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Research Article

Issue Framing and Institutional Constraints in EU Agenda-Setting: An Analysis of European Union Sport Policy

Borja García, *Loughborough University*

Mads de Wolff, *Loughborough University*

Serhat Yilmaz, *Loughborough University*

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Abstract

The article uses agenda-setting to analyse the process which saw sport included in the new EU programme, Erasmus+, despite cuts in the EU's budget. In doing so, the article addresses gaps in two bodies of literature. On the one hand, it contributes to developing the study of EU agenda-setting. On the other hand, the article analyses recent developments in EU sport policy, a body of literature that has not paid attention yet to decisions taken after the entering into force of the Treaty of Lisbon (2009). The article applies conceptually guided process tracing through written documents and 25 semi-structured interviews with representatives from the European Commission, European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. The analysis shows how the Commission overcame blockades by framing sport initiatives as part of the wider agenda on economic growth through education, training and participation in grassroots sport, thus obtaining a funding stream for a new policy area in a time of austerity measures. The research illustrates that agenda-setting is a useful conceptual framework for explaining not just radical but also incremental policy changes on the EU agenda.

Keywords

Agenda-setting; EU sport policy; Erasmus+; EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF); sport

The Lisbon Treaty marks an important milestone for European Union (EU) sport policy. The EU, for the first time, was given direct competence on sport allowing EU institutions to develop a formal sport policy with a dedicated budget line (García and Weatherill 2012). However, despite having a legal basis in the field of sport, it was challenging for the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) - responsible for sport - to secure a budget line for the implementation of its initiatives under EU sport policy. The Erasmus+ Programme was finally chosen as the vehicle to facilitate the development of a European sport policy, hence becoming the 2014-2020 EU programme for education, training, youth, and *sport* (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2013, emphasis added). With Erasmus+, sport for the first time received a dedicated funding stream as part of the EU's 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), colloquially known as the EU budget.

This paper adopts the theoretical lens of agenda-setting to explore the process that led to the adoption of the Erasmus+ sports chapter. While agenda-setting has been used extensively to study policymaking dynamics at national level (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen and Jones 2006), it has only recently been employed to study EU decisions, and the academic literature which applies agenda-setting to policy making at the European level is in 'its relative infancy' (Stephenson 2012: 796). Therefore, the article represents a contribution to the growing academic work on that area (Princen and Rhinard 2006; Princen 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013; Moschella 2011; Littoz-Monnet 2012; Vanhoonacker and Pomorska 2013). In this regard, we use EU sport policy as a case study to help refine the existing literature that has developed theoretically the study of EU agenda-setting (Princen 2007, 2009, 2013).

Thus, the first research objective of the article is to analyse the process that led to the adoption of the Erasmus+ sports chapter as part of the development within EU's sport policy agenda. The article is not interested in the process that led to sport being initially introduced onto the EU policy agenda and incorporated in the treaties; this has been done at length elsewhere (see, for example, García and Weatherill 2012). The article additionally analyses the agenda-setting dynamics of an existing policy, i.e. sport. Building on the existing literature on EU agenda-setting (reviewed below) the second objective of the article is to discuss the role of issue framing and institutional constraints in EU agenda-setting. Thus, the article presents the case study of EU sport policy in order to contribute to the ongoing development of EU agenda-setting theory.

Our findings particularly illustrate the way institutional factors constrain the attention of EU policy actors, namely the Council of the European Union (we will refer to this institution also as the Council for stylistic reasons) and the European Parliament (EP); and how the strategic framing of sport by DG EAC recaptured their interest. Theoretically, these findings underline the importance of issue framing and its strategic use to overcome institutional constraints and the lack of attention from policy actors. The article proceeds in four steps. First, the literature on EU agenda-setting is reviewed. Second, the specific details of our methodology are outlined. Then, the process of sport's inclusion in Erasmus+ is explained. Finally, we reflect on our findings and conclude with the implications for the wider understanding of EU agenda-setting.

AGENDA-SETTING IN THE EU

The concept of issue framing is at the heart of agenda-setting theory (Littoz-Monnet 2012). It refers to the way in which issues are defined while being incorporated onto the agenda (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). It forms, together with issue initiation and issue specification, the core of agenda-setting (Cobb and Elder 1972; Cobb, Ross and Ross 1976). For agenda-setters, the challenge to incorporating an issue onto the political agenda is capturing the attention of policymakers and building credibility (Princen 2011) so that their proposals are considered. Consequently, an issue is unlikely to get incorporated onto the agenda unless it is expanded to attract the attention of enough decision-makers (Cobb et al. 1976; Princen 2011). This is even more so the case in the EU, as issues may be lost in the process due to the EU's multilevel governance system, which provides a multiplicity of venues for deliberation. Moreover, the complexity of the EU's institutional structure, with power and competences diffused across institutions (Buonanno and Nugent 2013), offers actors the ability to set, modify and block the agenda at different points.

