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**German National Identity and Sports: Insights from the 2006  
FIFA World Cup and 2024 European Championship**

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## **Abstract**

Sports can be referred to as mirror of socio-politics, as it provides an arena where different views and norms meet in diverse interplays. This becomes particularly visible in the context of so-called mega events, such as sports tournaments where teams from different nations compete against each other, followed by a large number of spectators from all areas of global society. Two of the relevant football mega events hosted in Europe in the twenty-first century are the 2006 FIFA World Cup and the 2024 UEFA European Championship. The host nation for both tournaments is Germany, a country which continues to position itself as a central pillar in the European Union and key-player on the global stage. Due to its history, German national identity has often been explored critically. Meanwhile, in the context of sporting mega events, national identity is always being emphasized, be it by teams from different countries competing against each other or a host nation showing off e.g. their organizational capabilities, which often go hand in hand with strategic aims. Mega events bring a lot of responsibilities, but also opportunities for the host nation: as the entire sporting world follows the events, each tournament does not only bring attention, but also economic, political, and socio-cultural potentials with it. The latter ones could be e.g. new opportunities for transnational cooperation, economic growth, or an improved reputation of a country in the world. However, as especially politicians continue to emphasise the positive outcome of hosting large football tournaments, their aftermaths and effects are often unpredictable, especially regarding society. The sporting competitions normally trigger sentiments of nationalism and feelings of national identity. However, chauvinism could develop if the sense of togetherness and solidarity were lost in a society. Sports, in particular football, paints a picture of diverse discourses on this within Germany and therefore Europe. In this view, it is the goal of this work to examine how the national identity of Germany was influenced by the hosting of the 2006 World Cup and the 2024 European Championship.

**Keywords:** sports, football, society, Germany, nationalism, national identity, patriotism, politics, discourse analysis, Europe, international politics, mega events, media, narratives

## Table of contents

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION AND CONTEXTUALISATION.....	6
1.2 LIMITATIONS.....	6
<u>2. BACKGROUND.....</u>	<u>7</u>
2.1. FIFA WORLD CUP 2006.....	8
2.2 UEFA EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP 2024 .....	9
<u>3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....</u>	<u>10</u>
3.1 NATIONALISM.....	11
3.2 NATIONAL IDENTITY .....	13
3.2.1 GERMAN NATIONAL IDENTITY .....	14
3.3 IMAGE OF A NATION .....	16
3.3.1 GERMANY’S IMAGE IN EUROPE .....	17
3.3.2 GERMANY’S GLOBAL IMAGE .....	18
<u>4. METHODOLOGY .....</u>	<u>19</u>
4.1 DATA SELECTION.....	21
<u>5. ANALYSIS.....</u>	<u>23</u>
5.1. FIFA WORLD CUP 2006.....	23
5.1.1 GERMAN NATIONAL IDENTITY .....	24
5.1.2 EUROPEAN IMAGE .....	26
5.1.3 GLOBAL IMAGE .....	28
5.2 UEFA EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP 2024 .....	29
5.2.1. GERMAN NATIONAL IDENTITY .....	29
5.2.2 EUROPEAN IMAGE .....	31
5.2.3 GLOBAL IMAGE .....	33
5.3 DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS .....	34
<u>6. CONCLUSION.....</u>	<u>38</u>
<u>7. APPENDIX .....</u>	<u>40</u>
<u>8. BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</u>	<u>44</u>

## 1. Introduction

In twenty-first century Europe, football can be considered as one of the most important and popular kinds of sport. On national, as well as international level, professional and amateur athletes are organised in football teams competing against each other. The foundation of different football competitions and collectives, for example clubs or national teams, date back to the previous century and continue to attract large public interest until today. The latter aspect applies to professional sporting mega events, such as the FIFA World Cup and the UEFA European Championship. It is usually the case that several nations compete against each other to become the host of such a large tournament, as they view this as an attractive opportunity to strengthen and promote the own image, as well as to follow other strategic aims. For two of the biggest men's football events taking place in Europe in the current century, namely the 2006 FIFA World Cup and the 2024 UEFA European Championship, Germany was selected as host nation.

Football can be seen as the most popular sports in Germany. Especially on professional level, many football players and teams have reached major sporting successes in the past. The German men's national team have won the World Cup four times and furthermore secured three European Championship titles over the years (comp. Deutscher Fußball-Bund e.V. 2024). Meanwhile, their female counterparts can showcase an even broader collection of major sporting titles: they became world champions two times and have won the European Championship a total of eight times, as often as no other women's national team (comp. Deutscher Fußball-Bund e.V. 2020). To top off their success, they are regular competitors at the Olympic Games, having won the bronze medal four times and finally, the gold medal in 2016 (comp. Deutscher Fußball-Bund e.V. 2020). Based on their sporting successes, the athletes enjoy huge popularity, become idols for the upcoming generation of footballers, as well as steady ambassadors for their sport.

A survey of the German Football Federation (*Deutscher Fußball-Bund e.V.*, DFB) from 2023 stated that 7.364.775 people in Germany have been registered as members of a football club (comp. DFB 2023). Additionally, across Germany, there is a total amount of 24.154 football clubs that are officially recognised by the DFB (comp. DFB 2023). These numbers underpin the great popularity, and the status quo of football within the country. Thus, sports can be seen as mirror of society, and “in the current financial, political, social and cultural environment – football offers (...) one lense in which to view and analyse society and social issues” (Power,

Carr, Parnell, Widdop and Millar 2021: p. 1). Due to its large reach within Germany, football has become an important arena of discourse, which affects all areas of the nation state, such as society, politics, economics, and culture.

Furthermore, Germany plays an important role in modern days European politics, while the nation can also be seen as key actor in sports and the businesses surrounding it. Furthermore, sports, including football, have always taken up an influential role in terms of national consciousness and have “long been used as tool to strengthen national identities” (Brun and Gomez 2022, p. 48). Football is closely linked to the Germany’s culture, society and therefore its national self-understanding. As this poses a relevant research topic, I will explore how the two football mega events hosted by Germany have influenced its national identity.

Looking at the role of sporting mega events, which the World Cup and European Championship can be considered as without any doubts, it is stated that they “provide cultural resources for reflecting upon identity and enacting agency” (Horne and Manzenreiter 2006: p. 1). Picking up these aspects, the question of the exact effects that football can have on the construction and development of a country’s self-understanding arises. The latter term is used as synonymous to the one of national identity. This concept refers to sentiments of belonging, and associations of citizens regarding their nation. In the context of sporting mega events, national identity is always being emphasized. This be seen, for example, by fans displaying national symbols, e.g. flags, in public, or a host nation showing off their organizational capabilities during a tournament.

Arranging them goes hand in hand with a lot of responsibilities, but also opportunities for the host nation: as not only the entire sporting community follows the events, each tournament also brings worldwide attention, and economic, political, and socio-cultural potentials with it. Therefore, new opportunities for transnational trade deals or new agreements on political cooperation arise for host nations and make the task of executing a sporting mega event attractive for them. Between 1930 and 2026, “only 22 countries will have hosted a men’s or women’s World Cup (...), [hence it allows countries] to be part of a ‘select club’” (Brun and Gomez 2022: p. 48). Just like the FIFA World Cup, the UEFA European Champion takes place every four years. Since 1960, the men’s edition of the latter one took place in 11 different countries on the European continent (comp. DFB 2021). Germany is one of few countries to have hosted both kinds of tournaments and manage the huge efforts that comes along with this

role. It therefore provides an interesting field to draw comparisons and analyse what impact the first tournament had in the country, and then carried over to the next one, 18 years later.

### **1.1 Research question and contextualisation**

The aim of this work is to explore the influence, which the two football tournaments hosted by Germany had on the country's self-understanding, as well as in which ways they contributed to the construction of German national identity in the twenty-first century. As arenas for socio-political exchanges of diverse kinds, the chosen football tournaments provide an ideal field of study and give a concrete time frame for the analysis executed in my thesis. The research question explored in my work is hence the following:

*How did the two football mega events hosted by Germany, the 2006 FIFA World Cup and the 2024 UEFA European Championships, influence the country's national identity?*

The thesis is structured in the following way: I start by explaining limitations I face when exploring the chosen topic, before I continue with giving insights on the two sporting mega events hosted by Germany. In the third chapter, I outline the theoretical framework of this thesis and define all important key-terms and -concepts. A particular focus is put on their relation to the construction of German national identity. After that, the methodology used will be explained, as well as the exact choice of data in terms of research material. The fifth chapter is made up by the overall discourse analysis, and a discussion of the results. Finally, I conclude my thesis with answering the research question.

### **1.2 Limitations**

I have decided to explore German national identity in the context of the 2006 FIFA World Cup and the 2024 European Championship to give my analysis a clear time frame and more structure when it comes to the contents discussed. As the two events took place in Germany, there have been other major sporting events of high relevance for the country. Among them are the 1974 Olympic Games hosted by the city of Munich and the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, where the German men's national team claimed their only international title in the current century. As I agree that these events also had their influences on shaping German national identity, I will only briefly mention them instead of making them part of my analysis. This decision comes from the aim of focussing on German national identity in the twenty-first century, as well as to keep the extent of work well-arranged and to the point. In addition, when writing this thesis, it

has been approximately one month since the end of the 2024 European Championship. Hence, only the short-term aftermath of the tournament can be considered for the analysis, as more time needs to pass before grasping the exact long-term effects the games had on German national identity.

