



UNION OF
**EUROPEAN
CLUBS**

UEC POLICY BRIEFING

Piracy in European Football

A structural threat to the European Sport Model

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Piracy in live sports broadcasting has evolved into a systemic and industrialised phenomenon , with profound consequences for the economic foundations of European football. Far from being a marginal or purely digital issue, it directly undermines the value of broadcasting rights, weakens club revenues and disrupts the financial equilibrium that sustains domestic leagues and the wider football pyramid.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE ECONOMIC TOLL

Recent industry estimates suggest that piracy costs the global sports sector approximately **\$28 billion annually**. Across Europe, the impact is already measurable and severe — in some markets more than one-third of fans regularly consume football through illegal streams.

These losses translate directly into **reduced investment capacity**, particularly for small and mid-sized clubs that rely disproportionately on collective media revenues.

The consequences extend beyond economics. Piracy accelerates financial polarisation, weakens competitive balance and undermines the **solidarity mechanisms** central to the European Sport Model.

GLOBAL SPORTS

\$28_{bn}

lost to piracy **every year** worldwide

LALIGA

€600–700 M

in **annual losses** across its clubs

SERIE A

~€300_M

lost **per season** to illegal streams

A RISK TO FANS, TOO

Consuming pirated matches puts viewers directly in the crosshairs of cybercriminals. Criminal networks behind illegal streams can gain access to sensitive personal data — postal addresses, emails, bank information, even device control. The risks range from **identity theft and financial fraud** to

ENABLED BY STRUCTURE

Fragmented media-rights markets
Technological vulnerabilities
Lack of collaboration among digital intermediaries
Insufficiently effective EU-level enforcement

“Failure to act risks entrenching existing inequalities, further weakening domestic competitions and undermining the long-term viability of European football.”

The current regulatory environment does not allow for the speed and coordination required to address live content theft — where value is lost in real time. UEC considers that an effective response must combine enforcement, regulatory reform and structural adjustments to football’s economic model.

INTRODUCTION

01. INTRODUCTION



The economic model of professional football is fundamentally dependent on the value of **media rights**. These revenues underpin not only elite competitions but also the redistribution mechanisms that sustain the broader football pyramid.

In recent years, the rapid expansion of digital technologies has altered the distribution and consumption of live sports content. While this created new commercial opportunities, it has also facilitated the large-scale, organised theft of audiovisual content. Piracy must therefore be understood not as an isolated digital challenge, but as a **structural threat**.

SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

02. THE SCALE

GLOBAL LOSSES

\$28_{bn}

drained from the global sports sector every year.

LALIGA

€600–700M / year

Serie A

~€300M / year

France • Ligue 1

37% use illegal streams • 55% for big games

Ireland • LOITV

over 50% of potential revenue lost

Global fans

up to 48% pirate sport monthly

4.7M

UK adults consumed illegal sports streams in a single six-month period.

Piracy is no longer informal or marginal. It is now:

Industrialised

Technology-enabled

Linked to organised crime

Normalised among consumers

STRUCTURAL IMPACT

03. STRUCTURAL IMPACT

3.1 — Broadcasting Rights & Revenue Loss

Broadcasting income remains the primary financial engine of professional football.

Piracy directly erodes this value by:

Reducing subscription revenues

Weakening rights negotiations

Lowering long-term investment capacity

The impact is particularly acute for domestic leagues outside the top tier.

