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# Assessing, Evaluating, and Implementing Athletes' Social Protection in Olympic Sports

Erasmus+ SOPROS  
(Project 101090790)



# SOPROS

# Project Overview

SOPROS is the title of the ERASMUS+ project “Assessing, Evaluating, and Implementing Athletes’ Social Protection in Olympic Sports”. It is a 3-year project which officially began in January 2023. The **main objectives** of the project can be summarized as follows:

- Assessing the statutory social protection coverage of elite athletes in Olympic sports<sup>1</sup> in both European Union countries and countries on the European continent, as well as private social protection schemes of organisations of the elite sport system;
- Evaluating the current landscape of athletes’ social protection;
- Developing and providing clearly formulated actor-specific steps for the implementation of athletes’ social protection;
- Providing and piloting a framework and a platform for an open, transparent, and deliberative process of negotiations.

## Concept Note

### What is athletes’ social protection in Olympic sports, and why is it important?

International legal frameworks, charters, and minimum standards on social protection apply to *everyone* (see ILO 1952, 2022; Council of Europe 1965; European Union 2021). Social protection is a human right to which all elite athletes in Olympic sports are entitled, irrespective of their legal status under a contract or national law, their nationality, or their gender, amongst others. Adequate social protection measures for elite athletes in Olympic sports is imperative.

Recent empirical research highlights the insufficient social protection measures provided to some elite athletes in Olympic sports due to factors such as low employment rates and atypical employment relationships in the sector (see ILO 2020), as well as the limited harmonisation and coordination across different stakeholders and countries (see Mittag et al. 2022), and international legal instruments (see ILO 1952, 2022; Council of Europe 1965; European Union 2021). This underlines that (minimum) social protection provisions must be implemented for all elite athletes in Olympic sports.

The measures which shall be guaranteed to any elite athletes in Olympic sports are:

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|-----------------------------------|--|
| (1) Child and family benefits;    | (6) Health protection/insurance (including |
| (2) Maternity/paternity benefits; | maternity protection);                     |
| (3) Unemployment support;         | (7) Old-age benefits/pensions;             |
| (4) Employment injury benefits;   | (8) Invalidity/disability benefits;        |
| (5) Sick leave benefits;          | (9) Survivors’ benefits; and               |
|                                   | (10) Minimum wage.                         |

The project partners acknowledge that there are many ways to provide these social protection measures. While the inclusion of all elite athletes in Olympic sports within the scope of a country’s social protection system is a necessary precondition, additional complementary

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<sup>1</sup> Within the framework of this study, Olympic sports are those sports that are part of the Olympic programme. These are not organised in professional leagues and the Olympic Games constitute the pinnacle of the sporting stage. Elite athletes are athletes who are a member of a national team or, where they exist, a national elite cadre (synonym: Olympic elite athletes).

policies may be required to fully account for the specific situations that athletes face in their sports.

Fulfilment of the human right of social protection can arise from bespoke and needs-based policies and provisions which are adopted to mitigate and prevent poverty, vulnerability, social exclusion, and injustice throughout the life cycle of the athletes for whom stakeholders assume a joint responsibility. These policies and provisions may include, yet not rely exclusively on:

- (1) statutory (public) provisions to which athletes are entitled based on their specific legal/contractual status by law (e.g., as citizens/residents, employees, self-employed, and/or, elite athletes); and
- (2) complementary (private) measures (e.g., attained through cadre status, sporting success/performance) which account for the peculiarities (threats/risks) associated with the practised sports.

In line with the common practice of the modern welfare state, a combination of contributory (social insurance) and non-contributory (tax-financed) schemes may be utilised to finance measures for athletes' social protection.

## Background and Rationale

In recent years, several cases of issues related to the social protection of elite athletes have made headlines in newspapers and raised critical awareness in the public sphere. Unfortunately, in many cases, these headlines refer to incidents of tragic accidents of elite athletes, but topics like pension payments, health care or maternity protection have also entered the sphere of Olympic elite sport governance. However, recent data of the EMPLOYS project indicate that limitations in social protection is the reality for many athletes in Olympic sports across the continent. Most athlete-centred social protection systems are based on ad-hoc cooperation and coordination between sport governing bodies and public authorities. The actual roles and responsibilities taken by public and private actors in the practical implementation of athletes' social protection have not yet been precisely defined.

