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## Media freedom in sport

### Report<sup>1</sup>

Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media

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1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 16036](#), Reference 4837 of 29 November 2024.



## A. Draft resolution<sup>2</sup>

1. Sports journalism performs an essential democratic function by informing the public, ensuring transparency and contributing to accountability in sports governance. Freedom of expression and freedom of information, as guaranteed by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5), therefore apply fully to sport and to sports journalism.
2. The Parliamentary Assembly refers to the relevant Council of Europe framework in this area, in particular:
  - 2.1. the [Revised European Sports Charter](#), which recognises the importance of co-operation among the various stakeholders in sport and affirms that the integrity of sport rests, in particular, on the principles of transparency, accountability and good governance. These principles create an environment conducive to the work of the media and independent journalism, which play an essential role in promoting transparency and accountability in sport;
  - 2.2. [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2018\)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the promotion of good governance in sport](#) which sets out key principles relating to transparency, accountability, conflicts of interest, whistleblower protection and public funding conditionality in sport;
  - 2.3. [the Declaration by the Committee of Ministers on sport integrity \(2023\)](#), calling for strengthened governance frameworks, enhanced transparency and effective mechanisms to combat corruption and manipulation in sport;
  - 2.4. [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2016\)4](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors, complemented by the more recent [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2024\)2](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on countering the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), addressing legal harassment against public interest reporting; as well as the work of the Platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists, which continues to document threats, intimidation and restrictions affecting journalists across Europe, including in sports reporting;
  - 2.5. the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, which confirms the strong public interest in investigative sports journalism and the risks to freedom of expression when journalists face disproportionate sanctions or pressure.
3. The Assembly also points to [Resolution 2200 \(2018\)](#) “Good football governance”, [Resolution 2199 \(2018\)](#) and [Recommendation 2120 \(2018\)](#) “Towards a framework for modern sports governance”, [Resolution 2465 \(2022\)](#) “The fight for a level playing field – Ending discrimination against women in the world of sport”, [Resolution 2532 \(2024\)](#) and [Recommendation 2268 \(2024\)](#) “Guaranteeing media freedom and the safety of journalists: an obligation of member States”, and [Resolution 2607 \(2025\)](#) and [Recommendation 2297 \(2025\)](#) “Protecting human rights in and through sport: obligations and shared responsibilities”.
4. Sport has become a global and highly commercialised sector with significant economic, social and political influence, which increases the importance of independent media scrutiny while also intensifying structural pressures linked to the concentration of media rights, commercial interests and control over access to information.
5. The profound transformation of the media environment, driven by digitalisation, the growing role of digital platforms and economic change, has weakened traditional journalism models and reduced the resources available for investigative reporting, including in sport, while sports journalism remains highly dependent on access to events, athletes and institutions.
6. In the context of upcoming major sporting events such as the 2026 FIFA World Cup, media and policy discussions have already highlighted potential challenges related to increasingly restrictive accreditation systems, the growing control of content by rights holders, and the complexity of ensuring consistent media access across multiple host countries. These developments illustrate broader structural trends which may further affect the ability of journalists to report freely and independently across a range of major competitions and high-profile international events.
7. The Assembly is deeply concerned about restrictions on journalistic access, contractual limitations, intimidation, harassment, legal pressure and structural inequalities within sports media, including the particular challenges faced by women in sports journalism. Sexual harassment, threats and intimidation create a chilling

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2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 2 June 2026.

effect that undermines participation in the profession and reinforces persistent gender inequalities in sports media, including the under-representation of women in investigative sports reporting and the unequal visibility of women's sport. Public investment in sport creates a legitimate expectation of transparency, accountability and openness to independent media scrutiny.

8. In light of these considerations, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States to ensure that freedom of expression and freedom of information are effectively guaranteed in sport, including by:

- 8.1. guaranteeing practical, fair and non-discriminatory access for journalists to sporting events, athletes and relevant institutions;
- 8.2. reviewing legal and regulatory frameworks on broadcasting rights, accreditation systems and contractual arrangements so that they do not disproportionately restrict journalistic activity or the public's right to information;
- 8.3. strengthening whistleblower protection mechanisms in sport, including secure reporting channels and effective protection against retaliation;
- 8.4. supporting investigative journalism in sport through appropriate public interest funding mechanisms and safeguards against undue commercial or political interference;
- 8.5. ensuring that sports organisations benefiting from public funding comply with minimum standards of transparency, accountability and media access, including fair accreditation procedures;
- 8.6. taking effective measures to prevent and address intimidation, harassment and violence against sports journalists, both online and offline;
- 8.7. promoting gender equality in sports media, including by addressing structural barriers, ensuring equal opportunities and combating discrimination and harassment;
- 8.8. improving the collection of data on gender representation and diversity in sports journalism to support evidence-based policy making.

