

# An intercontinental expansion of European club competitions: A new reality? The case of Dubai and EuroLeague

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## ABSTRACT

Euroleague is the second-best basketball league worldwide. To grow the competition, Euroleague plans to integrate a team from Dubai. The aim of this study was to meaningfully contribute to the discussion about the feasibility of this idea. Through a case study, using an exhaustive analysis of primary and secondary sources, we analyzed the peculiar nature of Euroleague, the consequences of this expansion on European basketball and the vision of Gulf countries governments regarding sport investments. We found that Dubai fits partially the conditions for Euroleague membership. Theoretically, Euroleague could become a paradigm-changing organization. Practically, it could attract interest from leagues due to this idea. However, it could affect interdependencies with other stakeholders and attract criticism due to the human rights record in Emirates. This underscores the importance of stakeholder engagement in this initiative to create lasting social change in Dubai, promoting sport as a positive force.

## KEYWORDS

Euroleague; European Basketball; League Expansion; Gulf Countries; Sport Diplomacy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, basketball has become a very popular global sport, with 212 National Basketball Federations and more than 450 million fans and players worldwide (FIBA, 2024). Popularity of leagues and players is essential to understand this process, with the American National Basketball Association (NBA) league being at the top of global basketball's pyramid due to its powerful branding and cultural dominance, while European basketball has Euroleague as its top league. Euroleague, with the presence of the best European teams, posts the fifth-highest attendance

of any professional indoor league globally, the highest outside the United States (Di Mattia & Krumer, 2023).

Since its inception in year 2000, Euroleague wants to run the top European club competition in an effective and lucrative way. With an average attendance of 8.771 spectators (Euroleague Basketball, 2021), all of its matches available through its OTT (Euroleague Basketball, 2024a) and a joint venture agreement with IMG Agency worth 630 million euros for a decade until 2026 (Buraimo et al., 2023), there is no doubt about the growth of this competition (Garza Segovia, 2023). Moreover, the quality of the teams and players has resulted in Euroleague being considered by experts, players and fans as the second-best basketball competition globally, only after the NBA (Karamürsel, 2023).

However, Euroleague suffers a series of problems, like its ongoing conflict with the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) regarding the governance of European basketball (Buraimo et al., 2023; Cetin & Tribou, 2017). Another difficulty includes a lower competitive balance in comparison with competitions like basketball's American NBA or football's UEFA Champions League (Karamürsel, 2023). A lack of rational and sustainable economic model with many teams dependent on rich benefactors to survive is a major concern (Karamürsel, 2017a). The internal disagreements about the competition's governance between member clubs (Karamürsel, 2022, 2023) are also of note. As it can be seen, Euroleague's reality is not without its challenges.

In recent decades, the quest for new markets has become a noticeable development in professional basketball leagues (Doppler-Speranza & Gasparini, 2022). As a result, a possible Euroleague expansion has been recently floated to improve its appeal, marketability and revenue streams (Karamürsel, 2023). An idea gaining traction is the possibility of accepting a new club from a big city where currently no club participates, like London, Paris or Dubai. The objective would be to open up the Euroleague towards powerful markets like the UK, France or United Arab Emirates (UAE) to benefit from the basketball's untapped potential there (Karamürsel, 2023).

Among the expansion alternatives, it is Dubai in UAE that has attracted most headlines (Mundo Deportivo, 2024). The first meeting between Euroleague and Dubai investors took place in October 2022 (Euroleague Basketball, 2022), and Euroleague has kept a low profile about any further development ever since. According to the media, a potential Euroleague-Dubai cooperation could range from the entrance of a Dubai club in Euroleague, commercial partnerships with UAE sponsors or hosting Euroleague's Final Four in Dubai (Eurohoops, 2022). After a series of discussions,

Euroleague shareholder clubs met in November 2023 and reportedly voted almost unanimously to invite Dubai to participate with a club in the Euroleague in the future (Eurohoops, 2023a). However, as of now there is no official set date for Dubai's entrance in the competition.

Considering the previous situation, a process of a pan-European competition expansion like the Euroleague into the Middle East represents an interesting object of study for various reasons. First of all, geographically, as there are no additional clubs from non-European countries participating in European competitions since the integration of Kazakhstan in UEFA in 2002 (Katrak, 2018). Accordingly, cultural and organizational challenges lead us to ask if Euroleague is prepared for an expansion into a region where professional leagues and clubs are not as developed as in Europe (Schreyer & Singleton, 2023). In this sense, interest in basketball is recent in UAE, as shown by Abu Dhabi hosting NBA games from 2022 and the FIBA 3x3 World Tour (Mosly, 2022).

From another angle, this expansion could fit into a bigger picture of increasing involvement of Gulf countries in "sports diplomacy" to increase their global influence (Carosella, 2022). Hence, some critics label it as "sportwashing" or the tactic used by authoritarian nation states to get legitimacy through sport associations (Kearns et al., 2023). Moreover, this expansion could affect critical interdependencies of Euroleague with stakeholders like FIBA or national leagues, among others. In this regard, the distorting effects that external investments like "sugar daddies" or rich benefactors from Russia and the Middle East have in European sports have been discussed (Kelkar, 2021), or even the growth of rival competitions like the Royal Saudi League of football that want to attain a global status by huge investments in top players (Mutz, 2024).

It is precisely at this point that we find a significant research gap. There has been no literature about the possibility of expanding European competitions to other continents and its possible consequences. Hence, our main goal would be to meaningfully contribute to the discussion about the feasibility of a possible Euroleague expansion to Dubai considering its different angles and consequences with respect to stakeholders. The study represents a theoretical advance for analyzing the feasibility of a groundbreaking idea in Europe like a competition expansion that is usual in American leagues like NBA (Mendizabal, 2020). In practical terms, it helps sport practitioners identifying challenges and opportunities associated with this decision, representing a benchmark for leagues like UEFA Champions League that could see themselves in a similar future position.

Hence, the article will be structured as follows. Firstly, we will focus on the particular and distinctive characteristics of the Euroleague as a private league independent from national

federations. This exploratory analysis is followed by an exhaustive examination of the European club competitions and the status of Euroleague in it, as well as the consideration of Euroleague clubs' financial position and ownership models. Subsequently, we indicate the possible consequences of an expansion by reflecting on the current governance model followed by Euroleague. Afterwards, we analyze the UAE and Dubai societies and their governments' vision towards sport investments, at a time when Middle East countries try to gain a foothold in sports through investments in clubs, sponsorships and player transfers. Furthermore, we examine if Dubai fits in principle with the conditions set down by Euroleague to obtain a long-term participation in the competition. We finish the article with a conclusion section.

## **2. METHODS**

This paper relied on a qualitative research methodology. A qualitative methodology is a research strategy whose purpose is to explore and uncover meaning for data, aiming for an in-depth analysis of a phenomena (Schäfer & Vögele, 2021). More precisely, a case study of an organization like the Euroleague has been adopted in this research. According to Gerring (2004), a case study is defined as "intensive study of a single unit with an aim to generalize across a larger set of units" (Gerring, 2004, p. 342). The case should be a complex functioning unit, investigated in its natural context with a multitude of methods and be contemporary (Johansson, 2007). The main challenge has been both the scarce literature about Euroleague and European basketball governance as well as the lack of transparency of Euroleague about the expansion process.

With the objective of conducting a descriptive analysis of the governance of European basketball and the potential for expansion into Dubai, a combination of both primary and secondary sources was used. Firstly, primary sources such as the Euroleague Bylaws for the 2023–2024 season were analyzed, as they provide mandatory regulations for all Euroleague clubs. Additionally, information from Euroleague Basketball's official website was reviewed to supplement this analysis. (<https://www.euroleaguebasketball.net>). Moreover, secondary sources like reports by Karamürsel (2017a, 2017b, 2022, 2023) describe in detail many critical aspects like the long-running conflict between Euroleague and FIBA, the loss-making nature of the majority of European elite basketball clubs, as well as the challenges posed by Euroleague's status as a league blending characteristics of the European and American sports models.

In addition, qualitative methodology has also been necessary to analyze the UAE and Dubai's sport strategy to understand their motifs behind the sports-related investments. As a result, we have

analyzed primary sources like official governmental documents called “We the UAE 2031” and “UAE Vision 2021” outlining the vision for the UAE by their governments (United Arab Emirates, 2010, 2022). We have combined this analysis with secondary sources like academic articles that discuss the use of sport as a diplomatic tool by Gulf Countries like UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia to improve their public image around the world (Fruh et al., 2023). By utilizing a case study using official and scholar documents as a data collection method, we have gained an in-depth knowledge of UAE and Dubai’s sporting diplomacy as a country’s foreign policy tool.

Considering the lack of antecedents about an expansion of European club competitions to the Middle East, the study follows an inductive approach, as we will discover more knowledge and information throughout the research. Moreover, due to the importance of theoretical analysis, then the quality of documents represents an essential requirement for the research to be truthful and reliable (Søyland, 2020). By following Scott’s (2014) criteria, the documents employed can be considered as credible, genuine and from truthful sources. The documents are clear and comprehensible (Søyland, 2020). However, it is vital to be aware of the biases that the different documents might present. In this regard, we have to assume that the official documents from UAE and Dubai will not highlight any controversial aspect regarding their soft power motives which might put their strategy in jeopardy. Therefore, we have followed a prudent approach in this document analysis.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. Case Study Analysis 1: EuroLeague and European Basketball Governance

##### 3.1.1. *Euroleague: A breakaway league with a turbulent start*

As for the European basketball landscape, it constitutes a hybrid ecosystem where competitions with different governance and sporting structures cohabit, albeit not very smoothly. Nowadays, European competitions are at the center of a major conflict between the International Basketball Federation’s (FIBA) subsidiary for Europe (FIBA Europe), and the Euroleague, which is a private company of Spanish rights created in 2000 to develop more attractive competitions for the media and the sponsors (Cetin & Tribou, 2017; Mendizabal, 2020). FIBA and FIBA Europe have as a responsibility to organize national team competitions. Meanwhile, Euroleague Basketball is a private company, owned and administered by some of the most renowned European clubs to commercialize the league, play more matches and have more marketing opportunities (Garza Segovia, 2023).

Ever since its inception in 1958, FIBA Europe organized the main European championship for top basketball clubs, up until the summer of 2000, when top clubs broke away from FIBA Europe and decided to organize its own private European championship called the Euroleague as a new private league. The objective of these top clubs was to have more power in the decision-making of the competitions, ultimately restricting the access to this new “super-league” only to those teams with more financial resources, as a way to develop a more attractive competition for TV dealers and sponsors, and to have a more secure financial system for the big clubs (Mendizabal, 2020).

At this point, it is important to stress that the creation of Euroleague represented a landmark moment in European sports, given that it disrupted the traditional European sports model through fundamental changes. Firstly, it established a joint venture with a union of European leagues (called ULEB) and clubs to manage the competition independently from the International Federation FIBA, while transferring ownership of the league from federations to (stronger) clubs. In the same vein, it also broke with promotion and relegation models by granting long-term licenses to the clubs in key markets (a semi-closed league structure) according to economic and market results rather than sporting results (Garza Segovia, 2023).

