

## Transformation of Sports Practices in Pandemic and Post-pandemic Times

Maurizio Esposito<sup>a</sup>, Sara Petroccia<sup>a</sup>, Ciprian Panzaru<sup>b</sup>

### Abstract

This study explores how sports activities and practices have transformed during the pandemic. These social phenomena have impacted society, organizations, interactions, and individuals (Luhmann, 2003). We conducted desk research and expert interviews in Italy and Romania. The data collected will demonstrate that the two countries represent different patterns of pandemic development. Italy was the most affected European country in the first wave of SARS-CoV-2 (hereafter COVID-19) in 2020. On the opposite side, Romania managed to control the situation well at the beginning of the pandemic. However, it was stronger affected in 2021, while Italy managed to control the situation much better.

The desk research consisted of reviewing available official sources and literature (De Nunes, 2020; Pleyers, 2020) related to measures and policies taken to control the effects of Covid on sports activities. Qualitative data were obtained from expert interviews and a critical theoretical framework was applied to assess the countries' restrictions. Our research aims to help to understand how social capabilities could be used to support sports activities in crisis times, as the COVID-19 pandemic was and is – first and foremost – a social phenomenon.

Not surprisingly, COVID-19 has spread thanks to the multiple relationships – cultural, economic, political, etc. – that the world's population has forged over a definitively global space, with differential impacts across places (Bailey et al., 2021) that pose sociology to face to understand these new complex scenarios, the main issues we had to face, the successes, the criticalities and the lessons learned.

Keywords: health, sport, social impact, COVID-19, social research.

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<sup>a</sup> University of Cassino e Lazio Meridionale, Italy.

<sup>b</sup> West University of Timisoara, Romania.

Corresponding author:  
Maurizio Esposito  
E-mail: maurizio.esposito@unicas.it

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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that broke out at the beginning of 2020 has disrupted all socioeconomic activities. Sports was among the first and most strongly impacted activities by the restrictions mainly because they implied isolation and physical distancing. Many sporting events have been postponed or canceled to slow the virus's spread. Many sports organizations have had to implement new protocols and procedures to protect the health and safety of players, coaches, and other staff because "systems are based on a difference between system and environment. Therefore, system differentiation means the repetition of this difference within systems" (Luhmann, 1984, p. 63).

One of the significant ways that COVID-19 has transformed sports practices and activities is by implementing social distancing measures. According to Stichweh (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a simplification of the social. This has meant that many sports organizations have had to modify their schedules and practices in order to allow for physical distancing, and - to this effect - Wright Mills (2000) would reply that sociological imagination could describe, analyze and interpret social phenomena in fundamental, differentiated, systematic or surprising ways.

Sports involve social interaction, proximity, and contact between practitioners. It is one of the activities that cannot be carried out online. Therefore, restrictions based on physical distancing and isolation have made practically all sports activities impossible to run. However, not only performance sports were affected, but also mass sports, and the impact was undoubtedly harmful. From the alteration of the daily training of the performance athletes to the change of the competition calendars and the postponement of the main competition (e.g., the Olympic Games) to the significant socio-economic impact on the sports environment, everything unfolded quickly. It required from those involved flexibility and ability to adapt. Each athlete or individual, active practitioner of physical activities and each sports organization had to redefine themselves to a certain extent and find ways to reduce as much as possible the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed. Research reveals that COVID-19 related restrictions have mainly increased the appeal of outdoor activities and made initiatives related to open-air individualized activities more urgent than in the past (Bortoletto & Porrovecchio 2018; Bortoletto et al., 2021). They have been forced to train themselves at home, even though some clubs have offered home training or online.

Another way that COVID-19 has transformed sports practices and activities is by requiring tracking apps; then the vaccination cycle; then the certification of immunity, *de facto* substantializing the vaccination obligation. All

these obligations require accepting the point of view of a part of medical science, according to which vaccination is the powerful solution to the problem (Michelini et al., 2023).

All these measures affected direct or indirect sports activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy and Romania.

The government imposed restrictive measures to control the virus's spread. All activities practiced in gyms, sports centers, and swimming pools were suspended (Zaccagni et al., 2021). Additionally, jogging or walking in parks and cycling were limited and monitored by the police. People were allowed to go out only for reasons of primary necessity, for example, to accomplish specific activities (health visits, purchasing medicines or food) or to perform essential work (healthcare and social care operators, police and armed forces, firefighters) (Guicciardi & Pazzona, 2020). The lockdown posed unusual challenges to people practicing sports and physical activities, who had to find in-home alternatives to exercise (Sanfelici, 2020).

In Romania, the government also implemented restrictive measures to contain the spread of coronavirus, including the closure of all sports facilities. All sports activities were suspended, and people were encouraged to stay home (Cosma et al., 2021). Additionally, a few online courses and activities were created to provide an alternative for people who wanted to stay active during the lockdown. For example, the Romanian Olympic and Sports Committee created a platform for online sports training and organized virtual tournaments in various disciplines (see IMF, 2021).

Overall, the impact of COVID-19 on sports practices and activities has been significant. It has required a great deal of adaptation and flexibility from sports leagues and organizations to keep players and staff safe and healthy. So, according to Watson et al. (2020), the impact on sports activities will be seen more broadly, as sports play essential social functions by promoting social inclusion, integration, cohesion, mutual respect and understanding, solidarity, equality, and the relationship. Between physical activity (sport, physical education) and social justice through both microscopic (individual experience, psychological dimension, educational relationship) and macroscopic (social, societal, cultural, and religious) frames.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

The social sciences began about two decades ago to deal systematically with the sport as a phenomenon of collective action. Often research has resorted to elaborate keys to interpreting different phenomena, unable to interpret, and thus to interrogate, sport as a specific cultural system (Porro, 2006).

The link between sports and society represents one of the most exciting topics in the social sciences. More analytically, we aim to define the social functions of sport, which enable the discipline to avoid excessive reliance on uplifting visions of what could be, at the same time, making itself alienated from the easy equation between champions and sport, undoubtedly necessary, yet reductive of some of the logic and effects of sport. This implies a more careful focus on the peculiarities of the sociological study of and about sports, focusing on the state of the art of sports values and culture in the present. This will be represented in the following paragraphs through empirical research.

Sports disciplines and organizations are connected with sociality, and the representations of sports play an (almost) totalizing role in the meaning conferred by the cultural studies approach. Then, following Simmel's studies, it is possible to observe the sociability of sports supporting the dichotomy between pursuing sports recreationally or professionally. Using binary oppositions in social scientific analysis has an extensive multidisciplinary history (e.g., Saussure and Lévi-Strauss). In sociology, a dichotomy is principally associated with structural approaches, such as the structural functionalism of Parsons (1960), the systems theory of Luhmann (1995), or Bourdieu (1990). Structuralist and system-theory approaches that emphasize these dichotomies have been used in diverse ways in the sociology of sport (Giulianotti, 2015) or in various applications of Luhmann's theoretical oeuvre to sport (Wagner & Iversen, 2022). The link between sports and society represents one of the most exciting topics in the social sciences. Sports disciplines and organizations are connected with sociality, and according to Roversi (1989), representations of sports play an (almost) totalizing role in the meaning conferred by the cultural studies approach. Then, it is possible to observe the sociability of sports supporting the dichotomy between pursuing sports, recreationally or professionally, as represented in this study (in Italy and Romania).

However, the social practices of the game and mass sports movements constitute polarities of meaning that are autonomous and interacting simultaneously (Porro, 2013).

In contemporary society, human beings face global challenges that have a direct impact (often devastating) on collective and individual lives; the pandemic was one of them. The destructive nature of these events raises the question of the state of health of the civilization process – to put it in terms of Elias (1991), ensues the unintended consequences threaten those private lives – in the words of Beck (1992) – of the malfunctioning of social dynamics far beyond the understanding of individuals.

The sport could operate in these events, and it can shine a light on a specific framework of a date social fact with well-defined spatial and temporal coordinates, such as that of the pandemic that is the subject of this study.

Sports culture co-participates in the representation of a model of life (see Grupe, 1987), and it is based on a specific social and cultural heritage that goes beyond the merely playful dimension to analyze that, we are going, In the following paragraphs, to discuss the different approach in Italy and Romania.

This seems to stimulate our interest in the analysis of the possibility of a new paradigm that needs a theoretical model that recognizes in sports an intrinsic relational potential in the making of social relations in those contexts, that is, in all concrete configurations of sociality (see Kluckhohn, 1959) that the relations between the subjects and object come to assume in each space-time.

Sport as a total social fact has a supra-functional character, and as enunciated by Mauss (1950), it involves all dimensions of human existence, especially in complex societies.

Therefore, the sport will be interpreted on a par “inherently relational phenomenon” (see Winnicott, 1991, p. 171.), it means “the social fact lies neither in individuals nor in structures, nor their fusion. It lies, instead, in their relationship” (ibidem).

The principal assumption of this study is based on the observation of how people (or social groups) are involved in sports practices, at different levels (e.g., as culture and social institution), as part of the shared imagination of a given culture, they are used for a simplified interpretation of the surrounding reality. Some rituals, such as those in the realm of sport, are packaged as narratives that broadly coincide with some of these models, which are thus reinforced (Secondulfo, 2022). This contributes to the constant construction-reconstruction of reality as social representation (Berger & Luckmann, 1969; Durkheim, 2013).

Indeed, the relationship between sport, culture, and society is present even where it does not seem to emerge, either because a surplus of euphoric individualistic entertainment absorbs it or because deterministic and holistic factors strand it.

The theorizing on sports strongly echoed the dichotomous approach present in sociological studies, namely, the remarking on the differences and epistemological dualisms between individualism and holism or the antitheses between nature and culture.

In the following paragraphs, insights into how the sport operates for social bonding, through the Italian and Romanian narrations, more in detail through those set of material conditions and cultural factors that helped share common values and meanings.

### **3. Methodological approach. Material and methods**

The study used a mixed methodological method combining desk research with semi-structured interviews. The aim was to understand how sports activities and practices have transformed during the pandemic.

