



Violent Extremism and Sports in the Western Balkans

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RAN 
Practitioners

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Introduction

The Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo* ⁽¹⁾, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) represent a post-conflict region ⁽²⁾ facing various forms of violent extremism. At present, the Western Balkans face most problems with Islamist extremism (IE) and right-wing extremism (RWE). Between 2012 and 2016, more than 1 000 individuals from the Western Balkans travelled to the battlefields in Syria and Iraq (Metodieva, 2021, p. 2), the majority of whom joined terrorist organisations (Daesh and Al-Nusra Front). At the moment, the return of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their families, including children and juveniles, from the war zones is a major security challenge. In parallel with this issue, RWE has seen a surge in the Western Balkans in the recent years, reflecting a broader, global trend. The prime generators of its resurgence are the migrant crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic (Đorić & Klačar, n.d.).

The key objective of this paper is to provide practical insights on how extremists in the Western Balkans use sports to connect extremist actors, disseminate propaganda, and also to recruit and radicalise individuals. The analysis is based on desk research and in-depth interviews. Across the Western Balkans, 15 in-depth interviews were organised with members of the security sector, NGOs, the academic community and sports actors. The paper is structured as follows: after a brief introduction, two main sections constitute the analytical core, followed by conclusions and recommendations. Of the two sections, the first focuses on the nexus between right-wing violent extremism (RWVE) and football hooligans, taking into consideration recruitment techniques as well as the links between hooliganism and nationalism, organised crime and politics, while the second addresses the relationship between IE and sports.

Violent extremists resort to various methods and means in order to radicalise and recruit young people (i.e. video games, social networks, music and humour), one of them also being sports.

The link between violent extremism and sports in the Western Balkans exists and can be seen in two ways:

- 1. sport as a means of prevention of violent extremism, an idea that has not yet sufficiently translated into practice in the region; and**
- 2. sport as a means of politicisation and recruitment of young people to join extremist groups (this trend has been growing stronger and may become a serious security issue for the region).**

⁽¹⁾ Reference should be understood in full compliance with United Nations' Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

⁽²⁾ The entire region was directly or indirectly involved in the wars of the 1990s, during the breakup of Yugoslavia.

1. Right-wing Violent Extremism and Football Hooligans

The direct link between sports and violent extremism in the Western Balkans has been most present in football so far. Since the 1980s when “Yugoslav sport at that time mirrored Yugoslav state weakness” (Brentin, 2014, para. 4), until the present, it has now become an instrument in the hands of various extremist groups. Specifically, this process has involved the creation of football hooligan groups predominantly motivated by the RWE ideology (mainly in the form of nationalism and, to a lesser degree, Nazism). In the Western Balkans, a total of 122 supporter groups have been identified, of which 78 are ultras and 21 have participated in hooligan incidents (Đorđević & Scaturro, 2022). Hooliganism in the Western Balkans is very dangerous because it is a combination of several important phenomena: political power, organised crime and extremism (Đorić, 2012, p. 139).

Definitions

Although the expressions ‘ultras’ and ‘hooligans’ are not mutually exclusive and the distinction between the two is often blurry, some main differences can be noted. The term ultras usually refers to well-organised associations of football fans, who are generally strictly connected to a specific territory, political perspective and/or an ethnic group. Generally, violence does not represent an objective per se for ultras, even if they do engage in violent incidents sometimes. On the contrary, hooligans do present a clear inclination towards regularly and collectively engaging in violent episodes within the framework of sporting contexts. While generally speaking all hooligans are ultras, not all ultras are hooligans.

1.1. Manifestations of Right-wing Violent Extremism in Football Hooligans

The link between football hooliganism and RWVE is most pronounced in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia.

