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Uefa TV bonanza will entrench a Euro elite

At some point European football will have to decide where its future lies after 2024 and whether that is one in which elites are reinforced and dynasties are created by all those billions of euros of broadcast revenue or whether something fairer emerges.

This will not just be about whether Real Madrid can afford to pay Kylian Mbappe what he wants, or whether his Qatari paymasters can appease him with something new like a billion-euro contract, a city in the desert called Kylian, or the deportation of Neymar. Whether it is Uefa or a new version of the European Super League which divides up the wealth, how it does so will have a profound effect on the European, as well as the domestic, game. From the Premier League and the rest of Europe's big five leagues, down to the smallest domestic leagues in its smallest countries.

As Uefa tries to keep its clubs on board, and the next stage of its legal war with the ESL draws closer on Dec 15, the question of money is central. At Uefa, the early projections for its club competitions from 2024 are a record television broadcast yield of €5 billion (£4.3 billion) annually when the new Champions League format launches. Uefa hopes that will be enough to buy it a fragile peace among its most querulous and biggest clubs.

Outside the golden elite, the danger for clubs who do not participate in Uefa competition is obvious. That is the looming possibility of a wealth division between those on the outside and those on the inside, even more unbridgeable than those created in previous years. In some European countries it has already become the norm.

Uefa's solidarity payments to the clubs outside its own competitions have stalled. Up to the rights cycle that started in 2018-19, those payments tracked the rise in broadcast earnings and then, when Michel Platini was ousted as Uefa president, the dominant clubs seized their opportunity. The solidarity tracking was discarded. As for how much the rest will get in redistribution post-2024, no assurances have been given by Uefa or the ESL.

The last analysis into solidarity payments by European Leagues, the body representing domestic leagues, showed that broadcast revenue has kept rising, by up to 70 per cent, while the solidarity payments to all those hundreds of clubs not participating in Uefa competition increased by just 20 per cent. In that cycle, Champions League qualifiers shared around €2 billion in revenue and Europa League clubs €660 million. Those on the outside got just €130 million.

Under the new projections for the post-2024 settlement, a club participating in the first stage alone of the new 36-team Swiss model Champions League format could earn as much as €150 million. In the group stages of the Europa League it would be €35 million. Even in the Europa Conference League it

would be €5 million. At every level, from the Premier League down to the League of Ireland, that could have a hugely distorting effect on European domestic leagues.

The riches available from Uefa competitions to a relatively small elite stands to create a two-tier system, or further increase the divide that already exist. The prospective jump in Europa League group-stage payments would transform that competition from Thursday-night irritation to something that would offer a club a serious domestic advantage. That is before the extra matchday ticketing income from those games is factored in.

Post-2024, as many as eight or nine Premier League clubs could be in European competition in any one season. The threat to create a two-tier league is serious and comes from the bottom up, too. Uefa wants a reduction in domestic top-flight leagues to 18 teams. It is already the case in the Bundesliga and will be soon in France with Ligue 1 having voted for a two-team reduction to start next year. Uefa, and Fifa, want the space in the calendar for one reason: more games outside the domestic orbit in Europe and beyond.

The biggest clubs – the European regulars – have the potential to become more powerful while those outside Uefa competitions are relatively much poorer, and depleted in number. Lest we need reminding, Bayern Munich are playing for their 11th consecutive Bundesliga title this season and earn €274 million more annually in revenue than their nearest domestic challenger. In countries such as Latvia, where there is no domestic broadcast deal, even the €5 million earned from a Europa Conference league group-stage place would skew the domestic league in favour of a one-team dynasty. That is, unless Uefa is prepared to advance a serious solidarity programme.

The creation of an even-more unbeatable elite does not sound like a vision of the future that most football fans would endorse. Once again the Premier League's biggest clubs seem on a track to destroy the league's unique selling point in favour of expanded European competition and ultimately the consolidation of its advantage over European rivals.

It was the same act of self-harm that led the current so-called big six into the ESL. A belief that what matters is pursuing this mythical, untapped reservoir of broadcast money that is theirs for supporting an expanded, endless European competition – and it comes at the expense of everything