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## MANY A LITTLE MAKES A MICKLE: LESSONS FROM NEGOTIATING ATHLETES' SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR STRENGTHENING SOCIAL DIALOGUE IN SPORT

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### Abstract

The social protection of elite athletes in Olympic sports constitutes a salient human rights issue. This article elucidates the outcomes and processes of a three-year Erasmus+ Sport project (SOPROS) aimed at assessing, evaluating, and implementing athletes' social protection. The project relied on a participatory methodology and assembled national academic as well as transnational policy partners in its consortium. The aim of this article is to reflect on the three-year process of internal project work and stakeholder consultation in order to derive lessons for strengthening social dialogue and structured negotiation in sport governance. Based on the experiences of the authors in coordinating the project and participating in its negotiation-based formats, as well as on data generated throughout various project activities, we establish a three-dimensional model of preconditions for strengthened social dialogue and meaningful negotiations in sport. As these preconditions are significantly intertwined, positive developments in one area may trigger advances in all other dimensions, thereby enabling new and strengthened forms of collective efforts. We posit that, while narrow in scope and reach, the project and its main learnings may add to the current momentum towards a more equitable governance of sport based on processes of co-determination and social dialogue.

**Keywords:** *Athlete Rights, Social Dialogue, Erasmus+, Negotiations; Social protection.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A growing prominence of social dialogue in professional sport has recently become visible both in academic publications and in practical governance arrangements and debates. Recent scholarship by Fiege and Seltmann<sup>1</sup>, O’Leary,<sup>2</sup> and Cattaneo<sup>3</sup> points to a revived academic interest in social dialogue as a governance instrument that strengthens accountability, enhances stakeholder involvement and supports athletes’ rights. Empirically, social dialogue in sport is widely established in North America where collective bargaining has long shaped labour relations in professional leagues.<sup>4</sup> As Fiege and Seltmann show for professional sports in Europe, processes of social dialogue remain a rather underused instrument to govern sport in an equitable fashion, despite a steady increase in collective outcomes.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding this finding, the European Parliament, in its resolutions of 2021<sup>6</sup> and 2025, has identified social dialogue as an important mechanism to govern sport in the European Sport Model, by proposing “that the Commission consult with relevant stakeholders on the establishment of an EU Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee for Professional Sport.”<sup>7</sup> In professional football, the only sport in which a Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee exists at the EU level, momentum has increased following the *Diarra* case<sup>8</sup> which exposed structural weaknesses in FIFA’s transfer regulations. In response to the judgement, the Committee adopted a *Joint Resolution on Key Principles of the Football Transfer System and its Reform* in November 2025.<sup>9</sup> FIFA’s consultations on its *Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players*<sup>10</sup> and its introduction of maternity protection provisions for female players – inspired by proposals of the global football players’ union FIFPRO<sup>11</sup> – demonstrate, first, that the regulation of sport is a global

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- 1 Fiege, Lorenz, and Maximilian Seltmann, “Social Dialogue in Professional Sports in Europe: Towards Democratic Governance Between the European Sport Model and National Industrial Relations?,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 32, no. 11(2024): 1-33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2418337>.
- 2 Leanne O’Leary, “ISU, Royal Antwerp, European Superleague & Employment Relations in Sport,” *The International Sports Law Journal* 23, no. 4 (2023): 431-435, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40318-024-00266-9>.
- 3 Andrea Cattaneo, “Social Dialogue and the Regulatory Power of Governing Bodies,” *The International Sports Law Journal* 17, 3-4 (2018): 119-127, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40318-018-0122-2>.
- 4 Michael P. Barry, James Skinner and Terry Engelberg, eds., *Research Handbook of Employment Relations in Sport* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016).
- 5 Fiege, Lorenz and Seltmann, “Social dialogue in professional sports in Europe: towards democratic governance between the European Sport Model and national industrial relations?”
- 6 European Parliament, “EU Sports Policy: Assessment and Possible Ways Forward: European Parliament Resolution of 23 November 2021 on EU Sports Policy: Assessment and Possible Ways Forward (2021/2058(INI)) (2022/C 224/01),” *Official Journal of the European Union*, 2021.
- 7 European Parliament, “Role of EU Policies in Shaping the European Sport Model: European Parliament Resolution of 7 October 2025 on the Role of EU Policies in Shaping the European Sport Model (2025/2035(INI)),” [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0157\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0157_EN.html), 7.
- 8 *Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) v BZ* (Case C-650/22)
- 9 EU Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee for Professional Football, “Resolution of European Social Partners on the Key Principles of the Football Transfer System and Its Reform,” accessed 12 December, 2025, [https://editorial.uefa.com/resources/02a0-1f554c9ba86d-1bf322cc0ad7-1000/eu\\_ssdcc\\_for\\_professional\\_football.pdf](https://editorial.uefa.com/resources/02a0-1f554c9ba86d-1bf322cc0ad7-1000/eu_ssdcc_for_professional_football.pdf), 1.
- 10 Mark James, “The Diarra Case,” *The International Sports Law Journal* 24, 3-4 (2024): 205-207. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40318-024-00286-5>.
- 11 Alexandra Gomez Bruinewoud, “New Maternity Protections for Professional Women’s Football Players,”

matter, and second, how social protection issues and social dialogue mechanisms may be intertwined. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has also highlighted the increasing importance of the potential use of social dialogue to advance athletes' social protection rights, not least through the first Global Dialogue Forum on Decent Work in the World of Sport held in 2020.<sup>12</sup> The *Points of Consensus*, jointly adopted by employers' and workers' organisations in sport, stipulate, among other things, that:

"[L]ack of cohesive statistical data and comprehensive knowledge on the working conditions, social protection, contractual arrangements and other work-related issues makes it difficult to develop evidence-informed policies and measures addressing decent work deficits among athletes."<sup>13</sup>

Against this backdrop, the SOPROS project was launched under the EU's Erasmus+ Sport Programme (Call 2022) and is receiving funding from January 2023 to December 2025. The project brings together an interdisciplinary consortium that combines academic expertise with policy experience at national and international levels. Academic partners include the German Sport University Cologne (Germany), Edge Hill University (UK), the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Law (Croatia), the Institute for Sport Governance (Poland), and the Sport Evolution Alliance (Portugal). Over the past three years, these institutions were responsible not only for research activities but also for outreach and policy contacts within their respective national settings. Their work is complemented by policy partners representing key stakeholder groups in the field. The European Athletes and Players Association (EAPA, formerly known as EU Athletes) gives voice to national athletes' and players' unions. The European Association of Sport Employers (EASE) represents organisations in their role as employers. The European Olympic Academies (EOA) contribute a perspective rooted in Olympic education and maintain direct links to central stakeholders of the Olympic movement. Although the project focuses on Europe, it acknowledges the global character of sport by involving the ILO as an associated partner. The ILO provides technical expertise on labour standards and social protection that helped situate the project within international frameworks and debates on decent work in sport.

The project is structured around three substantive and one process-oriented objective: The substantive goals include, first, an assessment of athletes' social protection through the development of practical self-assessment instruments for stakeholders and especially for athletes ("Assessing").<sup>14</sup> Second, the consortium conducted an academic evaluation of current structures based on empirical evidence ("Evaluating").<sup>15</sup> And, third, it produced an implementation-oriented *Manual for the Improved Implementation of Athletes' Social Protection*

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FIFPRO, <https://media.fifpro.org/media/k2bdmt23/fifpro-maternity-regulations-english.pdf>.

