

# Foreign players, coaches, and the politics of belonging: strengthening citizenship in Czech football

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## ABSTRACT

In a globalized world, the use of foreign players by elite sport clubs has become normalized, yet fan perceptions of this practice are not always positive. The top Czech football league has consistently included 100 to 120 foreigners per season, representing 22–27% of players, for more than 15 years. This article pursues two related aims. First, it examines Czech fans' views on the use of foreign players, drawing on survey data from 2018 and 2023. Second, it analyzes the case of AC Sparta Prague, where internationalization strategies under two foreign coaches, Andrea Stramaccioni in 2017 and Brian Priske in 2023, produced contrasting fan responses. While Stramaccioni's tenure was deemed a failure, Priske's multicultural squad secured the league championship and shifted perceptions toward greater acceptance. Complemented by interviews with club executives, marketing directors, and sport managers, the analysis highlights how foreign players and coaches can be integrated in ways that strengthen not only club performance but also broader forms of citizenship, understood as practices of belonging, respect, and inclusion within Czech football and society.

## KEYWORDS

fan perception; glocalization; internationalization; national identity; sport migration

## DOI

10.14712/23366052.2026.6

## INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, elite sport clubs occupy a complex position at the intersection of local identity and global flows. While the use of foreign players

and coaches has become normalized across top leagues, fan responses often reveal an underlying tension between the embrace of competitive success and the preservation of local or national belonging. Nowhere is this tension more evident than in European football, where clubs historically rooted in national pride must negotiate the challenges and opportunities presented by internationalization (Crossan, 2024; Crossan et al., 2024).

In this article, citizenship is used in a broader sense than formal nationality. Citizenship here refers to cultural and social practices of belonging, enacted within the public sphere where shared values, identities, and responsibilities are negotiated (Ong et al., 1996; Spracklen, 2007). In the sporting context, scholars have emphasized “cultural citizenship”, where participation in sport, whether as athletes, fans, or institutions, becomes a site for teaching, contesting, and symbolizing social membership (Collins & Kay, 2014; Kidd, 2006). This extends to corporate citizenship in sport organizations, where clubs are expected not only to compete but also to embody civic values such as respect, inclusion, and non-discrimination (Matten & Crane, 2005). Thus, the integration of foreign players in Czech football can be understood as more than a labor-market strategy: it is also a process through which clubs negotiate belonging and contribute to the strengthening of citizenship behaviors in society.

The Czech Republic offers a compelling case study for examining these dynamics. Since the early 2000s, the top tier of Czech football, the Fortuna Liga, has seen a steady influx of foreign players, comprising between 22% and 27% of total players annually (Crossan, 2024). Despite the relative stability of these numbers over the past fifteen years, fan perceptions of the trend have not remained static. This became particularly visible in 2017 when AC Sparta Prague appointed Italian coach Andrea Stramaccioni and rapidly expanded its foreign player roster (iDNES.cz, 2017). The backlash among fans was immediate and fierce, culminating in widespread skepticism about the viability of foreign leadership within Czech football (Filípek, 2017; Palička & Čermák, 2018). Yet by 2023, with Danish coach Brian Priske leading Sparta to the league championship and similarly utilizing a multinational squad, fan sentiments had shifted markedly toward acceptance (Vait, 2022).

This article investigates the evolving relationship between the internationalization of elite Czech football clubs and the construction of citizenship and belonging among fans. Drawing on fan surveys conducted in 2018 and 2023, as well as interviews with club management, marketing directors, and sports managers, we explore how the strategic use of foreign players and coaches influences perceptions of identity and national pride. The Czech case sheds light on broader questions relevant to semi-peripheral football nations: under what conditions does the globalization of sport reinforce, rather than erode, a sense of citizenship?

This inquiry is grounded in sociological theories that conceptualize sport as a critical site for the negotiation of identity in a global age. As King (2017) argues, football clubs are not merely sporting organizations but arenas where national, local, and global identities intersect and are contested. Rather than viewing globalization as a simple erosion of national identity, researchers have emphasized the processes of “glocalization” and hybridization, wherein local cultures adapt to global influences in ways that rearticulate rather than erase traditional forms of belonging (Andrews, 1996; Andrews & Grainger, 2007; Finn & Giulianotti, 2013; Giulianotti, 2015; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007).

