

European Sport Model According to Organised Athletes – Input for the Development of the European Commission’s Communication on the European Sport Model

The European Athletes and Players Association (EAPA) is a federation of 28 independent organisations representing the rights and interests of professional athletes and players across 15 European countries. Our members span a wide range of sports—including basketball, handball, rugby, volleyball, and individual disciplines—and collectively give voice to over 25,000 athletes.

EAPA is firmly committed to ensuring that athletes are meaningfully included in decision-making processes that affect them, in accordance with the principle of freedom of association.

We welcome the initiative to issue a Communication on promoting and strengthening the European Sport Model in the second half of 2026. As a set of guiding principles for sport governance in Europe, the European Sport Model is a cornerstone of EU Sport Policy. We consider this Communication a vital opportunity to ensure future EU action in sport is relevant, responsive, and in alignment with the evolving realities of the sector and the rights of its key stakeholders.

Considering the critical importance of the European Sport Model to athletes and ahead of the upcoming Commission Communication, we would like to present the following collective position and recommendations:

(1) General considerations

- Sport is a fundamental pillar of European culture, society, and economy, but it can only fulfil its vital role when operating in harmony with the *acquis communautaire*.
- The definition of the European Sport Model should incorporate the perspectives of various stakeholders and reflect the diverse structures and challenges across different sports.
- The European Sport Model should be understood as a set of principles, consistent with the European Union values, guiding the organisation and practice of sport in Europe.

Recommendations for the Communication:

- Clearly state that the European Sport Model is fully consistent with the European law, policies and values.
- Emphasize the need and concrete opportunities for cooperation with other DGs (such as DG Employment and DG Competition) as well as EU agencies (including OSHA, FRA and EIGE), to further strengthen the harmonious coexistence and synergies between sport and other policies.
- Emphasize the importance of the stakeholder involvement, particularly athletes through their independent organisations, and offer further guidance on meaningful engagement in line with the EU principles.
- Clarify that the European Sport Model should not serve to validate or preserve any existing governance or competition structures unless are aligned with and compliant with EU law, particularly in areas such as competition, labour rights, and non-discrimination.
- Define the European Sport Model as a living framework of values and principles, adaptable to change and responsive to the needs of those who make sport possible—first and foremost, the athletes themselves.

(2) The European Sport Model must respect EU law

- For the European Sport Model to uphold values such as the rule of law, transparency, accountability, good governance, and integrity, it is essential to reinforce and uphold legal compliance at all levels - from local to international.
- Terms such as autonomy of sport organizations and specific nature of sport have recognized purposes and limits that should be carefully upheld within the European Sport Model.
- The European Sport Model should fully embrace EU case-law and the opportunities it presents for improving governance across different sports through transparent and democratic decision-making and reforms.
- Within the European Sport Model, all internationally recognised human rights of athletes and other people must be protected, respected and promoted.

Recommendations for the Communication:

- Clearly state that sport is not inherently excluded from the scope of EU law, meaning that regulations by the sport organisations as well as sport-related laws in member states must comply with the EU law.
 - Based on the recent jurisprudence, offer further guidance to sport governing bodies and Member States on what autonomy of sport organisations and specific nature of sport mean, clarifying that these concepts do not grant blanket exemptions from EU law and must be assessed on a case-by-case basis.
 - Propose further work on good governance in sport, updating its principles in line with the recent developments and raising standards, and focus on its implementation and monitoring.
 - Monitor implementation and practical implications of recent legal cases in order to ensure they result in meaningful improvements in sports governance. It is important that national, European and international sport organisations proactively bring their rules in line with the EU law and that similar cases are not reproducing.
- 