12 Jürgen Mittag et al., *Good Governance in the Employment Relations of Athletes in Olympic Sports in Europe: Understanding - Evaluating - Improving* (Rijeka: University of Rijeka, Faculty of Law, 2022), <https://repository.pravri.uniri.hr/en/islandora/object/pravri%3A3107>.

13 International Labour Organization, "Points of Consensus: Global Dialogue Forum on Decent Work in the World of Sport," [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed\\_dialogue/%40sector/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_735388.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_dialogue/%40sector/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_735388.pdf), 4.

14 The so-called Athlete Social Protection Check can be accessed at [www.athletes-social-protection.eu](http://www.athletes-social-protection.eu).

15 Jürgen Mittag et al., "Elite Athletes' Social Protection in Olympic Sports in Europe: An Evaluation of the Status Quo" (2025), <https://www.dshs-koeln.de/en/institute-of-european-sport-development-and-leisure-studies/research-projects/ongoing-projects/sopros/evaluation-report/>.

(“Implementing”).<sup>16</sup> The latter is accompanied by a *Declaration on Athletes’ Social Protection* in which project partners outline their individual and shared commitments for future action and summarise the main calls to action detailed in the Manual.<sup>17</sup> The process-oriented goal (“Negotiating”) focuses on piloting a negotiation process that resembles social dialogue in professional sport. Representatives from employers and workers met alongside network organisations and academic partners, while the ILO supported the overall conceptual design. The project organised a variety of consultations with a broader stakeholder community through workshops and meetings with national and transnational actors, as well as through a dedicated written consultation, to ensure that the development of substantive outputs was rooted in a participatory approach (see further Chapter 3).

The present paper aims to reflect on the three-year process of internal project work and stakeholder consultation in order to derive lessons for strengthening social dialogue and structured negotiation in sport governance. We posit that, while narrow in scope and reach, the project and its main learnings may add to the current momentum towards a more equitable governance of sport based on processes of co-determination and social dialogue. The analysis draws on the authors’ experience coordinating the project, organising and conducting consultation activities, as well as on empirical data generated through surveys and ten in-depth interviews, both conducted in the framework of the workshops and public conferences.<sup>18</sup> We begin by elucidating the background that led to the establishment of the project and shaped its focus on matters of athletes’ social protection. Then, we summarise the main empirical findings of the project to provide important substantive context of the issue to the reader. Chapter 3 outlines the main deliverables and outputs of the project and explains which participatory formats were used to design, create, adopt, and promote the outputs. We then establish a three-dimensional model to assess preconditions to strengthen processes of social dialogue and structured negotiations in sport. The model builds, in its conceptualisation, on academic literature and is validated by the experiences made throughout the project as well as the data generated to evaluate the negotiation-related processes carried out in the project. A fifth chapter discusses the possibilities and limitations of using the specific policy issue of social protection as a common denominator or point of departure for re-initiating social dialogue in professional sports in Europe. We conclude with a final chapter that summarises the findings and offers an outlook.

## **2. ELITE ATHLETES’ SOCIAL PROTECTION IN EUROPE: BACKDROP AND MAIN ANALYTICAL FINDINGS OF THE SOPROS PROJECT**

Tragic accidents of elite athletes, like the cases of Austrian ski jumper Lukas Müller or the Austrian synchronized swimmer Vanessa Sahinovic, have not only raised sport and legal scholars’ attention of many elite athletes’ precarious social protection

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16 Paulina Tomczyk et al., “Manual for the Improved Implementation of Athletes’ Social Protection” (Cologne, 2025), [https://www.dshs-koeln.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Institute/Europaeische\\_Sportentwicklung\\_und\\_Freizeitforschung/Projekte/SOPROS/2025\\_SOPROS\\_Manual\\_for\\_the\\_Improved\\_Implementation\\_of\\_Athletes\\_Social\\_Protection.pdf](https://www.dshs-koeln.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Institute/Europaeische_Sportentwicklung_und_Freizeitforschung/Projekte/SOPROS/2025_SOPROS_Manual_for_the_Improved_Implementation_of_Athletes_Social_Protection.pdf).

17 The *DECLARATION ON ATHLETES’ SOCIAL PROTECTION AND SOPROS PARTNERS’ COMMITMENTS* can be accessed on the project website <http://www.dshs-koeln.de/iesf/sopros> and is open for endorsements by institutions and individuals.

18 The raw data are available upon reasonable request to the authors.

situation,<sup>19</sup> but have also contributed to an increasing awareness of athletes' poor level of protection in the wider public sphere and among EU sport politicians, as the above-mentioned Parliament Resolution of 2025 illustrates.<sup>20</sup> In addition to court cases following these tragic accidents, topics like minimum income, pension rights, or maternity protection have also entered the sphere of Olympic elite sport governance in many European countries.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the social protection of elite athletes today constitutes a core negotiation matter of existing processes of social dialogue in professional sports in Europe.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, athletes have also claimed greater involvement in the design and implementation of social protection measures to ensure a safe working environment and a secure after-career transition, as recently witnessed in Germany.<sup>23</sup>

Notwithstanding the efforts of the different stakeholders involved in securing athletes' social welfare during and after their careers, data from the Erasmus+ EMPLOY S Project indicate that many Olympic elite athletes in Europe are confronted with an insufficient social protection coverage.<sup>24</sup> While many different ways and modes of implementation prevail across the European continent, most athlete-centred social protection systems rely on close cooperation and coordination between SGBs and public authorities.<sup>25</sup> The social protection of athletes in Olympic sports has a private element, particularly in terms of measures provided by the NOCs and National Federations of a country. Yet, it can be argued that statutory (state) provisions may best serve the general aims of social protection by providing a suitable socio-political and legal framework for addressing the still prevailing inadequacies. These inadequacies become particularly visible when comparing the current situations across countries and types of sports. While ad-hoc interaction and exchange between the involved stakeholders is predominant, their actual roles and responsibilities as regards to the practical implementation of athletes' social protection in Olympic sport have not yet been precisely defined.<sup>26</sup>

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19 Leanne O'Leary, Maximilian Seltmann, and Vanja Smokvina, "Elite Athletes and Worker Status," *Industrial Law Journal* 54, no. 2 (2025): 248-277, <https://doi.org/10.1093/indlaw/dwae025>; Fiege, Lorenz, "The Social Protection of Olympic Elite Athletes in Europe: A Human Right Trapped Between International Commitment and Domestic Institutionalisation?," *The International Sports Law Journal* 25 (2025): 234-256, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40318-025-00323-x>; Mittag et al., *Good Governance in the Employment Relations of Athletes in Olympic Sports in Europe*.

20 Said Resolution acknowledges, among other things that "[...] athletes often face insufficient social protection [...]" and calls "[...] for the EU institutions to protect and promote, and for the Member States to implement, the fundamental rights of athletes and other workers in the sports sector, including social rights and protection". European Parliament. "Role of EU Policies in Shaping the European Sport Model: European Parliament Resolution of 7 October 2025 on the Role of EU Policies in Shaping the European Sport Model (2025/2035(INI))." [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0157\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0157_EN.html).

21 Mittag et al., *Good Governance in the Employment Relations of Athletes in Olympic Sports in Europe*.

22 Fiege, Lorenz and Seltmann, "Social dialogue in professional sports in Europe: towards democratic governance between the European Sport Model and national industrial relations?"

