



# ACADEMY

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## Final Report

### U21 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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## Executive Summary

This research holds significance as it offers the valuable opportunity to scrutinize the influence of major sporting events on sustainable development through comparative analysis of Georgia and Romania, as the hosting nations of Under 21 European championship (Further referred as U21). Furthermore, it enriches the ongoing discourse surrounding the contribution of sports to the realization of the United Nation's (Further referred as UN) 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Further referred as SDGs). The insights derived from this research have the potential to guide prospective choices regarding the hosting of major sporting events in developing and developed countries, with a focus on aligning these endeavors with the Union of European Football Association's (UEFA) Environment, Social, Governance (Further referred as ESG) strategy (UEFA ESG, 2023) and UN's sustainable development objectives. Ultimately, this study has the capacity to make a substantial contribution to the pursuit of sustainable development on a global scale.

Moreover, the findings emerging from this research carry practical implications that encompass beyond academic discourse. The insights gathered have the potential to guide and inform future activities related to hosting major sporting events in countries being in development phase, with the focus to extend actualization of SDGs. It equips policymakers, event organizers, and stakeholders with a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, enabling them to make more informed choices. By ensuring that these events are effectively aligned with the UN's sustainable development agenda, we can pave the way for a more environmentally conscious, inclusive and equitable approach to hosting such events.

The study applied Critical Discourse Analysis (Further referred as CDA) to examine the alignment of the U21 European Championship in Georgia and Romania with the SDGs. Qualitative research, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, shows a mixed alignment with environmental sustainability, efforts towards social equality, and gaps in stakeholder engagement. Georgia focuses on social inclusion, while Romania prioritizes governance and community engagement. Both countries aim to use the U21 championship for sustainable development, aligning with UEFA's sustainability strategy and emphasizing the importance of adjusted approaches for hosting major sporting events. Recommendations include improved communication and initiatives for environmental sustainability and social equality.

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## Introduction

Mega Sporting events, with their global audience and expansive infrastructure requirements, have long been touted as potential game-changers for host nations, particularly those in the developing world. These events, although primarily aimed at promoting sports, are intertwined with broader geopolitical and socio-economic agendas (Cornelissen, 2010). The hope, as articulated by Matheson & Baade (2004), is that these events may serve as a pathway to prosperity for developing nations, fostering economic growth, global visibility, and sociocultural advancement. The distinction between an event and a mega-event fundamentally revolves around size. Mega-events are distinguished by their larger scale compared to regular events. However, the question arises: what defines 'large' and where does the threshold begin? Muller (2015) has identified key dimensions of mega-events, drawing from various definitions, including visitor attractiveness, mediated reach, cost, and transformative impact. He also proposed a classification matrix that categorizes large events into three size classes: major events, mega-events, and giga-events (Muller, 2015). In frames of our research U21 is defined as major sporting event.

As the track record of such events paints a nuanced picture comparison of these two countries in the context of the same event will produce meaningful insights towards the actualization of sustainability agenda. It is also important to look through the previous evidence in this area. On the one hand, mega-sporting events, as suggested by Baumann & Matheson (2013), can trigger infrastructure investments that benefit both the event itself and the broader community. Yet, they also caution that the experience for countries who are in the development process can differ starkly from that of their well-developed counterparts. This dichotomy is also mirrored in the realm of economic spin-offs, where some believe that tourism can act as a significant revenue source (Peeters, Matheson & Szymanski, 2014), while others, like Tomlinson (2011), see these events as potentially a "poisoned chalice" that can lead to more challenges than benefits. Another critical lens through which the impact of mega-sporting events can be viewed is their alignment with human rights. Rook & Heerdt (2023) in their compilation, underscore the importance of these events in shaping global human rights discourses, among others labor rights. They put forth the proposition that while these events can offer a platform to amplify human rights concerns, there's an equal risk of exacerbating existing societal disparities if not managed with intent and foresight.

Meanwhile, Horne (2007) has identified four "knowns" of sports mega-events: the assuredness of a global audience, the certainty of an urban transformation, the predictability of heightened national pride, and the inevitability of socio-political contestation. His subsequent work (2017) has also highlighted the spaces where political contestations play out, adding depth to our understanding of these events as not merely athletic, but deeply political and societal engagements. Financial considerations, too, play a central role in the narrative. Preuß, Andreff, & Weitzmann (2019) have documented the recurrent theme of cost and revenue overruns associated with mega-events, underscoring the need for prudent financial planning and transparent governance.

In synthesizing these academic works, one gleans that while the U21 Championship holds immense potential for Georgia and Romania, its success in delivering broad-based benefits hinges on meticulous planning, stakeholder engagement, and a holistic understanding of the complex interplay between sport, society, and sustainability. This research, bolstered by the UEFA Research Grant, aims to provide a critical examination of these very intersections, paving the way for future championships to align more closely with global sustainability mandates, particularly the UEFA . Environmental, Social and Governance (Further referred as ESG) standards (UEFA ESG, 2023) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

### **Research question(s), and the aims and objectives of the research**

The main research objective, as mentioned, was to examine the impact of the U21 European Championship in-line with SDGs. To ground our research on the UEFA standing, the primary source which defines policy in this area is the Football Sustainability Strategy (UEFA, 2021) which sets the framework for event sustainability and is reflected in ESG strategies for concrete events, among others U21 championship, held in Georgia and Romania. Environmental, Social and Governance related pillars which are set in the strategy (UEFA ESG, 2023) are related to specific SDGs. For the analysis to be detailed, specific topics from each area of action were selected - a. Environment: Climate Action; b. Social: Diversity & Inclusion; c. Governance: Communication.

Moreover, the Football Social Responsibility Bids (Further referred as FSR) which were developed specifically for U21 both in Georgia<sup>1</sup> and Romania (FRF, 2021) as well as sustainability strategies have corresponding sub-sections to the above-mentioned areas of action. These three streams are described in the literature review and served as lenses for analysis, which was thoroughly employed in the overview section of the main research findings.

Based on the above specific pillars and sub-section the Research Questions (RQ) are listed as follows:

**RQ1:** How aligned was the U21 in Georgia and Romania with environmental sustainability (SDG 13 Climate Action; SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities) in sustainability strategies / FSR bids<sup>2</sup> and how were they actualized in frames of U21 2023?

**RQ2:** How aligned was the U21 in Georgia and Romania with social equality in sustainability strategies / FSR bids and how were they actualized in frames of U21 2023?

**RQ3:** How aligned was the U21 in Georgia and Romania with governance aiming to enhance awareness about sustainable development (SDG 17 Partnerships for the goals) in in sustainability strategies / FSR bids and how were they actualized in frames of U21 2023?

## Literature Review

### Existing Knowledge in the Field

Mega-sporting events often serve as the backdrop for nations to parade their economic and infrastructural prowess, while also highlighting the challenges intrinsic to their planning and execution. Matheson & Baade (2004) have critically discussed the dichotomy of these events in developing countries, elucidating the sometimes-elusive bridge between anticipated prosperity and the actual economic outcomes. Furthermore, mega-sporting events have a reputation for their grandeur and allure, but they simultaneously spark debates about their economic viability, societal implications, and environmental impact.

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<sup>1</sup> GFF strategy and FSR bis are not available in the public domain.

<sup>2</sup> For GFF both Sustainability Strategy and FSR bid were analyzed, while for FRF - Sustainability Strategy only.

In the realm of infrastructure, Baumann & Matheson (2013) have accentuated the stark contrast between the experiences of developing and industrialized countries, which is especially important to be observed in the Georgian and Romanian context. While infrastructural overhauls might promise modernity and development, the aftermath can reveal disparities in maintenance costs, underutilization, or even stark abandonment. Such considerations make the decision to host these events in developing nations a matter of profound deliberation.

From a geopolitical perspective, the ambition of emerging powers to host and capitalize on mega-sporting events cannot be understated (Cornelissen, 2010). These events symbolize more than mere sportsmanship - they represent a nation's aspiration to bolster its global stance and draw attention to its socio-economic advancements. Nevertheless, as indicated by Peeters, Matheson, & Szymanski (2014) and further emphasized by Tomlinson (2011), the economic ramifications can be unpredictable, with tourism revenue not always offsetting the exorbitant costs involved.

A recognizable pattern emerges in the consequences of hosting major sporting events, as demonstrated by Horne (2007). The assurances of urban transformation, amplified national pride, and socio-political contestations are nearly ubiquitous outcomes. However, his later analysis in 2017 sheds light on the specific contexts of Georgia and Romania, revealing the arenas for political contention that these events consistently generate. In the Georgian and Romanian contexts, these sporting venues serve as platforms for addressing a multitude of societal concerns and advancing various political agendas, among others sustainability related.

Concurrently, the relationship between sports mega-events and human rights has been thrust into the spotlight in recent years. The compilation by Rook & Heerdt (2023) raises pertinent questions about how these events can both facilitate and potentially impede human rights, considering the vast resources and labor often required for preparations. It should be mentioned that in developing countries like Georgia, labor rights are often underrated or even neglected by the employers due to its liberal tax code, being characteristic for developing countries (Jobelius, 2011).

Furthermore, it's paramount to factor in the financial implications of organizing mega-sporting events within the specific co-hosting contexts of Georgia and Romania. The collaborative effort between these two nations in hosting the event introduces a distinct set of financial dynamics. Preuß, Andreff, and Weitzmann's comprehensive study in

2019, primarily centered on the Olympic Games, emphasizes the recurrent challenge of effectively managing cost and revenue overruns in such multi-host scenarios. This is an especially critical consideration that both Georgia and Romania must diligently incorporate into their event planning, taking into account the unique economic landscapes and circumstances within each country while navigating the complexities of co-hosting.

To encapsulate, while the U21 European Championship, with UEFA's backing, promises Georgia and Romania an unparalleled opportunity for socio-economic and infrastructural elevation, it is equally fraught with challenges. Grasping these nuances, highlighted by the referenced studies, is pivotal for ensuring the Championship's successful execution and achieving desired outcomes in alignment with the SDGs.

#### [ESG - Environment: Climate Action \(SDG 13; SDG 11\)](#)

Environmental sustainability has become a keystone for mega-sporting events in recent times. As such events have historically been associated with large-scale infrastructure developments, they've often been met with criticism for their considerable environmental footprints. This has spurred debates about the need for environmentally-friendly strategies, both in preparation for and during these events (Matheson & Baade, 2004).

Green Transformation of Infrastructure: Historically, the context of mega-sporting events, even when co-hosted, has often prioritized grandeur and scale in infrastructure development. Nevertheless, it is imperative to recognize that in the case of Georgia and Romania co-hosting the event, the approach may need to adapt to the unique circumstances and needs of these nations. Baumann and Matheson (2013) have astutely observed an evolving trend in the realm of event preparations, where sustainability has become an increasingly significant driver. This shift encompasses various aspects, from the choice of construction materials to energy consumption patterns, emphasizing the reduction of environmental impact. In this context, it is not merely a matter of constructing eco-friendly facilities but also ensuring their post-event utility. This sustainable approach aligns with Cornelissen's (2010) perspective that emerging powers seeking to host major sporting events should focus on legacy use, guaranteeing that the infrastructure remains relevant to long-term societal needs in an environmentally responsible manner. Given the collaborative efforts of Georgia and



Romania in hosting the event, these considerations are even more pertinent, as both nations might have a shortage of resources to promote a lasting, eco-friendly imprint on the sporting landscape.

