

Role of cross-cultural management in professional football: The perspective of Polish Ekstraklasa SA

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Published online: April 30, 2021

(Accepted for publication April 15, 2021)

DOI:10.7752/jpes.2021.s2155

Abstract:

During last decades Polish economy made a significant progress. A milestone in reforming and developing Polish economy was political and economic transition. Thanks to reforms and reorganization in functioning of the country many industries still have opportunities for growing and expanding. One of the beneficent from this perspective is football. Free movement of goods, both financial and human capital, seem to be crucial here. In a consequence, football can be perceived as an attractive sector from the perspective of investors and customers. The results of functioning in new realities and possibilities can be observed not only from the perspective of financial results but also can be presented by showing other determinants of success, including quality of the championships. In this case quality is related to the skills and competences of players and managers. The best footballers and coaches want to play and work in the best leagues. Quality of championship is meaningful here. To increase the level of matches it is necessary to base on domestic resources but also to attract capital and best specialist from abroad. The main purpose of the paper is to present the evolution of foreigners in Polish first football division. In the article there are presented the nationalities which are significantly represented by foreigners in Polish Ekstraklasa, both players and coaches. The review gives opportunity to analyze the issue from the perspective of cross-cultural management by showing the opportunities and challenges which the managers, directors and owners of the football clubs need to face in cross-cultural organizations. The theoretical approach used to compare the data is 6-dimensions by Geert Hofstede.

Key Words: cross-cultural management; cultural differences in football; management in football; sport team management; Ekstraklasa SA

Introduction

Nowadays, football and science are increasingly connected. Statistics plays an incredible role in the development of football. The prove of this situation is steadily increasing number of science articles where the main subject is football. This paper continues the trend, and the authors believe that the article will inspire other researches to involve in the process of expanding science in developing football. Under the influence of social and economic development, sports clubs are transforming into enterprises that must ensure their regular operations in an intensely competitive market. Thus, the market economy forces top football clubs have become modern and sophisticated companies (Morrow and Howieson, 2014) and sports club managers have to act like commercial managers (Zawadzki, 2020). Sports clubs are particular organizations different from manufacturing firms or service companies in many aspects, such as their operations, organizational structure, and scope of activities. Clubs, especially which are managed in the form of enterprises, emphasizes the demand to achieve economic goals to continue their development (Oczki and Pleskot, 2020).

They need to spend enormous effort to complete sports performance, but they should also make a social and economic profit. This idea relates also to the national and international championships, which can be classified to the group of mega-events (Wyszyński, 2016; Gulak-Lipka and Jagielski, 2020). Moreover, it is very common for sports clubs to hire foreign coaches and players in order to improve club's strength and competitiveness, so that management methods especially cross-cultural management are also an indispensable part of sustaining operations. In a survey from the project Social Inclusion and Volunteering in Sports Clubs in Europe (SIVSCE) in 2017, sports clubs were asked to estimate the percentage of members with a migration background. An average of two-thirds of sports clubs reported having migration members. There are 26% of Polish sports clubs with migration members (Breuer, Feiler, Llopis-Goig and Elmoose-Østerlund, 2017). Many sports clubs have decided to hire better quality players and more professional coaches from abroad to survive in the fierce market competition. In this way, they can obtain better sports performance and financial income, and gain competitive advantages, to be in an invincible status over the industry (Gulak-Lipka, 2016). On the road to internationalization, cross-cultural issues should be taken seriously, which requires clubs' managers and directors to listen closely to the new expectations, oppositions, and attentions of club members, as well as

external stakeholders such as suppliers, sponsors, and government agencies (Becker, 2010; Holan and Phillips, 2004).

