



## REVIEW

## A Three-Phase Intervention Model for Systemic Governance Reform in National Sports Federations: The Case of Cyprus

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### ABSTRACT

This study addresses the critical governance challenges facing Cyprus's national sports federations, where persistent issues of financial opacity, leadership entrenchment, and resistance to reform hinder organizational effectiveness. Despite adopting the Code of Good Governance in 2018, implementation remains inconsistent due to resource constraints, ambiguous regulations, and cultural barriers. The research aims to develop a practical reform framework by adapting SIGA's Universal Standards to the Cypriot context, creating a mandatory yet supportive pathway for governance improvement. The study's significance lies in its dual contribution to theory and practice. Theoretically, it advances understanding of how to operationalize voluntary standards through enforceable, tiered systems. Practically, it provides Cyprus's sports authorities with actionable tools to overcome implementation barriers, while offering transferable lessons for international sports governance. Findings present a three-phase model (Bronze-Silver-Gold) that progressively builds governance capacity through: (1) mandatory transparency measures and basic compliance; (2) advanced accountability systems and leadership reforms; and (3) cultural institutionalization of governance values. Key innovations include digital compliance tools, subsidized governance officers, and incentive mechanisms linking certification to funding access. The framework successfully balances structural reforms with cultural change strategies, demonstrating how to transform governance from a compliance exercise to a strategic advantage. This research provides evidence that comprehensive reform requires both policy mandates and implementation support, offering a replicable blueprint for sports organizations seeking to enhance

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integrity while respecting contextual constraints. The adaptable tiered approach proves particularly effective for federations at different development stages, making governance improvement achievable across diverse organizational contexts.

**Keywords:** Sports Governance Reform; Tiered Compliance Framework; Organizational Integrity; Stakeholder Engagement; Institutional Transparency; Capacity-Building; Cyprus Sports Federations

## 1. Introduction

Governance in sports organizations has long been a subject of scrutiny, particularly as high-profile scandals, ranging from corruption and doping to systemic abuse, continue to undermine the integrity of global sports institutions<sup>[1]</sup>. Despite the proliferation of voluntary governance standards designed to promote transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct, many organizations have struggled to implement meaningful reforms<sup>[2]</sup>. This persistent gap between formal governance commitments and real-world outcomes presents a paradox: why do voluntary standards, ostensibly adopted to strengthen legitimacy and trust, so often fail to prevent misconduct? Voluntary governance standards in sports typically take the form of codes of ethics, integrity frameworks, and reform initiatives<sup>[3]</sup>. These measures are theoretically intended to align sports organizations with best practices in corporate and nonprofit governance, ensuring fair decision-making, financial accountability, and athlete welfare<sup>[4]</sup>. Yet, recurring scandals, suggest that voluntary standards frequently serve as symbolic gestures rather than enforceable mechanisms. This paradox raises critical questions about the efficacy of self-regulation in sports<sup>[5]</sup>. On one hand, voluntary standards allow organizations to signal compliance with societal expectations, thereby preserving their legitimacy and securing commercial partnerships. On the other hand, the absence of stringent enforcement mechanisms, coupled with entrenched power structures and conflicts of interest, often renders these standards ineffective<sup>[6]</sup>.

### 1.1. Research Problem

Cyprus has a well-organized sports structure, with numerous national federations overseeing different sports under the umbrella of the Cyprus Sport Organisation [CSO], the official government body responsible for sports development and regulation<sup>[7]</sup>. The national federations operate in a challenging environment, where governance issues delay

progress<sup>[8]</sup>. They face several governance challenges, ranging from structural and financial issues to political and administrative hurdles. These challenges, which are not recent but have persisted for many years, impact the development of sports and the effectiveness of national federations<sup>[9]</sup>. Historical mismanagement, longstanding bureaucratic inefficiencies, and recurring political interference have compounded these issues over time, making sustainable reform difficult to achieve<sup>[10]</sup>.

Recognizing these challenges, the CSO, as the supreme sports authority, has joined forces with the national federations to develop a clear operational framework, aiming to support and enhance their efforts in improving governance<sup>[11]</sup>. In 2018, the CSO introduced the Code of Good Governance, a practical framework designed to help federations adopt principles of effective, transparent, ethical, and democratic management. Aligning with best global practices, the CSO's Code of Good Governance provides a roadmap to address various challenges<sup>[12]</sup>. The Code balances respect for autonomy with societal and governmental expectations for good governance in sports, and promotes transparency, accountability, and ethical management. National federations often operate with complex, multi-layered governance systems that breed inconsistencies and inefficiencies<sup>[13]</sup>. Their heavy reliance on untrained volunteers and entrenched conflicts of interest frequently undermines accountability. Furthermore, opaque decision-making and financial mismanagement fuel suspicions of corruption. High-profile ethical breaches have further eroded public trust in recent years<sup>[14]</sup>. Many sports federations have made progress in adopting good governance practices, but significant challenges remain. Some organizations have successfully implemented reforms by securing proper funding and skilled staff, allowing them to develop long-term plans and operate transparently<sup>[2]</sup>. Others have improved by making their rules clearer, especially around issues like conflicts of interest, so everyone understands what's expected. However, many smaller federations continue to struggle with governance reforms. Some simply don't have

enough money or qualified people to make the necessary changes. In other cases, leaders resist reforms because they don't want to lose control or give up privileges. Some organizations also dismiss any new good governance practices as they believe that changes are unnecessary<sup>[11]</sup>.

This mixed situation explains why some federations now operate with strong governance systems while others keep repeating the same management problems<sup>[15]</sup>. The successful ones focus on building trustworthy systems for the future, but others keep putting personal or short-term gains ahead of what's best for their sport in the long run. Without addressing these different challenges, it will be difficult to achieve consistent governance standards across all sports organizations<sup>[16]</sup>.

## 1.2. Research Aim

These issues are compounded by an institutional resistance to change. Traditional power structures and the personal interests of decision-makers often actively obstruct modernization efforts. Many federations lack proper succession planning, perpetuating stagnant leadership and stifling innovation. Leaning on the above, the study aims to decode Sport Integrity Global Alliance's [SIGA] Universal Standards on good governance and adopt their approach to suggest a viable solution that can be implemented by the sports authorities in Cyprus, to force the national sports federations to implement the introduced Code of Good Governance. Specifically, the study will propose a plan that combines mandatory compliance frameworks, capacity-building support, and incentivized transparency to tackle key barriers such as resource constraints, cultural resistance, and conflicts of interest.

