

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on ‘The White Paper on Sport’

(2008/C 105/09)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- points out that sport is an important means of promoting the integration of all social groups and notes that it enhances individual capabilities and inculcates fundamental values such as fairness, tolerance and solidarity;
- holds the view that a strong, healthy population — young and old, men and women — constitutes a basis and driving force for economic growth, competitiveness and, quite generally, greater prosperity in Europe, thus helping efforts to meet the Lisbon strategy objectives;
- welcomes the Commission’s White Paper on Sport as a contribution to promoting sport as a growing phenomenon of educational, health-enhancing, social and economic significance, which makes an important contribution to the European Union’s strategic objectives of solidarity and prosperity;
- is however concerned to note the objectives set out in the Commission’s White Paper, as they reflect a clear tendency to expand EU competences in the sports sector, with objectives which go beyond the current content of the Nice Declaration and the existing Treaty rules;
- agrees with the Commission that structured dialogue with stakeholders through an EU sport forum and thematic discussions has an important role to play in contributing to the European debate on sport. In line with its role, the Committee feels that it should be actively involved in shaping this dialogue.

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Reference text:

White Paper on Sport (presented by the Commission)

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Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS:

1. notes that sport is an integral part of European society and the daily lives of many European citizens;
2. confirms that the pursuit of sports enhances health and helps to prevent illnesses, particularly those due to a lack of exercise and poor nutrition;
3. emphasises the holistic contribution of sport to educating the younger generation and its support for the process of children and young people developing as fully-fledged, responsible and principled individuals;
4. points out that sport is an important means of promoting the integration of all social groups: in few other areas of social life can immigrants and native-born men and women, with and without disabilities, young and old co-exist in such harmony as in sport;
5. holds the view that a strong, healthy population — young and old, men and women — constitutes a basis and driving force for economic growth, competitiveness and, quite generally, greater prosperity in Europe, thus helping efforts to meet the Lisbon strategy objectives;
6. notes that sport enhances individual capabilities and inculcates fundamental values such as fairness, tolerance and solidarity;
7. therefore welcomes the Commission's White Paper on Sport as a contribution to promoting sport as a growing phenomenon of educational, health-enhancing, social and economic significance, which makes an important contribution to the European Union's strategic objectives of solidarity and prosperity;
8. considers however that sport is also confronted with new threats and challenges which have emerged in European society, such as commercial pressure, exploitation of young sportsmen and women, doping, racism, violence, corruption and money laundering;
9. at the same time, is concerned to note the objectives set out in the Commission's White Paper, as they reflect a clear tendency to expand EU competences in the sports sector, with objectives which go beyond the current content of the Nice

Declaration and the existing Treaty rules; the autonomy of sports organisations and the competences of Member States and of local and regional authorities must not be called into question. It therefore strongly emphasises that the Community has only limited competences in the sports sector;

10. with this in mind, would still welcome supporting, coordinating or complementary measures by the Commission to foster sport in the Member States and to promote its social, educational, health-enhancing and cultural values, without interfering with the competences and autonomy of Member States and sporting organisations;

11. in view of the fact that an independent EU support programme for sport will not be feasible before 2011, proposes that a budget heading for preparatory measures and pilot projects to implement the White Paper be included in the EU budget for 2009; alternatively proposes that information be disseminated widely on funding possibilities which are already open to sport or will become so;

12. is in favour of integrating sport more closely than previously in EU policies and support programmes. In the Committee of the Regions' view, including sport in the treaty amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community is sufficient legal basis to justify explicit provision for supporting, coordinating or complementary measures in the next funding period starting in 2013;

13. urges its members to back the White Paper's call for integration of sport in implementation at regional level of EU support instruments from the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development;

14. appreciates that the White Paper has identified the mainstreaming of sport as a key task and asks the Commission to report regularly on implementation of this task;

on enhancing public health through physical activity

15. feels that the Commission has acknowledged the problem, and has drawn attention at supranational level to the need for action and possible solutions through its complementary White Papers on Sport and on 'A Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity related health issues';

16. feels that there is an obvious case for involving sporting organisations in the improvement of public health through physical activity, given that sporting organisations can reach a large target group due to their being organised in clubs and associations. It endorses the Commission's intention to provide stronger moral and financial support than hitherto for the creation of networks to pool experiences, particularly in relation to good practices for young people, and with an emphasis on grassroots sport; also emphasises the importance of cross-sectoral cooperation in this field, in view of the fact that joint action at Community level can benefit national governmental structures, which are compartmentalised between various sectors (sport, health, education);

17. the Committee also suggests that the Commission should explicitly recognise spontaneous and non-organised sporting activity, and should work to enable sporting and public authority organisations to create the best possible climate in which these activities can develop;

on preventing and combating doping

18. feels that, as in other areas, in the absence of appropriate ethical foundations, predominantly commercial and social pressures to perform represent a major threat in that they encourage the use of unfair means of enhancing performance;

19. notes that doping seriously undermines the spirit of fairness of sport and its image, and represents a serious threat to individual health. It also demotivates other athletes;

20. feels that in competitive sports it is not only professional athletes who are under intense pressure from many social groups to perform. Even upstream of professional sport, these pressures are increasingly exposing amateurs and young athletes to the threat of progressive doping;

21. would argue that commitments to doping-free sport can only be met if effective checks are in place; this requires EU and worldwide determination to combat doping;

22. recommends a more closely coordinated approach to combating doping in the EU, taking into account the Unesco Convention against Doping in Sport and the necessity for an anti-doping testing agency with genuinely independent technical competences;

23. considers that local and regional authorities and organisations are particularly well placed to raise awareness of the problem through information campaigns in schools, sports clubs and the sports sector in general, and to contribute to the imparting of knowledge; therefore calls on them to act, and confirms its intention to complement and support such activities at local and regional level;

on enhancing the role of sport in education and training

24. welcomes and approves efforts to support and promote sport and exercise through the Commission's various policy initiatives and the award of a label to schools which are particularly committed to promoting physical activity and to sports associations which pay special attention to the quality of their services;

25. emphasises the particular importance of pre-school exercise, games and sport for the physical, mental, cognitive and social development of children and young people as an essential part of a holistic education process. The Committee therefore calls on the Commission to attach particular importance to physical activity in nursery schools;

26. would nevertheless point out that any supporting, coordinating or complementary measures by the Commission in education or sport must not encroach on the powers of Member States or of the competent subnational levels in Member States;

on promoting volunteering and active citizenship through sport

27. emphasises the particular importance of volunteering and calls on the Commission to take account of voluntary work in sport from the very outset; also warns against seeing sport as a merely economic activity, as this does not adequately reflect the phenomenon of sport as a whole. Professional sport is only a small part of the overall sport movement, a fact which the White Paper does not sufficiently reflect;

28. feels that especially in sport there is a direct link between civic commitment and community building, thus serving not only sports-related objectives but also contributing to society and promoting public-spiritedness;

29. with regard to promoting grassroots sport, welcomes the 'Europe for Citizens' programme;

30. with regard to the 'Youth in Action' programme, welcomes the Commission's proposal to promote volunteering by young people in the sports sector;

31. welcomes the Commission's plan to launch a European study on volunteering in sport, as this will be a useful means of identifying future tasks and ensuring planning certainty with regard to volunteering in the sports sector;

on using the potential of sport for social inclusion, integration and equal opportunities

32. feels that the special role that sport can play for people with disabilities must be taken into account;

33. therefore encourages Member States, the local and regional authorities, and sport organisations to take into account the needs of people with disabilities, and to ensure that sport venues and accommodations are accessible for people with disabilities;

34. feels that the training of monitors, trainers, volunteers and staff of clubs and organisations for the purpose of welcoming people with disabilities should be promoted;

35. considers that elderly people can preserve their potential for physical and mental activity for as long as possible through sport and retain their independence, in order to reduce their dependency on outside help as far as possible. Mobility means that elderly people can maintain their social contacts and participate autonomously in social life. Among other things, sports activities have a specific role to play here;

36. agrees that Member States should consider the potential of sports to promote integration as part of their programming of the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund and the European Integration Fund;

on strengthening the prevention of and fight against racism and violence

37. welcomes existing efforts at national and international level to combat violence and racism in sports by putting in place central information points and ensuring cooperation between police authorities and sports clubs;

38. notes that the 2006 World Cup in Germany demonstrated that such cooperation is already working and leading to good results;

on sharing our values with other parts of the world

39. encourages the Commission to do more to promote the use of sport as a tool in its development policy;

40. therefore recommends tapping into the experience and knowledge of the United Nations and the Member States derived from the 2005 International Year of Sport and Physical Education as a means of promoting education, health, development and peace, and suggests that where appropriate existing projects and measures could continue running and developing;

41. for reasons of subsidiarity, does not feel there is any need for uniform EU rules on migration of athletes from third countries or for applying circular migration arrangements. Migration of athletes should therefore remain a national competence;

on supporting sustainable development

42. agrees that European sport organisations and sport event organisers should adopt environmental objectives and approves the Commission's plan to encourage them to participate in the Eco Management Audit Scheme (EMAS) and Community Eco-Label Award schemes, which should be promoted during major sport events;

43. welcomes the Commission's proposal to take sport into account as a component of the new LIFE+ programme;

on the economic dimension of sport

44. points out that the economic potential of sport for tourism is not only reflected in major sports events but that active sport in the form of recreational tourism makes a significant contribution to regional development and to structural change in particular. Regional strategies play a key role here. The Commission should therefore continue supporting regions in their endeavours to take their structural development forward through measures which are adapted to regional needs; encourages local and regional authorities to invest some of the Structural Funds resources available to them in sports and leisure facilities;

on moving towards evidence-based sport policies

45. is concerned that the Commission is calling for an improved knowledge base without reaching agreement with Member States and European regions on the objectives of such a measure;

46. points out that compiling further sports and sports-related statistics as an end in itself, which is not really necessary in order to provide a better picture of sport's added value, could result in additional red tape. In view of the efforts to cut red tape, including at European level, such additional procedures are definitely to be avoided;