23 Maximilian Seltmann, "Different Worlds of Athlete Welfare? A Social Policy Perspective on Elite Sport in Six European Countries," *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, (2025):1-28 <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2025.2583977>.

24 Mittag et al., *Good Governance in the Employment Relations of Athletes in Olympic Sports in Europe*.

25 Ibid.

26 Fiege, Lorenz, "The social protection of Olympic elite athletes in Europe: a human right trapped between international commitment and domestic institutionalisation?"

Meanwhile, policy actions at the transnational and European levels acknowledge the need to increase social protection standards for athletes: In its 2021 *European Sports Charter*, the Council of Europe states that: "People engaging professionally in sport should have appropriate social status, ethical safeguards against all forms of exploitation and the enjoyment of economic and social rights."<sup>27</sup> (Article 14)

Furthermore, the *Points of Consensus* of the ILO's 2020 Global Dialogue Forum on Decent Work in the World of Sport call on:

"30. Governments, employers' and workers' organizations and other relevant stakeholders, each within their own responsibilities, should create an enabling environment to promote decent work in the world of sport, including by: [...]

e. enforcing, and where necessary reviewing, existing law and practice and taking steps to ensure access to comprehensive and sustainable social protection coverage for athletes, particularly in relation to workplace injury benefits and maternity protection;"<sup>28</sup>

The public discourse and sports-political debates on recent legal decisions, along with joint policy-making initiatives aimed at developing new practical instruments for the social protection of Olympic athletes at the national level (e.g., pension/retirement scheme by the German Sport Aid Foundation and Federal Ministry of the Interior), underline the need for further elaboration and exchange within the broader stakeholder community.

Against this backdrop, the SOPROS project set out to systematically collect data on the legal and policy frameworks that shape athletes' access to social protection coverage in six European countries: Croatia, France, Germany, Poland, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. Athletes' social protection is conceptualised as a combination of statutory measures provided by relevant social and sport laws of a country, as well as athlete-specific measures developed by various actors to account for the specific social situation and risks associated with a career in elite sport. Based on an analysis of relevant international social protection frameworks of the ILO, the European Union and the Council of Europe, the following ten statutory provisions and five athlete-specific measures were identified as "measures which shall be guaranteed to any elite athletes in Olympic sports."<sup>29</sup>

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27 Council of Europe, *Recommendation CM/Rec(2021)5 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Revised European Sports Charter* (2021).

28 International Labour Organization, "Points of Consensus: Global Dialogue Forum on Decent Work in the World of Sport," [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed\\_dialogue/%40sector/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_735388.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_dialogue/%40sector/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_735388.pdf), 4.

29 Mittag et al., "Elite Athletes' Social Protection in Olympic Sports in Europe," 9.



Table 1: Components of Athletes' Social Protection, adapted from Mittag et al. 2025

	<b>Statutory Provisions</b>	<b>Athlete-specific measures</b>
1	Child & family benefits	(Special) injury and/or accident insurance
2	Maternity/paternity benefits	(Private) health insurance/medical services
3	Unemployment support	Athlete Pension and/or retirement funds
4	Employment injury benefits	Pregnancy and maternity/paternity policy
5	Sickness benefits	Others (e.g. liability, travel insurance, legal expenses)
6	Health protection (including maternity care)	
7	Old-age benefits/pensions	
8	Invalidity & disability benefits	
9	Survivors' benefits	
10	Minimum income	

The SOPROS *Evaluation Report*, which was published in July 2025,<sup>30</sup> has a research-centred and analytical character. It outlines:

1. The domestic institutional framework of athletes' social protection in Europe;
2. Athletes' and key stakeholders' awareness and viewpoints on matters of athletes' social protection;
3. Comparative patterns and governance gaps; and
4. Good practices and key challenges.

Since improvements in athletes' social protection and any underlying policy or governance reform processes were at the core of project partners' negotiations, in this article we illustrate where key challenges for these overarching objectives lie. Overall, five key challenges for improving elite athletes' social protection coverage have come to the forefront in the empirical evaluation. Firstly, social protection measures for elite athletes in Europe are currently underpinned by a high degree of *conditionality*. The current paradigm of existing social protection measures resembles privileges for the best rather than adequate protections for the weakest and most vulnerable. An example are dedicated pension funds for Olympic/Paralympic medallists, such as in Croatia and Poland. This means that the specific systems that combine elements of the welfare state with athlete-specific measures are not inclusive for all athletes in the elite spectrum of a given country. It can, thus, be interpreted that there is a strong cleavage between aspirations towards greater inclusiveness and equality of opportunities for athletes on one side, and the current reality of a largely performance and success-based, meritocratic protection system on the other side.

Secondly, when comparing different countries, we conclude that there is an *ambiguous state role*. On one hand, there are direct public provisions for top-level athletes in centralised state systems – with basic pension contributions paid by the state, also for non-employed athletes (e.g., in France and Poland). On the other hand, we observe strategies of systematic outsourcing and delegation in terms of the promotion of public-private partnerships, which are reflective of a neoliberal ordering of elite sports (e.g., in Germany and the UK). The latter

30 Mittag et al., "Elite Athletes' Social Protection in Olympic Sports in Europe."

commonly rely on two delegation chains: a) from the state to private (insurance) companies (e.g., in terms of a public subsidy for athletes who sign a private pension insurance, as seen in Germany); and b) from the state to private SGBs (e.g., in relation to accident insurance during sport events).

Thirdly, we hold that athletes' social protection is often not considered as a holistic policy issue – *fragmentation* prevails. Conceptually, we find a lack of integrated rights-based approaches to social protection, with almost no explicit mention in applicable athlete rights frameworks.<sup>31</sup> Where mentioned, only single dimensions are referred to. Additionally, empirically, we can see considerable progress in some dimensions – for instance in terms of maternity protection – whereas others remain sidelined, especially minimum income, unemployment benefits, or parental leave provisions.

Fourthly, there are *limited participation* opportunities for elite athletes in Olympic sports. Evidently, the social protection of athletes is not something that is widely negotiated with athlete representatives. Hence, in the present context, conventional athletes' commissions have proven to be ineffective, taking, at best, the character of internal works councils rather than independent representative bodies involved in collective and meaningful negotiations. Yet, other forms of democratic co-determination like social dialogue and collective bargaining remain largely absent in most Olympic elite sports. This could be a major shortcoming, since in other industries and economic sectors, and also in many professional team sports, these are widely recognised deliberative tools to negotiate enhanced social protection standards for workers, including players.<sup>32</sup>

And, fifthly, current social protection frameworks for elite athletes suffer from *poor transparency and education*. Our report shows that athletes and stakeholders are not sufficiently aware of athletes' social protection rights and entitlements. Their access to information is constrained; and holistic comparative data on the complex architecture of applicable social protection measures are still missing. Many indicate difficulties in navigating through complex national systems. Moreover, long-established narratives of amateurism and non-employment – coupled with a circumvention of athletes' human right to social protection and related labour standards – are upheld, at the expense of athletes' welfare and likely also their performance.

### 3. PROJECT DELIVERABLES AND RELATED NEGOTIATION PROCESSES

The project's main outcomes were underpinned by a dedicated process of collective negotiation, in which the project partners took different roles and responsibilities. As part of the project events, different external stakeholders were, furthermore, invited to share their critical remarks and viewpoints on the project's interim outcomes (see Table 2).