Up until the 2015-2016 season, Euroleague Basketball organized the two main continental competitions: the Euroleague – the top championship – and the Eurocup – the second-tier championship – while FIBA organized the FIBA Europe Cup as a third-tier league. Since 2016, the conflict has escalated. In 2016, FIBA created a new competition, the Basketball Champions League, that would be accompanied by the FIBA Europe Cup as a lower-tier league, opposing itself to Euroleague Basketball and its competitions (Cetin & Tribou, 2017). In contrast, Euroleague Basketball signed a joint venture with the company IMG Media Limited for 10 years and created Euroleague Ventures S.A. to increase economic value for its competitions (Garza Segovia, 2023).

The value of the joint venture contract with IMG Media in 2015 was worth 630 million € with the potential of reaching 900 million € in the most optimistic scenario, in addition to the contract with Turkish Airlines which saw the airline becoming the title-sponsor of Euroleague (Mendizabal, 2020). Euroleague Basketball has also a pool of partners determined to grow the sporting competition, whereas FIBA struggles to find wealthy sponsors. This situation illustrates the increasingly important role of economic partners in the organization of the sport spectacle: the sponsors, but also the owners or investors from the biggest and most popular clubs, the equipment suppliers who provide for the teams, and the media who distributes competitions (Cetin & Tribou, 2017).

However, one of the main problems of the Euroleague is the lack of public and primary sources related to the income distribution and the disclosure of the budget of each participating team (Karamürsel, 2023). Hence, we have found estimated data from other secondary sources. The estimated prize distribution in Turkish Airlines Euroleague is as follows: a total of 42,5 million euros is shared among the 18 participating teams, with Licensed clubs getting a guaranteed minimum of 1,5 million €. According to EuroLeague ByLaws, this amount is allocated to two different pools: 33,7 million € is distributed by the clubs' market pool (which basically refers to their broadcast rights and television contracts), and only 8,8 million € makes up the sports pool, which is premised upon teams' position in the standings (BasketNews, 2023).

### ***3.1.2. European club competitions: A fragmented ecosystem***

As it has been said before, basketball European club competitions feature a fragmented ecosystem, characterized by the fight between FIBA and Euroleague Basketball in their quest for supremacy. On the one hand, we find those competitions organized by Euroleague Basketball: Turkish Airlines Euroleague and BKT Eurocup (from now on referred as “Euroleague” and “Eurocup”), considered as the first and second-tier competitions, respectively. On the other hand, FIBA organizes those competitions considered by the basketball community as the third and fourth-tier respectively: Basketball Champions League and FIBA Europe Cup. The following analysis of the characteristics of each competition has been elaborated on the basis of the research by Mendizabal (2020):

With regards to Euroleague, it represents the main European club competition. Participation is restricted to a handful of elite teams, called Licensed teams, although other teams' participation depends on their sporting achievements, so it is a semi-closed league. Licensed Clubs have a right to participate from 2016 to 2026, on the basis of criteria like arena capacity, a minimum average attendance to home matches, and a minimum budget and sporting performance over time (Mendizabal, 2020). The 13 Licensed clubs are Real Madrid, FC Barcelona, Saski Baskonia Vitoria-Gasteiz, Zalgiris Kaunas, Armani Milan, CSKA Moscow, Olympiacos Piraeus, Panathinaikos Athens, Fenerbahçe Istanbul, Anadolu Efes Istanbul, Maccabi Tel Aviv, Asvel Lyon-Villerbaune and Bayern München (Garza Segovia, 2023). Secondly, the remaining 5 clubs get an invitation to take part in the Euroleague for one or two seasons, depending on Euroleague criteria (Mendizabal, 2020).

Concerning the EuroCup, it is the second-tier European basketball competition, and it is organized by Euroleague. Here, teams qualify from their national leagues and earn their access with

the results obtained in their national competitions. It was originally created in the 2002-2003 season under the name of ULEB Cup, and later on, starting from the 2008-2009 season, it was renamed as the EuroCup (Mendizabal, 2020). There are currently 20 participating teams in the EuroCup during the 2024-2025 season, distributed as follows: 3 teams each from Spain and Turkey, 2 teams each for Germany, Israel, Italy, Lithuania and 1 team apiece from France, Greece, Poland, Slovenia, Montenegro and Romania (Euroleague Basketball, 2024b). Both the EuroCup champion and runner-up are expected to get an Euroleague license for the following season, as long as they fulfill the requirements established in the Euroleague Bylaws and any subsequent modifications (Euroleague Basketball, 2023a).

Regarding the club competitions organized by FIBA Europe, the main participation criteria are the sporting results of clubs in their national leagues. Firstly, we have the Basketball Champions League (known as BCL) that is considered as the third-tier competition and was created in the 2016-2017 season. Here, 52 teams from 30 countries participate (Basketball Champions League, 2024). Finally, the fourth-tier competition is FIBA Europe Cup, created in the 2015-2016 season. It is a championship of 40 teams, with a maximum of 2 teams per national league. As with the Eurocup and BCL, club access depends on sporting results in national leagues. However, FIBA Europe may also grant access to the BCL through different invitations or wild-cards (FIBA Europe Cup, 2023).

