



The role of sports in violent right-wing extremist radicalisation and P/CVE

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Introduction

It is well-known that sport has the potential to positively influence our physical as well as mental health. Sport can also increase self-awareness and nurture team spirit, serve as a tool to process emotions and experiences, and play a part in identity formation. Especially during childhood and puberty, sport can play an important role in personality and competency development. Whether in the form of ball sports, athletics, martial arts or horse riding, sport can enhance social and cognitive skillsets. Being part of a team but also supporting a team as part of a fan club can generate a strong sense of togetherness, support and belonging. For many sports players, team members are close friends who offer a safe space outside their own families and with whom they can share emotions and experiences. Sport can also improve competencies such as discipline, emotional control, self-confidence and leadership, team spirit and the ability to work within and navigate heterogeneous environments in a positive manner ⁽¹⁾. Sports clubs and facilities (as well as coaches and instructors) are typically viewed favourably by society as positive contexts and meeting places for young people.

However, the inconvenient truth about all of these positive factors is that, as is often the case with many supposed protective or “resilience” factors, they can also prove to be negative, depending on the social context and individual needs as well as the influential factors. Hence, (competitive) sports can also be viewed from a sceptical perspective that showcases the implications of sociocultural narratives. First, “performance” as a success category in sports can result in a “body cult”, where performance improvement is the sole focus. This can increase the risk of unhealthy habits like the ingestion of performance-enhancing substances. Second, the sporting competition dynamic can create a “cult of victory”, where winning and defeating opponents is the principal consideration. The consequences are typically excessive ambition, overestimation and a hostile attitude towards opponents. And third is the “cult of violence”, where the dynamic of competitive sports leads to verbal and physical violence, both between competitors and in the social context of the match ⁽²⁾. These negative aspects in sports offer potential entry points for recruitment strategies by extremist actors.

This has become evident, for example, in the development and formation of the violent hooligan groups involved in violent actions and riots for many decades across the European Union (EU). Here, “belonging” is often defined by a typical in-group/out-group dynamic, and is strengthened by almost ritualised acts of violence against “enemy” groups and other groups perceived as different. However, hooligan groups are not alone in exploiting the identity-building dimension of sports: extremists also do so by using sports as a recruiting tool for future members and to further their own objectives. Martial arts such as boxing and mixed martial arts (MMA) in particular have gained notoriety as recruitment and radicalisation grounds for extremist organisations. Troubled young men are often expected to benefit from the structure and discipline they are supposedly subject to in martial arts clubs. While young women may also show troubling behaviour, they are not the primary target group of MMA. There are women training in martial art clubs and female tournaments are organised, but it remains a predominantly male sport. However, women are present in the audience of large-scale martial arts tournaments. In this context, young men and women might be exposed to extremist actors who will take advantage of their situation, while appearing to act in their best interest.

This dynamic is certainly true for violent right-wing extremism (VRWE); internationally, some MMA clubs have even begun advertising with openly far-right attitudes ⁽³⁾. Instead of covertly attempting to influence their more susceptible members, some have turned to open recruitment, which demonstrates how confident they are in acting visibly in view of the extreme right, on an international scale. It is important to note, though, that while this paper focuses on VRWE, sports and in particular martial arts and surrounding communities have been used by other types of extremists, especially violent Islamist extremists (VIE), in similar ways and for similar purposes. This is why, in order to learn from these experiences, some examples from VIE will be mentioned as well, particularly in relation to P/CVE measures in this field.

However, this paper sets out not only to discuss the role of sport in VRWE radicalisation and recruitment processes, but also to highlight the benefits of sport for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE).

⁽¹⁾ Keyßner, *Bewegung als Medium der Identitätsbildung*, p. 533-547ff.

⁽²⁾ Pilz, *Sport und Prävention – Wie viel Soziale Arbeit, Prävention kann der organisierte Sport leisten?*, p. 4.

⁽³⁾ Zidan, *Fascist fight clubs: How white nationalists use MMA as a recruiting tool*.

