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**The politics of ConIFA: organising and managing international football events for unrecognised countries**

## **Abstract**

### **Rationale: (subheading altered)**

This paper examines the development, politics and impact of the Confederation of Independent Football Associations (ConIFA), which organises alternative 'international' competitions for 'countries' not recognised by football's established governing bodies.

### **Approach: (subheading altered)**

Three case studies are focused upon here: the 2016 World Football Cup held in Abkhazia, the 2017 European Football Cup hosted by Northern Cyprus and the 2018 World Football Cup staged in England. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at each event with senior ConIFA personnel, competing team staff and players as well as supporters, journalists, filmmakers and photographers covering the various competitions.

### **Findings:**

The paper reveals important logistical, managerial, political and security reflections and concerns relating to the respective tournaments. It also critiques the challenges facing ConIFA in hosting such events, often in fractured and disputed locations.

### **Practical implications:**

The work offers important findings pertaining to the politics, role and impact of ConIFA. These are to be shared with the organisation and its members in order to shape subsequent practice.

### **Research contribution:**

Focusing on a significantly under researched strand of sport event scholarship, and with unique access to high ranking personnel, the work examines and critiques the politics and impact of three football tournaments and the role of ConIFA in wider mega event contexts.

### **Abstract (if not subheadings are not required):**

This paper examines the development, politics and impact of the Confederation of Independent Football Associations (ConIFA), which organises alternative 'international' competitions for 'countries' not recognised by football's established governing bodies. Three case studies are focused upon here: the 2016 World Football Cup held in Abkhazia, the 2017 European Football Cup hosted by Northern Cyprus and the 2018 World Football Cup staged in England. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at each event with senior ConIFA personnel, competing team staff and players as well as supporters, journalists, filmmakers and photographers covering the various competitions. The paper reveals important logistical, managerial, political and security reflections and concerns relating to the respective tournaments. It also critiques the challenges facing ConIFA in hosting such events, often in fractured and disputed locations. The work offers important findings pertaining to the politics, role and impact of ConIFA. These are to be shared with the organisation and its members in order to shape subsequent practice. Focusing on a significantly under researched strand of sport event scholarship, and with unique access to high ranking personnel, the work examines

and critiques the politics and impact of three football tournaments and the role of ConIFA in wider mega event contexts.

## Introduction

Football is often heralded as the most popular sport in the world, from both a spectator and participation perspective. The engagement from supporters across different contexts can adopt performative forms, with the collective creation of atmospheres and fan cultures sometimes blurring the lines between consumption and production. The organisation of football teams within clubs or representative national sides competing in the structured formation of regular domestic and international league and cup competitions has helped develop professional players and provide supporters with a focus for cultural identity and expression (Rookwood & Hughson, 2017). As a quadrennial spectacle the FIFA World Cup is often considered the ultimate football competition to win and watch (Penfold, 2019).

Some of the globe's elite sporting tournaments that demonstrate mass popularity are typically framed as 'mega events', with such status usually bestowed as a reflection of the significant scale, dramatic character, periodicity and international prominence of these widely identifiable and memorable public cultural competitions (Roche, 2003). International football tournaments such as the FIFA World Cup – and the various continental events organised within its affiliated confederations – have come to dominate global sporting attention. Such competitions can also demonstrate the correlation between politics and sport. For countries engaged in international disputes or even armed conflicts with one another, football can become a prelude to war, or a diversion from or extension of the existing state of diplomatic relations. For instance, the 1970 World Cup qualifier between El Salvador and Honduras helped exacerbate pre-existing tensions between the countries leading to the so-called 'Football War' (Mislán & Streich, 2019). More recently, the 2019 Asian Cup match between Saudi Arabia and eventual champions Qatar in UAE was heralded as the 'Blockade Derby', reflecting the Gulf region's diplomatic crisis in which Qatar has been at the centre since June 2017 (Duerden, 2019).

Beyond such examples, the very involvement of countries within international football tournaments might infer the political acceptance of such competing 'nations' as independent and sovereign at the state (or sporting) level; and yet there have been numerous cases of contestation and rejection in this respect across world football, as explored in the following section. In addition, for 'countries' not recognised by football's governing bodies, an alternative series of 'international' competitions have recently emerged, organised for its members by the Confederation of Independent Football Associations (ConIFA) since 2014. These tournaments have largely remained on the periphery of scholarly attention, partly due to the relative lack of global awareness and the diminutive scale of these recent 'minor' sporting events, and the difficulty of accessing some of the locations in which they have been staged. This paper proceeds by outlining key issues pertaining to the sovereignty and recognition of independent countries and the connected use of terminology, and the associated ramifications for sporting competition between countries. In doing so it offers some political context to and rationale for the establishment and work of ConIFA. It also examines the development and politics of the organisation and the management of its

competitions. This work is focused on and structured around short case studies on three consecutive events organised by ConIFA: the 2016 World Football Cup held in Abkhazia, the 2017 European Football Cup hosted by Northern Cyprus and the 2018 World Football Cup staged in England.