In **Serbia**, football hooliganism culminated during the wars in the 1990s, when volunteers for paramilitary formations were recruited from the ranks of supporter groups ⁽³⁾. A specific characteristic of hooligans in Serbia is that they were, and remain, an instrument of politics. This was best evidenced on 5 October 2000, when the same hooligans who had been supporting the regime of Slobodan Milošević participated in its ousting. The ‘politicisation of hooliganism’ continues to the present. In 2010, for example, around 6 000 hooligans clashed with the police in their attempt to disrupt the Belgrade Pride parade, causing injuries to more than 100 people ⁽⁴⁾ and vandalising the city at the cost of an estimated EUR 1 million in damages ⁽⁵⁾. In addition to the connections between hooliganism and the realm of politics, hooligans, in some instances, have also transformed into organised crime groups. Although their ideology remains extremely right wing, this is just a façade for the recruitment of young people, while the real goal is lucrative gain (profit) ⁽⁶⁾. The two most influential hooligan groups originate from the ranks of supporters of football club (FC) Red Star and FC Partizan. The Red Star fans, known as *Delije*, are divided into several groups, such as *Belgrade Boys* ⁽⁷⁾, *Rif Raff*, *Hijene* (Hyenas), *Brigade* (Brigades) and *Bez straha* (No Fear). At the moment, they are in the process of generational renewal; a dozen leaders (aged 35 to 40) control Red Star fans ⁽⁸⁾. In 2009, a motion was filed to ban the violent and criminal activities of 14 extremist groups, supporters of Belgrade FC Partizan, FC Red Star and FC Rad, but it was rejected due to the lack of constitutional prerequisites necessary for conducting such proceedings before the Constitutional Court ⁽⁹⁾.

⁽³⁾ The extent of politicisation of sport (especially football) is best illustrated by the fact that many researchers believe that the break-up of Yugoslavia was announced at the match between Red Star and Dinamo in 1991. During this event, the *Delije* (Red Star supporters from Serbia) clashed with *Bad Blue Boys* (Dinamo supporters from Croatia), at the Maksimir stadium in Zagreb, when nationalist slogans led to brutal violence.

⁽⁴⁾ Most of the injured people were policemen.

⁽⁵⁾ Gordana Andric and Bojana Barlovac, [Belgrade Riots Over, Officials Condemn Violence](#), Balkan Insight, 10 October 2010.

⁽⁶⁾ In-depth interview – member of the security sector (Serbia), No 3.

⁽⁷⁾ Currently the most dominant group.

⁽⁸⁾ In-depth interview – member of NGO (Serbia), No 4.

⁽⁹⁾ Saša Đorđević and Ruggero Scaturro, [Dangerous Games: Football Hooliganism, Politics and Organized Crime in the Western Balkans](#), Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, June 2022, p. 24.

In **North Macedonia**, violent extremism at football games is linked to certain political and criminal structures ⁽¹⁰⁾. In this country, supporter groups began to organise in the late 1980s. The first supporter group was formed in 1987 under the name *Komite* (Komitas), who supported the Vardar football club (Musliu, 2022, p. 12). A major change occurred in the 1990s with the disintegration of Yugoslavia. During that time, local patriotism grew stronger and virtually every town had its own football club. The greatest clashes between *Komitas* and *Škembari* (respectively, supporters of FC Vardar and FC Pelister) take place not only at football but also at basketball and handball matches (Musliu, 2022, p. 13) ⁽¹¹⁾. The most influential Macedonian supporter groups are in the capital Skopje, where Macedonians make up the ethnic majority.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is very specific due to its ethnic ⁽¹²⁾ and cantonal division, which is also reflected in sports (i.e. football). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ultras groups represent a kind of counterbalance to corrupt political structures, because “the Ultras portray themselves as the only resistance group to the status quo” (Testa, 2020, p. 29).

In other parts of the Western Balkans, there is also a connection between football hooligans and violent extremism, only it is less pronounced than in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia. In these countries, a strong connection between football hooligans and organised crime and certain political structures can be noticed, with ideology covering up for lucrative criminal activities.

1.2. Football Hooligans: Recruitment Strategies and the Impact of Nationalism

Recruitment for hooligan groups is carried out in the Western Balkans with the help of: crime, political connections and manipulation of youth.

Recruitment in hooligan groups is strictly related to party preferences in **North Macedonia**. The influence of politics on football clubs is evident because every municipality has its own representatives in the clubs. Thus, politics exerts its influence on the clubs. Supporter groups in North Macedonia are often viewed as party ‘armies’ enjoying the protection of some politicians, indicating a direct link between supporters and political parties (Musliu, 2022). Although explicit links between the big political parties and the most violent ultras are usually concealed, fans often consider themselves the frontline soldiers of the nationalist causes dominating politics ⁽¹³⁾.

“The doors of local government, companies and political parties are always open to us” ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Apart from conflicts along ethnic lines, conflicts between the members of the same ethnic groups supporting rival clubs in North Macedonia are also frequent. A good example is represented by supporters *Šverceri* from Skopje and *Balisti* from Tetovo, mostly ethnic Albanians, who often clash. In research conducted in North Macedonia, the main reason cited for these conflicts are: hatred of the rival club (41,7%); religious and ethnic intolerance (19,8%); political influence (7,5%); and lucrative interest (5,7%) (Musliu, 2022). In North Macedonia, even after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, there are still some fan groups that support Serbian FCs Red Star and Partizan, pointing to the fact that the region is interconnected.

⁽¹⁰⁾ In-depth interview – member of NGO (North Macedonia), No 9.

⁽¹¹⁾ The Komitas support FC Vardar and are the most dominant group in terms of strength and numbers. Apart from them, the *Šverceri* (Švercerat, or Smugglers) are also active in Skopje and they support FC Škupi (known for being mainly supported by Albanians). The *Škembari* from Bitola support FC Pelister, supporters of FC Pobeda from Prilep are *Majmuni* (Monkeys), *Ajduci* (Outlaws) support FC Belasica from Strumica, while in Ohrid, *Ribari* (Fishermen) support FC Ohrid 2004. In Tetovo, where Albanians make up the majority, there are two dominant clubs: FK Škendija supported by *Balisti* (Ballistas) and FC Tetek supported by *Vojvode* (Dukes). Apart from them, the following supporter groups are also active: *Majmuni* (Monkeys) from Prilep, *Vojvode* (Dukes) from Tetovo, *Pirati* (Pirates) from Autokomanda, City Park Boys from the centre, Family from the airport, etc.

⁽¹²⁾ Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats.

⁽¹³⁾ [Balkans' political football keeps hooligans close to heart of power | Football violence | The Guardian](#)

⁽¹⁴⁾ Declaration by a 22-year-old leader of the Ballisti, supporters of the FK Shkendija club from Tetovo, [Balkans' political football keeps hooligans close to heart of power | Football violence | The Guardian](#)

“At the stadium, we fight with words ... On the street, we fight with fists. We defend our national identity with our blood” ⁽¹⁵⁾.

Inconsistencies that are specific only for Macedonia — that those supporter groups which support a specific football club, in other sports (e.g. basketball) support another club, often a rival one ⁽¹⁶⁾. This suggests not only an identity problem, but also a lack of loyalty — a quality inherent in supporter groups. This phenomenon can be an indicator of lucrative interests.

In **Serbia**, all hooligan groups use extreme right-wing rhetoric and recruit teenagers through the idea of patriotism and nationalism. The recruitment starts in secondary school (ages 12-15) at the local level ⁽¹⁷⁾. Older fans ‘look out for’ boys in schools and initiate them into the hooligan world. In the beginning, they use them for courier tasks ⁽¹⁸⁾ and later introduce them to serious crime. Young people undergo an ‘act of initiation’, meaning that they have to commit a misdemeanour or crime ⁽¹⁹⁾. In addition to young teenagers, members are also recruited from disillusioned working-class youths without prospects for a future ⁽²⁰⁾. Hooligan groups are closed, strictly organised and have a distinct hierarchy following a military model. In addition to nationalism, the actions promoted by these groups are often underpinned by extreme homophobia, xenophobia, racism and other forms of intolerance. Recent information shows that some hooligans have departed to the Ukrainian front as foreign mercenaries ⁽²¹⁾. Ties with some biker clubs in Serbia have also been registered ⁽²²⁾.

Football hooligans in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** are mainly divided along ethnic lines, with the exception of Sarajevo and Tuzla, which have ethnically mixed groups. Until now, the most frequent clashes have been in Mostar between *Red Army* (FC Velež) and *Ultras* (FC Zrinjski). Great animosity is also present between supporter clubs from Sarajevo, primarily between the fans of FC Sarajevo and Široki Brijeg ⁽²³⁾. Also evident is the city rivalry between the football clubs Sarajevo and Željezničar. Forms of violent extremism can also be found among the youngest generations. At the children’s football tournament in Sarajevo (for children up to the age of 15) in January 2023, there were two incidents that can be associated with extreme nationalism. First, the boys from the Croatian team chanted “Kill the Serb”, and then the parents of Serbian children who played in the tournament were physically attacked and stabbed (Danas, 2023).

