

4.4 The gap between sports institutions and the public will: responses to match-fixing in Lithuania

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Until recently it seemed as if there was no match-fixing in Lithuania, with no information on the subject available and no publicly known investigations. Suddenly in 2011, however, players from the Lithuanian Basketball League (*Lietuvos krepšinio lyga*: LKL) club Naglis were alleged to have betted on themselves to lose a game by 30 points.² Not only was this was the first ever known case of match-fixing in the country, but it occurred in Lithuania's most beloved sport, its 'second religion'. Despite this, no public debates about integrity in sport or the possible scale of the problem followed. The LKL and the Lithuanian Basketball Federation (*Lietuvos krepšinio federacija*: LKF) imposed monetary and disciplinary sanctions³ – and that was pretty much the end of the story.

Lithuanians next heard about corruption in sport at the end of 2012, when the Swiss-based monitoring organisation Sportradar claimed that Lithuania was among the top 10 European countries with the highest number of likely fixed football matches.⁴ It was another red flag raised to the sport community, but, again, neither the LKF nor the Lithuanian Football Federation (*Lietuvos futbolo federacija*: LFF) seemed ready to publicly admit the existence of the problem, and the issue remained largely behind closed doors.

The sporting authorities might have been making little effort to advocate for honest sport, but the Lithuanian people clearly stated that both the LFF and the LKF had a responsibility for integrity in sports and should be the ones to address the issue. According to the research by Transparency International

Lithuania in 2014, integrity and honesty in sports was important to 68% of Lithuanian people, and most of them would be prepared to punish their beloved sports clubs in the event of match-fixing:⁵ 57% of those betting said they would stop doing so, 44% of those watching games on television said they would not do that anymore and half of all those buying tickets to watch sport matches live said they would abandon the habit.

How did Lithuanian sportsmen respond to this demand by sports fans for fair play? To find out, TI Lithuania conducted the first ever representative research into match-fixing in the professional basketball and football leagues, surveying 100 football players and 259 basketball players⁶ about their experience and perceptions. The results suggested that basketball may be as vulnerable to match-fixing as football – a fact that is hardly raised when reporting match-fixing worldwide.



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Figure 3.1 Match-fixing: football vs basketball

The findings clearly showed that Lithuanian sport faces big challenges, including that every fifth football player and every seventh basketball player is likely to have taken part in a fixed match, whether knowingly or otherwise.⁷ According to the data collected, team-mates, former colleagues and club owners are the ones suggesting that players participate in match-fixing. Some 15% of football players and 21% of basketball players admitted to having been personally approached to agree to fix matches.

The research received a considerable amount of media attention, and provided a good catalyst for public debate. Even after all this, however, more than half the players interviewed said they still did not perceive the practice of match-fixing to be a problem.⁸

Root causes

Why do players get involved in such agreements? The results of the research showed that football and basketball players alike face a number of issues in their daily lives that, in the end, greatly influence their decision to engage in match-fixing. Primarily, players highlighted financial reasons: they were either looking for extra money (52%) or found themselves in a poor personal financial situation (16%), sometimes because of delays in the payment of their salaries (13%).

Not all the players were aware of the rights and basic entitlements that they could demand from their clubs.⁹ According to the research, 18% of players have not even signed a contract with their clubs; 62% stated that their wages were not paid on time at least once during the last year, most often with a delay of three to five months.¹⁰ Those who did have contracts did not always understand the legal guarantees a contract brings, or what clauses the contracts should contain to protect them fully in the event of injury,

for example. Injuries are one of the most pressing problems, as not all players receive their salaries when they are injured.

The results of the research inspired TI Lithuania to organise integrity seminars for professional players across the country. This provided a unique opportunity to talk face-to-face and develop a better understanding of the context they operate in. After discussing the risks of match-fixing, what it can mean for their professional career and how to avoid it, players consistently highlighted the fact that there are currently no effective measures to solve match-fixing and help athletes.

First and foremost, there is no legal protection for whistleblowers, and there are no safe reporting channels. Even if a player decides to report anything related to match-fixing, he or she is never sure what exactly will be done with the information and what the personal consequences could be. More broadly, TI analysis shows that Lithuania is among the weakest EU states in terms of protection for whistleblowers.¹¹ At the same time, there is no special provision for fraud in sport in Lithuania's criminal code, so law enforcement institutions have never been able to bring any investigation to a successful conclusion.

Findings

It is now known that match-fixing exists in Lithuania's sports. The necessary first step is to make a public admission of its existence and state clearly that it will not be tolerated. This would be a tremendously important move, as local sports fans already appear to be prepared to begin sanctioning their favourite sports teams and athletes if they are found out to have engaged in match-fixing.

Notes

¹ Rugile Trumpyte is a project manager at Transparency International Lithuania.

² Players from the club Naglis were alleged to have betted on their loss against the club Zalgiris by 30 points on 5 April 2011; see BasketNews.lt, 'Skandalas LKL: "Naglio" žaidėjai statė prieš savo komandą (papildyta – komentarai)', 6 April 2011, www.basketnews.lt/news-38465-skandalas-lkl-naglio-zaidejai-state-pries-savo-komanda-papildyta-komentarai.html#.VOx3vizEpKo.

³ Each player who participated in match-fixing was fined €869: BasketZone.lt, 'LKL skyrė baudas lažybose dalyvavusiems "Naglio" žaidėjams', www.basketzone.lt/naujienos/7651-lkl-skyr-baudas-laybose-dalyvavusiems-qnaglioq-aidjams-.html.

⁴ Albania Screen, "'Sportradar". Albanian football, the most corrupted in Europe", 30 November 2012, http://news.albanianscreen.tv/pages/news_detail/51996/ENG

⁵ See Transparency International Lithuania, 'Lietuvos gyventojai apie nesąžiningus susitarimus sporte' (Vilnius: TI Lithuania, 2014), http://transparency.lt/media/filer_public/2014/01/21/gyventojai_futbolas_krepsinis_2014.pdf.

⁶ The survey of players was carried out in December 2013. The representative survey of Lithuanian citizens was also commissioned by TI Lithuania, and carried out in October/November 2013 by VISEO.

⁷ Transparency International Lithuania, 'Nesąžiningi susitarimai sporte' (Vilnius: TI Lithuania, 2014), http://transparency.lt/media/filer_public/2014/01/22/sportininku_apklausos_rezultatai_2014_1.pdf.

⁸ 45.1% of players said that match-fixing is a minor problem; 16.4% said it is not a problem at all.

⁹ This became even more obvious when integrity seminars were organized for professional football and basketball players.

¹⁰ Ibid..

¹¹ Transparency International, *Whistleblowing in Europe: Legal Protections for Whistleblowers in the EU* (Berlin: TI, 2013), http://transparency.lt/media/filer_public/2013/11/05/praneseju__apsaugos__ataskaita_es.pdf.