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Sport policy in Finland: from class divisions to depoliticisation, from sport for all to business like any other?

Abstract

Sport in Finland has a fundamental societal role as the nation's favourite pastime, serving also various instrumentally defined social goals. Finland for a long time combined significant successes in elite sport with high levels of physical activity among the population. In recent years, the successes, particularly in individual sports, declined but Finland remains the European country with the highest share of the population being physically active. The paper approaches these peculiarities, tracking Finnish sports' historical institutional roots and transformations over the years. Elaborating on the recent reforms of the sports policy, the article points to two crucial processes. The first concerns the transformation of sports policy in accordance with neoliberal ideas, whereas the second relates to the depoliticisation of sport-related policymaking in Finland. The latter phenomenon is particularly interesting given the long-lasting tradition of class-based, political divisions relating to the field of sport in the Finnish context.

Keywords: public policy, Finland, neoliberalism, sport policy, policy reforms, depoliticisation

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Introduction and inspirations. Finnish sport policy and its outcomes

Sport is almost universally perceived as a useful and potentially important tool in a variety of social policy measures (Woźniak, 2017). From a utilitarian perspective, it may help to implement actions supporting social cohesion, counteracting exclusion, and promoting public health (Kelly, 2010, pp. 131–139). Giulianotti (2011, p. 757), summarising the contexts of sport in social policy design, mentions building social cohesion through integration and enhancing opportunities educational opportunities for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, the ethnic integration of young people from ethnic/national minorities (by organising competitions for children from different ethnic backgrounds), reducing crime (by organising activities for those at risk of demoralisation), and integration of people with disabilities. Sport is also supposed to serve public health. The states see the provision of sports infrastructure and the promotion of sports participation as a benefit and indicative of a "quality" lifestyle activity among the citizens (Collins, 2014; Palmer, 2013). All those goals are visible in the Finnish context. Sport policies and sport-related investments are important welfare policy tasks, designed and implemented in accordance with the ideals of the Nordic, social-democratic welfare regimes as part of the universal provision of access to socially important goods and services: "The 1998 Sport Act in Finland, for example, understood sport to be a force for diverse social benefits, such as health and welfare, the development of young people, environmental sustainability, cultural diversity and social equality" (Giulianotti et al., 2017, p. 42). Sport is, therefore, perceived instrumentally as a tool promoting public health, helping in the socialisation of citizens, strengthening social identity and an important part of the labour market creating employment opportunities.

Although sport is important at all stages of the life cycle, and Finland has a spectacularly high level of participation among the elder age cohorts (Mäkinen, 2019), it is the children and the youth that are particularly important categories when it comes to the goals of Finnish sport policy. Promoting and supporting sport and physical activity among young people is explicitly defined as a priority in the Sports Act. Several measures are implemented to achieve these goals, financed by the government. Only the national promotion programmes organised under the umbrella term "On the Move" (*liikkuva*) engage pupils in kindergartens and schools in more than 90% of the municipalities (European Commission, 2023). In the Finnish context of sport policy, the state serves as a sponsor and regulator and for a long time, the voluntary sector of civic organisations served as a provider of services, a link between the citizens and the Government (Lehtonen & Mäkinen, 2019; Bratland-Sanda et al., 2019; Vehmas & Ilmanen, 2013).

Finland, a small sports nation with spectacular achievements

Finland, a "small sports nation", as Koski & Lämsä (2015) labelled the country in their overview of the development of national sport policy, is unique for several reasons. Comparative data from numerous sources clearly shows that it combines

globally impressive achievements in an elite sport with a very high level of physical activity among the population. Finland standing in the elite sport may be confirmed by its position in the medal tables of the Olympic Games. As of 2021, in the number of gold medals per capita won at the Summer Olympics Games, this sporting nation usually rightly associated with winter sports is located at the third spot behind the microstate of Bahamas (with less than 400 thousand population and eight medals) and Hungary[2]. In terms of the number of medals per capita, it lost the first position only after the Tokyo 2021 Summer Olympic Games when another microstate of San Marino with a population of approximately 34 thousand won its first ever three medals. In the Winter Olympics, Finland is 11th in the all-time medal table and seventh when we measure medals output per capita.