9. Furthermore, the Assembly urges sports organisations, federations and event organisers to recognise media freedom as a core element of good governance in sport and to ensure that journalists can operate independently and without undue interference, including by:

- 9.1. ensuring that host countries of major sporting events fully respect media freedom and facilitate the work of journalists, including by avoiding unnecessarily restrictive, burdensome or disproportionately costly visa and accreditation procedures that may impede access for independent journalists and hinder investigative reporting during international sporting events;
- 9.2. guaranteeing access to sporting events, venues, athletes and information on a fair, transparent and non-discriminatory basis;
- 9.3. ensuring that accreditation systems are not used to control editorial content or restrict legitimate reporting;
- 9.4. avoiding contractual arrangements that undermine editorial independence or impose disproportionate restrictions on the use of information gathered in the public interest;
- 9.5. facilitating access for investigative journalists, including on issues of governance, integrity and accountability;
- 9.6. refraining from practices that limit critical reporting or treat journalistic work as a form of controlled communication output.

10. The Assembly also calls on media organisations and journalism stakeholders to safeguard editorial independence in sports reporting and to contribute actively to a pluralistic media environment, including by:

- 10.1. resisting commercial or institutional pressures that may affect journalistic integrity;
- 10.2. investing in investigative sports journalism as a key contribution to transparency and accountability in sport;
- 10.3. promoting diversity and inclusion within newsrooms, including balanced representation in editorial and leadership positions;
- 10.4. developing ethical standards for the use of artificial intelligence in sports journalism, ensuring transparency, accountability and human oversight.

11. Furthermore, the Assembly recalls the principle of the specificity of sport, as recognised in European Union law, which reflects the unique social, cultural and democratic role of sport in European society. While acknowledging the autonomy and special status granted to sports organisations, the Assembly stresses that these principles must not be used to shield such organisations from public scrutiny and accountability. As European governments continue to promote media freedom and protect investigative journalism as fundamental democratic values, there is a legitimate expectation that these standards should also be respected and upheld internationally within global sports governance.

12. Finally, the Assembly supports continued reflection on initiatives by non-governmental organisations and human rights defenders, which may contribute to improving transparency and access to reliable governance information in sport, in complementarity with Council of Europe standards.

13. Safeguarding media freedom in sport requires sustained co-operation between public authorities, sports organisations, media actors and civil society to ensure both the autonomy of sport and its democratic accountability.

## B. Draft recommendation<sup>3</sup>

1. The Parliamentary Assembly refers to its Resolution ... (2026) "Media freedom in sport" and reiterates that independent sports journalism is an essential component of democratic accountability, transparency and integrity in sport.
2. The Assembly underlines that the growing commercialisation of professional sports, increasing control over access to information and wider transformations of the media environment create significant challenges for freedom of expression and the public's right to information in the field of sport. It therefore recommends that the Committee of Ministers:
  - 2.1. reinforce the Council of Europe's standard-setting and monitoring work on media freedom in sport, building on the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5), the Revised European Sports Charter, Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)12 on the promotion of good governance in sport, Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)4 on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors, Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)2 on countering the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), and the relevant case law of the European Court of Human Rights;
  - 2.2. invite the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS) to integrate media freedom and access to information more systematically into its activities on sports governance, integrity and human rights in sport, including through regular consultations with journalists, media organisations, sports bodies, academics and civil society organisations;
  - 2.3. encourage the development of practical guidelines and good practices for fair, transparent and non-discriminatory media accreditation and access procedures at sporting events, while safeguarding editorial independence and the public's right to information;
  - 2.4. promote stronger protection for investigative sports journalists, whistleblowers and journalistic sources, in particular in cases involving corruption, match fixing, doping, financial misconduct or human rights violations in sport;
  - 2.5. support initiatives aimed at improving transparency and accountability in sport governance, including through co-operation with independent watchdog organisations, human rights defenders and investigative journalism networks;
  - 2.6. encourage member States and sports organisations to address structural inequalities in sports media, notably by promoting gender equality, combating harassment and discrimination, and improving the visibility and representation of women in sports journalism and women's sports coverage;
  - 2.7. examine the impact of digitalisation, platformisation and artificial intelligence on media freedom in sport, including the growing control of content by rights holders and digital platforms, with a view to developing policy guidance that safeguards pluralism, editorial independence and the sustainability of quality journalism in sport.

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3. Draft recommendation adopted unanimously by the committee on 2 June 2026.