Another aspect I was confronted with limitations in was the one of the public perceptions of male and female sporting competitions. As it was previously outlined, the German women's national team in football can indeed present major sporting success, while Germany also hosted the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup. However, women's football in the country continues to enjoy less popularity and public attention than its male counterpart. The average numbers of TV-viewership, media coverages and game attendances vary heavily between men's and women's football, as the latter one can be considered as "still (...) emerging market" (Hallmann, Oshimi, Harada, Matsuoka and Breuer 2018: p. 903). From 1955 to 1970, women's football was officially forbidden on professional as well as amateur level by the country's sporting authorities (comp. DFB 2020). This can be seen as main driver that put the development of the sport on hold and fuelled gender-related stereotypes, as well as prejudices. These continue to impact the evolution of women's football until today. Based on this, it can be said that men's football does contribute more to the continuous development of German national identity, which underpins my focus on the two male sporting mega-events. Adding to this, the differences between the perceptions of male and female sports and competition pose an interesting field for further research project in humanities and social sciences.

## **2. Background**

As it was described in the introduction to this thesis, football looks back on a long history and great importance in Germany. The two tournaments hosted by the country in the current century can be considered as sporting mega events. Swiss sociologist Martin Müller explains this complex phenomenon as "ambulatory occasions of a fixed duration that (a) attract a large number of visitors, (b) have large mediated reach, (c) come with large costs and (d) have large impacts on the built environment and the population" (Müller 2015: p. 629). Furthermore, Müller argues that a mega event cannot be labelled as such by only looking at the number of attendance or its physical dimension (comp. Müller 2015: p. 628). His definition can be seen as important for the understanding of the backgrounds of both tournaments, as it takes into consideration the many different aspects that come a long with the mega events, and does not only look at the sporting sides of them.

## 2.1. FIFA World Cup 2006

In Germany, the 2006 FIFA World Cup is being referred to as *Sommermärchen*, which translates to summer fairy-tale. This name stuck with the tournament until today and is often used in media, as well as in politics. It can be seen as emphasis of the sentiments that the German people experienced as a collective during the tournament. The eyes of the world laid on the country that aimed to use the international attention to improve its image on the global stage. The FIFA (*Fédération Internationale de Football Association*) decided on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2000 that Germany would be the host of the 2006 World Cup (comp. Deutscher Bundestag 2006: p. 4). The country was given the tournament in the third and final voting round of the decision process and received the majority of votes ahead of South Africa (comp. Deutscher Bundestag 2006: p. 4), who later went on to host the 2010 edition of the tournament.

Ahead of the tournament kicked-off, the German Parliament (*Bundestag*), commissioned a report in which, among other things, the political aims pursued in hosting the World Cup were explained. These also represent the views of the German Federal Government (*Bundesregierung*) and thus political actors of the executive branch. The paper states that the German Federal Government sees “an unique opportunity” (Bundestag 2006: p. 7) in the country taking up the role as host nation for the sporting mega event. Furthermore, the government has “the expectation that over the run of four weeks, the 2006 World Cup, when worldwide media attention on Germany increases, a positive image of Germany shall be conveyed, and the international understanding be promoted” (Bundestag 2006: p. 7). From the point of view of the German government, the country should be portrayed as “cosmopolitan, modern, likeable and hospitable, as well as foreigner-friendly” (Bundestag 2006: p. 7).

These aspects have lacked in the reputation of Germany back in 2006, otherwise the federal government would not have seen such room for improvement, which needed to be made up for by hosting a sporting event of a large dimension as the World Cup. Deficits were recognised by political actors and hence, measures were taken. This was embedded in a long-term strategy, as the application as host nation for the tournament was decided about six years prior to its kick-off in June 2006. In addition to the agenda directed at strengthening Germany’s reputation on the outside, the federal government also expressed their hope that “one of the most important sporting events in the world [would have] positive and sustainable effects on the economy, the labour market and investments made in Germany, as well as [generate] more global attention for Germany as travel destination” (Bundestag 2006: p. 8).

The official slogan of the 2006 World Cup was declared “The world as guests at friends” (*Die Welt zu Gast bei Freunden*), underpinning the ambitions of the government to change their international image long lasting. It is particularly interesting in which rather blunt way the political agenda behind the hosting of the World Cup was formulated. Apart from the political debates on the state of the country ahead of the tournament, during its course itself it became visible what effects the four weeks of international football in Germany had. The games were played in 12 cities across the country, among them the capital city Berlin and epicentres of football with the likes of Munich and Hamburg. Euphoria had spread among the entire nation, making people feel more connected by a new sense of togetherness, as they gathered in the stadia or newly introduced public-viewing events to follow the matches. In this context, it is to point out that “for (...) Germany (...) hosting an event such as the football World Cup has had political value beyond what is generally associated with [it]: (...) the World Cup apparently helped the country overcome a difficult twentieth-century history” (Cornelissen and Maenning 2010: p. 97).

## **2.2 UEFA European Championship 2024**

18 years after the first football mega event took place in Germany, the country got to host another one, this time, it was the UEFA European Championship, which ran from June to July 2024. The motives were different ones this time, as the country took many different opportunities outside the sphere of sports to position itself in (international) politics and actively build, as well as further develop its reputation. In the build-up, as well in the aftermath of the tournament, many discourses went on about whether the effects of the so-called *Sommermärchen* from 2006 could be repeated or not. Especially in German media coverage during the Euros, the tournament was often referred to as *Sommermärchen 2.0*, showing the public expectations which were linked to it.

Again, Germany followed a clear strategy with its bid as hosting nation. As basis for this, the National Strategy for Sporting Mega Events (*Nationale Strategie Sportgroßveranstaltungen*) was introduced by the German Federal Ministry of the Interior (*Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat*). It formulated four clear aims, some of which seem recognisable from the 2006 agenda. First, it is intended that “sporting mega events serve the sports” (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat 2021). This means that professional, as well as amateur athletes and upcoming sports talents should benefit from the effects of sporting mega events, the same

applies to sports clubs and federations in the country (comp. Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat 2021).

The second point stands in line with the mirroring aspects of sports, meaning that “mega events stand for values, (...) make tolerance, fairness, integration and the willingness to perform visible and result in effects that lay beyond sports” (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat 2021). Next, the German ministry emphasizes that sporting mega events “support common goals of society, (...) among those the strengthening of social togetherness, respect for the environment, efforts for sustainability and the application of future-orientated technology” (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat 2021). Here, Germany seems to have developed the own approach to its role as host beyond national agendas and focus more on international issues. The concluding point of the strategic paper is a familiar one from 2006: “Sporting mega events (...) succeed in a unique way when portraying a positive image of Germany to the world and push the exchange between athletes, fans, visitors and the German people forward” (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat 2021). The European Championship, as its name says, puts European topics and issues more on the political agenda behind it than a World Cup, which comes along with more global aims and approaches. Nevertheless, Germany actively worked on combining it with placing national goals in between, which still seems less present than they did in 2006. This is also made visible in the official slogan of the 2024 European Championship: A home game for Europe.

To sum this chapter up, both tournaments were brought to Germany by its political decision-makers with the clear aim to strengthen the country’s general reputation on the international stage, which includes the European one. Increasing intercultural dialogues in the courses of the tournaments was also part of the underlying strategies. However, influences on internal dynamics in German society seem to have been considered as side effects. It can be said that they, as well as the socio-cultural aftermaths of the tournaments, have been underestimated when the political concepts for both sporting mega-events were created.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

In view of the backgrounds outlined in the previous chapter, it is pointed out that society and sports, football to be more exact, are closely linked to each other. Due to “its global appeal and strong ties to local allegiances, football is a hugely influential platform for billions of people across the globe [and it] offers a space for the public performance of communal identities, both

for those demarcating dominant cultural values and for others who critique the status quo and celebrate their differences” (Power, Carr, Parnell, Widdop and Millar 2021: p. 3). In this chapter, this view will be further examined alongside theoretical views on nationalism, and the concepts of national identity and national image.

### **3.1 Nationalism**

The theory of nationalism unites different views on how and to what extent the citizens of a country identify with it, as well as its social and cultural practices. This includes values and traditions shared within society, but also political and economic acts made by decision-makers. I argue that nationalism is the invisible kit that holds together a nation state. It creates feelings of togetherness, belonging, enthusiasm or approval for the political agenda of a country. These bonds created by nationalism are essential for the functioning of a nation state and cohesion in its social practises.

In his book, ‘Imagined Communities’, which remains one of the most influential works on nationalism until today, political scientist Benedict Anderson shared a similar view. He suggests that a nation is “an imagined political community, (...) because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 1983: p. 6). With this, Anderson underpins that nationalism refers to the dynamics of socio-political discourses. These influence a country’s self-perception and foster a sense of belonging among members of a nation (comp. Anderson 1983: p. 6). I argue that football tournaments, such as World Cups or European Championships can provide visibility for this anonymous community, which is difficult to grasp for the individual citizen of a nation. The sporting mega events give an unique platform for social practices, and values to be played out and made visible. In this process, many citizens can be reached and exposed to experiences of nationalism.

A more recent approach to the theory of nationalism is made by sociologist Steven Grosby. He points out that “[e]very nation has its own understanding of its distinctive past that is conveyed through stories, myths, and history” (Grosby 2005: p. 8). Due its history in Germany, football is a mean of identification for the German people and part of social practises. Grosby states that these shared traditions and experiences within a nation build relationships between a nation’s citizens (comp. Grosby 2005: p. 9). German society can re-call narratives of football tournaments from the past, share stories e.g. about famous players that helped the German

national team to achieve great sporting successes. This sharing of experiences further offers opportunities for citizens for exchanges in diverse contexts, creating more connections between the individuals. Throughout these dynamics, they are made aware and/or are remembered of similarities shared with fellow citizens. In view of this, I argue that football can help a society to overcome the anonymity among people and strengthen their consciousness about belonging to a certain state.

