

Elements for the intervention of Ms Maria Daniella MAROUDA, Chair of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)

Combating hate speech in sport project – Launch Conference

31 May 2022

Session 2 – Addressing hate speech in sport: current policies

i) ECRI standards on combating hate speech in sport

Sport is reflective of society, and as such, continues to provide a venue for racist and homophobic hate speech.

In order to address hate speech in sport, ECRI, as the Council of Europe’s monitoring body specialised in combating racism and intolerance, has developed a set of standards, or rules of thumb, on the basis of its findings in various countries across Europe.

ECRI’s standards to combat hate speech in sport are mainly found in its General Policy Recommendation (or GPR) N°12 on [combating racism and racial discrimination in the field of sport](#) (2009) and its GPR N° 15 on [combating hate speech](#) (2016).

GPR No. 12 proposes a comprehensive set of measures covering all aspects of sport and the wide range of actors involved. It refers often to racism, which includes racist hate speech. Furthermore, its recommendations can be applied equally well to hate speech on other grounds, such as sexual orientation.

As regards hate speech that has reached the criminal threshold, ECRI considers that there should be appropriate legal provisions penalising racist acts and that the dissemination of online racist material should be prohibited. Security regulations should allow the police and security personnel to stop, report and document racist behaviour and sports clubs and federations should be held accountable for racist acts committed during sports events.¹

In the context of sporting venues, the scrutiny of those attending events is vital to prevent them from distributing or selling in their proximity any material in which hate speech is used, as well as to prevent access to those who display or carry banners, leaflets and symbols on which hate speech is used. ECRI has also long considered that a sport event should be suspended or stopped when hate speech is used by those attending it.²

In many instances, codes of conduct and protocols adopted by sports organisations now provide for sanctions such as the expulsion and barring of persons from sporting

¹ GPR No. 12. II.5.

² GPR 15, Explanatory memorandum, § 123.

venues, the withdrawal of points in sporting competitions and the requirement to hold sporting events behind closed doors. It is important that any sanctions imposed genuinely reflect the gravity of the use of hate speech. This could otherwise give the impression of endorsing it. Certainly, the imposition of appropriate and well-publicised sanctions for the use of hate speech can send a clear anti-hate speech message.³

Referees should also be reminded to react appropriately where athletes, technical staff or supporters engage in racist gestures or expressions by imposing adequate measures and sanctions. They should also mention racist incidents in the referee report.⁴

In football as in many other sports, supporters' organisations should be strongly encouraged to adopt supporters' charters, containing anti-racism clauses and to be vigilant about possible racist content on their websites and fanzines.⁵

Certainly, media professionals should be encouraged to abstain from reproducing racist stereotypes in their reporting. However, they should also report on racist hate speech incidents taking place during sport events and give publicity to sanctions incurred by racist offenders.

Political actors and opinion leaders should also be invited to take a firm public stance against racism and hate speech in sport.⁶

ECRI also considers that governments should organise, finance or support large scale anti-racism awareness-raising campaigns in sport, involving all relevant actors.⁷

Finally, positive examples from the field of sport can be used as part of the effort to counter hate speech by encouraging respect for diversity. Persons with a migration background prominent in the field of sport, for instance, could take part in programmes that show their successful integration while maintaining their identity⁸. It is also crucial that personalities in sport speak out when they hear or see hate speech being used.⁹

ii) Examples of racism/racist hate speech in sport from ECRI's country monitoring reports

³ GPR 15, Explanatory memorandum, § 125.

⁴ GPR No. 12. II.12.

⁵ GPR No. 12. II.13.

⁶ GPR No. 12. II.14.

⁷ GPR No. 12. II.7.

⁸ GPR No. 15, Explanatory memorandum, § 94.

⁹ GPR No. 15, Explanatory memorandum, § 98.

In its fifth report on *Romania*, for instance, ECRI observed that sports events continued to be a “forum” for incidents of hate speech. The Romanian Football Federation had to impose sanctions on several occasions and banned fans and players over racist behaviour during football matches. The report refers specifically to a match between the teams Sepsi and Dinamo Bucureşti in Bucharest a few years ago, when the fans of the host team chanted “Out with the Hungarians from the country”.

In its latest report on the *Netherlands*, ECRI found that at football matches, antisemitic hate speech continued to occur. It also noted that Black players were all too often the receiving end of so-called monkey chants or “jungle sounds”. Prosecution services had to investigate a considerable number of cases in which hooligans openly incited hatred. At the same time, an even bigger issue was the amount of anti-Muslim, antisemitic and homophobic hate speech at the level of the amateur clubs.

The scale of the phenomenon of racism in football has been the subject of a specific dialogue between ECRI and *Poland*. In its fifth report on this country, reference was made to the “Brown Book”, which was produced by the Never Again Association and which documented, with supporting photographic evidence, the recurrence of cases of antisemitism, anti-Black racism and fascist or neo-Nazi propaganda, whether in the form of chants or banners displayed in the stands, as well as the regular and visible presence of extremist groups. This has prompted ECRI to ask the Polish authorities to take some further action in this area, including by establishing closer co-operation between the prosecution service, the Polish Football Association, football clubs and civil society in order to collect evidence.

Incidents may also occur outside sports events. For example, in its sixth report on the *Czech Republic*, ECRI noted with concern that a person of African descent was physically assaulted on the tram in the Czech capital by three football hooligans.

ECRI also observed that there was a growing challenge of countering hate speech on social media. For example, ECRI noted in its last report on *Ireland* that a Black professional footballer on the national team was subjected to a barrage of racist abuse and threats on Twitter after Ireland’s World Cup playoff defeat to Denmark.

On a more positive note, the situation may have improved in recent years in a number of member states in the sense of a growing awareness, co-operation and action between the relevant actors such as the authorities, sports associations, the media and equality bodies of the need to combat racism and intolerance in sport. For many years, ECRI has been advocating for this and noted with great satisfaction the launch of various campaigns and the widespread adoption and application of codes of conduct, protocols and sanctions.¹⁰

¹⁰ See, for instance, ECRI (2015), Report on Poland, § 89.