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31 Fiege, Lorenz, "The social protection of Olympic elite athletes in Europe: a human right trapped between international commitment and domestic institutionalisation?"

32 Fiege, Lorenz and Seltmann, "Social dialogue in professional sports in Europe: towards democratic governance between the European Sport Model and national industrial relations?"

Table 2. Negotiation Matters Addressed by the Project Partners

<b>Project Outcome/ Deliverable</b>	<b>Discussion Points/ Elements</b>	<b>Project Partners' involvement</b>	<b>External stakeholders' involvement</b>
Concept Note	Definition	ILO involvement crucial, general agreement among partners	
	Dimensions/ Provisions	ILO + EU dimensions, general agreement	
	Normative Background	ILO frameworks	
Self-Assessment Tools	Concept and logic	Suggestion by academic partners, agreement by policy partners, suggested optimisations	National Workshops to comment on logic and draft
	Development and implementation	Academic partners + EASE for French tool	
	Dissemination	Policy partners	
Manual	Concept	Suggestion by GSU, refinement by EASE, EAPA and EOA	National and EU-level Workshop(s) to comment on logic and draft; Written Consultation process among stakeholders
	Recommendations	Joint development by academic and policy partners, adoption by boards of policy partners	National and EU-level Workshop(s) to comment on logic and draft; Written Consultation process among stakeholders
	Dissemination	Academic and policy partners	Institutional support by two MEPs and European Commission staff
Declaration	Commitments/ Declaration	Development by policy partners, adoption by boards of policy partners	Members of policy partners
	Dissemination	Academic and policy partners	Institutional support by two MEPs and European Commission staff

In addition, the project's main events, including multi-stakeholder workshops and conferences at both the domestic and EU levels, were used to reach a mutual consensus on specific policy and governance issues which were deemed relevant for the completion of the project outcomes (see Table 3).

Table 3. Specific Policy and Governance Issues Addressed by the main Events of the SOPROS-Project.

Project Event	Main Discussion Points / Elements	Policy and Governance Issues
National Workshops (1 <sup>st</sup> round)	Identifying current needs, protection gaps, and governance deficits at the national level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploring existing social protection measures for athletes in domestic contexts</li> <li>• Seeking athletes' and stakeholders' perceptions /viewpoints of athletes' social protection coverage</li> <li>• Development of accessible educational tools ("Athlete Social Protection Check")</li> </ul>
	Raising awareness and educating athletes and stakeholders at the national level	
1 <sup>st</sup> Conference, Cologne	Assessing the status quo: current solutions and future needs at the national level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definition and conceptualisation of athletes' social protection (social protection as a human right and condition for good governance in sport)</li> <li>• Aggregation and application of national and international social protection frameworks and rights to athletes</li> </ul>
	Transnational perspectives: national and international coordination of athletes' social protection	
2 <sup>nd</sup> Conference, Zagreb	Evaluating the status quo: good and bad practices at the national level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rebalancing the economic and social dimensions of sport through greater social protection coverage of elite athletes</li> <li>• Three criteria (i.e. (1) Recognition, (2) Representativeness/Reach, and (3) Resources) for the social partners who engage in social dialogue on athletes' social protection</li> </ul>
	Athletes' social protection in a values-based future European Sport Model	
	Social dialogue as a key driver of athletes' social protection	
EU-level Multi-Stakeholder Workshop (MSW)	Athletes' social protection in a values-based future European Sport Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Precise definition of an "elite athlete" and related athlete populations and target groups</li> <li>• Commitment to principles of shared responsibility and duty-bearing in line with international human rights frameworks (e.g. UNGPs)</li> <li>• Integrating and aligning national, European, and international rights and measures for athletes</li> </ul>
	Stakeholders' responsibilities and duty of care	
	Instruments and tools for closer transnational coordination	

National Workshops (2 <sup>nd</sup> round)	Evaluating domestic/national peculiarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Four main areas for improvements: (1) funding; (2) legislation/policy making; (3) coordination and interaction; (4) education</li> <li>• Incorporating athletes' social protection into current policy/legal reform processes at various governance levels</li> </ul>
	Practical recommendations for key stakeholders	
	Mutual learning and sharing of good practices to improve the implementation of social protection measures for athletes (across participating countries)	
3 <sup>rd</sup> Conference, Brussels	Athletes' social protection in a values-based future European Sport Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Horizontal Coordination and follow-up within EU institutions and beyond (e.g. with the Council of Europe and ILO)</li> <li>• Five key challenges: (1) Conditionality, (2) Ambiguous state role, (3) Fragmentation, (4) Limited participation, (5) Poor transparency and education</li> <li>• Social dialogue as a common denominator to re-initiate a Sectoral Social Dialogue in Professional Sports</li> </ul>
	EU/European policy action and reform processes	
	Enabling and constraining factors	

#### 4. A THREE-DIMENSIONAL MODEL TO STRENGTHEN SOCIAL DIALOGUE AND COLLECTIVE NEGOTIATIONS IN PROFESSIONAL SPORT

In the following analytical part of this paper, we combine observations and experiences from coordinating the project with enabling factors of social dialogue established in broader academic literature. The three-dimensional model introduced further below reflects some of the elements of the conceptual model of defining social dialogue in professional sports, which we developed previously (see Figure 1). However, this model is of different analytical quality. While the model in Figure 1 defines the criteria that must be met in order for governance processes to qualify as social dialogue in sport, the model we develop here elaborates more specifically on the *preconditions* needed to effectively engage in social dialogue and collective negotiations in sport.

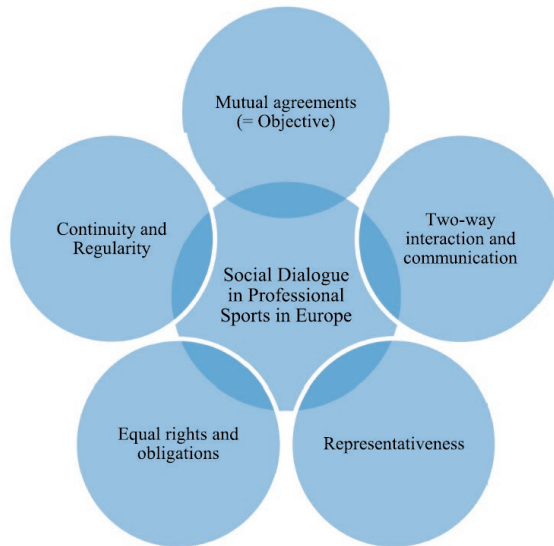


Figure 1: Five key criteria of SD in professional sports in Europe. Source: Fiege & Seltmann 2024, 2820.

The model we here propose consists of three dimensions: (1) *recognition*, (2) *representativeness and reach*, and (3) *resources*. Given the project's main setup as a collaborative effort that also integrates stakeholders and voices beyond the project consortium (see Table 2), we include insights from negotiations among and within the project team as well as from consultation and discussion rounds with a wider stakeholder community, to develop and empirically verify the model.