As Koski & Lämsä (2015, pp. 428–431) point out, the golden era of Finnish sport lasted until 1952, parallel to the period of amateurish sport but its legacy does not boil down to statistics. Sport remains a crucial, most popular, and binding pastime, both when it comes to spectatorship, viewership and everyday actual engagement in physical activity. In this respect, Finland also leads numerous rankings as a spectacularly active nation. Accordingly to the most recent Eurobarometer's report on sport and physical activities in the European Union countries, Finland was the state with the most numerous share of respondents (71%) who declared that they exercise or play sport at least once a week and the lowest share of respondents (8%) who declared that they never exercise (European Commission, 2022). Physical fitness was the best, and physical activity was highest among highly educated men and women (Valkeinen et al., 2013), which is unsurprising. However, large-scale research conducted by KIHU (*Kilpa- ja huippu-urheilun tutkimuskeskus,* the Research Institute for Olympic Sports) showed that the differences between various educational groups were not too large. Almost 89% of Finns with a tertiary education degree are physically active, while for the group without completed secondary education, the share was close to 78% (Mäkinen, 2019). Physical activity is also distributed in a relatively egalitarian way among various age groups. Almost 84% of people older than 65 declared engaging in sport and/or physical activities. It was actually the second most active age group after the group aged 35–44 (84,9%). What may sound surprising is that it was the youngest category (15–24 years of age) that least frequently declared engagement in sport. It was the only category with less than 80% of such a declaration. More than every 10th

[2] The golden era of Finnish Olympic successes culminated during the Summer Olympic Games in Helsinki in 1952. It was an event with long-lasting legacy both in terms of highly useful sports infrastructure, built as a joint effort of the whole society and symbolically as a confirmation of Finland's international status. The Olympics were held in a year when Finland finished paying post-World War Two reparations to the Soviet Union which marked a symbolic new beginning for a quickly modernising state. Since 1952, the scale of success in the Summer Olympics has declined, while the results achieved during the Winter Olympics have improved. It should be noted that the facade of sports amateurism in Finland was maintained at least until the beginning of the 1980s, even though under-the-table income was largely available to top athletes, including those competing in the Olympic games (see: Lavikainen, 2021, who uses the term shamateurism to describe the scheme in his article pertinently titled: *If the IOC finds out about this, all of you will be declared professionals*).

citizen (12%) is a member of a sport club, and even more (13%) join a fitness or health centre. Depending on the source, the number of clubs is estimated from 8,500 (Mikkonen et al., 2022, p. 720) to 10,000 (Szerovay, 2020, p. 72). Although a direct relationship between investment in sports infrastructure and frequency of sports participation has never been fully confirmed, it might be explained, at least partially, by the accessibility of state-funded and available for all facilities (Bergsgard et al., 2019). If we consider that the state, via its sport policy should, on one hand, provide opportunities for the most talented to achieve success in elite sports competitions and, on the other, ensure a high level of physical activity among the general population, we may conclude that for most of the time, Finnish state fulfilled these tasks very efficiently.

Aims of the paper. May we speak about the depoliticisation of sport policy in Finland?

The observations made above inspired this paper which aims to delve into the history of Finnish sport policy and its recent transformations. Special attention is paid to the current challenges as defined by Finnish scholars, policymakers and experts interviewed for the purpose of this article and some peculiarities identified in their works that differentiate the Finnish case from the other sport policies. Literature review and interviews conducted for the purpose of this work show that one of the crucial peculiarities concerns the fact that until the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the sphere of sport remained a deeply divisive field that served as a "proxy" for class-based political conflicts. After the demise of these cleavages, sport policy quickly became designed and implemented in accordance with the rules of the New Public Management or New Public Governance, where evidence and technocratic knowledge are supposed to be the basis of policymaking. The research conducted for the purpose of this paper may be perceived as a reconnaissance into the field, attempting to gather a thorough and multidimensional body of information and identify potential loopholes or gaps in the knowledge. Therefore, the paper is of an exploratory and idiographic rather than analytical nature. It is organised around two research goals and one accompanying research question. The goals are to depict two interlinked processes, on one hand, the demise of the class-based and highly ideological system of sport in Finland and, on the other, the growing professionalisation and commercialisation of this field and to discuss them within a frame of depoliticisation. The general research question is: has the control of politicians over the institutional field of sport vanished (because of this transformation), and we may speak about the sport policy in Finland?

Depoliticisation is thus, the central term here. Concise but influential definition by Burnham (2001, p. 128) states that

> *depoliticizations as a governing strategy is the process of placing at one remove the political character of decision-making. State managers retain, in many instances, arm's-length control over crucial economic and social processes, whilst simultaneously benefiting from the distancing effects of depoliticization. As a form of politics it seeks to change market expectations regarding the effectiveness and*

credibility of policy-making in addition to shielding the government from the consequences of unpopular policies.

The scholarship on the depoliticisation of public policies has at least 40 years of tradition (Kiel, 1984; for a review, see: de Nardis, 2017). The roots of the depoliticisation strategies have been tracked to Keynesian policymaking in Western Europe (Burnham, 2017, p. 357). Most frequently, though, the term was used to analyse the policymaking practices which were inspired by the neoliberal politics of the era of Reagan and Thatcher and constitute its lasting legacy visible particularly well in various national applications of the "third-way" policymaking. The most recent stream of research directly ties depoliticisation with the rise of populism in many Western democracies (Scott, 2022). Delegating of the governance to the experts' bodies, which are not democratically legitimised, has been frequently criticised for a variety of reasons. Some criticisms (normative ones) focus on the soundness of the expertise applied (e.g., the validity of solutions coming from conflicting schools of thought), while most of them concentrate on the very logic of the delegated expertise. On one hand, it is perceived as a "rule by Nobody", by almost automised expertise which diminishes public scrutiny over the political circles, allowing them to withstand responsibilities. On the other hand, the criticism concerns the very idea of potential "truth" in the expertise, questioning its neutrality, pointing out that sometimes it is merely a facade behind which value-laded and ideological agenda may be hidden (Barbi, 2018, pp. 77–78).