Environmental Advocacy & Education: Tomlinson (2011) underscored that mega-sporting events, given their global viewership, can be potent tools for environmental advocacy. By integrating green themes into event branding and messaging, organizers can effectively push for more significant environmental consciousness among the masses. However, it's not just about the fans. Horne (2007) emphasized that stakeholders, including athletes, sponsors, and media, play a pivotal role in championing sustainability. Their active participation can elevate the event's green ambitions. It is noteworthy that developing countries might face obstacles like the lack of awareness and absence of relevant policy.

Challenges Looming Large: Peeters, Matheson, & Szymanski (2014) derived insights from the 2010 World Cup to highlight the acute resource strains host cities face. From water to energy, catering to the spiking demands without jeopardizing ecological balances remains a pressing concern. Horne (2017) drew attention to the voluminous travel-associated emissions as fans and teams' crisscross continents. While carbon offset initiatives can help mitigate some of these impacts, the cumulative carbon footprint remains daunting.

### ESG - Social: Diversity & Inclusion (SDG 5; SDG 10)

The socio-cultural implications of hosting mega-sporting events such as the U21 European Championship are profound. Matheson and Baade (2004) discerned that such events not only galvanize the sporting community but also impact broader social strata by fostering community engagement, igniting nationalistic fervor, and promoting intercultural interactions. Given the fact that Georgia and Romania are in different phases of development such factors might be of high importance.

Engagement and Cohesion: By hosting youth-centric events, developing countries can meaningfully engage their young population who have poor access to sports infrastructure and activities. Rook and Heerdt (2023) postulated that involving the youth not only enhances their participation in sports but also instills values of teamwork, discipline, and mutual respect. Mega-sporting events necessitate collaborative efforts from diverse segments of society. Tomlinson (2011) stressed that such collaborations,

ranging from local artisans to technocrats, can lead to unique social synergies and inter-community collaborations. Such events also provide an opportunity to promote a healthy lifestyle through role models among the young population, both girls and boys, which is very beneficial for countries like Georgia, where grassroots football is in its infant phase.

Gender: In many countries, including Georgia and Romania, football still predominantly occupies a masculine domain, with perceptions deeply rooted in societal norms. Considering this context, it was essential to emphasize the significance of involving women in management and leadership during the U21 European Championship. Rook and Heerdt's recent observations in 2023 reveal the pivotal role women have played in various grassroots environmental initiatives across the world. Their contributions, at times underestimated or overlooked, provide a unique and valuable perspective on addressing environmental challenges and finding sustainable solutions. By integrating the principles of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) with environmental objectives, there is an opportunity not only to recognize but also to amplify the roles of women in environmental decision-making within the specific context of co-hosting by Georgia and Romania. This approach aligns with the idea that a holistic and inclusive approach to sustainability can be fostered by ensuring that women are at the center of leadership during the U21 European Championship, thereby challenging the prevailing gender perceptions associated with football in developing countries.

### ESG - Governance: Communication (SDG 17)

Stakeholder Involvement: Prior studies have extensively explored the intricate dynamics between stakeholders and the achievements of sports events (Reid & Arcodia, 2002; Reid, 2004; Hede, 2008; Parent, 2008; Bowdin et al., 2006). Stakeholders, broadly defined as individuals or groups who have been or will be impacted by the activities of a sports event in the past, present, and future, play a pivotal role in shaping the outcomes (Parent, 2016; Bowdin et al., 2006). Recognizing the vital role that stakeholders play in evaluating sports events, it is imperative to take their requirements into careful consideration during the preparatory phase (Reid, 2004).

The spectrum of stakeholders involved in sports events is diverse, encompassing sports organizations, event organizing committees, host municipalities and

governmental bodies, participating delegations, athletes, volunteers, sponsors, media representatives, local and international NGOs, general public and other stakeholders whose interests are intertwined with the event and have a substantial impact on its overall success. These stakeholders engage in deliberations to ensure that the information and results of the events align with their individual needs and the overarching goals of the event. While stakeholder engagement is crucial in the process of hosting mega sporting event, their roles and level of engagement may vary according to the specific country and its culture, taking into consideration the legacy strategies they have selected.

Post-event Social Legacies: The success stories and experiences of such events can lead to enhanced local participation in sports, culture, and civic activities in many countries among them Georgia and Romania. Horne (2007) elaborated that witnessing international events often spurs local communities to take up sports, leading to healthier lifestyles and community bonding. Preuß, Andreff, & Weitzmann (2019) discoursed that while stadiums and arenas are tangible legacies, the intangible ones like community programs, youth engagement platforms, and cultural exchange forums have longer-lasting societal impacts.

The impact of the U21 European Championship on social development in Georgia and Romania is multifold. While it offers immediate benefits in terms of national pride, the event also sets the stage for longer-term social legacies, shaping the trajectory of urban sustainability and inclusivity. As the host countries, Georgia and Romania were responsible for meeting certain standards set by UEFA, therefore infrastructure became more accessible for disabled fans, which might have contributed to the socialization and overall well-being of the spectators with special needs. Hosting mega-sporting events, especially ones as significant as the U21 European Championship, presents a dynamic interplay of opportunities and challenges for host nations. Through the careful examination of literature, certain patterns and implications emerge that illuminate this interplay in the contexts of Georgia and Romania.

In summation, the U21 European Championship, much like other mega-sporting events, holds the promise of profound societal transformation for Georgia and Romania. However, the realization of this promise hinges on the careful, strategic, and inclusive execution of event preparations and legacy planning. As suggested by Horne (2017), while the stage of the Championship will witness footballing battles, the real

contest lies in leveraging this global spectacle for holistic, sustainable, and equitable development, in line with the United Nations' ambitious SDGs.

### [A Comprehensive Analysis of Sustainability Strategies and FSR Bids](#)

The research investigates the alignment of the UEFA European U21 Championship with the SDGs outlined in UEFA's strategy, as well as in the FSR bids which are in-line with sustainability strategies of the GFF and the FRF. UEFA's commitment to sustainability is evident in its strategic framework, which emphasizes inclusivity, empowerment, and environmental stewardship. The GFF's sustainability strategy similarly prioritizes inclusivity, equality, and environmental sustainability, aiming to force football as a platform for positive social change. Meanwhile, the FRF's sustainability initiatives, as outlined in its strategic documents, focus on promoting responsible practices, fostering community engagement, and advocating for environmental conservation. During the critical analysis of the mentioned documents the RQs were used as the scope-setting instrument, therefore relevant sub-sections of environmental, social and economic progress were selected. By examining the alignment of the U21 Championship with these sustainability objectives, the research aimed to assess the actualization of these strategic documents in practice. Having this agenda, comprehensive analysis was conducted in order to identify areas of synergy and opportunities for further integration of sustainability principles into football events and operations, ultimately contributing to the advancement of the SDGs within the football ecosystem.

Environment - Climate Change: The FSR Bid for the UEFA U21 European Championship by the GFF outlined a multifaceted approach to addressing climate change concerns associated with the tournament. This included not only reducing carbon emissions through sustainable transportation options and energy-efficient infrastructure but also incorporating renewable energy sources to power event facilities. Additionally, waste reduction strategies such as promoting recycling and responsible waste management were emphasized to minimize the environmental footprint of the championship. The GFF's sustainability strategy complements these efforts by advocating for the integration of eco-friendly practices into all aspects of football operations, from facility management to event planning. By evaluating the effectiveness of these measures in mitigating the tournament's environmental impact, the research aims to contribute valuable insights into sustainable event management

practices that can be applied to future football tournaments and events across Europe. In alignment with UEFA's sustainability objectives and the SDGs, the FSR Bid by GFF also prioritized environmental sustainability, which outlined a comprehensive plan to address climate change concerns associated with the tournament. Strategies included the implementation of eco-friendly event infrastructure, the reduction of carbon emissions through sustainable transportation options and renewable energy sources, and the promotion of waste reduction initiatives such as recycling and responsible waste management. Building on the GFF's sustainability strategy, which prioritizes environmental stewardship, the research evaluated the effectiveness of these measures in mitigating the tournament's environmental impact and contributing to broader climate action efforts within the football community.

**Social - Diversity and Inclusion:** Both the FSR Bid and the GFF sustainability strategy prioritize diversity and inclusion as fundamental principles underpinning their approach to football development. The FSR bid by GFF proposed initiatives to ensure the participation and representation of marginalized groups, including individuals with disabilities, refugees, and ethnic minorities. Furthermore, the bid outlined strategies for empowering youth through football, leveraging the tournament as a platform for personal development, education, and community engagement. This commitment to inclusivity aligns with the GFF's broader vision of creating football environments that celebrate diversity and empower all participants. Through the research, we hunted to evaluate the implementation of these initiatives and their impact on fostering social cohesion, empowerment, and equal opportunities within the football community. By examining best practices and identifying areas for improvement, the research aims to support the ongoing efforts of football federations across Europe to build more inclusive and socially responsible football ecosystems.

**Governance - Communication and Sustainable Events:** Effective governance practices are essential for driving sustainability initiatives and ensuring accountability within football organizations. The FSR Bid and sustainability strategies of both the GFF and the FRF emphasize the importance of transparent communication and sustainable event management. These include engaging stakeholders through clear and accessible communication channels, promoting transparency in decision-making processes, and implementing sustainable practices in event planning and execution. By analyzing the governance frameworks and practices outlined in the FSR Bid and sustainability strategies, the research aims to identify opportunities for enhancing

communication and event sustainability within football federations. Through collaborative efforts and knowledge sharing, football organizations can leverage these insights to strengthen their governance structures and advance their sustainability agendas, ultimately contributing to a more resilient and socially responsible football community.

Effective communication strategies are essential for engaging stakeholders, promoting transparency, and disseminating information about sustainability initiatives. The research evaluates the communication mechanisms employed by the federations to communicate their sustainability goals, engage fans and stakeholders, and foster a culture of accountability and transparency. By identifying synergies and opportunities for collaboration between football stakeholders, the study sought to inform future strategies for integrating sustainability principles into football events and operations, ultimately driving positive social, economic, and environmental outcomes within the football ecosystem and beyond. Furthermore, the research assesses the sustainability of event management practices, including the integration of eco-friendly event infrastructure, waste management protocols, and community engagement initiatives. By analyzing the governance frameworks and practices outlined in the FSR Bid and sustainability strategies, the research aims to provide insights into best practices for fostering sustainable, inclusive, and socially responsible football events.

## **Research Design and Strategy**

### **Justification of the design**

The research employed qualitative research methodology (Cohen, 2017) to address the research questions above. The qualitative data with comparative research design of two selected countries has the potential to provide rich, contextualized insights into the perspectives and experiences of stakeholders, as well as attendees of the U21 championship. The quantitative approach was excluded as an approach due to protection of personal data (See further limitations sub-section) and reach towards the audience of spectators. Therefore, two methods of the qualitative methodology were applied within the research - in-depth interviews and focus groups discussions. In frames of the former - 21 (Twenty-one) respondents were interviewed; while in the latter direction 4 (Four) focus group discussions were held with the participation of 32 (Thirty-two) respondents.