Recent policy initiatives at the transnational and European level have acknowledged the need to increase social protection standards for athletes, for example the Council of Europe in 2021 and the ILO in 2020. Additionally, athletes have increasingly been positioning themselves as key actors of the Olympic movement and demanding greater involvement in decision-making processes that affect their lives both as athletes and human beings. This demonstrates the importance of involving all stakeholders in the elite sport sector that are responsible for the regulation and implementation of athletes' social protection.

Athletes' social protection was identified via the EMPLOYS project as the predominant dimension in which policy change should be implemented in the next few years. The current state of systematic knowledge in this field must be considered insufficient to implement substantive and effective policy change on a sound evidence base, and the transfer of the gathered data and analytical results into practical policy and implementation strategies remains a matter of concern. Therefore, the SOPROS project's objectives, each of which is translated into a specific work package with a precise methodology, clearly defined tasks and associated deliverables, is a decisive step toward setting a framework for the implementation of measures for athletes in the policy field of social protection.

# Consortium Members

The consortium contains academic partners from countries across the continent, as well as policy partners which represent core organisations of the elite sport sector responsible for the regulation and implementation of athletes' social protection.

## Academic Partners

- German Sport University Cologne
- University of Rijeka
- Institute for Sport Governance
- Edge Hill University
- Sport Evolution Alliance

## Policy Partners

- European Elite Athletes Association (EU Athletes)
- European Association of Sport Employers (EASE)
- European Olympic Academies (EOA)

## Associated Partner

- International Labour Organization (ILO)

# Project Summary

The aim of the SOPROS project is to promote integrity and values in sport by **assessing, evaluating, and implementing athletes' social protection in Olympic sports**. It can be understood as a deepening of the Erasmus+ EMPLOYS project in the area of athletes' social protection, which is one of six core dimensions of the employment relations of athletes in Olympic sports. It will build on the solid foundation and findings of the EMPLOYS project (<https://www.dshs-koeln.de/employs/>) and take the next steps toward setting a framework for the implementation of measures for athletes in the specific policy field of social protection.

The SOPROS project involves the German Sport University Cologne, the University of Rijeka, the Sport Evolution Alliance, Edge Hill University, the Institute for Sport Governance, the European Elite Athletes Association (EU Athletes), the European Olympic Academies (EOA), and the European Association of Sport Employers (EASE).

Each partner is in charge of different tasks. The **academic partners**, besides their leading roles in carrying out the research providing an evidence base for all efforts, assume the role of **national managers** in their respective countries, specifically addressing the involvement of stakeholders of the five countries. The **policy partners**, in addition to representing their member organisations, assume the role of **stakeholder managers** and **multipliers**, tasked with maintaining and fostering relationships with the identified actors of the target groups. The three policy partners may be seen to represent the two "traditional" sides of social partners (i.e. the employers and the employees).

Additionally, the International Labour Organization (ILO) in its role as an **associated partner** contributes to the project as bridge to the social partners and as an important **multiplier**. The ILO is involved in all phases and all topic-related matters of the project as well as the dissemination activities.

### The SOPROS project will:

- 1) develop practicable **Self-Assessment Tools** (one each for athletes, sport governing bodies, and public authorities) to collect unique data about athletes' social protection in Olympic sports;
- 2) analyse and present this data in an **Evaluation Report**;
- 3) develop a **Manual for the Implementation of Athletes' Social Protection**;
- 4) pilot a **process of negotiations** in Olympic elite sports and provide analytical and practical insights into its benefits and challenges; and
- 5) host two rounds of **National Workshops**, one **EU-Level Multi-Stakeholder Workshop** and three public **Conferences**.

## National Workshops

The aim of the national workshops is to present the project's approach and its findings to the stakeholders involved in the governance of Olympic elite sport at the national level. The workshops are a crucial element in the development of the project:

- At the first national workshop (06-12/2023), the project team will present the draft methodology of the Self-Assessment Tools. In an open discussion stakeholders can share their thoughts and influence the development of the tools to ensure that they serve the athletes community in their country.
- The second national workshop (time) aims at refining the recommendations included in the manual for the implementation of athletes' social protection, which is the final outcome of the project.

A deliberative methodology is key to the success of the project and will pave the way for a more comprehensive coverage of athletes' social protection in their respective national contexts but also in a transnational way.

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