



**European Committee
of the Regions**

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OPINION

Building a values-based, bottom-up European sports model: a vehicle for encouraging inclusion and social wellbeing among young Europeans

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS:

- points out that, because of its specificity, sport has been associated not only with free movement and competition law, but also with a large number of other EU policy areas, including social, health, education and training, youth, equal opportunities and accessibility, employment, the environment, media and culture, and tourism;
- notes that it is high time for sport to be officially recognised as an essential public policy instrument and a driving force for community whereby the health and social return that it guarantees for territories and their communities is not separate from its economic importance. On the contrary, it is exactly this recognition that should be the distinguishing feature that will shape the establishment of this instrument;
- calls for a greater share of regional development funds, structural funds and EU cohesion policies to be coordinated, co-programmed and co-designed for small-scale activities and sports facilities, with the specific goal of promoting grassroots sport across the regions (grassroots approach);
- calls for the involvement of the level of government that is closest to citizens, i.e. local authorities, in identifying good practices for establishing sport as social infrastructure and the subsequent dissemination and communication activities, and actions needed for its formal recognition, in collaboration with the European Commission and urging the European Commission to actively engage with LRAs in the development and recognition of sports as social infrastructure in their respective regions;
- recommends the adoption of minimal environmental criteria and standards for Member States, regions and cities applying to host medium-sized and large sports events in Europe, with a focus on initiatives that attract and retain young athletes, promote youth engagement, and foster a sense of belonging through sports events;

Rapporteur

Roberto Pella (IT/EPP), Mayor of Valdengo (BI)

Reference document

Resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the key features of a European Sport Model¹

European Union Work Plan for Sport²

Study on the European Sport Model³

European Year of Skills⁴...

¹ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14430-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

² [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:42020Y1204\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:42020Y1204(01)).

³ European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *Sennett, J., Le Gall, A., Kelly, G. et al., Study on the European sport model – A report to the European Commission*, Publications Office, 2022, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/28433>.

⁴ https://year-of-skills.europa.eu/index_en.

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Building a values-based, bottom-up European sports model: a vehicle for encouraging inclusion and social wellbeing among young Europeans

I. OPENING REMARKS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. recalls that sport is an area in which the EU's remit is relatively recent, having been acquired only with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009. In fact, according to Article 165 of the TFEU, the EU "shall contribute to the promotion of European sporting issues, while taking account of the specific nature of sport, its structures based on voluntary activity and its social and educational function". This provision specifically indicates that the sports movement enjoys universal autonomy and distinction in the general legal system, from a regulatory, organisational and judicial point of view. The EU is therefore responsible for developing public policies in this area based on data and good practices, and for promoting sport, fostering cooperation and managing initiatives in support of sport across Europe, recognising that local and regional authorities play a vital role in the promotion and development of sports activities within their communities, and that EU funding opportunities should be tailored to the specific needs and priorities of LRAs in less developed and outermost regions;
2. also recalls that the Work Plan for Sport (2021-2024) provides, in its thematic priorities, for the adoption and implementation of a European Sport Model making it possible and a more attractive option for the various national sports federations (including, in Italy, associated sports disciplines and sports promotion bodies) to operate within the sports organisation system, taking into account the autonomy and specificity of sport. The model should also take account of the involvement of municipalities and regions, which enable a huge proportion of the self-organised sports that, in turn, make up a significant proportion of residents' sporting activity. Sport has therefore been recognised as a public policy instrument whose social aspect and economic and employment importance were considered decisive features in shaping it, on the basis of a set of principles and key characteristics:
 - a pyramid structure for sports organisations and competitions, where national sports federations play the main role, in charge of organising and drawing up the specific rules at professional, recreational and amateur level, and consolidating their work with European and international federations;
 - promotion of a financial solidarity mechanism between various sector operators in order to have the funds available for amateur sport and provide equal opportunities, starting from the lower levels of sport. the redistribution of income is considered essential for financial survival and development at all levels of every sport;
 - creating a sports movement that is largely independent and capable of developing partnerships with public authorities, in line with the autonomy and specificity of sport. National sports federations that have the power to self-regulate shall base their operation on the principles and practices of transparency, good governance, inclusivity and diversity and accountability;
 - structures based on the promotion of the values of sport and the recognition of volunteering, which play a crucial role in the management of sports organisations and competitions;
 - the introduction of practical provisions and measures aimed at encouraging equality, inclusion, diversity and anti-discrimination in compliance with human rights and upholding