One dimension or type of culture (Schein, 1985) is needed if study its impact on society for investigating the behaviors, activities, and values of social members (Ali, 2006). National culture defines an interactive aggregate of common characteristics shared by a nation (Clark, 1990; Hofstede, 2001; Steenkamp, 2001). Numerous scholars identified significant relevance in the explanation of human behavior in national cultural theories, especially concerning Geert Hofstede (2002). The nation is a meaningful proxy for culture because within-country commonalities and between-country differences exist (Dawar and Parker, 1994; Schwartz, 2006; Steenkamp, 2001). Further, culture is deep-rooted, and therefore evolution is quite gradually. Hofstede's national cultural framework may be the most influential conceptual foundation in cross-cultural studies (Fernandez, Carlson, Stepina and Nicholson, 1997), his framework is both conceptually and empirically important. Berry (2001) mentioned that integration is an option when foreigners attach importance to their original culture and at the same time show an interest in both maintaining one's original culture and engaging in daily interactions with other groups. Cultural integration plays a positive role in cross-cultural contexts. This element can be a key aspect in realizing the strategies of an organization (Gulak-Lipka, Jagielski and Taciak, 2018).

The preferred definition of culture is from Hofstede (2001): "culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or society from those of another". The first four dimensions of Hofstede's cultural theory, including Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism, and Femininity, formed the basis toward Hofstede's book *Culture's Consequences*. Motivated by Hofstede's work, a new national culture dimension initially identified by Michael Bond among students in 23 countries, it sought to resolve one limitation of Hofstede's previous findings (*The Chinese Culture Connection*, 1987; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010). According to Bond's research focused on the Far East, the fifth dimension was first called Confucian Dynamism, which was later changed to Long-Term Orientation in the 1980s (Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Hofstede, 2001). In the 2000s, Minkov (2007) analyzed data from the World Values Survey which involved 93 countries, a new dimension was obtained, which described the indulgence-restraint dimension, then it became the sixth dimension of Hofstede's Value Dimension Theory (Hofstede, 2011).

Because of historical and political aspects in Poland after WWII, the transfers of players from and to Poland were difficult or in many cases impossible. This situation is improved after 1990's when Poland was transitioned from post-communist economy to market system. Undoubtedly, these conditions are developed thanks to participation in European Union and participation in free movement of goods and people in terms of international agreements. Thus, showing the evolution in this area seems to be an interesting issue.

Materials and Methods

In the paper, the authors focus on the cross-cultural differences in professional football on the example of Ekstraklasa SA, which is the first division of the football league in Poland. The data were collected from transfermarkt.com – the online football database which collects numbers and statistics about football all over the world. The analyzed data in the article contain the range from season 2009/2010 to first round of season 2020/2021 and include information about the numbers and nationalities of foreign players who played in Polish clubs during 12 seasons covered by the study. The data were analyzed from few perspectives and they are described by showing different issues of cross-cultural management in football clubs as well as underlying the increased meaning and role of foreigners in the Polish first division football league.

The purpose of the study is to present the evolution of the foreigners in the first division Polish football league by distinguishing the nationalities of players. Subsequently, the nationalities of players and coaches who contained the highest percentage of foreigners are analyzed from the perspective of 6-dimensions by Hofstede and finally juxtaposed with Polish culture to present the challenges and opportunities that managers and owners of Polish football clubs need to face. Thanks to that, it is possible to identify and underline potential cultural issues in the teams.

Results

In the Polish first division football league since 1990 there had been playing players from different destination of Europe and whole world. However, the nationalities which appeared in Poland most commonly in this period were Slovaks (122 different players – 9.1% of all foreigners); Brazilians (121 players – 9%); Serbs (92 players – 6.9%); Croatians (84 players – 6.3%); Spanish (66 players – 4.9%); Czechs (65 players – 4.8%) and Portuguese (40 players – 3%). Moreover, during the last 12 seasons, players from mentioned countries contained the most notable percentage of foreigners in Ekstraklasa SA.

