

## RUGBY EUROPE MISCONDUCT JUDGMENT

IN THE MATTER OF ALLEGATIONS OF MISCONDUCT BROUGHT BY RUGBY EUROPE AGAINST  
EBUBEKIR HARMANCI (“The Player”) and TURKEY RUGBY UNION FEDERATION (“The Federation”)  
DISCIPLINARY COMMITTEE

Mike Hamlin Chairman – England

Marcello D’Orey – Portugal

Palemia Field – Finland

HEARING DATE – 18<sup>th</sup> September 2025 (Via Zoom)

### ATTENDEES

The Player

Selcuk Gorgulu (Vice President of The Federation)

David Baird-Smith (Secretariat for Rugby Europe)

### INTRODUCTION

1. On the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> July 2025 Rugby Europe hosted the U18 Boys Sevens 1 Trophy. It was held in Budapest, Hungary over 2 days. On 19<sup>th</sup> July 2025 (the first day of the Competition) it was alleged by Philippe Tuccelli, Head of Competitions at Rugby Europe that The Player and The Federation had breached Article 5.12 of the 2025 7s Tournament Manual by displaying the Turkish National Flag (2 incidents) on the field of play and displayed political messages on the field of play. It was alleged that The Player (who was the Captain of the Turkish Federation U18 side) entered the field of play showing the national flag of Turkey in a demonstrative fashion in the matches between Turkey v Croatia and Turkey v Andorra. The Player scored a try after 7 minutes and 24 seconds in the match between Turkey v Croatia. To celebrate The Player, first made a heart shape with his hands. Then, looking towards the official photographer, he joined his thumb, middle finger and ring finger together. This gesture is commonly associated with the sign of the Grey Wolves, a Turkish ultranationalist group. Rugby Europe allege that this was a political sign in breach of Article 5.12.
2. On 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2025 Rugby Europe received a report from the Judicial Officer appointed for the tournament (Mr Bartosz Marczyński from Poland) where he outlines the alleged facts set out in paragraph 1 above. Taking into account the footage of the matches and the Judicial Officer’s report Mr Tuccelli filed a misconduct complaint against The Player and The Federation on the basis that both parties had failed to comply with and respect Article 5.12 of the Tournament Manual.
3. Mr Tuccelli also stated in his complaint that on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2024 Rugby Europe received a complaint from the appointed Tournament Director, Mr Karlis Vents regarding the U18 Boys

1 & 2 Trophy Tournament hosted by the Polish Union in Zabki Poland from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> July 2024. The complaint reported similar behaviour from members of the Turkish delegation. In 2024 no further action was taken because, although political gestures were already forbidden, it was decided that further clarifications in the Tournament Manual were needed before imposing sanctions. This led to the addition of Article 5.12 in the Tournament Manual. The Misconduct Complaint further alleged that given the repeated character of the breaches and the political nature of the gestures are serious enough to be considered as non-standard breaches (see Article 12.5 of the Tournament Manual and constitute a case of misconduct.

4. Article 12.5.2 requires Rugby Europe to serve (share/send to) The Player and The Federation the Misconduct Complaint. This was complied with. The Player and The Federation then had 48 hours to respond to the Misconduct Complaint. In their response they both disputed that they had breached Article 5.12 and/or Article 12.5.

5. Mr Tuccelli, on behalf of Rugby Europe submitted the following pieces of evidence to substantiate the Misconduct Complaint:-

2025 7s Tournament Manual

Email dated May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2025 to all Participating Teams enclosing the Tournament Manual

The Team Manager's Meeting Handbook

Video Clip 1 of Turkey v Croatia (Flag Incident)

Video Clip 2 of Turkey v Andorra (Flag Incident)

Photograph 1 of Turkey v Croatia (Flag Incident)

Photograph 2 of Turkey v Andorra (Flag Incident)

Video Clip 3 of Turkey v Croatia (Political Sign)

Photograph 3 of Turkey v Croatia (Political Sign)

Report of Bartosz Marczyński (Judicial Officer)

The Misconduct Complaint Form

Video Clip 4 (U18 Trophy Turkey v Sweden)

Team Sheet of the Turkish Boys Team

No oral evidence or written submissions were presented to the Disciplinary Committee by Rugby Europe.

6. The Player and The Federation submitted the following documentation:-

Player's Statement

## Responses to the Misconduct Complaint

### Detailed Information and Photographs relating to the Wolf Gesture

### Responses to the Disciplinary Committee's Directions dated 15<sup>th</sup> September 2025

### The Federation's Response to Rugby Europe's Regulatory basis for the Misconduct Complaint

The Player and The Federation supplemented their written submissions with oral evidence and submissions.