47. therefore, as a first step, urges the Commission to engage in closer dialogue with the Member States and in particular the regions in order to reach a common agreement on the objectives of a new knowledge base. It is important to ensure that additional red tape connected with the compilation of statistics is kept to a minimum;

48. acknowledges that the Commission will launch a study to assess the direct and indirect contribution of sport to the Lisbon agenda. However, it would ask whether the lack of a sound knowledge base mentioned by the Commission might not seriously constrain a considered assessment of the contribution of sport to the Lisbon agenda. The Committee of the Regions requests the Commission to inform it of the findings of the study;

on putting public support for sport on a more secure footing

49. feels that sustainable financing models for giving long-term support to sporting organisations are indispensable as a basis for promoting sport in the Member States;

50. feels that state support for grassroots sport is essential and points out that in many Member States such sports receive significant direct or indirect contributions (through taxes and levies) from state-run or state-licensed gambling or lottery services;

51. in this context, would emphasise that existing government monopolies in the field of sports-related gambling and lotteries, which are based on imperative requirements in the general interest, on the prevention of compulsive gambling and the maintenance of public order, and which consistently pursue such objectives, comply with European law, according to the established case law of the European Court of Justice. The Committee therefore feels that it would be appropriate to use money from gambling, which is fundamentally undesirable, for purposes which are in the public interest (e.g. sport);

52. welcomes the European Commission's intention of carrying out an independent study on the financing of grassroots sport in the Member States, and requests that it waits for the findings of this study before taking political decisions which could undermine state support for grassroots sport;

53. asks the Commission to recognise there is a need for reliable methods to gauge the impact of public funding for sport. National, regional and local funding systems have different arrangements and it is worthwhile using studies and comparisons in order to be able to assess the importance of different types of public support for sport;

54. supports the Commission in its plans to defend maintenance of the existing possibilities of reduced VAT rates for sport;

on the organisation of sport

55. together with the Commission, acknowledges the autonomy of sporting organisations and representative structures, and feels that the White Paper fails to emphasise the importance of such autonomy as described and acknowledged in the Nice Declaration;

on the specificity of sport

56. feels that the specific characteristics of sport are fundamental and feels that the White Paper fails to take a clear position on this point. The Committee is concerned that a case-by-case approach to dealing with the specificity of sport will be unsatisfactory from the perspective of sporting organisations and will entrench existing legal uncertainty;

on free movement and nationality

57. feels that the instances of limited and proportionate restrictions on free movement listed in the White Paper are appropriate, useful and necessary in view of the specific characteristics of sport;

on transfers

58. feels that transfer rules are essential to ensure equal competition between sport clubs;

on players' agents

59. is pleased that the Commission will carry out an impact assessment to provide a clear overview of the activities of players' agents in the EU;

60. suggests that, if action at EU level is necessary, national laws and the rules of sporting organisations be coordinated jointly with international federations;

on protection of minors

61. urges the Commission to give high priority to implementing cooperation with Member States and sporting organisations on the protection of minors, as proposed in the White Paper;

on corruption, money laundering and other forms of financial crime

62. welcomes the Commission's intention to support anti-corruption authorities and to monitor the implementation of EU anti-money laundering legislation with regard to the sports sector;

on licensing systems for clubs

63. feels that licensing systems are the responsibility of sporting organisations, provided that such systems are compatible with competition law and internal market provisions;

on the media

64. is pleased that the Commission will continue to support the right to information and wide access for citizens to broadcasts of sporting events;

65. feels therefore that existing European legislation on the right to broadcast short news reports are an important and proven means of ensuring freedom of information and the plurality of views;

66. is therefore in favour of using future evaluations of the European legislative framework for audiovisual media to consider whether and to what extent the right to broadcast short news reports should be extended to other media such as radio;

67. reaffirms its support of the role of public service broadcasters in ensuring diversity. As economically autonomous public service providers, public broadcasters have a duty to cover minority-interest sport as well as pursuing ratings success with coverage of major events;

on structured dialogue

68. agrees with the Commission that structured dialogue with stakeholders through an EU sport forum and thematic discussions has an important role to play in contributing to the European debate on sport. In line with its role, the Committee feels that it should be actively involved in shaping this dialogue. In this connection the CoR would highlight the need for forums for representatives from different sports and representatives from public stadium owners to enable them to discuss current and future requirements for sports facilities and stadiums. The Committee hopes the Commission will use the structured dialogue for this purpose;

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69. suggests that seminars should be held with the involvement of specialist agencies in order to provide European sporting organisations with information on the application of the *acquis communautaire*;

70. proposes that conferences on sport and regional development should be held, to explain the benefits of sport for regional development and to identify best practices;

71. suggests that the Commission should promote and provide long-term support for the development of cross-border inter-regional clubs and projects (such as the European inter-regional sport pool in the greater SaarLorLux region);

on cooperation with Member States

72. feels that the non-government sport movement should be more closely involved in the dialogue between the European Commission and the Member States, as in the Council of Europe;

73. in this connection, points out that cooperation should not encroach on Member State competences in the sports sector.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE
