

Joint public hearing by the Subcommittee on Human Rights ([DROI](#))
and the Committee on Culture and Education ([CULT](#))

“Sport (large sporting events) and Human Rights”

Co-chaired by Elena Valenciano (DROI) and Silvia Costa (CULT)

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Changing the Game: A Year of Reckoning for Global Sports

I. Sports and human rights over last decade: how things have changed

Thank you to the European Parliament for hosting this important debate—at a critical moment for global sports.

Let me say from the start: I am a sports fan.

We all love to watch the Olympics and the World Cup, and we all want to enjoy elite competition at the highest level. We want to cheer for our teams and for our favorite athletes to break records. But it is increasingly hard to do so. Sports fans don't want to sit in a stadium built by exploited, cheated and abused workers—or worse, a facility that cost lives to construct. Journalists who cover sport—like ARD's Florian Bauer, who is here today—should not face intimidation, arrest and censorship of their reporting on mega-sporting events. Human rights activists who expose government corruption around games should not be jailed. These egregious human rights abuses violate the Olympic Charter and the fundamental principles host cities, sports federations and institutions claim to uphold.

Discrimination is another abuse that undermines fair play and the rules of sport—and human rights. Many would-be sports hosts have pernicious laws and policies that discriminate or encourage violence against LGBT people and athletes.

Alone in the world, women and girls in Saudi Arabia are denied the right to play sports and physical education as a matter of government policy. The Olympic Charter says “Sport is a human right.” But when there are no sports federations for women, as in Saudi Arabia, or women and girls are arrested for trying to watch international tournaments in stadiums, as in Iran, then the time has come for sports federations to use the leverage they have for change.

II. Human Rights Watch research

For more than a decade, Human Rights Watch has monitored abuses caused by mega-sporting events, including the Olympics and football's World Cup. In a series of reports, from China to Russia, from Saudi Arabia to Qatar, we have documented how mega-sporting events bring mega-violations when games are awarded to serious human rights abusers.

We have documented: forced evictions without compensation, abuses of migrant workers building state-of-the-art sports venues, crushing of civil society, environmental degradation, discrimination and exclusion, and quashing of reporting.

No government has a perfect human rights record, but Human Rights Watch has proven through our reporting that these abuses are much worse when Games are awarded to hosts who have bad rights records or no functioning rule of law.

And increasingly, it is repressive governments who are seeking the right to host these mega-sporting events. Why? Global games bring the chance to stand next to world leaders, burnish reputations, and divert media attention from domestic crises—while shifting the spotlight from abused workers who build glittering new stadiums and luxurious facilities.

This trend poses a serious challenge to today's sports leadership, and is why we say 2015 is a year of reckoning for global sport. This is a year when promises and rhetoric will be tested by some of the world's most notorious human rights abusers.

Here are **key dates** for European Parliamentarians and member states to put on your radar screens:

- **On May 29**, FIFA will hold an election to select a new president. The current president is seeking a fifth term with challengers who have spoken of support for human rights, transparency, and labor reforms. Whoever leads FIFA must take action on the unfolding crisis of migrant labor abuses in the construction of stadiums ahead of the **2018 World Cup in Russia**, and the **2022 World Cup in Qatar**, where workers are bound by an oppressive sponsorship system known as “*kafala*.”
- **On June 12**, the first European Games will launch in Baku, Azerbaijan, with 6,000 athletes and 50 National Olympic committees. Instead of an environment of “human dignity” and media freedom as required by the Olympic Charter, the Baku Games will launch in a setting of extreme repression. President Aliyev is forging ahead with the most devastating clampdown on human rights in 24 years of post-Soviet independence, arresting many of the Azerbaijani human rights advocates and journalists who could have brought scrutiny and transparency to the conduct of these Games—if they weren't jailed. Because of the prestige the first European Games confer, leaders can and must use the short window of time before the launch to insist on the release of political prisoners—and should condition high-level attendance on this step. For its part, the European Olympic Committees, the Rome-based organization that consists of 50 National Olympic Committees, has the power and the leverage to tell Baku to release prisoners and stop threatening journalists before the Games begin.
- **On July 30**, the IOC will choose between Kazakhstan and China to host the 2022 Winter Olympics. Both countries are corrupt and authoritarian human rights abusers, repress media freedom and often fail to act in cases of labor rights abuses. Kazakhstan may soon pass a copycat ugly anti-LGBT law similar to the one enacted in Russia just months before the Sochi Games. Learning the lessons of Beijing and Sochi, the IOC should ensure new Host City Contracts explicitly include enforceable human rights guarantees from the beginning.
- **August 4** will mark the one-year countdown to the Rio 2016 Olympics. After allowing two women to compete in the 2012 London Games for the first time, Saudi Arabia has failed to permit sport for millions of girls in state schools, failed to allow sports federations for women, and failed to set up a women's section of its National Olympic Committee. The Saudis should win a gold medal in brazenness for sending a 199 member men-only team to the 2014 Asian Games, claiming, “Technically, we weren't ready to introduce any ladies.” This choice to effectively exclude women from sport should be firmly answered by the IOC with a ban on the Saudi team, until women are allowed to take meaningful part in sport inside the country.

Each of these dates represents a major test for global sports. Human Rights Watch is a member of the new **Sports and Rights Alliance**—an international coalition which was formed here in Europe to uphold human rights, labor rights, children's rights, anti-corruption, and sustainability standards and principles in major sports events.

