Beşiktaş JK | Trabzonspor SK |
|---------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Super League | 20 | 19 | 15 | 6 |
| Turkish Cup | 17 | 6 | 9 | 8 |
| T. Super Cup | 15 | 9 | 8 | 8 |

Source: Turkish Football Federation

Table 2. The evolution of the foreign players' quota (1998 – 2018)

| Seasons | Lineup | On field | Number of contracts |
|----------------|---------------|-----------------|----------------------------|
| 1998-2000 | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| 2001-02 | 6 | 5 | 8 |
| 2005-06 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| 2007-08 | 7 | 6 | 7 |
| 2008-10 | 8 | 6 | 8 |
| 2010-11 | 8 | 6 | 10 |
| 2011-13 | 8 | 6 | unlimited |
| 2013-14 | 6 | 6 | 10 |
| 2014-15 | 8 | 5 | 8 |
| 2015-18 | 11 | 11 | 14 |