Within the scope of this research, centered on the UEFA U21 European Championship, we also employed Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (Further referred as CDA) as the key rationale for the data analysis. CDA served as the key instrument and data analysis technique for delving into the intricate web of discourses surrounding major-sporting events such as the U21 Championship. Through CDA, we analyzed the text with a focus on the discursive elements that underlie the research questions. This methodology helped us uncover the ways in which language constructs and reflects socio-political and environmental realities. In this section, we introduce Fairclough's 3-Tier CDA approach, which comprises following elements: 1. Discourse as text; 2. Discourse as practice; 3. Social practice. Within the research first and third tiers are included for analysis.

Discourse as text: Through the first stage of analysis UEFA policy documents and literature in the field were identified and analyzed to define the keywords which were related to the major sport events. These keywords / discourses served as a predeterminant to develop code book (See Annex #1) and research instruments - the Aide Memoire for the in-depth interviews (See Annex #2) and the focus group guideline (See Annex #3) for focus group discussions.

Social Practices: This stage of analysis was important in order to look how (based on the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions) the identified keywords / discourses were actualized within the UEFA U21 European Championship. At this stage the data obtained from the in-depth interviews were coded according to the code book, synthesis of which has guided us to the findings of the research. The code book defined themes which are areas from the UEFA ESG strategy (UEFA ESG, 2023) being related to specific SDGs; while categories are specific topics from each area of action linked to the ESG, FSR bids and sustainability strategies of GFF and FRF. The codes were listed under these categories and during the analysis process 6 (Six) new codes were added.

### Research Stages and Sample Size

The sampling which was employed, was purposive, being a variety of non-probability sampling, which led us to more depth as the inclusion criterion was related to the respondents' expertise (Cohen, 2017), and that guided our approach towards the sampling for the in-depth interviews. The professional network of researchers was

used to identify and contact potential respondents. The focus group discussion guideline was tested through the pilot stage. The selection of focus group participants was again purposive and researchers relied on the personal contacts to identify volunteers and spectators, who have attended the U21 championship in Georgia. The focus group discussions (In total 4) were conducted in December, 2023 after the finalization of the in-depth interview phase. The data derived from focus group discussions created possibility to cross check findings accumulated from desk research and in-depth interviews. Two focus groups were conducted among spectators and two - among volunteers. In terms of sequence of research stages following logic was put in place:

#### *Stage 1 - Desk Research:*

The study involved review of relevant documents such as policy documents (among others FSR bid and sustainability strategies), event planning documents and relevant literature in the field. The data provided insights into the sustainability initiatives implemented by the host countries and UEFA, as well as approaches in order to ensure this proximity towards ESG standards (UEFA ESG, 2023). Through CDA (Fairclough, 1992) we identified keywords / discourses which gave us the opportunity to prepare code books and research instruments - Aide Memoire (for in-depth interviews) and guidelines (for focus group discussions).

#### *Stage 2 - In-depth Interviews:*

Before delivering the in-depth interviews, the pilot was conducted (Duration: 57 minutes) with one of the stakeholders which gave us the possibility to refine our questions and identify possible duration for the actual in-depth interviews in order to share this information with respondents. As off the initial project planning, in-depth interviews were conducted in Georgia and Romania (In total - 19) as well as online with UEFA representatives (In total - 2). Due to the ethical standards no specification is given about the respondents' roles for non-identification purposes and is also argued further in the Validity and Ethical Issues sub-section below.

The in-depth interviews which were conducted in Georgia amounted to 9 (Nine); There were 2 (Two) interviews with UEFA representatives; And the in-depth interviews in Romania totaled to 10 (Ten). In both countries together with GFF and FRF representatives, stakeholders were interviewed - local governmental officials, local NGOs and U21 event partners. All the 21 (Twenty-one) in-depth interviews were



recorded and transcribed word-by-word. The duration of the interviews varied from 34 minutes to 1 hour and 5 minutes, while the average duration was 48.8 minutes (Total minutes - 103 for UEFA divided by 2 = 51.5 Minutes average interview; 376 for Georgia divided by 8<sup>3</sup> = 47 Minutes average interview; 338 for Romania divided by 7<sup>4</sup> = 48 Minutes average interview).

Mostly the Georgian in-depth interviews and interviews with UEFA representatives were conducted through Zoom platform, which increased our flexibility towards accommodating to the time and location (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014) of our respondents. The in-depth interviews in Romania were conducted in the physical environment in the month of November. The face-to-face format gave us opportunity to develop trust from the respondents. The FRF was cooperative and on-site interviews went smoothly. All the participants of the interviews signed consent forms, which is further explained in the Validity and Ethical Issues sub-section below.

### *Stage 3 - Focus Group Discussions*

The pilot of the focus group discussion guideline was tested in the month of September, duration of which was 1 hour 47 minutes. Again, this pilot among spectators and volunteers of U21 gave us the possibility to refine our questions in the guideline and identify possible duration for the actual focus group discussions in order to include this information in our communication with potential participants of the research. The actual focus group discussions (All 4 of them) were conducted with the event attendees and volunteers in Georgia in the month of December, which aimed to cross check the data acquired at the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> stages of research. The orientation on Georgia only, at this stage, is justified by the fact that majority (12 Romania / 19 Georgia) of games, as well as important matches (Quarter-final; Semi-final; Final) were conducted in Georgia.

Out of total 4 focus group discussions, as mentioned, 2 (Two) were conducted with volunteers and 2 (Two) were conducted with attendees of the U21 in the physical environment. The numbers and timing of the focus group is as follows:

1. Volunteers FG1 - 7 attendees; Duration: 1 hour 19 minutes;
2. Volunteers FG2 - 8 attendees; Duration: 1 hour 34 minutes;
3. Spectators FG3 - 9 attendees - Duration: 1 hour 41 minutes;

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<sup>3</sup> One GFF representative asked the research team to send the questionnaire via e-mail and replied back in written form.

<sup>4</sup> In 3 interviews which were held in Romania 2 respondents were sitting together.

4. Spectators FG4 - 8 attendees - Duration: 1 hour 27 minutes.

The average focus group discussion duration was as follows: Total minutes - 361 divided by 4 = 1 hour 30.2 Minutes average.

### Research Instrument

Both the aide memoire for in-depth interviews and the focus group discussion guideline were structured in line with the main research objective, which is to examine the impact of the U21 in-line with SDGs. The basic structure of both research instruments contained the following subsections: 1. Opening questions; 2. SDG related general questions; 3. Environmental, 4. Social and 5. Governance related sub-sections, which are defined by UEFA ESG strategy (UEFA ESG, 2023); 6. Closing questions, including questions about future recommendations. The similar approach towards the structure of the research instruments were purposeful and was developed by the objective to cross check data obtained through these two approaches - in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. As the research instruments were semi-structured, both respondents and researchers had the opportunity to ask additional questions and the interview had more the structure of the conversation. The interviews with GFF and stakeholders in Georgia were conducted in Georgian; while interviews with UEFA representatives, FRF and stakeholders in Romania were conducted in English.

### Data Analysis

Collected data - the audio and video recordings (Acquired from Zoom and physical interviews) from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed word-by-word through repetitive listening which ensured high descriptive validity (Thomson, 2011). The transcripts for the final report were analyzed with a coding approach and theoretical and open codes were put in place. Theoretical codes comprised already analyzed documents at stage 1 - desk research through CDA, which aimed to analyze text and define the keywords / discourses, which were related to major sport events. The code book was formed by theoretical coding, where the themes, categories and codes were linked to UEFA ESG strategy and literature review and is known as pre-ordinate categorization (Cohen, 2017). Themes, as mentioned, are areas from the UEFA ESG strategy (UEFA ESG, 2023) being related to specific SDGs; while categories are specific topics from each area of action (Saldaña, 2016) and were linked to FSR bids and sustainability strategies from Georgia and Romania.

For the final analysis, the open coding technique was applied in the opening and closing sections, as well as moments when respondents went off the topic, which was relevant for the research. In total 6 (Six) new codes have been added to the theme of opening and closing section under the category of SDGs; Future prospects; Lessons Learned (See further Annex #1). Some of arguments and findings which were crosscutting have been added to several codes.

The provided final report is based on the analysis of transcribed interviews, which were thoroughly coded through NVivo and the frequencies of certain code occurrences as well as patterns were analyzed (Cohen, 2017). Coding was conducted line-by-line and as a unit of the code sentences (in some instances paragraphs) were selected. Through this approach social practices were analyzed and the actualization of keywords / discourses was summarized. In other words, the analysis is some kind of reality check, how FSR bids, strategies, approaches have been made operational in frames of U21 UEFA Championship. In the analysis section all the data were analyzed through cross-interview tactics and the analysis is framed according to themes, categories and codes and as of the research stages - in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

### Validity and Ethical Issues

Previous experience might affect the findings of the research (Ezzy, 2002) though it is well known that bias can never be fully eradicated. The research team addressed the risk of subjectivity by the approach that the interviews were conducted in couples - so two researchers were attending each interview to ensure maximum objectivity and balance previous experiences of each other. In the data interpretation phase word-by-word transcription and respective coding can serve as a predeterminant of high descriptive validity as the data is most accurate (Thomson, 2011). The Georgian interviews were translated in English for the analysis purposes and here again working in couples helped to eradicate deficiencies which might have occurred in the translation process (Sutrisno *et al.*, 2014). Last but not least, the pilot of the in-depth interview as well as focus group discussions, was very productive to eradicate all the ambiguities there can be in the research instruments, which again contributed to the accuracy of the data and respective findings.

The research project followed the ethical guidelines of GIPA - Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, which has its Code of Ethics and Conduct approved by the order of the Rector by the following order - N01-17/136, October 18, 2017. The research committee reviewed the research project at the initial stage and the research team was granted the ethical clearance by the decree of the research committee - N5, February 15, 2023. The team of researchers created the consent form (See Annex #4) for the respondents and attendees of focus group discussions. The issues of privacy and data protection are fully considered throughout the research project. The participation in the research was fully voluntary and respondents were provided with detailed information about the research both verbally and through the consent form, which was distributed electronically.

The consent form gave the respondents of the interviews the possibility to withdraw the data they provided up to two weeks after the interview and they were made aware of it beforehand to ensure sincerity and openness. Moreover, all of our respondents were made aware that anonymity would be ensured and only organizational affiliation or status / pseudonyms such as - 'representative' or 'expert' would be mentioned. This kind of approach ensured that the identification of respondents would not be made possible and further specifications would not be mentioned (Cohen, 2017). During the research process power distance between respondents and researchers was minimal and the process was horizontal, which is proven to further ensure straightforwardness of respondents (Cohen, 2017).

### **An overview of the main research findings**

The overview of the main research findings demonstrates the general patterns, which were identified during all the stages of the research: Stage 1 - Desk Research; Stage 2 - In-depth Interviews and Stage 3 - Focus Group Discussions. The analysis is structured according the above-mentioned stages - firstly the findings from the interviews with UEFA, Georgian respondents and Romanian respondents is presented, followed by the analysis of the focus group discussions. In the final section of this chapter discussion is provided, which summarizes the research in-line with the research questions.