Due to its recognised positive potential, sport has been used in crime reduction for years, and is being increasingly recognised in P/CVE, too.

Overall, three related general trends can be identified:

- 1. solely sport-focused interventions;**
- 2. the creation of partnerships with sports clubs to work on youth resilience;**
- 3. the incorporation of sports elements into larger programmes.**

Finally, based on practical examples of previous and current experiences, this paper will present challenges as well as lessons learned and recommendations for the further development of sports-related measures in P/CVE.

Part 1: The detrimental use of sport in radicalisation

A Historical Perspective

Historically, competitive sports and athletic activity in general have often been viewed as a rehearsal or practice for military action. In the ancient Greek and Roman eras, sports tournaments were a proxy for military conflict. But the ideological appropriation of sports reached new peaks in Nazi Germany, where physical exercise was dissociated from the concept of being an end in itself, and was subjected to the militarised totality of the regime ⁽⁴⁾. Post-World War II, sports and RWE ideology remained intertwined in some areas, though in far less institutionalised ways. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, the intensive use of sports gained popularity among RWE and terrorist organisations and groups across the EU ⁽⁵⁾. A well-known example of this phenomenon is the Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann (literally translated as defence sports group Hoffmann), a paramilitary organisation whose aim was to re-establish a Nazi dictatorship. The organisation's members practised shooting and combat sports, as well as bodybuilding. For specialised training, some members attended paramilitary camps in Lebanon, where they received combat instruction from Lebanese and Palestinian terrorist fighters ⁽⁶⁾. The use of sport in the context of political violence, extremism and terrorism is therefore not new per se. Today, VRWE groups still employ sport as a means to implement their political goals and to recruit new members – this practice is not only prevalent, but has actually increased in recent years.

The appeal of extremism, facilitated by sports

“The nationalist movement was never built on idle talk, but on those with iron will who didn't back down. In a time of weak men, it only takes some effort to rise above all. Combat sports is that way up.”

Robert Rundo, co-founder of the American white supremacist “Rise Above Movement”

While processes of radicalisation are unique and specific, with a variety of different push and pull factors in play for every individual, certain factors are known to potentially increase one's susceptibility to extremist groups in relation to sports.

⁽⁴⁾ Bernett, *Der Weg des Sports in die nationalsozialistische Diktatur. Die Entstehung des Deutschen (Nationalsozialistischen) Reichsbund für Leibesübungen*, p. 93.

⁽⁵⁾ Riordan, *The International Politics of Sport in the Twentieth Century*, p. 219.

⁽⁶⁾ Ibid.

The following factors are likely to be exploited by extremist groups.

- **Providing a space for recognition.** For young people from unstable backgrounds, or adolescents struggling with self-confidence, sports clubs can provide a space for them to prove themselves and assume shared goals, interests and values. Through sports activities, they are often able to meet and exceed expectations, even when feeling overlooked in other areas of everyday life (e.g. school, the work place, family and friends).

However, the search for validation within sports groups and the aspect of mutual empowerment through unifying goals and activities can create a space for exploitation, coercion and abuse of power by coaches and/or team members ⁽⁷⁾. In particular, young men whose lives lack structure and positive role models constitute a vulnerable target group for extremist recruiters astutely offering approval, simple solutions, direct needs gratification, and potentially, prospects for the future.

- **Offering brotherhood or sisterhood.** As many sports are group or team activities, young people seeking a social group to identify with gain a sense of belonging within their sports clubs or teams. It is widely acknowledged that notions of brotherhood or sisterhood constitute a strong pull factor for individuals searching for a sense of belonging: this increases the attraction of extremist groups who know how to exploit such essential needs in vulnerable youths. Extremist groups seemingly offer unconditional support and belonging to vulnerable young people still uncertainly trying to find their place within society. They provide guidance and answers, as well as an outlet for individual problems, frustrations and perceived injustices; in some cases, they serve as a replacement for (positively connotated) family structures ⁽⁸⁾.

