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Author: James Corbett, Senior Correspondent

Photo:

PR | Dennis Gudasic, UEC Co-Founder and Executive Director of Zagreb's Lokomotiva FC.

New club union sets out statement of intent with rapid recruitment drive

- The Union of European Clubs (UEC), launched in April, has already signed up 118 member clubs, and expects to hit two hundred members within months.
- The union launched on a one-member, one-vote platform has already surpassed the European Club Association's (ECA) normal membership, despite warnings from ECA.
- Why it matters: The UEC seeks to give voice to the majority of professional clubs in Europe, who they say remain disenfranchised as stakeholders.
- The perspective: ECA argue that exclusivity of ECA membership is "fundamental" and warning that "fragmentation of club representation ... would not serve the best interests of clubs."

Membership of the Union of European Clubs (UEC), the club union launched on a one-member, one-vote platform in April, has already surpassed the European Club Association's (ECA) normal membership, with officials saying they are optimistic of gaining 200 clubs within months.

The UEC is an independent representative body founded to improve support and advocacy for non-elite professional clubs across Europe. The body believes all clubs should have a meaningful voice and effective representation in designing the rules that govern them.

The new organisation, co-founded by Gareth Farrelly, a lawyer and former Everton and Ireland player, Dennis Gudasic, a Lokomotiva Zagreb executive, and Katarina Pijetlovic, one of Europe's leading sports law experts is seen as a response to disenfranchisement of clubs by ECA.

UEC officials have been touring Europe all summer, including a visit to war-torn Ukraine in June, where its General Secretary Katarina Pijetlovic met with Ukraine Premier League clubs in Kyiv. It has also held discussions in 10 other countries.

Off The Pitch has been told that the UEC has enlisted 118 members so far, including several that concurrently have normal membership of ECA. ECA's full voting – or “normal” – membership currently stands at 110, as per its website, although it has plans to increase this number to 140 from next season.

ECA also has a membership base that includes several hundred “associate” and “network” clubs. Associate members vote to elect representatives onto the board and other bodies, while its network members have access to ECA activities and services. Neither group has voting rights at ECA's general assembly.

Warning letter

The expansion drive comes as ECA's CEO, Charlie Marshall, has written to ECA's members, warning them that it is not possible to hold simultaneous membership of both bodies. According to correspondence seen by this publication Marshall claims the UEC's objectives are “unclear and ambiguous” and that it is “not recognised” by either FIFA or UEFA.

“We have received reports that representatives of the UEC have suggested that clubs could hold simultaneous memberships of both ECA and the UEC. We wish to clarify that this information is incorrect,” Marshall wrote.

“ECA membership is, in accordance with its statutes (Article 8(a) of the ECA Statutes), exclusive, and simultaneous membership of another European club representative body is therefore not compatible.”

He also points out that both FIFA and UEFA require that clubs who are members of ECA must not simultaneously be members of another European representative body, as per the 2019 Memorandum of Understanding between ECA and UEFA.

Marshall goes on to say that the exclusivity of ECA membership is “fundamental”, warning that “fragmentation of club representation would undermine the strength of collective action and would not serve the best interests of clubs at European and International level.”

Off The Pitch understands that a number of ECA members have signed up to the UEC and hold simultaneous membership of both organisations. The consequences of this remain untested. ECA say that it is up to the clubs to decide in the sense that they cannot belong to another association and ECA according to its statutes.

"In that sense 'we' don't do anything 'they' need to choose," an ECA official told us.

Mission statement

Speaking in response to Marshall's letter, the UEC's co-founder, Dennis Gudasic, told Off The Pitch that his organisation "in no way prejudices any objectives pursued by ECA that are in legitimate public interest." He pointed out that according to EU law, unionism and representation is a fundamental right.

"Our mission is to give voice in European football governance to the clubs that are not represented or are inadequately represented," he said.

"Our members are those clubs that seek equal voting rights - the only way to improve their sporting and financial position and bring about much-needed equality of opportunities in European football. Substituting this fundamental right that pursues public interest objectives with club services is inadequate and intended to preserve the dominance of elite clubs in the governance.

"It is like saying: 'Welcome to ECA! Here you will not have equal voting rights, elite clubs will dominate the decision making, but we have fancy hotels, cocktails and cookies!'"

Gudasic said that UEC are in regular contact with UEFA and report on their activities, and that the European governing body have raised no objections.

Growing membership

Gudasic said that membership has grown "far beyond expectations".

"Clubs are identifying with the UEC and our key goals and considering our current level of support from stakeholders, leagues and clubs we are well on the way to achieving stakeholder recognition," he said.

"In our meetings with clubs it's been very encouraging to receive their feedback and support. They see the UEC as a lifejacket and missing piece in the puzzle, giving clubs of all sizes the opportunity to be represented and heard."

Shakhtar Donetsk remain the most high profile club to publicly voice their support for the UEC, although the Ukrainian club are still deciding whether to join as members.

Clubs elsewhere in Europe, which are already part of ECA, face a similar dilemma. In one lower tier European league, all clubs have signed up to UEC barring its solitary ECA member club. The president of that club is considering his options, but has expressed reservations about that ECA statutes forbid it and about what UEFA may think.

UEFA mechanisms

The increase in representation of European clubs, both with the UEC and ECA's expanded membership, comes as UEFA has expanded its own stakeholder base. In June UEFA's

Executive Committee decided to integrate the voices of players (via FIFPRO Europe) and fans (via Football Supporters Europe) into its decision-making process, giving them dedicated seats on relevant standing committees, where they join existing members from national associations, leagues and clubs.

UEFA has also created “new, bilateral stakeholder-specific platforms of engagement”, which it says “will further increase the opportunity for dialogue and understanding”, although it declined to give further details when pressed on the detail of these plans.

Nevertheless, it is understood that various European football stakeholders have seen these platform as an opportunity to engage with UEFA in different ways. In June LaLiga left the European Leagues body and instead see the new platforms as a way to keep talking bilaterally with UEFA in an official way.