### **The sovereignty and recognition of 'independent countries'**

As with language, culture is not static but fluid and subject to change relative to variance in conditions and experiences, whereas the stability and status of individual countries is often perceived to adopt greater permanence (Duff, 2019). However, various territories across the globe have been exposed to changes in power structures, recognition and control, through processes including invasion, occupation and colonisation. India for instance has been invaded over 200 times since 321 BC (McLeod, 2015). Laycock (2012) identifies only 22 modern day countries that have never been subject to British invasion. Many countries have changed names, allegiances and boundaries, often reflecting historical, ideological, cultural and/or economic contests for power and sovereignty. Manifestations of such developments can be highlighted in the context of international sport. For instance, the final of the first European Nations Cup was contested in 1960 between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, who are now 21 different independent countries (22 if Kosovo is included in that list). On an individual level, Belgrade-born Novak Djokovic has represented three widely recognised countries in international tennis tournaments without naturalisation, namely Yugoslavia, Serbia and Montenegro, and Serbia.

In 1900 the world was divided into 77 countries according to Pederson (2015). However, a search for a current list highlights certain complexities and reveals various related queries, some of which are presented here as connected parts to a significant question: What is a nation, how does the term appropriately relate to other synonyms often employed interchangeably, who decides on the status of a given nation and what happens when there is disagreement, and what role does sport (and especially football) play in this respect? **Before addressing these questions, it is important to reference the seminal work of Anderson on the subject of 'imagined communities'. First published in 1983, Anderson offers some important observations about the concept and construct of nations, which has remained resonant within and beyond scholarly investigations of nationalism in the decades since. He argues "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 2006, p. 6), whilst suggesting that "communities are to be distinguished by... the style in which they are imagined" (ibid). The nature and identity of nations often includes imagined, constructed, accepted and contested ideas about community, commonality and difference (Jenkins, 2014).**

In relation to terminology, 'nation', 'country' and 'state' are often used interchangeably. Although some view similarities between the latter two terms, the former can offer a different invocation. An 'independent State' can be seen as an area recognised as sovereign with internationally accepted borders and its own government, whereas 'state' (often without a capital) is usually used as a description of a smaller division of a country. Etymologically of Latin derivation (*nationem*), and influenced by the old French term *nacion*, the English word

'nation' has adopted different meanings over time (Chambers Dictionary of Etymology, 2005). In a broad sense it can refer to an aggregation of persons who share characteristics such as language, institutions, culture and religion. As Anderson (2006) has argued, such groups are typically larger than single communities or tribes and often encompass an entire country. Some countries are comprised of several nations, and not all nations possess recognisable statehood. In a narrower sense however, the term can be used to describe a political society characterised by government, organised community, defined territory and sovereignty. Importantly, the interchangeable use of such terms occurs at the state and sporting level, and within academic analysis (Habermas, 1996). In ConIFA contexts, a heightened consciousness of the politics of terminology has seen various attempts at clarification and differentiation. For instance, as manager of Matabeleland (technically comprised from a region of western Zimbabwe) at the 2018 ConIFA World Football Cup, Walley reflects: "Yes, they aren't a national team, but I would be an international football manager, pitting my wits against stateless nations and countries" (2018, p. 14).

The status, recognition and acceptance of a given nation state is often agreed on an individual basis, in that each country can determine whether or not to recognise a given entity as sovereign and independent, and subsequently build or avoid diplomatic relations. This practice can be shaped by organisations which bind member countries. Since its establishment in 1945, the United Nations (UN) has been the most prominent global example. Rising from an initial 50 affiliates, there are currently 193 members, although not every nation it is comprised of recognises the legitimacy of all other members. In some contexts, an entity's involvement in globally popular sports including football has been manipulated to help build its case for UN membership. As the global governing body of the game, FIFA currently have 211 affiliated associations, whereas the Olympic equivalent, the IOC, has 206 National Olympic Committees (NOCs). Membership to all three organisations does not always follow the same arrangement, for political, historical and/or sporting reasons, amongst others. As a key example, England are affiliated to FIFA, Great Britain is an NOC within the Olympic Movement and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a member of the UN.

Some countries have used involvement in 'international' sport during key periods to promote the recognition and legitimacy of their status as a nation state. Significant examples can be seen in relation to the dissolution of Yugoslavia. For instance, in preparing for a referendum and declaration of independence from May 1991, Croatia arranged an 'international' football match against USA in October 1990. This exhibition game against the 1994 World Cup hosts coincided with the American team's European tour, and it was viewed as a symbolically important political endorsement of the legitimacy of Croatia as an independent nation state (Grandits & Leutloff, 2018). FIFA and UN membership followed in 1992, with the third-place finish in the 1998 World Cup helping solidify an 'international community' view of Croatia as a dominant football nation, representative of a newly sovereign independent state (Tregoures, 2018). However, such examples typically reveal the plight of recognised countries and/or member associations. In contrast, relatively little is known about many de-facto nations and sports-isolated territories whose legitimacy as sovereign states is less established, and who may therefore have been denied access to compete in international sporting events. This work focuses on some of ConIFA's first competitions, as a confederation offering such entities the platform for 'international' experience and global exposure.

## Research methods and analysis

Data were collected at three ConIFA tournaments: the 2016 World Football Cup staged in Abkhazia, the 2017 European Football Cup held in Northern Cyprus and the 2018 World Football Cup hosted in England, hereon referred to as CWFC2016, CEFC2017 and CWFC2018 respectively. Having secured media accreditation, 42 semi-structured interviews were carried out with various personnel in attendance across the three events, including two subsequent interviews undertaken in January 2019. In conducting independent scholarly investigations of mega event organisers, researchers can experience difficulties in accessing senior staff and pursuing candid responses to questions. Even Sugden and Tomlinson's (2016) seminal investigative critical analysis of FIFA encountered such obstacles. However, one of the benefits of conducting research on less profile, 'minor' contexts is the relative ease of access to and the openness of respondents. In addition, I made a documentary on CWFC2016 and its broader political context, which both the ConIFA president and General Secretary subsequently saw, liked and shared on social media ([link to film, post peer review](#)). This facilitated greater access at the two events that followed. The film therefore, became the gatekeeper into the organisation and culture of ConIFA.

15 interviews were conducted in Abkhazia/Georgia, but only with those who categorised themselves as journalists, filmmakers, photographers or supporters – a consequence of the aforementioned accessibility challenges. Each participant had a professed interest in football, de-facto nations and sports-isolated territories. 14 interviews were then undertaken in Northern Cyprus, with respondents including the ConIFA president, General Secretary, Executive Committee members, Commercial Director and presidents of ConIFA Asia and Africa, as well as players and the manager of the host team. 11 interviews were carried out at CWFC2018 including team managers, players and supporters and some of the aforementioned personnel for a second time. I made short films on both the Tibetan ([link 2](#)) and Matabeleland ([link 3](#)) teams at CWFC2018 which enabled access to team buses, hotels and changing rooms during the event, and facilitated rapport with interviewees.

37 of the 40 interviewees were male, partly in reflection of the approximate demographic characteristics at men's ConIFA tournaments. All interviews were conducted in English and included participants from 13 nationalities – according to their respective identification. No respondents are named here, with extracts presented instead according to demographic (such as 'Executive 1'). Some of the spectators interviewed were not travelling with or fans of a specific team, but were more interested in ConIFA events and members generally. Such respondents were framed as 'Supporters'. Interviews were analysed and coded relative to the recurrence of particular themes (Morse, 2015), which are presented in the following four sections. After examining the philosophy and development of ConIFA, the remaining findings are organised around the respective events, [offering insight into key political, logistical, security and managerial challenges \(CWFC2016\)](#), [the celebration of culture \(CEFC2017\)](#) and [the management and expansion of ConIFA events \(CWFC2018\)](#). Published work is also examined here, but given the scarcity of academic research on ConIFA events and the timeframe of the tournaments, this is limited in some cases.

## The development, philosophy and role of ConIFA

ConIFA were formed in June 2013, but the creation of the confederation was influenced by the Non-FIFA Board (NFB) according to one interviewee: “The NF Board, were really the precursor organisation to ConIFA. You’ll find ConIFA are a much more professional outfit because of the experiences and failures of the NF Board” (Journalist 1). The NFB operated from 2003-2013 with up to 28 members from Europe, Asia and Africa. It organised football events for nations, dependencies, unrecognised states, minorities, stateless peoples, regions and micro-nations not affiliated to FIFA. Its dissolution led the way for the establishment of ConIFA, who currently have 52 member organisations across five continents, none of whom “meet the threshold of statehood required for membership in bodies like FIFA” (Keating, 2018, p. 1). One interviewee stated: “We deliberately don’t refer to them as ‘nations’ or ‘countries’ but as ‘members’, because even the language we use can be seen as a political statement” (Executive 1). Some teams were involved in both confederations, but as one interviewee argued: “The organisation is much better now with ConIFA. We operate as a proper governing body” (Executive 4). A variety of minor competitions have been organised, and some of the more prestigious events have had qualification matches. As one respondent stated however: “There are two main biannual tournaments on alternate years – a World and European competition – so, one major annual event each June, as the highlight of the ConIFA calendar” (Journalist 1). Prior to the start of this research the first CWFC was hosted by Sápmi in Sweden in 2014 and the first CEFC was organised by Székely Land in Hungary in 2015. Table 1 and Figure 1 below show key details and locations from each ConIFA event (2015-2019).

Table 1: Details of ConIFA tournaments

Year	Competition	Host	Location	Teams	Winner
2014	ConIFA WFC	Sápmi	Sweden	12	County of Nice
2015	ConIFA EFC	Székely Land	Hungary	6	Padania
2016	ConIFA WFC	Abkhazia	Abkhazia/Georgia	12	Abkhazia
2017	ConIFA EFC	Northern Cyprus	(Northern) Cyprus	8	Padania
2018	ConIFA WFC	Barawa	England (London)	16	Kárpátalja
2019	ConIFA EFC	Artsakh	Artsakh/Armenia	8	N.A.





Figure 1: A map of ConIFA football tournaments (2014-2019)

The ConIFA philosophy is a key element of the organisation. Various respondents, including both those connected to and independent from ConIFA, made reference to the nature and importance of this philosophical underpinning. For instance: “It’s not just that we organise football tournaments. We are like a family. People from very different backgrounds, but united by the love of football. There is a kind of shared ethos at ConIFA” (Executive 2). It was described as an “equitable organisation” (Executive 3), with placement rounds used in tournaments to ensure teams play a similar number of games. Similarly, Walley refers to ConIFA’s “unique brotherhood” (2018, p. 259) and its “friendly and open” nature, facilitating member involvement in international football irrespective of “how right or wrong others perceive their existence to be” (p. 8). The NFB professed to be “apolitical and nondenominational” (Menary, 2007, p. 26). ConIFA has similar philosophical aims, extended to include building bridges between “people, nations, minorities and isolated regions all over the world through friendship, culture and the joy of playing football” (Rookwood, 2018: no page). Again however, the involvement of entities within such competition formats might infer the political acceptance of such competing ‘teams’ as representative of independent and sovereign bodies at the state or at least sporting level.

ConIFA profess to ‘gather’ over 166m people from its various member entities. It also claims to serves as: “A global acting non-profit organization that supports representatives of international football teams from nations, de-facto nations, regions, minority peoples and

sports isolated territories... CONIFA works for the development of affiliated members and is committed to fair play and the eradication of racism” (ibid). One participant offered the following reflection on these aims: “Most organisations have lofty mission statements that perhaps represent what they aim to stand for, more so than what they actually achieve necessarily. The Olympic Movement claim to represent world peace, but obviously not every Olympic Games has been associated with peace” (Supporter 2). Another argued: “Their [ConIFA’s] claim to be apolitical is maybe undermined a bit by them enabling teams that others reject in international football, allowing them to play this format of international football” (Supporter 1). A key question therefore concerning and connecting the philosophy and aims of ConIFA and its affiliate member entities, is whether it is intended or viewed as a springboard to eventual FIFA membership. Menary (2007) argues that the NFB was established as a compliment rather than rival of FIFA. When interviewed in North Cyprus he suggested that ConIFA have a similar ethos in this respect, but also argued that “involvement in ConIFA events can actually inhibit the process of gaining FIFA membership” (Journalist 1).

As a point of substantiation, Kosovo are a pertinent example. Despite being a member initially, Kosovo’s football authorities opted to ‘shun the NF Board’ (Menary, 2007: p. 121), as well as ConIFA. Instead, after declaring independence in 2008, FIFA/UEFA membership was pursued, both of which were controversially granted in May 2016 (Giulianotti, Collinson, Darnell & Howe, 2016). As Keating (2018) notes, Kosovo are recognised (as of August 2018) as an independent country by 114 UN member states (with Russia and Serbia notable absentees from the list), with football being utilised as a vehicle to garner international support and eventually gain recognised sovereignty and possibly UN membership. As one respondent argued however “ConIFA is too small and too much in the margins still, to have an impact on the state level, especially of major countries” (Filmmaker 1).

The role that ConIFA expressly intend to play however is non-political, as one ConIFA board member argued: “We are not here to make territories into countries... but to give opportunities to play football” (Executive 1). Some individual member entities have expressed similar sentiment. For instance, Matabeland manager Walley argues: “I am here to manage a football team, not a political movement” (2018, p. 107). However, operating with a membership that includes a wide variety of entities, including those representing politically disputed territories such as Kurdistan, Tibet, Somaliland, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Artsakh, emphasises the political nature of ConIFA. In its short lifespan to date the growth of the organisation in terms of membership, the scale of its events and related media exposure, together with some of the members and locations selected for competitions has in some cases – and however (in)advertently – highlighted rather than underplayed this politicisation, as the findings in the following sections illustrate. **The case studies reveal that some of the events that ConIFA organise and the locations selected to host them could be considered to be heavily politicised, even if the expressed intent at an organisational level is to remain non-political. Such intent could be viewed of in itself as a political position, as Nurhat (2017) notes in his work on football administrators and authorities and the politicisation of football identities.**

### **Abkhazia CFWC 2016: Key political, logistical, security and management challenges**

The nation state of Georgia holds a strategically important location in the Caucasus region at the crossroads of Western Asia and Eastern Europe. Having gained independence from the USSR in 1991, Georgia represents “an incredibly rich and uniquely complicated case for the analysis of modern civil wars” (Baev, 2018, p. 127), largely connected to two breakaway territories on the Russian frontier: South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Both are ConIFA members, with the latter hosting CWFC2016. In 1992-1993 an 18-month ethno-political conflict in South Ossetia was followed by a 13-month war in Abkhazia, both producing deaths and widespread displacement. Subsequent conflicts have occurred, notably the Russo-Georgian War in South Ossetia in 2008, which also involved Abkhazia (Rookwood, 2013). The UN considers both entities to be part of Georgia, despite being under Russian military occupation (Lanoszka, 2018). In practice they remain largely separate from Georgia, with respective claims of independence recognised by Russia and a small number of allies (Ter-Matevosyan & Currie, 2018).

**The precarious state of Abkhazia-Georgia relations complicates travel between territories and the management of ConIFA events.** In the build up to CWFC2016 Ellan Vannin (Isle of Man) withdrew following security advice from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the County of Nice subsequently pulled out (Rookwood, 2018). One interviewee stated: “Travelling to Abkhazia, it’s difficult to come from Georgia so the teams arrived from Russia, and some had problems getting Russian visas. Although, no problem then to enter Abkhazia. But it’s expensive and complicated” (Filmmaker 2). Unlike most international attendees I entered Abkhazia from Georgia, where one week earlier a Georgian civilian had been fatally shot six times by a border guard for allegedly attempting to cross the ‘administrative boundary line’ (Agenda.ge, 2016). Entering Abkhazia from Georgia is difficult for international visitors, but seemingly impossible for Georgians. One interviewee noted: “Logistically, Abkhazia is a real challenge. Travel, infrastructure, internet, communication, all very complicated” (Supporter 2). Another respondent commented on the substantial security presence: “Everywhere in Abkhazia there are soldiers and police” (Filmmaker 3).

CWFC2016 was staged in the Black Sea cities of Sukhumi and Gagra, both of which revealed “still-bombed out structures” (Keating, 2018, p. 34) with “walls strewn with bullets” (Journalist 3). The two stadiums had a combined capacity of 5,800, set in significant locations. As one respondent noted: “Gagra is a symbolic place, with a dark history” (Supporter 1). The stadium where that particular interview was conducted was the location of mass killings during the Georgia-Abkhazia War (Dale, 1997). In contrast, Sukhumi’s stadium was considered “an impressive, modern, purpose built ground that wouldn’t look out of place in Western Europe” (Supporter 4). **As well as the official stadiums, a Fan Zone was erected on a disused pier on Sukhumi’s promenade. Such spaces can prove integral to the management and experience of modern football tournaments, allowing fans to congregate in secure environments to watch matches.** The concept was initiated by the organisers of UEFA Euro 2004 in Portugal and has been adopted in most football mega event host cities from Germany’s 2006 FIFA World Cup onwards (Rookwood, 2019). In an interviewee that took place at the entrance to that Sukhumi Fan Zone, one respondent argued: “Fan parks usually have fans, screens showing football, stores, entertainment. This one has none of those things! But then, this is a new venture for Abkhazia” (Supporter 2).

Twelve teams competed in the tournament, split into four groups of three, with the top two in each group progressing to the quarterfinals. **Event management, engagement and expenditure are difficult to measure and access in this context: Attendance figures were not recorded although “the semi of Abkhazia and the final in Sukhumi had 11,000 and 7,000 respectively, both much more than the capacity” (Executive 7).** In addition: “The total costs for the hosts aren’t known, as they were managed by a local organisation committee and money went through this. Abkhazian media claimed it was approximately \$350,000, but that’s unconfirmed” (ibid). Another key issue which some consider “common to a lot of ConIFA events” was the “polarised level of quality” (Journalist 1). Another interviewee, who has watched football in 48 countries, argued: “the best players are probably National League [the fifth tier of English football] level” (Supporter 4). At the other end of the spectrum the Chagos Islands team were drawn from a diaspora community of 5,000 people, according to one interviewee, who was making a documentary on the team’s CWFC2016 campaign: “It’s so expensive to get here. So there are only 13 players... and the coach, a 50-year-old guy, was ready to play as well” (Filmmaker 1). The team lost all four group and placement matches, conceding 29 goals.

Abkhazia won the competition, beating Punjab in the final on penalties. The Abkhaz president declared the following day a national holiday, with 10,000 people celebrating in the streets of Sukhumi (Sharp, 2018). One interviewee noted: “It’s a huge deal for the Abkhazians. You can see what it means to the people. They see this as their country, their people... Having international visitors gives them status and a chance to welcome guests” (Supporter 3). Another respondent offered a frame of reference in this respect: “This event means the world to Abkhazia, but most Georgians are completely oblivious to it” (Journalist 2). **The lack of exposure of CWFC2016 was a persistent political challenge for ConIFA, according to Keating (2018). He argues that it lacked publicity and recognition globally, which was not aided by the state of Abkhazia-Georgia relations and the lack of international support for Abkhazia:** “As far as the United States and Europe was concerned, this event was being held in Georgia” (p. 2). **Managing CWFC2016 proved politically complicated and logistically challenging, subject to a variety of interpretations.** A Moscow-based journalist offered the following summation of its impact in Abkhazia: “Today they fight, not for independence maybe, but for being heard... And most important for them is to accommodate this feeling of the one nation... I want to believe that football can bring peace and can bring international understanding” (Journalist 4).

### **North Cyprus CEFC 2017: Politics and the celebration of culture on a divided island**

The island of Cyprus has been subject to Greek, Ottoman and British rule for most of the last millennium, but gained its independence from the latter in 1960. Ethnically, the island is populated primarily by Greeks and to a lesser extent Turks, with significant demographic changes since 1964 caused by the movement of people and influx of settlers (Ekenoğlu & Loizides, 2018). **Key political developments occurred from July 1974, when nationalist movements intent on annexing Cyprus to Greece were followed by a Turkish invasion, conflict and an eventual partition of the island, with the UN brokering a ceasefire agreement and overseeing the ongoing buffer zone between the Turkish north and Greek south.** Nicosia is the only divided capital in Europe and yet Cyprus is considered a single nation state by the

entire international community, except Turkey who are the only country to recognise the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (Adamides & Kontos, 2018). Despite movements for both reunification and official partition, peace talks and referendums have thus far failed to achieve either (Casaglia, 2019). Cyprus is a member of the UN and European Union as well as FIFA and UEFA, but Northern Cyprus (who are subject to a FIFA embargo) hosted CEFC2017 as a member of ConIFA, having previously competed in and won NFB events.

CEFC2017 was staged in four locations, the English names for which are Nicosia, Kyrenia, Famagusta and Morphou. As one board member noted: “By playing across the island, stretching from the West to the East coast, the tournament really feels like all of Northern Cyprus is involved” (Executive 5). Similarly: “Tournaments are often criticised for neglecting certain parts of the country. Only one of the 12 venues at the 2006 World Cup was in what was East Germany for instance. This one [CEFC2017] is spread out, which is good to see” (Supporter 8). Eight teams competed in two groups, with the top two in each group progressing to the semi finals. All the teams and officials stayed at the same all-inclusive five-star hotel, with accommodation, food and transport paid for by the hosts (Walley, 2018). It was viewed as an “equitable tournament” as a result (Executive 4), which served as a reminder of “how football used to be before it became... bloated and obsessed by its own fame” according to Walley (2018, p. 9). One of the Northern Cyprus players interviewed argued: “All staying in the same place means you see other teams and players. We have our cultural night too with traditional dances.... And if you have the same language sometimes you can talk. It’s part of the experience and culture of ConIFA” (Player 1).

The level of competition was considered “more even than Abkhazia [CWFC2016]” (Team manager 1). 11 of the 12 group games were decided by a margin of no more than two goals, the outlier being the host’s 8-0 victory over South Ossetia: “I doubt the South Ossetians have many opportunities to stay in resorts like this. They had a heavy night’s drinking before the game against Northern Cyprus. I know football can have a drinking culture, but it usually starts after a game!” (Photographer 2). Despite only conceding one goal before the final, Northern Cyprus lost to Padania in the final on penalties. Padania is a representative team from northern Italy, and one of the most successful teams in this form of football, as three-time VIVA World Cup champions (under the NFB) and reigning ConIFA European Football Cup champions. All teams had to pay their own travel expenses, but the total costs for the hosts, as with attendance figures across the 22 matches are “completely unknown, as they were managed by a local committee” (Executive 7).

In revealing a central issue connected to the management of the event, the same interviewee also admitted “it would have been good if more local people had attended” (ibid). The tournament organiser also commented on the local engagement: “One of the biggest challenges is getting people to watch the matches. All the organisation is here, but maybe communication and support could be better” (Event manager 1). Asked if Turkish Cypriots feel represented by the team, he argued: “Yes, the people know this is their team, but maybe they think the level is not that high. If Galatasaray or Fenerbache [Turkish clubs] came from Istanbul to play here, stadiums would be full” (ibid). Although there is no space here to examine the Greek response to the tournament, it is pertinent that no major Greek Cypriot media outlet covered or mentioned the competition. The event organisers adopted the slogan ‘Freedom to play football’, which featured on all the official CEFC2017 logos. Several



interviewees were asked what that inferred freedom from. The responses included: “From the politics maybe. From FIFA not letting us play other countries” (Player 2); “Just freedom to play football against other countries, and show our level, and our culture as Turkish Cypriots” (Team manager 1).

### **London CFWC 2018: The evolution of ConIFA?**

CWFC2018 represented a shift in the planning, operation and management of ConIFA events. One board member stated: “After some challenges in Abkhazia and North Cyprus we wanted to take ConIFA to a global place, and where is more global than London, the home of football?” (Executive 6). London is the most populous city in Western Europe, a diverse centre of commerce, industry and culture (Wessendorf, 2019). It has more professional football clubs than any other city on earth, with 11 clubs in England’s top four divisions and a further 30 clubs competing in tiers 5-8 (as of the 2018-19 season). After consultation with various clubs (see Walley, 2018), 10 non-league venues were selected across London. The unprecedented scale of the event was also outlined by the number of participants: 16 teams divided into four groups, with the top two in each progressing to the quarterfinals. Northern Cyprus were beaten in the final again, this time by Kárpátalja, who represent the Hungarian minority in western Ukraine. A ConIFA board member argued that: “hosting in one of our member nations has always the highest priority. That wasn’t feasible in 2018” (Executive 7). The tournament was technically staged by Barawa (an area of Somalia, with the Barawa team representing the diaspora in England). Under ConIFA’s event management guidelines, the host member heads the organising committee, and the event does not have to be held in the host’s territory (ConIFA, 2018).

The tournament secured ConIFA’s first major lucrative sponsorship deal, with Paddy Power investing a figure “rumoured to be £150,000” (Supporter 8). Expenditure was monitored by ConIFA, which the board member who oversaw the overall budget declared to be “around £350,000-£400,000” (Executive 7). Over 400 journalists were accredited from almost every major international media outlet, ConIFA’s Twitter feed recorded over 6 million impressions and there were 250,000 views of the 41 live-streamed matches (ConIFA, 2018). Although such figures from previous events are not available as a frame of reference, Keating (2018) argues that CWFC2016 performed poorly in commercial terms. The analysis undertaken to produce these statistics for CWFC2018 in itself reflects a development within ConIFA. An interviewee in London stated: “by any metric this [CWFC2018] is by far the biggest tournament ConIFA has ever organised with the greatest impact” (Executive 4). A Google search for ‘ConIFA World Football Cup 2018’ returned 159,000 results at the time of writing, 8.5 per cent more than the equivalent for CWFC2016 and CEFC2017 combined.

CWFC2018 was considered “interesting and exotic... a different kind of world cup with teams most people have never heard of” (Journalist 5). The scheduling of the event was also thought to have contributed to its impact, ending five days before the commencement of the FIFA World Cup in Russia: “Fans gearing up for Russia, already missing their football, this [CWFC2018] fills a gap between the Champions League final and the World Cup” (Supporter 8). It also had involvement from some high profile personnel, appealing to a wider audience, including “football romantics” (Rookwood, 2018). Matabeleland featured the 60-year-old

former Liverpool goalkeeper and Zimbabwe international Bruce Grobbelaar, who was also instrumental in facilitating and securing funds, visas and equipment for the players (Walley, 2018).

Various interviewees were asked what else contributed to the enhanced appeal of CWFC2018. One argued: “I was in Abkhazia and North Cyprus, but this [CWFC2018] is more recognisable as a football event that Westerners might go to. Less of an adventure, but better organised. More merchandise, more supporters, more interest” (ConIFA supporter). The tournament also saw ConIFA encounter some unexpected challenges. **There were some event management and governance issues, most notably the mid-competition withdrawal of Eilan Vannin in a dispute over an unregistered player (Rookwood, 2018).** Matabeleland’s manager discusses risks of crowd disturbances during a group game against Székely Land, as “smoke spills onto the pitch from the terrace” courtesy of the “menacing army... of Székely Land’s band of rough-looking black T-shirt wearing ultras” (Walley, 2018, p. 237). However, there were no reported instances of fan disorder or violence at CWFC2018: “Every stadium has their own security, all used to fans so security was not a problem” (Executive 3).

During CWFC2018 it was unclear whether such a model would be adopted again for future ConIFA events. In a post-CWFC2018 interview one board member stated: “London was amazing to get even more in front of a global audience and the media. We are now taking this raised profile and exposure with us to put the spotlight back on two of our member nations” (Executive 7). CEFC2019 takes place in Artsakh (also known as Nagorno-Karabakh) a fractious de facto independent country in the South Caucasus populated primarily by Armenians yet internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan (Rookwood, 2012). CWFC2020 is set to be hosted in and by Somaliland, another disputed entity, widely recognised as a part of Somalia: “We are extremely excited and happy to have our first major tournament outside of Europe in 2020” (Executive 7). FIFA’s policy of rotating World Cups across continents introduced in 2000 and abandoned in 2018 was framed as a means of taking the game to “new frontiers” (FIFA.com, 2018). Similarly, ConIFA’s plans for expansion also include hosting women’s events, disability football and tournaments across the world, extending the confederation’s membership and evolution in the process.

## Conclusion

“ConIFA aims to build bridges between people, where others have built walls. We aim to give a voice to the voiceless and unheard. We want to make international football and grassroots support a natural fit – not a contradiction” (Walley, 2018, p. 262).

**The growing membership, footprint and impact of ConIFA since its inception reflects an interest in the movement as an alternative form of ‘international’ football for members and personnel otherwise denied access to such competitive formats. On a macro level the confederation and its events can be subject to varying political interpretations.** Keating claims that “many of the participants hope that their membership in ConIFA is only temporary, a weigh station on their path to eventual membership in FIFA” (2018, p. 3). Having interviewed representatives from half of ConIFA’s members however, few openly consider that a realistic objective. Where such ambition exists it may indeed be more in hope than expectation. As

Walley argues, the majority of ConIFA members merely seem “grateful for being a part of all this” (2018, p. 259).

For some entities, policies of avoidance or retraction have led to FIFA membership, as the examples of Kosovo and Gibraltar testify. Although ConIFA cannot match the financial support of more prosperous organisations – such as through the FIFA Goal Programme (Menary, 2007), it has offered opportunities to those FIFA refuses membership. The Polynesian micro-nation state of Tuvalu, a member of the UN but not FIFA (despite holding associate membership of the Oceania Football Confederation), participated in CWFC2018. **In political terms the language used to describe nations, states and countries can shape perceptions of their territories as legitimately sovereign and recognisably independent, or otherwise. ConIFA have illuminated the plight of numerous entities, enabling cultures to be showcased and networks to be extended. Impact can also occur as resistance rather than support. Some ConIFA events and contests will inevitably cause controversy, reflecting the oppositional nature of political identities and conflicting claims to territories. Georgians are likely to oppose a representative Abkhazian football team, just as Greek Cypriots are with Northern Cyprus. Events that are staged within and as representative of such entities are likely to be subject to political disputes in some cases, producing potential challenges for event managers and organisers connected to issues such as sport governance, financial support, the safety of participants and the accessibility of the events.**

ConIFA competitions do not yet qualify for the status of ‘mega events’, according to the criteria outlined by scholars from Roche (2003) to Rookwood (2019). Through the unprecedented access to three diverse ‘minor’ tournaments however, this research clearly demonstrates that the ConIFA movement is widely perceived to have considerable impact on a micro level, empowering people and transforming communities, creating unity instead of division in some cases (Wally, 2018). **There are some important insights here for those seeking to organise such collaborative events and engagements across sport and other spheres of culture and commerce, in respect to both political challenges and event management concerns. In some cases, the very involvement of disputed territories will by the nature of such disputes produce politically motivated contestations. Hosting events in ‘risky’ locations is also likely to present organisers with challenges, relating to transportation, logistics, media representation, sponsorship and funding. A future expansion of ConIFA could yield further opportunities, but could also lead to additional disputes and event management and governance challenges. It is important to work with local partners and agencies to facilitate event operations, whilst developing context-specific strategies to minimise potential problems.** However, enabling members to host subsequent ConIFA events could also see enhanced risk, logistical and security concerns, perhaps mirroring and thereby highlighting the fractious and volatile existence of members in certain territories. The Guardian’s (2016) film on Kurdistan’s CWFC2016 ‘World Cup rebels’ offers a pertinent example.

In an accusation often directed at FIFA and the IOC, there is also a Eurocentricity apparent in ConIFA, with more than half its members and Board based in Europe. The scheduling of competitions during gaps in the European football calendar intended to increase and focus interest has become common elsewhere. Moving the African Cup of Nations tournament to the summer from 2019 is likely to reflect broadcasting and commercial revenue targets as well as minimising the disruption to European leagues. For ConIFA, increases in match



attendances could help organisers finance events, although such strategies could also incur crowd management challenges if fan disorder and hooliganism become apparent, particularly regarding teams representing political identities and 'nations' in which participatory and violent forms of fandom are commonplace. With a growing membership and tournaments held annually, opportunities for unrecognised countries to compete in 'international' football are likely to continue.

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