Sports clubs can provide a sense of community, but can also have a negative impact: seclusion and homogeneous feelings of exclusivity or over-identification with the group can exacerbate problematic attitudes towards out-groups ⁽⁹⁾. In the context of extremism-influenced sports clubs, these feelings can be fostered and manipulated to serve extremist ideologies; they contribute to drawing clear delineations between friend and foe, or feelings of superiority, amongst others. It is often extremely difficult to differentiate between the real team spirit that sport teams can offer, and the instrumentalised support extremist groups provide. In this sense, it is not just martial arts clubs that are targets for recruitment – any sports clubs where peers interact, away from schools, parents and other oversight structures, will serve.

- **Destructive notions of masculinity.** For many, participating in a sport is also an opportunity to escape from pressure and stress at home, school or elsewhere – and to distance themselves from their problems. At the same time, during puberty and adolescence, sports can offer an outlet for young people to invest in and showcase their bodies, especially for male adolescents. A strong physique could help a young person achieve recognition amongst peers as a “true man”. ⁽¹⁰⁾ In societal contexts in which so-called traditional gender roles are increasingly being questioned and doubted, some men seem to struggle with a more complex notion of what it means to be male – beyond the stereotype of the strong and courageous provider. Martial arts, weightlifting and other sports often perceived as “typically masculine” and associated with strength and competition can provide a space for the projection of masculinity and can reassure young men in their process of identity-building. The idealised return to “traditional”, and sometimes even “natural”, gender roles and anti-feminism is also a core element of many extremist ideologies, particularly in VRWE ⁽¹¹⁾.

While women in both right-wing and Islamist extremism take on vital roles in promoting and advancing their own group’s interests, they are often represented within the ideologies as housewives and caretakers, responsible for the sustainable growth of the in-group by bearing and raising children. Men, on the other hand, are characterised as “fighters”, complying to traditional expectations as protectors and family leaders ⁽¹²⁾. This may partly explain why extremist groups target martial arts or fight sport clubs. They hope to find predominantly male recruits that correspond to their own image of a physically and

⁽⁷⁾ Reipp, *Demokratieförderung im Sport*, p. 4.

⁽⁸⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, *The Root Causes of Violent Extremism*, p.3f.

⁽⁹⁾ Reipp, *Demokratieförderung im Sport*, p.4.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Wendler, *Bewegung und Körperlichkeit als Risiko und Chance*, p. 664.

⁽¹¹⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Gender-specific approaches in exit work*, p.2ff.

⁽¹²⁾ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism*.

mentally strong man; at the same time, they hope to capitalise on the prevalent pre-existing notions of masculinity by influencing the identity-building process.

- **Identity formation through othering, patriotic connotations and racism.** Inherent to the logic of competitive team sport is the differentiation between in-group and out-group, or more precisely, identification with one team while attributing negative characteristics to other teams. Historically, sports have been used as a conduit to create a means of (national) identification for countries, alongside disapprobation of other nations or ethnic groups ⁽¹³⁾. Over-identification with sports teams or clubs can lead to inflated patriotic and nationalist sentiments. While the line between strong patriotic feelings and racist attitudes may not always be clear-cut, in VRWE groups, the (nationalist) differentiation between in-group and out-group is taken to extremes.

VRWE groups often stress the need to defend their own nation/identity group that is considered to be under threat, at all costs. Widespread RWE propaganda narratives emphasise the importance of keeping oneself in good physical condition in readiness for a possible societal/political revolution (as expressed through the “survival of the fittest” trope). In these contexts, sports are used to frame selection processes in order to pick and train future “warriors” ⁽¹⁴⁾. The violent element of martial arts and the prospect of defensive or offensive violence makes it especially attractive to extremists ⁽¹⁵⁾. These means of militaristic teambuilding and physical training contribute to the feeling of belonging to a superior race.

