



**THE EU SPORTS POLICY IN MOTION:
INTERVIEW WITH MAXIME LEBLANC**

Maxime Leblanc, EU Affairs Manager, Sport & Citizenship

MAY 2015

THE EU SPORTS POLICY IN MOTION: INTERVIEW WITH MAXIME LEBLANC

Maxime Leblanc is an EU Affairs Manager at Sport & Citizenship.

IRIS: You have been working for several years on the European sports policy. Could you briefly describe the main evolutions in this field since the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009?

MAXIME LEBLANC: The very first European step in sport policies can be found in 2007, with the adoption of the *White Paper on Sport* produced by the European Commission. It is the first large-scale European initiative on sport and sets the EU “doctrine” on sport and its role in the lives of European citizens.

More importantly, it recognizes the impact that sport can have on other European policies. It is structured in 3 main chapters: the societal role of sport, the economic dimension of sport and the organisation of sport.

The year 2009 indeed marks a turning point for the field of sport, with the Lisbon Treaty mentioning sport as a supporting competence of the European Union for the first time. It means that before 2009 the EU was not granted a competence to conduct a direct policy on sports. The New Article 165 in the Lisbon Treaty thus constitutes an important step with the view to build coherent and structured policies, while recognizing the societal dimension of sport. This new article states that *“The Union shall contribute to the promotion of European sporting issues, while taking account of the specific nature of sport, its structures based on voluntary activity and its social and educational function”*.

From 2009 onwards, sport becomes a policy area in its own, and is not seen any more as a mere sub-category of culture and education. Consequently, sport policies are framed in a large policy approach, including societal, economic, financial, law, health, educational, social inclusion and diplomacy aspects. It triggered a number of policy documents. In 2012, the European Parliament sets its position on sport via the “Resolution on the European dimension of sport”. In November 2013, the Council adopted the first-ever recommendation on sport¹.

Beyond giving a legal basis to define sport policies at EU level, article 165 opened a range of possibilities to EU institutions including, amongst others, funding programmes on social inclusion, health promotion, education and training, volunteering, anti-doping, the protection of minors, combating violence and corruption in sport, the promotion of good governance in sport and supporting the development of a well researched evidence base on current issues in sport.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/sport/news/2013/20131129b_en.htm

This funding possibility materializes in the Erasmus+ Sport Chapter 2014-2020 (with a total budget of 268M euros) which aims to support European partnerships on grassroots sport in order to tackle cross-border threats to the integrity of sport, promote and support good governance in sport and to promote voluntary activities in sport, together with social inclusion, equal opportunities and awareness of the importance of health-enhancing physical activity, through increased participation in, and equal access to sport for all. This long-awaited programme will allow to consolidate existing networks, to identify best practices and to build new partnerships to contribute to the development of European policies in the field of sport.

How can the EU democratize the sports programs like Erasmus + sport or the implementation of its guidelines? What are your concrete suggestions?

The EU has taken a great step forward with the inclusion of Sport in the Erasmus+ programme, which is probably the most well-known “brand” of the European Union. .

The priority is now to make it accessible for all. Aware of this, the European Commission launched last year the first “Erasmus + Infoday” dedicated to Sport and EU funding opportunities. The second edition was organised in Brussels on 11 February 2015 and it was an important success.

This programme is a direct support of EU policies in the field of sport. Projects are selected on their ability to answer to and implement EU guidelines, identify best practices, create and consolidate networks on topics related to sport at EU level (promotion of physical activity, dual careers, fight against corruption and violence, etc...).

If this new funding programme has been welcomed by European stakeholders, it is still young and its administration will probably evolve in the coming years. Simplifying the funding rules is obviously a question, so that potential applicants are not tied up in red tape and discouraged by the level of administrative difficulty.

One way to democratize access could be to allocate smaller grants and reduce the number of participating countries to a project. As of today, successful projects have to involve at least 5 organisations from 5 Member States to be eligible.

Our think tank counts among the few organisations that were awarded a grant in 2014. The European Commission has mandated Sport and Citizenship and its partners (FESI, EUPEA, ICSSPE, ISCA, TAFISA, Spolint Institute) to conduct a 3-year project on health-enhancing physical activity. It will:

- Document the scale, costs and consequences of physical inactivity in Europe,
- Raise awareness among decision-makers on the extent of physical inactivity and on the need to make physical activity a political priority,
- Mobilise political authorities and sportsmen to stop the crisis of physical inactivity.

In terms of the implementation of EU guidelines, the model has to be the one of a multi-governance approach. The governance of sport at European level is complex, involves many stakeholders and the message of the EU institutions have to be brought to the local level in order to be efficient. In this respect, institutions like the Committee of the Regions of the European Union have a great role to play in cascading message to the territories.

Ultimately, the impact of the EU guidelines in the field of sport is bound by the involvement and engagement of Member States.

However, one must not forget that the relationship between sport and the EU is still young. The “European time” is long and patience and compromise are key qualities to advance towards a better recognition of sport’s societal role. It is the mission of our think tank to keep contributing to and disseminating the European public policies in the field of sport.

Regarding the overall sports governance in Europe, how does the EU Commission position itself towards national competences and the private sports authorities?

