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SPORT 43

NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject:	Democracy and transparency in sport - <i>Exchange of views</i>

Delegations will find attached a Presidency steering note on the above subject, with a view to the exchange of views at the Council (Education, Youth, Culture and Sport) on 28 November 2025.

Democracy and transparency in sport

Presidency steering note

Sport is an integral part of European society. It is more than competition, results and medals: it inspires, engages and unites people across borders, cultures and languages. By promoting joy, fairness, inclusion and respect, sport helps shape active, healthy and socially engaged citizens. It builds bridges, creates spaces and sets aside differences in pursuit of common goals. On the pitch and in local clubs, sport strengthens shared identity and cohesion, showing that fair play and respect for rules are the foundations of democratic citizenship. As a true school of democracy, sport cultivates integrity, responsibility and participation, reinforcing the very social fabric on which our societies rest.

A European Sport Model has been built on this foundation. It rests on the conviction that sport must not only entertain but also uphold our shared values of democracy, transparency, solidarity and respect for human rights. These principles are the cornerstones of trust and legitimacy in sport. Without them, sport risks losing its unifying role as a constructive force for good in society. This is why the Danish EU Presidency has chosen to place Democracy and Transparency in Sport at the centre of this political discussion.

Initiated by Denmark and the Nordic countries in 2021, the joint declaration Statement on Transparency, Democracy and Human Rights in the Work of International Sport Federations was an important milestone. Initially signed by 23 European countries and now endorsed by 38 countries in total, the declaration promotes open and democratic decision-making and serves as a useful reference in domestic and international discussions for sporting organisations, which hold significant responsibility in implementing and upholding best democratic practices. Democratic and transparent values are now firmly anchored in EU sport policy, from the 2007 White Paper on Sport and the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon to the EU Work Plans for Sport and the Erasmus+ programme, all strengthening good governance and embedding sport's societal role in European cooperation.

Despite this progress, serious challenges persist. Many international sports organisations still face democratic deficits, where decisions with far-reaching implications are made without genuine involvement of member organisations, athletes or civil society. Transparency also remains inadequate, e.g. in the awarding of hosting rights, where unclear criteria and opaque voting procedures increase the risk of corruption and undue influence. At the same time, sport continues to be used as a tool for so-called sportswashing, where regimes exploit major events to polish their reputations and divert attention from undemocratic processes and human rights abuses.

Moreover, we have seen a threat from breakaway leagues – commercial ventures that do not fully align with the underlying values of a European Sport Model. Closed competitions detached from promotion and relegation structures that undermine solidarity between large and small clubs, cut grassroots and elite sport's essential ties, and erode the openness and fairness at the heart of European sporting traditions. Also, the relocation of European competitions to non-European venues for commercial purposes can weaken the cultural and social bonds between clubs, fans and communities. When sport is moved away from its natural context, it risks alienating its supporters and losing its role in sustaining local and national identity.

If these developments continue, there is a risk that sport will lose its popular legitimacy. Public trust depends on the belief that matches are played on a level playing field and that decisions are taken on fair democratic grounds. Defending a European Sport Model requires active effort. The EU, its Member States and sports organisations must reaffirm their commitment to the values of a European Sport Model, support open competitions and preserve the solidarity between grassroots and elite levels.

Defending the model means upholding transparency and integrity, ensuring that access to competitions and sporting outcomes are based on merit – not financial exclusivity or closed systems. This transparency, embedded in structures of promotion and relegation, is what distinguishes most European sport from commercially driven formats. The recognition of sport’s autonomy by the EU and its Member States should not make us complacent; we must remain active, in constant dialogue and committed to continual improvement. A strong stance is needed against moving European competitions outside Europe for commercial purposes, reaffirming that sport’s cultural and social value should not be reduced to a tradable commodity.

The awarding of hosting rights for major events is another area where transparency and legitimacy must be strengthened. Decisions should rest on clear, public criteria, and candidate countries should be evaluated for their record on human rights, governance standards and freedom of press. In recent years, whistleblowers and independent investigations have revealed how the awarding of tournaments can be influenced by opaque decision-making, lack of oversight and manipulation of public narratives – including surveillance of journalists and control of information to suppress criticism. Such experiences highlight the risks when transparency and accountability are weakened, and demonstrate the urgent need to ensure that openness, freedom of expression, and independent scrutiny become non-negotiable conditions in the awarding and monitoring of international sporting events.

Therefore, once decisions on hosting rights are made, full disclosure of votes and transparent follow-up processes are essential, alongside independent oversight and clear requirements for the long-term social and environmental legacy of the event.

Strengthening democracy and transparency in sport, however, goes far beyond hosting rights. It concerns the daily governance of federations, clubs and associations, how financial flows are managed, how athletes are protected and supported, and how information is shared. It also means supporting those who promote the integrity of sport – journalists, whistleblowers and independent experts – whose scrutiny and courage are indispensable to accountability. Ensuring that these actors can operate freely and safely is a core part of democratic governance in sport.

No single country or organisation can achieve these changes alone. Progress depends on strong alliances among like-minded states, support for international sport federations in reforming their governance practices, and the development of practical tools and standards for openness and accountability. Promoting education and media literacy within the sports ecosystem is equally important to strengthen critical and independent reporting and to help resist manipulation and control of narratives.

Through collective effort, the EU, its Member States, and sports organisations can help ensure that transparency and democracy become the rule rather than the exception in international sport. Sport unites us, but it also needs us. A strong, democratic and common European voice is needed to defend the integrity of sport and preserve its role as a unifying force in society.

All Member States are consequently invited to reflect on the following questions.

1. How can the EU and its Member States most effectively and concretely support international sports federations in strengthening democracy, transparency and integrity in governance structures – for example through shared European principles for good governance that set clear standards and expectations?
2. How can the EU and its Member States most firmly defend and promote a European Sport Model – including values of open competitions, solidarity between all levels of sport, and social responsibility – while also addressing breakaway leagues and relocations of European competitions?

Please do not exceed three minutes' speaking time.