VRWE use of activities and clubs to recruit young people

In the music industry, RWE music (e.g. a particular type of rap or white power music) serves as a low-threshold entry point into the RWE scene. Similarly, sports activities can provide VRWE with easy access to young people. While VRWE organisations have been active in popular sports such as football or martial arts, in terms of recruitment and radicalisation efforts, they have also targeted more niche activities such as paintball, shooting sports and bushcrafting. The recruiting, training and radicalising activities of VRWE organisations in the sports context has reached a new level of professionalism in recent years ⁽¹⁶⁾. According to Claus, an important part of their professionalisation strategy involves organising large sports events, in particular MMA tournaments. Apart from training their members, such events fulfil three other key functions for VRWE groups: (a) expanding and strengthening networks among far-right groups, (b) providing a space for recruitment, and (c) creating a source of funding ⁽¹⁷⁾.

Selected RWE approaches to engaging followers and attracting potential new recruits are analysed below.

- **Commercialisation and merchandising.** Affiliation to extremist organisations is evident in external features such as scene-related hairstyles or certain brands of clothes. As VRWEs attach particular importance to specific symbols and signs, these are visually displayed in logos on flyers, websites and clothing items ⁽¹⁸⁾. Across Europe, far-right organisations have used the sale of merchandised products to increase brand recognition and as a source of funding. RWE martial arts groups and brands have been particularly active in developing a broad range of products including hats, t-shirts and fight gear displaying nationalist or anti-Semitic symbols. For instance, the French martial arts brand Pride France, which is also affiliated with a neo-Nazi fight club, maintains an online shop selling gloves, rash guards and shorts imprinted with Nazi symbols ⁽¹⁹⁾. Pride France is itself the “French offshoot” of the better-known Russian neo-Nazi clothing brand White Rex ⁽²⁰⁾. Such products can be viewed as part of a larger strategy to disseminate far-right propaganda and ideology as well as consolidate feelings of brotherhood and unity. The right-wing martial arts tournament Battle of the Nibelungs, which is organised by a well-connected

⁽¹³⁾ Reipp, *Demokratieförderung im Sport*, p.5.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Bachem, *Rechtsextreme Ideologien. Rhetorische Textanalysen als Weg zur Erschließung rechtsradikalen und rechtsextremistischen Schriftmaterials*, p. 41.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, *The role of sports and leisure activities in preventing and countering violent extremism*, p. 3.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Redaktion Belltower News, „Eventkultur aus gewalttätiger Männlichkeit und politischem Hass“.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Ayyadi, *Professionalisierung der Gewalt im Kampfsport*.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, *Right-wing extremism: Signs, symbols and banned organisations*, p.3.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Zidan, *Pride France: the French martial arts brand connected to the neo-Nazi fight scene*.

⁽²⁰⁾ Zidan, *RAM's revival and the ongoing struggle against MMA's far-right fight clubs*.

network of right-wing extremists in Russia as well as in Germany and other European countries, has also extended its product line, in an effort to expand and commercialise the brand ⁽²¹⁾.

- **Organisation of competitive events and joint sports activities.** Extremist groups of all types organise sports events framed as “leisure activities”, with the principal objective of strengthening group cohesiveness. In one Islamist extremist example, the Austrian Salafist organisation IMAN facilitates joint sports activities such as hiking, climbing, rafting and football games. On the RWE scene, the German branches of the Identitarian movement are known for linking sports events to ideological components. Their members organise so-called activist weekends that include fitness and self-defence training as well as folk dance classes, lectures, talks and strategic planning ⁽²²⁾. Whether such extremist sports groups also have a paramilitary aspect (e.g. the Slovenian Styrian Guard ⁽²³⁾) is highly dependent on their extent of radicalisation, degree of organisation and level of visible militant orientation.