Glocalization suggests that while elite clubs increasingly draw on international talent pools, they also localize these global influences to fit their historical narratives and cultural expectations (Giulianotti, 2015). In this way, clubs become vehicles for both global competitiveness and local meaning-making. This process often involves selective incorporation: not all foreign influences are equally embraced, and the manner in which players are integrated into the club's ethos plays a crucial role in fan acceptance (Andrews & Grainger, 2007; Maguire, 1999). Finn and Giulianotti (2013) further note that while globalization introduces new identities and practices, it also intensifies local attachments as a form of resistance or adaptation.

The relationship between sporting success and the acceptance of foreign players has also been well documented. Cleland (2015) demonstrates that fan hostility toward internationalization diminishes significantly when foreign players and coaches contribute to on-field success. Similarly, van Hilvoorde et al. (2010) argue that achievements in international competitions often bolster, rather than weaken, national pride, even when victories are secured by multicultural teams. Success, therefore, becomes a critical mediating factor in the tension between global personnel strategies and local identity narratives.

In the Czech context, anxieties about the use of foreign players have been compounded by broader historical and cultural factors. The nation's transition from a communist regime to an integrated member of the European Union brought about significant changes in economic, political, and cultural domains. Yet as Fialová et al. (2016) show, Czech media have often framed foreign players as a "threat" to national traditions, reflecting lingering ambivalence about globalization. Despite the formal political and economic openness associated with EU membership, Czech football fandom has retained strong nationalistic undercurrents, making the process of accepting foreign players and coaches particularly slow.

Building on these theoretical insights, this article examines how Sparta Prague's contrasting experiences under two foreign coaches, Stramaccioni and Priske, illustrate the conditional nature of fan acceptance toward globalization in sport. We argue that elite clubs can indeed strengthen notions of citizenship and belonging when they successfully integrate foreign players and align sporting success with narratives of local pride. However, this process remains contingent on strategic management, effective communication, and consistent performance on the field.

This article contributes to broader debates on sport, globalization, and identity by offering a detailed case study from a semi-peripheral European football context. It demonstrates that the internationalization of sport does not inevitably dilute national loyalty but can, under certain conditions, reinforce it in new and dynamic ways. Understanding these conditions has significant implications for how elite clubs manage their rosters, communicate with their fanbases, and navigate the politics of belonging in a globalized world.

## METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods approach investigating how the use of foreign players and coaches in Czech elite football influences fan perceptions of identity, belonging, and citizenship. Two sources of data were used: online surveys of football fans and semi-structured interviews with football leadership stakeholders.

Online surveys were conducted during the fall seasons of 2018 and 2023. The surveys were distributed through Facebook fan pages affiliated with each of the sixteen clubs in the Czech First Football League (Fortuna Liga). This approach enabled the inclusion of a geographically diverse and demographically varied group of respondents. The 2018 survey received 186 responses, and the 2023 survey received 194. The full sample was predominantly male (93%), with a concentration in the 19–39 age range. Approximately half of the respondents reported active involvement in football as players or coaches, and over 80% reported following foreign leagues in addition to the domestic competition. While Sparta Prague, Slovan Liberec, and Slavia Prague were the most represented clubs, responses were obtained from all league teams, and a notable number of respondents reported no specific club preference. Because the sample was not stratified and was based on voluntary participation, results are presented descriptively and are not intended to generalize to the full population of Czech football fans.

The surveys included both closed and open-ended questions. Respondents were asked to evaluate their views on foreign coaches and players, perceived trends in internationalization, preferred foreign nationalities, and attitudes toward league regulations concerning foreigner limits. All questions from the 2018 survey were included in the 2023 survey, allowing for direct comparison over time; the second survey also featured a few additional questions to capture emerging themes. The 2023 version included new questions related to the economic dimensions of internationalization, such as willingness to support clubs that invest in recognizable international talent. Survey data were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentage shifts across the five-year period.

To supplement the fan perspective with organizational insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted with football club personnel during late 2023 and early 2024. Six interviews were conducted with top-level executives, marketing directors, and sports managers from four teams in the top division. These individuals were selected based on their direct involvement in team building, public communication, and long-term strategic planning. Interviews were guided by a flexible protocol covering integration strategies for foreign players, communication with fans about internationalization, and the perceived relationship between globalization and club identity. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in person or via video conferencing. Interviews were recorded with participant consent, transcribed, and analyzed thematically. An inductive coding approach identified recurring themes, which were compared with survey results to highlight convergences and tensions in perceptions and management of foreign player integration.