## Findings from the Interviews - UEFA, Georgia and Romania

In total 21 respondents participated in the in-depth interviews. Following respondents participated in the process: UEFA - 2; Georgia - 9 (T = 9 Total amount; N = Referral amount); Romania 11 (T = 11 Total amount; N = Referral amount).

*Theme - Opening questions*

*Category - SDGs; Future prospects; Lessons Learned*

In the analysis of the interviews conducted for the research on the alignment of the U21 European Championship with the UN SDGs, distinct perspectives emerged from respondents in Georgia, Romania, and UEFA. Representatives from both the UEFA and the football federations of Georgia and Romania emphasized the primary role of sporting activities in driving such events, including promoting the sport itself, providing opportunities for athletes to showcase their skills, and engaging fans on a global scale. Additionally, these events are seen as platforms for promoting positive values such as fair play, role modelling, and community engagement. There is also recognition of the potential of major sporting events to contribute to broader societal goals such as promoting social cohesion, raising awareness of important issues, and fostering international cooperation. Moreover, hosting major sporting events offers opportunities for countries to enhance their international image and attract attention to social issues like human rights and gender equality. In evaluating the U21 European Championship, respondents express varying perspectives on its success and impact. While some view it positively as a successful sporting event that met its objectives in terms of organization and competition, others highlight challenges and areas for improvement, such as the need to better integrate social responsibility campaigns. Despite differences in approaches between countries and federations, there is overall satisfaction with the event's outcomes, including increased spectator attendance and positive feedback from fans.

Representatives from GFF expressed a general lack of awareness and integration of SDGs within their organizational strategies and operations. There is a notable absence of structured policies or dedicated staff focused on sustainability initiatives, with short-term planning and immediate results outweighing long-term sustainability plans. In contrast, representatives from FRF demonstrated a higher level of engagement with sustainability strategies, including the development and implementation of a sustainability strategy approved for the next six years. Both GFF and FRF collaborated

with various stakeholders, including governmental bodies, NGOs, and environmental organizations, to address sustainability goals such as cleaner air and climate change mitigation. There is an acknowledgment of the importance of aligning events with sustainability strategies derived from SDGs, with efforts made to integrate sustainability considerations into event planning and execution. Overall, while the GFF exhibited a limited understanding and implementation of sustainability principles, the FRF demonstrated a more proactive approach to sustainability integration and the capacity of the latter can be explained by legislative context, as well as previous experience of EURO 2020.

Representatives from both GFF and the FRF highlighted various aspects where differences were observed. GFF representatives emphasized the enthusiasm and devotion of the Georgian side compared to the more formal attitudes of the Romanian side. Additionally, differences in waste management practices, governmental support, and fan involvement were noted, with Romania demonstrating a more advanced system and culture in waste management and volunteer engagement, while Georgian respondents mentioned about the legacy of volunteer network from the U21. Both sides acknowledged successful cooperation and mutual support in organizing the event, emphasizing the positive relationship between Georgia and Romania. On the other hand, FRF representatives could not recall the differences between the two countries, noting similarities in challenges faced and solutions implemented. They highlighted successful collaboration and problem-solving between the two countries, suggesting a shared approach to addressing common issues.

All the respondents from UEFA, GFF and FRF emphasized the multifaceted nature of stakeholders, including government entities, national football associations, local administrations, sponsors, media, NGOs, schools, clubs, fans, and general public. They recognized the crucial role played by stakeholders such as the government, local authorities, and sponsors in providing financial support, infrastructure, and organizational assistance. Additionally, the importance of engaging with various stakeholders early on in the planning process was highlighted, with mentions of efforts to involve local communities, schools, NGOs, and companies in different aspects of the event. However, challenges such as limited resources, cultural differences, and varying levels of stakeholder engagement were also acknowledged, indicating the need for more proactive as well as strategic approaches and structures to stakeholder management and collaboration.

*Theme - Environmental Sustainability (SDG 11; SDG 13)*

*Category - Climate Action*

The U21 European Championship presented a challenging landscape for implementing smart mobility initiatives aligned with the SDGs. Despite efforts to promote eco-friendly transportation, including incentives for spectators and volunteers to use public transport and electric vehicles, the overall impact was limited. Challenges in implementation, such as a lack of prioritization and infrastructure limitations, interrupted the successful execution of the actual plan. During the U21 European Championship, smart mobility initiatives varied among the host countries. In Georgia, limited progress was made in implementing smart mobility measures, with a focus on volunteer transportation in Batumi and Kutaisi through partnerships with local Mayor Offices. However, broader initiatives, such as providing free public transport for ticket holders, were not realized. In contrast, Romania made more significant steps, particularly in Bucharest, with efforts to improve infrastructure for bicycles and electric scooters. The city's transport company partnered with the tournament to offer free public transport for accreditation holders, demonstrating a proactive approach to promoting sustainable transportation. While there was a growing trend towards electric vehicles, particularly for VIP transportation, there were infrastructure gaps, such as a lack of charging stations, that impeded their widespread adoption. UEFA's role primarily involved encouraging national associations to engage with municipalities to facilitate smart mobility initiatives.

From the Georgian side, there was a focus on the significance of record-breaking attendance at the tournament, highlighting the high interest in the event despite its lower popularity in Europe compared to countries like England. Additionally, GFF was noted for implementing local initiatives, such as smart mobility activities for volunteers, although there was also recognition of a lack of evaluation and reporting within the organization, indicating a need for improved measurement practices. In contrast, responses from Romania emphasized the challenges of measuring performance and sustainability, seeing the importance of tracking KPIs and ensuring access to information. Practical approaches to data collection and measurement were also highlighted, such as using daily reports from metro stations to estimate the impact of campaigns. From the UEFA perspective, there was mention of a survey conducted for all associations to track basic KPIs, indicating a broader approach to measurement practices. However, there were also indications that UEFA had not specifically

requested or collected certain types of data, suggesting potential gaps in data collection and analysis at the organizational level.

UEFA emerges as a leader in sustainability, promoting electric vehicles and implementing measures to minimize team travel and promote sustainable transport for spectators. In contrast, Romania's approach, while commendable with initiatives like free public transport and engaging stakeholders for sustainable practices, faced challenges due to limited municipal support and the event's lower attraction compared to larger tournaments. Georgia's efforts in sustainability during the championship were less pronounced, with a recognition of the need to minimize carbon footprint but lacking specific initiatives for reducing impact among spectators or promoting eco-friendly transport. UEFA's role in activating host cities was evident through its efforts to promote sustainability and eco-friendly practices. In Romania, activated host cities demonstrated a commitment to sustainability by providing free public transport and promoting the use of electric vehicles. However, as mentioned above, challenges arose due to limited municipal support and the lower profile of the U21 Championship compared to larger tournaments, like EURO 2020. In Georgia, there was a need for stronger initiatives to promote sustainability and reduce environmental impact, which was explained by the poor legislative measures and awareness about sustainability topics in the country.

UEFA's advocacy was evident in its push for waste separation activities, although challenges arose due to low initial awareness. Georgian respondents highlighted campaigns like "clean air - better game," using various channels such as social media, TV shows, and stadium banners. However, there was a need for further awareness raising, especially regarding sustainability issues. In Romania, the focus was on effective communication and promotion, with collaboration between UEFA and local partners of tournament information and sustainability messages. Despite these efforts, challenges in translating awareness into ticket sales were noted. Differences in attendance between Romania and Georgia was also explained by the national teams' performances.

In Georgia, respondents highlighted challenges related to stadium infrastructure, indicating that sustainability might be a lower priority due to other issues, such as the necessity of developing new stadiums for the U21. Accessibility was a key concern, with one NGO representative expressing frustration for people with disabilities. GFF respondents discussed missed opportunities for sustainable infrastructure, such as



failed negotiations to sponsor solar panels for stadiums. In Romania, respondents discussed various aspects of sustainable infrastructure, including cost-benefit analyses of practices like hybrid pitches and LED lighting, and efforts to promote green practices such as installing solar panels and using electric vehicles for transportation during events.

One respondent from UEFA highlighted the successful waste separation efforts in Georgia, indicating a potential legacy for future events in the country. UEFA representatives mentioned that the experience gained from hosting the U21 event would help both Georgia and Romania host bigger events in the future, emphasizing the importance of grassroots support and volunteer training. Additionally, there was mention of the event's impact on infrastructure and stakeholder engagement, with a focus on the positive experiences and long-lasting legacy. The respondents also touched the importance of legacy in terms of volunteer training and workforce development, as well as the broader impact of hosting such events on the local level. From the interviews with the representatives of both GFF and FRF, the focus was on the infrastructure left as a legacy from the tournament. The respondent from FRF also mentioned the importance of sustainability in future events, with plans to electrify operations and promote circular economy initiatives. Both GFF and FRF representatives highlighted the legacy of human resources, mentioning the training and involvement of stadium staff and organizational teams, as well as the overall impact on the country's sports infrastructure. The respondent from FRF emphasized the importance of having a sustainability strategy articulated until 2030, indicating a long-term approach to legacy building.

From the UEFA interviews respondents highlighted sustainability as a top priority, alongside sporting and security matters. They emphasized the success factors of the tournament, including strong support from top management and motivated sustainability managers in both countries. Additionally, there was discussion among GFF representatives about the challenges and achievements related to sustainability initiatives, such as providing free public transport for volunteers and engaging in recycling efforts. The interview responses from Romania focused on the federation's commitment to sustainability, with efforts to integrate SDGs into their strategy and prioritize environmental initiatives, such as using LED lights and solar panels to reduce energy consumption. Respondents from both federations also discussed the importance of communication and collaboration with stakeholders to promote

sustainability.

Both federations highlighted their efforts to promote sustainability and clean air through various communication channels, such as campaigns in stadiums, visual communication, and engagement with environmental NGOs. However, there were challenges in communication, awareness, and internal coordination, with mentions of limitations in internal communication interrupting the sharing of important information among stakeholders. Additionally, there were challenges in implementing certain initiatives due to bureaucratic obstacles and a lack of preparedness from the local authorities.

*Theme - Social Equality (SDG 5; SDG 10)*

*Category - Diversity and Inclusion*

Participants highlighted the need for training stewards and personnel to assist disabled spectators, citing incidents of mishandling and lack of awareness in both countries. While efforts were made to make stadiums accessible in both Georgia and Romania, there were specific challenges noted in each country. In Georgia, there were mentions of tough paths for wheelchair users and the need for special assistance, whereas in Romania, there were discussions about making access easier having designated and accessible areas. Respondents emphasized the importance of government and organizational responsibility in investing in infrastructure, training, and security personnel to improve accessibility, with varying levels of awareness and commitment noted between the two countries. Additionally, they recognized the need for better communication and coordination among stakeholders in both Georgia and Romania to ensure accessibility and inclusion.

In Georgia, there were mixed views on ticket accessibility, with some participants noting that prices were affordable and inclusive, especially for youth and disadvantaged communities. However, there were also mentions of issues with ticket sales management, including difficulties in purchasing tickets for the National Team matches due to high demand. On the other hand, in Romania, respondents praised the affordability of tickets, with prices as low as 5 euros and a maximum of 7 euros for the semi-final and final matches. The Romanian Football Federation conducted research to determine fair ticket price based on the fan feedback, ensuring that tickets were accessible to a wide range of spectators.