7. Neither The Player nor The Federation raised any preliminary points nor any objections to the composition of the Disciplinary Committee. Selcuk Gorgulu acted as interpreter for The Player as he did not speak English.
8. It should be recorded that neither The Player nor The Federation disputed the facts alleged in the Misconduct Complaint. The Player accepted as a fact that he had carried the Turkish flag onto the field of play on two occasions as alleged. Furthermore, he accepted that after scoring a try in the match v Croatia, he made a heart gesture with his hand and a Wolf Sign. Both parties denied that the allegations were in any way politically motivated.
9. The relevant Regulatory Articles of the 2025 Tournament Manual relating to the allegations are as follows:-

#### Article 5.12

"Activities within the playing enclosure are strictly monitored. National Flags (expected during the Pre-Final protocol or opening/closing ceremonies) or signs or slogans, or any message of political nature are prohibited in the playing enclosure at any time. For the avoidance of doubt, playing enclosure includes the technical zones. Any infringement will be reported to the Tournament Director and followed up by disciplinary sanctions according to the provisions of Article 12. Non standard breaches will be dealt by the Judicial Officer on site"

#### Article 5.4

"No political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted on the field of play, in the technical areas or in any official competition venue."

#### Article 7.2 - Misconduct

"Any action that brings the game, Rugby Europe or the Competition into disrepute shall be considered misconduct"

#### Article 9.1

“Repeated or aggravated misconduct even if not explicitly listed, may be sanctioned by the Disciplinary Committee”

10. The issues in this case were not factual, as both parties accepted the flags were carried onto the field of play and that the Player made two signs after he scored a try, namely a heart and a wolf sign. The principal issues were why the flags were carried onto the field of play and why the signs were made by the Player. Were they political as alleged by Rugby Europe or an act of celebration or joy as submitted by The Player and The Federation. The burden of proof is upon The Player and The Federation to show that their respective actions were not political. The test is therefore, is it more probable than not, that their respective actions were political, or a celebration of joy reflecting Turkish mythological history and culture? In respect of the heart and wolf sign if the Player and The Federation can satisfy the Disciplinary Committee that on the evidence that it is more likely than not the making of the signs were a celebration of success and joy then they will have satisfied the Committee that the complaint should be dismissed. This case is of significant importance to Rugby Europe, The Player and the Federation, all be it for different reasons. Rugby Europe wish to control the behaviour of players on the field of play and prevent any form of political statements or gestures to preserve the respect and integrity of their competitions and the game. Players or participants of many sports demonstrate their joy or success by the use of physical gestures, for example, raising a thumb, the pumped arm, raising arms in celebration or as in some sports (football) by players removing their shirts. The examples are many. Furthermore, sporting bodies have permitted what may be described as political statements by permitting players to take the knee against racism or wearing rainbow armbands to support LGBTQ+ rights. Difficulties arise when an action sign or gesture is capable of being interpreted in more than one way, as in this case. It is clear to the Disciplinary Committee that the ‘Wolf’ sign may be interpreted in two ways, the signature sign of a Turkish ultranationalist group linking it to extreme right wing activities or according to Turkish history a symbol of shared cultural history with roots in Turkish mythology. The ‘Wolf’ sign is for example banned/unlawful in Austria, France. It is, however, used or recognised by Turkic communities in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. It is against this background that this case is brought and must be decided. We are very mindful that the member unions of Rugby Europe come from all over Europe where there are many different cultures and political systems.
11. Rugby Disciplinary Hearings are not courts of law. They are a sports disciplinary tribunal. All cases are fact and issue specific. No two cases are identical. Each case is decided on its own facts with due application of the relevant regulations. Our function is inquisitorial. This judgment is the unanimous decision of this Committee. Inevitably, it is a summary of the evidence produced to us before and during the hearing. We have not recorded in this judgment all the evidence or submission made, but we have in finalising our decision considered carefully all written, oral and photographic evidence produced.

#### THE EVIDENCE

12. Rugby Europe’s factual evidence was uncontentious. The carrying of the Turkish National Flag on two occasions as shown in the exhibits was admitted by The Player and The Federation. Furthermore, neither The Player nor The Federation disputed the making of the heart sign

nor the 'Wolf' sign. The Player can be seen after scoring a try make a heart sign and then on his haunches grinning and making the 'Wolf' sign. On these facts Rugby Europe asserted that there was a breach of Article 5.12.