An example of reciprocity of extremism (along ethnic lines): when a banner is raised for Slobodan Praljak at a game in Herzegovina or a slogan of support for Ratko Mladić, a slogan of support to Sakib Mahmiljin will in turn be raised in Sarajevo (these individuals are war crimes indictees) ⁽²⁴⁾.

In Brčko District (Bosnia and Herzegovina), there are local informal hooligan groups organised according to the ethno-national principle. The majority of supporter groups in the district does not have a formal leader and they mostly operate in smaller groups when local sports events are staged. The age structure ranges

⁽¹⁵⁾ Declaration by a 17-year-old affiliated to the *Sverceri*, [Balkans' political football keeps hooligans close to heart of power | Football violence | The Guardian](#)

⁽¹⁶⁾ For example, the *City Park Boys* supporter group, which supports the basketball club Rabotnički, simultaneously supports FC Vardar – the former club’s great rival – in football. On the other hand, supporters of FC Vardar (also known as Komitas) support the basketball clubs Rabotnički and MZT, although the sports society Vardar has an eponymous basketball club whose main rivals have included BC Rabotnički and BC MZT.

⁽¹⁷⁾ In-depth interview – member of NGO (Serbia), No 4.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Boys (minors) are provided with scooters for drug transportation and then these motorbikes are gifted to them as a reward. Source: In-depth interview – member of NGO (Serbia), No 4.

⁽¹⁹⁾ That implies that they have a record for attacking a police officer or steal something from the shop or start a fight with a rival club’s fans, etc.

⁽²⁰⁾ Jovo Bakic, [Right-Wing Extremism In Serbia](#), Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, February 2013.

⁽²¹⁾ They are fighting on Ukraine’s side. Source: In-depth interview – member of the security sector (Serbia), No 6.

⁽²²⁾ In-depth interview – member of the security sector (Serbia), No 6.

⁽²³⁾ Antagonism is the result of the murder of an FC Sarajevo fan in 2009, during the team’s match in Široki Brijeg.

⁽²⁴⁾ In-depth interview – member of academia (Bosnia and Herzegovina), No 5.

between 15 and 40 ⁽²⁵⁾. Identified as the most interesting in the context of violent action are the members of the fan faction called *Trt-Mrt*, who belong to the supporter group *Grobari-Shadows*, traditionally supporters of Partizan from Belgrade and members of the fan faction named *Kopre Nedri*, or KND, who belong to the supporter group *Delije*, traditionally supporters of Red Star from Belgrade, as well as members of the fan group *Manijaci* (Maniacs) from Brčko District in Bosnia and Herzegovina, traditionally supporters of the FC Željezničar from Sarajevo and also part of a wider group of BH Fanatics from this area. The groups *Trt-Mrt*, *Kopre Nedri* and *Manijaci* have greatly contributed to the radicalisation of the supporter scene in the Brčko District area. Aside from violent behaviour and hate speech, these groups are charged for the criminal offence of drug trade ⁽²⁶⁾.

Due to the ideology of nationalism, football fans in **Albania** connect with Albanians living in Kosovo and North Macedonia. Tirana is the centre of the fan scene in Albania. There are two main supporter groups. The first one is the left-wing *Ultras Guerrillas 08-09* that supports FC Partizan. It is interesting that they enjoy support among Albanians in North Macedonia and Kosovo and Metohija, as well as in the diaspora (Norway and Sweden) ⁽²⁷⁾. The second one is *Tirana Fanatics* that supports FK Tirana. Their ideology is right-wing and is supported by the fan group *Šverceri* (whose members support FC Škupi) from North Macedonia. The ties between these groups are based primarily on ethnic, family and language ties. The main opponents of these groups from Tirana are *Vllaznit Ultras* (FC Vllaznia) from Shkodër and *Djemt e Detit*, which supports FC Teuta Durres.