Whereas the EU is defined as an 'agenda-setting paradise' (Peters 2001: 88), it is not that easy to get issues onto the political agenda because the multiple entry points to the policy process can be used by both those in favour or against. In the ordinary policymaking process of the EU, the European Commission acts as a main agenda-setter due to its right of legislative initiative. However, it needs to ensure that proposals expand from its technocratic internal services ('the low politics route') to 'the high politics route' involving the Council and the European Parliament (Princen and Rhinard 2006: 1121) in order to have a realistic chance of being accepted onto the decision agenda. Here, in this process of expansion from the initial policy agenda to the decision agenda of the Council and the European Parliament, is where issue framing is crucial. Issue framing has the potential to influence the degree of support by decision makers for the issue at hand, hence facilitating (or not, depending on the framing) the entrance onto the decision agenda (Moschella 2011). Thus, issue framing is considered to be central to agenda-setting's success (Littoz-Monnet 2012).

Agenda-setters, therefore, will use issue frames strategically in order to define them in a way to mobilise the attention of policy actors. Accordingly, Princen (2011) conceptualises a typology of strategies that are adopted by agenda-setting policy actors at the European level. Among those strategies, Princen defines the strategy that uses frames to increase the interest of decision-makers: 'arousing interest' (Princen 2011: 933). The success of such a strategy depends on whether a convincing link is created between a policy problem and a prospective solution (Kingdon 1995; Princen 2007; Littoz-Monnet 2012). Framing, according to Princen (2011: 933) can be constructed either through 'big words' or through 'small steps'. The former involves linking the issue with established overall values which are central to the EU's identity, such as democracy and human rights (Princen 2011). By emphasising certain values, policy entrepreneurs seek to attract attention and attempt to induce policy actors to look at issues from their preferred perspective (Vanhoonacker and Pomorska 2013). Another closely related strategy to the use of big words is to connect the issue to the stated policy priorities and commitments of the EU. For example, Princen (2011) highlights that a wide variety of issues was presented as contributing to the so-called Lisbon Agenda for economic development and growth when it officially became a top priority in the EU. The strategic use of frames through broader-level concepts or context is also in line with the general studies on framing. These emphasise the importance of new frames referring to existing meta-frames, whether being resonant with broader values or wider social concerns (Goldstein 1993; Schon and Rein 1994; Rhinard 2010).

An alternative strategy to the use of big words is to generate interest in the issue through 'small steps' such as debates of the issue, organising conferences and focusing on its non-controversial elements (Princen 2011). Although the small steps approach is more time consuming, it makes use of a variety of instruments at the disposal of agenda-setters and gets operationalised if the link to the broader values or concerns cannot be convincingly established (Princen 2011).

Beyond the strategic use of frames to gain attention, institutional constraints also significantly impact the agenda-setting process. Institutional constraints will dictate whether an issue can be considered or not, and the way in which it can be done. The institutional and political framework within which policy actors operate favours the consideration of some issues while hindering the consideration of others (Littoz-Monnet 2012). Thus, institutional constraints directly affect the possibilities for issue expansion in the agenda-setting process. The EU's institutional framework is characterised by fragmented decision-making and a multilevel system of governance, which makes the EU very receptive to agenda-setters (Peters 1994, 2001; Peters and Pierre 2004). There is always at least one actor, whether a member state, a DG of the Commission or a committee of the European Parliament, that could be receptive to an issue. Nonetheless, this is a double-edged sword. Given the multiplicity of institutions and policy venues that are part of EU policymaking, issue expansion might become problematic for agenda-setters because they need to overcome a large number of procedural stages where EU institutions enjoy agenda-blocking powers that can delay or force change (i.e. reframing). Indeed, successful agenda-setting in the EU 'requires a considerable degree of consensus among important actors about the need to address the issue' (Princen 2007: 33). In other words, whereas agenda-setting proposals might find a receptive EU policy venue/actor with relative ease, it is much more difficult to get the issue considered high enough on the political agenda because there are a large number of actors to get on board (Princen 2007).