We believe that when sports bodies stay silent and complicit in the face of abuses and discrimination, or have double standards for host countries, ***it undermines fair play, the rules of the game, and the foundation of sport itself.***

III. Old and new approach to sports and rights

For many years, international sporting institutions such as the International Olympic Committee maintained that there was no connection between sports and human rights—and indeed that sports must be free from pressures around human rights. But the growing pattern of repressive countries promising whatever it takes to win the right to host prestigious events, swearing allegiance to the Olympic Charter, then reneging on those pledges has become too ugly.

While the IOC has leverage with countries hosting Olympic Games, it has not always used this power. Eight months before the Sochi Games, Russia adopted its discriminatory anti-LGBT law. The IOC had an opportunity to stop passage or seek the repeal of that law, by arguing that it directly violated Principle Six of the Olympic Charter on non-discrimination, but chose not to.

So like much else that has changed with 24 hour news cycles and social media, the approach of the International Olympic Committee has changed—and if implemented, could show a path for all global sports bodies.

Last December, the IOC's new president Thomas Bach formally put forward a reform platform called **Olympic Agenda 2020** that called on host cities to respect human rights provisions in the Olympic Charter, such as gender equality, non-discrimination (Principle 6) and the respect for basic rights as enshrined in UN treaties. It was passed unanimously in Monaco at a special IOC session.

After the ugly fallout from Sochi, President Bach insisted that Host City contracts and the Olympic Charter itself must include protections against discrimination—clearly in response to Russia's adoption of its anti-gay law. The IOC also agreed that international press and human rights protections apply, and that the previously secret host city contracts will now be public. The reform agenda passed last December mean that if future host countries fail in their duty to uphold rights, the IOC can enforce the terms of the hosting agreement—including the ultimate sanction of withdrawing the Olympics. And for those who break rules like non-discrimination, the punishment should be banning from hosting and being part of the Olympic family.

In short, if you want to play, you have to play by the rules.

IOC President Dr. Bach has started the ball rolling, but with abuses mounting around global sporting events, it's time for the EOC to embrace Agenda 2020 ahead of Baku, and time for federations such as FIFA to launch their own overdue reforms.

IV. FIFA lags in reforms, unexplained deaths

When the Beijing Olympics cost 40 billion dollars and the Sochi Olympics cost 52 billion dollars, many thought that was the most that could be spent on a mega-sporting event. But the 2022 Qatar World Cup, involving the construction of a dozen new stadiums and infrastructure by thousands of migrant workers, will cost an estimated \$200 billion dollars. Along with the financial costs that are deterring some democracies from hosting, there is a huge human cost with such massive infrastructure: already coffins are being shipped home to Nepal and other South Asian countries as hundreds of migrant workers toiling under Qatar's Kafala system have died unexplained deaths in the construction sector.

In Qatar, codes of conduct for high-profile construction projects, including World Cup stadiums, should provide increased levels of protection for workers on those projects. But so far action falls short of what's required. As for Kafala—a Gulf-wide system that can lead to forced labor—Qatar is simply changing the name, not making significant changes to the system. As for exit visas, Qatar still will not abolish the controls that tie workers to even abusive employers.

With seven years until 2022, FIFA and Qatar still have the opportunity to do the right thing.

FIFA can and should insist on:

- The outright **abolition of denying exit visas**;
- a clear timetable for meaningful **reform of the kafala system**; and
- an immediate investigation into the tragically **high pattern of worker deaths**.

V. Why act now

Some will tell you sports federations and institutions have no power, and in any event can't change an environment of chronic human rights abuses. This is not new or true.

The IOC at times **has** been a genuine "force for good": it banned Apartheid-era South Africa from the Olympics from 1964-1992 for racial discrimination, and Taliban-run Afghanistan from 1999-2002 for discrimination against women. The IOC pressured South Korea to hold elections before the 1998 Seoul Games—and the country has been a durable democracy ever since. Over time, and with a lot of media embarrassment and external pressure, the IOC has adopted reforms to address **doping, environmental degradation, and corruption**.

If MEPs, governments and sports federations don't take steps to address abuses as they are occurring, they simply send just the wrong message to abusers—who may be emboldened and become more brazen in their abuses and demands, and will put ever more pressure on those who do play by the rules.

Because autocrats like Azerbaijani President Aliyev are increasingly turning to international sporting events to boost their standing, sometimes sports rules can be the key to achieve human rights advances in some of the most abusive places.

In sum, we are **not** asking FIFA or the IOC or the EOC to be the "world's cop," policing human rights abuses. That is the job for those of us in the human rights movement.

But we are asking something very achievable with political will: for the IOC and the EOC, with the crucial support of European parliamentarians, to use leverage *you have* to free journalists and rights activists who shouldn't be in prison or threatened in the first place. The window to do so before the Baku Games launch on June 12 is closing fast. You will be helping not only valiant reporters and activists in Azerbaijan, but your own athletes: no one wants to take home medals tarnished by association with repression.

Fans, corporate sponsors, and the general public are increasingly turned off by human rights violations in staging sporting extravaganzas. It is time to put an end to double standards in hosting sport and the high human cost of awarding mega-sporting events to repressive governments. Let's agree there cannot be a truly successful global sporting event associated with major rights abuses—and at last begin to use the leverage mega-sporting events bring ... for good.