The supporters of the Albanian national team Tifozat Kuq e Zi have a great influence on the Albanian supporters in North Macedonia (*Balisti*, *Šverceri* and *Iliri*), as well as on the fans in Kosovo* (*Plisat*, *Torcida* and *Šiponjat*). The links between the supporter group Tifozat Kuq e Zi from Albania and Albanian supporters in Kosovo are best illustrated by the fact that the members of Tifozat Kuq e Zi presented a huge Albanian flag to the family of Adem Jashari from Kosovo*.

Albanian supporters from Kosovo are associated with violence and political structures close to the former Kosovo Liberation Army ⁽²⁸⁾. There is no great rivalry among Kosovar Albanian fan groups, and it is mostly directed at other ethnic groups, primarily Serbs from Kosovo. The link between FC Plisat from Pristina with the *Black and Red* supporter group from Albania is noticeable in the context of Greater Albania. The second dominant supporter group is called *Šiponjat* and its members support FC Šiponja.

In 2005, in Pristina, members of the Albanian supporter groups *Plisat* and *Šiponjat* were the principal rioters at a rally organised against the creation of the Association of Serbian Municipalities and the demarcation line with Montenegro (Mejdini et al., 2023).

The ethnic Serbian population in Kosovo traditionally supports Serbian-affiliated clubs, especially Red Star, and shows animosity towards Albanian-affiliated clubs ⁽²⁹⁾.

In **Montenegro**, it is possible to associate violent extremism with sports and political events ⁽³⁰⁾. Football (and less often basketball) is the most instrumentalised of all sports for political propaganda. A person's ethnicity is the prime determinant of their affiliation with a particular sports club. Montenegrins support their national clubs, while the Serbian population mainly supports Serbia-based clubs Red Star and Partizan. In Plav and Rožaje, predominantly populated by ethnic Bosniaks, supporter groups *Gazije* and *Hajvani* support local clubs. Interestingly, these Bosniak clubs back 'their brothers' in Bosnia and Herzegovina and thus they support BH Fanatics at football matches. In the north of Montenegro (Pljevlja, Žabljak, Mojkovac, Savnik, Plužine), the largest share of the population supports Serbian clubs Red Star and Partizan. In Berane and Bijelo Polje, in addition to Serbian clubs, the supporter groups *Ultras Bijelo Polje*, whose activities have declined in recent years, and *Street Boys Berane* are also popular. In Nikšić, *Vojvode*

⁽²⁵⁾ In-depth interview - member of the security sector (Bosnia and Herzegovina), No 7.

⁽²⁶⁾ Ibid.

⁽²⁷⁾ In-depth interview - member of NGO (Serbia), No 4.

⁽²⁸⁾ The Kosovo Liberation Army was initially perceived as a terrorist organization in many countries, including the US, <https://irp.fas.org/world/para/docs/fr033199.htm>

⁽²⁹⁾ In-depth interview - member of NGO (North Macedonia), No 10.

⁽³⁰⁾ In-depth interview - member of NGO (Montenegro), No 11.

(Dukes) supports FC Sutjeska. There are also supporters of FC Partizan, *Grobari*, who are the dominant group. The number of FC Red Star supporters is declining, especially since their flag was stolen a few years ago. *Cetinje* supports local clubs such as FC Lovćen. In coastal towns, Serbian clubs dominate, while those supporting Croatian clubs, such as FC Hajduk, can also be found in Tivat. In Ulcinj, predominantly populated by the Albanian national minority, there is the fan group *Dilberi*. In Podgorica, *Varvari* (Barbarians), whose members support FC Budućnost, is definitely dominant. They often clash with Red Star supporters.

Although hooliganism is traditionally and mainly linked to men, girls and women can play, in some cases, a role in the background as “activists, street fighters and leaders of local branches, protest coordinators and internet activists” ⁽³¹⁾.

1.3 Football Hooliganism, Organised Crime and Politics

There is a nexus in the Western Balkans between football hooliganism, organised crime and politics. This connection makes the process of democratisation in the region very difficult.