All procedures adhered to ethical research standards. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent. Survey responses were anonymized, and no personally identifying information was retained in either data set.

## RESULTS

### **League context: foreign player participation in Czech football**

Before turning to survey and interview findings, it is important to situate them within the broader context of foreign player participation in the Czech First League. League data from 2013 to 2023 reveal that the number of foreign players has remained

relatively stable at just over 100 per season, representing roughly 22–27% of total players. This consistency provides the backdrop against which perceptions of change must be understood, as many fans nevertheless believe the number of foreigners has increased. The gap between perception and reality highlights how visibility, whether through media coverage, club strategies, or the prominence of foreigners in key roles, shapes impressions even without significant numerical growth.

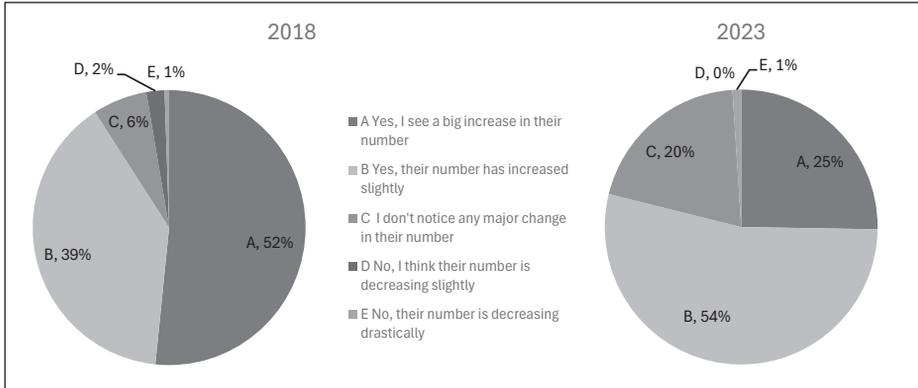


Figure 1 Has the number of foreign players in the Czech First League increased in recent years?