13. Rugby Europe submitted that Turkish players had, in Zabki, Poland between 12-14 July 2024, in the U18 Boys Competition breached the Rugby Europe Code of Conduct by making wolf signs in post-match celebrations and that this together with The Player's conduct amounted to repeated and aggravated misconduct. No action was taken against The Federation or the players in respect of the 2024 Polish incident. There was no evidence of any finding of culpability or written warning issued to The Federation. The incident was verbally brought to the attention of the manager and Vice President of the Federation on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2024.
14. The Player had submitted a signed undated statement in which he denied his actions were in any way political but were expressions of love, joy and pride. He was the Turkish Captain and very proud to lead his team. He gave oral evidence. He was born on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2007 and therefore 18 years of age at the time of the Tournament. He admitted draping the flag round his shoulder and holding it aloft and making the heart and wolf sign. He was not told he could not take the flags onto the field of play. After the first day he was told and complied on the second day of the Competition. He had played in Poland in 2024. He was not aware of any issues in 2024. He made the heart sign as an indication of his love for his mother who was watching the game. He made the wolf sign as a sign of joy and celebration having just scored a try. He had no interest in politics, just sport. He did not know that the wolf sign was linked to any right-wing ultranationalist party. He was not aware that the Grey Wolves had been involved in any violence or historical massacres. He could not recall seeing the sign being made in other sports. He had carried the flag from the airport to the venue and had it with him on the first day. He was told not to display it on the second day by his manager. His brother was 7 years older and in the army. The Player was younger his brother was always making the wolf sign which he copied. He knew about the Turkish footballer Demiral being suspended by UEFA in 2024 but he was not concerned about these things despite it being big news at the time.
15. The Turkish Federation's evidence can be summarised as follows. It, like The Player, did not contest the carrying of the flags and the making of the wolf sign. It submitted detailed evidence of the history and cultural significance of the 'Wolf' sign. The carrying of the flags was nothing more than national Turkish pride. In its responses to Rugby Europe's Notice of Disciplinary Hearing, its compliance with our directions and in oral evidence the making of the Wolf sign was not political propaganda but an expression of cultural and historical significance. The Player's actions were celebratory without political intent. Visual evidence was produced from athletes and Turkish communities worldwide demonstrating the gesture can be cultural and political. Reference was made to the haka in rugby by New Zealand.

16. Photographs of the Wolf sign being used as a victory sign were submitted in wrestling, basketball and even by a Turkish Professor of Chemistry who was awarded the Nobel Chemistry prize in 2015. There were 20 examples of the sign being used in primarily a sporting context but also by young children which inter alia included, American Football Team, the Tulpar Dance School Dagestan and at the Hungarian Magyar Festival. Furthermore, there were eight examples of the sign being used by individual politicians across the political spectrum in Turkey – for example President Erdogan, Yildirim, Ozdag, Kilicdaroglu, Ihsanoglu, Aksener, Arinc and Bahceli. On this basis, in the context in which the sign was made it was not political and therefore no misconduct. (The Disciplinary Committee took judicial note that in the London Times on Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> September 2025, there was a photograph of Prince Harry with a Ukrainian War veteran and a little girl and the Ukrainian was making the ‘Wolf’ sign across his chest. All three were smiling).
17. Selcuk Gorgulu adopted the written submissions of The Turkish Federation. He supplemented them by giving oral evidence. The Wolf sign had its roots in Turkish mythology from a 1000 years ago. It portrays resilience, leadership and is part of Turkish heritage and culture and is used to express success pleasure and joy. He recognised that it is also the political sign of the Grey Wolves. Having made enquiries he disputed that the management team had been specifically advised about the new Article 5.12 at the Team Managers meeting prior to the start of the competition.

#### FINDINGS OF FACT

18. (i) The Player and The Turkish Federation admit that the Turkish National flag was displayed on the field of play on two occasions in the matches between Croatia and Andorra and the ‘Wolf’ sign was made by The Player in the match v Croatia as alleged by Rugby Europe.  
(ii) The Player made a heart gesture in the match v Croatia intended for his mother. This was not political.  
(iii) We accept The Player’s evidence that he has no interest in politics and that at the age of 18 his main interest is sport. He had little or no knowledge of the origin of the Wolf sign other than as a commonly used sign in Turkey. We accept he was not aware of the association between the sign and the ultranationalist right wing political party known as the Grey Wolves  
(iv) The Turkish Federation failed to inform their players prior to or on the first day of the Competition that the display of National flags was prohibited on the field of play. It is accepted that this information was made known to the players after the first day. There was no repeat of flag carrying or wolf signs on the second day.  
(v) We do not accept that the Turkish Management Team were not made aware of Article 5.12 at the Managers meeting. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of every team’s management to know the competition regulations and to comply with them.  
(vi) The Wolf Sign can have two meanings. Firstly, it is a sign associated with the Grey Wolves and is political. This sign can be, and is offensive as it is connected with a far right ultranationalist political party. The use of it is banned in some countries. Secondly, the sign can be, has been and continues to be a sign reflecting Turkish history and culture and has also been adopted and embraced as a sign of happiness and joy. The varied photographs submitted by the Federation showing the sign being used in this manner support this finding.