The views of Anderson and Grosby underpin the function of nationalism as complex phenomenon involving emotional, cultural, and political dimensions. Thus, it takes up a key-role in shaping identities and influencing political agendas. However, what both scholars lack is a detail view on how nationalism relates to negative outcomes e.g. populism and chauvinism in the form of discrimination based on people's religion and/or race. Anderson and Grosby each portray nationalism as rather neutral term, while not neglecting its connection to historical links. The latter ones suggest that nationalism is closely linked to elements that make up a nation state, e.g. a common language, and certain state territory. Over time, the influences on nationalism have changed and have become broader. A point made on negative outcomes of nationalism is made by political scientist Lloyd Cox. He states that "the widespread identification of nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s with some sort of social pathology (as a result of extreme right-wing variants of nationalism in Italy, Germany and Japan) was expressed (...)" (Cox 2021: p. 13). This led to negative associations with the term of nationalism, which remain present until today (comp. Cox 2021: p. 13), especially in the case of Germany. In the twentieth century, it first went from an empire to a democratic republic. After that, a dictatorship under the misanthropic rule of the National Socialists followed. Once the Second World War had ended in 1945, Germany was split into a democratic republic (West Germany), and a socialist regime (East Germany). The reunification as the nation state, which continues to exist until today, finally took place in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9<sup>th</sup> November. In the past, nationalism was instrumentalised to make German citizens feel superior to others, with the aim to justify numerous chauvinist crimes. These negative experiences made within society has influenced the country's national identity, as well as the image which other states have of Germany.

Both these concepts will be further outlined in the following paragraphs, starting with the one of national identity. I argue that this concept is the outcome of the complex dynamics of

nationalism. The theory relates to the way how a society is being linked to its state, while national identity refers to the exact experiences that contribute to this relation.

### **3.2 National identity**

The term of national identity can be derived from the theory of nationalism. Adding to this, I emphasize that I use the expressions of national self-understanding and -perception as synonyms for it in my work. This is because the concept of national identity can be seen as the way how members of a nation state feel linked to it and how they view, as well as experience their belonging to it. In his approach to the definition of national identity, social scientist Anthony Smith outlines that “nationalism, the ideology and the movement, must be closely related to national identity, a multi-dimensional concept, and extended to include a specific language, sentiment and symbolism” (Smith 1991: vii in McCrone and Bechhofer 2015: p. 9). As fundamental features of national identity, Smith lists “an historic territory or homeland; common myths and historical memories; a common, mass public culture; common legal rights and duties; and a common economy with territorial mobility for its members” (Smith 1991: p. 14 in McCrone and Bechhofer 2015: p. 9). In the context of Germany, it can be said that due its long and present history, football is part of these collective memories, and social traditions. Thus, the sport actively contributes to shaping the country’s national identity.

Social scientists David McCrone and Frank Bechhofer complement Smith’s definition by the aspect that “[n]ational identity is a mechanism for giving people a sense of individual and collective worth, without which they cannot function” (McCrone and Bechhofer 2015: p. 10). This shows that the concept of national identity links a society to its state by fostering a sense of belonging and connection among the citizens. Thus, nationalism and national identity can be seen as mutually reinforcing. Nationalism builds the foundation on which a continuous and present national identity can be developed on. At the same time, national identity can strengthen nationalism. This happens throughout the fuelling and promotion of close connections among the citizens to their nation by emotions and positive experiences linked to it. This complex interplay takes up a key-role when it comes to influencing socio-political discourses, also in the context of sports.

Building another bridge to football and the two sporting mega events hosted by Germany in the twenty-first century, it needs to be pointed out that these tournaments provide an environment where both nationalism and national identity are made visible. This is as they are being

expressed in many different forms. As example to outline what this can look like, I briefly refer to Michael Billig's theory of banal nationalism. This additional approach is brought up to exemplify the close connection between the theory of nationalism and concept national identity. Billig introduces the term of banal nationalism "to cover the ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced" (Billig 1995: p. 6). National identity has become normalised to a certain extent in daily life and practise, meaning that is not being actively emphasized or expressed in this context. However, football tournaments become reminders for citizens of their national identity, and provide an environment, where it is actively lived out. An example for this is the public display of national symbols, such as flags, crests and anthems, which link the spectators to supporting athletes and teams that represent their nation.

German national identity is constructed from within the country itself and those, who belong to the country's society. Collective experiences and historical events from the past, namely the Holocaust and the horrors of the Second World War, have had heavy influences on the German citizens attitude towards and identification with the state.

### **3.2.1 German national identity**

In daily life in Germany, national identity is rarely expressed or emphasized. Common values, such as democracy and human rights, have a strong position within society, based on their legal foundation in the German Basic Law (comp. Deutscher Bundestag 2024). The latter one can be seen as source where socio-political norms are being derived from, as the legislation provided a necessary amount of stability with its introduction in 1949 (comp. Deutscher Bundestag 2024). At this time, the country was embossed by chaos, uncertainty, and the general aftermath of the Second World War. The German Basic Law thus became a guideline for the country to develop into a democratic nation state. However, right after the Allied forces had freed Germany from the National Socialists, it was only West Germany that pursued the democratic way. On the other side, East Germany turned into a socialist regime with numerous anti-democratic features. Both states dealt differently with the horror of the Nazi regime and the heritage of the Second World War due to "different social and political priorities" (Fulbrook 2020: p. 303), as political scientist Mary Fulbrook points out.

In West Germany, people carried a collective sense of guilt with them because of the inhuman events between 1933 and 1945. Therefore, Fulbrook highlights that "[o]ne widely accepted

version of West German history has it that, following an initial period of “amnesia” and repression in the early postwar years, people gradually came to confront their past in later decades” (Fulbrook 2020: p. 295). As a result of the negative historical events, the citizens were reluctant to show national symbols in public, such as the flag or crests, for a long time. Hence, the German national identity was not seen as something to be proud of in the West. However, in East Germany, the political leaders did not initiate constructive self-reflections about the recent past. Fulbrook states that “the communist narrative prevailed with little space for public expression of alternative views” (Fulbrook 2020: p. 306), which hindered the development of memories politics on the Holocaust and Nazism.

In addition, East Germany’s self-perception was rooted in the notion that a successful de-Nazification had taken place there (comp. Fulbrook 2020: p. 306). Thus, they felt way less or even not guilty in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the disaster of the Second World War. In West Germany, a lot of former Nazi leading figures continued to work in important political positions e.g. Hans Globke, who worked chief aide in the chancellery under former Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (comp. Fulbrook 2020: p. 306). Prior to this, he “had assisted in drafting Adolf Hitler’s Nuremberg Laws” (Fulbrook 2020: p. 306). These different approaches to dealing with the past can be explained by the socio-political contexts they were framed in, and which the citizens of both states were exposed to in their daily lives. West Germany pursued a clear way to becoming a democratic country and establish itself in international relations. At the same time, East Germany complicated a socio-political dealing with the memories of the Holocaust and the Second World War, as this had to match with its socialist ideology. Once Germany was reunified in 1989, two worlds that once were the same nation state seem to have collided. This made differences in the way that the citizens perceive the state even more visible.

Until today, there are differences between the West and East of Germany in terms of “standards of living as well as attitudes and political beliefs” (Wittlinger 2010: p. 141). Thus, “internal divisions” (Wittlinger 2010: p. 142) are a key characteristic of today’s German national identity. Since the differences between East, where people e.g. receive lower incomes and entitlements to pension, and West remain, a large part of the German populations feels treated unfairly (comp. Wittlinger 2010: p. 142-143). This results in growing resentment about national politics. Hence, “support for democracy has become eroded and east and west are reluctant ‘to imagine’ themselves as part of one national community” (Wittlinger 2010: p. 143). This reference to Benedict Anderson’s theory of nationalism shows the difficulties which the German nation state

is facing in the twenty-first century regarding its identity. Divisions and resentment among its population lead to “more socio-economic problems than ever before (...) and a lack of cohesion” (Wittlinger 2010: p. 145). In East German states, previous elections have shown an increased support for right-wing populist parties, mainly the *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)*. In September 2024, the party gained the most votes during the state election in Thuringia, which was part of East Germany until 1989. In this particular German state, the party group is considered to be right-wing extremist, according to a decision by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Verfassungsschutz*) (comp. *Verfassungsschutz Thüringen* 2020).

The concept of national identity is limited to the society, as well as the internal dynamics of a specific nation. These developments are not only seen in the country itself, but also picked up, shared, and reproduced by foreign visitors and international media coverage.

### **3.3 Image of a nation**

The concept of the image of a nation is introduced to explain the view on a state from the outside. Generally speaking, a “[n]ational image is constructed through history, along with the cultural memory of a nation, by striking a balance between self-shaping and other-shaping in different times” (Meng 2020 in Wang 2024: p. 2). Both concepts of national identity and image complement each other, while their close link is crucial for fostering a positive image of a nation. Meanwhile, a negatively perceived identity from foreigners can lead to a bad reputation. In this work, I use the term of reputation synonymous with the concept of a national image.