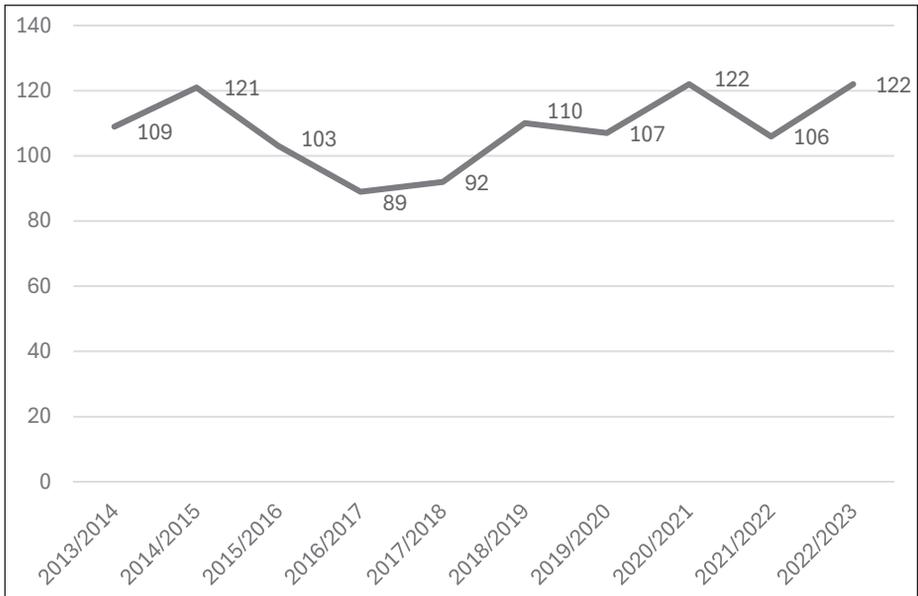


Figure 2 Actual number of foreign players in the Czech First League, 2013–2023

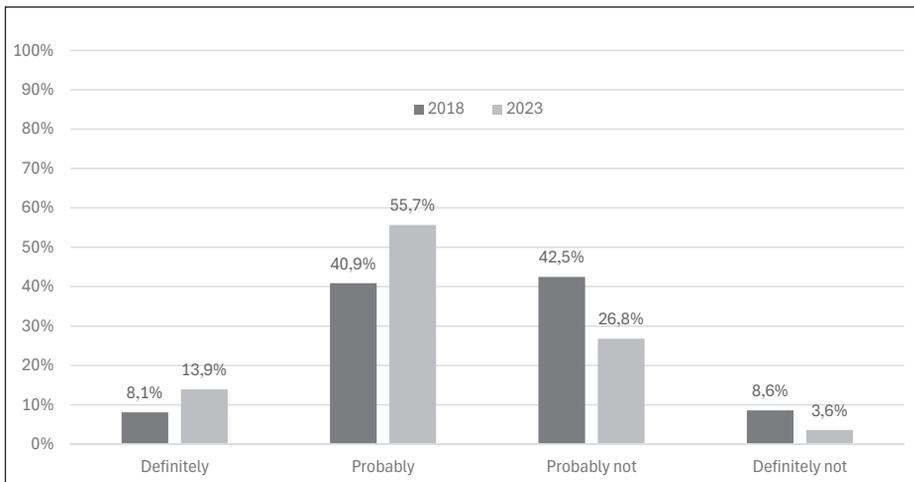
Several factors may explain this perceptual gap. Changes in team strategy, the visibility of foreign players in key roles, and media coverage likely contribute to fan impressions. Notably, although the league size briefly expanded from 16 to 18 teams in 2020–2021 due to pandemic disruptions, the average number of foreigners per team

has remained consistent. The small fluctuations illustrated in Figure 2 are primarily attributable to promotion and relegation rather than shifts in recruitment policy.

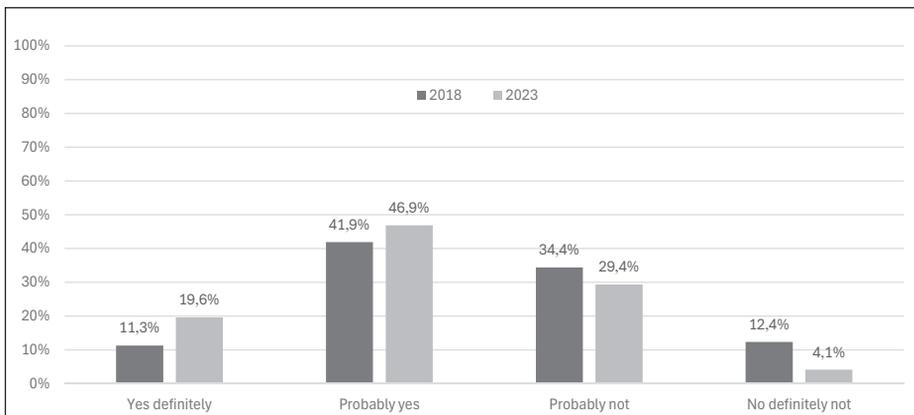
### Fan perspectives on foreign players

The first aim of this study was to analyse how Czech fans view the presence of foreign players in their league. Survey data from 2018 and 2023 show significant changes in attitudes. When asked whether they would welcome more foreign players, fan attitudes in 2023 were notably more positive than in 2018. As shown in Figure 3, there was a 20.6 percentage point shift from negative to positive responses over the five-year period. This suggests that fans are increasingly able to reconcile the presence of foreign players with their sense of club identity, particularly when those players are seen as contributing to team success and the development of domestic talent.

In addition to increased openness toward foreign players in general, the 2023 survey revealed a growing willingness among fans to follow clubs that bring in internationally



**Figure 3** Would you welcome more foreign players in the Czech First Football League?



**Figure 4** Would you start following the matches of a club that brought in a well-known international player?

recognized talent. While the Czech First League rarely attracts global superstars, the idea of clubs signing players with international name recognition is becoming more appealing to domestic supporters. As shown in Figure 4, there was a 13.3 percentage point increase from 2018 to 2023 in fans who indicated that they would be more likely to follow a club that signed a well-known international player. Although this shift is more modest than the general increase in openness to foreigners, it carries important implications for club marketing strategies.

