

Austria moves to deport one of North Korea's few international footballers

SKN St. Pölten, where Pak Kwang Ryong has played since 2017, insists he still holds a "valid contract," however

[Oliver Hotham](#) April 20, 2020



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The Austrian government has begun the process of revoking the work permit and issuing a deportation order against North Korean football player Pak Kwang Ryong, a report by the United Nations revealed last week, potentially marking the end of the career of one of the DPRK's few internationally-performing athletes.

[The report](#), [made public by the United Nations' Panel of Experts \(PoE\) on Friday](#) but subsequently taken offline for reasons that remain unclear, detailed North Korea's continued ability to circumvent international sanctions and bring in illicitly-obtained funds and goods through cyber-attacks and smuggling.

But it also to sought follow-up on member states' implementation of UN Resolution 2397, which [required member states repatriate](#) all DPRK citizens earning currency in their territory by the end of 2019.

The report listed the 27-year-old Pak Kwang Ryong — who has played as a forward for Austria's SKN St. Pölten since 2017 — as being one of three North Korean footballers working overseas with “contract terms extending beyond the due date for repatriation.”

“In respect of Mr. Pak, Austria replied that its competent authorities initiated procedures necessary to revoke the residence and work permit and to issue a return decision based on the relevant laws,” the report said.

It's unclear when precisely the deportation order will be carried out, with Austria's Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs declining to comment on individual cases when contacted by *NK News*.

It also appears that Pak remains in Austria and that, for the time being, he will continue to play for the club, which competes in the Bundesliga, the country's top-tier football competition.

Speaking to *NK News* over email, a spokesperson for SKN St. Pölten insisted that he holds “a valid contract at our club, which lasts until the end of the current season.”

“Kwang-Ryong Pak is currently in Austria and is a regular player of our team with a valid contract until the official end of the current season,” Tomas Weber, who oversees press and communications for the club, said. “Furthermore he has a valid working permission in Austria.”

The current Austrian football season is on hold due to concerns over the spread of COVID-19, he added, meaning it is “not clear, when the season will be finished this summer.”

Signed to SKN St. Pölten in 2017, Pak, a [fluent English speaker](#), previously played for Switzerland's FC Basel and FC Lausanne-Sport, as well as his country's national team during the World Cup and Asia Games.



Pak (fifth from the left) and the rest of the DPRK national team at the 2015 Asia Games | Photo: Hugh

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One expert said she was saddened by news that he may now be being sent home, arguing that cultural and sporting engagement would help, not hinder, efforts to open North Korea up to the outside world.

“I suppose it shows how this sanction is absurd, and even counterproductive,” Tereza Novotna, Senior Associate Research Fellow at the EUROPEUM and an expert on DPRK-EU relations, told *NK News*.

“I think that there should be cultural, sports and educational exemptions,” she added, pointing to her own country, the Czech Republic, and the positive impact that its engagement with the west had during the Cold War.

“When I think back about our (Czechoslovak) experience, going to work to ‘the West’ was one of the things that many still think about fondly,” she said. “There are still shows where Czech actors, musicians, etc talk about their ‘overseas performances,’ how they smuggled in things, saw things they had no idea of... it has become a stuff of legend.”

“The Europeans should think a little more long-term, and think back about their own experience, rather than think short-term and assume that they will please the Trump administration this way.”

Long one of North Korea's most high-profile international footballers, Pak's star was eclipsed somewhat in the past year by the rise of Han Kwang Song, who signed [to Italy's Juventus under-23 team in September for a reported €3.5 million](#).

Han was then [transferred](#) to Qatar's Al-Duhail SC for €5 million in January, just two weeks after UN resolutions required he be sent home.

The UN panel in its report released last week said it was yet to receive a response from the government of Qatar on Han's status.

Also unclear, it said, is the fate of the 22-year-old North Korean Choe Song Hyok, who was previously reported to have signed for Italy's SS Arezzo back in July 2018.

He appears to have now left the club, however, with his name not appearing on a [list of this season's players posted on the team's website](#).