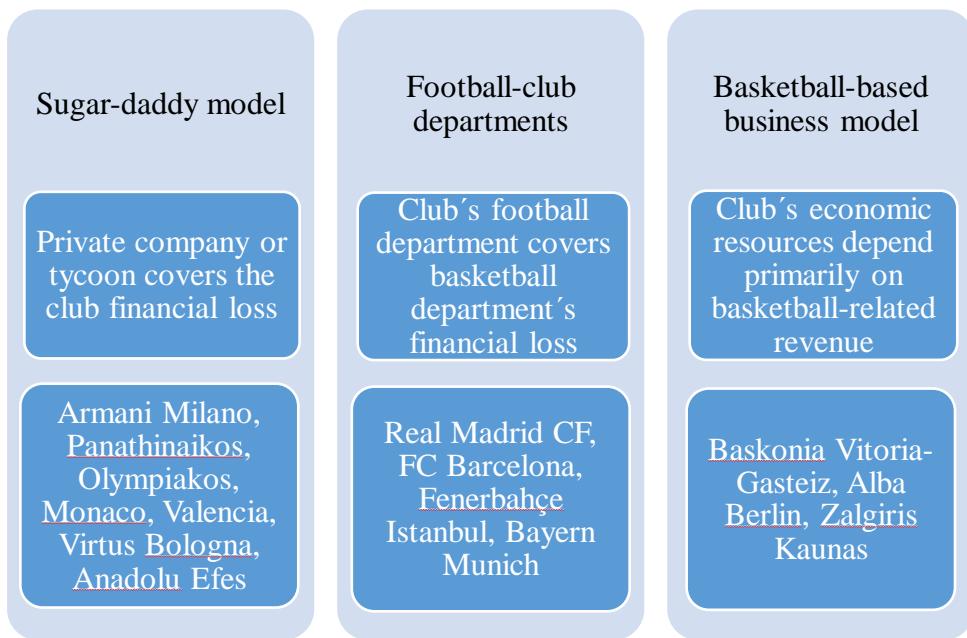
In consequence, Eurocup, BCL and FIBA Europe Cup serve as an opportunity for clubs that do not belong to the European elite to showcase their talent. One of the reasons for clubs to choose either of the three competitions might lie in the financial rewards. As there are no official figures, the amounts correspond to estimates from basketball-related websites. Considering that 24 teams take part in the Eurocup's regular season and that 32 teams take part in the BCL's same stage, each club would share approximately 166.000 € in the former competition and 162.500 € in the latter, the total distribution to the clubs being of 4 million € in the Eurocup and 5,2 million € in the BCL (Eurohoops, 2018). Unfortunately, there are no available data regarding the prize money for the FIBA Europe Cup.

As a consequence, the European basketball landscape can be considered as a very complex framework, where different competitions are run in parallel under a variety of governance principles. The fact that these competitions have different competition systems and accession criteria increases the complexity of decision-making for all stakeholders. At the same time, these competitions cohabit with different national leagues, fragmenting European competitions and missing synergy effects, confusing the fans and creating an inefficient market. Hence, European basketball suffers

from high operational costs (travel, refereeing, facilities, accommodation, etc.) and higher injury risk for players. Hence, in the absence of stronger cooperation between FIBA, Euroleague and the rest of stakeholders, an optimal return on investment for clubs seems improbable (Karamürsel, 2017a).

### **3.1.3. Euroleague and financial sustainability: A difficult balancing act**

Yet, despite the commanding lead of Euroleague in European club competitions in terms of public attention, teams' budgets and financial prizes, practically all Euroleague's clubs are loss-making. These clubs need their deficit to be covered by external actors like football clubs, rich benefactors or public administrations (Mendizabal, 2020; Karamürsel, 2022). This led Karamürsel (2023) to establish this Euroleague clubs' categorization, as shown by Figure 1:



**Figure 1.** Ownership and budgetary models of different Euroleague clubs

*Source: Own elaboration based on Karamürsel (2023)*

With the previous situation in mind, Euroleague approved in 2015 what is known as "Euroleague Financial Stability And Fair Play Regulations" (FSFP) regulations. Their purpose is to ensure good financial practice in the Euroleague, guarantee the transparency and credibility in the finances of participating clubs, as well as the long-term financial stability and sustainability of Euroleague clubs and competitions (Euroleague Basketball, 2023a). Among the main lynchpins of the FSFP regulations are certain budget restrictions, especially on players' salaries, as well as limiting contributions from certain shareholders like wealthy individuals or multisport clubs (mainly football clubs) that allocate part of their budget to their basketball departments. Hence, each club

holding a license and/or club applying for a license in accordance with the EuroLeague Bylaws will have to comply with the following criteria of FSFP, as of the 2023-24 season (Euroleague Basketball, 2023a).

The Euroleague's FSFP regulations are similar to UEFA's Financial Fair Play (FFP) regulations intended for participating football clubs in UEFA's main competitions (Karamürsel, 2023). These measures were adopted by Euroleague against the backdrop of financial insolvency of top European clubs like Limoges in 2000, Pau Orthez in 2009, Montepaschi Siena in 2013 or Khimki Moscow in 2021, to name but a few. It is not our aim to enter into a discussion about the efficacy of FSFP. However, its implementation has been controversial from the beginning, even creating disagreements between Euroleague's clubs (Karamürsel, 2022). This led to the appointment of a new CEO in 2022, Marshall Glickman, who stressed the importance of a proper enforcement of FSFP, suggesting a future salary cap as an idea (The Athletic, 2022).

Nonetheless, there are a number of factors that make it harder to implement a salary cap in European professional sport competitions. First of all, the complexity of the European sports pyramid, with different national associations, regulations and economic and sporting landscapes creating additional stakeholder diversity and complicate the decision-making process. Secondly, the fact that US leagues, controlled by their member clubs, are independent from national associations. These leagues determine the rules, rewards and running of leagues, contrary to Europe where many rules are dictated by the sport governing bodies performing regulatory functions normally reserved for states (Dietl et al., 2012). Then, balancing mechanisms introduction in European professional sport is a really difficult task.

### **3.2. Case Study Analysis 2: Feasibility of EuroLeague Expansion to Dubai**

#### ***3.2.1. Potential of a league expansion***

When analyzing Euroleague's governance, one of the key questions is whether the competition has fully realized its commercial value for the markets where it currently operates. This prompts questions of whether a potential league expansion would represent a good idea to increase commercial, TV broadcasting and ticketing revenues (Karamürsel, 2023). The first expansion option would involve granting a permanent access to the competition to teams with experience in Euroleague, like AS Monaco, Valencia Basket or Virtus Bologna, due to their solid financial and organizational structures. The second option would mean accepting a new club from a big city or metropolitan area where currently no club participates, like London, Paris or Dubai. The objective

would be to open up the Euroleague towards powerful markets like the UK, France or United Arab Emirates (UAE) in order to benefit from the untapped potential of basketball there (Karamürsel, 2023).