Apart from joint training and sports activities, larger-scale sports events and tournaments, especially in the field of martial arts, serve as networking opportunities for VRWE groups on a national and international level. The group mentioned above that is behind the Battle of the Nibelungs organised tournaments hosting so-called team and show fights that attracted more than 800 attendees from across Europe ⁽²⁴⁾. This event was held annually from 2013 in Ostritz, Germany, until 2019 when the city banned it ⁽²⁵⁾. Such events are linked to performances by like-minded musicians and bands, and serve as a platform for RWE groups to present and showcase their activities and agendas as well as inform and recruit new members. They present a clear example of the increasing professionalism and strategic organisation of RWE groups in the sports scene. Pride France organises similar tournaments in France, and its strong connection to the Battle of the Nibelungs is clearly stated on its website ⁽²⁶⁾. However, their events are held behind closed doors, and attendees must sign up in advance. Additionally, some RWE groups have set up their own sports studios and gyms, thus benefiting from a more protected training environment for open discussion of notions and ideologies, free from public exposure and external debate. This move towards the establishment of designated RWE sports clubs sets an almost insurmountable challenge for current P/CVE practice, as is noted later in this paper.

- **Tailoring sports activities to propagated narratives.** As mentioned above, RWE groups broadcast repetitive narratives to convince target audiences and recruit new members. In a sports context, RWE groups commonly claim that European or “white” societies are under threat from refugees or Muslim immigrants ⁽²⁷⁾. By organising private, violent “anti-refugee defence groups” and specific survival and combat training, RWE groups claim to be reacting to a threat imposed by the so-called migration crisis in Europe ⁽²⁸⁾. In RWE recruitment and propaganda, the “dangerous refugees” narrative plays a particularly important role in relation to the safety of women. The Identitarian movement has published videos and Facebook posts warning female peers of alleged criminal migrants and refugees, and has offered free self-defence training designed specifically for women. While RWE groups place propagandistic anti-immigrant content on flyers, shirts and posters, some martial arts clubs, not openly connected to the RWE scene, have also been reproducing this narrative, albeit in more subtle ways.

All of the above-mentioned activities aim to strengthen and expand (V)RWE networks and recruit new members. Merchandised products and the organisation of large-scale sports events in particular are used to enhance mainstream recognition for such groups and foster the dissemination of their values by increasing their visibility. Apart from using these strategies, RWE groups also often make contact with potential recruits at regular gyms or sports clubs by simply broaching a conversation and building up friendships over time. Conversely, it is not uncommon for individual members of sports clubs or coaches to make contact with extremist milieus, who can then to reach other club members or teammates via friendship ties. There are

⁽²¹⁾ Runter von der Matte, *Kommerzialisierung, Professionalisierung und ein mögliches Verbot*.

⁽²²⁾ Verfassungsschutz Baden-Württemberg, *Verfassungsschutzbericht BW*, p. 204.

⁽²³⁾ Pugliese, *The Militarization of Slovenian Far-right Extremism*.

⁽²⁴⁾ However, the network behind KdN remains well connected and stays dedicated to their goal of professionalising and financing FRE violence. See: TAZ, *Kampfsport in Neonazi-Strukturen, Fighter für den Umsturz*.

⁽²⁵⁾ Ibid.

⁽²⁶⁾ Zidan, *Battle of the Nibelung: the dangerous evolution of neo-nazi fight clubs in Germany*.

⁽²⁷⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Far-Right Extremism. A practical introduction*, p. 10.

⁽²⁸⁾ Meiering et al., *Brückennarrative – Verbindende Elemente in der Radikalisierung von Gruppen*, p. 24.

many cases linked to RWE and Islamist extremism where small networks have been formed within sports clubs or groups, which themselves had no connection to extremist networks ⁽²⁹⁾.

SPOTLIGHT: THE MMA SCENE AS A RECRUITMENT POOL FOR EXTREMISTS

Mixed martial arts (MMA)

MMA is a full-contact combat sport that includes technical elements from boxing, judo, jujitsu, karate, Muay Thai and multiple other disciplines.

History

- Early versions of MMA may date back as far as the Olympic Games of 648 BCE. A fight was considered to have ended when one of the competitors was rendered unconscious or acknowledged defeat. In some cases, the match did not end until one of the fighters had died.
- Despite being criticised for its brutality, it has gained widespread popularity since the 1990s when the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) first began organising MMA events.
- It is one of the fastest growing spectator events of the last two decades, especially in the United States of America (<https://www.britannica.com/sports/mixed-martial-arts>).