European values (for example, democracy, workers' rights, gender equality, free movement, the equalisation of pay, safe sport etc.). The EU has identified local and regional entities as drivers of inclusion and social cohesion. These entities are able to identify the good practices and public policies that can be most effective in fostering a vision of sport as essential social infrastructure;

3. points out that, because of its specificity, sport has been associated not only with free movement and competition law, but also with a large number of other EU policy areas, including: social, health, education and training, youth, equal opportunities and accessibility, employment, the environment, media and culture, and tourism. However, the EU's capacity to allocate financial resources to this activity starting from the 2014-2020 period under the Erasmus+ programme, and to develop a consistent and comprehensive policy on sport, has not yet been fully realised, while at the same time there has been a steady increase in sport's important and urgent role in regional communities, democracy and social cohesion, emphasising the need to prioritise less developed and outermost regions in EU funding allocations for sports programmes and initiatives, to address regional disparities and promote social cohesion;
4. recalls the objectives of the European Year of Skills and recognises the multifaceted role of sport in skills development and personal growth, as well as its broader societal and economic impacts; in fact, 2023 will allow local and regional authorities to benefit from support in their efforts to implement suitable employment and education policies, recognising the vital role of sports in attracting and retaining talented young people; stresses the importance of training and skills development for European citizens and the urgent need to strengthen the careers guidance provided to them, their employability, their resilience, their physical and mental well-being and their social engagement in order to meet the EU's strategic objectives;
5. highlights that the economic dimension of sport in the EU is estimated to account for around 1.76% of GDP and 2.12% of employment, and these figures are growing steadily. This should not be separated from a real social cohesion dimension, one of the EU's fundamental values⁵ as sport in the EU represents an important social sphere by the representation of social and ethnic diversity in both, amateur and professional level. Sport is a labour-intensive sector (employing many young people), as well as being innovation-intensive (especially as regards digital innovation), generating significant positive externalities in relation to the EU's objectives, including in respect of the circular economy and the green transition⁶, highlighting the importance of involving local and regional authorities in sustainable sports initiatives that contribute to the circular economy and the green transition, particularly in less developed and outermost regions;
6. stresses that, in an international context, the EU is an attractive part of the world when it comes to holding global events and competitions, as well as developing innovative policies for sport-related tourism and mobility thanks to experience gained and an increased focus on the legacies that such events generate, particularly when it comes to improving the liveability of cities, stimulating economic growth, enhancing infrastructure and fostering community cohesion;

⁵ [Cohesion Alliance](#).

⁶ European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *Mapping of innovative practices in the EU to promote sport outside of traditional structures – Final report to the European Commission*, Publications Office, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/063092>.

7. warns that there is an urgent need to address regional disparities, socio-economic inequalities and skills mismatches in the EU, through policies based on an assessment of the social impact of sport. In order not to compromise the EU's as well as the Member States' achievement of economic growth, social cohesion and political stability, there is a significant need to focus on young people in precarious living conditions as well as cities and regions characterized by high unemployment and lacking of health, social and educational infrastructure ;
8. stresses the importance of the territoriality principle within the European Sport Model, through which its commitment to promoting cohesion, fairness and inclusivity is strengthened.
9. recognises the intrinsic value of sports in developing the character and skills of young Europeans, ensuring their preparedness for contemporary professional landscapes. Through sports, they can learn resilience by navigating adversities, comprehend the significance of collaboration and teamwork, acquire a constructive sense of competitiveness, and cultivate leadership abilities essential for the diverse challenges of the modern working environment.

Building a values-based, bottom-up European sports model

10. notes that it is high time for sport to be officially recognised as an essential public policy instrument and a driving force for community, whereby the health and social return that it guarantees for territories and their communities is not separate from its economic importance. On the contrary, it is exactly this recognition that should be the distinguishing feature that will shape the establishment of this instrument;
11. recalls, in this regard, the definition of sport as a "Total Social Fact"⁷: this is not just because it comprises many aspects that reflect the state of health of the society it is part of, but also because its existence on an individual as well as a collective level in terms of the media, organisation, and bringing people together, as well as in financial and symbolic terms, has an impact, and a very strong connection with all societies. Sport, as distinct from mere physical activity and movement, has the ability to bring people together and speaks a universal language. It embodies and teaches according to the values and principles on which society and modern states are founded, such as the internalisation of rules and the sharing of collective emotions. The EU bases its identity on the same values and principles that are currently shaping a European Sport Model and determining a distinctive identity for it;
12. refers to the EU Charter on Youth and Democracy⁸, which acknowledges the value of the skills and abilities acquired through sport, youth work, volunteering, non-formal education and informal learning, especially in youth organisations;
13. welcomes the fact that the EU has already recognised the role that sport plays in all EU regions as a decisive factor for health, capable of improving citizens' individual and collective quality of life and should be accessible to all. It also applauds the fact that the EU has undertaken to promote

⁷ M. Mauss, *Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques*.