## C. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Tone Wilhelmsen Trøen, rapporteur<sup>4</sup>

### 1. Introduction

1. This report originated in the motion for a resolution on “Media freedom in sport” (Doc. 16036), which was referred to the committee on Culture, Education and Media, on 29 November 2024.
2. The media plays a pivotal role in the global sports industry and the sports economy, acting as a conduit between sports competitions and the public. Sports journalists have a vital role in informing the public and can play a significant part in exposing misbehaviour and scandals that affect sports organisations and athletes. They can also promote value-based sports governance.
3. Recent press reporting across football, tennis and the Olympic Games points to a broader trend of increasingly regulated accreditation systems, restricted media zones and tightly controlled access to athletes and venues, which together limit the scope for spontaneous questioning and independent newsgathering by journalists at major sporting events. These practices illustrate a broader trend towards increased institutional control over media access and content production in elite sport.<sup>5</sup>
4. The challenges currently facing sports journalism are similar to those impacting other forms of independent journalism. These challenges are a result of the crisis of traditional media in the current global digitalisation era, as well as the rise of social media. However, the unique characteristics of sports journalism can present additional challenges. Journalists who address critical issues within the sports family they cover are often met with disdain by their colleagues, and marginalised because they put harmony within the sports family at risk. The de facto monopoly status of sports organisations serves to reinforce a culture in which criticism is not tolerated, and sports journalists are subject to pressure, threats and retaliation measures because of their reports.
5. To fulfil their role effectively, media organisations and journalists must have proper access to sports event venues. While copyright and broadcasting rights impose limitations, these must be balanced with the freedom of information, and there should not be any undue restrictions on how sports news content is created and disseminated. It is vital that sports journalists are protected from violence, intimidation, harm, discrimination, and self-censorship. They should also have the right to protect the sources of their information, which, in many instances, is jeopardised.
6. In line with the motion for a resolution, the report will examine the challenges faced by sports journalists when it comes to conducting investigations and gaining access to venues, athletes, and sports officials.
7. This report is based on desk research and on contributions from several experts with whom we had the privilege of speaking in committee hearings.<sup>6</sup> More recently, on 12 March 2026, the Committee held an exchange of views with Mr Andreas Selliaas, sports journalist (Norway), and Ms Mejdaline Mhiri, co-president of the Association of Women Sports Journalists (France). The hearing provided further insight into the structural, political and societal challenges affecting media freedom in sport, including growing restrictions on journalistic access, increasing political influence in sport governance, and persistent inequalities in sports media, notably with regard to gender representation.

### 2. Standard-setting of the Council of Europe

8. The [Revised European Sports Charter \(ESC\)](#) is the Council of Europe standard which lays down the basic principles for national sports policies and provides guidance to member states on how to perfect their existing sport legislations or other policies and to develop a comprehensive framework for sport. Its Article 5 states that dialogue and co-operation should be undertaken with representatives of companies and occupational categories involved in sport in sectors, including the media. According to Article 8(2), sport integrity policies should encourage and co-operate with whistle-blowers and free media.

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4. The explanatory memorandum is drawn up under the responsibility of the rapporteur.

5. [Qatar: Very restrictive accreditation for reporters covering Fifa World Cup | RSF](#); [Qatar: World Cup restrictions on broadcasters threaten media freedom - IFJ](#); [Beijing Winter Olympics: RSF urges press to protect themselves against surveillance | RSF](#); [Sochi Winter Olympics – freedom of information left out in the cold | RSF](#).

6. I wish to thank in particular: Mr Jens Sejer Andersen, International Director of Play the Game (PTG); Mr Andrew Moger, Chief Executive Officer of News Media Coalition (NMC); Mr Håvard Melnæs, Editor at Josimar, Oslo, Norway; and Mr Raymond Boyle, Centre for Cultural Policy Research, University of Glasgow, United Kingdom.

9. The [16th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Sport](#) (November 2020 – February 2021) adopted a Resolution concerning “Human rights in sport”<sup>7</sup> in which the Ministers encouraged the member States to harness the potential of the Council of Europe to further enhance the protection and promotion of human rights in the field of sport, in particular by continuing developing standards and tools on the protection of whistle-blowers, paying attention that they can be effectively applied in the field of sport. Furthermore, they invited the member States to use the Council of Europe standards and tools in particular to adopt or enhance policies aimed at defending media freedom in the field of sport and hosting of major sports events, within the boundaries of sports competitions organisers’ property rights and in accordance with the principles of proportionality.

10. The Parliamentary Assembly, in its [Resolution 2200 \(2018\)](#) “Good football governance”, recalled that sports organisations have a role to play in protecting human rights and must exert a positive influence on the attitude of countries that host sports events. In this regard, the Assembly recommended that FIFA and UEFA, each within its sphere of responsibility, insist with the governments of host countries on the necessity to protect fundamental civil and political rights, and in particular freedom of expression – including the freedom of the media – and freedom of peaceful assembly, and this not only in connection with their competitions, but beyond.

11. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has, in its jurisprudence, has addressed issues of human rights, including freedom of expression and information, in the sports field.<sup>8</sup>

12. The ECtHR dealt in particular with the issue of the importance of sports journalism for society in [Ressiot and Others v. France](#). The case concerned investigations at the offices of the newspapers L'Équipe and Le Point, as well as the homes of journalists accused of breaching the confidentiality of the investigation and receiving stolen goods. The ECtHR found a violation of Article 10 (freedom of expression) of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The subject of the articles in question — doping in professional sport, in this case cycling — and the associated problems, were of very great public interest. Moreover, the articles responded to a growing and legitimate public demand for information on doping practices in sport, particularly in cycling.

13. It is important to note that defamation proceedings against journalists may have a chilling effect on freedom of expression and public debate. The Council of Europe promotes the decriminalisation of defamation and provides guidance to its member states with a view to ensuring that defamation laws and their application comply with the principle of proportionality with regard to human rights.<sup>9</sup> In [Colaço Mestre et SIC v Portugal](#) the ECtHR was required to deliver a ruling on an accusation of defamation relating to an article that alleged corruption among referees in Portugal. The ECtHR found a violation of Article 10 ECHR because the complainant was a well-known public figure who played an important role in the nation’s public life, and the debate around issues of corruption in football was clearly of public interest. Punishing a journalist would seriously hamper the contribution of the press to the discussion of problems of general interest.

14. The right of the public to information can also be undermined by the exercise of exclusive broadcasting rights by a broadcaster. The original Article 9 of the European Convention on Transfrontier Television (ECTT)<sup>10</sup> included a rather vague provision that required each Party to examine how avoid that the exercise of exclusive broadcasting rights by a broadcaster deprive a large part of the public of the opportunity to follow an event of high public interest on television, undermining thereby the right of the public to information.

15. In its [Recommendation No. R \(91\) 5 on the right to short reporting on major events](#), the Committee of Ministers stated that the exercise of exclusive broadcasting rights in a transfrontier context should be subject to limitations in order to protect the public’s right to information, and proposed that secondary broadcasters (that is, those which do not have exclusive right on an event of high interest to the public) should be entitled to provide information on a major event by means of a short report by recording the signal of the primary broadcaster and/or by having access to the site to cover the major event. It also proposed rules for the use of such short reports by secondary broadcasters.

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7. 16th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Sport (November 2020 – February 2021) - Resolutions as adopted at the Closing Session on 11 February 2021 [MSL16\(2020\)10final](#).

8. See [Sport and the European Convention on Human Rights](#).

9. See the [Council of Europe’s webpage on defamation](#).

10. European Convention on Transfrontier Television ([ETS No. 132](#)) and Protocol amending the European Convention on Transfrontier Television ([ETS No. 171](#)) Since its entry into force, this Protocol forms an integral part of ETS 132 and is closed to legal acts. The ECTT is the first international treaty creating a legal framework for the free circulation of transfrontier television programmes in Europe, through minimum common rules, in fields such as programming, advertising, sponsorship and the protection of certain individual rights.

16. Following the principles of this Recommendation, the 1998 Protocol amending the ECTT introduced a new provision in Article 9, which now mentions introducing the right to short reporting on events of high interest for the public as one possible measure to avoid that the right of the public to information is undermined due to the exercise of exclusive rights for the transmission or retransmission of major events.

17. The Committee of Ministers' [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2018\)12 on the promotion of good governance in sport](#) sets out key principles relating to transparency, accountability, conflicts of interest, whistleblower protection and public funding conditionality in sport. Furthermore, the [Committee of Ministers' Declaration on sport integrity \(2023\)](#) calls for strengthened governance frameworks, enhanced transparency and effective mechanisms to combat corruption and manipulation in sport. This strong political statement aligns with the present analysis regarding governance opacity and the role of investigative journalism.

18. The Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS) also addressed the issue of media freedom in sport through policy dialogue and stakeholder engagement. On 5 June 2019, a round table on "Sport and Media Freedom" brought together journalists, media freedom experts and representatives of sports organisations. The discussions highlighted the ambivalent role of the media in sport, as both a key driver of the sports economy and a watchdog capable of exposing misconduct and governance failures. Participants underlined that undue restrictions on access to information, accreditation, filming rights or editorial independence undermine the public's right to receive impartial information.

19. The round table also emphasised the particular risks faced by investigative sports journalists, especially when covering issues such as corruption, match-fixing or doping, where links with organised crime may expose them to intimidation, legal pressure or even physical threats. The discussions further pointed to a lack of awareness, both among journalists and within media organisations, of the human rights dimension of media freedom in sport.

20. Participants stressed the need to strengthen co-operation between sports organisations, media actors and public authorities, including through the development of voluntary charters of good practice and awareness-raising initiatives on media freedom standards. They also underlined that respecting media freedom should be seen not as a constraint but as a means to enhance transparency, accountability and public trust in sport.

### 3. European Union law and policy

21. As mentioned above, the exercise of exclusive broadcasting rights by a broadcaster may undermine the right of the public to information.