The desk research consisted of reviewing available official sources and literature related to measures and policies taken to control the effects of Covid on sports activities. In addition, the collection of statistics concerning the sports sector and sports services workforce was also consulted.

Qualitative data were obtained from expert interviews. Seven interviews were conducted in Italy and four in Romania with representatives of national sports organizations. Experts were selected based on their experience and knowledge in sports and COVID-19. They were identified through professional affiliations and recommendations from other experts in the field (Patton, 2014; Rubin & Rubin 2011). To ensure a diverse range of perspectives and experiences, experts were selected from different sports organizations. They included sports medicine, physicians, athletes, coaches, and administrators. In the first step, it was developed a list of potential interviewees. In the second step, we contact them to assess their availability and willingness to participate in the study. We have continued contacting experts and collecting data until no new information emerged, ensuring the principle of data saturation.

Interviews were based on a semi-structured topic guide and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The topic guide included questions to assess what were the main challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, how did the Covid-19 pandemic affect the availability of activities, how were impacted activities from the economic point of view, how did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the quality of activity, what types of specific support was provided by the government, what specific sports activities were developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what activities are expected to be developed in the future.

The expertise of interviewed persons was critical in understanding the impact of COVID-19 on sports activities, the effectiveness of mitigation strategies, and the potential long-term consequences for sports organizations.

The mixed-methods approach provided a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sports activities and insights into the experiences and needs of those affected by the pandemic. Quantitative data provided a broad overview of the impact on the sports sector, while qualitative data provided in-depth insights into the experiences of sports organizations affected by the pandemic. Moreover, the qualitative data helped us to contextualize quantitative findings, getting a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and economic factors that influence the impact of the pandemic on sports activities.

#### 4. Results of the study

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted all sectors of the labor market. The measures taken to control the spread of the virus, such as lockdowns and social distancing, have led to widespread job losses and economic downturns. One of the significant impacts of COVID-19 on the labor market has been the increase in unemployment. Many workers have lost their jobs or had their hours reduced because of the pandemic, and unemployment rates have soared in many countries.

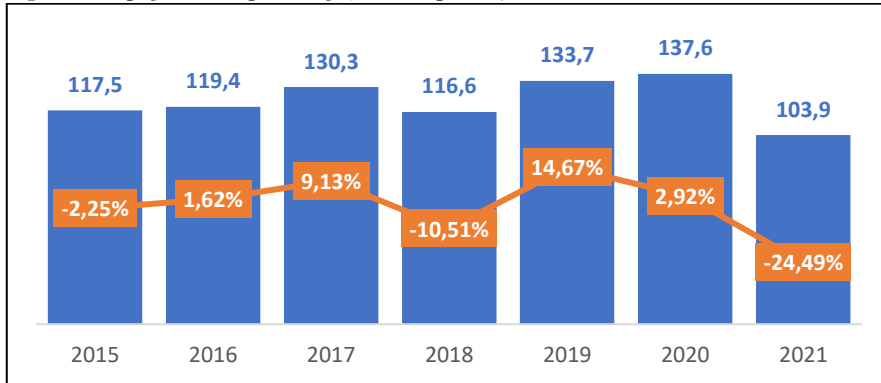
These changes did not except the Sports sector. Even though there is no specific assessment of employment changes as an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, considering the scaling back or suspending activities due to the pandemic, we can suppose that recent job losses or reductions in employment were because of the pandemic impact.

Quantitative data explored during desk research revealed that both countries experienced fewer employees in the Sports sector. However, in 2021, in the second year of the pandemic, not at the beginning, in 2020 as we expected. This could be a lag effect – a delay between the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic and its visible impact on employment. Usually, the decrease in employment may not always be immediate. It may take some time to be reflected in the data due to the lagged response of businesses to changing different conditions.

According to Eurostat (2021a), Romania's sports sector accounted for 0.16% of total employment in 2021. This was much lower than the EU average of 0.7%. With 0.46% in 2021, Italy was also slightly below the EU average but far from Romania.

From 2015 to 2016, employment in the sports sector increased by 1.62% in Italy. In 2017, there was a significant increase of 9.13% in employment. However, in 2018, employment decreased by 10.51%. In the following year, 2019, there was a 14.67% increase in employment in the sports sector. Employment remained relatively stable in 2020, with a 2.92% increase. However, in 2021, there will be a significant decrease of 24.49% in employment in the sports sector. These numbers indicate that the sports sector in Italy has been affected by fluctuations in the overall economy, and there has been a significant decrease in employment in the sports sector in 2021. The decrease could be due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly impacted the economy, including the sports sector.