While there were not any direct policies or instruments to promote gender inclusion within the U21 European championship, all the respondents highlighted the significant representation of female volunteers, stewards and staff on managerial positions in U21 European Championship. The representatives from UEFA, the Georgian Football Federation, and the Romanian Football Federation emphasized the importance of promoting gender equality within the workforce of football organizations, though both federations endorsed women contribution highly and mentioned that women were holding managerial positions both at FRF and GFF. They highlighted initiatives aimed at increasing the representation of women in various roles, including coaching, and administration. Additionally, interviewees discussed the implementation of programs to empower women within the football community, such as mentorship schemes and educational opportunities.

For both federations key themes emerge, notably focused on initiatives aimed at supporting disabled individuals and promoting gender equality. Across the interviews, there is recognition of the importance of creating inclusive environments within football stadiums, with efforts such as providing accessible seating for disabled fans and implementing training programs for staff and volunteers to ensure proper treatment and support. Moreover, there are mentions from both federations of specific projects targeting marginalized groups, such as unprivileged children, with initiatives ranging from providing free tickets to organizing educational programs. The interviews in both countries also highlight a commitment to promoting values of respect, equality, and empathy among spectators and stakeholders, emphasizing the tournament's role not only as a sporting event but also as a platform for social integration and empowerment. However, challenges remain, particularly concerning the need for further investment in infrastructure and training to enhance accessibility and ensure the full participation of all individuals, including those with disabilities.

The responses from Romania demonstrated a strong commitment to promoting respect within the framework of the U21 European Championship. Several key themes emerged, including a focus on fostering inclusivity, combating discrimination, and promoting fair treatment for all individuals involved in the tournament. There was recognition of the importance of implementing educational projects and e-learning modules to instill values of respect and inclusion among volunteers and staff members, which was later also confirmed in the findings of focus group discussions. Additionally, FRF pointed to the efforts to address issues such as hate speech, with measures in

place to prohibit such behavior and provide alternatives that promote inclusivity and understanding. Moreover, there was an acknowledgment of the need to respect diversity and individual motivations among participants and stakeholders.

In the context of the Romanian Football Federation, references predominantly highlighted the experiences and challenges encountered in volunteer management, including efforts to engage with NGOs to recruit volunteers and the importance of post-event feedback mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of training modules. There was also an acknowledgment of the significant impact of the tournament on volunteers, spectators, and employees, indicating a focus on creating a lasting legacy beyond the U21. In contrast, the GFF emphasized the establishment of a volunteer culture within the country and the positive impact of the tournament on volunteer mobilization and engagement, particularly among students. Respondents underlined the importance of inclusivity in volunteer recruitment, with attention to gender balance and efforts to encourage participation from underrepresented groups. Additionally, there is recognition of the role of foreign experts in training local staff and volunteers, contributing to the overall success of the event.

In Georgia, community engagement is highlighted through efforts to integrate disabled individuals into fan clubs and foster positive attitudes toward the federation through hosting major sporting events. One of the respondents from the government underlined the importance of utilizing the tournament as a platform to promote critical social issues such as human rights and gender equality, leveraging the attention garnered by major sporting events to amplify messages of peace and inclusion. Similarly, in Romania, community engagement initiatives targeted various sectors of society, including families and schools, through programs offering free tickets and memorable experiences, therefore, promoting football as an educational and unifying instrument. FRF representative, emphasizes the event's role in providing a recreational and educational outlet for families and schools, contributing to a broader societal impact beyond traditional football audiences. Lastly, the human rights discourse is naturally linked to football, while FRF representative claims that - *It's in the DNA of football to promote human rights.*

*Theme - Governance (SDG 17)*

*Category - Communication*

Reporting domain was endorsed highly in terms of importance for the governance from both Georgian and Romanian respondents. This research as such, was considered to be an important follow up and Georgian respondents indicated further interest with the proceedings. It is also notable that reporting, was mostly addressed to UEFA and in several cases to Government, the transparency towards other stakeholders and general public did not occur in the findings. From both Georgian and Romanian perspective, the reporting process was described as an activity which took place 2-3 months after the tournament was completed. Respondents from GFF mentioned that the above-described record-breaking attendance as well as infrastructural achievements were important predeterminants for the development of the positive report to UEFA. In terms of sustainability, representative of UEFA emphasized that the KPIs for U21 were less extensive in contrast to club finals. From the overall findings for the both GFF and FRF, it can be concluded that reporting was reactive towards the daily processes, as well as final reporting. From more critical outlook, the reports were for internal purposes and were not communicated externally. One of the respondents from GFF even states that - *We are not forced to provide feedback about what has been achieved. Moreover, even governmental organizations have not requested any reports or information. So, this never happened.* One difference observed is the questionnaire in Romania, which gave spectators opportunity to express their satisfaction / dissatisfaction towards the events. This data is used for the comparison of matches and internal insights (Are not available publicly). This finding is important, as focus group discussion participants from Georgia mentioned that feedback about these topics is important and development-oriented. This concrete experience should be interesting for the GFF representatives to consider as a potential initiative. From more critical outlook, several respondents from both GFF and FRF mentioned that daily reports were somewhat mechanical and burdensome, indicating for the room of improvement in this respect for UEFA.

In terms of campaigns, the UEFA representative underlined - “Cleaner Air, Better Game” Campaign, which was according to the respondent - *got reasonable exposure, let's call it like that and it was not a top campaign that we have launched, but it has been ok taking into account what resources we had.* It was also mentioned by the same respondent, that the activation in this area was more for the waste management, than clean air. Generally, it was agreed by all respondents, that this kind of championships are beneficial for the promotion of human rights, gender equality and

other SDG related ideas. However, the actual implementation of the campaign in Georgia was criticized from the representatives of the GFF themselves, with somewhat insignificant engagement, explained by low priority of environmental related issues and other more important challenges (Such as social and economic problems, infrastructural challenges). The cooperation with UEFA in this regard was considered to me important, though Georgian interviews demonstrated the low awareness and capacity in this area, corresponding with the findings from the focus group discussions. For Romanian context, the overarching campaign was the same, though some difficulties were mentioned to have taken place in the implementation process. In terms of outreach social media platforms were mentioned, as well as social bubbles, in frames of which these topics became actualized, but finally the U21 outreach was contrasted with that of EURO 2020, where the former was less impactful than the latter, considering the scale and the scope of this tournament was endorsed highly.

The partnership domain was one of the most important streams for analysis and it is important to note that UEFA representative mentioned the difference in capacity of stakeholder involvement between Georgia and Romania due to the prior experience of EURO 2020. Representatives from GFF mentioned existing partnerships with several partners whom they have been engaged in direction of inclusion for disabled, as well as Ministry of Defense and their employees with special needs. It is also noteworthy, that in terms of partnership in both countries the resource of civil sector (NGOs) in direction of environment protection is underused. However, in frames of U21 only one company was considered as partner in direction of waste management, which was responsible for the reuse of the plastic. The problems with further cycles of recycling are evident, as one of GFF representative recalled attempts of cooperation with Mayor's office in Tbilisi, though it was not successful due to shortage of capacity. The partner of GFF from Georgia mentioned that the cooperation started 1 (One) week ahead of the tournament and the waste was poorly separated, especially in Tbilisi and mentioned that reality was better in Kutaisi and Batumi. The difference between the cities can be explained by volume of waste - the smaller portions were more effectively managed. This finding is important as it is indicative that the context, legal base, competence and general infrastructure is of paramount importance. As the UEFA representative mentioned - *If we go to a country that couldn't care less about environmental topics in their laws, then we don't have that much leverage.* Therefore,

the prospective proximity of Georgia with the EU regulations can be assumed that will have positive influence of SDG actualization.

In Romania the partnerships were in several directions - governmental body, department of SDGs; existing partners and newly partnered environmental NGO. It is an important finding that FRF became partners with governmental SDG department after the U21 with an objective to raise awareness. The interview with the representatives of this unit was also important, mentioning the planned promotional activities. It can be considered that U21 further nudged the establishment of such partnership. One FRF representative mentioned proactive approach towards the NGOs in Cluj for the volunteer attraction purposes, though the openness was not sufficient enough as they expected benefits, which made the partnership less successful. The existing partnerships were employed during the U21 especially for inclusion of disabled spectators. The transportation, as already mentioned was provided for free and was achieved through negotiations with Mayor's Offices. The important finding in this aspect was the importance of social capital, which was quite similar both for Georgia and Romania. In other words, partnership building and negotiations were heavily reliant on personal contacts - *When you know, someone who knows someone, it's perfectly legal, it's nothing illegal to just ask them - come on, if we don't do it, we will make a fool of ourselves on the international level* [Respondent from FRF]. Lastly, the newly (Springtime before the tournament) established partnership with environmental NGO was successful and mutual cleaning event was held, with the participation of FRF representatives. It can be assumed that U21 again appeared to be a stimulus in the environmental direction. Overall, it can be concluded that FRF was more proactive than GFF, though both organizations stressed the importance of funds for these activities and responsibilities.

The post event social legacies and impact as according to respondents were also important domains for observation. The UEFA representative mentioned the increased awareness about waste separation, which is somewhat corresponding with the focus group discussion findings. GFF representative mentioned that these activities were implemented due to its obligatory nature and the level of compliance was somewhat low, because of the general capacity on the national infrastructural level (The waste recycling facilities have poor capacity in Georgia). The environmental NGO in Georgia stressed the importance of awareness as well, which as according to research is 1% among youth and climate change is mixed with waste management which once again

indicates how problematic the overall awareness is. In Romanian context, the post event social legacies were endorsed highly, which can also be argued with the above-mentioned new partnerships. Most importantly, both federations mentioned the influence on the employees, volunteers and spectators, which is further analyzed in the legacy section. The social legacy section can be concluded with the following quotation - *Football is close to religion, it has social power*, which force is quite well realized and applied by both GFF and FRF.

### *Theme - Recommendations*

#### *Category - Future Prospects; Lessons Learned*

Representatives of GFF highlighted the significant contributions made by the tournament towards the economy, including financial resources, simplification of administrative processes, and provision of municipal services. Additionally, the tournament is recognized as a platform for promoting social inclusion and bonding within communities. In Romania, similar ideas are stated regarding the economic benefits of hosting major sporting events, emphasizing increased tourism and social inclusion as key outcomes. However, economic challenges are also acknowledged, particularly in terms of infrastructure management and sustainability. Respondents from both Georgia and Romania pointed to issues such as insufficient readiness for implementing new standards, lack of awareness about sustainability practices, and financial constraints hindering comprehensive tournament organization.

In terms of tourism, both countries recognize the tournament as an opportunity to showcase their culture, values, and hospitality to a global audience. Respondents from Georgia highlighted the potential of the event to increase touristic potential and attract visitors from different countries, as well as its role in popularizing host cities. Similarly, the representatives from the FRF acknowledged the positive impact of the tournament on tourism, with particular emphasis on the improved facilities and accommodations observed during the event. However, there were also observations about varying levels of spectator interest, with the U21 tournament not generating as much buzz as other major events like EURO 2020.