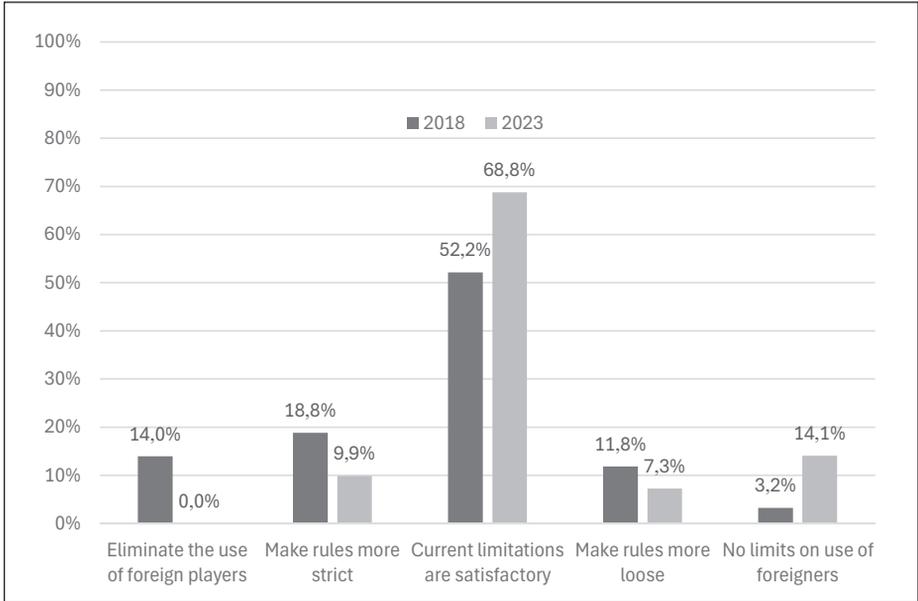


Figure 5 Should the football association tighten the criteria regarding the use of foreign players?

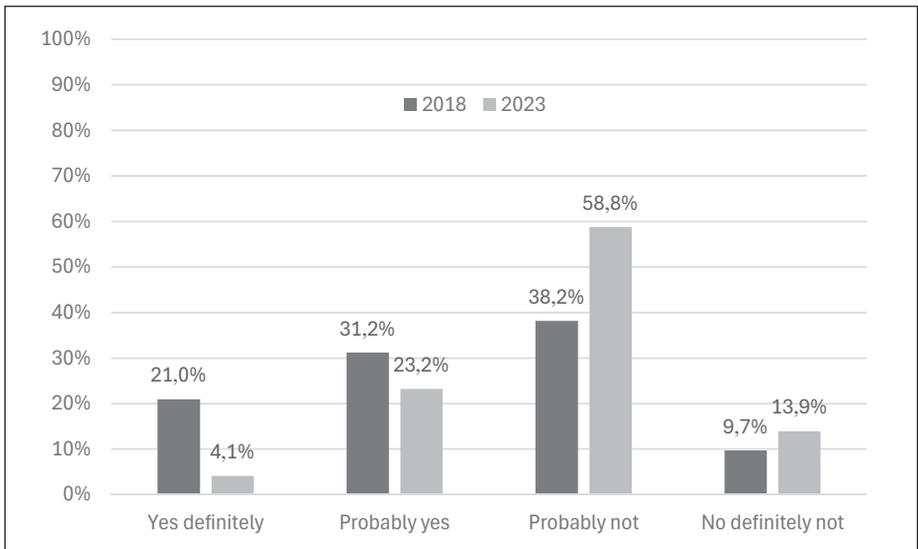


Figure 6 Do you think the arrival of foreign players can have a negative impact on domestic players?

This trend toward acceptance of foreign players appears to be grounded not only in performance outcomes, but also in the growing fan awareness of the economic logic behind such recruitment strategies. As shown in Figures 5 and 6, most fans in 2023 rejected the idea of stricter regulations limiting foreign players and acknowledged that recruiting foreigners is often necessary due to the limited availability of top-tier Czech players. As one club executive explained, “There simply aren’t enough top Czech players to go around. Everyone wants to build from the academy, but not every club has the resources or local talent pool. So we scout young players who can make an impact and later be sold”.

Beyond general attitudes toward foreign players, the survey data also captured fan preferences for specific nationalities. Table 1 presents the top ten most frequently mentioned nationalities in response to the open-ended question, “Which foreigners would you most welcome in the Czech First League?” Across both survey waves, Slovak players were by far the most popular choice, reflecting historical, linguistic, and cultural proximity. One football manager explained, “Slovaks are so close they’re not really foreigners – same language, same culture. You don’t need to integrate them. That makes it easier for everyone – coaches, players, and fans”.

**Table 1** Foreigner preferences for Czech fans

Nation	Preference %	Total from 2004–2022	Notes
Brazil	31.4	92	#5 in world
Slovakia	18.6	746	Neighbor, EU, Slavic language
Nigeria	13.9	33	
Croatia	13.9	68	#10 in world, EU, Slavic
England	13.4	4	#3 in world, EU
Spain	12.4	18	#8 in world, EU
Argentina	11.9	6	#1 in world
France	10.5	65	#2 in world, EU
Germany	9.8	8	Neighbor, EU
Portugal	8.2	2	#7 in world, EU
Denmark	7.2	6	EU
Serbia	7.2	113	Slavic
Netherlands	6.7	15	#6 in world, EU
Norway	6.7	4	EU
Poland	6.2	8	Neighbor, EU, Slavic
Ukraine	5.7	29	Slavic
Ivory Coast	5.2	40	

Note: World Rankings based on November 30, 2023 FIFA rankings

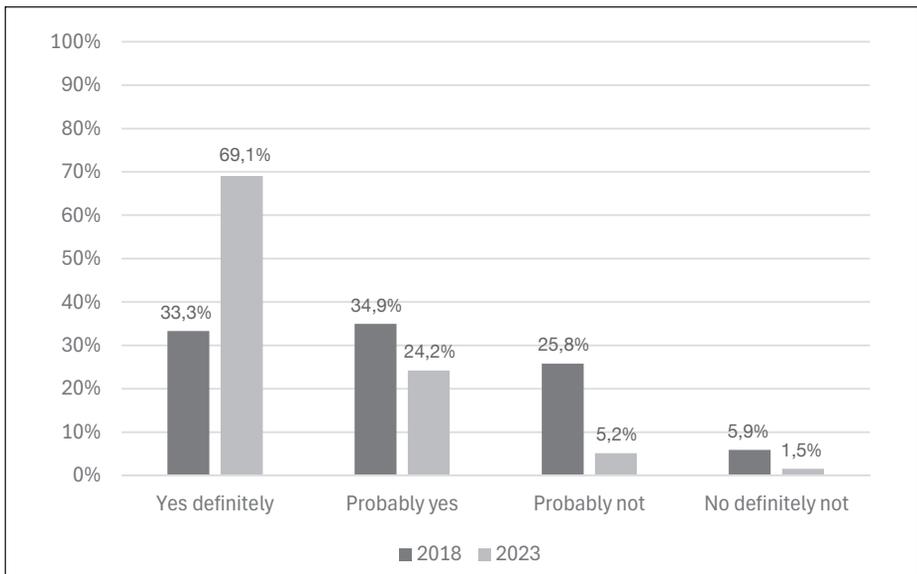
Other European nationalities such as Germans, Spaniards, and Italians also ranked highly, consistent with perceptions of technical quality and professional standards. As one club representative noted, “Some of the French and Spanish guys come here after failing elsewhere. But fans still like the idea of having someone from those countries, even if they’re not stars”. Interestingly, African players also received a notable number

of mentions. While responses were not uniformly positive, interview data and survey comments suggest a growing recognition of the athleticism and work ethic associated with African footballers. As one manager shared, “We don’t just sign African players for their potential resale value – though that helps. We have to support them to adapt or they won’t perform. It’s not about talent alone. It’s about connection.” Nonetheless, some concerns were raised in both surveys and interviews about whether African players could fully integrate into Czech football culture, indicating a more conditional acceptance. One respondent noted, “They [fans] want magic from African players but are harsher when they underperform. The expectation is higher, and so is the criticism. That’s where racism shows – not in whether we sign them, but in how they are judged.”

This ordering of fan preferences reflects broader themes in how national identity and perceived cultural closeness shape openness to foreign players. Slovaks are seen as “almost Czechs”, while other European players are evaluated more on footballing merits. African players are often seen through a lens of athleticism, yet their perceived social distance and the potential for racialized bias highlight areas where clubs’ integration and communication strategies play a vital role.

### Expert perspectives and the Sparta case

The second aim of this study was to assess how internationalization strategies play out in practice, using AC Sparta Prague as a focal example. Fan perceptions of foreign coaches shifted dramatically between 2018 and 2023, and interviews with club officials help explain this transformation. In 2018, after Andrea Stramaccioni’s failed tenure, 32% of fans doubted a foreign coach could succeed, and only 33% expressed strong confidence. By 2023, following Brian Priske’s league title, only 7% held doubts and 69% were fully confident. Among Sparta supporters, belief in foreign leadership jumped from 57% in 2018 to 100% in 2023.



**Figure 7** Can a foreign coach succeed in the Czech league?

One manager reflected: “Analysts and fans said the Italian coach didn’t get the Czech dressing room. But in truth, there was no adaptation strategy at all. That was the real problem, not that he was foreign, but that the team acted like that didn’t matter.” Club leaders emphasized that Priske’s success was not only tactical but also cultural, involving clearer communication and more careful integration of foreigners while maintaining club traditions. As another manager observed: “The worst reaction from fans comes when the internationalization of the team is rushed and uncommunicated. They need to understand the why.”

Interviews further revealed that clubs see themselves as responsible for strengthening citizenship both on and off the pitch. Integration strategies included pairing new signings with bilingual teammates and connecting them with local communities. As one staff member explained: “We now try to help them get connected outside of football, even if it’s just a local church or some expat groups. It helps with mental health and retention.” Such practices align with broader understandings of corporate citizenship, where clubs act not only as competitive enterprises but as civic institutions fostering inclusion and social cohesion.

Clubs also acknowledged their broader role in shaping Czech cultural life. Rather than viewing globalization as a threat to national identity, several managers saw it as an opportunity to strengthen citizenship through intentional inclusion. One executive stated, “We’ve stopped thinking of ourselves just as a football team. The club is a part of Czech cultural life. What we do, who we hire, how we talk about players, shapes more than football.” This expanded sense of responsibility has led some clubs to develop initiatives aimed at reducing prejudice and promoting inclusion. One manager described creating workshops not only for fans, but also for staff and youth players, to address racism and cultural sensitivity: “Not many clubs do this, but we saw it as our duty.”

## DISCUSSION

This article has pursued two related aims: to examine Czech fan views on foreign players and coaches, and to consider how these issues are illustrated through Sparta Prague’s contrasting experiences under Andrea Stramaccioni and Brian Priske. In this article, citizenship has been used in a broader sense than legal nationality, but instead is understood in its broader cultural and civic dimensions. Following Habermas (1990), citizenship is embedded in the public sphere, where individuals and institutions negotiate belonging, recognition, and values. This approach resonates with work on cultural citizenship (Franks, 2009; Newman et al., 2021; Ong et al., 1996), which highlights how citizenship involves participation in shared cultural practices and the negotiation of inclusion, even by foreigners, within a community. Within sport studies, citizenship has also been examined as a set of embodied behaviors, acceptance, respect, solidarity, and non-racism, that can be fostered by organizations through participation and representation in sport (Collins & Kay, 2014; Laker, 2003; Spaaij, 2013). Thus, the use of citizenship in this article emphasizes social practices of belonging and responsibility rather than formal nationality.

At the league level, the relatively stable presence of foreign players over the last fifteen years underscores how Czech football is already embedded in global flows,

even if fan perceptions often suggest otherwise. This confirms King's (2017) contention that football clubs, and by extension leagues, are powerful sites for negotiating national identity. As Cleland (2015) has shown, sporting performance mediates the acceptance of globalization, but stability in numbers also points to deeper processes of normalization, where internationalization itself becomes an enduring part of the game. In this sense, Czech football provides an example of how global pressures compel even semi-peripheral leagues to engage in practices of corporate citizenship (Matten & Crane, 2005), balancing international competitiveness with the civic expectations of local supporters.

Turning to fans, survey data from 2018 and 2023 reveal that perceptions of foreign players and coaches are far from static. Fans increasingly accept internationalization when it is tied to on-field success and national belonging, with success enhancing club credibility at home and abroad and underscoring the cultural dimensions of citizenship. The inclusion of Table 1 illustrates how national and cultural proximity continues to shape fan preferences, even within a globalized football context. Slovaks are viewed as "familiar foreigners", whose linguistic and cultural closeness positions them as extensions of local identity. Other European players are evaluated more in terms of footballing quality, while African players face conditional acceptance, shaped by higher expectations and harsher criticism when underperforming. These patterns echo van Hilvoorde et al.'s (2010) argument that while global success may enhance national pride, it can also provoke concerns about cultural cohesion and talent development.

Beyond these general patterns, the Sparta case provides a concrete example of how fan attitudes toward internationalization are shaped by coaching leadership and integration strategies. The success of Brian Priske's multicultural squad in winning the Czech league championship not only shifted fan attitudes but also expanded the club's credibility both domestically and abroad, aligning with Cleland's (2015) finding that sporting performance significantly mediates acceptance of globalization. Moreover, Sparta's internationalization strategy can be understood through the lens of Giulianotti's (2015) "glocalization", wherein local (Czech) identity adapts to global realities rather than being erased. Fans' shifting perceptions between 2018 and 2023 suggest a rearticulation of Czech football identity in line with Bairner's (2001) thesis that nationalism in sport evolves, rather than disappears, under global pressures.