22. The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), in its [judgment regarding the Football Association Premier League \(FAPL\) case](#), defined the nature of those exclusive rights. The Court explained that the organiser of a sporting event cannot claim copyright in matches themselves, as sporting events cannot be regarded as intellectual creations classifiable as works within the meaning of EU Copyright legislation. It is, however, permissible for a Member State to protect sporting events by putting in place specific national legislation, or by recognising protection conferred upon those events by agreements concluded between the persons having the right to make the audiovisual content of the events available to the public and the persons who wish to broadcast that content to the public of their choice.

23. A report by the European Audiovisual Observatory<sup>11</sup> explains that some countries have expressly regulated the rights on audiovisual sports events (Bulgaria, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovak Republic, Spain), whereas in some of the countries where no specific protection is granted to sports events (e.g. Cyprus, Czech Republic, Germany), sports event organisers can rely on domiciliary rights (also referred to as "house" rights), that allow the rightsholder of the event to claim rights on the recordings made within the venues where the events take place.

24. With regard to the public's right to information, Article 15 of the EU's [Audiovisual Media Services Directive](#) contains an obligation for its member states to "ensure that for the purpose of short news reports, any broadcaster established in the Union has access on a fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory basis to events of high interest to the public which are transmitted on an exclusive basis by a broadcaster under their jurisdiction".<sup>12</sup> Broadcasters must be allowed to freely choose short extracts from the transmitting broadcaster's signal with, unless impossible for reasons of practicality, at least the identification of their source. These short extracts are to be used solely for general news programmes and may be used in on-

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11. [Mapping report on national remedies against online piracy of sports content; Audiovisual sports rights – between exclusivity and right to information.](#)

demand audiovisual media services only if the same programme is offered on a deferred basis by the same media service provider. The modalities and conditions regarding the provision of such short extracts must be defined with respect to any compensation arrangements, the maximum length of short extracts and time limits regarding their transmission. Where compensation is provided for, it shall not exceed the additional costs directly incurred in providing access.

#### **4. Systemic challenges: political influence, access restrictions and journalistic risks**

##### **4.1. Structural transformation of the media environment**

25. At a time of disinformation, untrustworthy synthetic AI-generated information and economic constraints on newsroom operations, it is vital for governments and other institutions to proactively support and enable professional witness-based newsgathering and reporting, as it has the potential to uncover and report the truth, and hold back the tide of fake disinformation campaigns and manipulation of public knowledge and opinion.

26. A recent analysis by the European Audiovisual Observatory confirms that the European news media sector is undergoing profound structural transformation driven by digital technologies, with significant implications for media freedom and sustainability. Digitalisation, platformisation and changing consumption patterns are reshaping news production and distribution, while creating new economic pressures on traditional media and increasing dependence on large online platforms.

27. These developments raise concerns regarding editorial independence, market concentration and the long-term viability of quality journalism, including in specialised fields such as sports reporting, where investigative work is particularly resource-intensive. At the same time, evolving regulatory responses at European level seek to balance the fight against disinformation and harmful content with the protection of freedom of expression and media pluralism.<sup>13</sup>

##### **4.2. Specific features of sports journalism**

28. Sports journalists are subject to the same legal constraints and challenges than other journalists, but they also have specific issues. The institutional culture is a key factor in shaping the context in which journalists operate, and sport journalists are a diverse group of journalists constrained by the institutions they work for.

29. There are two challenges that are specific to sports journalism:

- Sports are run by monopoly organisations. This yields a lot of power to those who are in charge of these organisations, and it gives ample opportunity to isolate marginalised people or ignore critical voices inside and outside the organisation;
- For 150 years, sports journalism has very much been based on fans and on the media and journalists acting as fans. But sport has become a very powerful international entertainment industry that needs public control by the media and policymakers more than ever. For example, according to the [UNODC Global Report on Corruption in Sport](#), illegal gambling could have a turnover of up to 1.7 trillion U.S. dollars, and its part of the gambling sector is estimated to be around 60% of the total.

##### **4.3. Political influence and governance risks**

30. A growing concern highlighted during the hearing of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media of 12 March 2026 relates to the increasing influence of State actors in sport governance and its implications for media freedom. This trend contributes to a progressive blurring of the distinction between sport and politics. As sport becomes a strategic tool for geopolitical influence, journalists investigating governance, corruption or human rights issues may face heightened risks, including restricted access, surveillance and political pressure. This development affects both democratic and non-democratic contexts and calls into question the autonomy of sport as a regulatory space.

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12. Up to the end of the nineties, the AVMSD (formerly TVWF Directive) was negotiated in parallel with the ECTT. With the second revision process of the TVWF Directive in 2007, a provision on short news reporting was introduced (which remains untouched until today) and that regulated more in detail the right to short reports. On the other hand, the Council of Europe decided to discontinue work on transfrontier television in 2011. Consequently, the ECTT was no longer revised in parallel with EU legislation. See [Transfrontier television: the revision of the Convention discontinued](#).