Firstly, we should consider that whereas league expansions are commonplace in North American leagues, they are not usual in Europe (Mendizabal, 2020). This is because the United States, sports leagues operate under a closed-entry structure with a fixed club number per competition, where leagues like NBA, NFL and MLS are typical competitions under a mixed-mode private property structure. In these competitions, individual club owners enjoy limited off-the-field competition due to territorial monopolies and duopolies. On the contrary, in Europe, sports leagues operate under a promotion-relegation system based on clubs' on-the-field performance, thus allowing any prospective owner to form a club and join. Clubs that perform well on the field replace weaker clubs in higher-ranked leagues, while weakest clubs are relegated into lower divisions (Mendizabal, 2020).

As a result, we should remember the important point that Euroleague does not fully align with neither of US or European models. Euroleague is a European competition in addition to the domestic national leagues and apart from Federations. Hence, Euroleague clubs compete also in national leagues and show important interdependences in national leagues with non-Euroleague teams in aspects like player transfer and broadcasting rights negotiations (Karamürsel, 2017b). According to Karamürsel (2023), it has certain characteristics of a US league as it is practically a closed league for its shareholder clubs with governance rules like centralized marketing and revenue-sharing mechanisms, but without hard salary caps or draft systems. On the other hand, it keeps historical ties to the traditional European sport structures (Karamürsel, 2023). As a result, it might be expected that a Euroleague expansion will present certain peculiarities on its own.

In this sense, there are scarce antecedents of transcontinental expansions in a European league. In Euroleague, the only precedent is the Israeli club Maccabi Tel Aviv, accepted in FIBA's European Cup in 1958 due to the boycott towards Israel from Middle East Countries. When Euroleague broke away from FIBA in 2001, Maccabi joined it a year later. However, considering the importance of the historical, social and political ties of Israel with the West (Kaufman & Bar-Eli, 2005), this integration became straightforward. As of Dubai, it is an Emirate with more than 200 nationalities doing business, living, learning and touring the UAE, where foreigners outnumber the population of UAE nationals (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Considering the global outreach of basketball and the multicultural nature of Dubai, a Euroleague club there could

find an important growth potential, as long as the team works on a long-term plan to make a name for itself in Dubai.

At this point, it is also worth asking whether Euroleague has analyzed how a potential Dubai expansion will impact the fragile European basketball stakeholder ecosystem. Firstly, due to the geographical distance between Dubai and Europe, a change in competition system from the current round-robin format towards a Conference System dividing teams geographically like in NBA has been suggested, creating controversy among Euroleague clubs (Mundo Deportivo, 2024). In addition, a league expansion might mean more matches and demanding journeys for teams, increasing the injury risk for players who already complain that the match schedule is overloaded (Karamürsel, 2023). Similarly, it would be ever more difficult to accommodate in the calendar the national teams' matches. If no acceptable solution is reached, European national teams would field weaker teams, affecting the quality and attractiveness of international tournaments (Karamürsel, 2017b, 2022).

The main argument for Euroleague to expand to Dubai is related to growth expectations in commercial, TV broadcasting and ticketing revenues (Karamürsel, 2023). We should remember that despite Euroleague's recent growth, the majority of its teams remain loss-making (Karamürsel, 2022). A potential benefit of Dubai would be the rumored new sponsorship deals with UAE's companies (around 50-60 million € per year), that would overtake the current title sponsorship with Turkish Airlines (worth 10 million € a year). In addition, each club would get an extra 1,5-2 million € yearly for accepting Dubai's entry (Mundo Deportivo, 2024). However, this could present a problem. If Dubai wants to build a strong team, it could present a high budget with the advantage that there is no income tax on salaries in Dubai (United Arab Emirates, 2024). This could force Euroleague clubs to augment their players wages, hence wage increases could offset new hypothetical revenue increase.

At this point, the importance of a robust application of the Euroleague's FSFP regulations comes into play. Considering that the sanctions for breaching those rules have been considered as inconsistent and too low (Karamürsel, 2017a), it is crucial that additional measures are enforced so that a league expansion is not detrimental for the league's financial sustainability. This is appropriate as there are competitions like the UEFA Champions League that have enforced Financial Fair Play regulations to promote financial sustainability among participating clubs (Mendizabal, 2020). If one of Euroleague's main issues is the loss-making nature of certain clubs that rely on rich benefactors to survive, it would be necessary to consider mechanisms like risk assessments for concentration of sponsors and some sort of salary cap to address this issue (Karamürsel, 2017a).

Finally, a potential expansion Dubai expansion would introduce another point of debate in the European sport model. One of the main justifications championed by proponents of the failed European Super League in football back in 2021 was the creation of basketball's Euroleague in year 2000 (Buraimo et al., 2023). This indicates the intertwined nature of European sport competitions and their governance. In this respect, the increasing involvement of Middle East countries has affected the landscape of global sport, by hosting tournaments like the FIFA and FIBA World Cup in Qatar, purchasing football clubs, and developing Saudi Football League as a possible destination of football stars (Mutz, 2024). Hence, it is important that the Euroleague communicates with its stakeholders and the wider sporting community to address the challenges that this Dubai expansion presents.

### ***3.2.2. Dubai – Background and development of a “sport soft power strategy”***

Dubai, as a constituent emirate of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), became independent from Great Britain in 1971. UAE is an elective monarchy with the seventh-largest oil reserve in the world, as well as a founding member of UAE. The UAE have taken advantage since its independence of its fossil resources to gain political and economic leverage on a global level and have consolidated their position as new economic centers in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Considering that fossil fuels are a finite source, the UAE, as well as his neighboring nations of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have begun to reinvent themselves with the aim of being more accepted in the international community (Carosella, 2022). The Emirates' oil reserves, its location and its moderate Islam, have made it an appealing trade partner to the West, despite its controversial record in terms of human rights in the eyes of its Western counterparts (Carosella, 2022).