These specific institutional characteristics of the EU can be rather constraining for agenda setters and underline the stark contrast between the ease of achieving access to the wider policy agenda and the difficulty of actual policy adoption and implementation (Peters 2001). Therefore, it is

claimed that ‘the rise of issues on the political agenda depends on the availability of institutionally favourable conditions within the political system’ (Littoz-Monnet 2012: 507).

Despite the growing academic interest that EU agenda-setting has attracted, the focus of the existing literature on issue framing and its strategic use is rather limited (Moschella 2011; Littoz-Monnet 2012; Stephenson 2012; Vanhoonacker and Pomorska 2013). Furthermore, among this limited academic work, there is only one study that highlights the interplay between institutional constraints and issue framing in EU agenda-setting (Littoz-Monnet 2012). In her examination of EU cultural policy, Littoz-Monnet (2012) underlined the way in which DG EAC framed culture strategically as a potential solution to the EU’s economic problems by articulating its capacity to promote European growth and competitiveness. Littoz-Monnet, however, emphasised that such framing was only possible due to the power and salience of a pre-existing broader discursive framework: the establishment of the Lisbon Strategy under which the knowledge-based, competitive economy was the cornerstone of the EU’s economic strategy. In other words, the Lisbon Strategy created a broader institutional condition which could have been rather constraining but DG EAC managed to link its creativity frame successfully to the broader priorities of the strategy.

As we have seen in this review, the academic literature argues that issue framing is at the heart of successful agenda-setting (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Princen, through his work on the application of agenda-setting concepts to the European Union, has formulated a typology of strategies that policy actors follow in order to set the agenda and manage to get their issues incorporated onto the EU decision agenda. A limited number of case studies (Moschella 2011; Littoz-Monnet 2012; Stephenson 2012; Vanhoonacker and Pomorska 2013) have built on that work by exploring the strategic use of issue framing. Thus, this article represents the exploration of another case study (the adoption of the Erasmus+ sport chapter) to develop further the analysis of the relationship of issue framing and institutional constraints in EU agenda-setting. In doing so, we seek to refine the study of EU agenda-setters’ strategy and to contribute to the existing literature on EU agenda-setting.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

A case study approach is employed because it is particularly suited to investigating processes over time (Yin 2014). The research approach adopted is inductive, as the article seeks to contribute to existing theoretical debates rather than to generate theories or hypotheses. More specifically, our research design represents a form of ‘case-centric process tracing’ where the main aim is explain a particularly puzzling outcome (Beach and Pedersen 2013: 11), in particular: how do we explain the novel inclusion of earmarked funds for sport through Erasmus+? Rather than outright ‘theory testing’, the agenda-setting framework elaborated above is used pragmatically: as a heuristic instrument with analytical utility in explaining our case (Beach and Pedersen 2013: 13). Thus, agenda-setting theory is used to identify the intervening processes (George and Bennett 2005: 206–207). By submitting this case to careful process tracing and by presenting careful descriptions (Mahoney 2010: 125–131), however, the goal is also to evaluate this framework. Thus, while our aim is case-centric, we still draw some theoretical inferences.

Since case study research collects evidence from a multitude of sources in order to arrive at relevant conclusions (Yin 2014), this research draws from both primary and secondary sources. Specifically, we rely on written sources and interviews with policymakers. As for the former, the article uses official documents from EU institutions. The interviews informing this research comprise a total of 25 semi-structured interviews with officials involved in EU sport policy from the European

Commission, the European Parliament and the Council (see Table 1 appended to this article for interview details). These were undertaken face to face, except for two which had to be performed by telephone due to the interviewees' agenda. Interviews typically lasted between one and two hours. The interview guide design was informed by the review of the written documents, as specified above. Among other topics, interviewees were particularly asked about how Erasmus+ came to be adopted. These interviews formed part of a larger study (see De Wolff 2016), but the data used for this article is only concerned with the context and the process that led to the adoption of Erasmus+.

THE ADOPTION OF ERASMUS PLUS

The article now moves to explore the adoption of the Erasmus+ sport chapter. For the sake of brevity, highly stylised facts of process tracing are presented here in chronological order. Our analysis is divided into two stages that highlight the dynamics of EU agenda-setting within which DG EAC successfully worked to get sport onto the EU financial policy agenda and the subsequent funding stream for sport policy.