13. European Audiovisual Observatory, [News media, pluralism and journalism in the digital age](#), 2025.

31. These concerns are also reflected in the work of [Play the Game](#), an international initiative dedicated to promoting transparency, democracy and freedom of expression in sport. Through its conferences, research and advocacy, Play the Game has consistently highlighted the shrinking space for investigative sports journalism and the growing pressures faced by journalists reporting on governance, corruption and human rights issues in sport. It has underlined the need to strengthen protections for journalists, improve access to information and ensure greater accountability of sports governing bodies. Its findings point to structural challenges in the relationship between sport, media and power, reinforcing the view that safeguarding media freedom is an essential component of good governance in sport.

32. In response to these challenges, recent initiatives have sought to promote greater transparency and integrity in the governance of sport and its interaction with the media. In this context, the [ClearingSport initiative](#) aims to strengthen co-operation between public authorities, sports organisations and other stakeholders, and to improve access to reliable information on sport governance. By fostering transparency and accountability mechanisms, such initiatives may contribute to a more enabling environment for independent journalism and help address structural imbalances in access to information.

33. These developments also highlight the need to integrate media freedom considerations into broader human rights due diligence processes in sport governance and the organisation of major events, ensuring that risks to freedom of expression and access to information are identified, prevented and addressed in a systematic manner.

#### **4.4. Access restrictions and control over information**

34. Economic pressures and restricted access to events severely hamper journalists' ability to perform their role. In particular, there are restrictive practices of some sports organisations and event organisers which often stem from a desire to control the narrative and prioritise direct communication with fans over independent reporting. This trend is troubling as it diminishes the public's access to unbiased information.

35. There are also inconsistencies in media access across different sports and countries, and even if some entities recognise the importance of a free press, others treat journalism as an afterthought.

36. While there is a broad recognition of the importance of news media in the form of universal declarations, and in the Council of Europe Sports Charter, this has not been translated into a positive environment for journalism in and around the stadium. Sports now conform to many of the rules that exist within the media entertainment industry. Rightsholders have a lot of power and influence, and they control media rights in relation to sport events. Some sports organisations still regard and refer to journalistic content as being their own Intellectual Property and therefore subject to limitations on use. The sale of broadcasting and media rights frequently includes exclusivity clauses that exclude independent news organisations, further hindering the free flow of information.

37. Journalists are always obliged to sign accreditation access contracts which can have a variety of restrictions, including copyright-assignment to sport organisations, obligations to acknowledge that the event owns 'all rights to event-related content' and limits on commercial exploitation of a journalist's or employer's legal copyright. Some sports events have even attempted to insist that 'nothing detrimental' can be published about the game, participants, its organisers or even commercial partners. Even when this is challenged, journalists can feel intimidated by access being withdrawn, by abuse online, because sports leaders denigrate the role of journalism or where legitimate investigations into in-stadia events and poor administration result in physical threats and harm. Subsequently, where sports news coverage is limited, this has an impact on the viability of news operations. Many sports organisations attempt to secure for themselves the ability to exploit new information technologies and for them (or commercial partners) to be the exclusive provider of their (non-independent) news.

38. These concerns are also reflected in the preparation of upcoming major sporting events such as the 2026 FIFA World Cup, where media and policy discussions have already highlighted potential challenges related to increasingly restrictive accreditation systems, the growing control of content by rights holders, and the complexity of ensuring consistent media access across multiple host countries. These developments illustrate broader structural trends which may further affect the ability of journalists to report freely and independently on sport.<sup>14</sup>

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14. [NMC Calls On FIFA To Further Enable Independent News Journalism At World Cup - News Media Coalition.](#)

39. The number of professional journalists (written press reporters, professional sports-news photographers and video journalists) allowed into sports events can vary significantly. Even where the press contingent is sufficient, their access is often limited. Reporters not able to ask questions at press conferences, video journalists being unable to record in-stadia press events, photographers not being allowed into the best of positions around the field of play. In addition, newsrooms can be prevented from accessing footage of events (from sport organisations, or broadcast partners) which they had been barred from or unable to video themselves. When such material of important news moments is accessible, it is often subject to conditions, including rules preventing use on digital news platforms and limiting when it can be used.

40. Getting access to athletes can be quite challenging and difficult: journalists have often to go through commercial agents who work for sponsors. Also, getting access to information around this complex global sports media industry is more challenging at present. In cases of publicly listed companies, financial information is more easily accessible, but there are still many cases where it was incredibly difficult to get this information.

41. A special challenge for sports journalists is the rise of professional public relations in sport that have adopted many of the techniques that are commonplace in the media and entertainment industry. There is no access, or copy and picture approval is requested, in order to control the narrative.

#### **4.5. Conflicts of interest and economic pressures**

42. Conflicts of interest within the media ecosystem represent a further structural challenge. Media organisations holding broadcasting rights may face inherent tensions between commercial interests and editorial independence. This dual role can limit critical reporting and contribute to a homogenisation of narratives around major sporting events, reducing space for investigative journalism and pluralistic debate.

43. Furthermore, investigative sports journalism is time consuming and costly, and it is difficult to find organisations that will support that kind of investment. The tendency today is not to send journalists to sporting events and not allow them to build networks. These trends must be understood in the broader context of the structural transformation of the news media sector, where digital disruption and shifting revenue models increasingly limit the capacity of media organisations to invest in costly investigative journalism.

44. Some of the space left by sports journalism had been taken up by sports documentaries made by streamers like Amazon, Netflix, or Apple TV. Many of these documentaries straddle a difficult position between on one hand being promotional videos and then having some grains of journalistic work.

45. A rising challenge for sports journalism is AI-generated content. On the one hand, AI tools are being used e.g. by the MLS to produce journalistic content (match summaries) without any human control<sup>15</sup> while other organisations such as the International Olympic Committee forbids the sharing of posts with video or photographs using artificial intelligence (AI) or containing any AI generated content or outputs.<sup>16</sup>

#### **4.6. Legal pressure, intimidation and safety of journalists**

46. In addition to contractual restrictions linked to accreditation, journalists covering sport are increasingly exposed to legal intimidation and surveillance practices. Strategic lawsuits, visa restrictions, and administrative barriers are used to deter critical reporting. These pressures may lead to self-censorship, particularly in cases involving powerful sports organisations or host States of major events. The protection of journalistic sources and whistleblowers is therefore becoming more fragile in the sports context.

47. Beyond institutional constraints, journalists are increasingly confronted with hostile environments, including online harassment, threats and intimidation from supporters or interest groups. Such dynamics are amplified by digital platforms and can disproportionately affect those reporting on sensitive issues such as corruption, governance or human rights. These pressures contribute to a climate that discourages critical reporting and weakens the watchdog role of the media in sport.

48. Recent developments concerning French sports journalist Christophe Gleizes also illustrate the risks faced by journalists reporting on sport in sensitive political contexts. In June 2025, his sentencing in Algeria prompted calls for his immediate release by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and by our Assembly's General Rapporteur on the safety of journalists, raising concerns about press freedom and the criminalisation of journalistic work.<sup>17</sup>

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15. See [MLS Publishes Unchecked AI-Generated Game Recaps](#).

16. See [IOC Social and Digital Media Guidelines Paris 2024](#).

49. A recent example illustrating these risks concerns whistleblower Rui Pinto, whose disclosures through the “Football Leaks” investigations contributed to major public interest reporting on corruption, financial misconduct and governance failures in international football. In April 2026, a Lisbon court acquitted him in a second hacking-related trial, finding that the repeated prosecutions violated fundamental procedural guarantees, the principle non bis in idem and human dignity under the Portuguese Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights. The case has been widely cited as illustrating the tensions between the prosecution of digital offences and the protection of whistleblowers and investigative journalism acting in the public interest.<sup>18</sup>

#### **4.7. Case study: investigative journalism in football**

50. During the Sub-committee meeting in Edinburgh (9 September 2024), Mr Håvard Melnæs, Editor of Josimar, presented the work of the platform dedicated to investigative football journalism. Football was described as increasingly exposed to risks linked to corruption, money laundering, organised crime and human rights concerns, while mainstream media was portrayed as focusing largely on entertainment content, influenced by commercial pressures and dependence on access to key stakeholders, to the detriment of investigative reporting.

51. Josimar operates in a context of financial instability and legal threats, and attention was drawn to the limited transparency and accountability of major football organisations, such as UEFA and FIFA. The links between parts of the football economy and illicit betting networks, with limited coverage of these issues in mainstream media, are also issues of concern. Reference was made to the Norwegian model of public support for journalism, alongside the difficulty for investigative outlets to meet funding criteria due to irregular publication patterns.

### **5. Gender equality and diversity in sports media**

52. The Assembly has repeatedly called for stronger action to promote gender equality in sport, including in its [Resolution 2465 \(2022\) on The fight for a level playing field – Ending discrimination against women in the world of sport](#), which urges member States to address structural barriers and promote equal opportunities in all areas of sport, including media representation.

53. The hearing of 12 March 2026 also highlighted that media freedom in sport cannot be fully assessed without addressing structural inequalities within the media sector itself, in particular gender disparities. Gender inequality affects access to the profession, career progression, representation and editorial content, and has direct implications for pluralism and diversity of perspectives in sports journalism.

54. Women remain underrepresented in sports journalism across Europe and globally, particularly in senior editorial and decision-making roles. While progress has been made in recent decades, structural barriers persist, including discriminatory hiring practices, unequal access to high-profile assignments and limited professional networks.

55. According to the [Association of Women Sports Journalists](#), although the proportion of women in journalism has increased over time, reaching around 40% in some contexts, they remain concentrated in less visible or less influential roles. In sports media specifically, women are still a minority, especially in areas such as broadcasting, commentary and technical production.

56. Gender inequality is also reflected in the content of sports media. Despite growing interest and audience engagement, women’s sport continues to receive significantly less coverage than men’s sport. Recent data indicate that women’s sport accounted for only around 8% of prime-time sports coverage globally in 2025, despite generating disproportionately high audience engagement.<sup>19</sup>

57. The limited visibility of women’s sport contributes to reinforcing stereotypes and reduces opportunities for investment, sponsorship and professional development.

58. Women working in sports media frequently face discrimination, gender stereotyping and harassment. These may take the form of exclusion from certain roles, questioning of professional credibility, or exposure to sexist narratives and online abuse.

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17. [PACE General Rapporteur urges immediate release of French journalist sentenced in Algeria; One month before the World Cup, the parents of Christophe Gleizes call for the release of the sports journalist from RSF headquarters | RSF.](#)

18. [Football Leaks hacker Rui Pinto acquitted of 241 counts in second Portuguese trial | Football | The Guardian.](#)

19. [UN Women, facts and figures on women in sport.](#)

59. Such dynamics contribute to a hostile professional environment and may discourage women from entering or remaining in the profession. They also affect the diversity and quality of sports journalism by limiting the range of perspectives represented in media coverage.
60. Gender inequality in sports media is not only a labour market issue but also a matter of media freedom and democratic pluralism. A lack of diversity within newsrooms influences editorial choices, storytelling and the framing of sports narratives. It may result in the marginalisation of certain topics, including gender equality, safeguarding, and social issues in sport.
61. Ensuring equal participation and representation in sports journalism is therefore essential to guarantee a pluralistic media landscape and to strengthen the watchdog function of the press in the sports sector.
62. Despite persistent challenges, recent developments point to a growing recognition of the value and potential of women's sport and women-led sports media. New specialised media platforms dedicated to women's sport have also emerged, aiming to address gaps in coverage and provide alternative narratives.
63. Professional associations, such as networks of women sports journalists, play an important role in supporting career development, mentoring and advocacy. Initiatives such as charters for gender equality, data collection and benchmarking contribute to raising awareness and promoting structural change within media organisations.
64. The committee hearing underscored the need for improved data collection and international benchmarking on gender equality in sports media. Evidence-based policymaking is essential to identify gaps, monitor progress and design effective interventions.
65. Addressing gender inequality in sports media requires a comprehensive approach, including regulatory frameworks, support for professional networks, incentives for media organisations, and measures to combat harassment and discrimination. Greater co-operation at European level could facilitate the exchange of good practices and strengthen common standards.

## **6. Conclusions and way forward**

66. The information presented in this report confirms that media freedom in sport is increasingly under pressure from a combination of structural, economic, institutional and political factors.
67. Sports journalism continues to play a crucial democratic function by informing the public, scrutinising powerful actors and contributing to transparency and accountability in sport. However, the analysis shows that this role is becoming more difficult to fulfil in practice due to growing restrictions on access, contractual limitations, and increasing control over information by sports organisations and commercial rights holders.
68. These challenges are not isolated but are linked to broader transformations in the media landscape, including digitalisation, 'platformisation' and economic pressures on news production. Within this context, sports journalism appears particularly vulnerable due to its dependence on access to events, proprietary content regimes and the commercial value of sports media rights.
69. At the same time, the evidence gathered points to specific features of the sports environment that further constrain journalistic work, including the monopoly-like structure of many sports governing bodies, the increasing professionalisation of public relations strategies, and the growing tendency to frame media access as a matter of control rather than transparency.
70. The hearings organised by the committee have also underlined the increasing risks faced by journalists covering sensitive topics such as corruption, match-fixing, governance failures or human rights concerns in sport.
71. These risks include legal pressure, intimidation, restricted access and online harassment, all of which contribute to a chilling effect on investigative reporting.
72. Particular attention has also been drawn to the structural inequalities within sports media itself, including persistent gender disparities in access, representation and leadership. These inequalities affect both the diversity of perspectives in sports journalism and the visibility of women's sport in media coverage.
73. Despite these challenges, important initiatives are emerging in civil society and non-governmental organisations and human rights defenders to promote transparency and accountability in sport governance. Such initiatives illustrate the growing recognition of the need for stronger integrity frameworks and improved access to reliable information on sport governance.

74. The existing Council of Europe and European Union standards already provide relevant principles to safeguard media freedom, including access to information, short reporting rights and protection of journalistic sources. However, gaps remain in their practical implementation in the specific context of sport.

75. Against this background, the recommendations put forward in the draft resolution aim to translate these observations into concrete policy recommendations for member States, sports organisations and other relevant stakeholders.