In **Serbia**, Partizan’s fans have a long-standing internal conflict (due mainly to the division of criminal spheres of influence), as evidenced by the antagonism between the *Zabranjeni* (Prohibited) and *Alkatraz* (Alcatraz) groups. The situation in Serbia is alarming, because some supporter groups are linked to serious crime. A good example is the *Janjičari* (Janissary) group that supports FC Partizan (eventually transformed into a group named *Principi* (Principles)). Their leader, Veljko Belivuk, and his associates were recently arrested and, according to media reporting, associated with certain high-ranking political figures and members of the security sector (Đorđević & Scaturro, 2022, p. 17). The *Principi* group is accused of cooperating with the Montenegrin Kavači clan, ‘specialising’ in cocaine trafficking from Latin America to Europe. Veljko Belivuk was arrested in 2021, along with his 20 associates. The group has been charged for several criminal offences: association to commit crime, unauthorised production and trafficking in narcotics, and three first-degree murder cases (Belgrade High Court, ‘Detention Ordered’). Following the arrest of the Belivuk clan, the *Vandal Boys* and *Grobari* (Gravediggers) *Vračar* groups clashed. Partizan’s hooligan groups are involved in providing night club security services ⁽³²⁾, narcotics trade and racketeering ⁽³³⁾. On the other hand, among the criminal activities carried out by Red Star fans are money laundering through construction works, control of energy sources, influence in the IT sector and drug trafficking ⁽³⁴⁾.

Today, Serbian football hooligans are serious criminal groups linked to individuals from high politics and the security sector, which gives them a sense of power and intangibility ⁽³⁵⁾.

Some hooligan groups in Serbia are very closely linked to criminal groups in Montenegro.

Aside from the Red Star and Partizan hooligans, there are also other groups operating in Serbia that can be associated with crime and extremism, including *United Force* (FC Rad), *Firma* (FC Vojvodina) and *Torcida Sandžak* (FC Novi Pazar). Due to their high popularity across the former Yugoslavia, branches of Red Star and Partizan can be found in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska), Montenegro, and North Macedonia. In addition to football, hooliganism is also partly detectable in basketball and occasionally handball, mainly reflected in hate speech messages.

⁽³¹⁾ [PAVE_870769_D5.1_publication_layout.pdf \(pave-project.eu\)](#)

⁽³²⁾ An unwritten rule is that those who control night club security also control drug trade.

⁽³³⁾ In-depth interview – member of the security sector (Serbia), No 8.

⁽³⁴⁾ In-depth interview – member of the security sector (Serbia), No 3.

⁽³⁵⁾ In-depth interview – member of an NGO (Serbia), No 4.

Judges, prosecutors and politicians are often board members of sports clubs in Serbia — this is a big problem as it often leads to a conflict of interest ⁽³⁶⁾.

A particular issue in Serbia in terms of prevention of hooliganism is that the management boards of some sports clubs include judges and prosecutors, which may affect their objectivity in prosecuting troublemakers ⁽³⁷⁾.

Drug trafficking is a type of organised crime very popular with hooligan groups. There are regional networks for drug distribution in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**. Hooligans from Banja Luka and East Sarajevo, for example, are connected to groups from Serbia and Montenegro. *Lešinari* (Vultures), *Horde Zla* (Evil Hordes) and *Skripari* from Bosnia and Herzegovina are also involved in narcotics and arms trading (Đorđević & Scaturro, 2022, p. 28).

In the Western Balkan region, the politicisation of football hooliganism (and links with crime) is mostly notable in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. In these countries, hooligans are used for showdowns with political opponents and for conveying political messages ⁽³⁸⁾.

Aside from the political influence, hooligans in **North Macedonia** are also connected to the world of crime. The *Šverceri* and *Komiti* are involved in drugs and arms trade, which helps them to finance their other activities (Musliu, 2022, p. 28).

In **Albania**, the links between sports and violent extremism can be found in football. Football hooliganism in Albania basically involves violence between rival groups, but it also has a political connotation, as evidenced by the match between the national teams of Serbia and Albania in 2014, held in Belgrade. At this event, Olsi Rama, brother of the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, was accused of flying a drone with the Greater Albania flag, which created additional tension between the two countries (CNN, 2023).

Fan groups in Albania are connected with fan groups in Kosovo and North Macedonia, especially when it comes to the idea of Greater Albania.

2. Islamist Extremism and Sports

At the time of first departures of FTFs leaving for Syria and Iraq, discussions flourished on the relationship between IE and sports: some claimed that change in sports habits (especially abstention from it) could be a sign for radicalisation following strong Wahabist rules, while others argued that some disciplines, such as martial arts, could be used for preparation as a fighter.

