

# An Intercontinental Expansion of European Club Competitions: A New Reality? The Case of Dubai and Euroleague

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## **1. Introduction – Theoretical framework**

In the last few decades, basketball has become a very popular global sport (Fédération Internationale de Basketball, 2024). Popularity of leagues and players is essential for this process, and the European Euroleague is considered as the second-best basketball competition globally, only after the American NBA (Karamürsel, 2023). Recently, the search for new markets has become important in professional sport leagues (Doppler- Speranza & Gasparini, 2022). As a result, a possible expansion of Euroleague has been floated to increase its marketability (Karamürsel, 2023). Among possible expansion alternatives, it is UAE's Dubai that has attracted most headlines (Eurohoops, 2023). After intense contacts with Dubai investors, in 2023 Euroleague clubs reportedly voted in favor of inviting a Dubai club to play in Euroleague (Eurohoops, 2023).

In this sense, this possible expansion represents an interesting object of study for various reasons. Firstly, geographically, as a club from a region with developing leagues and clubs would be integrated in a European professional sport league (Schreyer & Singleton, 2023). In sports governance, it could affect critical interdependencies of Euroleague with basketball stakeholders (Karamürsel, 2023). Additionally, the study analyzes if this move fits into a bigger picture of involvement of Gulf countries in “sports diplomacy” to increase their influence (Carosella, 2022).

The study represents a theoretical advance for analyzing the feasibility of a groundbreaking idea in Europe like a competition expansion that is commonplace in American leagues like NBA (Edelman & Doyle, 2009). In practical terms, it helps sport practitioners identifying challenges and opportunities associated with such a decision, representing a benchmark for other European leagues like UEFA Champions League, where similar proposals have been put forward recently (OneFootball, 2023).

## **2. Objectives**

Considering the previous dimensions, our objective is to meaningfully contribute to the discussion about the feasibility of a possible expansion of Euroleague into Dubai. Firstly, we will focus on the particular and distinctive characteristics of the Euroleague as a basketball competition with its particularities related to both European and American sports leagues, and its position among European club competitions. Afterwards, we will reflect of the consequences of a league expansion on Euroleague and European basketball system. Subsequently, an exhaustive examination of the Dubai and UAE societies and their governments' vision of sport investments will be carried out.

Additionally, we aim to analyze if Dubai would fit with the conditions set down by the Euroleague to obtain a long-term participation in the competition, ending the article with a general reflection and suggestions for the process.

### **3. Methodology**

The paper follows a qualitative research methodology exploring and uncovering data meaning (Schäfer & Vogele, 2021), through a case study defined as a “intensive study of a single unit with an aim to generalize across a larger set of units” (Gerring, 2004, p. 342), focusing on Euroleague. Primary data from Euroleague and UAE Government websites has led to an extensive descriptive analysis of European basketball governance and Dubai’s history, demography and economy. Analysis of secondary data like academic papers, press and sport websites have led to analyze European and American sport systems, Euroleague clubs’ business model and the development of a diplomatic strategy by Gulf countries through sport investments.

### **4. Results**

Euroleague does not fully align with neither US or European sport models. It is a closed league for shareholder clubs, but it keeps ties to traditional European structures (Karamürsel, 2023). However, practically all clubs are loss-making and depend hugely on sugar-daddies to survive, prompting questions as to whether an expansion can increase league’s income (Karamürsel, 2023). Dubai could bring new sponsors (BasketNews, 2024), in a multicultural Emirate with a rapid population increase (Sen, 2020). Dubai investors might perceive sport as a cross-cultural phenomenon to get a bigger external legitimacy (Carosella, 2022). Our analysis shows that Dubai fulfills the majority of conditions by Euroleague (2023) to be a member club.

### **5. Conclusions**

An important theoretical implication is that it can shape Euroleague’s image as a paradigm-changing league through an expansion to the Gulf, a strategy not tried in Europe. Practically, Euroleague could increase its exposure and reputation as the second-best league globally, attracting interest from leagues like UEFA Champions League who could be keen to follow a similar path. However, there are concerns. It could affect interdependencies with basketball stakeholders. Some actors might also consider it as a distraction from UAE’s human rights record, so engaging with Dubai is vital to create lasting social change to social groups like women and migrant workers.

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