

**SPEECH DELIVERED TO THE COMMITTEE ON CULTURE AND
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Madame President,
Vice-Presidents,
Members of the European Parliament,

I am happy to have the opportunity to present the priorities of the French Government in the areas of youth and sport during the six months of its presidency of the Council of the European Union.

As you know, European policy in these two fields is at very different stages of development. Youth is a European Union competence, and a number of major projects have been launched in this area in recent years. Sport, on the other hand, is not yet an EU competence, but we all hope that it will be in the near future.

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Let us now turn to the question of sport. As I mentioned at the beginning of my speech, the sports sector is, from a European perspective, still a plot of vacant land on which we must begin to construct the foundations of a solid building. This is a major challenge, commensurate with the importance of sport in today's society.

I am optimistic. If we pause to look back for a moment, it is clear that important work has been carried out in the past two years.

I would like to applaud the members of the European Parliament, who assumed their responsibilities in this regard by clearly stating their positions, in March 2007, on the future of professional football and, more recently, on the main challenges of a European sport policy, in the light of Manolis Mavromatis's report. I would also like to welcome the European Commission's White Paper on Sport, which has helped guide us on this path.

We must now forge a clearer path. This is what President Sarkozy said in his statement to the European Parliament last Thursday. He believes that in the area of sport, which transcends political divides, Europe should introduce a "sporting exception", similar to the existing "cultural exception". I share this view.

Specific sporting provisions are already recognised by the European Commission, such as the rules governing the composition of national teams and anti-doping regulations. But we must go

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beyond these. Indeed, this is what the European White Paper on Sport and the Lisbon Treaty call on us to do. They refer to the specificity of sport, to the need to preserve a competitive balance in European sporting competitions and to the central role of sport in education and training.

Let us be clear: sport cannot, nor should it, be regarded simply as an economic activity. But nor is our intention to promote a general exemption from Community law, which would allow sport to benefit from a sort of extraterritoriality. Community law is, obviously, applicable to sport. The aim is simply to introduce provisions to preserve the specificity of sport once all the necessary conditions are in place.

We have set three objectives for the current French presidency, building on work that began a year ago and in line with the Lisbon Treaty: to highlight the role of sport in society, to emphasise its role in economic development and to contribute to good governance in sport.

Beyond that, I feel that in order for a sporting exception to be recognised, it is essential that we do not simply take the easy route of copying established structures, but that we really dare to do something new.

That is why my priority for the French presidency is what is sometimes referred to in football as the “6 + 5” principle, whereby each club has to field a minimum number of players eligible to play for the national team of the country in question. In a similar vein, I would also like us to find a means of prohibiting the recruitment and transfer of very young players.

Why am I making this my priority? The situation, distinguished members of the European Parliament, seems clear to me; let us assess it together:

- many clubs are systematically pillaged before having had the chance to reap the benefits of the many years generously devoted to training young players; how can we expect them to carry on making such efforts in the long term?
- very young European and non-European players are uprooted, and when they do not succeed, as is most often the case, they have no fall-back solution; is this the future we would wish for our children?
- an increasing number of clubs no longer have any players from the town or region, or sometimes even the country, in which they are based; how can we identify with players who are only passing through or with clubs who have lost their identity?
- some European competitions are played each year between only five or six clubs and thus lose the element of uncertainty that makes all sporting competitions interesting; should we therefore resign ourselves to the definitive absence in the final stages of competitions of Belgian, Czech, Dutch, Hungarian, Austrian ... or French teams, who still won titles not so long ago?
- national teams are in decline because the majority of national players are kept on the bench or in lower divisions. This became clear when England did not qualify for EURO 2008 even

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though its clubs regularly win European competitions. As a former coach of a national team myself, I would say the reasons for the current weaknesses in French rugby are the same.

People often tell me that these developments are inevitable. I have a background in professional sport and am therefore well aware that we cannot return to the notion of sport that existed in the middle of the last century. But I have not lost sight of what I owe to sport, to my clubs and to my coaches in my formative years.

Sport must continue to adhere to the same values and we must continue to defend them, because they serve society, as is noted in the Commission's White Paper and in the resolutions of the European Parliament.

We now need to ask ourselves the following questions:

- do we really want to protect our training clubs?
- do we really want to protect very young players?
- do we want to address the alarming problem of young African players who are left to fend for themselves on arrival in Europe?
- do we want to strengthen interest in major national championships and European competitions?

If we share these goals, we must not wait ten years to act: we must do so now, together.

How can we achieve this and ensure that a sporting exception is recognised, for the "6 + 5" rule, for example, or any other similar regulation applicable to other sports?

I am well aware of the difficulties in respect of the current status of legislation and jurisprudence. On this and many other questions we will have to strike a balance between the founding principles of the European Union, such as the free movement of persons, which we are naturally committed to, and objectives such as the training and protection of our young athletes and preserving the interest of sporting competitions, which our fellow Europeans consider just as important and legitimate.

I believe that it is for us, the politicians, to clearly state the importance we attach to these objectives and to declare that they are legitimate and contribute to the development and diversity of sport in all European countries. A provision stipulating that each club must field a minimum number of players eligible for the national team does not, therefore, seem to me to be in theory either unreasonable or disproportionate to the specific objectives envisaged.

We must also ensure that the solutions that are adopted or encouraged are actually effective. We must therefore avoid taking half-measures that will not fulfil our objectives. This is why, for example, while acknowledging that it constitutes significant progress, I expressed scepticism with regard to the "home-grown players" rule, which though legally satisfactory does not go far enough and has obvious shortcomings.

In the field of sport, we now have the historic opportunity to prove to our citizens that we are capable of taking decisive and concrete action that benefits them and responds to their

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demands. Let us not waste this opportunity. My work, and that of the French presidency in the coming months, in the fields of youth and sport, that are so dear to us, will certainly be committed to these issues.

I am counting on your strong support and will be happy to discuss these important issues for the future of our Union with you over the coming months.

In conclusion, I would like to remind you that, together the European Commissioner Jan Figel, we will be hosting the first European Sports Forum in Biarritz on 26 and 27 November. This event, organised jointly by the European Commission and the French presidency, will be followed on 27 and 28 November by the traditional meeting of sports ministers. Madame President, your parliamentary commission will be represented at these two events by the MEPs designated by you.

Thank you for your attention.