It is important to notice that the percentage of foreigners in total number of players in Polish Ekstraklasa is significant in last seasons, respectively: Season 2009/2010: 105 foreigners (19.44% of total number of players); Season 2010/2011: 157 foreigners (29.51%); Season 2011/2012: 156 foreigners (29.94%); Season 2012/2013: 156 foreigners (28.57%); Season 2013/2014: 154 foreigners (24.87%); Season 2014/2015: 163 foreigners (28.4%); Season 2015/2016: 148 foreigners (26.57%); Season 2016/2017: 165 foreigners (27.5%);

Season 2017/2018: 210 foreigners (34.88%); Season 2018/2019: 197 foreigners (30.35%); Season 2019/2020: 217 foreigners (34.66%); Season 2020/2021: 168 foreigners (34.5%)¹.

The number of foreigners from selected countries is different in the analyzed period. Players from Slovakia, Brazil, Serbia, Croatia, Spain, Czechia and Portugal had been contained significant part of foreigners in Polish Ekstraklasa during the last 12 seasons. In season 2009/2010, there were 16 Slovaks (15.24% of all foreigners); 12 Serbs (11.43%); 11 Brazilians (10.48%); 6 Czechs (5.71%), 3 Croatians (2.86%) and 2 representatives of Spain and Portugal (1.9%). In season 2010/2011, Slovakia and Serbia were represented by 19 players each (12.1%); the number of Brazilians was 12 (7.64%); there were 7 Croatians (4.46%); 5 Czechs (3.8%); 3 Portuguese (1.91%) and 2 Spanish (1.27%). In season 2011/2012, there were 19 Slovaks (12.18%); 14 Serbs (8.97%); 9 representatives of Czechia and Brazil (5.77%); 7 Croatians (4.49%) and 2 Spanish and Portuguese (1.28%). In season 2012/2013, again the most representative nation by foreigners was Slovakia - 19 players (12.18%), then Serbian - 14 (8.97%); Czechia and Brazil - 9 footballers (5.77%); 7 Croatians (4.49%) and Portugal and Spain - 2 players from each of these countries (1.28%). In season 2013/2014, invariably, on the top were Slovaks - 18 players (11.69%) and Serbs - 11 (7.14%); then Portuguese - 10 players (6.49%); Brazilians and Czechs - 9 (5.84%); Spanish - 7 (4.55%) and Croatians, represented by 5 footballers (3.25%). In season 2014/2015, the number of Slovaks went up to the first - 25 players (15.34%); next were Brazilians - 13 (7.98%); Portuguese - 11 (6.75%); Serbs - 10 (6.13%); Spanish - 9 (5.52%); Croatians - 8 (4.91%) and Czechs - 4 (2.45%). In season 2015/2016, there were 29 (19.59%) Slovaks; 11 (7.43%) Brazilians; 9 (6.08%) citizens of Serbia; 8 (5.41%) Czechs and Croatians; 4 (2.7%) Spanish and 3 (2.03%) Portuguese. In season 2016/2017, there were 31 (18.79%) Slovaks; 10 (6.06%) Serbs; 8 (4.85%) Spanish, Croatians and Brazilians; and 6 (3.64%) Portuguese and Czechs. In season 2017/2018, there were 26 (12.38%) citizens of Slovakia; 18 (8.57%) Croatians; 16 (7.62%) Spanish; 10 (4.76%) players from Serbia and Czechia; 8 (3.81%) Brazilians and 6 (2.86%) Portuguese. During the season 2018/2019, there were 23 (11.68%) footballers from Spain; 20 (10.15%) Slovaks; 14 (7.11%) players from Croatia and Portugal; 13 (6.6%) Serbs and 5 (2.54%) representatives of Brazil and Czechia. In season 2019/2020, there were 24 (11.06%) citizens of Spain; 23 (10.6%) Slovaks; 19 (8.76%) Serbs; 16 (7.37%) Croatians; 12 (5.53%) Portuguese and 8 (3.69%) footballers from Czechia and Brazil. Finally, in the first part of season 2020/2021, there were 21 (12.5%) Slovaks; 17 (10.12%) Spanish; 13 (7.74%) Croatians; 11 (6.55%) Serbs and Czechs; 8 (4.76%) Portuguese and 7 (4.17%) Brazilians.

According to the data of the percent of foreigners in Ekstraklasa from 2009 to 2021, it can be found that before 2013, these two countries Slovakia (SLK) and Serbia (SER) have been at the top two in the ranking. Since 2014, the number of foreign players from Brazil (BRA), Spain (SPA), Portugal (POR) and Croatia (CRO) has gradually increased and appeared to be leading positions in the ranking. The proportion of Spanish members ranked first in the Season 2018/2019 and Season 2019/2020, and ranked second place in Season 2020/2021. The data show that the position of members' nationalities is constantly changing in the ranking. The league or clubs need to absorb more powerful members, but the team members' stability is also critical. So, it is precious to dig out the reasons behind this phenomenon.

Another interesting issue from the perspective of cross-cultural management in football clubs is the number of foreign coaches who worked in Ekstraklasa's clubs during the analyzed period. In the last 12 seasons, Polish first division clubs were trained by 37 (28.82%) coaches from abroad² out of a total number of 133 managers. 6 times Polish clubs were trained by Czechs (4.51% of a total number of coaches and 16.22% of number foreign managers); 5 clubs were managed by Spanish (3.76% / 13.51%); 4 times the nationality of coaches was German (3.01% / 10.81%) and 3 (2.26% / 8.11%) times coach was from Slovakia, Serbia, Portugal, the Netherlands and Croatia.

The similar nationalities of coaches and players can be observed from the data. From the perspective of national culture, there are no barriers in communication and understanding between coaches and players from the same country in the training process, which can give full play to coaches' mentoring role and contribute to the personal growth of players. However, it cannot be ignored that members no matter coaches or players from other countries, will bring new knowledge, technology and atmosphere to the teams. The composition structure of a league or club needs to be measured from multiple perspectives, such as the cost, players' ability, the organization development demand, the industry environment, and these factors are worth studying for further researches. According to these data, it is possible to get interesting comparisons which can bring valuable knowledge about the varieties of nationalities in Polish football.

The next step of the study was to compare the nationalities of players and coaches who most actively represent their countries in Polish Ekstraklasa according to the 6-dimensions theory by Geert Hofstede³. The following part of the article presents the comparison of the chosen cultures of nationalities of players and coaches in Ekstraklasa SA with Polish culture. Basing on Hofstede's theory, the selected countries were analyzed according to 6 determinants of the national cultures: Power Distance (PDI); Individualism (IDV); Masculinity (MAS); Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI); Long-Term Orientation (LTO) and Indulgence vs.

¹ data for first half of the season (February, 1st 2021); source: transfermarkt.de

² some of them trained more than one club or they managed one club more than once - they were rehired

Restraint (IVR). The data for six dimensions scores of culture are downloaded from geerthofstede.com. It provides to researchers more than 100 countries' scores to investigate in this field.

The basic values for comparing the numbers are results obtained for Polish culture. The numbers of the culture determinants for Poland are as follows: Power Distance (PDI) – 68; Individualism (IDV) – 60; Masculinity (MAS) – 64; Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) – 93; Long-Term Orientation (LTO) – 38; Indulgence (IVR) – 29. From the perspective of countries of players from abroad, Slovakia (SLK) obtains 100 points for PDI; 52 for IDV; 100 for MAS; 51 for UAI; 77 for LTO and 28 for IVR. For Serbia (SER), the results are as follows: PDI – 86; IDV – 25; MAS – 43; UAI – 92; LTO – 52; and IVR – 28. 6-dimension results for Spain (SPA): PDI – 57; IDV – 51; MAS – 42; UAI – 86; LTO – 48; IVR – 44. The results for Croatia (CRO): PDI – 73; IDV – 33; MAS – 40; UAI – 80; LTO – 58; IVR – 33. For Portugal (POR) the numbers are as follows: PDI – 63; IDV – 27; MAS – 31; UAI – 99; LTO – 28; IVR – 33. Culture analysis for Czechia (CZE) shows that PDI – 57; IDV – 58; MAS – 57; UAI – 74; LTO – 70; IVR – 29. And finally, the results for Brazil (BRA) are: PDI – 69; IDV – 38; MAS – 49; UAI – 76; LTO – 44; IVR – 59. To prepare a similar comparison according to the nationalities of coaches from abroad, it is necessary to choose the same countries as for players⁴ but subtract Brazil and add Germany and the Netherlands. The results obtained for Germany (GER) are: PDI – 35; IDV – 67; MAS – 66; UAI – 65; LTO – 83; IVR – 40. The numbers get for the Netherlands (NET) present as follows: PDI – 38; IDV – 80; MAS – 14; UAI – 53; LTO – 67; IVR – 68.

Discussion

According to the numbers presented in the previous section, it is possible to get some interesting conclusions about the situation in Polish football clubs from the perspective of cultural mixture in the organizations. The most significant difference between Poland and other cultures in Power Distance, there can be noticed in the case of Germany (GER) and Slovakia (SLK). The numbers in this field get values between 35 (GER) and 100 (SLK). Cultural differences in this field can be crucial. The most significant facts that should be considered are as follows. Among the lower Power Distant countries (GER and NET), team members do not like to be controlled. To manage effectively such cultures, the coaches should listen to the opinions of team members and cannot be arbitrarily judged. In a society with a high-Power Distance (SLK and SER), it is completely acceptable that some people have more power than others so that they equate the ideal boss with a good mentor. They prefer to be supervised and told what to do. Therefore, when facing such significant cultural differences existed in a team, the team leaders should pay attention to each member's acceptance and clear instructions and assign tasks to specific situations. Likewise, players should also try to respect and understand managers or coaches who are different from their own national culture to maintain the harmony of a team.

The next area is Individualism. Here the values are between 25 (SER) and 80 (NET). As it can be observed, the lowest numbers are given to the cultures from Eastern Europe and Brazil. The highest scores have countries from Central and Western Europe. This situation can have special meaning from the perspective of team sport. Consequently, the managers should remember that players from countries with low scores as Serbia (SER), Croatia (CRO) and Portugal (POR) are considered collective societies, and loyalty in a collectivist culture is crucial. The relationship between leaders and team members is perceived in moral terms, and they hope to have a good reputation and face in the group. These societies require everyone to take responsibility for their group. In individualist societies (NET, GER and CZE), people care more about themselves or their self-esteem than the group. In this case, when managers set goals, they should emphasize collective honor to the players with a collectivism culture. While when targeting players with an individualism culture, highlight personal achievements would be an intelligent step. Another element of the study is Masculinity. The scores given for the countries are as follows. The lowest rank NET – 14 and the highest SLK – 100. The most helpful tips and recommendations for coaches should include the fact that in typical Feminine countries (NET and POR), it is essential for people to keep their lives and work balanced. Effective managers are supportive of their people, and each member should be involved in making decisions. Managers pursue consensus, and members consider equality at the performance. In their opinion, discussions before reaching an agreement are deemed required. Slovakia (SLK) is an intensely masculine society, and citizens of this county can lay stress on success-driven and usually they are status-oriented. In this case, people work hard and spend a long working time to achieve a high living standard. From this perspective, it is necessary for the clubs to remember to stimulate the players through proper motivations.

The next dimension according to Hofstede is Uncertainty Avoidance Index. The lowest score in the ranking has SLK – 51 and the highest POR – 99. It is valuable to notice that the countries with high scores are also POL (93) and SER (92). Again, the differences seem to be too crucial to avoid the issue of Uncertainty Avoidance in organization management. Portugal (POR) scores high in this dimension, so the Portuguese like to avoid uncertainty. Even Slovakia (SLK), which scored the lowest, showed a slight preference for avoiding uncertainty. In these cultures, people expect to be governed by rules, precision and punctuality are the norms, innovation may

⁴ in most cases the clubs hired managers from the same countries as the origin of footballers

be resisted, and security is an important factor in individual motivation. It can be seen that players from these countries are more willing to obey their managers' orders, and they are more adapted to regular training and life.