- Explicitly commit to all internationally recognised human rights of athletes and other people involved in sport, referencing binding legal documents such as the Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the European Union, explain shared responsibilities of Member States and sport organisations in this area.
- Develop guidance for Member States and sport organisations on human rights and sport, particularly explaining when and how the rights of athletes and other people may be restricted in line with necessity and proportionality principles, and clarifying that private bodies such as sport organisations have obligations to respect the rights of athletes and cannot restrict them unilaterally.
- In line with the human rights law and particularly the freedom of association, ensure that athlete associations are properly involved in the EU policy and decision-making processes, including high level and operational level structured dialogue, whenever a matter affecting athletes is considered.
- Review the compatibility of Olympic Rule 50 with EU law and values—particularly human rights, democracy, and solidarity—and assess its impact on athletes' freedoms.
- Prioritise key athlete rights in current EU initiatives, with a specific focus on labour protections, data privacy, and effective access to justice.
- Ensure that measures intended to protect the integrity of sport, particularly when it comes to fight against doping and match-fixing, are in line with the EU law, including data protection law.

(3) The European Sport Model must be consistent with the European social model

- The European Sport Model should incorporate the principles of the European social model, based on labour rights, social dialogue and solidarity, in regard to athletes and other workers.
- Social dialogue should be fully integrated into the European Sport Model and actively fostered to negotiate fair and balanced solutions to the challenges facing sport sector.
- The role of athlete associations, as social partners representing workers, in shaping the governance of their sport should be recognised and respected in the European Sport Model.
- To comply with the principle of solidarity as a foundational element of the European Sport Model, fair remuneration, decent working conditions and equitable revenue-sharing mechanisms for athletes should be strengthened.

Recommendations for the Communication:

- Adopt a comprehensive EU definition of a professional athlete, in line with the one developed by the ILO: an athlete who gains income through competitive sport and whose activities are controlled by a sports organization, such as a club or federation. This definition includes (a) athletes whose only professional activity is sport, either as employees or as contract players of sports clubs; and (b) athletes who may have other jobs but who spend significant time training and competing in sports competitions from which they derive income, such as athletes in some Olympic disciplines.
- Investigate the status of athlete labour rights and working conditions across sports and Member States in order to gain data and information to inform further work, identify systemic issues related to athlete rights as well as any good practices.
- Ensure that all EU gender equality initiatives in sport explicitly address professional athletes as workers, with a focus on equal pay, equal opportunities, and workplace protections.
- Address anti-discrimination and protection from hate speech and abuse in the workplace..

- Expand EU support for dual career pathways by integrating education, personal development, and mental health resources into workplace and career transition policies for athletes.
- Cooperate with DG Employment and EU-OSHA to prepare guidance to Member States and sport organisations to align sport with EU law and labour standards.
- Provide guidance for Member States and sport organisations related to the athlete representation, in line with the EU law and European Social Model:
 1. Recognise the role of the athlete associations, as manifestation of athletes' freedom of association, right to organise and collectively bargain.
 2. Recognise the role of the athlete commissions, committees of councils as internal consultative bodies of the organisations they are a part of.
 3. Clarify that the existence or functioning of athlete commissions cannot in any way undermine the rights of athletes to form or join an association, to take part in the social dialogue.
 4. Clarify that only independent organisations representing athletes as workers should be recognised as social partners, in accordance with EU labour law.
- Recognise and promote social dialogue as a key component of good governance in sport and promote it as a suitable decision-making process in line with the European Social Model.
- Work with relevant stakeholders, especially social partners, to establish a suitable format for a European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee covering all professional athletes.
- Support the development of capacity and representativeness of organisations in order to constructively engage in social dialogue.
- Present a study mapping existing financial solidarity, redistribution, revenue sharing and athlete compensation mechanisms, covering different sports and levels within the EU, accompanied by recommendations for their further development.
- Ensure that the European Sport Model's core value of solidarity includes athletes – by guaranteeing decent work, fair pay, and a share of the revenues they help generate.
- Investigate the compatibility of the Olympic rule 40 with the EU law as well as its impact on the commercial freedoms and economic rights of athletes.

(4) Conclusion

A European Sport Model rooted in legal compliance, human rights, social justice, and financial fairness will not only benefit athletes but also enhance the integrity, sustainability, competitiveness and societal impact of sport across Europe. The European Athletes and Players Association remains committed to engaging in dialogue with the European institutions and sport stakeholders to further define and refine the European Sport Model.