## 1.3. Significance of the Study

This research makes important contributions to both academic knowledge and practical applications in sports governance. The theoretical significance lies in its innovative approach to transforming voluntary governance standards into enforceable, tiered frameworks that simultaneously tackle structural deficiencies and cultural resistance. The integration of institutional theory with SIGA's Universal Standards offers fresh insights into mechanisms for driving organizational change within traditionally resistant sports federations.

This conceptual model provides scholars with a new analytical lens for examining governance reform processes in similar institutional contexts. From a practical perspective, the study delivers immediate value to Cyprus's sports governance ecosystem. The proposed framework equips the Cyprus Sport Organization with concrete tools to implement its Code of Good Governance more effectively, specifically addressing persistent challenges like limited resources, opaque decision-making, and entrenched leadership. The inclusion of phased implementation guidelines, digital transparency tools, and incentive-based compliance mechanisms creates a comprehensive package that can be readily adopted by federations at different development stages. These practical solutions are particularly valuable for smaller federations that typically struggle with governance modernization.

The study's implications extend beyond Cyprus, offering transferable lessons for international sports bodies confronting similar governance challenges. It demonstrates how global standards can be adapted to local contexts without compromising their integrity, while establishing clear connections between governance improvements and organizational benefits. This research ultimately provides a blueprint for systemic reform that could reshape governance practices across the global sports community, making it relevant for policymakers, sports administrators, and governance professionals worldwide.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Integrity Global Alliance's (SIGA) Universal Standards on Good Governance to develop a tailored reform framework for Cyprus's national sports federations. As a conceptual paper, it synthesizes established governance principles with SIGA's tiered compliance model to address systemic challenges including resource limitations, cultural resistance, and accountability deficits. The introduced theoretical framework integrates SIGA's standards to examine how mandatory compliance mechanisms, capacity-building initiatives, and incentive structures can collectively overcome resistance to organizational change. The study adapts SIGA's three-tiered certification model [Bronze, Silver, Gold] to the specific context of Cyprus's sports federations, emphasizing a three-phased implementation timeline. Practical components such as public transparency dashboards, subsidized governance

officers, and stakeholder voting rights are incorporated to ensure operational feasibility.

Case-based reasoning further informs the framework's development by incorporating documented governance challenges within Cyprus's federations, including political interference, reliance on volunteer staff, and opaque decision-making processes. This approach ensures the proposed solution remains scalable while addressing localized structural and cultural barriers. The introduced framework combines theoretical rigor with practical applicability, offering a structured yet flexible pathway for transforming sports governance in Cyprus through evidence-based standards and measurable implementation stages.

### 3. Theoretical Background

The contemporary sports industry faces unprecedented challenges regarding governance and integrity<sup>[17]</sup>. High-profile cases of corruption, match-fixing, and financial mismanagement have eroded public trust in sports organizations worldwide. In response to this crisis, the Sport Integrity Global Alliance has emerged as a leading force in promoting transparency, accountability, and ethical governance in sports<sup>[3]</sup>. This analysis examines SIGA's Universal Standards on Good Governance and its Independent Rating and Verification System [SIRVS], exploring their structure, implementation, and potential impact on the global sports landscape. Established in 2015 and formally incorporated as a Swiss non-profit organization in 2017, SIGA represents a coalition of sports organizations, governments, businesses, and civil society entities united by a common goal: to safeguard the integrity of sport. The alliance operates through regional hubs in Geneva, Lisbon, Washington, and São Paulo, reflecting its global reach and commitment to addressing governance challenges across different cultural and legal contexts. SIGA's mission stems from the recognition that sport's immense social and economic influence must be matched by equally robust governance structures<sup>[4]</sup>. The organization's vision articulates a future where sport operates free from unethical practices, criminal influence, and governance failures. This vision is operationalized through the development of Universal Standards that provide concrete benchmarks for good governance, complemented by the SIRVS mechanism that verifies compliance with these standards<sup>[18]</sup>.

#### 3.1. The Framework of SIGA's Universal Standards: The Tiered Implementation Approach

The 2023 edition of SIGA's Universal Standards on Good Governance represents the culmination of extensive research and stakeholder consultation<sup>[6]</sup>. The framework draws upon best practices from various sectors, including corporate governance, public administration, and international sports organizations. At its core, the standards are built upon four foundational pillars: democracy, transparency, financial integrity, and stakeholder representation<sup>[19]</sup>. The democratic principle emphasizes the importance of representative governance structures, fair electoral processes, and clear separation of powers. Transparency requirements focus on open decision-making, public disclosure of information, and accountability mechanisms. Financial integrity standards address anti-corruption measures, ethical financial practices, and proper oversight of commercial activities. Stakeholder representation ensures the inclusion of diverse voices in governance processes, particularly those of athletes, fans, and local communities<sup>[20]</sup>.

A distinctive feature of SIGA's framework is its three-tiered implementation system: bronze, silver, and gold levels. This graduated approach recognizes the varying capacities and starting points of different sports organizations while maintaining a clear trajectory toward governance excellence. The Bronze level establishes fundamental governance requirements that all organizations should meet as a baseline. These include basic democratic structures, financial reporting standards, and conflict-of-interest policies. At this level, organizations must demonstrate they have moved beyond mere compliance with legal requirements to embrace principles of good governance. The Silver level introduces more sophisticated governance mechanisms. Organizations must implement independent oversight functions, enhanced transparency measures, and comprehensive risk management systems. This tier emphasizes the operationalization of governance principles through concrete policies and procedures. The Gold level represents the highest standard of governance excellence. Requirements at this level include full independence of judicial bodies, advanced stakeholder engagement mechanisms, and leadership in promoting integrity beyond the organization itself. Gold-certified organizations serve as benchmarks for the sports industry, demonstrating what is

possible when governance is treated as a strategic priority rather than a compliance exercise<sup>[4]</sup>.

The standards mandate clear separation between an organization's legislative, executive, and judicial functions. This includes establishing independent disciplinary bodies whose members are not involved in rule-making or commercial decisions. The framework specifies detailed requirements for electoral processes, including term limits, candidate eligibility criteria, and independent election oversight<sup>[21]</sup>. Board governance receives particular attention, with standards addressing composition, diversity, and performance evaluation. Organizations must implement regular board assessments, with Gold-level requirements including external evaluation components<sup>[22]</sup>. Director independence is emphasized, with specific provisions regarding the proportion of independent directors and mechanisms to prevent undue influence. Transparency requirements extend across all aspects of organizational operations<sup>[23]</sup>. At the Bronze level, organizations must publish basic governance documents and financial statements. Silver-level requirements include detailed disclosures about board operations, executive compensation, and commercial agreements. Gold-level organizations must make nearly all governance information publicly available, subject only to legitimate privacy and commercial confidentiality concerns<sup>[20]</sup>. The framework includes specific provisions regarding conflicts of interest, gifts and hospitality, and travel policies. These aim to prevent both actual conflicts and the perception of impropriety. Whistleblower protection mechanisms are mandatory at all levels, with increasing sophistication required at higher certification tiers<sup>[24]</sup>.

Financial governance standards cover budgeting, financial reporting, and audit processes. Organizations must implement robust internal controls and demonstrate compliance with relevant anti-corruption laws. The standards pay particular attention to procurement processes, requiring competitive bidding for significant contracts and transparency in vendor selection<sup>[19]</sup>. Commercial operations are subject to specific governance requirements, particularly regarding sponsorship agreements and event hosting decisions. The framework seeks to prevent conflicts between commercial interests and sporting integrity, with Gold-level organizations required to demonstrate how they balance these competing priorities<sup>[20]</sup>. The standards recognize that good governance

extends beyond internal processes to include relationships with all stakeholders. Requirements for athlete representation increase across the certification levels, culminating in Gold-level provisions for formal athlete participation in governance structures. Fan engagement mechanisms are similarly emphasized, particularly regarding ticket allocation and event accessibility. Social responsibility forms an integral part of the framework. Organizations must demonstrate commitment to diversity and inclusion, youth development, and the positive social impact of sport. Higher certification levels require active programs addressing issues like discrimination, environmental sustainability, and sport's role in social development<sup>[4]</sup>.

### 3.2. The SIGA Implementation and Verification System

The SIGA Independent Rating and Verification System [SIRVS] serves as the mechanism for assessing compliance with the Universal Standards. Developed through consultation with auditing professionals and governance experts, SIRVS represents a rigorous yet practical approach to governance evaluation. SIRVS assessments follow a standardized process beginning with organizational self-assessment against the relevant certification level<sup>[19]</sup>. This is followed by document review, stakeholder interviews, and on-site verification where appropriate. Auditors evaluate both the existence of policies and their practical implementation, seeking evidence that governance principles are embedded in organizational culture. The assessment considers three dimensions of governance: structure [policies and systems], process [implementation and monitoring], and outcomes [measurable results]. This holistic approach prevents organizations from achieving certification through superficial compliance while neglecting substantive governance improvements<sup>[20]</sup>. Following the assessment, organizations receive detailed feedback identifying strengths and areas for improvement. Certification decisions are made by an independent panel to ensure objectivity. Successful organizations receive certification for a fixed term, typically three years, with interim reporting requirements to maintain certification status<sup>[25]</sup>. The system includes an appeals process and mechanisms for addressing non-compliance. Importantly, SIRVS is designed as a developmental tool rather than a punitive measure, with organizations encouraged to view the process as an opportu-

nity for continuous improvement<sup>[4]</sup>.

### 3.3. Benefits and Incentives for Participation

SIRVS certification offers numerous benefits to sports organizations. These include enhanced reputation and credibility, improved access to funding and partnerships, and reduced risks of governance failures. The process itself provides valuable insights into organizational strengths and weaknesses, serving as a roadmap for governance development<sup>[17]</sup>. For stakeholders such as sponsors, governments, and fans, SIRVS certification serves as an independent assurance of an organization's commitment to good governance<sup>[26]</sup>. This helps address information asymmetries in the sports market, enabling more informed decision-making by all parties<sup>[6]</sup>. SIGA's framework builds upon and integrates elements from numerous existing governance standards, including those of the IOC, Council of Europe, and various national sports bodies. However, it distinguishes itself through several key features. Its comprehensive scope covers all aspects of sports governance rather than focusing on specific issues like anti-corruption or financial management. Additionally, the tiered certification system provides a clear pathway for improvement that is absent from many binary compliance frameworks. The inclusion of an independent verification mechanism addresses a critical gap in many existing standards that lack robust enforcement<sup>[21]</sup>.

### 3.4. Limitations of SIGA's Framework

While SIGA's Universal Standards and SIRVS represent a significant advancement in sports governance, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the voluntary nature of the framework limits its enforceability, as organizations resistant to reform can simply opt out. Second, the resource-intensive certification process may disadvantage smaller or less wealthy sports bodies, creating inequities in access. Third, cultural and legal differences across regions may complicate uniform implementation, particularly in jurisdictions with entrenched governance traditions. Additionally, the focus on structural compliance risks overlooking deeper cultural and behavioural aspects of integrity that are harder to measure. Finally, without binding regulatory support, SIGA relies heavily on market pressures and reputational incentives to drive adoption, which may prove in-

sufficient for systemic change. These limitations highlight the need for complementary measures, such as integration with legal frameworks and capacity-building programs, to maximize SIGA's impact.

## 4. Results

While some sports federations in Cyprus have successfully adopted the Code of Good Governance, their progress often encounters systemic barriers rooted in resource constraints, cultural resistance, and ambiguous regulations<sup>[8]</sup>. Federations that achieve compliance typically address what governance theory terms the "logic of limited resources", which refers to organizations lacking the financial means, staffing, or expertise to implement reforms. These successful federations secure adequate funding and specialized knowledge, enabling them to adopt strategic planning, a structured process for defining long-term objectives and resource allocation, along with transparency measures that ensure open decision-making and public accountability. Their ability to overcome these hurdles demonstrates how proper resourcing can facilitate governance reform<sup>[10]</sup>. Other compliant federations navigate what is known as the "logic of rule ambiguity", where governance rules are vaguely defined, leading to inconsistent application. They achieve this by clarifying key policies such as conflict-of-interest definitions, establishing explicit criteria to identify situations where personal interests may compromise institutional decisions<sup>[12]</sup>. For example, these federations often specify prohibited relationships, such as board members contracting family-owned businesses, and enforce clear penalties for violations. This approach transforms abstract governance principles into actionable, enforceable standards that staff and leadership can practically implement. Such specificity helps eliminate the uncertainty that frequently paralyzes reform efforts in less compliant organizations<sup>[2]</sup>.

However, many federations, particularly smaller or less-resourced ones, continue to struggle with voluntary non-compliance. This resistance stems from three interconnected governance logics that create substantial barriers to reform. The first is the persistent "logic of limited resources", where federations simply lack the funding or skilled personnel needed to implement even basic governance frameworks<sup>[27]</sup>. Without adequate budgets or trained

staff, requirements like independent financial audits or meaningful stakeholder consultations become impossible to fulfil, regardless of an organization's theoretical commitment to good governance<sup>[10]</sup>. The second barrier is the “logic of consequences”, where leaders actively resist reforms that threaten their authority or personal benefits. Measures like term limits, financial disclosures, or independent oversight are often opposed because they diminish leaders' control or expose questionable practices. In these cases, individuals prioritize maintaining their power and privileges over the institution's long-term integrity, effectively choosing self-interest over systemic reform<sup>[27]</sup>. This dynamic is particularly prevalent in federations with entrenched leadership structures where accountability mechanisms are weak or non-existent<sup>[10]</sup>. The third challenge comes from the “logic of appropriateness”, where entrenched cultural norms lead federations to dismiss governance changes as unnecessary or incompatible with traditional practices. Some view term limits as disruptive to valued leadership continuity, while others reject transparency measures as foreign concepts that don't align with their operational culture<sup>[28]</sup>. This cultural resistance is often the most difficult barrier to overcome, as it reflects deeply held beliefs about how sports organizations should function and who should control them.

This divergence in governance adoption explains why implementation remains inconsistent across sports federations. Progressive organizations that align with the Code's principles typically establish robust checks and balances, such as independent oversight committees, and implement comprehensive ethical codes that clearly define acceptable conduct<sup>[4]</sup>. These measures help mitigate risks and create systems where good governance becomes institutionalized rather than personality dependent. In contrast, non-compliant federations often remain trapped in cycles of mismanagement, prioritizing short-term gains like maintaining patronage networks or avoiding scrutiny over building long-term credibility and sustainability<sup>[14]</sup>. Addressing these challenges requires tailored solutions that account for both structural and cultural dimensions of governance reform. For resource-constrained federations, capacity-building programs that provide governance training, technical assistance, and partnerships with NGOs or development agencies can help bridge critical gaps<sup>[2]</sup>. Perhaps more importantly, governance reforms need to be framed in ways that make them

culturally congruent, emphasizing how they preserve and enhance sport's legitimacy rather than threatening traditional values. Clear, detailed guidelines with practical examples can help reduce the ambiguity that often paralyzes implementation efforts, giving federations concrete models to follow rather than abstract principles to interpret<sup>[27]</sup>.

Without this kind of systemic support, the adoption of good governance practices will likely remain uneven, with well-resourced federations making progress while smaller or more traditional organizations continue to struggle<sup>[29]</sup>. This disparity not only creates competitive imbalances but also leaves vulnerable federations exposed to crises of legitimacy, financial mismanagement, and ethical failures that can ultimately undermine their very existence. The challenge for the sports governance community is to develop approaches that recognize these diverse barriers while maintaining the core principles that make reform meaningful<sup>[13]</sup>. Only by addressing both the structural and cultural dimensions of resistance can the sports movement achieve the widespread governance improvements that athletes, fans, and stakeholders deserve<sup>[30]</sup>.

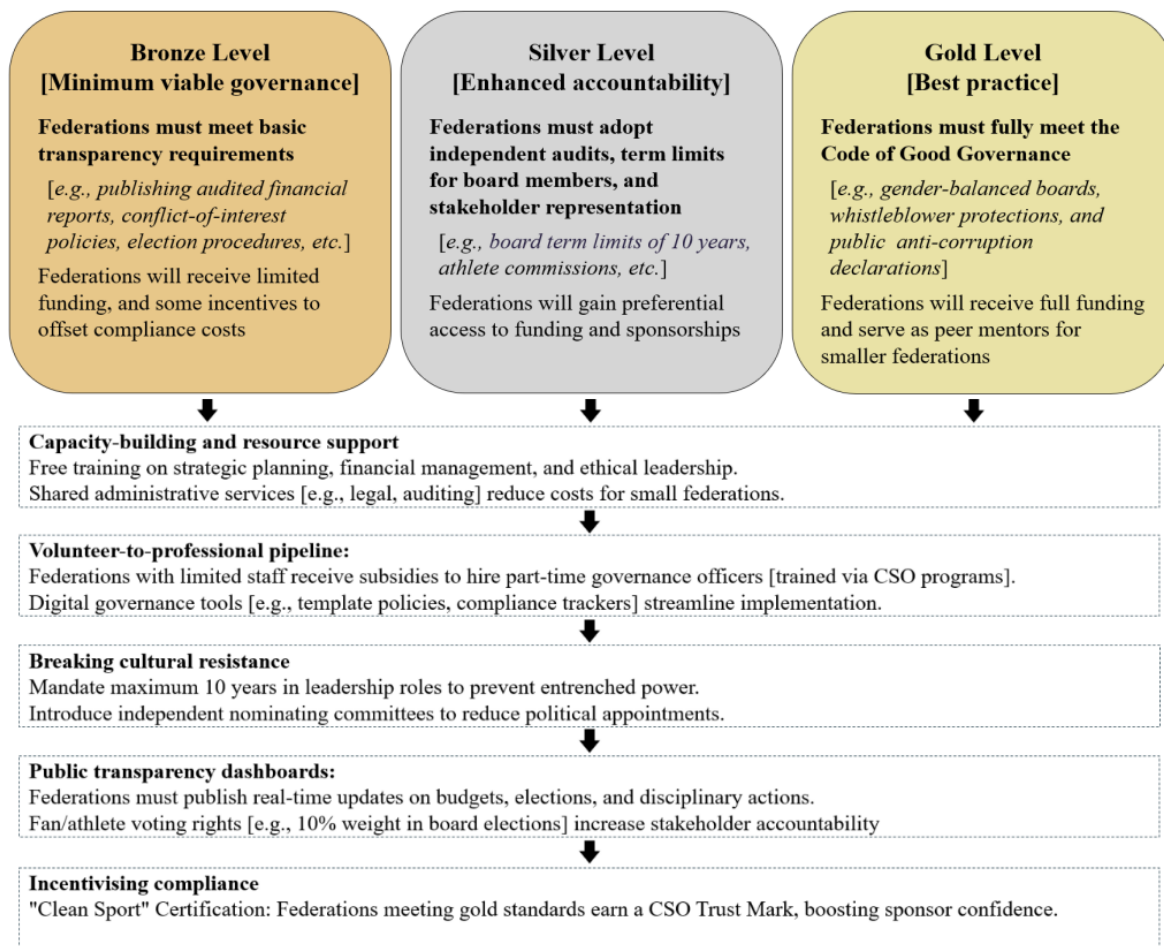
#### **4.1. Suggested Solution: A Tiered Governance Reform Program for National Federations**

As the sports industry continues to professionalize and globalize, the need for effective governance standards will only increase. SIGA's framework is well-positioned to become a global benchmark, particularly if adoption reaches critical mass among leading sports organizations<sup>[28]</sup>. SIGA's Universal Standards and SIRVS represent the most comprehensive and practical approach to sports governance reform developed to date. While combining principled standards with rigorous verification, the framework addresses both the technical and cultural dimensions of governance improvement<sup>[20]</sup>. The system's flexibility and developmental focus provide a realistic path forward. As more organizations embrace the standards, a new norm of governance excellence may emerge in global sports, one that safeguards the integrity of sport while maximizing its positive social impact. The success of this initiative ultimately depends on the collective action of all sports stakeholders<sup>[10]</sup>. Governing bodies must demonstrate leadership in implementation, governments should provide supportive policy environments, commercial partners need to incentivize compliance, and

civil society must maintain pressure for continuous improvement. Through such collaborative effort, SIGA's vision of integrity-driven sports governance can become reality<sup>[6]</sup>.

To address the identified governance challenges in the national sports federations, a tiered reform program could

be implemented by the CSO, integrating SIGA's Universal Standards. This approach combines mandatory compliance frameworks, capacity-building support, and incentivized transparency to tackle key barriers such as resource constraints, cultural resistance, and conflicts of interest (**Figure 1**).



**Figure 1.** Tiered governance reform program for the federations [Developed by author].

The program is designed to balance mandatory requirements with support mechanisms, creating a comprehensive system for organizational transformation. At its core, the framework adopts a three-tiered structure [bronze, silver, and gold] each representing escalating levels of governance achievement. This graduated approach acknowledges the varying baselines of governance capability across federations and provides a clear pathway from foundational compliance to exemplary practice.

The bronze tier establishes fundamental governance requirements that serve as the baseline for all federations. These include basic transparency measures such as finan-

cial disclosure, conflict-of-interest policies, and minimum organizational structure standards<sup>[1]</sup>. Recognizing that many federations, particularly smaller or under-resourced ones, may struggle to meet even these foundational requirements, the framework incorporates support mechanisms such as seed funding, governance toolkits, and priority access to development grants. These incentives are crucial for encouraging participation and minimizing resistance, particularly among federations unaccustomed to formal governance structures. When setting achievable benchmarks, the bronze tier ensures that all federations can begin their reform journey without being overwhelmed by immediate complexity<sup>[25]</sup>. Progressing



to the silver tier requires federations to adopt more advanced governance practices, marking a transition from basic compliance to institutional integrity. Key requirements at this level include independent financial audits, fixed term limits for leadership positions, and formalized stakeholder representation mechanisms such as athlete commissions or fan advisory boards<sup>[31]</sup>. These measures address common weaknesses in sports governance, including financial opacity, leadership entrenchment, and the exclusion of key voices from decision-making processes. To incentivize compliance, federations achieving silver certification gain preferential access to international funding, partnerships, and event hosting opportunities<sup>[6]</sup>. This not only rewards reform-minded organizations but also creates a competitive environment where improved governance translates into tangible benefits. The gold tier represents the highest standard of governance excellence, requiring full alignment with international best practices<sup>[20]</sup>. Federations at this level must demonstrate gender-balanced leadership boards, robust whistleblower protection systems, and enforceable anti-corruption declarations for senior officials<sup>[32]</sup>. These requirements tackle systemic issues such as discrimination, retaliation against internal critics, and unethical conduct among decision-makers. Gold-certified federations receive full funding eligibility, international recognition as governance leaders, and opportunities to mentor smaller or less-developed federations. This peer-learning component fosters a culture of shared improvement, where successful federations support others in navigating the challenges of reform<sup>[16]</sup>. Creating a clear pathway from basic compliance to exemplary practice, the tiered system ensures that progress is measurable, sustainable, and aligned with global standards<sup>[4]</sup>.

A critical challenge in governance reform is the lack of expertise, staff, and financial resources among many sports federations, particularly smaller ones<sup>[33]</sup>. To address this, the framework incorporates comprehensive capacity-building initiatives tailored to the specific needs of federations. It offers free specialized training workshops in financial management, ethical leadership, and strategic planning. These sessions are accessible both in-person and online, which helps accommodate federations in remote regions or with limited travel budgets<sup>[34]</sup>. These training programs emphasize practical application, using case studies and customizable templates to ensure that theoretical knowledge translates into

actionable steps<sup>[17]</sup>. Beyond training, operational support is essential to reduce the burden of compliance. Shared administrative services, such as centralized legal advice, auditing assistance, and compliance tracking systems, enable federations to navigate complex requirements without needing to hire full-time specialists<sup>[20]</sup>. A centralized digital platform could provide standardized policy templates, step-by-step guidance on conducting independent audits, and automated tools for monitoring progress against certification criteria. These resources are particularly valuable for smaller federations that operate with volunteer staff or minimal budgets, as they lower the cost and complexity of governance reform<sup>[35]</sup>.

To further support under-resourced federations, targeted subsidies should be available to help them hire part-time governance officers. These officers, trained and certified through the program, would oversee compliance efforts, coordinate with central governing bodies, and ensure continuity in governance practices amid leadership changes<sup>[25]</sup>. The subsidies could cover a portion of the officer's salary for an initial period, with federations gradually assuming full responsibility as they achieve higher certification levels and access additional funding. This approach ensures that even the most resource-constrained federations can participate meaningfully in the reform process<sup>[4]</sup>. The volunteer-to-professional pipeline marks a strategic initiative aimed at bridging the resource gap faced by smaller or underfunded federations. Many of these organizations rely heavily on volunteer staff, which can lead to inconsistencies in governance due to lack of expertise or high turnover. To counter this, the framework proposes subsidies to help federations hire part-time governance officers who are trained and certified through centralized programs<sup>[20]</sup>. These officers act as dedicated points of accountability, ensuring continuity in governance practices even amid leadership changes. Additionally, digital governance tools, such as template policies and compliance trackers, are provided to streamline implementation, reducing the administrative burden on federations with limited staff<sup>[21]</sup>. This approach not only professionalizes operations but also builds institutional capacity, enabling federations to progress through the tiered compliance system more effectively.

Breaking cultural resistance is another cornerstone of the framework, addressing the deeply ingrained practices that hinder governance reform<sup>[31]</sup>. Many sports federations

operate under longstanding traditions of centralized power and informal decision-making, which can perpetuate inefficiency and opacity. To disrupt these patterns, the framework mandates a maximum duration of 10 years for leadership roles, preventing the entrenchment of power and encouraging fresh perspectives<sup>[36]</sup>. Independent nominating committees are also introduced to oversee board appointments, ensuring selections are based on merit rather than political influence or personal connections. These structural changes are complemented by efforts to shift organizational culture, such as promoting ethical leadership and stakeholder inclusivity<sup>[20]</sup>. Dismantling barriers to change enables fostering an environment where transparency and accountability become the norm rather than the exception.

The introduction of public transparency dashboards represents a significant leap forward in ensuring accountability and building trust. Federations are required to publish real-time updates on key governance areas, including budgets, elections, and disciplinary actions. This level of visibility allows stakeholders, such as athletes, fans, and sponsors, to monitor activities and hold leadership accountable for decisions<sup>[37]</sup>. Furthermore, the framework incorporates fan and athlete voting rights, granting them a measurable influence in governance processes. This democratization of decision-making not only enhances stakeholder engagement but also reduces the risk of unilateral or biased actions by leadership. Making governance data accessible and participatory, the dashboards serve as both a deterrent against misconduct and a tool for fostering collective ownership of reform efforts<sup>[17]</sup>.

Finally, the framework emphasizes incentivizing compliance as a means to drive voluntary adherence to governance standards. Federations that achieve gold-level certification earn a “Clean Sport” Trust Mark, a prestigious designation that signals their commitment to excellence<sup>[20]</sup>. This mark enhances their reputation, making them more attractive to sponsors and partners who prioritize ethical governance. The psychological and financial benefits of such recognition create a powerful motivator for federations to pursue and maintain high standards<sup>[10]</sup>. Conversely, the framework also implies consequences for non-compliance, though the primary focus is on positive reinforcement. Aligning reform with tangible rewards, the incentivization strategy ensures that governance improvement is not seen as a bureaucratic burden but as a pathway to greater credibility and

success<sup>[16]</sup>. Together, these components form a cohesive strategy for transforming sports federations into transparent, accountable, and professionally run institutions. The volunteer-to-professional pipeline addresses resource constraints, breaking cultural resistance tackles systemic inertia, public transparency dashboards ensure openness, and incentivizing compliance fosters a culture of voluntary excellence. Integrating these elements, the framework provides a comprehensive solution to the multifaceted challenges of sports governance, paving the way for a future where integrity and performance go hand in hand.

While this framework adapts SIGA’s standards, it is informed by and seeks to address limitations observed in other major international governance reforms. The IOC’s Olympic Agenda 2020 introduced significant ethical and transparency measures, yet its effectiveness is often questioned due to its self-policing nature and lack of independent verification, a gap directly addressed by SIGA’s model’s proposed independent audits and SIRVS-like certification<sup>[38]</sup>. Similarly, FIFA’s post-2015 reforms [e.g., term limits, integrity checks] demonstrated that mandated structural change is possible but also highlighted the risk of superficial compliance without deep cultural buy-in, a challenge our phased approach mitigates through continuous capacity-building and incentivization<sup>[39]</sup>.

## 4.2. Implementation Roadmap and Phased Approach

A governance reform program for sports federations has been carefully structured into three distinct phases to ensure systematic, sustainable transformation. This three-phased approach recognizes the varying starting points of different federations and allows for gradual but meaningful progress toward governance excellence (**Figure 2**).

Each phase builds upon the accomplishments of the previous one, creating a logical progression from foundational compliance to cultural transformation.

### 4.2.1. Phase 1: Establishing Foundations [Years 1–2]

The initial two-year phase serves as the critical foundation for the entire reform program. During this period, all federations must achieve bronze-level compliance, focusing on implementing basic transparency measures that

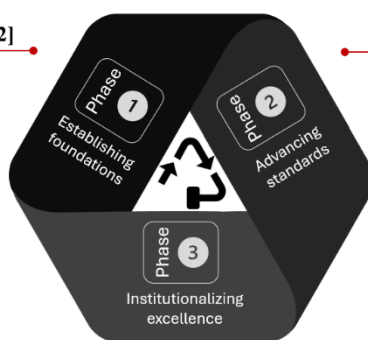
form the bedrock of good governance. These include mandatory publication of annual financial reports, establishment of conflict-of-interest policies, and creation of minimum organizational structures. Recognizing that many federations, particularly smaller ones, may lack the resources or expertise to implement these changes independently, the program provides substantial support through seed grants, governance toolkits, and comprehensive training sessions.

The training curriculum during Phase 1 covers essential topics such as financial transparency fundamentals, ethical decision-making frameworks, and basic organizational

management. These sessions are designed to be accessible, offered both in-person and through digital platforms to accommodate federations with limited travel budgets. To encourage rapid adoption, federations that meet all bronze-level requirements within the first 18 months receive early incentives. These may include additional development funding, priority access to international competitions, or public recognition from the central governing body. This combination of support and incentives creates a strong motivation for federations to engage with the reform process from the outset.

#### Phase 1: Establishing Foundations [Years 1-2]

- **Achieve bronze-level compliance**
- **Implement basic transparency measures**  
*Annual financial reports | Conflict-of-interest policies | Minimum organizational structures*
- **Provide support mechanisms**  
*Seed grants and governance toolkits | Training [financial, ethical basics] | Hybrid [in-person and digital] delivery*
- **Offer early incentives for rapid adopters**  
*Additional funding | Competition priority | Public recognition*



#### Phase 2: Advancing Standards [Years 3-4]

- **Progress to silver-gold certification**
- **Silver requirements**  
*Independent financial audits | Leadership term limits [8-10 years] | Stakeholder representation*
- **Gold requirements**  
*Gender-balanced leadership [40%+] | Whistleblower protection systems | Independent ethics committees*
- **Enhanced incentives**  
*Preferential funding access [Silver] | Full funding and leadership status [Gold] | Gold-to-Silver mentorship program*

#### Phase 3: Institutionalizing Excellence [Year 5+]

- **Cultural transformation focus**
- **Democratic governance tools**  
*Athlete/fan voting rights [10-15% weight] | Advisory panels for major decisions*
- **Strict accountability**  
*Sanctions for non-compliance [warnings to suspensions] | Annual standard reviews*
- **Sustainability mechanisms**  
*Governance Excellence Network | Biennial "health checks" | Best practice dissemination*

Figure 2. Implementation roadmap and phased approach [Developed by author].

### 4.2.2. Phase 2: Advancing Standards [Years 3–4]

Building on the foundational work of Phase 1, the second phase raises the governance bar significantly. Federations are now expected to progress to silver and gold certification levels, implementing more sophisticated governance structures and practices. Silver-level requirements include conducting independent financial audits, establishing fixed term limits for leadership positions [maximum of 8–10 years], and creating formal stakeholder representation mechanisms such as athlete commissions or fan advisory boards. For federations aiming for gold-level certification, the requirements

become even more rigorous. They must demonstrate gender balance in leadership positions [at least 40% representation of each gender], implement comprehensive whistleblower protection systems, and adopt advanced accountability measures such as independent ethics committees. To support this transition, the central governing body enhances its monitoring and evaluation framework, conducting regular compliance audits and providing detailed feedback to help federations address any gaps.

The incentive structure evolves during Phase 2 to reward higher levels of achievement. Federations attaining silver certification gain preferential access to international

funding opportunities and partnerships, while gold-certified federations receive full funding eligibility and are recognized as governance leaders within the international sports community. This phase also introduces a mentorship program, where gold-level federations provide guidance and support to those still working toward silver certification, fostering a culture of shared learning and continuous improvement.

#### **4.2.3. Phase 3: Institutionalizing Excellence [Year 5 and beyond]**

The final phase marks the transition from compliance to cultural transformation. By now, the program expects all national federations to have achieved at least silver-level certification, with gold-level practices becoming the aspirational standard across the sports ecosystem. The focus shifts toward deepening stakeholder engagement and ensuring the long-term sustainability of governance reforms.

Key innovations introduced in Phase 3 include participatory governance mechanisms that give athletes and fans formal roles in decision-making processes. This might involve allocating 10%–15% voting weight to athlete representatives in board elections or establishing fan advisory panels with input on major policy decisions. These measures democratize governance and create additional accountability channels beyond traditional structures. Accountability measures also become more stringent during this phase. Federations that consistently fail to meet silver-level standards face escalating sanctions, beginning with public warnings and progressing to suspension from funding streams or exclusion from international competitions in persistent cases. The program introduces an annual review process to ensure governance standards remain relevant and challenging, incorporating feedback from stakeholders and adapting to emerging best practices in the field. To maintain momentum, Phase 3 includes the establishment of a “Governance Excellence Network” comprising federations that have consistently maintained gold-level certification. This network serves as a think tank for innovation in sports governance, developing new tools and approaches that can be disseminated throughout the sports community. The phase also introduces biennial governance health checks to ensure standards are being maintained and to identify areas for further improvement.

Throughout all three phases, the program maintains robust support mechanisms to assist national federations in

their reform journeys. The phased implementation approach recognizes that meaningful governance reform cannot be achieved overnight. It allows federations to develop their capabilities progressively while maintaining competitive incentives at each stage. With the conclusion of Phase 3, the program aims to have transformed the governance culture of sports federations, making transparency, accountability, and stakeholder inclusion inherent characteristics rather than imposed requirements. This comprehensive, staged approach ensures that reforms are both ambitious in their goals and realistic in their implementation, creating sustainable change that will benefit the entire sports ecosystem for years to come.

#### **4.3. Overcoming Cultural Resistance and Institutional Change**

One of the most significant barriers to governance reform is cultural resistance within sports federations. Many organizations have long-standing traditions of opaque decision-making, centralized leadership, and informal operations, all of which hinder the adoption of transparent and accountable practices. To address this, the framework includes structural changes designed to disrupt entrenched power dynamics. Strict term limits, such as a maximum of 10 years for any leadership position, prevent the concentration of authority and create opportunities for new perspectives to emerge. Independent nominating committees oversee the selection of board members, ensuring appointments are based on merit rather than personal connections or political influence. Transparency is another key tool for cultural change. Public dashboards displaying real-time governance data, such as financial expenditures, voting records, and policy updates, allow stakeholders to monitor federation activities and hold leaders accountable. This visibility discourages misconduct and builds trust among athletes, fans, and sponsors. Additionally, incorporating fan and athlete voting rights in key decisions democratizes governance and ensures diverse voices are heard. These measures shift the culture of federations from closed-door decision-making to inclusivity and accountability. Incentives and sanctions play complementary roles in driving cultural change. Federations that achieve gold standards receive a Trust Mark, signalling their commitment to excellence and enhancing their reputation among sponsors and international partners. Conversely, federations failing to meet bronze-level requirements within the designated time-

frame face escalating sanctions, starting with warnings and progressing to suspension from funding or exclusion from international competitions. This balanced approach [rewarding progress while enforcing consequences for non-compliance] creates a compelling case for federations to prioritize governance reform.

The success of this phased implementation depends on consistent enforcement, adequate resourcing, and genuine buy-in from all stakeholders. When executed effectively, it has the potential to not only improve governance standards but also enhance the overall credibility and performance of sports federations worldwide, ultimately benefiting athletes, fans, and the broader sports community. The proposed framework's theoretical implications must be rigorously tested against empirical data to validate its efficacy. The assumption that structural changes like term limits and independent committees disrupt entrenched power can be measured by analyzing leadership turnover rates and the diversity of new appointments. The theory that transparency builds trust requires monitoring public dashboard usage and conducting longitudinal surveys to see if stakeholder confidence increases. Similarly, the incentive-sanction model's effectiveness hinges on data tracking the adoption rate of standards and any correlated shifts in sponsorship revenue. Crucially, the overarching hypothesis, that these imposed rules can engineer cultural change, will be proven not by mere compliance, but by qualitative shifts in decision-making processes and stakeholder sentiment. This continuous comparison between theoretical goals and real-world outcomes is essential, providing a feedback loop to refine the approach and ensure it genuinely transforms opaque cultures into ones of accountability and inclusivity.

#### 4.4. Practical Policy Recommendations

To translate the proposed theoretical framework into actionable change, the CSO should adopt a series of concrete policy measures. These recommendations are designed to operationalize the three-phase model, ensuring it is both mandatory and supportive, thereby overcoming the identified structural and cultural barriers. First, the CSO should legislate mandatory, tiered certification. The adoption of the SIGA-based Bronze-Silver-Gold framework must be enshrined in the official regulations governing national federations. This moves governance compliance from a vol-

untary aspiration to a compulsory requirement for official recognition and funding eligibility. The CSO's annual grant allocation formula should be directly linked to a federation's certification level, creating a powerful financial incentive for progression. Federations achieving silver status could receive a 10-15% funding bonus, while those stagnating at bronze would receive baseline support, and non-compliant federations would face funding suspension. Second, to address the critical resource gap, the CSO could establish a Centralized Governance Support Unit. This unit would be funded by the CSO and act as a dedicated hub, providing federations with subsidized access to essential services. Key offerings should include: a free digital compliance portal with automated policy templates, audit checklists, and transparency dashboard integrations; a roster of vetted external auditors and legal advisors offered at reduced rates; and training programs for designated Governance Officers. Furthermore, the CSO should create a specific subsidy fund to co-finance the salary of a part-time Governance Officer for smaller federations for the first two years of implementation, ensuring they have the human capital to drive reform. Third, policy must actively dismantle cultural resistance and promote inclusivity. The CSO's regulations should mandate strict term limits [e.g., a maximum of three four-year terms for presidential roles] and require federations to establish Independent Committees for board appointments to mitigate cronyism. Furthermore, policy should enforce stakeholder representation quotas, stipulating that Athletes' Commissions must hold a minimum percentage of voting rights on executive boards [e.g., 10%–15%]. This institutionalizes diverse voices in decision-making processes. Finally, transparency and accountability must be non-negotiable. Policy should require all federations to maintain a Public Governance Dashboard, hosted on a central CSO platform, displaying key real-time data: detailed annual budgets and expenditure reports, minutes from executive board meetings, and summaries of disciplinary decisions. Making this a mandatory condition for certification turns transparency into a default practice rather than an optional best practice. Concurrently, the CSO must enforce a clear sanctions regime for non-compliance, with penalties escalating from public warnings and provisional funding freezes to, ultimately, the suspension of official recognition for federations that consistently fail to meet bronze-level standards within the phased timeline.

The implementation of these specific policies will enable the CSO to cultivate an ecosystem where good governance becomes systematically required, supported, monitored, and rewarded, rather than just encouraged. This approach effectively transforms the reform model from a theoretical concept into a practical, enforceable, and sustainable reality for Cypriot sports.

## 5. Conclusions

This research presents a comprehensive governance reform framework designed to address systemic challenges within Cyprus's national sports federations. The study demonstrates how SIGA's Universal Standards can be effectively adapted to create a structured yet flexible approach for improving transparency, accountability, and institutional integrity. The proposed three-tiered model combines mandatory compliance requirements with capacity-building support and incentive mechanisms, offering practical solutions to overcome persistent barriers such as resource constraints, cultural resistance, and leadership entrenchment. The phased implementation strategy provides federations with clear milestones to progress from basic governance foundations to advanced practices. Structural reforms including term limits and independent oversight work in tandem with cultural transformation tools like transparency dashboards and stakeholder participation mechanisms. This dual approach addresses both technical and human dimensions of organizational change while maintaining adaptability for federations at different development stages. For Cyprus's sports authorities, these findings offer an actionable roadmap to operationalize the Code of Good Governance. The framework validates the importance of combining policy mandates with practical support systems to drive meaningful reform. The research contributes valuable insights into developing sustainable, integrity-driven management systems that can restore public trust and enhance organizational performance across sports institutions.

### Limitations and Future Research Avenues

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The study focuses primarily on Cyprus's federations, which may limit direct applicability to other national contexts with different governance structures

or cultural norms. The voluntary nature of the proposed framework could affect adoption rates among resistant organizations. Resource requirements for implementation may pose challenges for smaller federations despite the included support mechanisms.

While SIGA's Universal Standards and SIRVS represent a significant advancement in sports governance, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the voluntary nature of the framework limits its enforceability, as organizations resistant to reform can simply opt out. Second, the resource-intensive certification process may disadvantage smaller or less wealthy sports bodies, creating inequities in access. Third, cultural and legal differences across regions may complicate uniform implementation, particularly in jurisdictions with entrenched governance traditions. Additionally, the focus on structural compliance risks overlooking deeper cultural and behavioural aspects of integrity that are harder to measure. Finally, without binding regulatory support, SIGA relies heavily on market pressures and reputational incentives to drive adoption, which may prove insufficient for systemic change. These limitations highlight the need for complementary measures, such as integration with legal frameworks and capacity-building programs, to maximize SIGA's impact.

Future studies should examine the framework's implementation outcomes across different federation sizes and sports disciplines. Comparative research could explore adaptations for various cultural and regulatory environments. Longitudinal studies would help assess the long-term effectiveness of the tiered approach in sustaining governance improvements. Additional investigation into digital tools for compliance monitoring could further enhance the framework's practicality and accessibility.

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Not applicable.

### Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

## Data Availability Statement

No new data were created in this study. As a theoretical research paper, this work is based entirely on analysis and synthesis of existing scholarly literature. All sources referenced are properly cited and available through standard academic databases.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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