#### DECISION AND SANCTION

19. The Federation and The Player were in error to challenge the allegation relating to the display of the National Flag. Article 5.12 is clear. Apart from at opening and/or closing ceremonies the display of National Flags is prohibited. This part of the provision is unambiguous. The Federation are at fault for not communicating this provision to the players and specifically The Player who was the Captain. This is misconduct. We therefore uphold the allegation against The Federation and The Player.
20. The Wolf Sign allegation is far more complex. We have found that in Turkey it is capable of having two meanings, one cultural based on history, mythology and associated with celebration; the other political linked to the Grey Wolves. We are mindful of Articles 5.4; 7.2 and 9.1 set out above. Whether the act is a breach of Article 5.12 or not depends upon the evidence. The making of the Grey Wolf sign in this case is fact specific and requires us to consider whether this conduct is one of strict liability or not. If this sign was only capable of being associated with the Grey Wolves then the making of the sign would be political and amount to misconduct. But that is not the case. The making of the sign may be interpreted or depict one of two possibilities – political or non-political.
21. World Rugby Regulation 17 deals with discipline and foul play on the field of play. Law 9.12 provides that a player must not physically abuse anyone. Physical abuse is defined. Physical abuse equates to misconduct or foul play during the match. The physical abuse may be intentional, reckless or accidental. If the latter, no offence is committed. It depends upon the circumstances and the totality of the evidence. Similarly, if there was only one interpretation of the use of the Wolf Sign, namely political then the Player's actions would automatically be a breach of Article 5.12. But, that is not the case because the making of the Grey Wolf sign in Turkey can mean one of two concepts or interpretations. We recognise that the mere making of the sign can be or is offensive to others especially from different countries.
22. We have found that the Player's actions in making a heart sign were not political but an expression of love for his mother. Many sports participants make discrete non-political signs at a time of joy. We do not believe that Rugby Europe intended to prohibit this type of sign when drafting Article 5.12. It is neither offensive or political. If we are wrong then the provision will be amended.
23. We believe that Rugby Europe intended to prohibit any sign which was, or could be interpreted as political or offensive in nature. We are reluctant to accept that it wished to prevent actions or acts or signs which were celebrations of joy or success.
24. We must therefore, consider The Player's motives and intent on making the sign according to his evidence. He is only 18 years of age. He had seen his older brother regularly make the sign in daily life. He copied him. His evidence was credible; he made the sign as a celebration of scoring a try. In his mind, it had nothing to do with politics or The Grey Wolves. The Federation produced compelling evidence of the sign being used both in a non-political and political context. The position is further complicated by the fact that the sign was used by Turkish politicians who had no association with The Grey Wolves but were from across the Turkish political spectrum. We noted the incidents in 2024 but there was no evidence of any findings against The Federation or written warnings placed before us. We accept that they received a verbal warning. However, based upon our findings and for the reasons set out

above we are satisfied on the balance of probabilities that neither The Player nor The Federation breached Article 5.12 by making a political messages on the field of play. This allegation of misconduct against both is dismissed.

25. The sanctions for display of the National Flag shall be as follows:

- (i) The Player is reprimanded.
- (ii) The Federation is fined 1,000 Euros which will be suspended until 30<sup>th</sup> September 2027. If within that period The Federation commits another breach of Rugby Europe Regulations or Tournament Manuals then the fine may be activated in addition to any sanction for the subsequent offence or breach.
- (iii) The Federation in addition to the suspended fine set out in (ii) above shall make a presentation to all members of the Turkish National Teams (both senior and junior) including management, medical and coaching staff of the importance of observing the core values of rugby namely, Teamwork; Respect; Enjoyment; Discipline and Sportsmanship and the importance of Regulation compliance. The presentation shall be made by The Federation's President, or Vice President or Senior Manager. It shall be not less than 20 minutes and shall be recorded. A copy of the recording shall be sent to the David-Baird Smith, Rugby Europe's Secretary by no later than 18<sup>th</sup> November 2025.
- (iv) There is no order for costs against either party.

26. There is a Right of Appeal against this decision in accordance with Rugby Europe's Regulations

Mike Hamlin

Marcello D'Orey

Palemia Field

23<sup>rd</sup> September 2025