#### 4.1. RECOGNITION

Egalitarian negotiations and processes of social dialogue can, by definition, only take place if the negotiating parties recognise one another as legitimate parties to the negotiations.<sup>33</sup> A decisive element for *recognition* is mutual trust and confidence among representative organisations.<sup>34</sup> This illustrates that there is a connection between the dimensions *recognition* and *representativeness and reach* (see further below). The consortium of the SOPROS project was set up by the German Sport University Cologne as the coordinating organisation. Inclusion into the project proposal was based on a commitment to the project's objectives, participatory methodology, and recognition of the other partners. Seeing that the SOPROS project (2023–2025) is a continuation of the previously concluded EMPLOYS project (2021–2022), where many organisations and their representatives were involved, a certain level of mutual trust

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33 International Labour Organization, "ILO Social dialogue report 2024" (International Labour Organization. Governance and Tripartism Department, Geneva, 2024); Eurofound, *Collective Bargaining in Europe in the 21st Century* (Luxembourg: Publ. Off. of the Europ. Union, 2015).

34 Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, "Factors in Successful Collective Bargaining," *Monthly Labor Review* 74, no. 3 (1952), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41832593>.

and confidence had already been established among both academic and, more importantly, policy partners beforehand. EAPA and EOA were partners in the EMPLOY project already, while EASE, representing employers' organisations in sport, joined the consortium for the SOPROS project. This involvement, however, builds on previous cooperation, most importantly with EAPA in the context of a test phase for social dialogue in sport at the EU level<sup>35</sup> as well as through a collaborative project (*Social Dialogue in Europe for Professional Sports. SDE Pro*) funded under the EU Social Fund+ Programme involving EASE, EAPA, and the German Sport University.<sup>36</sup> Against this backdrop and legacy, mutual recognition of negotiating parties among project partners was existent, to a considerable extent, already at the outset of the project. As organisations representing the two sides of the professional sports industry (employers and workers), EAPA and EASE have defined the development, and support of social dialogue as their organisational goals and missions.

A second, more substantive element of the dimension recognition refers to the *problem* or policy issue at hand. It goes almost without saying that in order for collective negotiations to be successful, there needs to be a common understanding that there is a policy issue that requires action. While the topic of athletes' rights has seen a steady increase in recognition,<sup>37</sup> the specific issue of social protection has only been marginally considered in previous debate, formal discussions, or research work. This stands in contrast to broader welfare standards for workers across different sectors that may be improved through social dialogue, in which social protection has a central place.<sup>38</sup> The thematic focus on the issue in SOPROS arose as a result of the EMPLOY project. In light of the collected empirical data from 29 countries in six policy fields,<sup>39</sup> the project partners agreed that social protection constituted a fundamental rights area requiring immediate improvements. Following this rationale, the SOPROS project was drafted, submitted, and selected for funding to realise the project's objectives. While the problem was recognized during the proposal writing stage, the project's dedicated work streams "Assessing" and "Evaluating" provided further empirical data and insights that increased recognition of the problem among project partners. The main challenges identified in the Evaluation Report (see Chapter 3) provided a strong foundation for the main practical outputs to be negotiated and adopted by the policy partners: the *SOPROS Manual*<sup>40</sup> and the *Declaration on Athletes' Social Protection*.

At the national level, previous public debates and reform endeavours included elements

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35 Eurofound, *Representativeness of the European Social Partner Organisations: Professional Football Sector*, Sectoral social dialogue series (Dublin: Eurofound, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.2806/000000>.

36 Project 101051901, SOCPL-2021-SOC-DIALOG; the project outcomes can be accessed at <https://www.easesport.eu/sde-pro-sports/>.

37 Walter Palmer, "Athletes' Human Rights and Mega-Sporting Events," in *The Routledge Handbook of Mega-Sporting Events and Human Rights*, ed. By William Rook, Shubham Jain and Daniela Heerdt (London: Routledge, 2023); Maximilian Seltmann, and Lorenz Fiege, "Placing Athlete Rights at the Heart of Good Governance in Sport: Leveraging Ideational Power, Democratising Governance," *Sports law, policy & diplomacy journal 2*, no. 2 (2024): 37–71, <https://doi.org/10.30925/slpoj.2.2.3>; Yetsa A. Tuakli-Wosornu et al., "'Knowing We Have These Rights Does Not Always Mean We Feel Free to Use Them': Athletes' Perceptions of Their Human Rights in Sport," *BMJ open sport & exercise medicine 8*, no. 3 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjsem-2022-001406>.

38 Cf. International Labour Organization, "Social dialogue interventions: What works and why? Lessons learned from a synthesis review 2013–2016" (International Labour Organization. Evaluation Office, Geneva, 2017).

39 Mittag et al., *Good Governance in the Employment Relations of Athletes in Olympic Sports in Europe*.

40 Tomczyk et al., "Manual for the Improved Implementation of Athletes' Social Protection."

related to the social protection of elite athletes.<sup>41</sup> As explained above, in certain types of sports (e.g. in female football), enhanced welfare standards such as maternity leave and protection have been agreed upon by the responsible social partners. Conceptually, researchers have started to draw a more systematic connection between matters of athletes' social protection and broader human rights discourses on athlete welfare.<sup>42</sup> The developments at the ILO level add to an emerging policy and academic discourse that recognizes this issue as a fundamental rights concern by a wide stakeholder community. The most recent Resolution of the European Parliament is a testament to this evolution in that it recognises that "athletes often face insufficient social protection."<sup>43</sup> In response, the Parliament:

"Calls for the EU institutions to protect and promote, and for the Member States to implement, the fundamental rights of athletes and other workers in the sports sector, including social rights and protection, such as freedom of association, collective bargaining, non-discrimination, decent working conditions, safety measures and occupational health, especially with regard to pregnancy and maternity leave."<sup>44</sup>

Data collected during the ten National Workshops and the EU-Level Multi-Stakeholder Workshop (MSW) highlight that, despite these general developments, these workshops have added to the recognition and more precise definition of the problem.<sup>45</sup> The corresponding workshop surveys asked whether was sufficient information available on athletes' social protection. Respondents reported a low value of 2.71 (on a scale from 0 = *I fully disagree* to 6 = *I fully agree*), highlighting the need to further enhance measures that aim at increasing recognition and understanding of the problem. Workshops and conferences at different levels may be important tools in doing so. On average, respondents rated the question of whether the workshop increased participants' awareness of the policy issue of athletes' social protection at 4.91. In an in-depth interview, a workshop participant underlined the relevance of such formats by stating: "These kinds of workshops are very important because they help us all to become aware of the problems we face, but also of the possible answers to our problems. [...] I strongly recommend organising more workshops [...]".

## 4.2. REPRESENTATIVENESS AND REACH

*Representativeness and reach* constitute a second central precondition for the functioning of social dialogue in sport. Social dialogue presupposes that organisations participating in negotiations legitimately represent one side of the sector, usually workers or employers.

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41 Cf. Seltmann, "Different worlds of athlete welfare? A social policy perspective on elite sport in six European countries."

42 Fiege, Lorenz and Seltmann, "Social dialogue in professional sports in Europe: towards democratic governance between the European Sport Model and national industrial relations?"

43 European Parliament, "Role of EU Policies in Shaping the European Sport Model: European Parliament Resolution of 7 October 2025 on the Role of EU Policies in Shaping the European Sport Model (2025/2035(INI))," [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0157\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0157_EN.html), 4.

44 European Parliament, "Role of EU Policies in Shaping the European Sport Model: European Parliament Resolution of 7 October 2025 on the Role of EU Policies in Shaping the European Sport Model (2025/2035(INI))," [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0157\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0157_EN.html), 7–8.

45 In fact, the Daft Report of the EP, available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CULT-PR-772146\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CULT-PR-772146_EN.pdf) and published in April 2025, did not include a direct reference to social protection, but uses the more general term "social rights" in the draft paragraphs cited above. Whether, and to what extent, the MSW of June 2025 had an effect on the wording of the Resolution adopted in October 2025 remains subject to further academic investigation.



This requirement, *representativeness*, is widely accepted, yet its practical application varies considerably across national contexts, where different legal, institutional and cultural criteria determine who is considered a representative organisation and who is entitled to negotiate on behalf of a group.<sup>46</sup>

At the European level, formalised criteria apply:<sup>47</sup> Organisations engaging in European sectoral social dialogue are expected to relate to specific sectors or categories and to be organised at the European level. They should represent organisations that are an integral and recognised part of social partner structures in the Member States, as well as have the capacity to negotiate agreements and cover several Member States. In addition, they are required to possess adequate internal structures that enable their effective participation in the work of a European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee, which directly links to the dimension of resources (see below). These criteria illustrate that representativeness is not only a question of membership numbers, but also of organisational capacity, institutional embeddedness and geographical scope.

Representativeness is closely linked to recognition. Organisations that are perceived as insufficiently representative may not be recognised by other actors as legitimate negotiation partners. This interdependence becomes particularly visible in the case of athletes, and the question of who can legitimately speak on their behalf in Olympic sports is the cause of much controversy in sport governance.<sup>48</sup> In many Olympic sports, athletes remain weakly represented in independent associations.<sup>49</sup> One reason for this is that they are not consistently recognised as workers and therefore lack the legal and institutional conditions necessary to establish unions.<sup>50</sup> Another reason is that the dominant model to represent the voice of athletes in Olympic sports is athletes' commissions, which are internal consultative bodies of SGBs with limited decision-making power.<sup>51</sup> Numerous in-depth interviews conducted within the project, as well as data from the surveys accompanying each workshop highlight that a higher level of representativeness of athletes in matters related to their social protection is key to future improvements. In many cases, increased involvement of athletes would have also benefitted the conducted workshops, as one participant clearly stated: "Those institutions that represent athletes should play that role [an important one in future debates] – and this is precisely the level that hardly exists in [country] at all. Because in fact, unfortunately, our athletes hardly organise themselves."

A parallel challenge concerns the representation of employers. SGBs typically do not act as employers of athletes, although they constitute functional equivalents to employers by virtue of, for example, the high degree of athletes' subordination under their authority, direction, and monopolistic governance.<sup>52</sup> And still, SGBs often play a role in processes of social dialogue in professional team sports, either as direct negotiation parties or as "field experts" that provide framework conditions and expertise.<sup>53</sup> However, when it comes to Olympic elite sports, SGBs

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46 International Labour Organization, "ILO Social dialogue report 2024."

47 Eurofound, *Representativeness of the European social partner organisations*.

48 Seltmann and Fiege, Lorenz, "Placing athlete rights at the heart of good governance in sport."

49 Mike McNamee et al., eds., *Strengthening Athlete Power in Sport: Final Report* (Aarhus: Play the game, 2023).

50 Mittag et al., *Good Governance in the Employment Relations of Athletes in Olympic Sports in Europe*.

51 Ibid.

52 O'Leary, Seltmann and Smokvina, "Elite Athletes and Worker Status."

53 Fiege, Lorenz and Seltmann, "Social dialogue in professional sports in Europe: towards democratic governance

were reluctant to engage in negotiations on athletes' social protection issues. This reluctance was reflected in uneven participation patterns in the national workshops, with strong engagement of SGBs in some countries and limited involvement in others. Furthermore, at the European level, EASE hardly represents SGBs. Apart from the Finnish Olympic Committee, its members are sport employer organisation outside the realm of Olympic governance.

As previously explained, the central but ambiguous role played by governments and public authorities adds a further layer of complexity to the governance of athletes' social protection.<sup>54</sup> Ideally, national governments and public agencies would be represented in tripartite processes of social dialogue on athletes' social protection, as they may be directly involved in implementing and extending measures of athletes' social protection. Similarly to SGBs, unequal participation patterns of public authorities emerged across the various national project workshops. This is a missed chance since, in general terms, social dialogue and elite sport policy – with athletes' social protection being no exception – largely remain a matter of national legislative and policy-making competence. Despite recent innovative ideas based on internal market arguments,<sup>55</sup> and aspirations to revive a sectoral social dialogue in professional sports at the European level, there is so far no clear EU mandate for coordinated action. As a result, representation on the employer and public-institutional side is often fragmented and poorly coordinated across borders.

Despite the structural challenges, cooperation among the policy partners within the project consortium proved respectful, constructive, and forward-oriented. The partners collaborated with existing organisations and contact persons, were self-reflective of their own mandate and capacity, and represented at least parts of the sport sector at a transnational or European level. While this approach did not resolve fundamental questions of representativeness, it enabled collective negotiations and tested social dialogue under real world conditions. The concept of representativeness is complemented by the notion of *reach*. While *representativeness* concerns *on behalf of whom* organisations negotiate, *reach* refers to the question of *who can ultimately be held accountable for implementing* negotiated outcomes. Reach emerged as a particularly critical issue for the implementation of the project results. The *SOPROS Manual* formulates numerous recommendations and calls to action that address stakeholders beyond those directly represented in the consortium.<sup>56</sup> While the *Declaration on Athletes' Social Protection* and the commitments adopted by the project partners provide valuable support for implementation, the main responsibilities for implementing athletes' social protection lie with SGBs and national governments, neither of which were direct parties to the negotiations among project partners. Implementation will, therefore, be dependent on factors outside the control and influence of the narrow project design and consortium. To address this limitation, the project methodology explicitly aimed to involve these actors throughout all stages of the project. Governments, SGBs and other stakeholders were invited to participate in national and European level workshops, to contribute to written consultations on the Manual and to engage through conferences and dissemination events (see Tables 2 and

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between the European Sport Model and national industrial relations?"

54 Seltmann, "Different worlds of athlete welfare? A social policy perspective on elite sport in six European countries."

55 Jan Exner, Stephen Weatherill and Jan Zglinski, *The European Sports Act: A Proposal to Improve Sports Governance Through EU Legislation* (2025). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5235136>.

56 Tomczyk et al., "Manual for the Improved Implementation of Athletes' Social Protection."

3). As explained above, data collected during the workshops indicate that these efforts were partially successful, but they also suggest that participation of some of these key actors could have been higher. This underlines that questions of representativeness and reach remain central challenges for the future development of social dialogue in sport in Europe.

### 4.3. RESOURCES

Resources constitute a further enabling or constraining factor for the development of social dialogue in sport and consist of two interrelated elements.<sup>57</sup> The first concerns background knowledge on the specific policy issue at hand, which is closely linked to ex ante problem recognition. The second relates to the capacities, mainly in terms of available financial and human resources of the negotiating parties to prepare for and engage in negotiations, as well as to implement and monitor concluded agreements. This second element is closely linked to questions of accountability and representativeness, as only organisations with sufficient capacities are able to act sustainably on behalf of their constituencies.

With regard to background knowledge, the predecessor project, EMPLOYS, provided the essential foundation upon which the consortium could build. The empirical insights generated in that project enabled the partners to start the SOPROS project with a shared understanding of the key challenges surrounding athletes' social protection. In addition, the role of the ILO as an associated partner in the SOPROS project was instrumental in providing a common understanding of applicable international frameworks and in contributing specialised expertise at the intersection of social and sport policy. This highlights the importance of organisations with high levels of expertise in the policy field subject to negotiations, as they facilitate social dialogue and constructive debates. As discussed in the section on *recognition*, the SOPROS project significantly deepened the understanding of the issue among the project partners in both conceptual-normative and empirical-analytical terms.

At the same time, engagement with the wider stakeholder community revealed important limitations in terms of background knowledge. In particular, entities focusing on sport policy frequently acknowledged that questions of social protection had previously either been largely ignored or considered to fall within the competence of other institutional departments or units. This observation underlines that effective engagement with social protection in sport often requires horizontal coordination even within the same institution, in order to bring together expertise from sport, labour and social policy and to identify mechanisms suitable to implement change, as one interview partner pointed out:

“But precisely in these general and overarching questions – especially when looking from the perspective of employment conditions, labour market issues for staff, legal aspects, and especially formal qualifications – here different worlds, including legal worlds, are now meeting the high-performance sport system; worlds that have not interacted in this depth before and which current experts in the [sport] system cannot yet fully assess.”

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57 International Labour Organization, “Points of Consensus: Global Dialogue Forum on Decent Work in the World of Sport,” [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed\\_dialogue/%40sector/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_735388.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_dialogue/%40sector/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_735388.pdf); International Labour Organization, “ILO Social dialogue report 2024.”

Beyond knowledge-related resources, significant barriers emerged with regard to financial and human capacities. The results of the stakeholder surveys reveal, that on average, participating stakeholders respond to the question “My organisation has sufficient resources (human and financial) and information to participate in structured discussion and dialogue formats between the stakeholder groups in the field of ‘social protection for elite athletes’” with a value of 3.17 (scale 1 = *I fully disagree* to 6 = *I fully agree*). Figure 2 provides additional insights into the distribution of responses to this question and highlights that resources and information are a crucial element for successfully engaging in meaningful debates and negotiations.

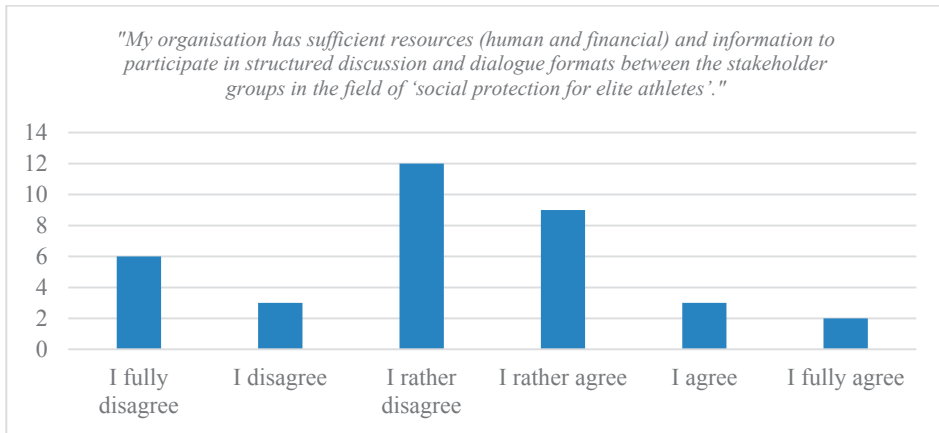


Figure 2: Distribution of survey answers to the question related to resources and information for participation in structured discussion and dialogue.

While the project consortium benefited from financial support granted by the European Commission, which enabled all partners to allocate resources to the processes described in Chapter 3, resource constraints remained a persistent reality. Even within the consortium, engagement had to be carefully prioritized, particularly for smaller organisations with limited staff and competing responsibilities. These constraints were even more pronounced among the wider stakeholder community. Reflecting the survey responses in Figure 2, many stakeholders invited to participate in workshops or conferences cited capacity-related reasons for declining the invitation. This illustrates that limited resources not only affect the quality and depth of engagement in social dialogue processes, but may already constitute a barrier at the level of participation itself.

#### **4.4. INTERIM CONCLUSION: THE VIRTUOUS (OR VICIOUS) CYCLE TO STRENGTHEN (OR WEAKEN) SOCIAL DIALOGUE**

The three identified preconditions detailed above provide a comprehensive model to assess and improve factors that influence the successful development of meaningful negotiations and processes of social dialogue in sport. As the analysis indicates, the elements are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. The main logic identified is characterised by the circular relationship displayed in Figure 3.

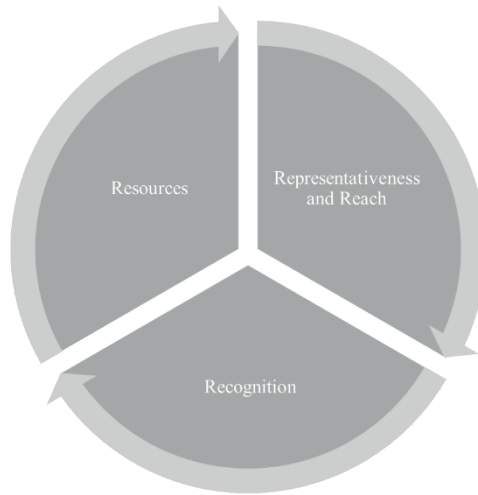


Figure 3: The virtuous/vicious cycle of intertwined preconditions for social dialogue in sport.

The circular model can be accessed at any of the three preconditions and an increase in one dimension may develop positive effects on the other dimensions, while a decrease in one dimension may have negative effects on the other dimensions. For the sake of explanation, let us consider hypothetical changes in the dimension of *resources*: Sufficient or insufficient resources, especially in terms of capacities, directly affect the representativeness and reach of collective entities engaging in negotiations. Generally speaking, organisations with more resources may have a higher potential to be representative of larger portions of the constituent population they aim to represent; they also have more resources available to increase their reach into the relevant stakeholder community. More knowledgeable organisations may also be empowered to increase representation and reach as they may be seen as competent and legitimate entities representing the interests of relevant constituents. As explained in the section on *recognition*, organisations meeting representativeness criteria may have higher chances of being recognised as a legitimate negotiating party by the other parties involved than those of limited representativeness. Problem recognition may also increase among highly representative organisations as their constituents may shape the agenda of the representing organisation in favour of the relevant policy issue. Higher problem recognition may lead to an increased allocation of resources to understanding and negotiating said policy issue. Furthermore, recognition by other negotiating partners may allow access to additional resources that are available to parties involved in collective negotiations. The model, thus, illustrates that because of the interconnectedness of preconditions, even small changes in a single condition may have significant effects on the overall possibility of successful collective negotiations.

## 5. SOCIAL PROTECTION AS A COMMON DENOMINATOR FOR DEVELOPING SOCIAL DIALOGUE?

The project as such constituted a piloting approach to re-initiating a sectoral social dialogue process in professional sports at the EU level. Its final outcomes – the *SOPROS-Manual* and *Declaration* – show that collective negotiations on matters of athletes' social protection may lead to clearly formulated commitments to implementing statutory provisions and specific measures for athletes by the involved parties. Hence, among the many different dimensions of athletes' employment and social relations, we postulate that athletes' social protection may serve as a *common denominator* for developing further sport-specific social dialogue at the EU level and, potentially, in different national contexts. In so doing, it addresses one of the most salient policy areas of a values-based and welfare-centred European Sport Model that aspires to be coherent with fundamental social rights.<sup>58</sup> However, a number of critical questions and issues in relation to the three preconditions specified above, which must be addressed and resolved by future endeavours and related research work remain. Two examples shall be referred to here in particular.