STAGE 1. THE TWO-YEAR EU SPORT PROGRAMME (2012-2013): FACING INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Following the entering into force of the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009, DG EAC started in early 2010 to develop suitable policy initiatives to implement the sport provisions in Art. 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). The policy process involved a consultation exercise with all actors concerned, including inter-service dialogue with all connected Commission DGs and an informal ministerial meeting during the European Sport Forum in April 2010 (European Commission 2011a; 2011b). In line with the previous budget allocations via three annual work programmes (2009, 2010, 2011) adopted by the Commission for 'the preparatory actions in the field of sport' and 'special annual events' (European Commission 2011c: 9), DG EAC developed a proposal for a two-year Sport Programme (2012-2013) that had a limited spending scheme from the ongoing EU budget (European Commission 2011b).

On 30th July 2010, DG EAC submitted the perceptive impact assessment report to the Commission's Impact Assessment Board (IAB). For the purposes of funding, sport was linked in this proposal to the budget's Citizenship section under the 'Heading 3B' (European Commission 2011b: 5). This budget heading aimed at addressing issues that generally concerned the interest of the EU citizens including some negative trends such as organised crime, terrorism and illegal immigration, but also fostering European culture and diversity (European Commission 2004). In this connection, according to DG EAC, sport as a policy field possesses socio-cultural values which can be utilised to ensure 'the positive effects of sport are of greater benefit for EU citizens and for European society as a whole' (European Commission 2011b: 7). This framing of the issue was consistent with DG EAC's general belief system regarding EU sport policy, as this unit of the European Commission has been one of the main advocates of sport's socio-cultural benefits over the last two decades (Parrish 2003).

Different institutional constraints, nevertheless, prevented the proposed two-year programme even getting onto the decision agenda. Firstly, DG EAC was unable to mobilise internal support within the Commission, as the IAB sent it back on 3rd September 2010 for revision (European Commission 2011b). The IAB particularly underlined the existence of different types of institutional constraints against the proposal and its specific funding requirement (European Commission 2011b). First, there

was a budgetary limitation at the European level. The mobilisation of additional financial resources for the programme as requested by DG EAC from the very limited remaining margins of the ongoing Financial Perspectives 2007-2013 was rather problematic. According to the IAB, a potentially very small financial allocation for the programme would have not been sufficient to achieve its envisaged policy objectives (European Commission 2011b). Second, an evaluation of the Preparatory Actions of 2009 and 2010 had not been carried out yet, which meant that it was impossible to illustrate and justify the EU-added value of the proposed programme in an independent manner (European Commission 2011b). This was deemed to be the key substantial constraint against the proposal and its required funding scheme (interview, Commission official, 17 June 2014).

Besides failing to gain internal support within the Commission, the proposed programme also failed to get the endorsement of European sport ministers. DG EAC's idea was discussed at the Council meeting in May 2010 and the ministers did not explicitly endorse the creation of the two-year Sport Programme. They underlined EU action in the field of sport should have clear added value by comparison with national plans (Council of the European Union 2010). Therefore, in this regard, the lack of evaluation of the 2009 and 2010 Preparatory Actions to illustrate the added value of EU actions in the field of sport proved to be an issue for the Council as well. Furthermore, taking into account the limited potential funding that would be available for sport-related activities, the ministers agreed that 'a possible EU financial programme supporting sports activities for the years 2012 to 2013 ought to have a limited number of priorities' (Council of the European Union 2010: 10). The request for limited issue priorities by the ministers was also underpinned by the budgetary limitation that had been pointed out by the IAB.

As a result of the existing institutional constraints, the proposed two-year sport programme was consequently withdrawn by DG EAC and replaced with a political communication without a spending scheme for 2012-2013 (European Commission 2011b). The IAB subsequently approved the revised proposal and the *Communication on Developing European Dimension in Sport* (European Commission 2011a) was adopted on 18 January 2011. The communication prioritised a number of policy issues with related policy actions. As a response to the communication, the Council also adopted a resolution on a three-year EU work plan for sport for the period from 2011 up to mid-2014 underlining the priorities of the member states (Council of the European Union 2011). These two policy documents officially established a policy framework incorporating prioritised issues and related policy actions and became the backbone of EU sport policy (Geeraert 2016).