Methodological issues

The data was collected and analysed for the purpose of the project titled *Finnish Welfare Culture: Historical Roots of Public Policies and the Late Coming of Neoliberalism* funded by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange under the Bekker NAWA Programme, edition 2021 (nr BPN/BEK/2021/1/00151/DEC/1). This paper is based on the desk research and literature review of the great body of research conducted by Finnish scholars, combined with data from qualitative expert interviewing. This fieldwork was part of the subproject on *Party politics and sport policy in Finland*. The selection of interlocutors for expert interviews is always subjective; it is based on the researcher's knowledge of who can provide useful information and to what extent (Bogner et al., 2009). The legitimisation of the expert position is most often the institutional embeddedness of the interviewee in a formal role related to academic status or profession. In this case, when looking for interlocutors, I usually relied on findings from the desk research. I have met authors of publications in which I found issues worth elaboration; I often asked for details. Sometimes, I was inspired by the information I read in the mass media or – using the snowball method – by suggestions from experts on whom else I should meet. Apart from the experts coming from the academic world, I have also talked to people who have been actively involved in decision- and policymaking processes on the national and local levels, i.e., two former ministers of sport from two different political parties, a head of the Department of Sport in one of the largest Finnish cities, vice-mayor responsible for

sport in one of the largest Finnish cities and the member of the board of National Sports Council (*Valtion Liikuntaneuvosto*), the crucial advisory committee appointed by the Government and assisting the Ministry of Culture and Education. Of course, the information obtained through the experts' interviewing does not constitute knowledge on par with the scientific texts published in peer-reviewed papers. Still, it is often an invaluable supplement, opening new fields of interpretation and deepening the knowledge gained from work based on scientific literature and other foundational data. I conducted most interviews face-to-face, visiting my interviewees; some took place remotely via MS Teams. The scenarios for the casual interviews were always structured in terms of the interviewee's area of expertise. Accessing interlocutors was mostly unproblematic; it seems that Finnish experts, even those who are active politicians, regarded participation in research as their duty and sharing knowledge as part of their official mission. The body of data collected during the realisation of the aforementioned project is much larger, but for this paper, I have compiled a dataset of 12 expert interviews. Most of the experts interviewed are well-recognised public figures, either on a national or a local level. Even mentioning their political affiliation would allow readers familiar with the Finnish context to recognise them. Therefore, in the article, they are recognised only by a function. I use the pronoun "they" to avoid identifying the gender of the interviewee.

Class divisions and sport policy. Sport as a proxy class war

Sports clubs have been part of a civil society, emerging in Finland since the late 19th century. The voluntary sector thus fulfilled crucial functions of sport provision. As Itkonen and Salmikangas (2015, pp. 548–549) write, in the 1960s, enabling the population to take part in sport and recreation was a state response to the change in lifestyle stimulated by urbanisation caused by the massive migration from rural areas to cities. Access to sport for all allowed to compensate for the less physically active lifestyle and meet the demands for active leisure stemming from fewer working hours. Even when the "idealistic era of amateurism" (Koski & Lämsä, 2015) began to vanish, volunteer-based jobs remained crucial for providing sports services. Finnish historians derive the culture of self-governance from the tradition of rural assemblies where local community elected representatives responsible for representing them during negotiations with the authorities (Stenius, 2012, p. 213). The emergence of civil society organisations that managed sport in Finland for many decades is a legacy of the Russian Revolution of 1905, when the Grand Duchy of Finland was an integral part of the Russian Empire. Finnish episode of the Revolution was a massive general strike which resulted in political reforms. It resulted in the dissolution of the Diet of Finland composed of the representatives of the four estates, the establishment of the Eduskunta, modern parliament and the introduction of universal suffrage, followed by the increase of political freedoms, including the freedom to establish massive number of civic associations and unions (Itkonen & Salmikangas, 2015).