The new supporting competence has allowed the EU to be equipped with tools to promote the European dimension of sport. However, one should bear in mind that this does not confer any additional legislative powers to the EU, insofar as it can act only to support the actions of Member States, without being able to harmonise. It means that the European Commission cannot lead a strong “European Top-down Sport Policy”.

With reference to the EU Commission, it has a role of facilitator. Sport stakeholders have slowly recognized the added value and the relevance of collaborating at EU level. To this end, the EC has established a structured policy dialogue among governments, the sport movement and other stakeholders like Sport and Citizenship through several tools: core policy dialogue through thematic Expert Groups² and structured and *ad hoc* activities at EU level (EU-wide conferences, annual EU Sport Forum, Presidency Agenda...).

This dialogue is organized on the basis of the EU Work Plan for Sport 2014-2017³, a 3-year guideline document from the Council, which sets the priorities for the sector, the objectives, methods and structure.

However, if the EU institutions offer an agora for discussing policies related to sport, the competence to organise sport remains in the realm of Member states and national sport movements, which hold the competence and responsibility to organize sport. It means that the EU institutions recognize the autonomy of the sport movement, while developing overall coordination mechanisms to support the implementation of sport policies at national level.

² http://ec.europa.eu/sport/policy/cooperation/expert-groups-2014-2017_en.htm

³ <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EN&f=ST%209131%202014%20INIT>

Later this year Baku will host the first European Olympic Games. Which significance bears this event? Which roles does the EU play (or should play)?

The first European Games will indeed be organized in Baku, Azerbaijan next month. This European Olympic event is governed by the European Olympic Committees. The European Games are the final continental Games to be initiated, after the creation of the Asian Games, Pan-American Games, All-Africa Games and Pacific Games.

A total of 20 sports will be represented, among which 16 Olympic sports and 4 non-Olympic.

European-wide events like UEFA's Champion's League or the Eurovision Song Contest can be a forum to bring people and culture together in a very pragmatic way, through culture or sport⁴. It contributes to creating and consolidating a European public sphere⁵, which is accessible and in which European citizens have a role to play. Even if it is still early to anticipate the effect of the first European Games, the idea of bringing together athletes from all over Europe is rather positive in this sense. The message that Sport and Citizenship is already keen to deliver is that major sporting events transcend the mere performance and competitions aspects and can create important momentum and address societal issues.

The role of the EU in this regard is difficult to define, since the borders of the European Games (the EOC consists of 50 national members) do not match with those of our common political union. A possible role for the EU could be to support the organisation of side-activities through the Erasmus+ programme and promote awareness-raising campaigns, debates and moments of reflection on physical activity and the societal role of sports.

Regarding the coming bids from Germany, France and Italy for the 2024 Olympic Games, could the EU play a coordination role? Does this European competition show that there is still a lack of European sport policy and integration?

It is true that from a European perspective, this situation is going to create a disadvantage to all European bids, and other countries will probably benefit from it. Also, because of the unwritten rules of alternation between continents, European countries which are considering to bid for Olympics after 2024 might not support Germany, France or Italy for 2024 Olympics in order to better their chances in the future.

In 2014, in the framework of the Education, Culture, Youth and Sport Council Meeting, Member States recognized: "*the importance of continuing to host as many international sports events as possible in the EU*"⁶. In this regard, it is unlikely that the EU will intervene directly and have a say in the possibility to have several bids. However, the EU can create the conditions to share experience and best practices on the organisation of major sporting events, to better the chance of European bids. If it remains an important criteria, the capacity to organise large-scale events has to be accompanied by a strong legacy. It has become increasingly important in planning that type of events and this is probably where the EU has the best-added value: coordinate the exchange of information

⁴ "Favoriser l'émergence d'une identité européenne par le sport: réalité ou utopia?", <http://fr.calameo.com/books/00076158590eaaa1d667f>

⁵ Sport and Citizenship's Scientific Journal n°29, Special Issue « FREE Project », <http://fr.calameo.com/books/0007615856fffa7ede9b4>

⁶ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/142704.pdf, p. 26

on the economic, but also social and environmental legacy of major sporting events. To this end, the launch a pan-European study would be an interesting first step.

On a more philosophical side, *Sport and Citizenship* has been opening the debate on a “European bid” for many years⁷.

Such an innovative bid would be a great opportunity to bring a European dimension to the Olympic games. It would be an occasion to gather people, work together and generate a European dynamic and momentum around sport. In addition, it would give a good picture of a unified Europe aligning to host one of the most followed events on the planet. Several barriers stand against this project but we do believe that the new Olympic Agenda 2020 of the IOC (which opens the possibility to coorganise the Games)⁸ encourages us to keep this debate alive. ■

⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emMM_9aVYJs

⁸ http://www.olympic.org/Documents/Olympic_Agenda_2020/Olympic_Agenda_2020-20-20_Recommendations-ENG.pdf

THE EU SPORTS POLICY IN MOTION: INTERVIEW WITH MAXIME LEBLANC

Maxime Leblanc is a EU Affairs Manager at Sport&Citizenship

OBSERVATOIRE GÉOSTRATÉGIQUE DU SPORT / MAY 2015

Directed by Pim Verschuuren and Carole Gomez, Research Fellow at IRIS

© IRIS

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

INSTITUT DE RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES ET STRATÉGIQUES

2 bis rue Mercœur

75011 PARIS / France

T. + 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 60

F. + 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 70

contact@iris-france.org

www.iris-france.org