

Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS)

Forum on Sport and Human Rights:

Focus on freedom of expression

Wednesday, 30 November 2022, 9:00 - 17:00 (CEST)

Opening remarks

Thank you very much Director SCHOKKENBROEK, thank you to the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS) and to the Council of Europe colleagues - it is a great pleasure for me to join you and the participants for the opening of the EPAS forum on Sport and Human Rights.

Sport plays a key role in the lives of young and adult people all over the world. Through it we can grow, learn, and improve. But that's not all.

Through sport, we can even express. Ideas, values, dissent. And this couldn't be more evident than in these very days. At some 6000 km from here, the World Cup Qatar 2022 is taking place, keeping millions of people glued to the TV. But good football is not the only thing we see on the screen. An overall climate of restriction to freedom of expression is evident. Affecting the players, the supporters, and the media operators, it raises questions on responsibilities, limitations and human rights.

Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights safeguards the right of everyone to freedom of expression. A right that is to be exercised without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. Still, a right that carries with it duties and responsibilities.

Recalling Article 10 and linking it to the sport dimension, we soon realise that the issue is more complicated than it seems, surely far more extended than Qatar. **Astonishing violations pertaining to freedom of expression in sport** are not novel phenomenon, nor are European countries strangers to it.

The Council of Europe works in this field since its early days. From a political perspective, freedom of speech, media freedom and protection of journalism and journalists are among the Organisation's key strategic priorities. Our member states are today equipped with an **outstanding standard-setting arsenal** aimed at safeguarding freedom of expression and at facing threats against it.

One of our most remarkable achievement is the [2016 Recommendation on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors](#). Providing specific guidelines to member States in the areas of: i) prevention, ii) protection, iii) prosecution, iv) promotion of information, education and awareness rising, the Recommendation remains a *landmark* instrument, which our and other governmental and non-governmental organisations continue referring to and drawing inspirations from.

The Recommendation requires member States to ensure **independence of the media and safeguard media pluralism**, both essential for the functioning of a democratic society. States have a positive obligation to guarantee pluralism in the media sector, including in the **sports media sector**, which entails ensuring that a diversity of voices, including critical ones, can be heard.

However, such **pluralism is not always guaranteed**. For example, because of the weight of the economic stakes. The sports events with high visibility, like the Olympic Games or the current football World Cup, are more and more broadcasted by private media companies, because they just have more money to offer for the broadcasting rights. That raises the questions of public media goals and responsibilities, and of how we finance it.

Media pluralism is also handicapped because sports journalists are often hindered because of their gender. The alerts about cases of threats and attacks against journalists, posted in the Council of Europe [Platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists](#) give us proof that the **situation on the ground has deteriorated in recent years**. And the **gender issue seems to be particularly outstanding when it comes to sports' reporting**. The Platform indicates a number of instances where women were subjected to various forms of harassment while fulfilling their professional tasks.

The issues of financing or sexism are not standing alone in the way to **enable pluralistic media environment**. In her [Annual report 2022](#), the Secretary General of the Council of Europe noted several other challenges, including the worrisome **growth of disinformation and hate speech online**, as well as the fact that the personal safety of journalists and the economic and financial conditions under which the media is expected to produce trustworthy and reliable journalism, continued to deteriorate.

In the sports sector, this is reflected in the need for:

- a **strengthening of the protection of the independence of journalists**, in particular vis-à-vis the organisers of sports events, sports federations or the communications media in the sector, and should not be subject to any direct or indirect censorship by them.
- **effective safeguards against the concentration of sports media and ensuring media and information pluralism**.

- **more transparent, independent and non-discriminatory access** to information and news sources to ensure quality journalism.
- an **improvement in the equality of working conditions** between men and women journalists.

Many of these issues, at a broader level, are addressed by the Council of Europe, including through the work of its Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (the CDMSI), which has **undertaken several activities to promote media freedom, including in sport**. The CDMSI has presented new policy guidelines in its fields of competence, taking the form of recommendations. To name only a few:

- The **Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)11 on principles for media and communication governance**, providing guidance on ways to modernize and adapt media and communication governance to the challenges of the digital age
- The **Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)13 on the impacts of digital technologies on freedom of expression**, formulating principles and recommendations on how to address the adverse impacts and enhance the positive impacts of such technologies on freedom of expression in human rights compliant ways.
- The **Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16 on combating hate speech**, mapping out a comprehensive legal and policy framework to prevent and fight hate speech, online & offline, which will be **further addressed in Session 4** of today's event, including by Maria Run Bjarnadottir, former Chair of the Expert Committee that produced the Recommendation.
- And, the **Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)4 on promoting a favourable environment for quality journalism in the digital age**, containing a set of practical guidelines aimed at ensuring sustainable funding for quality media, building trust in journalism, and promoting media literacy.

The challenges to media freedom are many, so our work does not stop. Within the current programme and budget period, in 2022-23, CDMSI policy making focuses on five new instruments:

- A future **Recommendation on SLAPPs** (strategic lawsuits against public participation);
- **Guidelines on the use of digital tools including AI for journalism/by journalists;**
- **Guidelines on combating disinformation in the online environment;**
- **Good practices for sustainable media financing;**
- **Practical media and information literacy tools.**

While presenting these outcomes and efforts, I need to make a clarification. Working on great standards, even reaching the agreement at the level of the 46 member States, is **useless if not effectively implemented**. This was very clearly acknowledged by the [Council of Europe's](#)

[Conference of Ministers responsible for Media and Information Society](#), which was held in Cyprus on 10-11 June 2021.

Recognising that the **time for effective action is now**, the Ministers invited the Council of Europe to “carry out a **comprehensive campaign, at European level, to promote the protection of journalism** and the safety of journalists and support corresponding campaigns at national level.

The Campaign for the Safety of Journalists should be launched next year. Throughout the campaign the member States will be encouraged, supported and guided in their effort to **develop national action plans** with a view to boost their standards, fill the gaps and enhance co-ordination, as appropriate; to effectively guarantee the protection of journalists and journalism, and to ensure all necessary conditions to reach this objective in practice.

To achieve its goals, the engagement and dedication of *all* relevant stakeholders is crucial. Journalists themselves, press councils, media outlets, are called to play a role as key international partners. Obviously, I see great added value in taking this occasion to reflect on the sport dimension. Therefore, I encourage not only your **support to the campaign, but also your active engagement** in carrying out concrete activities, in the effort to achieve our common goals, including in the field of sport.

We aim to ensure that everyone has the right to express oneself and to receive and impart information and ideas, what the Court has considered “one of the essential foundations of democratic society, one of the basic conditions for its progress and for the development of every man”. And I take the liberty to add “of every sport athlete, supporter, or reporter, man or woman, professional or amateur”.

I wish you a productive day, thank you.