As it was stated in the second chapter, the 2006 FIFA World Cup was brought to Germany to improve the country’s image (comp. Bundestag 2006: p. 7). Communication scientist Eytan Gilboa indicates that a “[f]avorable image and reputation around the world achieved through attraction and persuasion (...) became more important” (Gilboa p. 2853) than other factors that could shape a country’s image. In this context, football tournaments can become a “soft power” (Gilboa 1998: p. 2853) tool for political actors to actively influence their country’s perception among foreigners. Furthermore, Gilboa points out that in recent times, “image and reputation determine the status and influence of states, leaders, and nonstate actors more than military and economic strength” (Gilboa 1998: p. 2583). Mega events, including football tournaments, thus become more and more relevant for nation states and their decision-makers. Furthermore, political scientist Yoav Dubinsky highlights that “[s]ome (...) sports events can be associated with not just the place they took place in but an entire region or continent”

(Dubinsky 2019: p. 27). Throughout this, the organizers of the two mega events in Germany were able to ensure that the entire country would benefit from the efforts of hosting them. The outlined connection of “culture and history and [enjoyment of] international exposure” (Dubinsky 2019: p. 27) does influence Germany’s image on the European, as well as the global stage. Pointing out how nationalism can influence a country’s image internationally is crucial to understand the role which the 2006 FIFA World Cup and the 2024 UEFA European Championship played in influencing Germany’s national identity.

### **3.3.1 Germany’s image in Europe**

In recent times, Germany took over more responsibility within the alliance of states. The country has long established itself as key-player in the EU and one of its vocal members. When the European Union was founded on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1993 with the establishment of the Treaty of Maastricht, on the basis of the European Economic Community (EEC) from 1957, Germany was one of its founding states and strongest advocates. Until today, the country’s political agenda continues to emphasize the key-role it plays in the European Union, whose democratic values are seen as equal to the German ones (comp. Wittlinger 2010: p. 1439). While the political agenda of Germany in the twenty-first century continues to stress the importance and belonging of the country to the European Union, this comes along with practices of Europeanization being established in the country’s socio-cultural arenas. However, this development also causes resentment about the political situation and leading parties among the German citizens.

An example for this can be found in Germany’s acting during the 2012 Euro Fiscal Crisis. The country took over a leading role when deciding on financial aid for EU-member state Greece. Many citizens in Germany felt Greece’s needs prioritized over their own and gained an impression of being ignored and/or left alone by political decision-makers. These sentiments were picked up by the *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)*. It was founded in 2013 with the aim to lead Germany out of the European Union and re-gain political independence in decision-making, especially about financial issues, and fiscal aids for other countries. By now, the party has developed into a right-wing direction, cooperating with other right-wing groups in the European Parliament. Political scientist Luca Carrieri states that the AfD thus “became an important party actor, probably channeling a growing opposition towards the EU” (Carrieri 2019: p. 839). The populist party actively instrumentalizes the citizen’s resentment about the EU by promoting anti-democratic, as well as chauvinist narratives to destabilize the democratic

system. This is being noticed by other European states. Hence, these developments influence their view on Germany.

Despite these difficulties, it can be said that Germany has indeed managed to “assert itself more strongly on the international stage (...) [w]hilst being strongly committed to the European project” (Wittlinger 2010: p. 143). This commitment plays a key role in German political agendas of today and can also be seen in the framing of the 2024 European Championship. The football mega event was labelled as ‘Home games for Europe’ by the organizers. This also emphasizes that “German political leaders are now quite happy to acknowledge their country’s leading power on Europe” (Wittlinger 2010: p. 143-144) in times of socio-political and economic challenges, which the entire alliance of states is facing.

### **3.3.2 Germany’s global image**

In addition to its involvement on the European continent, Germany’s global image is also defined over its economic power and resources. Here, sociologist Christian Kastrop states that “Germany has a role to play, not just in Europe but in the interconnected global economy” (Kastrop in Mody 2013: p. vii). The country positions itself as export nation and thus as economically strong state on the international stage. Economists Fabian Bornhorst and Ashoka Mody underpin that “Germany has contributed to global well-being in important ways” (Bornhorst and Mody 2013: p. 2), which has been widely acknowledged on the global stage. It needs to be pointed out that “[w]ith a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 4.121 billion Euros in 2023, Germany is the third-largest economy in the world after the United States and China” (KPMG 2024). Germany sells many valuable goods worldwide, e.g. cars, technical equipment, and chemical articles (comp. KPMG 2024). Bornhorst and Mody highlight that “Germany’s continuing ability to maintain competitive manufactured exports has been crucial to its resilience and dynamism” (Bornhorst and Mody in Mody 2013: p. 1). Furthermore, they add that German “policymakers have supported stabilization and growth through measures to maintain employment and a sizeable fiscal stimulus” (Bornhorst and Mody in Mody 2013: p. 1). To achieve these economic goals and profit from their outcomes, the country needs to be perceived as trustworthy trade-partner with a good image in the world.

The global image of Germany is not only based on its economical positioning, but it needs to be stressed that the economic power of a country can be decisive for e.g. the political responsibility a nation state can take over in international contexts and decision-making

processes. Also, the combination of economic strength and solid financial capacities can make a country (more) attractive for the role as host of football World Cups and/or European Championships. Furthermore, only countries with enough financial means, as well as other resources, such as infrastructure, can successfully compete in the process to host a sporting mega event. This stands in line with Dubinsky's points on sports becoming soft power-tools to reach economic, and thus financial, goals of a state (comp. Dubinsky 2019: p. 26). Once again, this can be seen as interplay, in which German national capabilities are shown to the outside world. Throughout this process, the country's own resources, e.g. finances and trades, can be further improved. The entire process between influences from the in- and outside of the state are kept going by the steady attraction of new possibilities, such as international investments or new partnership deals, for all areas of the nation state (comp. Bornhorst and Mody in Mody 2013: p. 2).

To sum this chapter up, I use the theory of nationalism as framework in which the concepts of national identity and national image influence societies in a diverse interplay. I argue that nationalism is the constant driver that actively constructs a nation state in all its facets. This happens first and foremost on the inside of a state, which is where the concept of national identity is applied. National image refers to how a nation is perceived from the outside by foreigners. When Germany hosted both the 2006 FIFA World Cup and the 2024 European Championship, German citizens and international visitors made experiences on the ground that would affect sentiments related to both theoretical concepts. This influence was also intended by the political agendas behind both sporting mega events. However, they had a more external focus with the aim to improve Germany's international reputation. At the same time, chauvinist tendencies in socio-political discourse pose a threat for the nation state, based on different expressions of nationalism, which has a rather negative connotation in Germany. As it can be derived from my research question, the theoretical focus lies on German national identity. However, outlines on the national image are necessary to understand the concept as it is additionally shaped by external dynamics. In the following chapter, the methodology used for the analysis on how sporting mega events have influenced German national identity will be presented.

#### **4. Methodology**

Based on the theoretical framework and concepts outlined in the previous chapter, it is analysed how the two sporting mega events hosted by Germany in 2006 and 2024 have influenced

German national identity. The methodological approach chosen for this master thesis is discourse analysis. I refer to a definition outlined by social scientists Nelson Phillips and Cynthia Hardy. They “define it a discourse as an unrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being” (Parker 1992 in Phillips and Hardy 2011: p. 3). Furthermore, they point out that “social reality is produced and made real through discourses, and social interactions cannot be fully understood without reference to the discourses that give them meaning (...) [and in discourse analysis, the] task is to explore the relationship between discourse and reality” (Phillips and Hardy 2011: p. 3).

The definitions on discourse analysis given by Phillips and Hardy link up with the remarks on German national identity and its image stated in the previous chapter. As the country’s self-perception in a rather abstract concept based on consensus from the people guided by political agendas, discourse is the main arena where this social reality becomes visible.

Discourse also takes up a crucial role when constructing a nation’s image, as experiences and impressions among foreigners about a country are exchanged in this context. As sports tournaments pose a topic of socio-political relevance with high interest for different actors in society, they are being extensively covered by media. Furthermore, other actors from within a nation state, mostly politicians, start discourses on themes such as the two football tournaments, on their own terms. They use speeches and interviews, as well as written papers to share their views in public and present them to the citizens to reach as many of them as possible with their contents. In line with this, Phillips and Hardy point out that “discourses are shared and social, emanating out of interactions between social groups and the complex societal structures in which the discourse is embedded” (Phillips and Hardy 2011: p. 4). Hence, they emphasize that one “must also understand the context in which [the discourses] arise” (Sherzer 1987; van Dijk, 1997a in Phillips and Hardy 2011: p. 4). Based on this, discourse can be seen as a powerful important tool that contributes to the construction of a society and thus, a nation state. In discourse, individuals and other actors within a nation do not only share facts, general information, but also beliefs, opinions, political, economic, or cultural agendas. They also formulate rules and norms that give the framework which a society can exist in. These dynamics also play a key role in constructing a national identity and image. Hence, discourse analysis is used in this thesis to “to [provide] an understanding of discourse and its role in constituting a social reality” (Phillips and Hardy 2011: p. 8).