In agenda-setting terms, the two-year sport programme proposed by DG EAC failed to gain the attention of policy actors beyond DG EAC due to institutional constraints. Therefore, issue expansion did not take place from the low politics route of the Commission to the high politics route involving the Council and the EP. In fact, the career of the issue was short-lived and did not even survive internally within the Commission due to the opposition of the IAB. DG EAC realised that sport, as a standalone policy issue, failed to mobilise the support of enough actors to incorporate an adequate funding stream onto the decision agenda. Internally, the IAB clearly pointed out that 'the mere fact of a new Treaty basis for sport is an important *but not sufficient justification* for a proposal of a two-year EU sport programme at this point in time' (European Commission 2011b: 5, emphasis added). The discussion by the sport ministers in their Council meeting was indicative of an interest (i.e. it was on the political agenda), but not of enough support for the proposal (i.e. it was not on the decision agenda). Therefore, the challenge for DG EAC was now to construct a strategy that could secure enough institutional support for a sport programme funded in the upcoming financial budget for the period of 2014-2020, on which preparatory work had already been underway since mid-2010 (European Commission 2011c).

Such a strategy was needed to arouse the attention of EU policy actors with a view to overcome blockages to issue expansion within the Commission, but also to expand the issue to the agenda under the high politics route. In theoretical terms, the framing of sport had to be adjusted in order to overcome the institutional constraints that were evident after the first attempt.

STAGE 2: A STRATEGIC FRAMING OF SPORT FOR ISSUE EXPANSION AND AGENDA ENTRANCE

Learning from its original failure of securing funding for sport, DG EAC devised a twofold strategy to adjust its position in line with the broader institutional framework of the post-Lisbon era. The strategy was based upon two components: the reframing of sport for issue expansion and the integration of sport into a larger spending programme for the purposes of agenda simplification. Firstly, the framing of sport was adjusted in line with the broader discursive context related to the Europe 2020 agenda. DG EAC developed a new issue definition in which sport was successfully framed with a convincing link between the EU's economic problems and sport as a potential solution. In doing so, DG EAC not only managed to overcome the original internal opposition within the Commission but also attracted the attention of the Council and the EP. Gaining the interest of the Council and the EP was significant because it allowed the expansion of the decision agenda to include sport and paved the way for a favourable adoption. The second aspect of the strategy was to overcome institutional constraints through simplification. This meant using an existing programme to incorporate the sport initiatives, rather than creating a specific programme for sport. Here, we will see how Erasmus+ was chosen by DG EAC in order to gain the approval of other policy actors. Before moving to the analysis of this twofold strategy, we provide a brief contextual look at the EU's Agenda 2020 strategy and the 2014-2020 MFF.

Devised by the Commission, the Europe 2020 strategy aims to turn the EU into a smart, sustainable, and inclusive economy that delivers high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion (European Commission 2010). The priorities of the strategy consequently are 'smart growth' by developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation, 'sustainable growth' by promoting a more resource efficient and competitive economy and 'inclusive growth' by fostering a high-employment economy (European Commission 2010: 3). There are a number of headline economic targets set as a part of the strategy representing an overall view of where the Commission wants to see the EU on key parameters by 2020. The then-27 Heads of State and Government approved the Europe 2020 strategy in June 2010 (European Council 2010) and the member states in conjunction with the Commission have been working on the implementation since then.

Acknowledging that the success of the strategy would depend upon collective effort, the Commission decided to mobilise 'all EU policies' to pursue the strategy's objectives (European Commission 2010: 18). Subsequently, all programmes through which EU policies are implemented have also been redesigned to ensure their outputs and impacts support the key priorities of the strategy (European Commission 2011d). Additionally, with a view to improving EU financial efficiency, the Commission initiated a simplification process (European Commission 2012). The simplification aims to streamline spending programmes of the budget and to reduce the administration burden and cost for beneficiaries of funds. To achieve these objectives, the Commission agreed to rationalise EU programmes under the MFF by reducing the number of spending programmes and moving towards more integrated ones covering several policy areas (European Commission 2012).

It is against this backdrop of the Agenda 2020 and the effort to rationalise spending that DG EAC had to act in order to secure a funding programme to implement EU sport policy. The initial steps of this

second attempt were taken by the Commission with the publication in 2011 of a political communication to the Council and the Parliament on the future of EU sport policy (European Commission 2011a). This Communication was the first official policy document that presented the reframing of sport as contributing to the broader economic objectives of the EU under the Europe 2020 strategy. The document carefully articulated a link between sport and those broader economic goals at European level, in particular to turn the EU into a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy delivering high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion. DG EAC claimed that in the field of sport,

EU action also contributes to the overall goals of the Europe 2020 Strategy by improving employability and mobility, notably through actions promoting social inclusion in and through sport, education and training (including through the European Qualifications Framework) and European guidelines for physical activity (European Commission 2011a: 3).

The economic dimension of the sport sector was also underlined to illustrate directly its potential to contribute to economic growth in Europe:

Sport represents a large and fast-growing sector of the economy and makes an important contribution to growth and jobs, with value added and employment effects exceeding average growth rates. Around 2% of global GDP is generated by the sport sector. Major sport events and competitions provide strong potential for increased development of tourism in Europe. Sport is thus a contributor to the Europe 2020 strategy (European Commission 2011a: 8).

Thus, while the objectives of a sport programme were still the same, DG EAC framed the idea in a completely different way in order to fit ongoing broader policy discourses concerned with economic growth. This reframing of the issue of *sport* succeeded in gaining the attention of the Council and the EP. Additionally, through the Communication, DG EAC also hoped to spark political declarations from the Parliament and the Council with a view to using them in internal Commission discussions on the need for a sport programme (interview, Commission official, 16 May 2014).

First, it was the Council who endorsed the role of sport for the Europe 2020 strategy by acknowledging that ‘sport can contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth’ (Council of the European Union 2011: 1). In addition, the Council invited both the member states and the Commission to be bolder in their arguments on the contribution of sport to EU’s economy:

[member states and the Commission should promote] better recognition of the contribution of sport to the overall goals of the Europe 2020 Strategy given the sector’s strong potential to contribute to smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and new jobs and considering its positive effects on social inclusion, education and training as well as public health and active ageing (Council of the European Union 2011: 3).

Then, the EP welcomed the communication and recognised the potential of sport to help achieve the EU’s strategic objectives due to its educational and cultural values and as a vector of integration linked to social cohesion (European Parliament 2011). The EP also explicitly urged the Commission to ‘propose a dedicated and ambitious budget for sport policy under the future MFF’ (European Parliament 2011: 8). Moreover, in these documents the idea of a sport programme gathered the institutional support it needed. Both the Council and the Parliament encouraged the Commission to go ahead and draft a new proposal for a sport programme (Council of the European Union 2011;

European Parliament 2011). This was a clear signal that both institutions were ready to receive it onto their decision agenda.

The second part of DG EAC's two-fold strategy was to integrate sport as a sub-programme under a broader and existing programme, Erasmus+, in order to overcome internally the constraints caused by the simplification agenda of the Commission (European Commission 2012). This largely meant recognising that 'there was no appetite inside the Commission to have a separate programme for sport' since the Commission's general strategy was to rationalise its programmes (interview, Commission official, 17 June 2014). Therefore, senior officials in DG EAC made a strategic decision: To *hide* sport within a larger programme, rather than having a programme on its own.

That was a strategic decision of senior management, and I think they were right. I wasn't very happy when it happened [because] I wanted something separate because sport is so different [...] We have much more flexibility now with this small programme. You lose visibility perhaps, but you get flexibility and in the end you are kind of under the umbrella of something which protects you (interview, Commission official, 16 May 2014).

The rationale for this strategic decision was to ensure that sport was shielded as part of a larger and quite popular programme because there were wider negative trends towards more spending at EU level, as explained by this Commission official:

We made a conscious decision of not going with a separate programme for sport, and we packaged it within Erasmus+. I think that was the key because you are navigating very difficult straits in this political climate. One, of euroscepticism. Two, financial difficulties for absolutely everybody. If you try to navigate these straits with a little ship called 'Sports Programme', you will get blown out of the water in no time. So we packaged it on the bigger sort of ocean tanker called Erasmus+ (interview, Commission official, 12 May 2014).

With this proposal, DG EAC finally received a positive assessment on the Commission's internal impact assessment board (European Commission 2011c: 5), which also acknowledged the main benefit of including sport in Erasmus+ was mainly 'administrative efficiency' (European Commission 2011c: 36). DG EAC were thus successful in justifying sport's potential ability to contribute to Europe 2020 goals (issue framing) and negotiating institutional constraints by finding a suitable policy framework. DG EAC was then free to submit a proposal for the consideration of the EP and the Council.

Having adapted to the broader institutional conditions, DG EAC proceeded to draft a legislative proposal for Erasmus+. Sport was given a separate chapter in the Commission's proposal for Erasmus+, and two articles (11 and 12) which state specific objectives and activities (European Commission 2011e). Following the EU's ordinary legislative procedure, once the proposal is drafted and submitted, it is outside the Commission's hands and on the decision agenda of both the Council and the EP. Both the Council (2012a, 2012b) and the EP (2012) tabled amendments to the proposal and entered 'trilogue' negotiations throughout 2013 (European Parliament 2013: 4). There was very little contestation of the inclusion of sport (Council of the European Union 2013: 9–10; European Parliament 2013: 2–6). A couple of member states, most vocally Sweden, were opposed to including sport in Erasmus+ - a resistance based on strict subsidiarity concerns, i.e. that sport was best dealt with at the national level - but the vast majority were in favour and the resisting member states ultimately let go of their reservations, not least because the decision would be adopted under qualified majority (interview, member state representative, Working Party level, 21 May 2014).

The representatives of the member states working in the Council were finally happy to see the Commission's proposal adopted. They realised the chosen frame was probably the correct one for it allowed successful agenda inclusion and consequent policy adoption:

The general thing was that we were all very happy that sport was going to be getting its own dedicated budget as part of Erasmus+. Of course we would have liked it to be more. But I think there was recognition that even just getting this was a first, good step (interview, member state representative, Working Party level, 20 May 2014).

Moreover, a substantial majority of the EP's Committee on Culture and Education favoured sport's inclusion in Erasmus+ (European Parliament 2012; interviews with MEPs, June 4 and 11). Accordingly, the interinstitutional negotiations on the sporting aspects of Erasmus+ reveal much consensus. The end result of a long process was that sport was finally accepted as an area where the EU funds could be legitimately spent. Sport, within Erasmus+, has been placed under the MFF's Heading 1A (Competitiveness for Growth and Jobs) within the main heading of Smart and Inclusive Growth.

CONCLUSION

This article has analysed how sport came to be included as part of the Erasmus+ programme, hence adopting the first budgetary line to implement EU sport policy under Article 165 TFEU. This process has followed the expected agenda dynamics outlined in our conceptual framework in relation to issue framing, institutional constraints and issue expansion. DG EAC's initial proposal for a single programme for sport was internally blocked within the Commission, mostly due to the IAB's concerns over financial constraints of the EU budget. Seeking to overcome that constraint, DG EAC re-strategised (i.e. reframed the proposal), strengthening the link between sport and the EU's larger economic priorities and gave up on a single programme in favour of inclusion within a larger framework. Through institutional manoeuvring within the Commission, a viable institutional framework was located in Erasmus+. Crucially, the proposed sport actions were successfully linked to the priorities of Europe 2020, hence linking the sport chapter to a wider frame of already accepted EU policy objectives. Once the conflict was formally expanded beyond the Commission, the Council and the EP each sought to frame the content of the sport chapter according to their respective priorities.

In the vein of Princen (2011: 929) the agenda-setting strategies of DG EAC in order to 'mobilise supporters' and 'arouse interest' to induce conflict expansion focused on 'claiming authority' by defining (framing) sport as a vehicle for promoting economic development. This further underlines how an 'economised approach' (Princen 2011: 937) to agenda-setting remains a viable approach in the EU, especially in 'vulnerable' policy areas (Princen 2011: 939). It also indicates the importance of issue framing as a variable in predicting success in EU agenda-setting.

Attention and visibility are key terms in agenda-setting theory and, generally speaking, agenda-setting posits that more visibility is beneficial to promote an issue within the agenda in order to make a decision. Our research both supports and problematises this assumption. Earlier we noted how the Commission's decision to deliberately frame sport as a small chapter within a larger programme both increased and lowered the visibility of sport. This must be understood as a deliberately low-political agenda-setting strategy *caused* by high-politics (Princen and Rhinard 2006). Thus, the choice for Erasmus+ rather than a single programme was a consequence of the Commission's internal bureaucratic politics (Hartlapp, Metz and Rauh 2013), i.e. the strategy of

moving towards a streamlining of programmes, while also reflecting the uncertainty that revolved around the new MFF and the dominant politics of austerity. This meant DG EAC could not ‘speak with big words’ (Princen 2011) to arouse interest for sport’s funding. Rather, the strategy chosen to achieve a funding stream for sport included deliberately shying away from seeking visibility for sport and ‘hiding’ sports funding within a larger programme. As Princen (2011) suggests, this means that EU agenda-setting requires mixing diverse strategies – not all forms of visibility are equally beneficial when promoting an issue. In more generic terms, this also suggests that actors are heavily restrained by ongoing policy preferences when framing policy initiatives. Most importantly, this empirically supports Princen’s (2011: 940) claim that in areas where the EU is a ‘newcomer’, such as sport, building credibility is crucial, and accordingly agenda-setting strategies will tend to be ‘indirect’, with the most likely strategy being to link issues to more established programmes. DG EAC successfully linking sport to an ‘ocean tanker’ such as Erasmus+ represents a clear validation of this proposition.