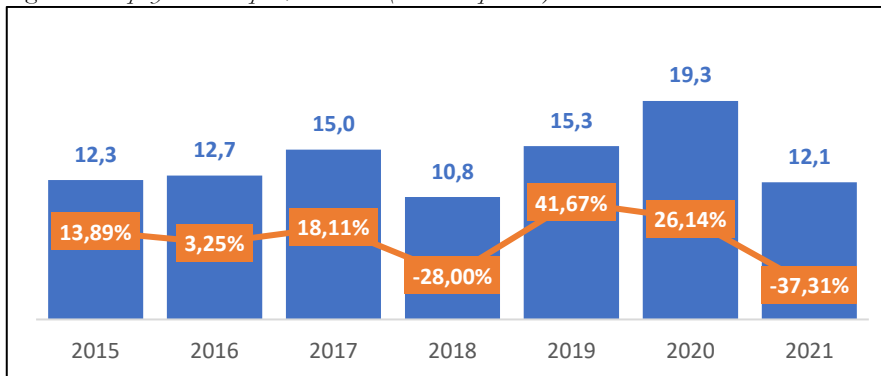
Figure 1. Employment in Sport, Italy (thousand persons).



Source: Eurostat, Employment in sport by sex (online data code: SPRT\_EMP\_SEX)

A similar trend was recorded in Romania. In terms of persons employed, Romania registered a slightly increased of 3.25% from 2015 to 2016 in employment in the sports sector. It continued in 2017 when there was a significant increase of 18.11% in employment. However, in 2018, employment decreased by 28.00% but increased again in 2019 by 41.67%. Employment continued to increase in 2020, with 26.14%, but in 2021, most probably due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant decrease of 37.31% in employment in the sports sector; compared to the previous year, much higher than the deceased register in Italy.

Figure 2. Employment in Sport, Romania (thousand persons).



Source: Eurostat, Employment in sport by sex (online data code: SPRT\_EMP\_SEX).

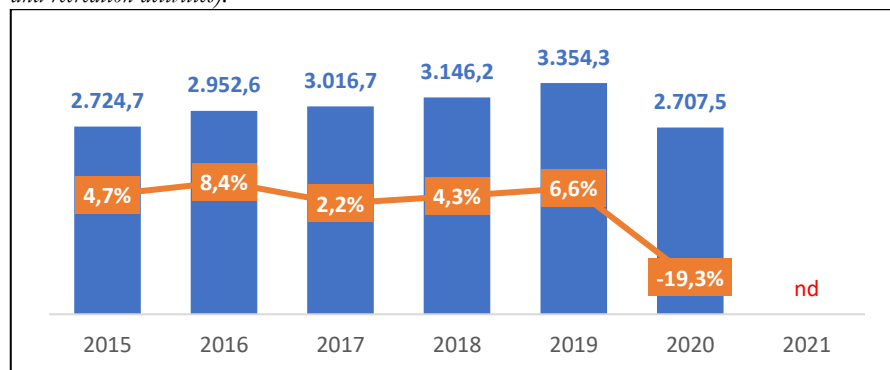


However, based on Eurostat data (2021a), we deduce Romania has experienced changes in employment levels in all sectors over time due to economic transition, technological changes, and government policies.

Another impact of COVID-19 on sports employees has been the financial impact of the pandemic. The cancellation of sports events and the reduction in revenues from ticket sales and other sources have had a significant financial impact on many sports organizations, leading to budget cuts and other cost-saving measures that have affected the wages and salaries of sports employees. This is reflected in at least two indicators: value-added and compensations of employees. The Eurostat statistics (2021b)<sup>1</sup> revealed a sharp decrease in compensations of employees, as wages and salaries, in both countries, for the year 2020, compared to the previous year; see Figure 3 below.

The wages in the sports sector in Italy experienced steady growth from 2015 to 2019, with an increase of 8.36% from 2015 compared to 2016, a slight increase of 2.17% in 2017, a 4.29% increase in 2018, and a 6.61% increase in 2019. However, in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant drop of 19.28% in wages in the sports sector.

Figure 3. Wages and salaries (million euro), Italy (NACE [R93] Sports activities and amusement and recreation activities).



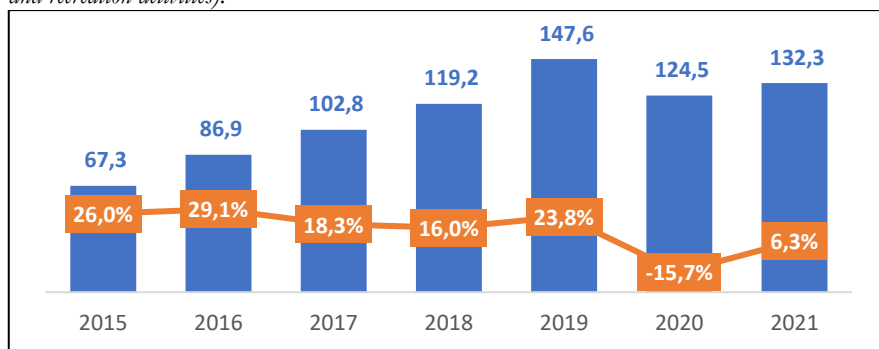
Source: Eurostat, National accounts aggregates by industry (up to NACE A\*64).

Similarly, in Romania, from 2015 to 2016, the wages in the sports sector (and amusement and recreation activities) increased by 29.12%. In 2017, a

<sup>1</sup> The compensation of employees, as wages and salaries also include the *Amusement and recreation activities* (NACE R 93) since no separate statistic only for Sports is available. See [https://www.openriskmanual.org/wiki/NACE\\_Division\\_R.93\\_-\\_Sports\\_activities\\_and\\_amusement\\_and\\_recreation\\_activities](https://www.openriskmanual.org/wiki/NACE_Division_R.93_-_Sports_activities_and_amusement_and_recreation_activities)

significant increase of 18.30% in wages and salaries compared to the previous year. In 2018, wages continued to increase by 15.95%, and in 2019, there was a 23.83% increase in wages compared to the previous year. However, in 2020, a significant decrease of 15.65% in wages and salaries was recorded. However, in 2021, in the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the wages and salaries in the whole sports and amusement and recreation sector seemed to record recover slightly registered an increase of 6.27% compared to 2020.

Figure 4. Value added (gross) (million euro), Italy (NACE [R93] Sports activities and amusement and recreation activities).



Source: Eurostat, National accounts aggregates by industry (up to NACE A\*64).

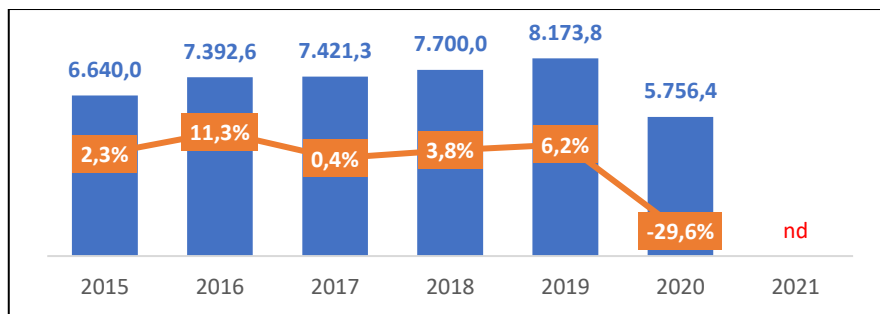
Another indicator we looked at to reveal the possible effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on sports activities was the value added for sports activities (and amusement and recreation activities) (Eurostat, 2021b). In Italy, the value added (gross) has been increasing from 2015 to 2019, with the most significant increase in 2016, compared to 2015, with 11.33%. However, in 2020, there was a significant decrease of 29.57%, which could be an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic (see figure 4).

In the case of Romania (figure 5), the data indicates a steady increase in value added from 2015 to 2019, with the highest increase in 2016 at 39.07%, compared to the previous year. A significant decrease was recorded in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020, 18.6%. In 2021, the value added increased again by 18.27%, recovering what was lost in the previous year. Overall, there is an upward trend in the value-added but with some fluctuations.

The closure of sports venues, cancellation of events, and suspension of competitions led to a loss of revenue for sports organizations, clubs, and teams. This includes lost ticket sales, sponsorships, and merchandise sales. In addition, many sports organizations also had to deal with increased expenses related to the pandemic, such as additional cleaning and safety measures.

Transformation of Sports Practices in Pandemic and Post-pandemic Times  
 Maurizio Esposito, Sara Petroccia, Ciprian Panzaru

Figure 5. Value added (gross) (million euro), Romania (NACE [R93] Sports activities and amusement and recreation activities).

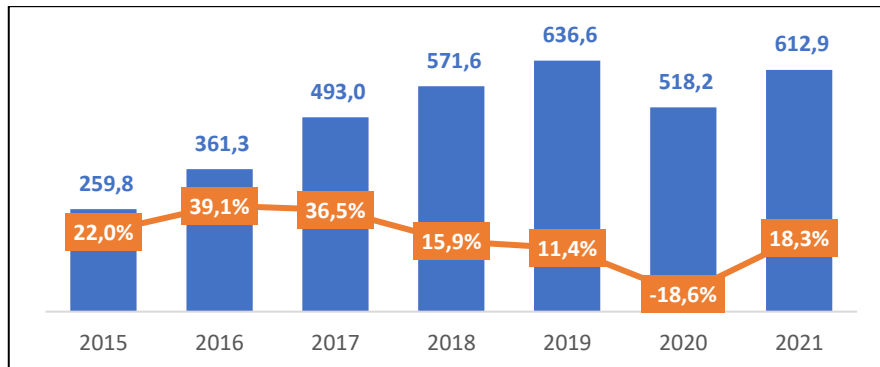


Source: Eurostat, National accounts aggregates by industry (up to NACE A\*64).

The economic impact of COVID-19 on sports, including the sports industry, has been severe. Since many sports activities have been put on hold or canceled due to the pandemic, this has led to considerable losses for the industry and labor market in both countries studied, as the data above showed.

At the European level, some research (Katsarova, 2021) estimates that the COVID-19-related measures have hurt EU-27 sports, translating into a 15% loss (or €47 million) of total sport-related GDP in 2020 compared 2019.

Figure 6. Value added (gross) (million euro), Romania (NACE [R93] Sports activities and amusement and recreation activities).