#### 4.1 Data selection

As it was previously pointed out, discourses, in which nationalism and national identity are being constructed and reproduced, largely take place in the public sphere. Media becomes the mean of transport to spread the contents shared by various actors within a nation state. Therefore, I have chosen to use journalistic texts about the 2006 FIFA World Cup and the 2024 European Championship as data for my analysis. They were selected on the following three criteria:

- 1) Digital availability and free access to the texts, as this is the basis for the texts to reach a large target audience in Germany.
- 2) Written in the German language, as German citizens are considered as the relevant target group for the journalistic publications. The people execute the actual discourse, throughout which national identity is being constructed, in the socio-political arenas and take input from media to manifest their opinions, as well as thoughts on Germany.
- 3) Published by a German media outlet with a high reach in society. Based on the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024 findings for Germany, I have identified 13 brands that are the most read digital media websites in the country across all demographics in daily life: tagesschau.de, t-online.de, bild.de, n-tv.de, web.de focusonline.de, spiegel.de, welt.de, gmx.net, heute.de, zeit.de, yahoo.de and faz.net. (comp. Behre, Hölig and Möller 2024, p. 27)

Adding to the third criteria, it needs to be said that gmx.net belongs to the same media company as web.de and over the past years, was less used as news tool but instead as provider for e-mails. Hence, no relevant data for this master thesis were found on gmx.net. However, it was listed among the other outlets due to means of integrity. Furthermore, during the collection of the data, it became clear that faz.net requires free registration to read most articles published on the website. This non-open access limited the number of texts used from this outlet. Based on the named Reuters Report, the chosen media sites also have a well-known history of in-depth and/or structured reporting on socio-political topics. The focus for the selection of data used for this master thesis does indeed exclude views shared over other media channels, e.g. blogs or websites with less reach. It can be stated that the higher the number of readers per outlet is, the more influence comes from their content. Reach determines how widely spread the information on the sporting mega events in German society are, contributing to their discourse and becoming shared experiences throughout exchanges of views. Media with less reach, reputation and establishment in Germany can thus not be seen as part of everyday news consumption for

the overall society. Therefore, they cannot be seen as sufficiently representative for the construction of public views and dialogues.

In Germany, media enjoys large acceptance and trust among the population. In a survey on media and political attitudes in Germany, the Pew Research Center states that “[a] majority of German adults (61%) consider news media very important to society (...), [while] around two-thirds (64%) say they trust the news media” (Pew Research Center 2018). Furthermore, media is protected by legal framework, while e.g. the freedom of speech is a key aspect protected by the German Basic Law. It can be said that “[t]he role of media as a pillar of democracy is widely accepted by politicians with the exception of the far right” (Reporters Without Borders 2024). For this master thesis, no media outlet with connections to far right or populist environments and parties was considered. Furthermore, “[t]he German media maintain a long tradition of criticising both the government and the opposition, (...) [and] [t]he independence of public media is protected by law” (Reporters Without Borders 2024).

Public broadcast ARD, which runs the news website *Tagesschau*, is named as the most trusted and most used media by the participants of the survey (comp. Pew Research Center 2018). When it comes to the political positions of German media, it is emphasized that “[n]ot only are most German outlets’ news audiences near the centre, but people who have heard of the outlets also tend to place them near the middle of the left-right spectrum” (Pew Research Center 2018). As none of the media outlets considered in this academic work is linked to an extreme political position, be it left or right, their contents are additionally useful for the analysis of reports on the 2006 FIFA World Cup and the 2024 European Championships. However, it is stressed that BILD.de is viewed as yellow press news outlet that is well-known for exaggerated headlines and sensationalised reporting. The latter one appeals to the emotions of the reader, which can also be seen in the context of sports coverage.

The journalistic articles on the two football mega events are also selected based on their inclusion of relevant thematic terms linked to my research question. I derive these from the points outlined in the previous chapter. The terms are the following: “nationalism” (*Nationalismus*), “national identity” (*nationale Identität*) and “patriotism” (*Patriotismus*). To get more specific results during the selection of the data used in this work, I combine the four key-terms with four more relevant expressions: “society” (*Gesellschaft*), “national symbols” (*nationale Symbole*), “fan culture” (*Fankultur*) and “we-feeling” (*Wir-*

*Gefühl/Gemeinschaftsgefühl*). The chosen media articles do not only include reports on experiences made throughout the two football tournaments, but also political statements on and interviews with relevant stakeholders about the mega events, e.g. organisers of the events and politicians from different parties.

To ensure a well structured analysis with a good readability to foster the understanding of the arguments presented, I will start by discussing media content on the 2006 FIFA World Cup before I proceed to focus on the 2024 UEFA European Championship. To maintain the red thread, I use the three levels of national identity, which I outlined in the third section of my work, to categorise the articles regarding their content. In the following chapter, I will also pick up on socio-political key-events that took place in the context of the tournaments, e.g. debates on national team players with migration background, if they are brought up in the data. This is to investigate further on the effects, which the two football mega events hosted by Germany had on the country's national identity, and therefore deepen the research to answer the overall question stated in the introduction.

## **5. Analysis**

As arena, or rather level of discourse, I have identified German media coverage on the 2006 FIFA World Cup and the 2024 European Championship. Narratives on both mega events are being constructed by journalistic reporting, as news and other means of storytelling are highly relevant sources of information for the citizens. Derived from these, they can pick up on stated topics and formulate own opinions and thoughts on them, which they carry further into other discourses, in public as well as in private spheres. Media thus was a key tool to create awareness on the two football mega events and creating a legacy in the collective mind of society.

### **5.1. FIFA World Cup 2006**

Picking up the points made in the third chapter of this master thesis, German citizens had a difficult relationship with their own national identity. This was based on the horrors of the Holocaust and the inhuman Nazi regime from 1933 to 1945. After the Second World War, the division of Germany, and the different ways of dealing with the past created split views and sentiments regarding the country's self-perception. With hosting the 2006 FIFA World Cup, Germany gained worldwide attention, while actively taking over responsibility for a mega event, which would turn into a gamechanger for discourses on German national identity.

### 5.1.1 German national identity

A sense of national pride has almost been unimaginable in the build-up to the 2006 FIFA World Cup (comp. Spiegel.de 12.06.2006). The term of patriotism, meaning feelings of pride and positivity among the citizens in view to their country, was linked with negative connotations. Public declarations of love for the country were met with reservation and even denial. In 2006, media largely described the sentiment in and about Germany as deadlocked and nearly plain (comp. Spiegel.de 12.06.2006). 16 years had passed since the reunification of East and West Germany and the country still found itself in the process of growing together and becoming one unit. These experiences from the past hindered positive feelings and associations with Germany from the citizen's point of view and hence, good feelings about the own national identity.

When the former federal minister and president of the German Parliament (*Bundestag*), Wolfgang Schäuble, a former member of the Christian Democratic Union party (*CDU*), spoke about himself being “content and happy to be a German” (BILD.de 07.03.2006) in an interview, this caused a public debate about such sentiments. On the one hand, German society was still processing its Nazi past, while on the other hand, a stable democratic system and European values were established firmly within the country. The 2006 FIFA World Cup was hosted under the official slogan *The world as guest at friends*. This phrasing clearly emphasized the will to portrait Germany as open and hospitable. At the same time, the motto came along with an indirect responsibility for the German citizens to take active part in making the aim possible, e.g. by contributing to a safe and peaceful celebration of football. The drastic change regarding its self-perception, which Germany experienced in the cause of the 2006 FIFA World Cup, was picked up by media with almost excitement, and the topic ruled the headlines long after the tournament had ended (comp. t-online.de 14.06.2018). To exemplify this, one article stated that the World Cup “went down in German sports history as a triumphant success” (t-online.de 14.06.2018).

The general memory of society about the tournament primarily revolves around the re-awakening of German patriotism, which the tournament made possible. What stood out in the various reports and articles was the connotation that the 2006 FIFA World Cup had sparked new national sentiments and acted as icebreaker for German society to feel good about its national belonging (comp. web.de 05.08.2014). The change was manifested by what was described as an unexpected enthusiasm of German citizens to display national symbols in public (comp. tagesschau.de 21.12.2010). Subject to this was primarily the German flag and the

country's colours: black, red and gold. During the 2006 World Cup, the public display of German flags played a key role in shaping and expressing national identity. The event saw a "Black red golden boom" (spiegel.de 29.06.2006) as people began to embrace the flag as a symbol of pride and unity. Thus, the flag became a visible representation of national joy, creating a unifying atmosphere and leaving a lasting impact on the perception of German identity during and after the tournament. The German colours were also applied in the form of face painting, while German flags were sold in all sizes and for many uses (comp. tagesschau.de 15.06.2024). Especially so-called car flags, that could be attached to the side-windows of vehicles enjoyed huge popularity. They made it possible for people to show the German national symbol in everyday life, e.g. when commuting to work, and thus outside of matchdays and footballing contexts. Yellow-press outlet BILD fittingly picked this up in its headlines, making "*Schwarz, rot, geil*" (BILD.de 13.06.2006) a slogan of its own. The expression can be translated to "black, red, cool", as *geil* is a colloquial word to describe a highly positive sentiment towards or approval of something.

Apart from the stadiums where the games of the 2006 FIFA World Cup took place, public screenings were the most popular locations where German football fans gathered to follow the matches. The concept of public screening events was known in the country, but it had never seen so many people in attendance prior to the mega event. In media discourse, public screening locations were described as tool to make everyone feel like a part of the tournament (comp. yahoo.de 08.06.2021). The number of tickets sold for the games was limited and not as high as it would have needed to be to fulfil every request. Hence, those excluded from entering the stadiums could still enjoy the matches in like-minded company. Public screening events during the 2006 FIFA World Cup had a significant impact on German national identity by creating spaces for collective celebration and unity. These gatherings allowed fans to meet up together and "experience the tournament as a shared national event" (focus.de 13.06.2018), which contributed to a sense of national pride and togetherness. The public screenings were seen as a "unifying force" (t-online.de 07.06.2018), where people from different backgrounds joined in a common expression of joy and patriotism. This atmosphere of shared enthusiasm helped shape a more open and inclusive national identity, making the World Cup a key moment in reshaping how Germans expressed their connection to the country. The public screening events unfolded over the course of the tournament, attracting more and more people (comp. yahoo.de 08.06.2021). Photographs of numerous German fans with flags and face painting gathered in front of large TV screens went viral throughout visual media coverage. The merchandise

displayed by the fans at the public screening events gave the impressions of “seas of black, red, and gold” (BILD.de 10.06.2009).