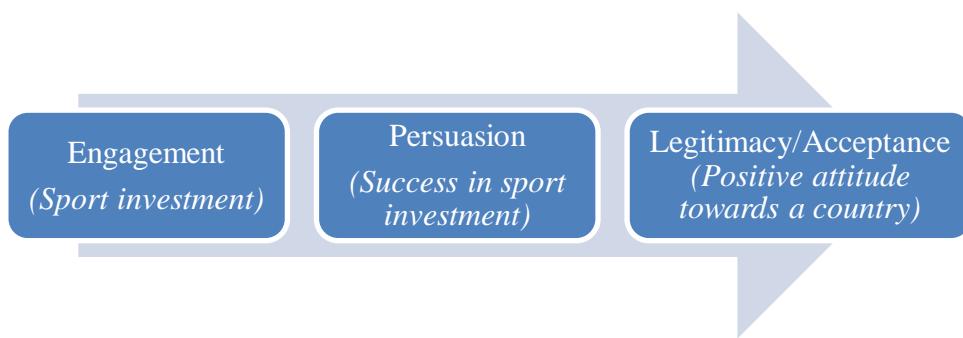
New challenges like immigration have resulted in a sharp increase of the UAE's population (Sen, 2020). From a population of 183.187 people in 1975, it increased to 3.549.900 people in 2022. Among this population, there are 1.111.120 female and 2.438.780 men (Dubai Statistics Center, 2022a). Only 284.650 people were Emirati in 2022, 8,02% of the total population (Dubai Statistics Center, 2022b). Over 80% of the population speaks English and 20% speaks Arabic. Concerning religion, Islam is the official religion, while 25% is Christian and 16% is Hindu. In 2022, population between 25 and 39 years old was 47,85% of the total, while those older than 50 years old represented 8,70% (Dubai Statistics Center, 2022c), reflecting a young and dynamic society.

Although Dubai is a constituent emirate of the UAE, it operates with a certain autonomy with respect to emirates like Abu Dhabi. Both emirates seek to increase their prestige by being tourist and

business hubs, competing with each other. Abu Dhabi, the capital of the UAE and its richest emirate, is ruled by the al-Nahyan family and owns up to 90 per cent of the country's oil reserves. It is also the seat of the president. Dubai is the "business emirate", ruled by the al-Maktoum family, and home to the Prime Minister (Carosella, 2022). Its dwindling oil supply has compelled Dubai to establish a business-friendly environment with twenty tax-free zones, this mentality making Dubai the city with the biggest economic growth of UAE between 1975 and 2009 (Carosella, 2022).

Hence, rapid social and economic changes over the last decades (Sen, 2020) have led UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia elites to try to re-brand themselves as modern and liberal countries to gain international acceptance (Søyland, 2020). A key concept to understand their mindset is "soft power" from American expert of International Affairs, Joseph Nye, defined as "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2008, p. 94), using "resources like culture, values and policies" (Nye, 2008, p. 94). It means getting others want the outcomes you want by attracting them, not using military or economic means (Nye, 2008). Hence, an important soft power tool is sport, a cross-cultural phenomenon transcending international borders (Søyland, 2020). Hence, by hosting major sport events and sponsoring and purchasing sport clubs these countries want global goodwill and bigger security for their regimes (Carosella, 2022).

In the case of UAE, in 2022 it launched its own "We the UAE 2031" outlining the vision for the country and updating the "UAE Vision 2021" from 2011 (United Arab Emirates, 2010, 2022). The document establishes as national priorities: society, economy, ecosystem and diplomacy (United Arab Emirates, 2022). The aim of these vision plans is to increase the country's global reputation by focusing on its identity, heritage, culture and contributions. It is expected that sport investment would cement its reputation as a modern and tolerant place (Carosella, 2022). Hence, Nye's (2008) soft power theory could explain the drivers of sport investments by Gulf countries, as seen in Figure 2:



**Figure 2.** Possible drivers of sport investments by countries using Nye's (2008) theory

*Source: Own elaboration*

The Emirate of Dubai has invested actively in sports, hosting a yearly professional tennis tournament from 1993 and the Paddle Tennis World Championship in 2022 (Sureda Llull, 2023). Dubai's main airline Emirates sponsors important football clubs like Real Madrid, Arsenal, AC Milan and Benfica (Emirates, 2024a). In this sense, the entrance of cycling team UAE Team Emirates in the top cycling division in 2017 is also noteworthy, as it wants to represent the UAE and promote a healthy lifestyle (UAE Team Emirates, 2024). This policy is consistent with the vision of the company, who see activities like sport, music and arts as a way to share the interests of their consumers and contribute to the development of communities in UAE and abroad (Emirates, 2024a).

However, it is Abu Dhabi that has acquired a high reputation in purchasing football clubs through the purchase of Manchester City back in 2008 by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al Nahyan. He is the deputy Prime Minister of the UAE, direct overseer of UAE's soft power strategy and owner of the private equity group "Abu Dhabi United Group for Development and Investment" (Carosella, 2022). Under his ownership, Manchester City has enjoyed huge sporting success, winning more than 20 trophies, becoming English and European champions. It was also the second-richest club in the world in 2023 with a revenue of 825,9 million €, only overtaken by Real Madrid (Deloitte, 2023). The ownership of Manchester City has added prestige and respectability to UAE in business and sporting circles, as well as local fan support and new revenue streams (Carosella, 2022). It has also helped UAE gaining a foothold in the United Kingdom, promising to invest 10.000 million pounds in the British industry (Romera Osuna, 2022).