Regarding global image, both countries viewed the tournament as an opportunity to enhance their reputation and promote their sports achievements internationally. In



Georgia, the successful hosting of the tournament was seen as a means to raise awareness about the country and its sports achievements on the global stage. Additionally, hosting major sporting events aligned with the government's priorities for development and popularization of the country, as outlined in policy documents. Similarly, representatives from Romania perceive the U21 tournament as a platform to showcase young talents and improve the professionalism of stadium staff, thereby enhancing the country's image in the sports world. In this respect, FRF representative again contrasted U21 with EURO 2020, where the latter was considered to be far more impactful. Additionally, there were indications of resource-related issues affecting event planning and execution, such as constraints on time allocation and challenges in maintaining stadium infrastructure, as evidenced by the example of wasted grass at the Tskaltubo Club stadium, being in correspondence with the literature reviewed.

Representatives from both GFF and FRF emphasized the positive social effects of the tournament, ranging from emotional engagement to infrastructure development. In Georgia, the tournament was seen as a means to reduce aggression levels and foster the sense of community involvement with football. The GFF representative also highlighted the benefits for fans, particularly in terms of local infrastructure improvements that enhance the football experience and promote social cohesion. Similarly, the FRF representative discussed initiatives aimed at engaging underprivileged children through football, emphasizing the role of sports in socializing and providing opportunities for youth. Additionally, the impact of the tournament on attendance records and national pride was noted, indicating its potential to foster a sense of unity and national identity.

In the interview with GFF representative, a concerning incident involving discrimination against a blind person was highlighted. The respondent recalled an incident where a blind individual was denied entry to the stadium due to security policies, which prohibited the white cane for the disabled spectator, leading to legal action against the security personnel involved. This was also confirmed by the NGO, which has the record of cooperation with GFF. This example underlines the challenges which occur due to lack of competence. GFF reacted adequately and the denied spectator was included in all other events. In contrast, the FRF interview highlighted efforts to promote social justice through initiatives aimed at supporting underprivileged children. The respondent discussed a program where national team shirts were donated for exhibition and sold to raise funds for providing tickets to unprivileged children,

facilitating their participation in the tournament matches. This initiative reflected a proactive approach towards promoting inclusivity and equal opportunities within football, demonstrating a commitment to social justice values.

The recommendations for the future extracted from the interviews with representatives from UEFA, GFF and FRF highlighted several key areas for improvement. In Romania, there was a call for greater attention to be placed on developing the reputation of football within the country, with an emphasis on hosting tournaments to attract audiences and enhance the overall standing. Additionally, there was an acknowledgment of the need for more significant resources, both human and financial, to meet UEFA standards and ensure successful tournament hosting is necessary. There was a recognition of the importance of legacy strategies and sustainability initiatives, with suggestions for concrete activities to be implemented to promote visibility and care for infrastructure. There was a recommendation for prioritizing sustainability at both governmental and organizational levels, with recommendations for UEFA to mandate host countries to implement activities aligned with specific SDGs. In Georgia, there was a similar emphasis on the need for resources, legacy planning, and sustainability strategies, along with a recommendation to prioritize international events to improve their quality. Additionally, there was a suggestion for a societal mindset shift towards collective responsibility for sustainability, with a role identified for government intervention in driving change. The importance of understanding and respecting local culture and fostering a more cooperative and friendly relationship between UEFA and host countries was also highlighted as crucial for successful event organization.

### Findings from the Focus Group Discussions

In total 32 respondents participated in the focus group. Four focus group discussions were held in Georgia - 2 among spectators (T = 17 Total amount; N = Referral amount) and 2 among volunteers (T = 15 Total amount; N = Referral amount). In the analysis the numbers are contrasted both in terms of respondents' roles (17 and 15), as well as total amount of participants (32).

#### *Theme - Opening questions*

*Category - SDGs; Future prospects; Lessons Learned*

When reflecting on the purpose of the major sports events the power of football was endorsed as immensely important in this domain. The majority of respondents (N=25; T=32) agreed that U21 had huge impact on the popularization of the country as country appeared on the world map and the healthy lifestyle was popularized. Some of the respondents also underlined that as Georgia was the host nation, we got the opportunity in U21, which was the easiest way to do so in order to give young footballers huge stimulus and future prospects due to the fact that this kind of tournaments are followed by plenty of potential buyers and international clubs. Also, economic aspect and increase of touristic potential was agreed to be one of the outcomes, which in the long run is important for the economic development of the country. From more emotional outlook, one of the respondents mentioned that - *Football in general is a celebration, especially in Georgia*. This idea was widely shared by the spectators' groups resulting in a consensus that attendance of so many people boosted this celebratory spirit. It was also mentioned that seeing Georgian flag on UEFA web page was huge source of pride, being indicative of the positive emotional side of the tournament. Volunteers' groups added that the purpose of major sports events is engagement and people who have never before been interested in football attended matches, which can predetermine the development of culture and habit. Again, several volunteers (N=3; T=15) described the challenges that the country at large and GFF had, have been overcome as the tournament was well-organized and Georgia as a country broke the attendance record. However, the latter idea was not shared by all the participants and some of the volunteers connected the attendance spikes to the success of the national team. To conclude this domain, the purpose of major sport events and namely U21 was endorsed highly and due to successful implementation and increased capacity, respondents hoped that country will have further opportunities to host major UEFA tournaments.

*Theme - Environmental Sustainability (SDG 11; SDG 13)*

*Category - Climate Action*

The focus group discussion participants, when reflecting on smart mobility, indicated that no such initiative was known to them. Some of them, mainly existing users of "Scroll" and "Cari", which are smart alternatives of the transportation, mentioned these ways as means to arrive to the stadium though association with U21 was rather low (N=3; T=17). This pattern is quite similar to the information obtained from the

qualitative interviews, in frames of which, respondents (Mainly from GFF) mentioned that smart mobility related initiatives was not widely employed during the tournament. The replies from the volunteers' focus group discussions were a little bit different, in frames of which vast majority (N=9; T=15) remembered to be given metro card to travel to the stadium and back<sup>5</sup> in frames of the U21. Moreover, they could also use public transportation [Kutaisi, Batumi] without any cost. It is noteworthy, that overall, the endorsement of partnership with the municipalities, especially in Tbilisi, was endorsed somewhat negatively, reasons to which were the additional efforts, which GFF was short of due to the fact that they had infrastructural challenges to overcome in the first place. Measurement of smart mobility initiatives was not mentioned by any of the focus group discussion participant and it can be concluded that no measurement was put in place in order to measure smart mobility related data. As for carbon management, footprint and respective measurements, not even one spectator could associate it with the U21, whereas volunteers remembered the mandatory training that they had to go through during the tournament. This finding is important, as it is indicative of low consciousness among general population. However, from more positive outlook, we can observe how the training among volunteers has meaningfully (N=6; T=15) raised awareness of this issue.

The communication component and campaign related answers can be grouped in two directions - 1. The potential, which U21 had as a platform; and 2. The actual reality what was observed. Respondents, especially from the spectators sub-group mentioned how important generally the UEFA tournaments can be as a platform to communicate different ideas. Among others, most frequently the colorful hand-bands [campaign for equal game] and anti-racism campaigns were highlighted. However, when reflecting on the actual reality during the tournament, none of the spectators could recall the "Cleaner Air, Better game" campaign. Two (2) of the respondents out of 17, from the spectators' domain remembered posted videos and Tik-Tok posts, though association with U21 was somewhat weak. Only thing that was indirectly linked to this campaign by respondents was the non-smoking policy at the stadiums. Some of the spectators even indicated that the social events before the game were under-developed, as well as entertainment blocks in between the half-times. The volunteers remembered two modules from the training - the code of conduct and SDGs. The latter

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<sup>5</sup> The agreement with the metro company was not reached in Tbilisi, though volunteers were given metro cards, which were purchased by GFF.

included the environment-related topics - the components about energy efficiency, recycling and waste-management. It can be summarized from the focus group discussion data that the awareness raising component for volunteers was effective.

The pollution related codes indicated that the waste-bins, which were planted at the stadiums, were noticed by the spectators, however, the general awareness in this direction was again low. This finding is corresponding to the analysis of the qualitative interviews, where stakeholders directly underlined non-existence of recycling culture in Georgia. Some of the respondents even recalled the advertisements, as well as concrete colors of the waste bins in all three cities - Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Batumi. Moreover, it was also mentioned that the plates, cups and forks, which vendors had, were eco-friendly. From the findings it can be concluded that this intervention was impactful to certain extent. The room for development in this component clearly exists, though these steps can be positively evaluated.

The legacy component based on the data obtained through the focus group discussions, can be sub-divided into two sections - infrastructural and emotional. Several respondents (N=2; T=17) emphasized the renovation of stadiums and compliance with international standards among others accessible entrances and comfortable seats. Even in the infrastructural domain, the sustainability elements that have been mentioned, were not consciously associated with sustainability as such. The emotional legacy was far more acknowledged - underlining touristic, as well as country-popularization related aspects. One of the respondents said that - *The fact that coach of England's national team eats at Bikentia's Kebab Shop [It is a landmark bistro in Kutaisi] is huge*. It is concluded that, even though this particular code - Legacy was included in the Environmental Sustainability section, none of the respondents had associated legacy to environmental sustainability.

*Theme - Social Equality (SDG 5; SDG 10)*

*Category - Diversity and Inclusion*

The accessibility of the stadiums was overall endorsed positively by the respondents, more from the spectators' group. All of them recalled disadvantaged (Wheelchair users) fans, whom they have noticed on the stadium during the games. Volunteers had more in-depth information as well as experience, remembering the stewards who were there to support disabled fans. Even the case of Kutaisi was mentioned, where

the path was steep and disabled fan would not have managed to reach his / her place independently. Overall, the respondents recalled separate sitting areas for disabled fans. According to the interview with NGO from Georgia, this kind of approach, where disabled fans are not integrated into the stadium and have separate sitting areas is discriminatory. Moreover, the interviews demonstrated that when discussing disability mostly people with reduced mobility opportunities, in other words people with wheelchairs were mentioned. It is noteworthy, because generally it confirmed limited awareness of inclusivity among spectators as other disabilities (Blindness, Deafness, etc.) were fully disregarded. General accessibility of the stadium was endorsed highly - vast majority (N=27; T=32) recalled stewards and designated personnel who were there to manage queues, redirect and guide spectators to their seats. Overall, this domain was endorsed positively. The price of the tickets was agreed by spectators' group to be accessible. In this domain, they also highlighted that the interest towards purchasing the U21 tickets intensified after successful performance of the national team, which increased demand and it became hard to buy tickets. In this respect the problem of resellers was underlined as an important challenge for the accessibility of the tickets. This finding is important, as for the future championships, mechanisms of coping with this challenge can be further addressed.

Second important aspect in direction of inclusion was the gender related component. Volunteers sub-group clearly stated that there were no barriers in terms of selection, as well as further involvement in the tournament, which would have occurred because of gender. Some of the respondents recalled that there were no additional stimuli to include women or girls, and the only area where females were not admitted was the doping domain. Gender, as well aspects of respect, as according to respondents, was part of PowerPoint presentation which was shared with them and was followed-up by a Q&A. In terms of volunteering orientation, it was also underlined that this training, due its mandatory nature, was attended by all 300 volunteers and issue like responsible HR was covered, which corresponds to the human rights discourse. According to respondents, GFF cooperated with universities to disseminate information and gather pool of applicants, through which one-third of respondents (N=5; T=15) learnt about this opportunity. One volunteer also reflected on the selection process, which according to her was fair and - *Pictures were taken at the interviews with the volunteers and posted to ensure that the process was transparent.* Moreover, due to summer those students who had exam periods had the flexibility from GFF and

universities, which created supportive environment for the participation. Overall, even though the stakeholder involvement was not endorsed highly in the in-depth interviews section, it can be summarized that GFF had certain positive practices in cooperation with universities and municipal transportation.

*Theme - Governance (SDG17)*

*Category - Communication*

From the spectators' perspective, it was made clear by vast majority (N=16; T=17) that none of them have participated in any kind of research at the stadium, where the questions would have been about the country of or origin, smart mobility or any other transportation and accessibility related aspects. This finding is corresponding to the answers of the GFF representatives, though is in contrast to Romanian experience, according to which attendees of the games participated in small surveys at the stadiums. This finding is important, as it indicates for the room of improvement from the Georgian perspective. Moreover, it was underlined by meaningful amount of the respondents from both domains (N=5, T=17; N=8, T=15), that it would have been important to share their feedback with the organizers, as well listen to the report of the organizing body. In their opinion, this kind of conversations would improve the quality of performance for future events and would boost openness and transparency.

The sponsors or partners of the U21 were not recalled by respondents, when asked. One spectator mentioned MacDonald's and Coca-Cola, which provided "Big Mac" menus with the illustrations of the players. Again, this hype of attendance was linked to success of the national team, which as according to respondents could have been used better. Volunteers were more positive about the communication and remembered promotional activities during the tournament, as well as kick-off. One of them even mention that - *Sport festival was used to promote the trophy and trophy tours were organized in each host city to promote the tournament.* In this domain not even once was the UEFA campaign "Cleaner Air, Better Game" mentioned. This finding is indicative of the somewhat flawed communication in this aspect among spectators, as volunteers were more familiar with these ideas due to the mandatory training, which they have gone through. Based on all of the above, in the domain of social legacies, more importantly the emphasis was on overall spirit of the tournament and the success of national team than any of the ideas / campaigns which would have

had purposeful impact. One of the respondents argued that this huge platform of the championship could have been used better to promote positive messages.

### *Theme - Recommendations*

#### *Category - Future Prospects; Lessons Learned*

In stakeholder domain majority of spectators (N=10; T=17) named government, GFF, as well as footballers and clubs. Some of the respondents (N=5; T=17) also named people and fans, who attend the championship. It is noteworthy that NGOs were not mentioned even once in frames of focus group discussions, what corresponds to the findings from the interviews and is indicative of poor cooperation and involvement of civil sector in such events. Stakeholders, in general, was a domain, which respondents perceived as doers whose contribution could have been monetized, for example one of the respondents even mentioned ticket sellers. The ideological connotation of the U21, as discussed above in the communication component, was given less emphasis on the level of organizations. Lastly, the role of government as a stakeholder was endorsed, where the impressions were somewhat divided - the spectators in Tbilisi saw as a limitation the coinciding process of rehabilitation at the Dinamo Arena, which complicated transportation and could have done after the U21; while other spectators and volunteers appreciated reconstruction and construction of the stadiums, arguing it to be one of the most important legacies of the tournament. Lastly, when reflecting on the future prospects, respondents emphasized the huge role that the football has to play, being the most watched sport in the world - both in terms of attendance and broadcasting. It was believed that it should be used more as a platform promoting different ideas, among others the fact the 20% of Georgia is occupied by Russia. It led to an interesting conversation about the political role of football and the opinions were divided between the respondents, some of them claiming (N=11; T=32) that football should not be politized. In the co-hosting format majority of volunteers (N=13; T=15) as well as spectators (N=14; T=18) believed that Georgia has the potential to host prospective major sports events owing to the increased capacity during U21.

### Discussion

The discussion of the research findings, framed within the context of the literature review and utilizing CDA illuminates the alignment of the U21 European Championship in Georgia and Romania with the SDGs. Drawing from the literature, mega-sporting events are portrayed as platforms for showcasing economic prowess and societal



advancement, yet they are also fraught with challenges and uncertainties, particularly in developing countries (Matheson & Baade, 2004). The discourse surrounding infrastructure development underscores a shift towards sustainability, necessitating considerations of legacy use and environmental impact, especially pertinent in the context of co-hosting by Georgia and Romania (Baumann & Matheson, 2013). Furthermore, the geopolitical significance of hosting such events underscores the aspirations of emerging powers to bolster their global standing, albeit with attendant economic risks (Cornelissen, 2010).

The qualitative research conducted through in-depth interviews with respondents in the field and focus group discussions with spectators and volunteers provided valuable insights into the alignment of the U21 European Championship with the UN SDGs in Georgia and Romania. Regarding RQ1, the analysis revealed a mixed picture of alignment with environmental sustainability and disparities between Georgia and Romania. While economic benefits and a celebratory atmosphere were acknowledged, gaps were identified in the implementation of environmental initiatives such as smart mobility, carbon management and campaigns in this direction. In terms of RQ2, efforts towards social equality were noted, particularly in accessibility and gender inclusion within the tournament for both countries. However, challenges such as ticket accessibility for the matches of the national team and discriminatory practices towards disabled fans were highlighted. Lastly, for RQ3, stakeholder engagement and communication were recognized as important aspects of governance for sustainable development. While there was acknowledgement of stakeholder involvement, gaps in communication strategies and awareness of sponsorships were identified, which painted somewhat different challenges for each host country.

Both Georgia and Romania present unique contexts and approaches to hosting the U21 Championship, as two hosts faced distinct socio-economic and infrastructural challenges. Georgia, with its growing tourism sector and rapidly developing infrastructure, prioritized initiatives aimed at enhancing social inclusion to bolster its global image. On the other hand, Romania, with its established sporting infrastructure and experience of EURO 2020, focused on benefiting from the U21 to address issues of governance and community engagement. The research also revealed the importance of supportive legislative base, as well as overall awareness towards the topic. Despite these differences, both countries share a common goal of using the U21

Championship as a catalyst for sustainable development, aligning their efforts with the broader objectives of UEFA being interlinked with SDGs within their sustainability strategy. Through comparative analysis, this research underscores the importance of context-specific approaches to hosting major sporting events, emphasizing the need for tailored strategies that address the unique challenges and opportunities present in each host nation. Recommendations stemming from these findings emphasize the need for improved awareness, transparent communication, and strengthened initiatives and resources to promote environmental sustainability, social equality, and governance for sustainable development in future U21 tournaments.

### The limitations of the current study

In terms of operational issues, the research was implemented smoothly. Notable limitation that can be indicated at this stage of the research is the fact that the local UN agency in Georgia refused to participate in the study. The major argument behind it was the fact that the organization could not identify relevant respondents adequate for the participation in the study. This limitation can also be interpreted as the fact that further inter-stakeholder communication is necessary on the ground for the actualization of the SDGs. However, the UEFA interviews covered the SDGs related areas rather accurately and this limitation was addressed by the research team.

As for the quantitative element, even though national statistics provide general data about tourism, economic indicators of the quarter, etc., still confounding variables (For example, timing of the U21 - summer, which is a period for increased mobility) play significant role here, which is impossible to be controlled within the research. At the final stage of analysis, the data of the National Statistics Office of Georgia was analyzed by researchers, which indicated somewhat increased mobility in the periods of June-July, 2023. According to initial plan the qualitative insights would have been enriched with quantitative data, though the spikes in touristic mobility was not that meaningful to make reliable judgements, what would have made the interpretation of quantitative data somewhat less valid. For example, the third quarter of year (In which the U21 was held) can be described with following visitor influx whose occupation was recreation in Georgia according to years (GeoStat, 2024): 2019 - 484.6; 2020-2021 - not available; 2022 - 381.9; 2023 - 451.4. As for the Romanian context, the touristic data was available in the Romanian language (NIS, 2024) and the challenge was overcome by the researchers, however in the word documents quarter-related data

was not available. Considering the decreased reliability due to confounding variables the decision was made to disregard this component from the research.

Further, the limitation of the study is the generalizability, which research cannot offer due to the sampling and approach, which was purposive and qualitative. Though, it is noteworthy that the research sheds lights on the existing tendencies around U21, being the pioneering effort in this regard. Quantitative approach was disregarded in the initial phase, as: a. given the limited funds of the research, the random sampling of all the population (attending the U21) was impractical and b. no such data was available. The only option towards the b. argument would have been to address the ticketing platforms of Georgia and Romania (Who were directly selling the tickets to attendees), though this approach would not have been in-line with personal data protection regulations. Lastly, for the focus of our research it was decided to gather qualitative data both from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions which resulted in rich and contextualized insights into the perspectives and experiences of stakeholders, as well as spectators and volunteers.

### The impact of the research

The importance of this research lies in its capacity to deepen our understanding of the intricate interplay between sustainable development and major sporting events, particularly in the context of nations such as Georgia, which is in its developing process and Romania being more advanced in this regard. With a specific focus on the U21 European Championship, the study aimed to analyze its influence on environmental sustainability, social equality, and governance practices tailored towards sustainable development within these host nations. By scrutinizing the alignment of the tournament with the SDGs, this research endeavored to identify, evaluate the measures undertaken by Georgia and Romania to promote sustainability within the sporting arena.

The outcomes of this study carry significant implications across multiple factors. Firstly, it offers valuable insights into the role of major sporting events in advancing sustainable development within these hosting nations, serving as a knowledge sharing for international bodies such as the UN and UEFA, as well as national policymakers. National football associations in Georgia and Romania, alongside other stakeholders,

can leverage these findings to better align future events with the UN's development agenda, particularly the SDGs, within their local contexts.

Secondly, the research enhances our understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with hosting major sporting events in developing nations while adhering to the SDGs. By describing the potential impacts of the U21 European Championship on the host nations, the study laid the groundwork for formulating strategies to optimize benefits and mitigate adverse consequences. These findings will inform the ongoing development of the Sustainability Strategy at GFF and influence the reevaluation of sustainability strategy at FRF.

Thirdly, the study contributes to the broader discourse on sports' role in advancing the UN's SDGs. The insights generated serve as a valuable resource for discussions and policymaking related to leveraging sports for sustainable development, social inclusion, and economic growth. Given football's immense social influence, these findings facilitate stakeholder engagement at national and international levels.

By incorporating targeted activities during major football events, this study recognizes the transformative potential of raising awareness about these vital subjects and bridging existing gaps. Additionally, amidst the scarcity of academic research focused on football and sports in general, this study stands as a pioneering effort, providing robust data for future reference. While sustainable measures in football may initially pose financial challenges for certain countries, proactive steps towards attaining the SDGs are essential for fostering unity and progress within the European football community.

