

PACE public hearing: excluding athletes from Russia and Belarus from taking part in the Olympics (25 April 2023)

Opening remarks by PACE President

Madam Secretary General of the Assembly.

Madame Rapporteur,

Deputy Minister of Sport of Ukraine,

President of the ASOIF,

Members of the Assembly,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to welcome you to this hearing and I am very grateful to the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media for organising it.

Some people may think that it is strange to spend the precious time of our Assembly members to discuss sport matters in the time when war is waged in Europe, when the people of Ukraine suffer and die every day as a result of the Russian aggression against their country.

But it is also true that sport has ceased since a long time ago to be just a leisure activity where people simply measure who jumped longer or lifted more weight. Sport, due to huge public following and enormous media attention, has evolved into a powerful tool that teaches those involved in it important values such as fairness, integrity, mutual respect, equality or inclusion. But sport is not only educating those directly participating in the sporting activities, but also has a capacity to transmit and to promote values, ideas and modes of behaviour to the society as a whole.

We should not underestimate the power of sport in influencing peoples' views and it is of course of the interest of the Parliamentary Assembly that sport promotes the values of peace, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. This is why it is important for the entire Council of Europe where serious work is done on various aspects of sport integrity and why it is relevant for our Assembly.

Today we will focus on one of the most topical though polarizing issues currently discussed by politicians, athletes and ordinary citizens around the world. The Assembly noted that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and sport movement at large currently seems to change the position it held since 24 February 2022 and to favour the participation of Russian and Belarussian athletes in international competitions, while other stakeholders strongly object this it. Some reservations were raised in a declaration signed by 30 Ministers responsible for sport representing many Council of Europe's member states. There is also a very strong reaction of the Ukrainian government, the Ukrainian National Olympic Committee

and of many Ukrainian athletes against possible participation of Russian and Belarussian athletes in the 2024 Paris Olympic Games.

But we are also aware that a potential decision to ban Russian and Belarussian athletes from the Games would raise delicate issues in terms of compliance with the Olympic Charter, and that the compatibility of such a ban with international human rights standards prohibiting discrimination has been questioned.

However, taking a decision to allow for the participation of Russian and Belarussian athletes in the 2024 Paris Games in the context of the on-going large-scale war of aggression against Ukraine is considered by many as such that would not only go strongly against the mission of Olympism to promote peace, but instead will widen divisions and serve propaganda purposes of the aggressor. For many, participation of the Russian athletes, a considerable number of whom are members of the Russian military or security services is totally unthinkable and unacceptable, given the tragic loss of thousands of Ukrainian lives, serious war crimes committed by the Russian army in Ukraine, and the pain and suffering which this aggression continues to cause.

In this complex context, our Assembly has decided to invite its Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media to prepare a report on this question and perhaps to look at the broad definition of the sport integrity and values in the context of military conflicts and aggressions. The current hearing should contribute to the deliberations on this report.

One of the fundamental principles of Olympism, as defined by the Olympic Charter itself is *'to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity'*. Today, we our discussion should help better understand whether and under which conditions the participation of Russian and Belarussian athletes in the international sport events will contribute to promoting this principle or will rather undermine it and how sport can be protected from those who wish to use it for the goals that go contrary to both principles of Olympism and the values of the Council of Europe.

I look forward to a constructive and respectful exchange and although it might be challenging to reach an ultimately consensual solution, I am an optimist and I believe we can do it!