

EU Conference on Sports Agents

Brussels, 9-10 November 2011

Speech

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Dear delegates,
Members of the European Parliament,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to welcome you to today's conference. I would like to thank the many distinguished speakers who have kindly accepted our invitation to share their expertise with us.

And I would like to welcome all of you in the audience – I am sure you will contribute to a lively discussion.

The subject of today's conference – sports agents - is highly topical. Discussions on the role and activities of sports agents, particularly in the field of football, have been going on for several years. Agents have a key function to play as intermediaries between players and clubs. Their role has grown in importance as money has flowed in huge quantities into professional football in recent years and as Europe has become the epicentre of global football.

Football in Europe is **the** example of a sport which has become very successful and very wealthy. The appetite of Europe's

football fans for the sport shows no bounds. At the same time, revenues from media rights, tickets and sponsors have led to an unparalleled development of wealth and of excellence in the game. However, this influx of money has also given rise to specific concerns and the risk of a growing gap between the game and the fans. One area that attracts concerns is the system of transfers of players, the point where players' agents are most heavily involved but also the point where the business of football is murkiest and least transparent.

The Commission has already highlighted the problems associated with the activities of agents - most recently in its Communication on Sport. There have also been many calls for the EU to act in this field.

We commissioned an independent study in order to have a clearer view of the situation and to better distinguish between real and perceived problems. The results will be presented today and will form a basis for your discussion. The study provides high-quality research and insights into the current situation regarding sports agents in the European Union and it highlights two major issues that the EU could appropriately address with regard to sports agents.

The first issue concerns possible obstacles to the free provision of agents' services across the EU Internal Market. It seems that few obstacles exist at the moment. A minority of Member States have adopted specific laws regulating the activities of agents.

We will hear today about the approach adopted by France, the country with the most developed legislation in this field. All in all, it would appear that agents are not hindered in their cross-border activities; however, this is one point on which we need to hear more from you here today. And, if it is the case that real barriers to establishment exist, the Commission would have to examine the situation to assess whether action is needed.

The second category of issues raised by the activities of agents is broader and more complex to address, and it touches on questions of an ethical nature; I am talking about the transparency of financial transactions; the possible exploitation of young sportspeople and the possible conflicts of interest in the exercise of the profession of agent.

Some of these problems if they are occurring would fall under the scope of criminal law: corruption, money laundering, trafficking of human beings. These are all areas where Member States have primary competence to legislate and where the basic legislative frameworks have been the subject of some harmonisation at EU level. It seems that the relevant legislation is in place, and that the main problems consist in ensuring appropriate enforcement.

On the other hand, these ethical issues raise a wider question concerning the governance of sport. Criminal proceedings must only be an instrument of last resort if we want to address flaws in the way sport is run. Prevention is usually more effective than

repression in solving problem. What is needed is the setting up of a system of rules at the level of sport's own governance and ensuring compliance with those rules by all those involved.

And so I am glad that FIFA has accepted to present today their current set of Regulations on Players' Agents as well as their ongoing reflections on possible amendments to those Regulations. I am confident that today's debate will feed into the discussions that FIFA is leading within the football family, and will inform the final outcome of those discussions. I am also grateful to the main stakeholders in the football world: federations, leagues, clubs, players and agents, who have worked closely with our services to prepare this conference and who will present their views today on the main topics for discussion.

Although the focus of the conference is on professional football, we wanted to include in the discussion other sports where agents are active. In Europe, this is the case for team sports such as basketball and rugby, as well as handball, ice-hockey and volleyball. I am happy to see that representatives of those disciplines have accepted our invitation to this conference. They will be under the spotlight tomorrow morning, and I am confident that their discussion will contribute to highlight the different practices carried out in sports other than football, thereby contributing to a fruitful exchange of views.

Tomorrow we will also hear from intervention from the European Committee for Standardisation, who will share with us their valuable expertise in producing standards for services and professions. We will conclude with a final panel where possible solutions to the identified problems will be discussed.

The European Commission has been entrusted with the task of facilitating a dialogue amongst stakeholders and to promote cooperation between bodies responsible for sports, all with a view to promoting the development of a healthy, vibrant and social inclusive European sports sector. As Commissioner in charge of sport, I fully intend to promote the adoption of measures in the field of sport agents, based on the best practices identified amongst sport governing bodies and public authorities, and to explore possible new solutions to the issues that require attention.

Now the ball is in your court. I wish you all a lively and productive discussion.