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## Annex #1 - Code Book

### ➤ Theme - Environmental Sustainability (SDG 11; SDG 13)

#### ➤ Category - Climate Action

- Code: Smart Mobility
- Code: Measurement
- Code: Measure
- Code: Spectator's carbon impact
- Code: Team's carbon impact
- Code: Activated host cities
- Code: Carbon Management
- Code: Measure carbon footprint
- Code: Reduce carbon footprint
- Code: Advocacy
- Code: Awareness raising
- Code: Campaigns
- Code: Sustainable Infrastructure
- Code: Legacy
- Code: Green Infrastructure
- Code: Sustainability
- Code: Clean air
- Code: Pollution

### ➤ Theme - Social Equality (SDG 5; SDG 10)

#### ➤ Category - Diversity and Inclusion

- Code: Accessibility
- Code: Stadium accessibility
- Code: Accessible tournament information
- Code: Tickets at an accessible price
- Code: Workforce equality
- Code: Inclusion
- Code: Respect
- Code: Gender
- Code: Women
- Code: Employment
- Code: Volunteers
- Code: Empowerment
- Code: Gender Empowerment
- Code: Gender Inclusion
- Code: Community Engagement
- Code: Inclusivity
- Code: Inclusive Policies



➤ **Theme - Governance (SDG 17)**

➤ **Category - Communication**

- Code: Reporting
- Code: Campaigns
- Code: Involvement of stakeholders
- Code: NGOs
- Code: Openness
- Code: Partnership
- Code: Discussions
- Code: Post-event Social Legacies
- Code: Social Legacies
- Code: Community Development
- Code: Advocacy
- Code: Environmental Consciousness

**Open-coding**

➤ **Theme: Opening / Closing Sections**

➤ **Category - SDGs; Future prospects; Lessons Learned**

- Code: Economic Impact
- Code: Economic Growth
- Code: Prosperity
- Code: Economic Challenges
- Code: Economic Overruns
- Code: Tourism
- Code: Global Image
- Code: Resource Strains
- Code: Social Development
- Code: Social Justice
- Code: NEW - Purpose of Major Sports Events
- Code: NEW - Evaluation of 21
- Code: NEW - Stakeholders
- Code: NEW - Differences between Georgia and Romania
- Code: NEW - Organizational Sustainability Strategies
- Code: NEW - Recommendations for future
- Code: Additional Codes to be added as relevant

## Annex #2 - Aide Memoir for the In-depth Interviews

*Opening Questions (for all the respondents in the qualitative approach):*

- What do you believe to be the overall mission / expectation of sports / major sports events?
- How would you describe U21 2023 towards the mission / expectation that you have already mentioned?
- How would you evaluate the role of key stakeholders in organizing and delivering the major sports events? **Who are they?**
- In your view, were there any differences in terms of organizing, delivering U21 2023 between Georgia and Romania? If yes, how would you explain them?

*SDG Related Questions (for all the respondents in the qualitative approach / reformulation necessary due to respondent):*

- In your view, how knowledgeable is your institution in direction of SDGs?
- In your knowledge, how are the SDGs integrated in organizational strategies and action plans?
- In your experience, how are SDGs being practiced in everyday workflow?
- In your view, were there any differences in terms of U21 2023 influence / alignment towards SDGs between Georgia and Romania? If yes, how would you explain them?

*Environmental Sustainability (SDG 11; SDG 13) and Climate Action:*

- In your view, how was smart mobility ensured during U21 in Georgia / Romania?
- In your knowledge, what kind of measurement was put in place to gather and analyze smart mobility related data?
- In your knowledge, what actions were taken to decrease spectator's and team's carbon impact?
- In your knowledge, what kind of measurement was put in place to gather and analyze carbon related data?
- In your experience, what awareness raising / advocacy related activities have been put in place in direction of environmental sustainability during U21? (In case of positive reply ask respondent about examples)

*Social Equality (SDG 5; SDG 10) and Diversity and Inclusion:*

- In your view, how accessible was the stadium for disabled audiences / fans during U21 in Georgia / Romania?
- In your view, how accessible was the information for general audiences / fans during U21 in Georgia / Romania?
- In your view, how accessible was the stadium ticket price for general audiences / fans during U21 in Georgia / Romania?

- In your knowledge, what kind of measurement was put in place to gather and analyze accessibility related data?
- In your knowledge, what actions were taken to ensure respect and inclusion for U21 employees and volunteers?
- In your knowledge, what kind of measurement was put in place to ensure equal opportunities (among others gender related) during U21?
- In your experience, what awareness raising / advocacy related activities have been put in place in direction of diversity and inclusion during U21? (In case of positive reply ask respondent about examples)

*Governance (SDG 17) and Communication:*

- In your knowledge, how was the efficient and transparent communication / reporting ensured during U21 in Georgia / Romania?
- In your knowledge, what kind of actions / campaigns were put in place to ensure stakeholder involvement? (Planning phase; Implementation phase; Follow-up phase)
- In your experience, how open were the National Associations (GFF & FRF) towards stakeholder engagement? (In case of positive reply ask respondent about examples)
- In your experience, how cooperative / partnership oriented were the National Associations (GFF & FRF) towards stakeholder engagement? (In case of positive reply ask respondent about examples)

*Closing Questions:*

- How would you envisage the future of major sports events, namely U21?  
**Concentration on capacities of Georgia and Romania**
- What incentives / actions should international organizations (UN, UEFA), state, and key stakeholders adopt to stimulate further the alignment of major sports events with SDGs?
  - Can you think of any 'best practice' in this direction? Examples?
- Further recommendations / reflections / comments

## Annex #3 - Focus Group Discussion Guideline

### *Opening Questions:*

- What, in your opinion, is the primary mission or expectation associated with sports and major sports events like the UEFA U21 European Championship?
- How would you describe the U21 2023 tournament in relation to the mission or expectation you mentioned earlier?
- Who do you believe are the key stakeholders involved in organizing and delivering a major sports event like U21 2023?
- Based on your experience as a spectator/fan, how would you assess the role of these key stakeholders in organizing and delivering U21 2023 in Georgia?
- Did you notice any differences in how U21 2023 was organized and delivered in Georgia compared to Romania/any previous major sporting event hosted by Georgia? If so, can you explain those differences from your perspective as a fan?

### *SDG Related Questions:*

- In your view, how aware do you think the general public and fans in Georgia are of the sustainability standards (United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs))?
- Based on your observations during UEFA U21 2023, do you believe that the sustainability standards (SDGs) were integrated into the event's strategies and action plans, and if so, how?
- How do you think the sustainability standards (SDGs) were put into practice during your experience as a spectator at UEFA U21 2023?
- Were there any noticeable differences in how UEFA U21 2023 in Georgia aligned with the sustainability standards (SDGs) from your perspective as a fan? If yes, what do you think contributed to these differences?

### *Environmental Sustainability (SDG 11; SDG 13) and Climate Action:*

- In your opinion, how was the concept of smart mobility implemented during UEFA U21 2023 in Georgia and how did it impact your experience as a fan?
- Were you aware of any efforts to collect and analyze data related to smart mobility during the tournament?
- Were there actions taken to reduce the carbon footprint of spectators and teams that you noticed, and was any data collected and analyzed regarding carbon impact?
- Did you encounter any awareness-raising or advocacy activities related to environmental sustainability during U21 2023? If so, can you provide examples of these activities? **(Cleaner Air, Better Game Campaign - have they heard about it? And if yes concrete examples)**

*Social Equality (SDG 5; SDG 10) and Diversity and Inclusion:*

- From your perspective as a fan, how accessible was the stadium for disabled audiences and fans during UEFA U21 2023 in Georgia and Romania?
- How accessible was the information provided to general audiences and fans during the tournament, and what impact did it have on your experience?
- What were your impressions regarding the accessibility of stadium ticket prices for general audiences and fans during U21 2023 in Georgia?
- Were you aware of any efforts to gather and analyze data related to accessibility during the event?
- Did you observe any actions taken to ensure respect and inclusion for U21 employees and volunteers during the tournament? Were there any measures in place to ensure equal opportunities, including those related to gender?
- Were you aware of any awareness-raising or advocacy activities related to diversity and inclusion during U21 2023 as a fan? If so, please share any examples you may have encountered.

*Governance (SDG 17) and Communication:*

- How, in your view, was efficient and transparent communication and reporting ensured during UEFA U21 2023 in Georgia, and how did this impact your experience as a fan?
- Were you aware of any actions or campaigns aimed at involving fans and stakeholders in the planning, implementation, or follow-up phases of the tournament?
- In your experience, how open and cooperative were the National Associations (GFF & FRF) towards engaging with fans and spectators? If possible, please share examples to illustrate their level of engagement.
- Were there instances where the National Associations (GFF & FRF) actively partnered with fans and spectators to enhance the tournament experience? If so, please provide examples.

*Closing Questions:*

- How do you envisage the future of major sports events, particularly in terms of their alignment with the sustainable standards (Development Goals), and Georgia's readiness to host such events?
- From your perspective as a fan, what incentives or actions do you believe international organizations (UN, UEFA), the state, and key stakeholders should take to further promote the alignment of major sports events with the sustainable standards?
- Can you think of any best practices or examples from U21 2023 or other events that successfully aligned with the sustainable standards? Please share any that you are aware of.

- Do you have any additional recommendations, reflections, or comments regarding the impact of U21 2023 on the sustainable standards or the overall alignment of sports events with sustainable development from the fan's perspective?

## Annex #4 - Consent Form



**Please complete this form after you have read the general information about the research listed below /or listened to an explanation about the research.**

**Title of Study: U21 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

**Ethical Clearance: GIPA - Georgian Institute of Public Affairs Research Committee Decree of 15.02.2023 Ref. Number 5/15.02.2023**

Thank you for considering taking part in this research.

Sport can play a vital role in improving / contributing environmental sustainability, social inclusion and accountable governance. All of the listed categories are of paramount importance for adequate climate action; diversity and inclusion and respective communication and awareness raising.

Our research aims to explore the role of major sporting events, such as the U21 European Championship 2023, in promoting sustainable development in developing countries like Georgia and Romania. Specifically, we will examine the impact of the tournament on promotion and encouragement of SDG 13 - Climate Action; SDG 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities; SDG 5 Gender Equality; SDG 10 Reduced inequalities; SDG 17 Partnerships for the goals. In frames of the research the measures taken by the host countries to ensure that the tournament aligns with the UN's 17 SDGs will be examined.

The person organizing the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the information above or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

I confirm that I understand that by ticking/initialing each box I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that it will be assumed that unticked/initialed boxes mean that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study. I understand that by not giving consent for any one element I may be deemed ineligible for the study.

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated 18<sup>th</sup> of September of the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and asked questions which have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason, up until 2 weeks' time after the interview.

3. I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes explained to me in the Information Sheet. I understand that such information will be handled in accordance with the terms of the General Data Protection Regulation.

4. I understand that my information may be subject to review by the Research Committee, GIPA - Georgian Institute of Public Affairs for monitoring and audit purposes.

5. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained, and it will not be possible to identify me in any research outputs

6. I understand that the information I have submitted will be published as a report and I wish to receive a copy of it.

7. I consent to my interview being recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of Researcher**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature**