

World football expatriates: global study 2019

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1. Introduction

This Monthly Report analyses the presence of expatriate footballers in 147 leagues from 98 national associations. Five championships from five different countries were added in comparison to the study carried out in 2018. The evolutions presented, however, refer to the same sample analysed last year. More than half of the leagues studied are in UEFA member associations, which reflects the solid anchoring of professional football in Europe.

Without taking into account the supplementary championships, the number of expatriates increased by 628 persons during last year (+5.0%). This increase shows that the internationalisation of the football players' labour market is a well established process. Expatriates represent 21.4% of players taken into account. This percentage is less than 15% only in South America (18 leagues studied) and in Africa (6 championships covered).

The notion of expatriate defines players having grown up outside of the national association of their employer club and having moved abroad for sporting reasons. This definition allows us to isolate migrations directly linked to the practise of football. Indeed, players of foreign origin having grown up in the association of their employer club are not considered as expatriates.

The sample is made up of players having being fielded in championship matches during the current season. In the 127 competitions where it was possible to obtain the list of substitutes, presence on the bench also constituted a criterion for inclusion. The data is referenced up to the 23rd April 2019.

Figure 1: sample of the study, by Confederation

	Associations	Leagues	Teams	Expats	(%)	Average Age
AFC	22	24	325	1533	18.1	29.1
CAF	5	6	93	353	13.6	26.5
CONCACAF	10	12	181	1194	23.5	27.1
CONMEBOL	10	18	362	915	9.0	28.2
OFC	1	1	10	69	27.9	27.6
UEFA	50	86	1380	9319	26.0	26.2
Total	98	147	2351	13383	21.4	26.8

2. Principle origins

Brazil is clearly at the top of the rankings for countries exporting footballers. In total, 1,330 players having grown up in Brazil play in the 147 leagues covered in this report. Brazilians are present in 85 associations out of 98. This reflects the unique role played by Brazil in supplying professional footballers worldwide.

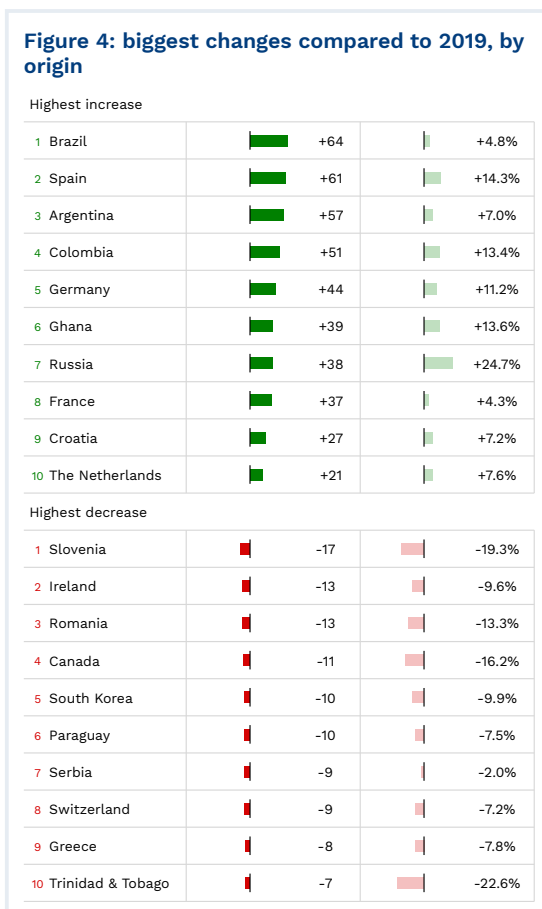
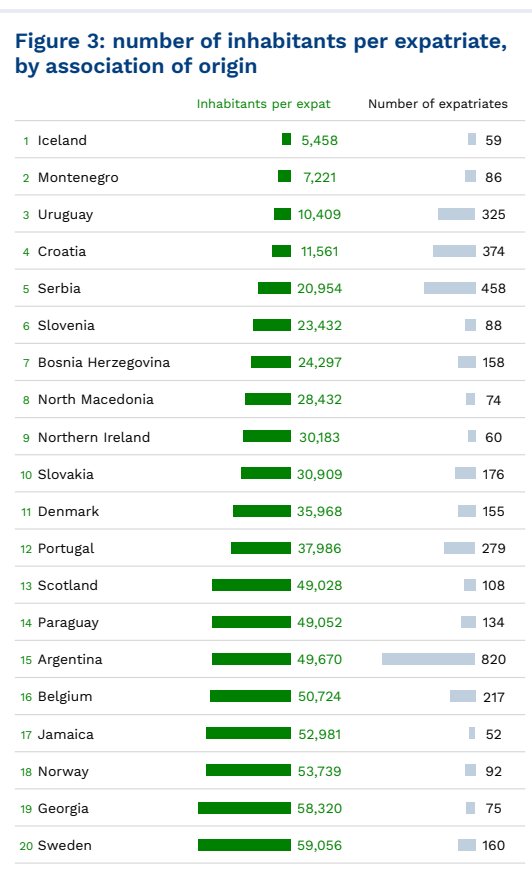
With over 800 expatriates, France and Argentina also stand out from the crowd as exporting nations. Overall, almost a quarter of expatriates are from Brazil, France or Argentina (22.5%). The principle exporters from other continents are Nigeria for Africa (10th place, 361 expatriates), the United States for North America (25th, 145), Japan for Asia (30th, 128) and Australia for Oceania (35th, 101).

Figure 2: most represented origins among expatriates



If we equate the number of expatriates to the population resident in the country of origin, Iceland is at the top of the rankings. There is one Icelandic footballer abroad for every 5,458 inhabitants of the island. Uruguay is third behind Montenegro and ahead of five other nations of ex-Yugoslavia (Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia and North-Macedonia). Only countries with at least 50 expatriates were included in this analysis.

In comparison to 2018, the biggest changes in absolute terms were recorded for the Brazilians, the Spanish and the Argentinians. In relative terms, among these three origins, the most notable increase was observed for the Spanish (+14.3%). The quality World Cup performances of the Colombian, Russian and Croatian national sides probably allowed players from these countries to increase their attractiveness abroad.



3. Principle destinations

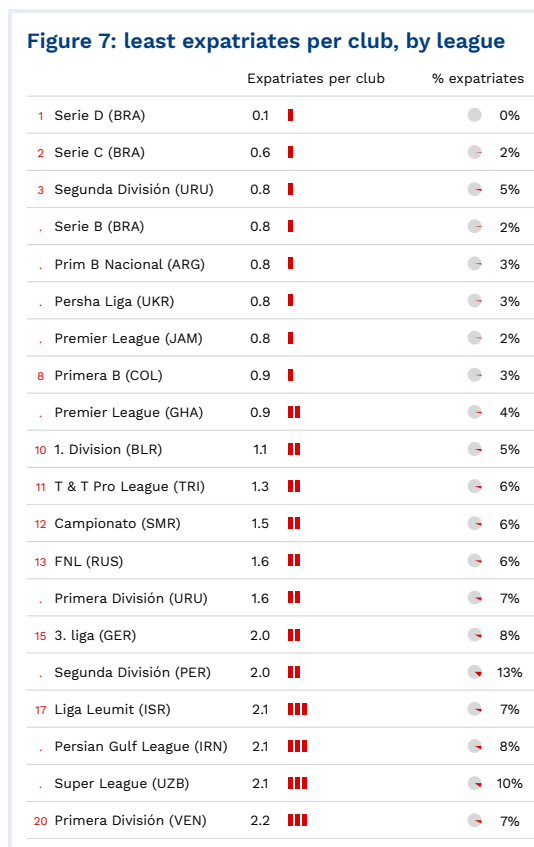
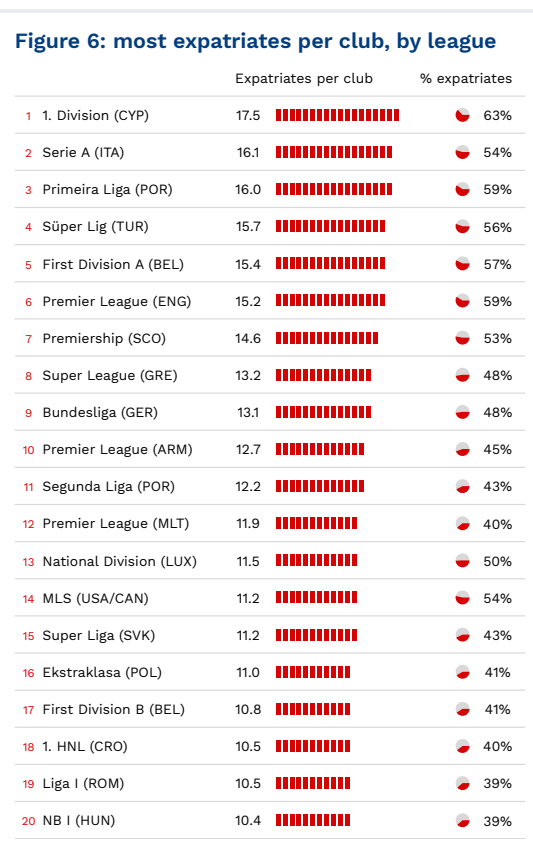
Two European countries are the biggest importers of footballers: England (728 players, 139 of which grew up in other UK nations) and Italy (636). In third place is an emerging force on the world football stage: the United States (575 players). You have to go down to 11th place to find the second non-European country: Mexico (289 imported footballers).

Figure 5: principle importing countries, number of expatriates

1	England	728	26	Switzerland	164
2	Italy	636	27	Luxembourg	161
3	USA	575	28	Norway	159
4	Spain	516	29	South Africa	152
5	Portugal	508	30	Sweden	151
6	Turkey	455	31	Japan	149
7	Germany	379	32	Saudi Arabia	146
8	Belgium	333	33	Croatia	143
9	France	330	34	Belarus	133
10	Greece	304	35	Finland	132
11	Mexico	289	.	India	132
12	The Netherlands	271	37	Argentina	125
13	Scotland	250	38	Bulgaria	115
14	Poland	232	.	Israel	115
15	Cyprus	210	40	Armenia	114
16	Slovakia	200	41	Peru	110
17	Romania	194	42	Wales	108
18	Austria	187	43	Qatar	105
19	Slovenia	184	44	Kazakhstan	104
20	Chile	179	45	Brazil	101
21	Russia	175	46	Bosnia Herzegovina	99
22	Czech Republic	170	47	Hong Kong	98
23	Hungary	168	48	Bolivia	96
24	Denmark	167	.	Serbia	96
25	Malta	166	.	Thailand	96

In relative terms, the strongest presence of expatriates by club and league was recorded in the Cypriot top division with an average of 17.5 expatriates per team. Major League Soccer in the United States and Canada is the only non-European competition in the top twenty of this rankings. As for Belgium, it is the only country to be represented by two leagues: First Division A and First Division B.

The South American championships are over-represented among those whose clubs employ, on average, the least number of players imported from abroad. There are almost no expatriates in the Brazilian Serie B and C. Only six championships from UEFA member countries figure in the top twenty of the rankings.