Ultimately, our case presents an interesting dynamic whereby a low profile in the wider political agenda helped to develop EU sport policy, another instance of integration by stealth (Mény 2014). This result was strongly driven by the politics of austerity and the financial crisis which necessitated a low-political approach. Unexpectedly, the outcome of the high-political MFF negotiations later benefited sport’s agenda-expansion. This further emphasises how ‘low’ and ‘high’ dynamics usually intersect in shaping outcomes (Princen and Rhinard 2006).

It is further worth considering the limits of agenda-setting as a conceptual framework, in particular with regard to the risk of conceptual overstretch when applying a set of categories to a new case (Sartori 1970, 1991). At the most basic level, agenda-setting deals with the question of why certain issues become part of the political agenda while others do not (Princen 2012). Sport’s inclusion in Erasmus+, as a measurable and tangible new budgetary output, represents a rather unambiguous instance of policy change and agenda-expansion (Princen 2013: 866). At the same time, it is worth highlighting that Erasmus+ does not signify ‘radical’ change in the direction of EU sport policy in the same way as, say, the Bosman case represented in the pre-Lisbon era (García 2007). Within the context of punctuated equilibrium theory, to which agenda-setting theory is deeply linked (Princen 2013), the post-Lisbon era of EU sport policy is arguably best characterised by incremental change insofar as ‘EU sport policy’ at large has not been subject to major reframing but has mostly been subject to agenda-shaping (Tallberg 2003). Empirical studies of EU agenda-setting have, however, tended to focus on ‘radical’ instances of policy-change, such as the establishment of hedge fund regulation following the subprime crisis (Moschella 2011).

The question, then, is whether or not agenda-setting as a conceptual framework stands to lose analytical clarity – of being stretched – by the inclusion of cases like this, which explore the dynamics of an already established agenda. We would argue quite the opposite. EU agenda-setting remains at a research stage where extension is to be supported and, moreover, that while scholarly practice has tended to focus on *ex post* examinations of ‘radical’ decisions, more research into incremental processes are necessary and warranted in order to achieve a broader understanding of EU agenda-setting dynamics.

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CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS

Borja García, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Leicestershire LE11 3TU [b.garcia-garcia@lboro.ac.uk].

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Interview sample

Date	Affiliation	Place, type
05-02-2014	Department of Culture, Youth, Media and Sport, Flemish Communities, Belgium	Over phone
24-04-2014	Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, Ireland	Over phone
02-05-2014	Cyprus Sports Organisation	Brussels, direct
07-05-2014	Ministry of Culture, Denmark	Copenhagen, direct
08-05-2014	Ministry of Culture, Denmark	Copenhagen, direct
12-05-2014	European Commission, DG Education and Culture	Brussels, direct
14-05-2014	Permanent Representation of Sweden to the EU	Brussels, direct
15-05-2014	European Commission, DG Education and Culture	Brussels, direct
16-05-2014	European Commission, DG Education and Culture	Brussels, direct
20-05-2014	Permanent Representation of Ireland to the EU	Brussels, direct
20-05-2014	Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, Ireland	Brussels, direct
21-05-2014	Ministry of Human Resources, Hungary	Brussels, direct
21-05-2014	Department of Physical Education and Sports, Republic of Lithuania	Brussels, direct
02-06-2014	Department of Culture, Youth, Media and Sport, Flemish Communities, Belgium	Brussels, direct
03-06-2014	Anonymous	Brussels, direct
04-06-2014	Member of European Parliament, European People's Party, Germany	Brussels, direct
11-06-2014	Member of European Parliament, European Conservatives and Reformists Group, UK	Brussels, direct

Date	Affiliation	Place, type
12-06-2014	Permanent Representation of Spain to the EU	Brussels, direct
13-06-2014	Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Brussels	Brussels, direct
17-06-2014	European Commission, DG Education and Culture	Brussels, direct
20-06-2014	Permanent Representation of Belgium to the EU	Brussels, direct
23-06-2014	Assistant to MEP	Brussels, direct
01-07-2014	Permanent Representation of Denmark to the EU	Brussels, direct
14-07-2014	Ministry of Sport and Tourism, Department of Strategy and International Cooperation, Poland	Brussels, direct
16-07-2014	European Commission, DG Education and Culture	Brussels, direct