

European football's earthquake is coming - what will it look like after?

A power battle at the very top of the game could soon come to a head with potentially massive repercussions for the whole sport, writes **Miguel Delaney**

When the European Super League project was gathering pace in spring 2021, Paris Saint-Germain were of course approached. The feeling from the organisers, according to well-placed sources, was that the Qatari-owned club thought this was “a brilliant entertainment project”. PSG president Nasser Al-Khelaifi nevertheless insisted, for his part, that it should be done under the auspices of UEFA. The executive wanted to keep the European game together.

There are a few potential ironies to that, though, because the politics of all this are causing deepening fissures. It is just as the club season splits for Qatar's World Cup that we could well see wider splits in the game itself. There is certainly a deepening sense that football is on the brink of an earthquake, and a major shift in the landscape. There are too many tremors.

Many people have already noted the recent speeches by the presidents of ‘the Super League three’, Real Madrid's Florentino Perez, Barcelona's Joan Laporta and Juventus' Andrea Agnelli. The trio have made new rallying calls for their project, just two months before an initial judicial recommendation comes in for the European Court of Justice case that will decide whether Uefa is a monopoly and should be broken up.

A further irony to that is there are many figures that share some of their opinion, much lower down the football pyramid. They just have a totally opposite view about what should be done. Some of it comes from Al-Khelaifi's own policy.

One under-appreciated fall-out from the Super League was PSG's rise to the very top of European football politics, and Al-Khelaifi coming in as president of the European Club Association [ECA], to go with many other roles. It also gives Qatar even greater influence over the game, a fact all the more relevant amid increasing concerns over sportswashing and the extent of state-club dominance.

Anyone who doubts that influence need only look at the position of the ECA in the game. Sources talk of how ensconced they are with Uefa that they recently asked for the furniture to be changed in their Nyon office. The truth is the ECA are the furniture, the most lavish centrepiece of the European game.

Uefa currently have a memorandum of understanding with the ECA that means the club body recognises Uefa as the sole institution governing European football - essentially, the monopoly the Super League are arguing against - and Uefa recognise the ECA as the sole representative of clubs.

It goes so far that the ECA receive €10m in funding from Uefa - rising to €15.3m next year - which is as much as the national associations of five different countries. Clubs involved in Uefa competitions are meanwhile required to sign an application form to claim their entitlement to compensation for their players taking part in international football, and embedded in this is a declaration that they won't be a member of any club organisation that isn't the ECA.

Article 51 of the Uefa statutes actually prohibits any grouping of clubs that aren't the ECA. This has effects that could authentically be described as undemocratic, and that go against the spirit of the game as a cultural force.

It also goes far deeper than the Super League clubs.

Having grown out of the old G14, the ECA currently has 245 members but only 109 of those have full voting rights. This has led to two absurd situations.

One is that representatives of some clubs actually put up their hands at ECA meetings when they don't even have a vote. A second more serious consequence is that it means hundreds of clubs across Europe - the very foundation of the game - do not have proper representation in this regard. Their only recourse is to the European Leagues.

It is in this context that the Union of European Clubs [UEC] have started to come together. The plan is for such a group to forge a conciliatory path that offers this representation, while also including other stakeholders like FifPro, the European Leagues and fan groups like the FSE.

An obstacle to that is that Uefa's memorandum prohibits the governing body even meeting with such a group, or such groups convening themselves, and there are many figures within the ECA who are keen to ensure this is properly applied.

It is again the same sort of principle that prohibits clubs from even discussing the idea of a Super League. Figures in that project joke of Uefa “making it a thought crime”. It has led to more tangible responses from the ECA, though.

The body has created a new network tier specifically to cater for clubs who might be interested in the UEC - but they still wouldn't have voting rights. It isn't even a membership category.

It is in this context that the Europa Conference League has been created. You might call that the ultimate in bread and circuses if viewing figures weren't so low. Many clubs are of course delighted to just be involved in European competition. They are literally happy to be there.

Others are a little more cautious. They see the Europa Conference League as a grand “sleight of hand”.

The new competition has essentially pushed 78% of Europa League clubs into a third tier, further stratifying the continental game and preventing mobility within football.

It is, in effect, institutionalising the Super League in the manner Al-Khalaifi spoke of. It has created this post-2024 Champions League, that a lot of parties are unenthused by it. Uefa, for their part, would say it helps some of the smaller clubs and keeps more involved.

This is one of the contradictions to the super club machinations.

The Super League has been held over Uefa for 30 years and it has conditioned a situation where 34% of all Uefa revenue between 1993 and 2018 has gone to the 12 clubs who threatened the April 2021 breakaway. Up to 94% of it has gone to ECA members with full voting rights.

It is this that has led to a sport in 2022 where so many games and so many leagues are now so predictable; where most of football east of Munich is a competitive wasteland; and where many great clubs are in sporting purgatories. "Football has failed to govern itself," is a regular refrain.

Many people in European football don't talk of the governing institutions as being Uefa and its national member associations. They talk of the ECA. Uefa has no real power in this regard because it is so beholden to the elite club representative body.

A classic example came in the fall-out to the Super League. Many were baffled as to why Uefa still pressed ahead with some of the changes to the Champions League, that had been suggestions of the super clubs. Among the reasons were the insistence that they had to keep the big clubs buying into the Uefa project, and being given “value”.

Negotiations are ongoing since 2016 about the Champions League becoming a joint venture between Uefa and the top clubs, where the latter would get a 49% share. There is still a feeling this is outright “wrong”, that it’s against the very spirit of European football.

It should be acknowledged that there is agitation within Uefa about this. Some figures are frustrated that “the ECA has the real power”. There is also a growing belief that the ECA should do something to change their membership, or allow new membership.

A further irony is that all of this loops back around to the Super League case.

Under EU law, Uefa has an obligation to provide equality of opportunity to clubs of different economies. That is highly debatable in the current structure, and raises questions of how the EU Commission is supposed to protect the market and equality. That in turn represents an attack point for the Super League.

One of their primary arguments is that Uefa isn’t fulfilling its stated role so doesn’t deserve such protection. It's again the same point of view as a growing rump in the game - its "proles", if you like - albeit from a completely different perspective and with totally different intentions.

There has nevertheless been a feeling that Uefa will still win the ECJ case due to the amount of EU states backing their position. There is a lot of lobbying on behalf of the governing body and Uefa.

One of the more notable aspects of Perez’s recent speech, however, is the indication the Super League may have a new trump card. By insisting they are making the project open, and diluting the closed-shop nature of the initial plans, there is a belief they can undercut Uefa’s legal argument. This approach, many sources insist on pointing out, actually relates to concessions Uefa afforded the super clubs previously.

Whether the argument is quite so sellable to the rest of the game remains to be seen. The Super League essentially want to change football governance so the

club is the basic unit of voting power rather than the national federation, and that led Perez to essentially pitching to European football's vast middle- and lower-classes, so to speak.

They would much rather have fair representation, in an overhauled system. The biggest question around all of that right now, however, is what that should look like. That is what should be driving the game now.