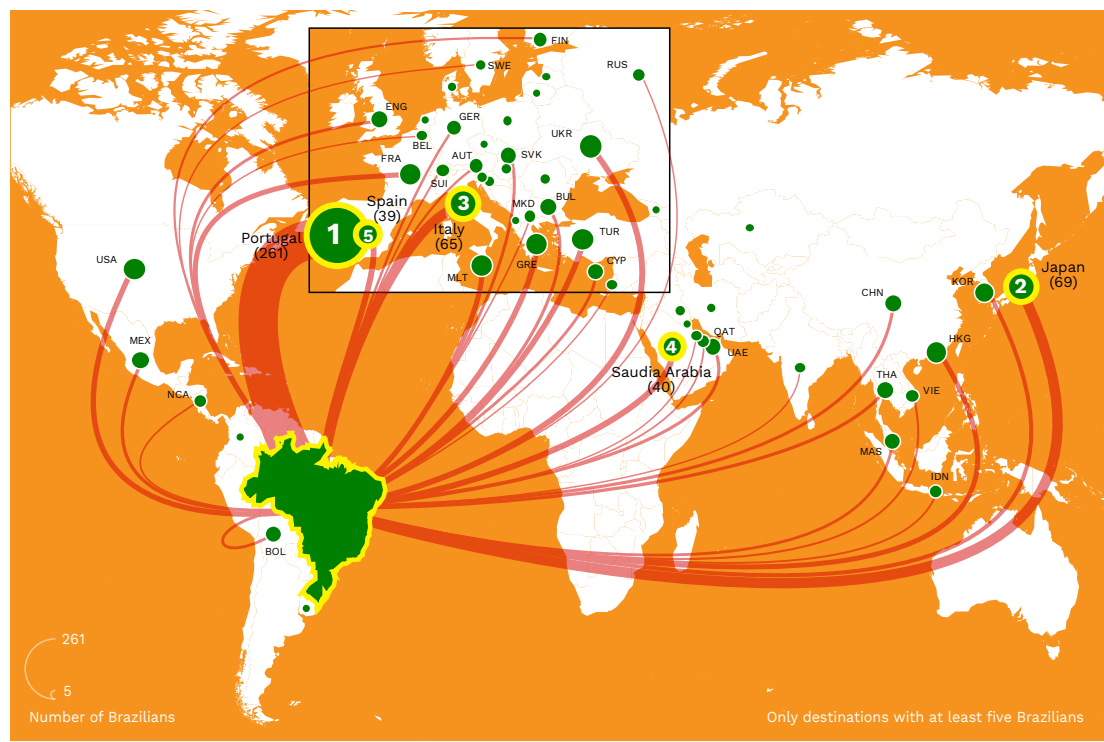
4. Transfer networks

The most frequented migratory route originates from Brazil and ends in Portugal (261 players). The migration of Argentinians to Chile (116 players) is the second principle axis. Two migratory channels departing from England also involve many footballers: the first ends up in Scotland (113 players), while the second leads to Wales (92 players).



The Brazilians constitute the only truly global force in the footballers' labour market. Though Portugal remains by far their privileged destination (261 players), many Brazilians are to be found in other European countries (Italy, Spain, Ukraine; Turkey, Greece, etc.), in Asia (Japan, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, South Korea, Thailand, etc.) and in the Americas (principally the United States and Mexico). The full list is available in the exclusive **CIES Football Observatory Atlas of Migration**.

Figure 9: principle migratory routes for Brazilians



5. Conclusion

The international mobility of footballers has risen steadily over the years. The total amount of expatriate players has increased by 5% in comparison to 2018. Expatriates represent about a fifth of the total number of active players in the leagues analysed. This percentage is to 26% at the level of the championships from UEFA member countries.

During last year, the number of expatriates has increased for each of the three principle exporting countries: Brazil (+64 players, +4.8%), France (+37 players, +4.3%) and Argentina (+57, +7.0%). Alone, these countries export almost a quarter of footballers (22.5%). The number of Spaniards abroad went also strongly up (+61, +14.3%). This is the second biggest increase in absolute terms after that of the Brazilians.

England and Italy are the chief importing countries of footballers. The professional clubs of these countries employ 728 and 636 expatriate footballers respectively. Without taking into account the 139 citizens of the other UK nations present in England, the greatest number of players imported from abroad is to be found in Italy.