⁸ <https://cor.europa.eu/it/our-work/Pages/charter-youth-democracy.aspx>.

sport for its mental and physical benefits that are the result of healthy lifestyles, and as a medium for education and social participation, especially for the younger generations; in the international context, sport is an important element of identity; at the same time, it can also play a role in diplomacy, dialogue and cooperation. As sport is a universal language, it is an effective tool for fostering improved relations and in development cooperation and peace initiatives;

14. recalls that one of the Commission's political priorities for 2023 – in line with the Fourth EU Work Plan for Sport (2021-2024) – is to increase involvement and promote equitable access to sport and health-enhancing physical activity for all in all circumstances, in order to promote an active and environmentally-friendly lifestyle, social cohesion and active citizenship, without barriers. These objectives are in line with recent European Parliament resolutions and with the recommendations of the Conference on the Future of Europe, which focuses on the European approach to mental health, a major social issue that was highlighted and made even more evident during and due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These objectives are part of the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 which seeks to further empower people with disabilities and ensure that they participate fully in society, promote their inclusion and full participation in the sporting community and sport activities .

II. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

General comments

15. considers that the following values-based aspects are complementary to the definition of the European Sport Model:
 - equal opportunities for access: given that sport, by its very nature, creates opportunities for people to come together, it must not fail to take into account the study and monitoring of underprivileged communities' access to sport and social inequalities, which are not just geographical and economic inequalities, but also cultural, religious, physical and psychological ones. European culture is based on inclusivity and must aim to make sport a core instrument, accessible to all - a "citizenship right" - given its nature and its potential to be of benefit to citizens;
 - the relationship between sport and work/school: this should be implemented as a driver for health and relational and mental well-being, including by ensuring that sport is fully incorporated into school systems practised in schools and, by introducing incentive schemes in welfare plans for employees;
 - the culture of sport: strengthening the culture of physical activity and providing training and more information to create sport literacy that will convey positive values and principles to young people such as inclusion anti-discrimination or fair play. This also involves training those responsible for sport education⁹, especially in schools¹⁰, starting already in early childhood education and primary education. In increasingly intercultural and diverse societies such as societies in Europe, including sport in formal learning and education settings has proven to be an innovative tool for managing special educational needs (SEN). Here, sport

⁹ See, for example the JESA project - *Diputacion de Barcelona*: <https://www.diba.cat/es/web/pam-2020-2023/joventut-esportiva-societat-activa>.

¹⁰ See, for example the EU project EduPact: <https://edupact.eu>.

- enhances cognitive, linguistic and interpersonal skills, facilitates the integration of pupils into schools, and contributes to the achievement of SDG 4. Promoting physical activity as a tool for well-being, both individually and collectively, for current and future young generations, is a core mission for the EU and an opportunity to prevent prejudice and social stigma;
- the link between sport and sustainability, which covers a number of aspects related to practising sport, including transport to activities and the environmental impact of facilities (e.g. microplastics, chemicals and energy consumption): integrating the environmental component of ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) into the risk factors of an investment to turn sport into a lever for the sustainable growth of regions, in line with European and global objectives for a more sustainable planet;
 - the digital dimension: not just by considering how sport and physical activity is portrayed digitally, as well as how its image is distorted (through digital addiction, the infodemic etc.), but also taking into account how the sporting world, its public and market is shifting to the digital world (e-sports, videoplay, etc.). Understanding the dynamics of the network is essential for planning the future of European sports and understanding developments among younger generations of digital natives. Moreover, the growing relevance of technological innovation platforms and start-ups strengthens new employment opportunities for youth, who need to be educated in an equal manner about these opportunities;
 - the importance of streamlining the regulatory processes governing the European Sport Model: while recognising the need for oversight and consistency, it is of key importance that sports bodies and organisations at grassroots levels are not burdened by excessive bureaucracy, ensuring they can evolve, and prosper organically to serve the unique needs of their communities;
 - the importance of a health-based approach: a European sports model should establish a framework of minimum training requirements for physical, sports or recreational educators and coaches, which they must satisfy before working with young users of sports services in order to ensure that sports activity is a determining factor for health.