These shared experiences became in the context of football quickly became a core memory of German society and images from the gatherings remain well-known until today. This new spirit and sense of togetherness within Germany and firmly linked it to the 2006 FIFA World Cup. The tournament contributed to "promoting integration and community" (welt.de 22.06.2010). This sense of shared excitement and pride helped forge a collective identity, as demonstrated by the nationwide celebrations that followed Germany's participation in the World Cup. Other members of public life, mainly politicians, picked up these new potentials triggered by the football euphoria and used them to carry clear messages to the international stage (comp. faz.de 05.07.2006). The new shift in German national identity painted a picture of progress in terms of more positive feeling towards the country, supported by good narratives around the 2006 World Cup. Overall, the tournament was portrayed as safe and joyful football party in media coverage (comp. BILD.de 10.06.2009). Single reports about crimes, namely clashes between hooligans of non-German backgrounds and the local police. It was also highlighted that despite a few isolated incidents involving hooligans, the event was successful in maintaining a positive and festive atmosphere (comp. spiegel.de 09.07.2006). Furthermore, as accusations of corruption in 2010 regarding the deciding process, throughout which Germany was selected as tournament venue, did not manage to harm the positive discourse.

The 2006 World Cup influenced German national identity by promoting new sentiments of unity and pride within society. The successful execution of the tournament and the positive global reception helped the German citizens to become more confident about their national identity, moving away from previous stereotypes, the horrors of the past. In addition, the tournament did spread a modern, welcoming image of the country on the international stage.

### **5.1.2 European image**

The 2006 FIFA World Cup had a significant impact on Germany's European image, and therefore influenced the country's national identity. The tournament was framed in a global context and was addressed to an international audience. Its influence on German national identity was manifested by the blending of national pride with a cautious approach to patriotism.

What stood out in media coverage when looking at Germany's European identity in the context of the 2006 FIFA World Cup was the emphasis on security policies. Hosting the mega event did bring huge responsibilities for the country, as it had to secure a peaceful course of the entire tournament and protect every participant and fan. As main threats, "[p]articular attention [was] paid to (...) violent football fans, terrorist threats and organized crime" (Spiegel.de 24.04.2006). Therefore, as main measure, Germany re-introduced border controls ahead of June 2006. This is to be seen as temporary withdrawal from the Schengen agreement, which was introduced in 1985 to enable free travel for all European citizens, and transnational economic trades. The easy and non-bureaucratic crossing of borders is something that Europe is well-known until today and it is a political achievement being appreciated and held high by many different actors (comp. Spiegel.de 24.04.2006). Throughout the Schengen agreement, citizens gained another dimension of freedom within Europe. At the same time, new doors were opened for transnational tourism, and it became easier for European people to travel and gain real-life impressions of other countries.

This plays part in constructing images of different nation states and therefore, their self-perception in an interplay with the development of a European identity. controls did not seem to match with the zeitgeist of 2006 but were widely accepted when they began to show their effectiveness. After the tournament, the controls were put on hold again with society understanding that temporary limitations on free travel and trade would not lead to a change in foreign politics within Europe, but a better regulation, as well as cooperation between the countries regarding security threats. Germany was in the middle of this development and was thus able to strengthen its position within Europe with a thought-through and successful organisational effort for the 2006 World Cup, which passed without any large or medium scale incidents. The latter aspect was also recognised by the international community.

The 2006 tournament enabled "a new sense of national pride" (Spiegel.de 01.08.2006) in Germany, which was different from previous connotations of nationalism in the country since it promoted a positive national identity. This view is supported by media remarks that the sporting mega event helped Germans to "connect with their national identity in a way that avoided excessive nationalism" (focus.de 07.07.2006). The 2006 FIFA World Cup promoted Germany as a proud nation that actively promotes its culture and achievements," (comp. faz.net 09.07.2006). This underpins its image as cosmopolitan nation state in Europe. However, the event also sparked critical discussions, as the summer fairy-tale of the World Cup led to a deeper reflection on how national pride should be managed (comp. zeit.de 01.10.2015). While the

World Cup "bolstered Germany's national identity" (welt.de 15.07.2006) it also highlighted the need for careful navigation of national pride. The long-term effects of the World Cup on German identity show that the event manifested Germany's self-image as part of a modern, open Europe. This also exemplifies the interplay how national identity and national image construct one another. Overall, the 2006 FIFA World Cup had a key role in shaping Germany's national identity and its European image.

### **5.1.3 Global image**

The latter finding also applies to Germany's global image. As it was previously stated, the 2006 FIFA World Cup was brought to Germany by its then political leaders with a clear agenda, namely, to strengthen the reputation of the country on the international stage. The official slogan of the tournament, "The world as guests at friends" (*Die Welt zu Gast bei Freunden*) clearly emphasized this and was also picked up in media discourse. The connotation of the word *friends* underpins the will to create positive associations with Germany as country. Furthermore, a new sense of and for cosmopolitanism is introduced: firstly, towards the global community by inviting them to visit the 2006 FIFA World Cup, secondly, to the German society by declaring them the world's friends. The term of global community refers to every socio-political actor with an international background. It is them who have views on Germany from the outside and therefore construct its international reputation. As example to underpin this, one article described that Germany had never been so black, red and gold, which lead to a "pleasant euphoria because we shared it with our guests from all over the world" (BILD.de 10.06.2009). The visiting fans from all over the world were actually in the midst of this developments and joined the games and public screening events with the German football enthusiasts. Thus, they became part of the collective experiences made in the summer of 2006. Not just the positive images and media headlines, but also these shared impressions from on the ground in Germany would support the building of a new attitude towards the country.

The 2006 FIFA World Cup also significantly influenced Germany's global image by showcasing a modern and welcoming side of the country. Enthusiastic narratives, stating that "the World Cup contributed to Germany being viewed as a friendly and inviting country, positively impacting its international image" (BILD.de, 10.07.2006) were shared in media. It was also pointed out that "[d]uring the World Cup, Germany was perceived as a nation that had overcome its historical past and positioned itself as an integrative part of the [global] community" (welt.de 15.07.2006). The impact of the World Cup extended to Germany's

national identity, which was increasingly seen as inclusive and progressive. Overall, the World Cup provided Germany with an opportunity to redefine its national identity on the world stage, shifting from historical associations to a more positive and inclusive image. Involving the international visitors in this context was also a crucial factor for German economy, which received a boost during the tournament. While international visitors spent money in the tourism and gastronomy branch, the mood among the German citizens was also lifted. This led to an increase in consumerism because of “[t]he increased attention to the event” (tagesschau.de 15.06.2024), spreading even more positivity within the different sectors of public life. By hosting the tournament, Germany was also able to present its resources and capabilities to the world, e.g. good infrastructures, attractive travel destinations and investment opportunities. In long-term view, this would also influence impressions on and within the country. On the international stage, this strengthens Germany’s newly found role as global player.

The German society felt the global attention during the tournament and gained good sentiments from being in touch with the media coverage on it. The political decision-makers saw their aims being reached, achieving far more than what was intended. Thus, the positive experiences of foreign visitors contributed to a positive international image of Germany, which resulted in a positive shift regarding German self-perception.

## **5.2 UEFA European Championship 2024**

18 years after the crucial changes initiated by the World Cup in 2006, Germany hosted yet another major football tournament, this time in an European context. The previous chapter mentioned that an European focus was intended and prioritized over global and national perspectives. Accordingly, this could also be seen in the media discourses analysed.

### **5.2.1. German national identity**

In 2014, German men’s national team had crowned themselves World Champions after a successful tournament in Brazil. However, afterwards, sporting successes declined, because the team did perform below its standards at other international tournaments. Resentment among fans and other public actors spread about the team. This led to the players being less perceived as identification figures and football business moving further away from the spectators.

Against the background of chauvinist tendencies, which were raising at the same time, discourses on the national team player’s took place in public. They revolved around their origins, skin colours and religious beliefs, among other things. This can be illustrated by the case of

former national team player Mesut Özil, which has had major impact on his footballing career. In 2018, Özil and his teammate Ilkay Gündogan, who was the captain of the German national team from 2013 to 2018, met with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. They posed for a photo with the politician. This was heavily criticised by German public and Özil later stated that he “was racially insulted” (zeit.de 25.07.2023). The German football federation distanced themselves from the photo and Özil himself, who later accused the actors responsible of not having protected him enough against racist attacks. The photo sparked debates in public of Özil’s commitment to Germany and the country’s democratic values, as the Turkish president is known for executing anti-democratic policies. Prior to the events, Özil had not sung the German national anthem ahead of international games, a point, which was later added to the accusations in public.

Furthermore, it was emphasized that his parents are of Turkish origin. The debate culminated in 2018, after the German national team exited the FIFA World Cup in Russia in early stages due to bad performances on the pitch. Özil was accused in public and media discourses to have brought unrest into the build-up to the tournament by posing for the criticised photo and not reacting properly to the reactions (comp. faz.net 31.07.2018). This led to him being blamed as one of the main reasons for Germany’s underwhelming campaign at the 2018 FIFA World Cup (comp. faz.net 31.07.2018). Özil resigned from the national team the same year and has since been associated with right-wing movement groups in Turkey (comp. zeit.de 25.07.2023). This example gives insights on the state of German national identity ahead of the 2024 UEFA Euros, as on the one hand, socio-political actors continue to advocate for the country’s democratic values, while on the other hand, rising chauvinist tendencies are intensified by using certain debates as instruments to change political views within German society.

