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“The power of the badge”? Interrogating sport as a vehicle for social integration of migrants in England and Hungary

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ABSTRACT

Given the growing impact of right-wing, anti-immigration political actors in various geographic contexts, this research critically examines the structural conditions shaping sport-based integration initiatives for asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants in England and Hungary; two countries characterized by increasingly hostile political landscapes towards immigrants. Drawing on original observations of sport inclusion programmes and in-depth semi-structured interviews with charity delivery staff, the study investigates how prevailing political and sociocultural attitudes towards migration shape the possibilities and limits of such initiatives. Our use of a Bourdieusian theoretical framework is deployed to examine how sport can simultaneously operate as a mechanism of inclusion, fostering integration and social connection, and exclusion, reinforcing boundaries of nationhood and belonging. By examining the perceptions of programme delivery staff in hostile socio-political environments, we offer novel insights into the structural constraints on sport-based integration work and the strategies through which practitioners negotiate symbolic violence, precarious funding, and anti-immigration discourse in both national contexts.

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Introduction

The rise of populist political parties and movements across Europe and North America has revitalized scholarly debate about the origins and consequences of populism. Recent work has examined its cultural, economic, and political drivers, as well as its implications for liberal-democratic institutions (Aiolfi, 2025; Brubaker, 2020; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022; Judis, 2016). High-profile events such as the (re)election of Donald Trump in the United States (Eiermann, 2016; Gusterson, 2017; Kellner, 2016; Tourish, 2024), the success of the “Leave” campaign in the United Kingdom’s Brexit referendum (Begum et al., 2021; Clarke & Newman, 2017; Freedon, 2017; Wood & Ausserladscheider, 2021), and the electoral growth of Eurosceptic parties across Europe (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022; Metten & Bayerlein, 2023; Schraff & Pontusson, 2024) underscore the political significance of populist movements today.

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Migration has become one of the central issues mobilized by populist actors. In many Western nations, migrants have been framed as cultural or economic threats, and such rhetoric has been particularly salient in the Brexit debate in the United Kingdom (Begum et al., 2021; Schmidtke, 2021) and in the consolidation of Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary (Michelsen, 2024; Molnár & Whigham, 2021; Szalai, 2024). While this relationship between populism and migration has been widely studied, less attention has been paid to its consequences for grassroots initiatives that seek to promote migrant integration through everyday practices. To address this, our study draws on Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and symbolic violence to examine how integration initiatives in sport are situated within broader power relations. This lens allows us to see sport not simply as a neutral site of inclusion, but as a social field shaped by political discourses, where embodied practices and symbolic boundaries are constantly negotiated.

This article addresses that gap by critically examining the role of sport in facilitating social integration among asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants in the context of two nations where populist politics has fostered anti-immigration sentiment. We focus on England and Hungary, two countries characterized by inhospitable political discourses around immigration, yet with active sport-based initiatives aimed at cultural exchange, language learning, and social cohesion. Drawing on observations of these initiatives and interviews with charity staff, we analyse how prevailing political and sociocultural attitudes towards migration shape the delivery and perceived success of integration programmes.

Populism, migration, and sport interconnection

Populist politics and anti-immigration ideology

The recent resurgence of populism in Europe has been widely linked to the 2007–2008 global financial crisis and the neoliberal reforms that preceded it (Gusterson, 2017; Laaker, 2024; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). Rather than fuelling a turn to the left, public dissatisfaction was successfully channelled by right-wing populists into resentment of multiculturalism and migration (Haugsgjerd & Bergh, 2024). Migrants became scapegoats for economic precarity, diverting attention from domestic structural inequalities. This process reflects the affective dimensions of populism, where resentment and anger are mobilized against perceived “outsiders” (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). In Bourdieusian terms, this scapegoating represents an exercise of symbolic power, which manifests in the capacity of dominant political actors to impose legitimate classifications of the social world, determining who is recognized as belonging and who is cast as a threat to national cohesion (Bourdieu, 1991).

A second key feature of contemporary populism is the denigration of “elites”, particularly those advocating pro-immigration or pro-globalization policies (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Rooduijn, 2015). In practice, this produces a political style in which nativism, authoritarianism, political dissatisfaction, and Euroscepticism converge (Rooduijn, 2015). These tendencies are closely aligned with ethnic nationalism (Kohn, 1944), which emphasizes shared culture and ancestry as the foundation of belonging. By contrast, civic nationalism defines membership through citizenship and democratic values. Although the dichotomous nature of Kohn's distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism has been criticized

for its oversimplification (Brubaker, 1998; Smith, 2010; Spencer & Wollman, 1998; Tamir, 2019; Zwet, 2015), political nationalist movements have often sought to clarify their stance on this spectrum in their appeal for popular support.

Critically, these ideological currents do not remain at the level of political rhetoric, but are enacted through what scholars of bordering have termed “everyday bordering” (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019): the mundane bureaucratic, institutional, and social practices through which boundaries of belonging are drawn, maintained, and policed beyond the formal apparatus of the state. From a Bourdieusian perspective, everyday bordering can be understood as a form of symbolic violence, whereby the exclusion and marginalization of migrants is rendered legitimate and even self-evident, which is part of the taken-for-granted order, or *doxa*, of the social world (Bourdieu, 1977). Sport provides a crucial arena for examining how these competing visions of the nation are enacted, as athletes and fans alike symbolically perform both inclusion and exclusion (Hertting & Molnár, 2025).

Theoretical framework: Bourdieu and the politics of sport

To interpret these dynamics, this study draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptual triad of field, habitus, and capital, along with his notion of symbolic power and symbolic violence. Sport can be seen as a distinct *field* structured by historically specific power relations, where actors compete for different forms of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1990). State actors and dominant political forces exercise symbolic power, which is the power to define the principles of vision and division that structure the social world (Bourdieu, 1991), in ways that shape the rules of the game within sport, determining which forms of capital are valued and which bodies are recognized as legitimate participants.

Migrants entering this field bring with them particular forms of embodied *habitus*, shaped by their prior cultural and social experiences. Whether these dispositions are recognized as legitimate by host societies often depends on the value ascribed to them within the sporting field. In hostile political contexts, the habitus of migrants may be systematically devalued through what Bourdieu (1977) termed *doxa*, i.e. the unquestioned, taken-for-granted assumptions that structure a field. When anti-immigration sentiment achieves *doxic* status, the exclusion of migrants from full participation comes to appear not as a political choice but as the natural order of things.

Social capital is especially relevant, as sport can facilitate the building of networks that provide migrants with access to resources, trust, and opportunities for social mobility (Spaij, 2012). However, participation is not always emancipatory. Through symbolic violence, dominant groups impose definitions of belonging that appear “natural” but function to reproduce exclusionary hierarchies (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In the context of hostile bordering, this symbolic violence operates at multiple levels: at the macro level, through political rhetoric and policy frameworks that delegitimise migrant presence; at the meso level, through institutional practices and gatekeeping within sporting organizations; and at the micro level, through everyday interactions on the field of play where migrant bodies are marked as “other”. For example, in contexts where ethnic nationalism is prevalent, migrant athletes may be tolerated only if they assimilate to dominant cultural norms, a process that itself constitutes symbolic violence

by demanding the erasure of embodied cultural capital as the price of conditional inclusion.

This framework helps illuminate how sport can simultaneously operate as a mechanism of inclusion, fostering both integration and social connection, and exclusion, reinforcing boundaries of nationhood and belonging. It also provides a useful lens for comparing England and Hungary, highlighting how broader political climates shape the distribution of capital and the forms of symbolic recognition available to migrants in sport. In both countries, the prevailing *doxa* around migration, shaped by populist discourses and hostile policy environments, conditions the possibilities for sport-based integration programmes, even as those programmes seek to challenge and disrupt the dominant symbolic order.

Hungarian politics, anti-immigration sentiment, and sport

Since regaining power in 2010, FIDESZ has pursued a nationalist agenda built on Euro-scepticism, anti-immigration rhetoric, and the centralization of cultural institutions (Molnár & Doczi, 2020; Molnár & Whigham, 2021; Sata, 2023). Orbán's government has framed migration as an existential threat to Hungary's sovereignty and "Magyar" identity, positioning itself as a bulwark against globalization and EU multiculturalism (Molnár, 2023; Reményi et al., 2023; Waterbury, 2020). This hostility has intensified in recent years, moving beyond rhetoric into institutional defiance. In June 2024, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) imposed an unprecedented €200 million fine on Hungary, together with a daily penalty of €1 million (Molnár, 2025). Hungary had made it virtually impossible to file asylum applications on its territory, requiring applicants instead to travel to Hungarian embassies in Belgrade or Kyiv, which is fundamentally incompatible with the EU's common asylum framework. Orbán dismissed the ruling as "outrageous and unacceptable", and his government refused to pay the fine, which the European Commission subsequently deducted from Hungary's allocated EU budget, with cumulative penalties exceeding €500 million by early 2025 (Scheffer, 2025).

Football continues to occupy a central role in this nationalist project. Orbán's long-standing personal connection to the sport enables him to embody the image of a "man of the people", while heavy state investment in football infrastructure projects national pride through a culturally resonant medium (Ligeti & Mucsi, 2016). This instrumental use of football illustrates how political elites mobilize sport as a symbolic field, embedding nationalist ideologies into everyday cultural practices and reinforcing exclusionary definitions of belonging. Thus, the conditions for sport-based migrant integration initiatives are profoundly shaped by the institutional and discursive environment described above (Molnár, 2023). Where the state itself functions as the primary agent of hostile bordering, through both legal mechanisms and sustained anti-immigration communication, any attempt to use sport as a vehicle for integration operates against, rather than alongside, the prevailing political current.

British politics, anti-immigration sentiment, and sport

In England, migration debates have been equally central to recent political developments. Brexit, the most significant political event of the twenty-first century in Britain, was

strongly fuelled by anti-immigration sentiment, strategically amplified by the Leave campaign (Begum et al., 2021; Schmidtke, 2021; Wood & Ausserladscheider, 2021). Indeed, the voting patterns in the 2016 referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union demonstrated that English votes returned the highest proportion of "Leave" voters (53.4% "Leave" vs. 46.6% "Remain"), when compared to the other nations of the United Kingdom¹ (BBC News, 2025). As Schmidtke (2021) observes, questions of borders and mobility lay at the heart of Brexit's appeal.

While immigration has long been a divisive issue in British politics, its salience has intensified, with both major parties recalibrating their positions in response to perceived voter anxieties (Schmidtke, 2021). Indeed, given the return to power for the supposed "centre-left" Labour Party in the summer of 2024 under the leadership of Sir Keir Starmer, it is important to note that the politicization of the issue of migration is no longer restricted to the ideological "right" of British politics (Gwilym et al., 2025; Tsegay, 2026), with the current Labour government showing little sign of reversing the growth of anti-immigration sentiment evident under the previous Conservative government's policy approach, such as the "hostile environment" of Theresa May's premiership and the 2023 Illegal Migration Act. Labour have becoming increasingly keen to project a strong position on the issue of migration in order to meet the perceived concerns of the British electorate, in a vain attempt to negate the rise of growing right-wing political parties such as Nigel Farage's Reform Party:

For Labour, handling the migration portfolio constitutes a delicate balancing act: the party must demonstrate that it is a political advocate for immigrants, while, at the same time, addressing the widespread concern among its core constituency, that migration could promote downward pressure on wages and the erosion of social protection. (Schmidtke, 2021, p. 153)

Sport has frequently been implicated in these debates. Football has become a site where anxieties over national identity and immigration surface, as seen in media controversies around national team selection, fan behaviour, and integration initiatives. Like Hungary, England demonstrates how populist anti-immigration politics shape the conditions under which migrants participate in, and are represented through, sport; however, the decentralized nature of sport policy in the England and the UK (Houlihan & Lindsey, 2012; Lindsey & Bloyce, 2023) offers a contrasting sport policy context with the aforementioned centralization process evident under Orbán's Hungarian government.

Sport and the integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers

Although sport has often been presented as a tool for migrant integration, its efficacy remains contested. Integration itself is a multidirectional process involving mutual adaptation, full participation, and cultural maintenance (Jurković & Spaaij, 2022). Research identifies potential benefits of sport participation, including improved health, language acquisition, social connections, and employability (Kataria & De Martini Ugolotti, 2022; Nunn et al., 2022; Webster, 2022). Yet these benefits are not equally accessible across migrant categories. Asylum seekers, for instance, may face legal restrictions on employment, movement, and access to public services that constrain their capacity to participate in organized sport in ways that recognized refugees or settled economic migrants do not (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018). The structural conditions under which

different groups encounter the sporting field are, thus, shaped by the intersection of legal status, symbolic classification, and the prevailing political climate. Furthermore, as Young et al. (2025) rightly argue, analyses of the impact of the intersectionality of gender, race, ethnicity, religion and (dis)ability for migrants involved in sport-focused initiatives identify additional inequalities regarding the potential integrative benefits for migrant populations.

Therefore, uncritical celebrations of sport's integrative power are misguided. The use of sport-based initiatives as a medium for achieving goals in relation to the integration migrants, refugees and asylum seekers within their new "host" societies remains highly contentious in terms of both their efficacy and in relation to what "integration" entails (Agergaard et al., 2023; Jurković & Spaaij, 2022; Kataria & De Martini Ugolotti, 2022; Nunn et al., 2022; Spaaij et al., 2022). Evidence of long-term benefits is mixed (Spaaij et al., 2022), and sport-based initiatives often risk reproducing assimilationist ideologies, framing migrants as passive recipients of charity rather than active social agents (Kataria & De Martini Ugolotti, 2022; Nunn et al., 2022). Moreover, when programmes fail to distinguish between the different needs, legal circumstances, and forms of capital that voluntary and forced migrants bring to the sporting field, they risk reproducing the very discursive erasure that characterizes hostile political environments.

Indeed, whilst the notion of "integration" remains a ubiquitous concept in policy surrounding forced migration, its uncritical application requires careful unpacking. Frequently, the term operates on unexamined normative assumptions, functioning as what Schinkel (2018) identifies as an ideological mechanism rather than a neutral sociological descriptor. Recent scholarship has increasingly challenged the pervasive, functionalist, and assimilationist narratives that position sport as a natural, unproblematic catalyst for social integration (De Martini Ugolotti & Caudwell, 2021; Nunn et al., 2022). As De Martini Ugolotti and Caudwell (2021) highlight, sport-for-integration policies frequently rely on romanticized assumptions about sport's inherent goodness, failing to account for the complex power dynamics, spatial constraints, and everyday realities experienced by forced migrants in the domain of sport which can often mirror and reproduce the exclusionary practices present in wider society. Indeed, as argued by Nunn et al. (2022, p. 52),

rather than being a tool for integration provided by members of the receiving community, football is a resource for belonging that many young people bring with them on their refugee journeys and draw on during displacement and resettlement as a valued source of continuity, connection, confidence, and comfort.

Consequently, a robust analysis of sport and forced migration must move beyond merely celebrating sport's supposed integrative power, and this critical perspective of integration is especially vital when analysing the intersection of sport and forced migration. A Bourdieusian approach, thus, foregrounds how the sporting field reflects broader struggles over capital and recognition, with inclusion and exclusion structured by national political climates. It also draws attention to the symbolic labour involved in categorizing mobile populations and that shapes which groups are deemed worthy of integration support and on what terms they are permitted to participate. This makes sport a particularly productive site for examining how civic and ethnic nationalisms are enacted in practice, especially in inhospitable political environments such as Hungary and England.

Methodology

To gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics surrounding the use of sport for the social integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, a qualitative research approach was adopted. This methodology allowed for a flexible yet focused exploration of key themes, ensuring that participants could articulate their experiences and perspectives in detail (Hammersley, 2012; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Ethical approval was granted by Oxford Brookes University's University Research Ethics Committee (approval number 241801) prior to the commencement of data collection.

All participants were supplied with participant information sheets and General Data Protection Regulation compliant privacy notices prior to providing informed consent by completing approved informed consent documents. The study involved interviewing nine staff members, encompassing both paid employees and volunteers, across two charitable organizations. It is important to acknowledge that this study centres the perspectives of charity delivery staff, and that the voices of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees are therefore absent from the analysis. This is not an incidental limitation but a reflection of the study's deliberate focus on how practitioners perceive, frame, and navigate the structural conditions of sport-based integration work in hostile political environments. Nevertheless, we recognize that staff perceptions of programme impact cannot be straightforwardly equated with participant experience, and that the absence of migrant voices represents a significant epistemological boundary. Future research should seek to address this directly by privileging the first-person accounts of migrants and refugees themselves, including through participatory and co-produced methodological approaches that are better placed to capture the complexity and diversity of lived experiences across different legal statuses, ethnicities, and genders.

As per ethical requirements, both charities involved in the project have been anonymised throughout the text. These charities were strategically chosen to offer a comparative perspective, one operating in a city in the north-central part of Hungary and the other in south-central England. This geographical diversity was crucial for understanding how the varying socio-political landscapes in each nation influenced the charities' work. Both charities have an explicit focus on using sport to tackle the social exclusion of migrant populations in their context, with migrant populations being the sole focus of the English charity's football-based initiative and one of the key populations for the Hungarian charity's multi-sport activities (alongside children living in deep poverty, residents of child protection institutions, and homeless adults).

The interviews were conducted between May 2024 and May 2025, and ranged from approximately 25 to 70 min in length. Of the nine participants interviewed, five were interviewed in person at the Hungarian charity, while the remaining four, who worked for the England-based organisation, were interviewed either in person or via Google Meet. This sample size, while modest, was deemed appropriate for qualitative research as it aimed for depth over breadth, allowing for rich data collection and nuanced insights into individual perceptions (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Semi-structured interviews are a well-established methodological approach in research on sport and the social integration of migrant populations (Jurković & Spaaij, 2022; Nunn et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022).

The interview questions were designed focus on several critical areas regarding the use of sport for the social integration of migrant populations. One primary focus was on staff

members' perceptions regarding the benefits and limitations inherent within the strategy of utilizing sport as a tool for the social integration of migrants. This included exploring what aspects of sporting initiatives they found most effective in fostering integration, as well as identifying any challenges or drawbacks they encountered in their practical application. Furthermore, the interviews sought to understand the perceived impact of these sports initiatives on the lives of the migrant participants themselves. This involved eliciting staff observations on how engagement in sports might contribute to migrants' well-being, sense of belonging, skill development, or overall integration into the host society.

Beyond the direct impact of sporting activities, a significant component of the inquiry addressed the broader influence of the prevailing socio-political contexts of England and Hungary on the day-to-day operations and strategic decisions of each charity organization. This aspect aimed to uncover how national policies, public discourse, and societal attitudes towards migration in these two distinct environments shaped the charities' approaches, challenges, and successes. Given the aforementioned rise of anti-immigration sentiment in the two countries these charities operate in, analysis of the responses from charity staff on the impact of these socio-political contexts will be explored in depth below.

Crucially, the interview process was preceded by a short period of participant observation within each charity, involving a week-long observation period with the Hungarian charity and attendance at nine weekly two-hour sessions with the English charity. Although no field note data was collected or analysed *per se*, this preliminary observation served as an invaluable step in familiarizing the researchers with the nature of the work conducted by the respective organizations, including both observing and participating in the delivery of sports sessions organized by each charity. It provided essential contextual understanding, enabling the researchers to frame the interview questions more effectively and interpret responses within the specific operational realities of each charity.

This immersive approach ensured that the subsequent interviews were well-informed and grounded in a practical understanding of the organizations' efforts in leveraging sport for migrant social integration. Furthermore, the process of participant observation helped to build rapport with the interviewees (Smith et al., 2022), thus facilitating a greater degree of openness in their interview responses. This rapport was further strengthened by the positionality of the two authors who conducted the interviews. The lead author carried out the interviews with the English charity, drawing on his personal involvement in supporting and observing its operations, while the second author, being a native Hungarian speaker, led the interviews with the Hungarian charity.

Following the reflexive thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021), we engaged in an iterative process of data familiarization, systematic coding, and the development and refinement of themes. These themes were constructed in relation to the core areas of inquiry embedded within the semi-structured interview schedule, whilst abductively draws upon Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and symbolic violence to examine how these initiatives were situated within broader power relations. The analytic process was further shaped by the positionality of the co-authors: their respective familiarity with the operational practices of the charities, alongside their knowledge of the wider socio-political contexts of England and Hungary, enabled a nuanced and contextually grounded interpretation of the data.

Consequently, we have intentionally structured the forthcoming Results section to focus strictly on presenting and describing the core findings and themes, illustrated by

original empirical data. Then, in the subsequent Discussion section, we offer a critical interrogation of the empirical data, thus critically applying Bourdieusian theory to illustrate our study's novel contribution to the field.

Results

Immediate benefits of sport for migrants

Across both England and Hungary, practitioners emphasized that sport offered immediate and tangible benefits for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. While long-term integration was often viewed with caution, there was broad consensus that sport provided a unique entry point for enhancing wellbeing, building friendships, and developing communication skills.

Several interviewees described sport as a “hook” that drew participants into wider forms of engagement. In England, football sessions were initially framed less as formal training and more as opportunities for social contact and relaxation. As one coach reflected:

It was just a social get together in the first few weeks before we really got down to the football ... There was no structure to it ... it was more about getting them in, getting them relaxed, and just seeing where we go from there. (Scott, England)

Similarly, in Hungary, practitioners highlighted the broader community functions of sport:

Obviously, the goal is that it is not simply about training but building a community, for everyone. We can help a person who needs tutoring, and someone with much more serious matters. (Ferenc, Hungary)

Language development emerged as a particularly important benefit. Sport was frequently described as an informal but effective context for overcoming communication barriers, especially for younger migrants:

If an Afghan kid comes here and doesn't know a bit of Hungarian, then after one year of playing soccer, he learns [the language] by kicking the ball ... it's easier for him to make Hungarian friends at school. (Nádja, Hungary)

Beyond local integration, “roadshow” initiatives and international travel through tournaments provided powerful experiences for participants, boosting self-esteem and reinforcing the value of language learning:

The purpose of these road shows would be ... that it connects, that it builds a bridge between different social groups, as there is a need for this from the other side [Hungarian society]. ('Nádja', Hungary)

The experience of travelling changes them ... even at the airport coming back home, more English classes become available. They realise, 'OK, yeah, I need to attend English classes.' That opens doors. (Ádám, Hungary)

Taken together, these accounts highlight sport's ability to generate immediate micro-level benefits for migrants: reducing isolation, fostering intercultural contact, and encouraging skills development. While practitioners remained cautious about long-

term structural change, they consistently valued sport as a safe and accessible arena where integration could begin in small but meaningful ways.

Pragmatism and the limits of social integration through sport

Despite recognizing the immediate benefits of sport, practitioners in both contexts expressed caution about its capacity to deliver lasting integration. While sport was seen as a valuable entry point, many questioned whether short-term activities could meaningfully shift entrenched social divisions or hostile political climates.

Several interviewees reflected on the limitations of one-off or small-scale initiatives. In Hungary, a staff member described the enthusiasm generated by a local tournament that brought together police, municipal representatives, and Roma children. Yet she questioned its long-term significance:

It was great to see ... integration was realised there on some level. But I don't know if this has a long-term effect, beyond the fact that they spent a very good day out there together.
(Nádja, Hungary)

Others highlighted the limited reach of projects that engaged only small groups. While sessions often created powerful experiences for participants, the broader ripple effects were less certain:

Sometimes not fifty people come, but only fifteen ... However, I think these fifteen people can also be ambassadors. If they represent acceptance in their schools and set an example, then that works too. (Gina, Hungary)

This pragmatism was also evident in England, where staff acknowledged that while football could provide respite from trauma, it could not by itself address the deeper scars of conflict and displacement. As one project leader explained:

Football can help them to forget about those troubles for however long the session is. But they're not going to go away entirely ... you're going to have to seek some therapy for those people because they've got long-term traumatic injuries. (Michael, England)

Such reflections underscore a critical self-awareness among practitioners: sport offers moments of relief, belonging, and connection, but these effects remain fragile and context-dependent. Integration, they suggested, requires sustained support networks, institutional backing, and wider societal openness, which are elements often beyond the reach of small, underfunded charities.

Challenges in practice

While practitioners valued sport as a tool for social integration, they also highlighted significant challenges that constrained their ability to sustain and scale initiatives. These barriers spanned financial insecurity, logistical difficulties, and the unique complexities of working with migrant populations.

Financial constraints were the most frequently cited obstacle. Many organizations struggled to cover basic costs such as transport, facilities, and equipment. An English interviewee summarized the issue bluntly:

If there was a magic wand, it would be finance. A lot of the participants haven't got access to any sort of transport other than bikes or scooters. To get more people to the project, you'd need money for facilities and transport. But you just have to work with what you've got. (Michael, England)

In Hungary, similar concerns arose:

Very often we meet hungry people with food or financial problems. Equipment is lacking. [Charity staff] gets shoes for many children through support ... Then there is also the problem of how they get to training sessions. For a while, a social worker accompanied children from a refugee hostel, but when that stopped, they couldn't come anymore. (Debóra, Hungary)

Logistical barriers compounded these financial pressures. In both contexts, the lack of consistent facilities undermined the continuity of programmes:

We don't have a permanent pitch, and that makes things very difficult. We cannot keep our training consistent because we're always somewhere else. That makes it difficult to show stability to the children and to teach what we want to teach them. (Gina, Hungary)

Language barriers also hampered communication in sessions, particularly in England:

The only main barrier I would say is they didn't know proper English. Most of them were Arabic and foreign ... if we speak in normal English, it was hard for them to understand what we mean and where we are coming from. (Sam, England)

Migrant-specific challenges further complicated delivery. Cultural norms, particularly around gender, shaped participation patterns:

There are cultures where it is not usual for boys and girls to play sports together. If the girls are not allowed, for example, refugee girls in an environment where boys play sports, then integration cannot really be realised there. (Debóra, Hungary)

Equally, some practitioners questioned whether integration could be achieved if projects only brought together marginalized groups without wider societal contact:

Honestly, I see them as a group of underprivileged kids who get together, make friends, and spend time together. But actual, real integration? I'm not sure ... as long as migrants only meet each other and not the wider society. (Nádja, Hungary)

These challenges jointly highlight the fragility of sport-based integration initiatives. While sport created moments of inclusion and belonging, limited resources, unstable infrastructures, and broader cultural tensions constrained their transformative potential.

The impact of hostile political and media environments

Beyond everyday financial and logistical barriers, practitioners in both Hungary and England pointed to a deeper challenge: the hostile socio-political climate surrounding migration. Anti-immigration sentiment, fuelled by government rhetoric and media narratives, created conditions that undermined both symbolic recognition and material support for sport-based integration initiatives.

In Hungary, the influence of government discourse was described as pervasive and corrosive. One practitioner explained how political campaigns actively framed migrants as threats:

The campaign that the Hungarian government is doing is that the immigrants are coming to take your job ... your life ... they are a threat. That's why it's so important we take these guys to local communities, so people see it's not what they've heard – these guys are just playing with them. (Ádám, Hungary)

Others reported a lack of engagement from local authorities, even when invited to collaborative events:

We went to a town with 25 Roma and migrant children, but no one came from the municipality, the police, the schools. There just wasn't interest. (Nádja, Hungary)

Interviewees in England, while less focused on government hostility, emphasized the role of the media in shaping public suspicion. Tabloid headlines and weaponised language on social media were said to perpetuate fear and resentment:

People have opinions because of what they read, not what they know. If you read the papers, migrants are 'stealing money.' Social media makes it worse – words like 'invasion' or 'take-over' spread fast, and people believe it. (Elliot, England)

This environment directly affected the charities' ability to secure funding. In Hungary, some practitioners admitted re-framing their applications to downplay migrant-focused work, for fear of rejection:

In Hungarian applications, they like us to say we support local people first. If we put migrants at the top, it doesn't look good. So, we list them after disadvantaged or Roma children. (Gina, Hungary)

Similarly, staff in England reported corporate sponsors' reluctance to be associated with migrant projects, especially during peaks of anti-immigration unrest:

I've had conversations with potential sponsors and they're hesitant ... not because they're against the project, but because they worry about negative feedback. Especially when tensions were high last summer, people didn't want to advertise it [their association with us]. (Michael, England)

Such accounts reveal that sport-based initiatives operate within, and are constrained by, broader fields of power (Bourdieu, 1992). Far from being neutral spaces, they are embedded in contested struggles over migration, nationalism, and belonging. As practitioners emphasized, even well-run programmes with clear benefits are constantly undermined by political hostility and hostile media climates that reproduce exclusionary narratives, thus requiring creative solutions from the charities in order to operate successfully in such climates.

Operating in hostile socio-political environments

While practitioners consistently emphasized the benefits of sport for migrants, they were equally clear about the constraints posed by increasingly hostile socio-political contexts in both Hungary and England, despite the contrasting level of central government intervention in the domain of sports policy. Interviewees described how anti-immigration discourse and policy climates shaped the environments in which their organizations operated, often undermining efforts to build trust and secure resources.

Notwithstanding these challenges, both charities had demonstrated a degree of success in securing funding to maintain their projects over a significant period in light of their successful track records. However, the interviewees expressed concern about the diminishing levels of charity or third-sector funding available which had, in turn, led to a move towards securing funding from corporate sponsors or donors, with a degree of success:

... we find that obviously our badge gets us in places where ... other people wouldn't necessarily be able to get to ... for example, with the refugee programme ... to sort of use the power of the badge which hopefully will be able to positively impact participants because obviously the power of the football club ... it's inspirational, and it carries a little bit of weight. (Michael, England)

In Hungary, hostility was experienced most directly through state-level political strategies that cast migrants as existential threats to national security and cultural identity. Practitioners noted how these narratives created reluctance among local officials to engage with migrant-focused initiatives. As one interviewee explained:

We went to [a Hungarian town] and had 25 Roma children, from little to big, but no one was there from the local municipality ... despite us having sent invitations to the municipality, the police, the fire department, the local football club and schools. (Nádja, Hungary)

Others highlighted the direct impact of governmental fear campaigns, particularly during election periods:

Mayors were spreading the word in villages that if the [political] opposition wins, a refugee family will be moved in with every single person. And, of course, I can imagine that aunt and uncle living in the village believed that. (Debóra, Hungary)

This broader climate not only delegitimised the presence of migrants but also constrained NGOs' ability to secure domestic funding. As one Hungarian practitioner observed:

We have to pay attention to how we write applications ... if the application is about supporting the inclusion of migrants, then it doesn't always look good. (Gina, Hungary)

In the English context, practitioners pointed less to state actors given the comparative decentralization of sport policy and more to the role of popular and social media in amplifying suspicion and hostility. Football coaches described how tabloid headlines and online discourses framed migration in militarized terms such as "invasion" or "take-over". As one interviewee noted:

I think there's a narrative ... the weaponised words, you know, the militarised words. And obviously that evokes an emotional response in people who read it. (Elliot, England)

This media environment was seen to shape public opinion, creating mistrust among local communities and, in some cases, deterring corporate sponsors concerned about reputational risks.

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that sport-based integration initiatives operate in structurally hostile environments where their efforts to foster inclusion are countered by dominant political and media discourses of exclusion. While Hungary illustrates a state-led production of anti-immigrant sentiment, the English case underscores the role of media-led hostility. In both contexts, however, practitioners must navigate

conditions where their work is precarious, politically sensitive, and dependent on the goodwill of limited allies.

Discussion

The findings presented above underscore how sport-based initiatives for migrants in Hungary and England are embedded within hostile political and social environments shaped by populist and anti-immigration sentiments (Begum et al., 2021; Michelsen, 2024; Schmidtke, 2021; Szalai, 2024). While charity staff emphasized sport's immediate benefits such as friendship, respite, and language development, echoing common patterns found within recent academic studies on projects of this nature (e.g. Agergaard et al., 2023; Jurković & Spaaij, 2022; Kataria & De Martini Ugolotti, 2022; Nunn et al., 2022; Spaaij et al., 2022), they also highlighted its fragility in the face of structural inequalities, precarious funding, and negative public discourse. In this section, we draw on Bourdieu's theoretical toolkit, particularly the interrelated concepts of field, habitus, capital, symbolic power and symbolic violence, to critically interrogate these dynamics and reveal how power operates through apparently neutral institutional structures.

Sport, migrants, capital, and the struggle for legitimacy

Sport in these projects offered participants opportunities to acquire social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Social capital was evident in the friendships and networks built through shared activities. Cultural capital emerged through improved language skills, travel experiences, and intercultural competence, and symbolic capital was conferred when sport enabled participants to be recognized as legitimate community members. These findings resonate with scholarship positioning sport as a mechanism for building bridging and bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000; Spaaij, 2012).

Yet, as Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes, capital only has value within a particular field. It is not universally transferable and depends on the specific "rules of the game" that structure different social spaces. Nesse et al. (2024) directly supports this, finding that integration approaches within sport marginalize newcomers in favour of competitive logics and othering, and adding to critical literature questioning the overall capacity of sport to promote civic integration into society. Migrant-focused charities occupy a marginal position in the overlapping fields of sport, politics, and civil society, where dominant logics of neoliberalism and nationalism dictate what counts as "valuable" outcomes. Funders often demanded instrumental returns such as employability, public health benefits, or community cohesion metrics that align with state priorities, which charities struggled to demonstrate when their projects were explicitly migrant-centred. As a result, evidence of integration success was frequently discounted or rendered invisible, leaving organizations unable to convert the social and cultural capital accumulated by participants into the economic capital necessary for organizational sustainability or the symbolic capital required for political legitimacy.

This dynamic reflects what Bourdieu (1977) terms the *doxa* of the funding field: the taken-for-granted assumptions that structure what is thinkable and sayable within that

space. The doxa here operates through the naturalized belief that projects prioritizing migrants are politically risky, economically inefficient, and potentially divisive, which are assumptions that go unchallenged precisely because they appear self-evident to dominant actors. Charity staff, recognizing the *orthodoxy* of their cultural and political surroundings (the officially sanctioned positions within the field), strategically adapted their *illusio*, i.e. their practical investment in the “game” and belief in its stakes (Bourdieu, 1998), by reframing their work under more “acceptable” categories such as serving disadvantaged youth, promoting social inclusion, or enhancing community wellbeing.

This strategic reframing, however, was not applied uniformly across the populations served by these initiatives. The classificatory distinctions between voluntary and forced migrants carried differential symbolic weight within the funding field and shaped the practical possibilities available to delivery staff. As Zetter (2007) and Crawley and Skleparis (2018) have argued, the labelling of mobile populations is not a neutral administrative act, but an exercise of symbolic power that determines who is positioned as deserving of support and who is rendered invisible or suspect. This played out in the way that the figure of the “refugee” could, in certain funding contexts, attract sympathetic attention that was not extended to those classified as economic migrants or asylum seekers with pending claims.

The symbolic capital attached to the legally recognized label of “refugee”, discussed through the formal apparatus of the state, thus functioned as a form of entry ticket to the field of legitimate support, while those without this credential were positioned lower in what might be understood as a *hierarchy of deservingness* (Kataria & De Martini Ugolotti, 2022). These hierarchies of deservingness, documented in comparative analyses of European responses to Ukrainian, Syrian, and Afghan refugees (Garland & Lee, 2025), have direct implications for how different migrant groups are positioned within sport-based integration initiatives (Kataria & De Martini Ugolotti, 2022). Staff navigated these hierarchies with considerable practical skill, but the hierarchies themselves were products of the broader classificatory politics, i.e. the exercise of symbolic power by state and media actors, that determined which categories of migrant were perceived as objects of public compassion and which were not. In Hungary, where dominant discourse cast virtually all mobile populations as threatening outsiders regardless of legal status, even the symbolic capital of the refugee label offered limited protection. In England, where the discursive landscape was more differentiated, the distinctions carried greater practical consequence for programme design and funding viability.

This strategic adaptation demonstrates what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) describe as a form of practical mastery: organizations internalized the unspoken rules of the field and developed embodied strategies for navigating its constraints without necessarily possessing explicit, codified knowledge of those rules. However, this adaptation comes at a cost. By obscuring the migrant-focused nature of their work, charities reproduce the system they seek to combat, participating in what Bourdieu (1991) terms *symbolic violence*: the imposition of systems of meaning that legitimise existing power relations by rendering them natural. The requirement to de-emphasize migrant identity to access resources constitutes a form of misrecognition, whereby dominated groups must adopt the categories and valuations of the dominant to survive within the field.

“Symbolic violence” and the mainstreaming of anti-immigration discourse

Anti-immigration narratives circulating in both national contexts exemplify symbolic violence in its most insidious form: the subtle imposition of dominant categories of perception and appreciation that render migrants problematic, threatening, or undeserving (Bourdieu, 2001). Interviewees described how centrist as well as far-right parties in Hungary and England legitimized exclusionary discourse, which is recognized by scholarship on the mainstreaming of xenophobia in Western democracies (Abadi et al., 2025; Begum et al., 2021).

It is important here to distinguish between symbolic violence and its precondition: symbolic power. For Bourdieu (1991), symbolic power is the capacity of dominant actors to impose the legitimate principles of vision and division of the social world. Symbolic violence is the effect of this power: the process by which the dominated come to accept these classifications as natural and self-evident, thereby participating in their own domination. In the contexts examined in this study, populist political actors exercised symbolic power by defining the terms of public debate around migration by constructing “the migrant” as a figure of threat, burden, or cultural incompatibility, and positioning the nation as a bounded community under siege. This classificatory labour preceded, and made possible, the symbolic violence experienced by charities and participants. The delivery staff interviewed did not simply encounter hostility as an external force; they operated within a discursive field whose very categories, “integration”, “community cohesion”, “deservingness”, had already been shaped by the exercise of symbolic power at the political level.

Bourdieu’s (1991) concept of symbolic violence is crucial here because it explains how domination operates not primarily through coercion but through the internalization of hierarchies of value. These narratives devalued the symbolic capital of both migrants and the charities working with them, constraining their ability to secure state or corporate support. Crucially, symbolic violence is most effective when the dominated participate in their own domination by accepting the legitimacy of the classifications that subordinate them (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In this case, even progressive actors within the field appeared to have internalized the logic that explicitly migrant-focused work was politically untenable, thereby contributing to reproducing the conditions of their own marginalization.

The withdrawal of corporate sponsorship in the wake of England’s 2024 anti-immigration riots illustrates how symbolic violence rippled across fields: corporations, operating within their own field of logic of risk management and brand protection, avoided association with migrant populations, thereby eroding charities’ access to economic capital. This demonstrates what Bourdieu (1993) describes as the *structural homology* between fields. While each field operates according to its own specific logic, these logics tend to align in ways that reproduce broader patterns of domination. In Hungary, government stigmatization of migrants produced similar effects, with local authorities refusing collaboration and funders discouraging migrant-focused framing.

In both contexts, exclusion was reproduced not only through direct hostility but also through what Bourdieu (2000) terms the “left hand” and “right hand” of the state. The left hand (social services, education, welfare) may express support for integration, while the right hand (finance, immigration control, police) actively produces conditions

of precarity and exclusion. This internal contradiction within state structures creates what Bourdieu describes as a form of institutional bad faith, whereby symbolic commitments to inclusion coexist with material practices of exclusion. The erosion of legitimacy operated through both overt political discourse and the mundane bureaucratic practices that undermined the practical capacities of integration projects.

These mundane practices – the local authority that refused collaboration, the funder that discouraged migrant-focused framing, the corporate sponsor that withdrew support to manage reputational risk – constitute what Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) term “everyday bordering”: the diffuse, often unremarkable processes through which boundaries of belonging are drawn, maintained, and policed beyond the formal apparatus of immigration control. What is significant, from a Bourdieusian perspective, is that everyday bordering operates as a mechanism of symbolic violence precisely because it is *not* experienced as bordering by those who enact it. The local official who discourages a migrant-focused grant application does not understand their action as an exercise of exclusion. They understand it as pragmatic advice about “what works” in the current funding climate. It is this misrecognition, i.e. the gap between the objective function of the practice (reproducing exclusion) and its subjective experience (offering practical guidance), that gives everyday bordering its efficacy as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990). In our data, the sporting field emerged as a site where these bordering practices were both enacted and, at times, contested.

Habitus, hysteresis, and the limits of sport

While charitable organizations attempted to mitigate external hostility, the embodied habitus of migrants also shaped experiences within projects. For Bourdieu (1990), habitus refers to the system of durable, transposable dispositions, i.e. ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, that are inculcated through socialization and function as generative principles of practice. Migrants bring with them dispositions formed through histories of displacement, trauma, and cultural norms, which sometimes clashed with the expectations of charitable or sporting institutions. For example, restrictions on girls’ participation in mixed-gender sport limited inclusivity, while literacy and language barriers complicated communication.

These examples reveal that the tensions observed in our data cannot be adequately understood as one-directional “clashes” between migrant habitus and institutional expectations. They are, rather, what Bourdieu (1977) identifies as the friction between habitus and field when the conditions that produced certain dispositions no longer match the conditions in which those dispositions must operate. This misalignment, or what Bourdieu (2000) terms *hysteresis*, occurs when habitus encounters a field whose logic differs fundamentally from that in which it was formed. Migrants navigate sporting spaces with dispositions shaped by their culture, experiences of forced migration, and encounters with hostile reception contexts, while sport organizations operate according to institutional logics that assume shared cultural references, linguistic competence, and bodily *hexis* (embodied, physical dispositions). The critical insight, however, is that hysteresis is not a property of the migrant alone. The sporting field, too, exhibits a form of institutional hysteresis: a lag between the changing demographic composition of the communities it serves and the assumptions embedded in its organizational practices,

echoing past scholarship on sport integration policy rhetoric (Jeanes et al., 2015). When programmes are designed on the premise of a culturally homogeneous participant base, their failure to accommodate diverse dispositions is itself a form of structural inertia.

This clash often resulted in what Bourdieu (1984) describes as misrecognition: the failure to recognize legitimate forms of cultural capital because they are expressed through unfamiliar schemas. When participants did not conform to expected modes of sporting participation or communication, their difference was often pathologized rather than understood as a product of divergent social trajectories. The concept of habitus thus reveals sport not as a universal language, but as a culturally specific practice that privileges certain bodily competencies, temporal orientations, and modes of sociability over others.

Moreover, Bourdieu's (1990) insistence that habitus is embodied, inscribed in bodily postures, gestures, and hexis, helps explain why some migrants embraced these initiatives while others disengaged. The practical sense developed through habitus operates below the level of conscious calculation; it is a "feel for the game" that either facilitates smooth participation or generates experiences of exclusion. When the sporting field felt misaligned with participants' embodied dispositions, disengagement was not a failure of will but a rational response to the symbolic violence of being required to inhabit spaces that denied recognition to one's habitus.

Sport as a contested field and the distribution of sporting capital

These findings require a more critical view of sport itself. While often celebrated as a neutral vehicle for integration, sport is a field structured by its own exclusions and hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1978, 1984). In his early work on sport, Bourdieu (1978) argues that different sports occupy distinct positions in social space, reflecting and reproducing class distinctions. Sports are not merely physical activities, but social practices that require and generate specific forms of capital: economic capital (for equipment, facilities, membership fees), cultural capital (knowledge of rules, techniques, sporting culture), social capital (networks within sporting communities), and what might be termed as *sporting capital*, which may be defined as embodied competencies, physical prowess, and the corporeal dispositions valued within particular sporting contexts.

Competitive logics prioritize meritocracy and performance, marginalizing those who do not conform to dominant sporting norms or who lack the requisite sporting capital. National sporting cultures also carry symbolic weight, reinforcing narratives of belonging that can reproduce, rather than dismantle, boundaries of exclusion. Bourdieu (1993) emphasizes that fields are sites of struggle over the monopoly of legitimate violence, which, in the case of sport, is the legitimate definition of what counts as sporting excellence, proper participation, or authentic belonging.

In Hungary, government investment in elite sport and nationalist sporting spectacles stands in stark contrast to the marginalization of grassroots migrant initiatives. This reflects Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of how dominant groups use sport to legitimate their position, converting economic capital into symbolic capital through sponsorship of prestigious sporting events. In England, football projects created safe spaces, yet wider football cultures often echoed xenophobic and racist discourse, limiting the

transformative potential of these efforts. Sport, then, should not be viewed as inherently integrative, but as a contested arena where capital, habitus, and symbolic violence intersect. In other words, sport is a field, the structure of which reflects and reproduces broader social hierarchies while simultaneously offering possibilities for contestation and transformation.

Advancing Bourdieusian understandings of sport and migration

This study advances theoretical understandings of sport and migration by extending Bourdieusian sociology to grassroots initiatives operating within hostile socio-political fields. First, it demonstrates that the ability of migrant-focused charities to generate and convert capital is contingent on the logics of the fields they inhabit and the positions they occupy within those fields. While participants accrued social, cultural, and symbolic capital through sport, these gains were frequently devalued within funding and political fields dominated by nationalist and neoliberal priorities, illustrating Bourdieu's (1986) argument about the field-specific nature of capital convertibility.