The contrast between Stramaccioni's failed internationalization and Priske's championship season illustrates that scepticism toward foreign coaches can be overcome when leadership is integrated with a clear vision, a local connection, and effective communication strategies. Interviewees emphasized that rushed, poorly explained internationalization provokes the strongest negative reactions, while measured integration and clear communication foster acceptance.

Clubs have also adopted various integration strategies that demonstrate their dual role in strengthening citizenship both on and off the field. Pairing new signings with bilingual teammates, supporting connections to local communities, and offering cultural sensitivity training were all mentioned as ways to build inclusion. Such initiatives reflect the broader logic of corporate citizenship, where clubs assume responsibility not only for athletic success but also for fostering social cohesion within their communities (Matten & Crane, 2005).

Clubs further acknowledged their broader role in shaping Czech cultural life, seeing globalization not as a threat but as an opportunity to strengthen citizenship through intentional inclusion. Initiatives aimed at reducing prejudice and promoting respect, directed at fans, staff, and youth players alike, illustrate how football clubs can act as agents of both commercial success and civic responsibility. This aligns with previous research highlighting how organizational responses to racism in sport reflect deeper tensions between commercial interests and cultural values (Crossan et al., 2025).

From this perspective, the acceptance of foreign players by fans is not merely a matter of tolerance but reflects the cultivation of broader citizenship qualities. The negotiation of belonging, whether Slovaks are seen as “almost Czechs”, whether African players are judged fairly, or whether foreign coaches can embody club traditions, mirrors wider societal debates about inclusion, identity, and diversity. By mediating these negotiations within the public sphere of football, Czech clubs contribute to strengthening citizenship behaviors as a cultural practice. Success on the pitch and inclusive narratives off it demonstrate that local identity can coexist with global flows, reaffirming both belonging within the national community and participation in a wider global football citizenship.

Overall, the results suggest that internationalization, when guided by strategic planning and grounded in transparent communication, can enhance rather than diminish the sense of belonging and citizenship associated with Czech football. Clubs that acknowledge their role in shaping national identity and actively invest in the integration of foreign talent are more likely to earn sustained fan support and contribute positively to the broader social fabric.

## CONCLUSION

This study has pursued two related aims: first, to examine how Czech football fans perceive the presence of foreign players and coaches, and second, to consider how these issues are illustrated through Sparta Prague’s contrasting experiences under Andrea Stramaccioni and Brian Priske. Based on survey data from 2018 and 2023, complemented by interviews with club executives and staff, the findings demonstrate that while fan skepticism toward internationalization remains, it is neither fixed nor purely nationalistic. Instead, acceptance is closely tied to cultural proximity, on-field performance, and the presence of transparent, value-driven communication from clubs.

Sparta’s contrasting experiences under Stramaccioni and Priske illustrate that internationalization efforts succeed not simply because of results, but because of how those results are framed within narratives of identity and belonging. When fans see foreign coaches and players as contributing to, not replacing, the club’s traditions and values, resistance diminishes. This supports the idea that sport, as King (2017) and Bairner (2001) have argued, is a key site for the re-articulation of national identity under globalization. Priske’s success also shows how winning with a multicultural roster can broaden a club’s credibility at home and abroad, reinforcing Cleland’s (2015) argument that sporting performance is central to fan acceptance of globalization.

Importantly, the analysis also reveals differentiated perceptions among foreign players. Slovaks enjoy a uniquely privileged position, seen as nearly local, while other

Europeans are valued for footballing quality. African players, though increasingly appreciated, continue to face conditional acceptance shaped by racialized expectations. This highlights the importance of proactive integration strategies and the potential for elite clubs to serve not only as sporting institutions, but as civic actors contributing to the formation of inclusive national narratives.

In sum, elite clubs in semi-peripheral contexts like Czech can reinforce rather than erode a sense of citizenship, provided they approach internationalization with care, transparency, and a commitment to cultural integration. Future research could expand this analysis to compare club-level strategies across Central and Eastern Europe, or to examine the long-term effects of foreign player inclusion on youth development and national team identity.

*Note:* Portions of this article draw upon material originally published in Chapter 6 of the book *Czech Sport Migration: Push and pull variations between sports and cultures* (Crossan, 2024).

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