Media has played a central role in this by portraying and covering the diverse narratives. As it was derived from the political concept for the 2024 UEFA Euros, a clear focus was put on European issues. However, further goals were outlined for German society in order to unite the citizens and change their attitude towards the men’s national team. Within Germany, high hopes for the tournament were created in public discourse. This is underlined by the term of *Sommermärchen 2.0* (summer fairy-tale 2.0), which was heavily used during the journalistic coverage of the mega event (comp. ntv.de 14.06.2024). In times of internal crises, mainly the rise of far-right movements and agendas, as well as resentment about the economic situation, the 2024 UEFA Euros provided the ideal opportunity for the political decision-makers to implement changes regarding the citizen’s sentiments. The actors responsible of the German

football federation themselves saw a change for German football to regain a good reputation and find its way back to the positive attention of the spectators.

The 2024 UEFA European Championships did eventually manage to spark a new enthusiasm for football among the fans. Just like in 2006, they gathered at the stadiums and public screening events to celebrate together in a peaceful way. In short-term view, it became clear that what was manifested in the aftermath of the 2006 FIFA World Cup was visible during the 2024 UEFA Euros: national symbols, such as German flags, colours and football jerseys were displayed in public with positive attitudes. As a result, the positive nationalism has found its way into everyday life in Germany. The European Championship also made visible that this newly established nationalism prevailed.

### **5.2.2 European image**

The 2024 UEFA European Championship was framed within the official motto *Home games for Europe*. This already gave a preview that the tournament would be socio-political constructed to provide a stage and possibilities to strengthen Western values, e.g. democracy and freedom. Furthermore, the common pattern of creating a sense of togetherness did arise, concerning not only the citizens in Germany, but people living all over Europe.

As mirror of society, the 2024 UEFA Euros shed a light on how chauvinist tendencies continue to express themselves in social arenas of football. There, narratives that will find their ways into everyday life are being actively constructed. During the first days of the mega event, the excitement about the tournament was overshadowed by chauvinist crimes in Germany: people displayed gestures forbidden by law, namely the Nazi salute, in public, where they also performed racist chants and started fights with local police units (comp. t-onlin.de 15.06.2024). Media did not elaborate on the perpetrators in detail, however, the coverage did once again problematise chauvinism in the context of football. These events also made the news in European media, questioning the way how Germany dealt with right-wing movements internally. Even though this right-wing movements involve the majority of the European Union member states which have to deal with populist threats, this being the case in Germany has another connotation to it. In the context of the 2024 UEFA Euros, Germany aimed to advocate for an united European society and the continent's universal values, while in the country itself, chauvinist ideologies are expressed.

Chauvinist expressions in the context of the 2024 Euros were, however, not only made by individuals in Germany, but also by larger groups and even national team players. Among others, Hungarian and Austrian football fans displayed banners with right-wing slurs at several games (comp. [zdfheute.de 21.06.2024](#)). Police investigations on this took place, while images of the events made the headlines in media. Another case of chauvinism expressed at the 2024 Euros revolved around Turkish national team player Merih Demiral. To celebrate a goal, which he scored in the round of 16-match against Austria, he showed the so-called wolves-greeting, a symbol used by the Turkish right-wing movement *Grey Wolves*. This publicly displayed gesture caused a large uproar in European society, and German media discourse. UEFA suspended Demiral for two games and ruled the Turkish Football Federation to pay a fine (comp. [tagesschau.de 13.07.2024](#)). However, apart from expressions of worry from security experts and politicians in German media, no larger consequences were put into action (comp. [tagesschau.de 03.07.2024](#)).

Instead of actively fighting right-wing ideology by emphasising Western values of democracy and freedom, Germany came across as rather inactive in media coverage of the incident (comp. [tagesschau.de 13.07.2024](#)). Thus, the 2024 UEFA Euros enabled right-wing movements to display their chauvinist expressions in front of not only an European, but international audience. During the analysis, an impression of German media to firmly link such events with foreign fans shone through. The reports about individuals with German backgrounds showing forbidden gestures and chanting chauvinist slurs in public were made but seem to have lost relevancy during the tournament. This resulted in a lack of problematisation of discrimination in football and the events being tolerated to a certain extent. Germany did miss clear chances in this context to strongly position itself as advocate against right-wing populists.

Highlighting that although the magnifying glass function of the tournament was evident in the media discourse, this was not taken up into the socio-political arenas because citizens had different expectations for the tournament (comp. [zeit.de 2024](#)). This was supported by statements from politicians, e.g. the Federal Minister for Economy, Robert Habeck (*Bündnis '90 Die Grünen*). In an interview prior to the start of the sporting mega event, he stated that “[a]s a country, we deserve to have four great weeks now” ([yahoo.de 10.06.2024](#)). Also, Federal Minister of the Interior Nancy Faeser (*SPD*) shared her hopes in media that all football fans can make the 2024 UEFA Euros a celebration of togetherness in unpeaceful times, in Germany as well as Europe (comp. [BILD.de 13.06.2024](#)). After telling that she was looking forward to the European Football Championship, she said the tournament “is a real opportunity for solidarity

in very difficult times, [and that's why] I'm hoping for a good atmosphere (...) and lots of black, red and gold flags flying everywhere like (...) at the 2006 World Cup" (BILD.de 13.06.2024). With regard to Germany's national identity, these statements are examples for how the country continues to take up responsibility, while at the same time positions itself as advocate for peace and unity. If Germany had properly addressed the problematic rise of the far-right internally, its positioning in European socio-politics would have come across more clinical, as well as effective.

However, Germany managed to strengthen its reputation in an European context as open and friendly, hospitable country making a safe and well-organised football tournament happen (comp. tagesschau.de 15.07.2024). As economy continues to have an important influence on German national identity, discourses on the mood of German and international consumers during the 2024 UEFA Euros took place (comp. tagesschau.de 24.07.2024). The economic sector did profit from improved spirits within society and higher sale number, e.g. in tourism and gastronomy branches. Furthermore, as Germany had declared to host the tournament as one of the most sustainable ever, the country was also able to set benchmarks in Europe. Media portrayed Germany as example of how mega events could be held in the future, bearing in mind the challenge of climate change. This sentiment was not only recognized on EU level, but on the international stage as well.

### **5.2.3 Global image**

As I previously stated, the focus of socio-political and media discourses during the 2024 UEFA Euros was largely put on European perspectives. National narratives were derived from this, while the global dimension seems to have been viewed as identical with the European one. Sporting mega events always draw worldwide attention to themselves, even if they are framed in an more European context. The continent can be seen as cradle of football and the traditions making up the sport, which is appreciated by numerous people around the world.

Since 2014, the German men's national team had not won any major titles and lost in popularity among its fans. Many supporters found it increasingly difficult to identify themselves with the players and their philosophy, as well as support their actual performances on the pitch (comp. focus.de 14.06.2024). Under the new head coach Julian Nagelsmann, the team experienced a generational switch, leading to younger and unestablished players taking over more responsibility. This turned out to be a successful strategy, as the German Football Federation

aimed at re-connecting with the fans and stir new enthusiasm about the National team (comp. focus.de 14.06.2024). Although Germany exited the 2024 UEFA Euros in the quarterfinals against Spain, the media echo on their campaign was throughout positive, as the players had managed to make German football likeable and attractive for society again. Due its rich and successful history in international football, Germany had perceived itself as football nation, a reputation that had more and more suffered since 2014. The Euros did put the country back on the map, which highlights the close relation between sport and the national identity of the country.

This resulted in sentiments of confidence and spirits of optimism within society. Solid sporting performances continue to keep football a key-tool and mean of identification within Germany, which other opportunities can be derived from (comp. web.de 19.07.2024). If football wasn't so popular in the country, future bids to host upcoming tournaments would not be approved by society. This again would be harmful for Germany as business location and political power to keep up its image of cosmopolitan nation with the will to take over responsibility on the global stage and welcome international guests for special occasions, such as sporting mega events.

### **5.3 Discussion of the results**

The discourse analysis of selected media articles on the 2006 FIFA World Cup and the 2024 UEFA European Championship gave impressions of many different narratives taking place in and on German society. Their interplay and output to the social arenas, in this case made up by the two sporting mega events, are highly complex. They contribute to the construction of Germany's national identity on different levels. Every media approaches the topics analysed in a different way, be it by diverse forms of coverage, a focus on a specific or more broad range of topics. Hence, I emphasize that it has a crucial role in the construction of a national identity and the exact influences it is exposed to.

Regarding narrative of German identity, I identified the strongest developments on the national level. In comparison to the 2024 European Championship, the 2006 FIFA World Cup took place in a time that was less affected by global crises. In 2024, discourses on climate change, numerous wars around the world, e.g. Ukraine, and the middle East, as well as tense economic developments continue to influence the sentiments within societies, including the German one. When the 2006 FIFA World Cup took place, the Germans were stuck in a difficult relationship with their national identity due to the country's history. Memories on the Nazi regime and the

separation into East and West Germany until 1989 remain present and led to German society feeling collective sentiments of guilt and shame in regard to being German. The public display of national symbols, e.g. German flags, was yet to be normalised by the citizens in their everyday life, however, football made a change in attitudes possible.