Second, it highlights how symbolic violence operates structurally and relationally rather than simply through individual prejudice. Anti-immigration narratives erode the legitimacy of charities and restrict their access to economic and symbolic capital by reshaping the doxa (the universe of the undiscussed and undisputed) within which these organizations operate (Bourdieu, 2000). This extends Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) analysis of symbolic violence beyond educational institutions to the domain of civil society and charitable work. These dynamics are compounded by the limited capacity of sport itself to convert capital accumulated within the sporting field into wider civic or social integration outcomes: a finding corroborated by Nesse et al. (2024), whose critical examination of young refugees' sport participation in Norway demonstrates that integration approaches within sport frequently marginalize newcomers in favour of competitive logics, ultimately questioning sport's capacity to promote civic integration beyond the field itself.

Third, it shows how migrant habitus, shaped by histories of marginalization and displacement, interacts with the institutional logics of sport in ways that produce what Bourdieu (2000) calls "the space of possibles" by which he referred to a structured field of opportunities that appears open, but is, in fact, constrained by the unequal distribution of capitals. This interaction produces both opportunities for inclusion and risks of misrecognition, depending on the degree of correspondence between participants' embodied dispositions and the demands of the sporting field.

Finally, the study reveals how the relative autonomy of the sporting field (Bourdieu, 1993), i.e. its capacity to operate according to its own internal logic, is compromised when sport becomes instrumentalised for nationalist political projects or neoliberal governance agendas. The heteronomy of sport-for-integration projects makes them particularly vulnerable to shifts in political narratives, as their legitimacy depends not on sporting criteria, but on their alignment with dominant political rationalities.

Overall, the findings contribute by supporting existent critical sociology of sport scholarship in challenging assumptions that sport is inherently integrative. Instead, sport emerges as a relatively autonomous social field in which inequalities are both reproduced and contested, depending on how the interplay of capital, habitus, field position, and

symbolic violence unfolds within broader political and cultural contexts. This perspective directs attention towards the structural conditions that enable or constrain the transformative potential of sport, moving beyond individualistic accounts of integration towards an analysis of the systemic logics that shape possibilities for migrant belonging.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the complex and ambivalent nature of using sport as a tool for the social integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in the increasingly hostile socio-political climates of England and Hungary. Charity staff consistently emphasized sport's potential as a "hook" that generates immediate and tangible benefits: improved physical health, emotional well-being, language acquisition, and a sense of belonging. Yet participants also expressed pragmatic scepticism, noting that such gains were fragile and difficult to sustain in the face of broader structural inequalities, precarious resources, and anti-immigrant sentiment. Furthermore, it is important to note that the perceived benefits of the respective charities' positive impacts on their participants must be caveated given that these are the perceptions of the charity staff, rather than the project participants themselves. The insights offered by the staff begin to shed light on this underexplored topic which could and should be investigated further in future research which focuses on the perspectives of participants themselves.

Notwithstanding the above limitations, the findings demonstrate that the greatest challenges to these initiatives lie not within sport itself but within the wider socio-political fields in which they operate. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is particularly useful in understanding how the stigmatization of migrants, perpetuated by political actors, government campaigns, and hostile media narratives, undermines both the symbolic capital of migrant participants and the legitimacy of the organizations that support them. In Hungary, the Orbán government's portrayal of migrants as an "existential threat" directly eroded public and financial support. In England, stigmatizing rhetoric, from "militarised words of invasion" to conspiracy-laden narratives, similarly fuelled suspicion and curtailed access to resources.

In navigating these hostile fields, charities adopted pragmatic strategies to sustain their work. Staff described reframing migrant-focused initiatives within broader projects targeting "disadvantaged youth" or presenting their missions in deliberately apolitical terms. Such tactics reflected an adjustment of *illusio* to the *doxa* of the funding field, enabling survival but limiting the scope for overt advocacy or transformative change. **Indeed, the *doxa* within the Hungarian and English contexts required contrasting strategies, given that the Hungarian government played a more hands-on role in funding allocations for charities in this domain, in contrast to the decentralized funding arrangements found in England.**

Ultimately, this research underscores that integration cannot be achieved solely through the bottom-up efforts of sport-based charities. While these initiatives cultivate vital forms of capital and create important spaces of belonging, their long-term impact is constrained by systemic hostility and the structural reproduction of exclusion. Therefore, sport to move from a temporary mechanism of well-being to a genuine vehicle of integration, a fundamental shift is required in political discourse, funding priorities, and public narratives around migration. Thus, not only how sport can support migrants

should be considered, but also how sport-based initiatives can be shielded and empowered to resist the symbolic violence that continues to frame migrants as “others”. Only by reshaping the orthodoxy of these socio-political fields can sport begin to fulfil its integrative promise.

Policy implications

The findings of this study carry several implications for policymakers, practitioners, and funding bodies concerned with migrant integration in sport. First, the evidence underscores that sport-based initiatives cannot succeed in isolation: while they provide immediate benefits such as friendship, language development, and well-being, their long-term impact is undermined when broader political and institutional contexts remain hostile. Policy interventions must therefore move beyond celebrating sport as a neutral tool for integration and instead address the structural conditions that constrain its effectiveness.

Second, funding frameworks should be revised to recognize and support the specific contributions of migrant-focused projects. Current funding environments in both Hungary and England reflect a doxa that prioritizes instrumental outcomes, such as employability or public health, over solidarity with marginalized groups. By valuing migrant-focused initiatives explicitly, funders can ensure that the social and cultural capital generated through sport is not dismissed as politically “risky” but understood as vital to social cohesion.

Finally, policymakers and public institutions must confront the symbolic violence embedded in anti-immigration narratives. Government rhetoric and hostile media portrayals erode the symbolic capital of both migrants and the organizations that work with them, discouraging corporate sponsors and public bodies from collaboration. Efforts to promote integration through sport must therefore be accompanied by initiatives that actively challenge misrepresentation and foster positive narratives of diversity and inclusion.

In sum, sport has the potential to contribute meaningfully to the integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, but only when embedded within supportive political, financial, and cultural frameworks. Policies that address structural inequalities, challenge exclusionary narratives, and provide sustained investment are essential if sport is to evolve from a fragile mechanism of temporary well-being into a genuine vehicle for social inclusion.

Note

1. For example, England’s voting proportion in the 2016 referendum on European Union membership (53.4% Leave vs. 46.6% Remain) demonstrated more anti-EU membership sentiment than Wales (52.5% Leave vs. 47.5% Remain), Northern Ireland (44.2% Leave vs. 55.8% Remain) and Scotland (38.0% Leave vs. 62.0% Remain).

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