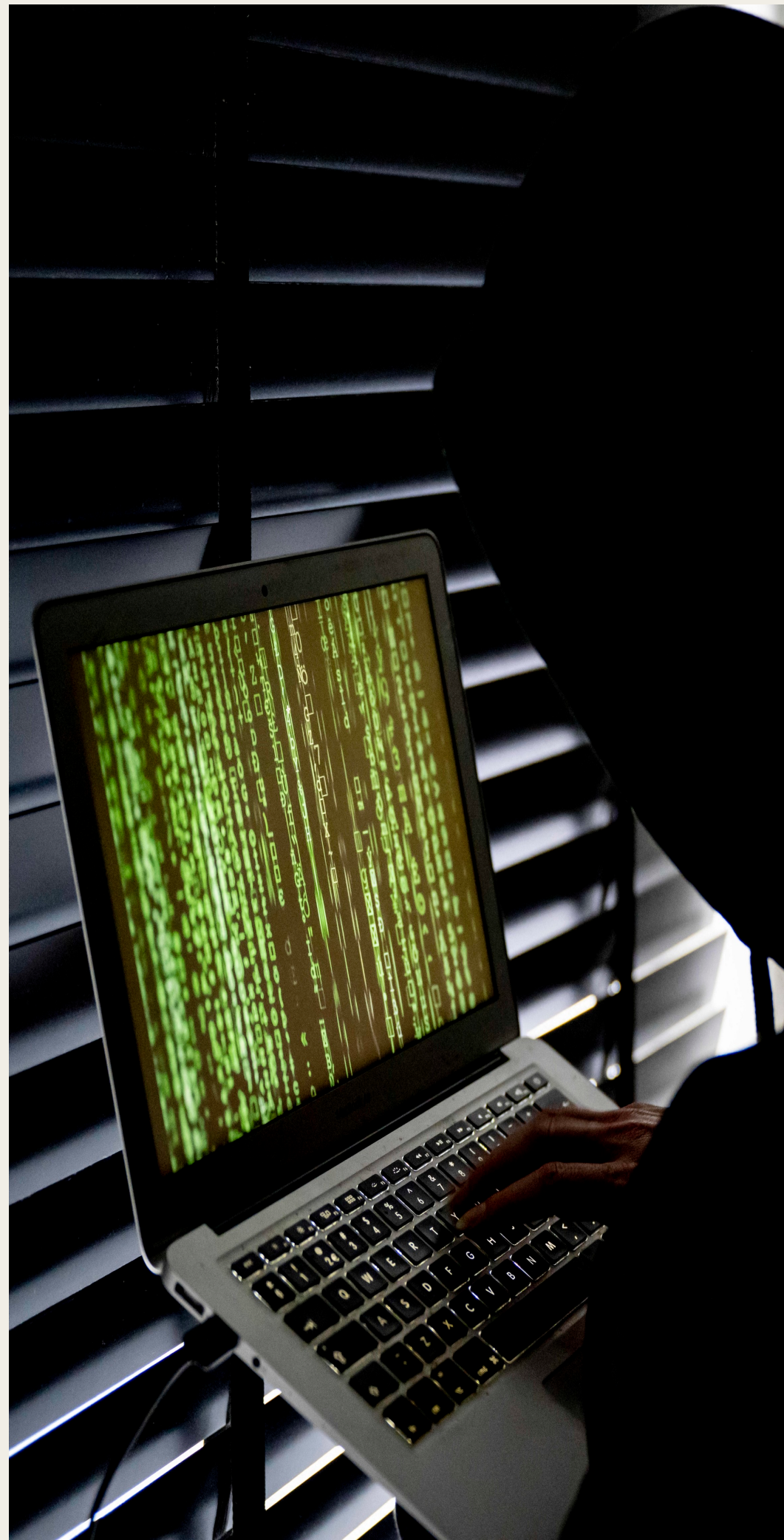
3.2 — Competitive Balance

Larger clubs can absorb revenue shocks; smaller clubs cannot. The result is:

Increased financial polarisation

Reduced competitiveness

Declining uncertainty of outcome



A GAME LOCKED DOWN — VALUE LOST IN REAL TIME

3.3 — Domestic Leagues & Pyramid

Domestic leagues rely heavily on centralized media-rights distribution.

Piracy:

Weakens collective revenue pools

Undermines solidarity mechanisms

Reduces funding for grassroots & development

This directly threatens the integrity of the European football pyramid.