Firstly, while the social partners committed, on paper, to improving athletes' social protection based on their mutual recognition, available resources, and applicable social dialogue formats, it is yet to be seen how their written commitments will translate into concrete, enhanced social protection standards for athletes and how accountability mechanisms are designed to effectively enforce and remedy these welfare gains in practice. Social dialogue must contribute to measurable welfare gains in terms of meaningful outcomes (i.e. mutual agreements). This means, that negotiations, debates and exchange formats must not become an end in themselves, as one interviewee put it:

"I believe that in the organized elite sport system in [country], there are many structured discussion and exchange formats, which may have become something like a form of self-legitimation or an end in themselves. There are an incredible number of working groups and processes, which sometimes get lost, sometimes lead somewhere, but often do not generate outputs or fail in implementation."

Secondly, for any related follow-up initiatives and social dialogue formats in the area of athletes' social protection, the role of governmental and public authorities, including leading EU institutions, in such processes must be clarified and determined more precisely. By virtue of the character of the Erasmus+ Sport Programme, the academic partners – and, first and foremost, the German Sport University Cologne – were responsible for the initiation and coordination of the underlying social dialogue component of this project. Despite their active participation in several project workshops and conference events, public institutions at the national and transnational levels mainly contributed in a one-sided consultative way upon the project team's invitation. Yet, as part of tripartite social dialogue or collective bargaining processes in other industries, governments and public authorities often take an important steering, enforcing, and extending role.<sup>59</sup> The future success and consolidation of

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58 European Parliament, "Role of EU Policies in Shaping the European Sport Model: European Parliament Resolution of 7 October 2025 on the Role of EU Policies in Shaping the European Sport Model (2025/2035(INI))," [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0157\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0157_EN.html).

59 Eurofound, *Collective bargaining in Europe in the 21st century*.

social dialogue processes on matters of athletes' social protection; therefore, depend not only on specific organisational preconditions for the social partners or certain procedural requirements.<sup>60</sup> The use of social dialogue in improving social protection standards for athletes also relies on the future involvement of public bodies and the extent to which EU institutions, for example, expand upon social partners' concluded agreements or commitments based on their available instruments and their mandate enshrined in Articles 154-155 TFEU.<sup>61</sup> Proactive support, follow up, and increased horizontal coordination and exchange among EU-level bodies seem paramount in this regard.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

The Erasmus+ SOPROS project set out to achieve three ambitious substantive goals and one process-oriented goal. The main aim of the present contribution was to reflect on the efforts undertaken within the project context to achieve the process-related objective, namely to pilot a process of social dialogue and collective negotiations in a salient policy issue of Olympic sports. We argue that the analysis we present offers concrete insights into the inner workings of a three-year collaborative project among academic and policy partners who represent different key actors in the industry. It also provides more general implications for strengthening social dialogue and meaningful negotiations as a key tool to govern elite sport policy. The experiences and data obtained from the project work illustrate high potential but also constraining elements to the success of such processes. Among the dimensions combined in the holistic model detailed in Chapter 4, representativeness stands out as a key factor currently hindering the more effective utilisation of collective negotiations. However, as the circular model suggests, progress in this dimension can be triggered by achieving advances in the dimensions *resources* and/or *recognition* (see Figure 3). We concede that the SOPROS project may have been limited in scope, reach and effect, both in contributing to tangible improvements in relation to its substantive objectives of assessing, evaluating and implementing athletes' social protection, and its process-oriented objective. Nevertheless, we argue that due to the identified logic to strengthen (or weaken) social dialogue in sport, the project has offered important impulses to support progress in both areas – substance and process.

In terms of social dialogue and collective negotiations processes, the project has received financial support from the European Commission. This had led to an increase in financial resources and future background knowledge among the project partners. We hope that this may contribute, as theorised, to also raising the level of representativeness among the social partners. As the knowledge gained through the project is publicly available in the form of the above-explained project outputs – including a public call to endorse the *Declaration*<sup>62</sup>– background knowledge may increase for any organisation or individual engaging with the material, thus supporting further advancements necessary for effective negotiations and debates.

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60 Fiege, Lorenz and Seltmann, "Social dialogue in professional sports in Europe: towards democratic governance between the European Sport Model and national industrial relations?"

61 On the importance of the political environment on successful social dialogue, see Alexandre Afonso, Maximilian Kiecker, and Pedro Goulart, "Determinants of Social Dialogue in European Countries (1980–2018)," *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 63, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjir.12863>.

62 See footnote 17.

As regards the general potential of such processes to constitute an effective tool in the governance of elite sport, we stress that negotiations and debates must always remain what they are meant to be: *means to achieve higher ends*, namely an instrument to design, adopt, and implement legally robust and socially progressive policies.<sup>63</sup> Negotiations must, therefore, never be a self-serving process to merely signal openness and democratic aspiration, while failing to contribute to substantive progress.<sup>64</sup>

As demonstrated in the above analysis of the project, the representation of several key stakeholders in the participatory formats of the project was uneven. In addition to a lack of representativeness, a lack of incentives to engage in debates, negotiations, and even to work towards substantive progress in athletes' social protection, may prevail at various governance levels as one interview alluded to:

"The federations are not interested, because that would probably impose additional obligations on them, such as monitoring athletes or clubs, which would be required to sign contracts or provide benefits. Clubs are not interested, because it means higher costs. Athletes, for the reasons we discussed earlier,<sup>65</sup> are also not interested at the moment. So, in practice, there is no one to conduct a dialogue with."

The quote neatly combines several elements of the model developed to interpret the current resistance to change in the local context of the interview participant. It highlights the need for further advocacy work to promote athletes' human right to social protection.

Against the backdrop of this resistance, the project took a strategic decision to place a special focus of its dissemination and engagement activities on the transnational level of sport policy and governance. In this endeavour, the support of the project's approach and objectives by two Members of European Parliament was crucial in providing a platform for wide, but more importantly, politically compelling dissemination of the main findings and outputs. In line with the underlying rationale of the Erasmus+ Sport Programme, the SOPROS project, thus, was not just a research project in the pure sense. It's ambition and aim have been – and will continue to be – to use rigorous and comparative empirical research, combined with solid normative reasoning, to provide knowledge and arguments to support progress in the area of athletes' rights. Whether in substantive or procedural terms, we hope that the project – and this article as the last outcome of the same – is, as the Scottish saying goes, adding "a little" to change a discourse and to support momentum in order to "make a mickle" for a more responsible, democratic, and rights-based governance of sport.<sup>66</sup>

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63 International Labour Organization, "ILO Social dialogue report 2024."

64 Arnout Geeraert, "The Dark Side of Governance Networks: How Private Actors Use Discursive Strategies in Global Sport Governance," *Public Management Review*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2025.2456034>

65 The interviewee argued that athletes in the local context would favour a higher level of direct income rather than lower payments coupled with mandatory contributions to statutory social protection.

66 See Daniela Heerd, Shubham Jain, and Antoine Duval, "Athletes as Multifarious Rightsholders: A New Frontier for Transnational Sports Law Research and Practice," *The International Sports Law Journal*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40318-025-00327-7> for elaborations on the importance of Erasmus+ projects in promoting athletes' human rights.



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