While the political agenda, introduced by the former decision-makers, followed the clear aim of improving Germany's reputation in the world in long term view, other effects on and dynamics seem to have not been considered here. This led to media coverage capturing the atmosphere within Germany during the 2006 FIFA World Cup in a raw and natural way. Images of German and international fans peacefully cheering on their national teams at the stadiums and at public screening events went viral not only in the country, but also internationally. German society surprised everyone with a new cosmopolitan and open attitude, which marked a contrast to its reluctant image. International guests praised the hospitality they experienced in Germany.

This kind of feedback was widely shared in media reports, throughout which it reached the citizens, who gained even more positive sentiments on top of the euphoria that had been sparked by the 2006 FIFA World Cup. What was constantly emphasized in media discourse was the shared experience of the German citizens regarding the positive associations and emotions. Public screening events and the entire mega event itself were described as meeting points for the people, who temporarily did not longer feel like parts of an anonymous community living in the same federal territory. Real feelings of togetherness and belonging to Germany were created against this background, a sea of German flags appeared at the football events, and it seemed as if German society finally dared to show pride on its own national identity.

Media referred to this as *party-patriotism*, however, the coverage did not neglect the long-term effects and influences of the 2006 FIFA World Cup on German self-perception. Nationalism was finally linked with positive associations. This new confidence and re-found patriotism within society completed the positive images of the sporting mega event shared in media. It can thus be said that the tournament marked the break-through for newly constructed positive attitudes within German society towards its own state and the own belonging to it. At the same time, the positive experiences made in the country during the tournament were shared with and by the international community, helping them to gain new and better views on the country. Overall, hosting the 2006 FIFA World Cup had the effect that German national identity was strengthened internally, while this swapped over to the international stage. This put the country

back on the map of world politics, with a society behind it that seemed to have found itself again through football.

In the aftermath of the sporting mega event, Germany furthermore developed this new self-understanding as cosmopolitan nation. Multi-culturalism became part of everyday life. On political level, the decision-makers e.g. intensified transnational relations with other states. Germany made the headlines in 2015 when welcoming numerous refugees that had fled from wars and other crises, showing once again its hospitality and the new attitude in society. However, at the same time, the divisions between East and West from the past were still not overcome and especially the people in the Eastern states began to feel forgotten about by the politicians. As the cosmopolitanism sparked by the 2006 FIFA World Cup, the developments in 2015 showed that this had not been accepted by all parts of society.

The foundation of the *Alternative für Deutschland* became symbolic for the issues that came up as a result of this. From being euro-skeptical at first, the party quickly turned into a right-wing movement. Similar developments took place in other parts of Europe, causing issues that last until today. Populist agendas are known for aiming to separate societies in their opinion building processes, causing chaos, and stirring resentment among the citizens. They question the democratic orders and put them purposely into danger to take over political power. Germany's self-perception is closely linked with the term of being a defensive democracy, which is able to stand strong against chauvinist influences.

By the start of the 2024 UEFA European Championship, media and society had long acknowledged the shifts within Germany and the continuous issues faced on socio-political levels. However, the focus of the decision-maker's agenda behind the tournament was once again not laid out to solve internal problems, but instead to use the big stage to bring Europe together again and re-create feelings of unity among the citizens. Media picked up on the sentiments among them and portrayed the 2024 UEFA Euros as temporary distraction from the global ongoings. However, no sporting mega event can be constructed as the perfect world, and thus, the 2024 UEFA Euros continued to highlight ongoing problems, such as the lowered inhibition threshold in European societies to express chauvinist ideas. This became visible by national team players and fans making forbidden gestures linked to right-wing movements at football games and public screening events. Furthermore, different fan groups publicly displayed banners with right-wing slurs. Germany as host nation could not prevent these actions

from happening. This gave the impression of inactivity, which did not seem to fit with Germany's self-perception as leading power in politics with strong democratic values.

On the sporting side, the 2024 UEFA Euros enabled German football fans to feel more related to their national team. The German Football Federation experiences an upvaluation due to the solid performances from the players on the pitch. For the German fans, it was normal to show national symbols, such as German flags and colours in public, as well as to interact peacefully with foreign visitors. Them celebrating with e.g. Dutch and Scottish football fans in the city centers of Germany created images that went viral and once again stirred positive attitudes and experiences. Once again, the feedback from the international visitors after the tournament was throughout positive, as it had passed without any large or medium scale security incidents. This strengthened Germany's reputation as reliable and well-organised host nation for such sporting mega events.

Nevertheless, the global issues on wars, climate change, rise of right-wing movements, and growing resentment within German society continued after the tournament. They obviously did not pause during its duration, but in media discourse, they were framed as less relevant for the time being. Therefore, it can be said that the 2024 UEFA European Championship were used to distract the society from numerous global issues for a certain amount of time, take up on the challenge to create more sense of togetherness and strengthen positive nationalism. The expectations for the tournament to become a second summer fairy tale for Germany seem to have not been fulfilled. The problems, which German society has been facing since 2006, root too deep for a tournament to initiate long term changes. Hence, the sporting mega. event of 2024 also served as burning glass for socio-political actors on the current state of German national identity. Based on these arguments and outlines, I answer my research question on how the two sporting mega events hosted by Germany, namely the 2006 FIFA World Cup and the 2024 UEFA European Championship, have influenced the country's national identity.

It needs to be highlighted that the first tournament strengthened Germany's self-understanding in an international context, as it enabled the country to position itself more strongly and take over more responsibility. Newly gained confidence and positive attitudes towards the own nationality enables the German citizens to normalize means of banal nationalism without feeling guilt about the past. The collective experiences of emotions, mainly euphoria, spread positive associations with and on Germany, within the country and on the global state. 18 years

later, these potentials were still present in their basic features, however, some developments had changed along the way. Right-wing movements are on the rise in Germany and pose a threat to its democratic structures and values. At the same time, the country and its society find themselves in the middle of further global crises. As the tournament could only distract from them temporarily, it was able to shine a light on the current state of German national identity. In uncertain socio-political times, the latter one has become more unsteady since 2006 and now finds itself at a decisive crossroad. However, football only plays a secondary role in this.

## **6. Conclusion**

My master thesis has explored the research question on how two football mega events have influenced the national identity of Germany. Furthermore, my work gives unique insights on how the 2006 FIFA World Cup normalized the use of national symbols of Germany in the everyday life of its citizens, and how sporting mega events can reflect socio-political sentiments. This fits with the relevant research topic I introduced earlier in the introduction to this work.

The tournaments chosen for my extensive analysis were the 2006 FIFA World Cup and the 2024 UEFA European Championship. After contextualizing my research project, I outlined the theoretical, as well as methodological frameworks of this work. As key concepts, I identified the one of nationalism and the concepts of national identity and national image. These were examined on three levels: internal, European and global. I stated national identity is exclusively referring to the national/internal level, but it is influenced by external factors. I used the expressions of national self-understanding and -perception as synonyms for national identity. A similar pattern applies to the concept of national image, referring to the perception of a country from the outside by foreigners. This image is also influenced by a country's national identity in a complex interplay in form of socio-political discourses, where inside and outside views are shared and made visible. The chosen methodology for this master thesis was discourse analysis. Journalistic coverage in media can be seen as crucial factors in the building of socio-political discourses and construction of opinions. Therefore, digitally available articles published by German media outlets served as my main data for this analysis. They were selected based on whether they included certain key words linked to my theoretical concepts or terms closely related to them. The full list of articles analyzed can be found in the appendix. After the discourse analysis was executed, findings were presented and contextualized. This chapter was then concluded by a discussion of the results and the final answer to my overall research question.

The main finding of this master thesis was that sporting mega events have diverse and unpredictable effects on national identity, in this case, the one of Germany. While certain aims and expectations are linked to them, manifested and constructed in political agendas and campaigns, the influences on society cannot be planned as such. National identity is created by a broad range of internal and external factors, sports can be seen as one of them. Nevertheless, football mega events can take up crucial roles in discourses on national identity, even if it is just for a certain span of time. They can enable new developments and can help normalizing certain acts, e.g. the public display of national symbols during the 2006 FIFA World Cup. Furthermore, sporting mega events do tell a lot about the current sentiments and attitudes within a society. While many socio-political views them as tool to distract from global issues, football tournaments cannot solve them in any way. A national identity can influence how a country, namely Germany in the context of this thesis, can position itself on the global stage, while not leaving national issues out of sight. However, finding the right balance between these tasks is up to the political decision-makers. Society and therefore national identity can be guided by the collective experiences made during football mega events, as it was shown in this research project.

In the introduction to my work, I outlined limitations, which I came across in the the build-up, as well as the actual writing process. I had to exclude other sporting mega events that were of relevance for Germany, such as the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil where the German men's national team won the prestigious title. Furthermore, it was not possible to include gender-perspectives in this work, mainly regarding women's football. It also has a rich history in German, but a different perception in society. I made these decisions on purpose to keep the scope of my master thesis well-structured and clear. Nevertheless, I do not neglect the fact that these events and factors can also have influences on national identity. Hence, these topics are suitable for future research projects, since the connection between socio-political discourses and sports will always remain of high relevance for social sciences and humanities.

Lastly, I want to point out that the role of football as mirror of society should not be underestimated. As the global community continues to face severe issues challenging its political decision-makers and societies, sporting mega events have the power to give impressions on the current attitudes and sentiments among citizens. These must be taken serious by politicians to take measure to protects democratic structures and values. Football has the power to bring people together, be it those belonging to the same nation state or different ones.

While this poses a big chance for improvements in society if executed correctly by the decision-makers, mega events can also become platforms for threats, such as chauvinist displays. The influences on national identity are clear, especially in the case of Germany. However, how this development continues to evolve in the future, remains uncertain.

## **7. Appendix**

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