Some research shows that “the phenomenon of recruitment is not only apparent in football, but also, for instance, in mixed martial arts” (RAN, 2019, p. 3). While in western European countries martial arts clubs are mostly associated with VRWE, in the Western Balkans there is a strong connection between martial arts clubs and IE.

A special security problem for Bosnia and Herzegovina is martial arts clubs ⁽³⁹⁾ and airsoft clubs ⁽⁴⁰⁾, often managed by radicalised individuals ⁽⁴¹⁾. Airsoft clubs are increasingly popular in the Federation of Bosnia

⁽³⁶⁾ In-depth interview – member of an NGO (Serbia), No 4.

⁽³⁷⁾ In-depth interview – former football player (Serbia), No 12.

⁽³⁸⁾ In-depth interview – member of an NGO (Serbia), No 4.

⁽³⁹⁾ At present, there are about 10 such clubs that can be associated with Islamist extremism and they are located in Sarajevo, Tuzla, Bugojno, Mostar, Zenica, etc. They are mainly taekwondo, kickbox and hapkido.

and Herzegovina and Brčko Distric. Here, it is possible to see the direct connection between IE and sports ⁽⁴²⁾.

Martial arts clubs in BiH Federation organise children's camps where children are taught religious doctrines and military skills. The Askeri Winter Club 2018, where trainees were boys aged 9 to 17, was organised in the municipality of Tešanj, prompting great media attention throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina and outrage in Republika Srpska (RTRS, 2023).

In addition to martial arts clubs, airsoft clubs have been especially popular in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the last 10 years. The expansion of airsoft clubs started some 10 years ago, especially in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where there are currently more than 40 such clubs ⁽⁴³⁾. In these clubs, military trainings are carried out, which in addition to their recreational function also have a religious one, by introducing the Islamist extremist ideas into the clubs' activities. It can be noted that the majority of members of airsoft clubs belong to the Wahhabi community. Interestingly, most of their exercises are carried out in villages abandoned by the Serb population, where war-devastated properties are used for their training. Among the members of airsoft clubs are also members of BiH Armed Forces ⁽⁴⁴⁾. They are funded through donations, membership fees and sponsorships. It has been observed that some local communities often support airsoft clubs, in particular the municipalities of Bužim and Cazin, but also municipalities from the area of Tuzla Canton. Particularly prominent ones are *Crna munja* ⁽⁴⁵⁾ (Black Thunderbolt) and *Lilium Bosniacum*. Most airsoft clubs are clustered in three regions: Una-Sana, Zenica-Tuzla and Sarajevo regions. The operation of these clubs is often monitored by the members of EUFOR ⁽⁴⁶⁾. These clubs are characterised by rigorous discipline and an emphasis on a vertical chain of command, making them close to the level of organisation of modern special units.

In **Montenegro**, the connection established by some martial arts clubs from Bosnia and Herzegovina with the local residents in areas of Montenegro predominantly populated by the Muslim population is evident. Thus, a few years ago, representatives of the martial arts club from Tuzla visited the Wahhabi community in Plav and Gusinje. Among the Bosnia and Herzegovina delegation was also Abdusamad Bušatlić, famous for his religious sermons on social networks, which are popular worldwide.

Conclusion

A common feature of all Western Balkan countries is that football is the sport most often associated with RWE. This is particularly true for Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia, the countries in which hooligans are linked to criminal and certain political structures, a phenomenon called the 'politicisation of hooliganism'.

A newly emerging trend in the Western Balkans is the use of martial arts clubs and airsoft clubs for indoctrination and recruitment of new extremists. This phenomenon is characteristic for Bosnia and Herzegovina (mainly for BiH Federation) and is related to IE ⁽⁴⁷⁾. Particular danger lies in the radicalisation of children indoctrinated in the camps under the pretext of learning sports skills.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Airsoft is an extreme sport. These clubs conduct training in the use of weapons, mine-explosive devices and field military-police tactics according to special unit standards. In BiH Federation, airsoft clubs are registered as sports associations.

⁽⁴¹⁾ Some coaches or club owners are members of radical Wahhabi groups. Some of them were even members of the El Mujahid squad during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

⁽⁴²⁾ In-depth interview – member of the security sector (Bosnia and Herzegovina), No 2.