Soon afterwards, in 1906, *Suomen Valtakunnan Urheiluliitto* (Finnish Gymnastics and Sports Federation, hereafter: SVUL) was formed as an official sports association

of Finland responsible for the preparations, financing, and coaching of the Olympic teams. Finnish Olympic Committee was established one year later. Finns took part in the Olympics for the first time already during the Summer Olympic Games hosted in 1908 in London when Finland was still not a sovereign state but under the Tzar's rule. In 1912, during the Games in the neighbouring Sweden, the Finnish team was the sixth largest in terms of the number of athletes. In the medal table they were ranked fourth only after the United States, the host nation of Sweden and Great Britain[3]. In 1918, during the Civil War, members of the SVUL were loyal to the White Finland with many serving in the army commanded by Carl Gustaf Mannerheim. The Civil War resulted in almost 36,000 deaths in a country of less than 3 million inhabitants at the time. Three-quarters of these were Red Guard soldiers, of whom only one in four died in combat. The War casts a long shadow on the political scene of Finland in the following decades. Although many attempts were made to unite a bitterly conflicted country, the field of sport politically remained one of the social realms where the divisions persisted (Haapala, 2010).

While SVUL remained a crucial sport organisation associated with the bourgeois, *Työväen Urheiluliitto* (Finnish Workers' Sports Federation, hereafter TUL) was established in 1919 as the association of the working class. Two parallel sports systems have been operating in Finland ever. Until the Second World War, this organisation's athletes did not participate in official competitions or represent Finland in the Olympic Games. Instead, they participated in the International Workers' Olympiads organised by Socialist Workers' Sport International. The athletes competed under the red flag of the international workers' movement. Finland and Czechoslovakia were the only countries represented in every of the six editions of the competitions and the most successful one. Two parallel sports movements emerged, with their separate competitions, tournaments, and clubs, functioned in Finland for a few decades longer than in other Nordic states, up until the 1990s when the Finnish state adopted the New Public Administration doctrine and performance- and domain-based management in public administration.

SVUL survived until 1993, when it was transformed into *Suomen Liikunta ja Urheilu* (Finnish Sport Federation, hereafter: SLU). SLU served as the umbrella organisation for Finnish sports associations until 2012. *Nuori Sport* (Youth Sport) and Kunto were separate entities responsible for the sport of the youth and children, while *Kuntoliikuntaliitto* was responsible for promoting public health through physical activity and mass recreation. Since 2013, all these organisations were merged, functioning as Valo (Finnish Sport Confederation). Reforms of the 1990s gradually moved the power to the state with the state-controlled subsidies, becoming a crucial tool for implementing policy plans in the field of sport (Lehtonen & Mäkinen 2019, p. 121; Mikkonen et al., 2022). Since 2013, the centralisation of sport policy has gone even further. In 2017, Valo ceased to exist. As a result of the most recent institutional

[3] Although SVUL was officially a bilingual association, only a few years later, in 1912, *Svenska Finland Idrottsförbundin* (Swedish Sports Association, SFI) was established, splitting from SVUL. Its task was to organise sport for culturally and linguistically distinctive Swedish-speaking population.

reform in the Finnish sport system, all crucial tasks were taken over by the Finnish Olympic Committee, which is currently, along with the Ministry of Sport (depending on the Government, it may be part of Ministry for Education and Culture or a separate body), the most influential institution governing the national sport system (Mäkinen, Lämsä & Lehtonen, 2019; Szerovay, 2022; Mikkonen et al., 2022). FOC serves as an umbrella organisation supervising sports federations. Recent reforms finalised the gradual centralisation and formation of the institutional pyramid model of sports governance (Lehtonen, 2020). The efficacy and feasibility of the new system are yet to be fully understood and recognised. Although, in many respects, Finland was one of the countries that survived well the hardships caused by the global pandemic, it was the sport that suffered financially more than other areas of public sector in Finland. The state financed sport mainly through the revenues from the state-owned monopolist lottery company Veikkaus, which in 2019 distributed approximately 1 billion Euro for that purpose via beneficiaries determined by the Government and specific laws. The pandemic and lockdowns were a massive blow to the company's profitability, as most of the gamblers turned to online, legal or illegal (but accessible through VPNs) platforms. In a paper written even before the pandemic (2020), Lehtonen pointed out that the situation when sport was financed almost exclusively from the state revenues from gambling was one of the most problematic issues. As a result of this crisis, the scheme of funding sport and recreation is now undergoing a crucial, as Mikkonen et al. (2022) claim, historical change. The reform is supposed to be enacted in 2024, however, the change of Government in mid-2023 may delay the process. The outcome of this reform is yet to be seen.

The commercialisation of the sport-field and the alleged vanishing of the "ideologies"

Traditional ideals of amateur sport based on voluntary work and the growing significance of the commercial sector in the sports industry coexist, but not without tensions. These are visible in the first place in the field of club management (Szerovay, 2022). The divergence has occurred since the 1980s; some parts of the sports sector were rapidly professionalising. Previously, the state and municipalities were responsible for establishing and maintaining sports facilities, while clubs, through the voluntary work of their members, organised activities that were usually free to all citizens. In recent decades (since the beginning of the 21st century), public subsidies received by the clubs were used more often to employ staff. In approximately one-fifth of clubs operating in Finland paid staff is now employed. In parallel, public funders expected cost-efficiency and the sporting results following New Public Governance postulates of evidence-based management (Koski, 2012). The state channels money for the facilities via the municipalities, relatively to the population. As of 2017, 71% of approximately 33,000 sports facilities in Finland were owned by municipalities, 8% by private companies, 7% by sport clubs and 1% by trusts (Bergsgard et al. 2019, pp. 5–6).

Institutional changes described above have been implemented since the 1990s to respond to the new challenges. The growing professionalisation and commercialisation

observed in the management of sports institutions changed the dominant logic in the sport policy in line with the priorities of New Public Management (in the 1980s and 1990s) and New Public Governance (from 2005 onwards, see: Koski et al., 2015; Mikkonen et al., 2022). Reforms concerned changes in funding, which became more competitive and project-based and contributed to the rise of entrepreneurialism and bureaucracy (Itkonen & Salmikangas, 2015). Parts of the public responsibilities were outsourced to the private sector as municipalities were required to organise the tenders for providing services (like swimming lessons for children) or maintaining the facilities (e.g., ski tracks in the cities). Szerovay (2023, p. 99) writes about the growing hybridisation of sport club activities and their modes of operation, which are inevitable consequences of the reforms mentioned above. This shift was accompanied by the growth of the private sector within Finnish "sports industry". The usage of private sports facilities increased fivefold in the first decade of 21st century (Laine, 2017; Giulianotti et al., 2019). The number of sport clubs operating for-profit and receiving payments for its services has grown massively. This resulted in the emergence of the category of citizens who, due to the cost of participation, have limited access to sport (Szerovay, 2022, p. 78; Koski et al., 2015). New lifestyle trends concern also individualisation of leisure and the rising popularity of "wellness industry" and tracking apps (Eskola & Laine, 2020). The changes were interlinked with the cuts in public spending because of austerity policies and individualist tendencies in approach to leisure, coming to Finland later than in other Western societies[4], which led to the emergence of inequalities in access to sports, based on socio-economic status.

These processes were met with the re-institutionalisation of sport policy and significant policy changes occurring since the beginning of the 21st century. The reforms have been duly analysed. Interestingly, given how long and how deeply the theme of sport polarised Finnish society, the ideological contexts of these reforms were rarely critically reappraised. The introduction of New Public Management and New Public

[4] There are numerous initiatives applied to determine the necessary direction of further changes. For instance, in line with New Public Governance and postulated evidence-informed policymaking (Mikkonen et al., 2022, pp. 723–724) Danish scholars prepared evaluation of the elite sport system commissioned by Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (Storm & Nielsen, 2022, pp. 8–9). Whereas the ideals of equality acculturated in the society and institutional memory of the state, along with high levels of social trust, both generalised, individual, and institutional are rather universally perceived as one of the most important advantages of policymaking in Finland (Kangas et al., 2021), the Danish report concludes differently. The lack of trust between the institutions and equality as a principle are enumerated as some of the most problematic issues in a field of sport policy: *The governance problems are strongly linked to broader historical developments and cultural issues deeply rooted in Finnish national identity. A poorly designed overall structure causes the malfunctioning interaction between organisations. Still, it is seemingly also related to lack of trust, flawed communication, strong norms of equality, and fear of failure, which various (doping) scandals have reinforced. The consequences are a systemic risk averseness held in place by the relatively low legitimacy of elite sport in broader society and inherent resistance to set up clear performance goals. Further, reluctance to prioritise the pursuit of excellence rather than mass participation is institutionalised. Also, norms of independence of stakeholders are significant, making steering and aligned management difficult […]. All of these issues constrain the development of Finnish elite sport.*

Governance as a *modus operandi* of institutions was portrayed rather as ideologically neutral, even though in scientific literature, it is frequently perceived as a sign of neoliberalisation of the public policy (see: Knafo, 2020). In Finland, no state retrenchment is witnessed in sport policy but the introduction of logic of profit-driven operations, competition-based funding, gradual dismantling of the role of collectives, and voluntary organisations, as well as an increase in commercialisation of services may be perceived as at least some indications of quite fundamental changes introduced in the name or professionalisation and technocratic reforming[5]. As neoliberalism proved its adaptability to different conditions Giulianotti et al. (2019, pp. 547–548) wrote about the glocalisation of neoliberalism in the Nordic context. There is a great body of research into the gradual penetration of the Finnish state with neoliberal solutions in numerous policy fields, e.g., financialisation of economy (Sulkunen, 2015), rise of the competition state (Kantola & Kananen, 2013), rise of managerialism (Poutanen et al., 2022) and consultocracy (Ylönen &K Kuusela, 2019), domestication of the startup culture (Koskinen, 2021), neuroliberal experimenting with new policy solutions (Mannevuo, 2019), and transformation of the family policies (Ylöstalo, 2022). Writing about neoliberalism infiltrating Finnish public policies Moisio & Rossi (2020, p. 540) underline that:

> *Since the 1990s, the gradual neoliberalisation of Finland has been characteristically a technocratic process whereby technological knowledge, and the whole techno-industrial complex, has assumed a pivotal. Indeed, the government programmes of 2011 and 2015 are premised on the idea of constructing a new state that would embrace technology-intensive development and productivity across different social spheres.*

It seems that the gradual shift of sport policy of Finland, at least partially fit to this diagnosis.

Depoliticisation of the sports field in Finland?

Even though the sports system's deep reforms in Finland occurred in recent years and required the decisions undertaken on either governmental or parliamentary level, the issue of sport policy was not topical in the contemporary political debates. Ideological and economic tensions of the current phase of sports sector development

[5] For the purpose of this paper, I understand neoliberalism (definition inspired by Schmidt & Thatcher, 2013; Schmidt, 2022a) as a political ideology that allowed for a crucial socio-economic and cultural change in the past half a century. According to its values, almost all policy domains should be framed and measured by economic terms and metrics. It treats individualism as a virtue and attempts at gradual dismantling of the role of collectives, including the state and state institutions. It has paved a way for an introduction of a capitalist competition-based and for-profit oriented institutions and modes of operation into most of the spheres of society. It combines a facade of objective, technocratic, if not "scientific", rules and solutions with deeply normative and morally-laden narratives.

are not discussed and problematised in the political debates. Furthermore, the political context of sport-related policymaking was rarely subjected to scientific scrutiny. Even with the first-ever *Government Report on Sport Policy* publication in 2018, the issue was not discussed within the frame of party politics (Mikkonen et al., 2022, p. 721). Re-organisation of the institutional framework operating in sport was presented more as administrative decisions and managerial restructuration than the outcome of the political process. In empirical works quoted above, there is almost no mention of the impact of party politics on the field of sport. In most of the papers quoted in this article, no political party name is ever mentioned. It seems an interesting and striking omission given how politicised and ideologically divisive sport was until just a few decades ago and how prominent active or former politicians frequently occupy institutional positions in Finland's sports system. To provide just three examples. Sauli Niinistö, the President of the Republic just before taking over the highest position in the country's politics has served as a chairman of the Finnish Football Association since 2009. He has left the post only after winning the presidency. Before becoming a very popular and highly respected head of state, Niinistö was a longtime minister (in government branches unrelated to sport: justice and finance), Deputy Prime Minister, and the Speaker of the Parliament. Kalervo Kummola, one of the most prominent persons in Finnish sport was a board member of the Finnish Ice-Hockey Association since 1975 and served from 1997 to 2016 as a chairman. Due to the massive popularity of ice-hockey in Finland, the Association has an influential position trespassing the borders of sport. Kummola is also a career politician, former parliamentarian, and local councillor who, in 2023, took over the position of mayor of Tampere, the third-largest city in the country. Finally, Jan Vapaavuori, who chairs the Finnish Olympic Committee, is another example of a politician taking over the most crucial position within a country's most important sports institution. Previously, among other political posts, he served as a minister in four different governments and the capital city's mayor. All three politicians are members of Kokoomus (Coalition Party), a right-wing and the most economically liberal and pro-market political party in Finland.

This issue was recently noticed in the popular mainstream debate when Ilta-Sanomat, one of the largest Finnish tabloids, published in mid-2023 a long article about challenges ahead of the Finnish sport and the newly forming Government. Kokoomus, after winning the April elections, at the time of the publication was leading the governmental negotiations before forming the coalition. Due to its impact the party was dubbed by the tabloid the "sports' party" of Finland. Finland's political system has a stable multi-party organisation with coalition governments based on consensual decision-making. Hence, in everyday policymaking, no single political party can fully dictate its agenda onto any policy field regardless of its support or the number of parliamentarians. From this perspective, the dominance of a single political party over the sports field is a rather surprising phenomenon; which has not been thoroughly scrutinised so farIn most of the works quoted above, the institutional transformation and new forms of governance implemented in Finland as a solution were not discussed within the frame of party politics. An interesting insight concerning this very issue comes from the expert interviews. One of the former ministers of sport

claims that the role of sport as a political topic has diminished in recent years and that on a general level, there is an overwhelming consensus that the sport should be politically and financially supported:

> *I could say sport isn't the big political theme in Finnish domestic policy if I compare it to for example, education or energy policy or forest policy or if I compare it to social policy, healthcare policy, it's not so ideological. It's sport, it isn't big political question. And even when it is, it's not ideological debate it's […] more like we all everybody is: "thumbs up for sport!".*

Their explanation regarding the role of Kokoomus as the crucial political party dealing with sport-related issues is twofold. On one hand, they claim that the liberal and pro-market is a "go to" institution when current or former athletes, coaches, club owners, managers or sponsors need the political institution to support their goals:

> *I think this is one reason why Kokoomus has been so successful in that area, because sportsmen, sportswomen, and sports enthusiasts are not typically very political […] Politics is boring. Politics is boring. Politics is something not for me. But if I want to have some politics, then the Kokoomus is the right door and there are no other doors. I think this is this is a little bit like this and I think the development has been long term and I think it has. And I think it has something to do with the sponsoring of sports because Kokoomus is traditional right-wing market party and many companies and many entrepreneurs want to sponsor sports because it's really good. It's really an easy way to get a positive publicity that I'm now sponsoring.*

On the other hand, Kokoomus strategically planned its "march through institutions" to use a phrase attributed to Antonio Gramsci:

> *I think Kokoomus has been very careful. I I have a lot of inside information like you can imagine that for example when you are recruiting the top [positions] in the sports associations and also in, to be honest, in the Olympic Committee also when there are recruitments both for jobs and both for the trust positions. Kokoomus is very careful. They don't give possibilities for example for Keskusta*[6] *party persons or Social Democrats. They are really careful that they will find a proper person and then they try to get him silently, but really effectively to those positions, and especially to the key positions like you have seen. And we have those.*
>
> The interviewee stated that on a low, local level, there is far more political pluralism,

[6] When speaking of Social Democrats, the interviewee thinks of SDP (*Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue*, Social Democratic Party of Finland), the largest left-wing political power in Finland. Keskusta or the Centre Party is a centrist political party, traditionally getting most of the support in smaller municipalities and rural areas of Finland. It was the part of seven out of 11 of the coalition governments in 21st century, sometimes as a biggest parliamentary party and sometimes with either Kokoomus or SDP in a leading role.

which vanishes in the top echelon of sport policy and management of sports institutions:

> *Lots of chairs of the sports clubs [are] for example from Centre Party and also from Social Democrats. But it's somehow the Kokoomus has been very careful that and quite strategical that when we're talking about the top positions in the national level and the Olympic Committee, they take care of that.*

This opinion was supported also by another former minister for sport. The following exchange can illustrate this:

> [A]uthor: *Well, actually former politician of Kokoomus is now the head of Finnish Olympic Committee.*
> [I]nterviewee: *And for the candidate for the chair of the Olympic Committee, there was four candidates there, all from Kokoomus*[7].
> A: *OK, how did it happen? I mean, for socialist and Social Democrats, sport should be also an important political playground.*
> I: *And yet it is. It happened when, of course, we used to have [sport] divided into two different camps, whole sport. Until I mean the 90s and when they decided that we take off the politics from the sport. And so the left decided to say OK. Not anymore. No politics in the sport, but as I said, [when it's Kokoomus] it is not ideological or politics, it's just administration.*

The last remark was sarcastic, which may be "lost in transcription". In the other parts of the interview, this informant claimed that Kokoomus managed to convince many policymakers and part of the general public that their *modus operandi* when governing or managing state institutions is not based on ideology, or any kind of normativism, but rather on the objective expertise and technocratic decision-making. This kind of rationalisation is rather typical of the neoliberal narrative, where value-laden and normative approaches are frequently hidden behind the facade of declaratively objective rules defined with the usage of various new labels of New Public Management, New Public Governance, managerialism, or evidence-based governance. Those were frequently implemented in various contexts, forcing the consent with universal (although frequently adopted to the national conditions) creed that "there is no alternative", formulated by the "masters of discourse" and reproduced by mass media (Schmidt, 2002, pp. 228–230).

It is also interesting that this political context of sport-related policymaking has not been scrutinised more deeply because also the head of the department of sport in one of the largest Finnish cities confirmed that political tensions and differing ideological

[7] In the most recent elections for the seat of the chairman of Finnish Olympic Committee held in November 2020, three of the candidates were indeed members and active politicians of Kokoomus (Jan Vapaavuori, Ilkka Kanerva and Sari Multala) while the forth one and the runner-up in the elections was Susanna Rahkamo, former athlete and sport manager without political party affiliation and formal ties to Kokoomus, other than through her father, longstanding and prominent member of this party, Kari Rahkamo.

influences still play an important part of the context in which everyday decision making is done, how the local policies are designed and implemented. The city official admitted that it is highly important to know the individual preferences of the mayor or vice-mayor responsible for the field of culture and sport and what their political allegiance is. They said: *So what I'm trying to do in a nutshell is* [to decide] *that what kind of sport facilities should we build and where those should be built so that people would be more physically active? […] I'm like head of the strategical planning with the sports facility network.*

> A: *Does this kind of political change [stemming from the results of local elections] bring any change into everyday functioning of the Department of Sport?*
> I: *Yeah, it does. I have experienced many municipal elections while I've been working in here. So the differences between our budgets [change] like in a big way.*

They moved on to explain that the budget for sport-related investments can be 60–70% higher if the person politically responsible perceives sport as an important field (and tool) for policymaking. The result of the constant power struggle over limited resources with the departments responsible for culture or youth affairs is highly dependent on the political significance of the decision-maker. And depending on the ideological allegiance of the decision-maker, the way the resources are channelled into particular activities may vary substantially. The decision whether to fund either universally accessible sport facilities or more entrepreneurial-based investments involving public-private partnerships and benefitting largely private companies and citizens who are also paying customers is always a value-laden choice.

Flinder and Buller (2006, pp. 295–296) argue that depoliticisation is "the range of tools, mechanisms and institutions through which politicians can attempt to move to an indirect governing relationship and/or seek to persuade the demos that they can no longer be reasonably held responsible for a particular issue, policy field or specific decision". They further argue that the politicians frequently use the processes of depoliticisation to create a "buffer zone" between them and some policy fields. Preliminary findings may suggest that this interpretation may be valid for the Finnish case of the sport policy. On the one hand, the introduction of new, more managerial rules in the sport policy is viewed as a proper response to the contemporary challenges and the neutral process of professionalisation of decision-making. On the other hand, many of the institutions crucial for this policy field are either taken over or dominated by a single political party. Kokoomus is the most pro-market force in Finnish politics, promoting neoliberal ideas, and policymaking through the implementation of the solutions allowing the party to distance themselves from decision-making based on the expertise. It characterises also depoliticisation as identified in many cases elsewhere (Burnham, 2017). At the same time, the party actively seeks to embed the members or former members in the crucial bodies, maintaining control over the institutional field of sport. If and how this phenomenon is explained and justified in the narratives produced by the party (e.g., in party manifestos) or by its individual members, needs separate investigation. This kind of scrutiny may allow us interpreting the ongoing processes and frame them either as a conscious long-term strategy of maintaining

institutional control over the institutional sport in Finland or rather a tactical manoeuvring, ensuring access to crucial institutions for the benefit of the party and its members. Reflecting on the research question posed in the introductory part, it seems that the process of depoliticisation of the sport policy in Finland is ongoing but the circumstance suggesting the partial takeover of the control of the institutional field yields further research, which may give a partial answer as to whether we may speak of the facade of depoliticisation or maybe de-depoliticisation as an outcome of political processes in the field of sport policy of Finland.

Conclusions and inspirations for further research

The desk research and expert interviews conducted for this paper and a wider research reconnaissance allowed painting a brief picture of the transformation of the Finnish sport field in recent decades. In the impressive body of research conducted by the Finnish scholars, two interesting phenomena identified in this article seem either under-researched or lacking critical interpretation drawn on critical political economy or critical policy analysis. Firstly, the gradual implementation of neoliberal solutions in sport-related policymaking has not yet been critically reappraised on par with similar processes observed in other areas of Finnish public policies by numerous scholars. Secondly, there are still strong interrelations between party politics and the field of sport, exemplified best by the overwhelming influence of members of one political party on the institutional landscape of Finnish sport. It seems that both these areas constitute potentially fertile ground for future research. Policy documents have been frequently researched in recent years. Still, political documents (like party manifestos) or public statements and speeches of prominent politicians may provide an additional, very useful insight into the political context of the aforementioned changes. In the historical context, it may also be interesting to study (if any?) the lingering legacy of former deep class-based ideological divisions in the field of sport in Finland to trace when and how the deep polarisation was substituted by (forced?) consensus and the political dominance of one political power. How are these processes interlinked with new phenomena, growing inequalities in access to sport services/facilities, relative decline in successes in elite sports or a slight decline in sport participation among younger age cohorts are also interesting angles of research and interpretation. It seems that the most modern applications of discursive institutionalism may serve as a potentially appropriate analytical framework that may allow the study of institutional changes (both rapid and evolutionary) and the ideational power enabling those changes (Schmidt, 2022a; 2022b; Carstensen et al., 2022). Inspired in part by historical institutionalism and institutional path dependency approaches, discursive institutionalism was frequently used to explore the impact of discourse and ideas on institutional changes in the context of the Western (or, more precisely, Anglo-Saxon) version of capitalism. Nonetheless, it may be just as useful in studying the neoliberalisation of policies in the particular context of Nordic capitalism. As Schmidt (2022a, p. 5), probably the most prominent proponent of this approach recently put it:

Discursive institutionalism lends insight into neoliberalism as a set of deep philo-

sophical ideas that has generated successive policy programs over the years created by ideational agents who coordinated their policy construction and communicated their legitimacy to the public in ways that helped serve to transform capitalism. 'Neoliberalism' in this perspective refers to a core set of ideas about markets and the state's role, and as such contains visions not only of the ideal way to govern the economy but also the polity.

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