Relevance for local and regional authorities

16. Calls for a greater share of regional development funds, structural funds and EU cohesion policies to be coordinated, co-programmed and co-designed for small-scale activities and sports facilities, with the specific goal of promoting grassroots sport across the regions (grassroots approach). Particular emphasis should be given to outdoor infrastructure (parks, green areas, public spaces etc.), given that a large number of such facilities and spaces are owned by municipalities. The strong, natural alliance between those practising sports, competitors/non-competitors and local decision-makers is mainly created through self-organised sport: walking, running and cycling are the easiest, most inclusive and accessible choices, including in terms of cost, that can foster a system of community welfare and bring people together in the regions, recognising that LRAs are key stakeholders in promoting grassroots sport and outdoor activities in their regions, and urging increased support and funding for outdoor infrastructure projects led by LRAs;
17. calls for sports tourism to be strengthened as an asset through the ESIF funds, backed by dedicated communication and marketing campaigns. Organised services and sports provided by the regions serve as a powerful platform for community integration, fostering a sense of belonging and shared experiences. They also contribute to the local economy by creating job opportunities, attracting new tourism and stimulating the development of infrastructure;

18. supports harmonisation of rules and financing for athletes with dual careers and legal migrant athletes, facilitating dialogue between stakeholders, including the media¹¹;
19. recognises the role played by sport in adopting innovative methods for preventing misinformation, promoting participatory democracy and strengthening democratic culture in EU regions and cities through civic education, the engagement of young people, gender equality in decision-making processes and fostering discussions on EU issues during local and regional elections, and encouraging initiatives that attract and retain young talent in sports, promoting active participation and civic engagement among the youth;
20. calls for the involvement of the level of government that is closest to citizens, i.e. local authorities, in identifying good practices for establishing sport as social infrastructure and the subsequent dissemination and communication activities, and actions needed for its formal recognition, in collaboration with the European Commission, and urging the European Commission to actively engage with LRAs in the development and recognition of sports as social infrastructure in their respective regions.

Relevance for the Member States

21. calls on the EU Member States to set up national programmes aimed at promoting active ageing and intergenerational exchange through sport, including by monitoring the impact of the silver economy on sport in their country; also calls on them to overcome generational injustice caused by the lack of or unequal access to sport; and to prevent additional factors of regional fragility and inequality by incorporating the right to sport into their objectives;
22. urges the Member States to continue to map the progress of national regulations on sports governance and to evaluate whether the European Sport Model is adapted to changing contexts in sport, in order to assess and monitor the practical application of the principles of this Model and underscoring the importance of involving LRAs in the evaluation and application of the European Sport Model's principles at the regional and local levels and to provide national authorities and the sports movement with the transparency needed to encourage and support the development of inclusive public policies aimed at strengthening and improving the application of such principles;
23. acknowledges the need for Member States to adhere to integrity and transparency rules. Integrity requires a collective effort in the promotion and training of professionals who reflect and are able to showcase the values of sport, through the implementation of measures and initiatives aimed at combating problems such as corruption, violence, doping and match fixing to safeguard the integrity of sport. In the same vein, transparency in good governance is to be promoted within sports organisations in order to protect the safety and rights of athletes, spectators and workers in the sector and to prevent abuse in the world of sport, especially towards vulnerable groups such as female, LGBTQIA+, disabled, migrant and youth groups. This can be achieved, for example, by making the decision-making processes of sports governing bodies more inclusive and representative as well as through the implementation of touching points where athletes, parents

¹¹ See, for example the EU project EdMedia: <https://www.eusa.eu/projects/edmedia>.

or other stakeholders can anonymously report abusive cases. This is necessary in order to safeguard the autonomy of sports federations and ensure respect for the values of the European Sport Model.