The following determinant is Long-Term Orientation. In this area, the lowest number is given to POR (28) and the highest to GER (83). Poland (POL) has a rather low value – 38 in this field. Long-Term Orientation can be significant in developing the strategic plan and goals for a team. It is necessary to remember that the citizens with a low score on this dimension, such as Portugal (POR) and Poland (POL), exhibit great respect for traditions, a relatively small propensity to consider for the future, and a focus on achieving quick results. Germany (GER) and Slovakia (SLO), so countries with high scores indicate that people show an ability to adapt traditions quickly to changed conditions, and they encourage efforts and perseverance to achieve results as a way to prepare for the future. Thus, if the players or coaches come from a country with Long-Term Orientation, it seems more helpful to the planning and development of a team, but they cannot forget to keep in mind that some cultures can look in a different way to this issue.

The last dimension mentioned by Hofstede is Indulgence. In this area, the lowest value is 28/29 (SLK; SER / POL; CZE) and the highest NET (68). Good coaches, who include the cultural issue in their management style should know that a low score on this dimension means that these countries have a culture of Restraint. People in restrained societies do not emphasize leisure time and control the satisfaction of their desires. In contrast to restrained societies, people in Indulgent societies show a willingness to realize their impulses and desires concerning enjoying life and placing a higher degree of importance on leisure time. They hold a positive attitude and tend towards optimism. According to the data, coaches should keep a watchful eye on players who come from an indulgence culture to get too relaxed, and understand these players, because they are not idle and listless, but caused by cultural differences. At the same time, it is undeniable that such people are almost impossible to bring dull emotions to the team.

As the numbers show by country comparison, according to the determinants of the culture are very diversified. There are not two or more similar cultures but they can show similarities in some areas. What is interesting the similarities cannot be observed even according to the common origins of the countries. Poland (POL), Slovakia (SLK), Croatia (CRO) and Serbia (SER) – all of these countries are Slavic countries. However, as it can be observed the differences in the context of determinants of cultures can be extremely high. Countries sometimes can be similar based on their geographical location, but it is not a rule. Moreover, Polish culture seems to be the most diversified from Slovak's (SLK) and Dutch' (NET) cultures and the closest to Czech (CZE), Portuguese (POR) and Spanish (SPA) cultures. As a consequence, this situation needs to introduce a special management methods to the football clubs located in Poland.

Conclusion

At present, research on the culture of sports organizations has not yet become mainstream, but the trend is growing (Girginov, 2006; Kaiser, Engel and Keiner, 2009; Schroeder, 2010). Sports organizations and their coaches, athletes, and members have gradually become valuable subjects in cultural studies (Maitland, Hills and Rhind, 2015). The research described in the article contributes to the cross-cultural management literature by analyzing the data of Polish Ekstraklasa SA. After comparing the listed countries with Hofstede's 6-dimensions, the result shows that the scores for most of the dimensions varied widely. Moreover, the clubs hire mostly coaches from the same countries as the players. Polish clubs very willingly hire players from neighbor countries like Slovakia (SLK) or Czechia (CZE), but as the research shows the cultural differences between the citizens of these countries can be significant in many aspects. However, the study brings additional questions which can be answered by providing further researches:

- 1) *What are the reasons of the turnover of the nationalities?*
- 2) *What are the reasons of similar nationalities of coaches and players in the league?*

The main limitation of the study is access and the range of available data. Football evolved to the range of serious business quite recently. Unfortunately, the data bases which present the facts about the numbers in football had been reliably and systematically completed since 2010s. Although, Polish football first division seems to be very diversified in terms of nationalities of players, this number should increase to catch up with the best European leagues, where foreigners contain more than two-thirds of the total number of footballers. Hopefully, this research will catch the attention of the challenges caused by cross-cultural conflicts, promote cultural integration, and encourage managers, coaches and players to understand and cooperate well.

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