However, one of the striking conclusions of these sport investments is that the economic return for the investor does not seem to be a primary concern. More precisely, an important driver would be to own a club that attains sporting success, so that the owner is also associated with this successful organization through the investment (Fruh et al., 2022). This could define ownerships like Roman Abramovich at Chelsea, Sheikh Mansour at Manchester City and Qatar Sports Investment in PSG (Francois et al, 2022). The main investment goal would be the "win or utility maximization" to deliver sporting success through sustained owners' contributions. The losses covered by the owner would be necessary for the club to become (financially) sustainable and grow in the future (Cetin & Tribou, 2017). A creation of a Dubai club in the Euroleague could fit with the previously stated motivations.

In spite of the positive image that Gulf Countries want to create by sport, this approach has been criticized as "sportwashing" (Fruh et al., 2023). Sportwashing is a tactic deployed by some political regimes to distort attention from ethical violations by leveraging emotional associations and

media coverage related to sport (Kearns et al., 2023). For instance, Manchester City is described as a successful sportswashing project as it has normalized state investment in football to frame Abu Dhabi and UAE positively (Kearns et al., 2023). This criticism has also targeted Qatar and Saudi Arabia's investments in Paris Saint Germain and Newcastle United respectively (Fruh et al., 2023), as well as events like Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008 and FIFA World Cup 2018 and 2022 in Russia and Qatar. Hence, a potential Euroleague expansion to Dubai poses potential risks to both actors.

In this context, with the sports exposure there will be questions, especially by other stakeholders like the media about whether the values that UAE espouses like tolerance, cohesion and harmony (United Arab Emirates, 2022), are replicated in reality. Hence, treatment of groups like women or migrant workers in Dubai could be scrutinized. This is challenging for Euroleague too, as its philosophy is "to unite people, fight injustice and fuel real social change" (Euroleague Basketball, 2021). Hence, a risk of soft disempowerment arises (Carosella, 2022), as the actors attempting to create goodwill (Dubai and Euroleague) could upset key stakeholders and lose attractiveness. To counter this threat, Dubai and Euroleague should ensure that this investment does consider both sporting and social dimensions, by working and promoting enduring social change by focusing on sport values and stakeholder-engagement in both Dubai and Europe.

### ***3.2.3. Dubai as a candidate to enter the Euroleague – Criteria fulfillment***

In order to be eligible to play in Euroleague, Euroleague Bylaws set down that all the clubs should obtain a license to participate (Euroleague Basketball, 2023a). These licenses may be of two different types according to their duration, requirements and allocation process: Licensed Clubs and Associated Clubs. Licensed Clubs participate on a long-term basis and Associated Clubs participate on a one-season basis, or through a wild card (invitation). For the purposes of this article, we will only analyze whether Dubai fits with the relevant criteria to become a licensed club according to the Bylaws, given that Euroleague's intention is to consider Dubai as a long-term participant (Mundo Deportivo, 2024). The criteria will be named with a C, followed by its number on the list and the wording in italics (Euroleague Basketball, 2023a):

*C1: "Territorial area: the area of influence of a Licensed Club will be defined as a population of 200.000 inhabitants within a geographical area of 200km<sup>2</sup>. One additional license will only be granted in this area if the population is higher than 200.000 inhabitants. Nonetheless, the General Assembly may authorize an exception if there are a*

*greater number of teams in the same territorial area and this does not affect the economic expectations of the Clubs and the Companies.”*

According to the data provided by the UAE’s government portal, Dubai is its second largest emirate. Its population is estimated to be of 3.549.900 as of 2022 (Dubai Statistics Center, 2022a). This would represent more than a third of the UAE population, which reached 9.282.410 people in 2020 (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2020). Hence, the area is bigger than other metropolitan areas where an Euroleague Licensed club plays. Examples include Milano in Italy, where 1,3 million people live in a 118 km<sup>2</sup> area, the municipality of Kaunas in Lithuania, of 289.380 people in 157 km<sup>2</sup>, or the municipality of Vitoria-Gasteiz, in the Spanish Basque Country, of 255.886 people in 277 km<sup>2</sup> (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2023; Kaunas, 2023; Milan, 2023).

*C2: “Use of an arena with a minimum capacity for 10.000 seated spectators that is less than a four-hour commercial flight from Frankfurt am Main (on the understanding that this city is considered as being in the geographical center of the European Union territory for the purposes of these Licensing Rules) and has all necessary technical elements duly approved for the game of basketball, as well as all other requirements demanded in the corresponding regulations.”*

The matches are expected to take place at the Coca-Cola Arena in Dubai, with a capacity of 17.000 people (Euroleague Basketball, 2023b). Concerning the second condition, the objective of the Euroleague would be to avoid long journeys that would affect the rest and players’ health (Karamürsel, 2023). A flight from Frankfurt am Main to Dubai takes approximately 6 hours, according to Emirates airline (Emirates, 2024b). This would pose problems, since the time deviation from the limit involves four hours (two hours per trip). In any case, Euroleague accepted clubs like Gran Canaria in 2018 or Unics Kazan in 2021 that are further than a 4-hour flight from Frankfurt.

*C3: “Availability of at least two 4-star hotels within a maximum distance of 25 km by road from the arena.”*

Dubai has various 4-star hotels close to Coca Cola Arena, among which there are: LEVA Hotel Mazaya Centre (1,4 km away), Villa Rotana (2,0 km away) and Ramada by Wyndham Downtown (5,7 km away) (Coca-Cola Arena, 2023). Hence, Dubai fulfills this condition without any problems.

*C4: “International airport at a maximum distance of 100 km by road from the arena, with enough daily flights to allow the teams to have access to the city under the right conditions, without significant disruption to their schedule.”*

The Dubai International Airport is 17,4 km. away from the Coca Cola Arena, and the journey takes from 15 to 20 minutes in normal traffic conditions (Coca-Cola Arena, 2023).