Relevance for the European Commission

24. in light of the current debate on the new Stability Pact, calls for consideration to be given to the possible temporary exemption of sports investments with a high social return on investment (SROI) from this pact, to allow European sports infrastructure to undergo a period of upgrading, modernisation (with a view to making multifunctional) and efficiency improvement¹², with a particular focus on enhancing sports infrastructure at the local and regional levels, where LRAs can play a central role in driving community well-being through sport;
25. calls for the European Social Fund to incorporate objectives for greater accessibility, inclusion, solidarity and social cohesion through sport, focusing in particular on ensuring more favourable conditions for the outermost regions, taking into account the specific characteristics of these regions;
26. supports the idea of European research to physically and digitally map all existing sporting facilities in order to make them easy to access and use for all citizens (city users, people who go to cities for work or studies and tourists) and to ensure that the planning of new or renovated facilities complies with criteria of correct geographical distribution, environmentally responsible practices, the long-term sustainability of investments and the full efficiency of the European sports ecosystem;
27. encourages raising awareness about the establishment of programmes to guide and strengthen the skills, of under-35s through sport, and about the possibilities for national priorities in this field, including general ones, in order to prevent and combat the phenomenon of NEETs and to reduce the mismatch between labour supply and demand;
28. proposes the adoption of a European assessment methodology for evaluating the return on investments, in line with carbon neutrality, environmental sustainability and social objectives, together with subsequent reward mechanisms, specifically considering the attraction and retention of young talent in sports as one of the key social objectives in evaluating the return on investments, particularly in terms of providing opportunities for youth development and engagement;
29. recommends the adoption of minimal environmental criteria and standards for Member States, regions and cities applying to host medium-sized and large sports events in Europe, with a focus on initiatives that attract and retain young athletes, promote youth engagement, and foster a sense of belonging through sports events;
30. supports the extension of the European Solidarity Corps to include volunteers in sport, by extending the duration or renewal of their experience within the regions;

¹² See in this regard the tests carried out by UEFA and the Italian Institute for Sports Credit (ICS).

31. welcomes the possibility that incentive or tax relief measures may be introduced for companies and employers that decide to tailor their premises, working hours or policy to enable their workers to exercise, and recognising the importance of sports facilities and programmes in attracting and retaining young employees, contributing to their well-being, and promoting a healthy work-life balance;
32. calls for a stronger dialogue to be held through a permanent EU Forum and a Sports Observatory. These structures should aim to make the outcome of topical discussions more concrete and impactful; guide decisions and public policies by implementing an annual pan-European dataset, based on shared formats and frameworks; ensure that EU data is comparable; and involve all levels of local and regional authorities and stakeholders;
33. hopes that the discussion on the new European Work Plan for Sport post-2024 and the new Erasmus+ programme can take into account the features and values of the European Sport Model set out by this opinion to the greatest extent possible, and that the European Committee of the Regions continues to be fully involved in this discussion, and emphasises the need for continuous collaboration between the European Commission, Member States and local and regional authorities in shaping and implementing sports policies at the grassroots level.

Brussels,

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

III. PROCEDURE

Title	Building a values-based, bottom-up European sports model: a vehicle for encouraging inclusion and social wellbeing among young Europeans
References	Resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the key features of a European Sport Model ¹³ European Union Work Plan for Sport ¹⁴ Study on the European Sport Model ¹⁵ European Year of Skills ¹⁶
Legal basis	Article 153(1)(b) TFEU, Article 153(2)(b) TFEU, Article 16(2) TFEU
Procedural basis	Rule 41(b)(ii) RP
Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter	N/A
Date of Bureau/President's decision	
Commission responsible	Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture
Rapporteur	Roberto Pella (IT/EPP)
Discussed in commission	Scheduled for 21 June 2023
Date adopted by commission	2 October 2023
Result of the vote in commission (majority/unanimity)	Majority
Date adopted in plenary	30 November 2023 (Majority)
Previous Committee opinions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Mainstreaming sport into the EU agenda post-2020¹⁷ – Erasmus programme for education, training, youth and sport¹⁸ – Active and healthy ageing¹⁹
Subsidiarity reference	N/A

¹³ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14430-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

¹⁴ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:42020Y1204\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:42020Y1204(01)).

¹⁵ European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *Sennett, J., Le Gall, A., Kelly, G. et al., Study on the European sport model – A report to the European Commission*, Publications Office, 2022, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/28433>.

¹⁶ https://year-of-skills.europa.eu/index_en.

¹⁷ [Mainstreaming sport into the EU agenda post-2020](#).

¹⁸ [Erasmus programme for education, training, youth and sport](#).

¹⁹ [Active and healthy ageing](#).