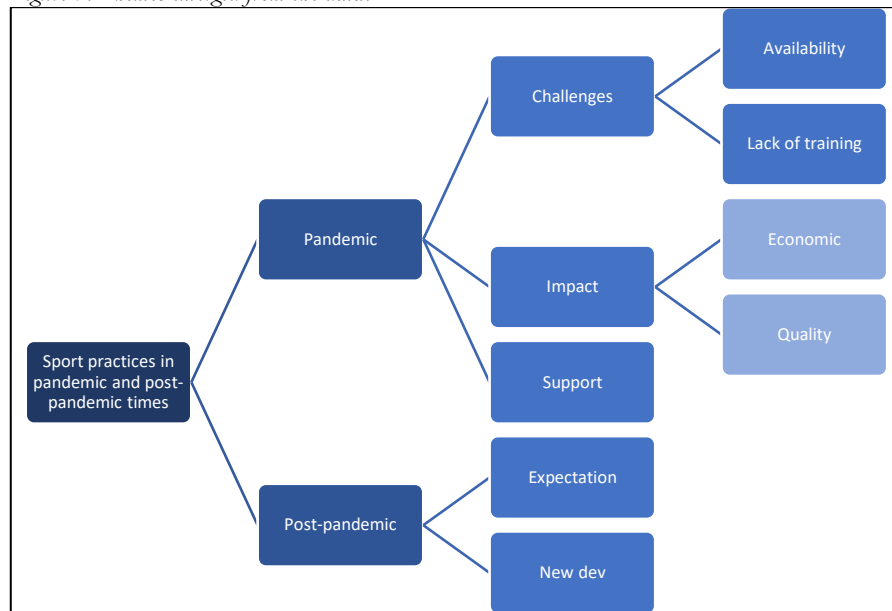


Source: Eurostat, National accounts aggregates by industry (up to NACE A\*64).

We conducted expert interviews with representatives of sports organizations from Italy and Romania to explore how sports activities and

practices were impacted during the pandemic. The content of the interviews was explored through thematic analysis. This allows us to capture the essential aspects of data about our research questions. Both inductive and deductive approaches were used to encode the text. To ensure consistency in the coding of the transcripts, each research team member read the text and worked collaboratively to define the final framework of analysis. The research started from the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted how sports organizations operate. In order to understand this impact, we have divided our content into two main themes: Pandemic and Post-pandemic. Under the Pandemic theme, we identified three sub-themes: Challenges, Impact, and Support. Within the Challenges theme, we have identified two sub-themes: Lack of Training and Availability of Services. We have also documented two sub-themes under Impact: Economic Impact and Impact in Terms of Quality of Services. In the Post-pandemic theme, we have identified two sub-themes: Expectations and New Developments. A graphic presentation of the themes that emerged from the data is presented in the figure 7.

Figure 7. Themes emerged from the data.



Source: own elaboration.

Examining the word cloud visualization (see figure 7) indicates that the themes identified in the analysis are indeed present in the content. The relative



All organizations struggled to keep sports activities open despite running in restrictive conditions and imposing many health protocols.

For some specific sports, the health protocols raised difficulties since disinfection was needed for each equipment or changing room. In these conditions, for example, individual sports were particularly affected from the point of view of availability as the impossibility of using sanitary facilities or simply a changing room to change has discouraged the practice of sport. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, many sports organizations have been able to adapt and continue to operate, albeit in a modified form. This has required much flexibility and creativity on the part of sports leagues and organizations, as well as cooperation and support from players, coaches, and other staff.

Since the pandemic resulted in the total interruption of all sports and cultural activities, this hampered organizing the competitions and participating in sports events and also led to a lack of training. The most affected activities were those usually organized indoors because, in many situations, they remained stopped even over the summer of 2020, in the second stage of the pandemic. In Italy, only from June 2020 was it possible to resume some activities outdoors under significantly stricter health security conditions. In Romania, all the clubs had their activity suspended, leading to a regression in training. In addition, many instructors and coaches were forced to enter technological unemployment<sup>2</sup>. Only in the football field, in Romania, immediately after imposing the State of Emergency, it was estimated by FRF that more than 7,000 persons (coaches, referees, administrative personnel) and over 20,000 players remain without jobs. However, some clubs continued activity in Romania during the lockdown, and although the Covid rate was high, activities never stopped. However, before training or a match, the player must have a test and cannot shower or have it but not too many people and in 2 or 3 dress rooms.

Despite the effort to ensure the continuity of sports activities, the *economic impact* was significant. In Italy, AiCS (Italian Association of Culture and Sport) assessed that about 20% of affiliated sports and cultural clubs left the association, and the number of individual members decreased from 1.200.000 (2020) to 900.000 (2021). In addition, in Romania, FRDS (Federation Romanian Dance Sport) assessed that 10-15 percent of clubs and trainers gave up their sports activity and oriented to other occupations. The cost of working conditions became higher (due to the use of masks, antibacterial treatment, and tests) and because the competitions (matches) were organized without spectators.

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<sup>2</sup> Suspension of the employment contracts due to the temporary reduction/interruption of the activity.

The quality of activity was profoundly impacted, but some organizations managed better than others. For example, AONI (Accademia Olimpica Nazionale Italiana) mentioned that they were forced to postpone everything planned for 2020. Surprisingly, in other situations working online help organizations to create more digital tools to communicate with employees, create a new program for the development of employment, or help to generate new communication strategy on social media. The online contributed significantly to maintaining the sports activities, and the general assessment was that due to digital technologies, the quality of the activity had not been strongly affected by declines. Digital technologies allowed people (athletes and administrative personnel) to remain in touch and keep sports organizations alive.

The provision of governmental support for sports organizations and specialists was a common feature at the federation level in Italy and Romania. In Italy, the Ministry of Sport and the Ministry of Social Policies provided specific funding to national organizations and sports specialists. Among the types of support provided were the distribution of hygienic equipment to sports associations and monthly payments for trainers. Additionally, the simplification of bureaucracy for accessing funds was highly appreciated by sports organizations. In Romania, the government created special programs to help all stakeholders involved in sports through different grants and social funds. Local authorities also contributed by providing financial support or supplying hygienic equipment. However, it is noted that some sports clubs in Romania have expressed dissatisfaction with the level of support they received from the government. Despite the efforts made by the government and local authorities, these clubs felt that they were not receiving enough support to sustain their activities and development.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the development of new and innovative ways for people to stay active and participate in sports safely. During the pandemic, several specific sports practices were developed to help keep people active while ensuring their safety. The most current practice was based on virtual training: Many sports organizations and coaches began offering virtual training sessions and classes, using video conferencing platforms like Zoom and Skype to connect with athletes (e.g., Romanian Football Federation invested in digital e-learning platforms to deliver education to all stakeholders, and developed programs for youth players, training for coaches and referees). This allowed people to continue training and working on their skills from the safety of their own homes. In addition, many sports organizations and teams began hosting online competitions and tournaments, allowing athletes to compete against each other remotely. This included esports competitions, which grew popular during the pandemic. Some sports organizations and teams developed

modified versions of their sport that could be played safely with social distancing measures in place. For example, some soccer teams began playing games with smaller teams without physical contact. Outdoor activities became predominant. With gyms and indoor sports, facilities closed, many people turned to outdoor activities like running, biking, and hiking to stay active. This led to an increase in the popularity of these activities and the development of resources and guidance for safely participating in them.

The operators interviewed for this research believe that the future focus of sports organizations could be on expanding existing activities, developing more outdoor activities, and improving facilities. They believe that for some types of activities, there were not many changes expected. For example, in the case of football, it is challenging to change training methods. Even though they are trying to develop innovative ways in various aspects, this process is neither simple nor concluded. They also noted that during the pandemic, people have come to realize how essential sports activities are. As a result, they expect that the government will increase the number of sports in the school curriculum. This will not only help fight against a sedentary lifestyle but also increase participation in sports activities affected by the pandemic. Overall, the operators believe there is a need for a more holistic approach to sports activities, one that considers the impact of the pandemic, the changing needs of athletes, and the role of government in promoting sports participation.

## **5. Discussion**

The quantitative data clearly showed that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the sports sector in Italy and Romania. Both countries experienced a decline in sport sector employees and a decrease in the compensation of employees. Italy had a more stable trend until 2021, when it experienced a significant drop in employment and wages. Romania had an increase in employment until 2021 when it experienced a significant drop in employment and wages. These changes can be attributed to the financial impacts of the pandemic, such as canceled sports events and reduced revenues. Finally, the value-added of the sports sector increased until 2020, but then there was a decrease in both countries.

The quantitative findings were strengthened by the qualitative data, indicating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sports organizations and sports persons in Italy and Romania. Thus, all interviewed persons mentioned the economic effects. The most affected activities were those usually organized indoors because, in many situations, they remained stopped even over the summer of 2020, in the second stage of the pandemic. Despite the efforts to



ensure the continuity of sports activities, the economic impact was significant, with many affiliated sports and cultural clubs leaving the association and individual membership decreasing significantly. However, some organizations managed better than others, with online technology being particularly helpful in maintaining contact and keeping the organizations alive.

The provision of governmental support for sports organizations and specialists was a common feature in Italy and Romania, with the government creating special programs to help all stakeholders involved in sports through different grants and social funds. Local authorities also contributed by providing financial support or supplying hygienic equipment. However, some sports clubs expressed dissatisfaction with the level of support they received from the government, feeling that they were not receiving enough support to sustain their activities and development.

In addition to the quantitative approach, interviews allowed us to identify the effects of the pandemic more in-depth, such as challenges, availability of activities, or new development.

The main challenge mentioned by participants in both countries was maintaining contact and interaction between sports persons and sports clubs during the pandemic, given the restrictions imposed by authorities. Efforts were made to maintain contact and interaction with sports clubs by providing information on health protocols, online training sessions and workshops, and maintaining contact with athletes and members through phone and online communication. However, the availability of services was affected mainly due to repeated stoppages and resumptions of activities as the pandemic evolved.

Finally, during the pandemic, several specific sports practices were developed to help keep people active while ensuring their safety, with virtual training sessions being the most prevalent. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, many sports organizations could adapt and continue to operate, albeit in a modified form. This required a great deal of flexibility and creativity on the part of sports leagues and organizations, as well as cooperation and support from players, coaches, and other staff.

## **6. Conclusions**

In this study, we explored examples, good practices, the impact of restrictions, etc., to find out how sports activities and practices have transformed during the pandemic, and this was our research question.

Our study of sport and society has focused on Italy and Romania and the changing social context of sports, especially as revealed by the expanded influence of the pandemic.

We have stressed the need for studies that clarify how sports articulate with other cultural consumption patterns and participation by different social groups.

The starting point was the structuralist approach, and we tried an explanation of its institutional providing a lens through which to view developments in sports, especially as they engulf by other social facts (such as the pandemic) or social spaces (e.g., government, media, education, etc.). In addition, we propose an understanding of historically the social composition of the contemporary sports space and its limits.

In this regard, the impact of COVID-19 on sports activities has been significant, with many sporting events being postponed or canceled to slow the spread of the virus. In addition to canceling events, the pandemic has also had several other impacts on sports activities.

The research provides insights into the impact of the pandemic and the measures taken to maintain sports activities while ensuring the safety of athletes, coaches, and other staff. Additionally, the study shed light on the effectiveness of the government's support programs for sports organizations and specialists in the two countries. Furthermore, the study also revealed the innovative ways sports organizations and coaches adapted to virtual training and the potential long-term implications of these adaptations. Overall, the research provides valuable information and lessons learned for sports organizations, policymakers, and stakeholders in the context of future pandemics or other disruptive events.

Some conclusions can be drawn from our analysis that emphasizes some social determinants:

- Changes to schedules and formats: Many sports leagues and organizations have had to make significant changes to their schedules and formats in order to accommodate social distancing measures and other safety protocols. This has included things like playing games without spectators, reducing the number of games played, and adjusting the timing of events.
- Financial impacts: The cancellation of sporting events and the reduction in revenues from ticket sales and other sources has significantly impacted many sports organizations. This has led to budget cuts and other cost-saving measures to weather the financial storm.
- Mental health impacts: The disruption caused by COVID-19 has hurt the mental health of many athletes and sports professionals. The isolation and stress caused by the pandemic, as well as the challenges of adapting to new protocols and procedures, have all contributed to increased levels of anxiety and depression.
- Changes to training and conditioning: The restrictions on travel and the closure of many training facilities have made it difficult for athletes to

maintain their regular training and conditioning regimes. This has led to several challenges for athletes, including a loss of fitness and an increased risk of injury.

This work also aims to highlight the extent to which inequalities have been highlighted by the pandemic, many of which have been exacerbated by COVID-19, which has rekindled interest in the corrosive effects of inequality on individuals, communities, and whole societies. Equality and inequality are also of interest in the sport since it is well established that sports are social phenomena that reflect, reveal, reproduce, and reinforce social inequalities, ideologies, and social exclusion. Sports are also potential sites of resistance to social inequality (Smith, 2023), producing social change, improving life chances, and fostering social relationships, which provide the basis for a more human social world.

As with previous pandemics, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the social determinants of health that primarily explain the consistency and severity of health inequalities we see throughout societies (Marmot et al., 2020). Entrenched social inequalities have meant that the vulnerability to and consequences of COVID-19 have not been evenly distributed. However, the pandemic has posed significant additional challenges to organizing and working more inclusive and participatory ways. The necessity of overcoming these challenges to co-produce knowledge and action has been emphasized by existing inequalities causing COVID-19 and government responses to it to disproportionately disadvantage, infect, and kill people already marginalized and discriminated against (Williams et al., 2021). It could help to understand the challenges sports organizations face or the difficulties of producing enforceable policies and actions to support sports.

Whether the sport will still be possible in the forms we know will be a central consideration. At the same time, new processes of re-sporting and de-sporting, such as new regulations on social distance and civic conduct, may be critical points we might question how sport (understood globally) will be viable in the future, requiring us to consider whether the continued globalization of competitive sport can continue at a sustained pace, or whether new limits based on health parameters will be introduced to the movement of athletes on regular tours or for international events. Moreover, relatively little has been said about the impact of social distance or isolation on sport at a more general, community, or local level.

Many scholars have pointed to the continued role of transnational organizations, national states, and local and regional cultural patterns, especially the peculiarities of individual sports' developments in given countries, useful to understand the international situation (Markovits & Hellerman, 2001). Indeed, it is only at the same international level of what Guttman (1994) calls ludic diffusion that we can see true globalization, which involves integration,

emulation, homogenization, and interdependence of cultural forces worldwide, ensuring a more equitable sports practice.

This study is just a snapshot; it was written when much of the future of sport remains uncertain, viewed from a specific set of perspectives from two countries (Italy and Romania). There is still much to be done to ensure the long-term survival of many sports, and we argue that sociologists could play an essential role in producing knowledge about how sports can weather storms.

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