*C5: “The club must meet the requirements established in the EuroLeague Financial Stability and Fair Play Regulations included in Appendix III.”*

*“i) Not having any overdue payables with former or registered players, coaches and/or employees for more than 45 days, or with any other club participating in the Euroleague Basketball competitions.*

*ii) Not having been formally declared bankrupt or insolvent by a competent body in its home country, nor having entered into liquidation or dissolution or any similar proceeding.*

*iii) Not presenting an aggregate deficit from the three immediately previous seasons that exceeds 10% of the club’s budget average from those same seasons.*

*iv) Presenting a revenue budget of a minimum of 7.000.000 €.*

*v) Having a budget allocated to gross player remunerations not exceeding 65% of the total budgeted expenses of the club for the current season.*

*vi) Not having direct or indirect contributions from the shareholders/related parties of each club representing more than 50% of the budgeted expenses.*

*vii) Having a financial year from 1 July to 30 June.*

*viii) Presenting a positive equity by season 2025-26.”*

It is expected that the new Euroleague club in Dubai will meet the criteria i), ii), iii), vii) and viii) without significant difficulties. With regards to criteria iv), the taxation policies would give Dubai a significant advantage over its competitors. We should consider that UAE does not levy income tax (United Arab Emirates, 2024), meaning that the salary budget of the club would be fully a net quantity for players. This is not the case for the Spanish competitors, who pay 47% of their gross salaries in tax, so the net pays are reduced around half from their gross amounts (La Moncloa, 2024).

Regarding the other conditions, we face the main difficulty of the lack of transparency by the Euroleague related to clubs’ financial position (Karamürsel, 2023). Nevertheless, the introduction of

a club in Dubai presents a challenging environment regarding condition v). If Dubai wanted to attract Euroleague superstars, the average net salary of the 15 best-paid players at both the 2021-22, 2022-23 and 2023-24 seasons is around 2,3 million dollars (Eurohoops, 2023b). Then, a rough calculation indicates that those budgeted salaries would exceed 30 million, if we assume a hypothetical budget of 40 million euro (similar to the top Euroleague teams), surpassing the 65% maximum threshold.

With regards to condition vi), we identify that Euroleague clubs that have a bigger estimated budget get higher owner contributions to cover their deficit. In this sense, Real Madrid´s basketball team (club with most Euroleague titles), presented in 2022-23 season expenses of 50,32 million € and revenues of 22,00 million € (Real Madrid CF, 2023). In Anadolu Efes (Euroleague champions in 2022 and 2021), their owner´s financial contribution was of 28,96 million € in 2022 and 19,16 million € in 2021 (Karamürsel, 2023). This raises doubts about Dubai adhering to the ownership contribution limit if they have a top budget, but by adhering to this rule it could also affect their sporting ambitions.

*C6: “The club must be in a sound legal position and will not have, by itself or through its managers or employees, any conflict of interests with any other club participating in the Euroleague Basketball competitions or be involved in companies representing players and/or coaches.”*

There is a potential weak link in these regulations related to the Dubai project. The new team in Dubai is rumored to bring a stream of Emirati club sponsors willing to sponsor the competition. This could create a potential conflict of interest if a competition sponsor is also a club sponsor. As Karamürsel (2017a) has highlighted, Fenerbahce´s main sponsor in 2017, Dogus Group, also became a Euroleague sponsor, causing concerns about a (possible) conflict of interest. Hence, additional rules to protect the competition´s integrity and independence could be considered (Karamürsel, 2017a).

*C7: “The club must not be banned or temporarily suspended from participating in the Euroleague Basketball competitions by the Euroleague Basketball Company, regardless of the reason for the prohibition or suspension.”*

Considering that the Dubai-based club will start from scratch, it is expected that there will not be any disqualifying grounds that prevent their participation in the Euroleague.

*C8: “When there are two or more Licensed Clubs from the same League, no additional Licensed Club Licenses will be granted to clubs from that League.”*

Dubai has agreed to start participating in another European domestic league for the 2024-25 season, the ABA League, made up of Balkan teams (ABA League, 2024). This condition could be

amended by Euroleague, considering that two ABA League teams, Partizan and Crvena Zvezda Belgrade, will participate in Euroleague for the 2024-25 season.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

The main theoretical contribution of this article is that it has analyzed the implications of a groundbreaking movement in European sport like a transcontinental team expansion in a private club competition, shaping Euroleague's image as a paradigm-changing league. This movement has profound consequences, not only for its novelty, but also due to the repercussions for the competition, its member clubs and other stakeholders of the European basketball pyramid. The entrance of Dubai has the potential to influence competitive balance, Financial Fair Play Regulations, the allocation of long-term participation licenses and relations with national and international federations.

From a practical standpoint, the main contribution of this article is that it can provide a footprint for the Euroleague and the CEOs of clubs in order to carefully consider the decision of whether to grant Dubai a long-term participation on the competition. It can also serve to the promoters of Dubai's club to assess the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Finally, the article can help stakeholders of sports like football to understand the implications and intricacies of the Middle East integration in European sport structures. This is particularly appropriate, as there are increasing tensions in the debate about the governance of important competitions like football's UEFA Champions League.

#### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

Euroleague and Dubai should consider this expansion not only as a sporting initiative but also address stakeholder engagement to create lasting social change in Dubai, promoting sport as a source for good among collectives like women and migrant workers. Regarding the limitations, the article focuses on a possible competition expansion to Dubai. Clearly, aspects like the financial clout, infrastructure quality and sponsorship revenues could be determinant factors, contrary to other clubs with a rich history relying on a more organic growth. It remains to be seen if a Euroleague expansion to markets where a longer basketball tradition exists can be translated.

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## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

## **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## **FUNDING**

This research received no external funding.

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