3.4 — The European Sport Model

The model rests on three principles — and piracy undermines all of them:

Sporting merit

Reducing redistribution capacity

Open competition

Reinforcing structural inequalities

Financial solidarity

Limiting long-term sustainability

Piracy converts a competitive imbalance into a structural one — concentrating resources at the top while the base of the pyramid is starved of the revenue it depends on.

DRIVERS OF PIRACY

04. THE DRIVERS

Key structural drivers include:

01

Fragmented rights markets requiring multiple subscriptions

02

Rising costs for consumers

03

Technological accessibility of illegal streams

04

Insufficient enforcement speed and coordination

05

Lack of accountability for digital intermediaries

Consumer behaviour reflects **rational responses** to these conditions rather than purely criminal intent — which is why enforcement alone cannot solve it.

UEC POLICY POSITION

05. OUR POSITION

UEC CONSIDERS PIRACY TO BE

**A systemic
economic threat**

**A driver of
competitive
imbalance**

**A risk to domestic-
league
sustainability**

ADDRESSING IT REQUIRES



EU-level intervention matched to the speed of live content theft



Coordinated stakeholder action across leagues, broadcasters and platforms



Integration into broader football-governance reform

RECOMMENDATIONS

06. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 · REAL-TIME ENFORCEMENT

Immediate removal of illegal streams
during live events
EU-wide harmonised blocking orders

6.2 · TECH ACCOUNTABILITY

Legal obligations for platforms, ISPs &
device makers
Faster response requirements

6.3 · STRONGER LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

Close regulatory gaps in live-content
protection
Align enforcement tools across
Member States

6.4 · CONSUMER-CENTRIC REFORM

Address costs and fragmentation of rights
Encourage accessible, simplified legal
offerings

6.5 · INDUSTRY COORDINATION

Joint action between
leagues, broadcasters & regulators
Cross-border enforcement cooperation

STRUCTURAL REFORM

07. STRUCTURAL REFORM

Piracy cannot be addressed in isolation. UEC emphasises the need to align anti-piracy efforts with broader reforms, including:

DMRP**Domestic Media Rights Protection**

Safeguarding the value of centrally sold league rights.

PDR**Player Development Reward**

Rewarding the clubs that train and develop talent.

UCC**Fairer UCC revenue distribution**

Rebalancing how UEFA club-competition income flows through the pyramid.

Together, these policies aim to **restore balance and sustainability** across European football.

CONCLUSION

08. CONCLUSION

Piracy is no longer a peripheral issue. It is a structural challenge that directly threatens the economic foundations of European football.

Without decisive EU-level action, its impact will continue to:

Erode revenues

**Undermine
competitions**

Increase inequality

A CALL TO ACTION

UEC calls on the European Commission to prioritise this issue and engage with stakeholders to develop a coordinated and effective response.

SOURCES

09. SOURCES

SVG Europe

Piracy in live sports: how broadcasters, leagues, platforms and federations are fighting back
svgeurope.org/blog/headlines/piracy-in-live-sports

AgileTV

Why piracy undermines football's biggest stage
agiletv.com/why-piracy-undermines-footballs-biggest-stage

BBC News

Football and other premium TV being pirated at “industrial scale”
bbc.com/news/articles/cp3n7dx2174o

The Athletic / YouGov Sport

Illegal streaming: research reveals rise in piracy and desire for scrapping of the 3pm blackout
nytimes.com/athletic

Figures cited in this briefing are based on publicly available industry estimates, media reporting and stakeholder research. Estimates may vary depending on methodology, market, reporting period and the definition of piracy used, and should be read as indicative of the scale and structural impact of live-sports piracy rather than as a single consolidated financial assessment.



UNION OF EUROPEAN CLUBS

The Union of European Clubs is an international non-profit association of European football clubs, constituted under the laws of Belgium. UEC was formed to promote a fair, sustainable and balanced football ecosystem where clubs of all sizes can thrive — protecting the European model of sport, its social and community value, and its commercial success.

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