⁽⁴³⁾ In-depth interview – member of the security sector (Bosnia and Herzegovina), No 1.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ In-depth interview – member of the security sector (Bosnia and Herzegovina), No 2.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ This club has a large number of followers on social networks (Facebook), and in their posts they glorify war flags, symbols and achievements of the former BiH Army in the Bihać region. The comments contain explicit hate speech directed at the Serbian community.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ In-depth interview – member of the security sector (Bosnia and Herzegovina), No 2.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ They are mainly linked with the Wahhabi communities. Interestingly, in Europe and worldwide, RWE is primarily associated with martial arts.

Especially sensitive victims of radicalisation are young men (teenagers) because hooliganism is predominantly a ‘male phenomenon’ in the Western Balkans (Đorić, 2012). The same goes for martial arts clubs.

Sport has two faces: the first is affirmative and can eliminate violence and extremist ideas among the young population through team spirit and fair play; its second, uglier face, is unfortunately the more visible one in the Western Balkans — the abuse of sports for the radicalisation of young people. “Learning through play (such as sports) can motivate youth to attend and participate in the classroom or in youth activities” (RAN, 2021, p. 5). This is the conclusion from the online RAN meeting in 2021, which could also be applied in the Western Balkans.

There is no suitable structure of preventing and countering violent extremism actors in sports-related domains in terms of prevention — this is currently a gap, and it needs to be worked on. The prevention ⁽⁴⁸⁾ of this phenomenon should be addressed as a matter of priority, with the assistance of the international community, as it may have long-term security implications for the entire region.

Recommendations

- **For state institutions:** A consistent implementation of laws — although relatively good laws on the prevention of violence at sports events are in place, they are not implemented; adopt state strategies on the prevention of violence in sports, as they have expired in several countries; cooperation with the academic community, civil society and international community in prevention measures (targeting young people and teenagers); increased monitoring of communications among extremists in the context of sport on social networks, since most communication takes place at this level; exchange experiences and information at the regional level.
- **For policymakers in cooperation with the international community:** In the past, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) has reacted to forms of racism inside stadiums by shutting down the sections designated for home fans, calling off games, or disqualifying soccer teams from the Champions League and the Europa League (i.e. Serbia’s Partizan Belgrade FK) ⁽⁴⁹⁾. These measures leave supporters without a dedicated space for sports activities and might fuel resentment and feelings of injustice and discrimination. Tailor-made countermeasures should be put in place, such as the creation and promotion of alternative spaces for gathering at local level, to avoid that bans and restrictions increase societal tensions.
- **For sports clubs:** Enhance good governance by eliminating politics from sport and halting abuse of position by judges and prosecutors in the management boards of sports clubs; joint activities (humanitarian actions, friendly matches, etc.) of rival clubs in order to promote tolerance; in cooperation with sponsors, promote friendship and tolerance; train sports workers on how to approach children and young people (through workshops, manuals, targeted toolkits) as a primary prevention measure; privatise clubs (while ensuring adequate control mechanisms to address the challenges that come with privatisation).
- **For civil society and the academic community:** Conduct research on links between sports and hooliganism, as there is a serious gap in the Western Balkans in this field; organise workshops through games and fun for young people; create a regional network of researchers to address this subject through conferences and projects; learning through play (such as sports) can motivate young people to overcome ethnic divisions and violent extremism.
- **For the international community:** Organise regional research, especially on the topic of martial arts clubs; steer projects towards the prevention of extremism in sport; implement foreign best

⁽⁴⁸⁾ About prevention of extremism in schools in the Western Balkans, see: Đorić, Marija. *Handbook for recognizing, preventing and combating radicalization and violent extremism among students* (Priručnik za prepoznavanje, prevenciju i suzbijanje radikalizacije i nasilnog ekstremizma kod učenika). Podgorica: Biro za operativnu koordinaciju – Nacionalni operativni tim, 2020.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ [Responding to Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans. \(nyu.edu\)](https://www.nyu.edu)

practices in the Western Balkans region (tailored to the needs of individual states/territories); organise summer schools and workshops for all actors in this process, in order to create a regional network for prevention.

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