Rules and regulations

- Though MMA fights are often perceived as barbaric and lawless, players must comply with an extensive set of rules (<https://www.ufc.com/unified-rules-mixed-martial-arts>).
- MMA participants fight in a ring or a fenced area, and fights can be won through submission, knockout and technical knockout.
- A variety of attacks such as throat strikes, head butting, and certain strikes against an opponent on the ground, are prohibited.
- Some countries have banned the sport, due to deaths resulting from fights.
 - France, for instance, banned MMA in 2016 but decided to recognise it as an official sport at professional and amateur level in January 2020 (https://www.espn.com/mma/story/_/id/27048038/france-recognize-mma-sport-jan-2020).

A challenging lack of governing bodies. One major issue is the lack of legal governing bodies (like FIFA for football) to regulate the sport in all aspects, including preventive measures to counter its misuse by extremists.

MMA offers an attractive recruitment ground for extremist groups, since the sport combines almost all the features fundamental to RWE movements, organisations or groups. These include “traditional” gender roles (especially notions of masculinity), a need for and gratification through violence, and tropes of strength and fighting, to name just a few. Because of these aspects, MMA – more so than other types of martial arts – tends to attract young men with problematic perspectives in these areas: ideal conditions for RWE recruiters. While MMA does have a comprehensive body of rules, it is still viewed as unusually violent, which means the sport is often not officially recognised and occasionally even banned in some countries.

⁽²⁹⁾ Belltower News, *Presseschau* 30.08.2019.

While this paper focuses on RWE groups, it is important to note that sport has been heavily targeted by Islamist extremist and jihadist recruiters, too. One of the most infamous examples of radicalisation as well as recruitment in sport is Valdet Gashi, a German world champion in Muay Thai (Thai combat sport). Gashi trained regularly in a fight club in Bangkok before travelling to Syria to join Daesh in January 2015, and he was killed in June of the same year. While not much is known about his radicalisation process, it is common knowledge that he set up an MMA training programme in Switzerland that accepted only devoted Muslim men and did not allow music or swearing during training⁽³⁰⁾. At least three young men are believed to have trained there before joining Daesh⁽³¹⁾. Moreover, Tajikistan's three-time national MMA champion, Alan Chekranov, as well as Chechen Hassan Edilkhanov, who is believed to have trained in a fight club in Bangkok, have joined Daesh. While this can only be coincidental, the terrorist organisation has publicly made much of having recruited sport stars, hoping this will attract more sport-minded young men to join their ranks⁽³²⁾.

The RWE scene is just as active as the jihadist scene in trying to create a space to promote their ideology through MMA. As mentioned above, the organisation of numerous fighting events grew in popularity, leading to international cooperation between MMA organisations throughout Europe, such as the Battle of the Nibelungs, the largest RWE martial arts tournament in Europe. The French Generation Identity organised a boot camp in 2016: advertised as a "summer university", it carried the slogan "From Covadonga to Calais" – a historical reference to the military victory of a Christian army over the troops of the Umayyad caliphate on the Iberian Peninsula in 722 AD. Here, hundreds of participants from numerous countries learned fighting techniques (including MMA) in preparation for demonstrations and street fights⁽³³⁾.

Due to well-established, local far-right structures and a growing extremist network, Ukrainian RWE organisations manage to influence societal conflicts both within and outside the country⁽³⁴⁾. The RWE organisation Right Sector realised early on the potential they had to influence the Euromaidan protests and the tense situation with Russia, and to expand their network of militant forces. Since 2016, Right Sector has functioned as the paramilitary arm of the Ukrainian neo-Nazi party National Corps, which owns several buildings serving as administration and recruitment centres. A variety of RWE groups from many European countries (e.g. Sweden and Germany) have attended events and informal meetings in National Corps facilities. Sports, particularly MMA, continue to play a significant role in these contexts. MMA congresses and show fights are regularly organised by VRWE groups in Kiev and increasingly attract right-wing MMA fighters from across Europe⁽³⁵⁾.

Intelligence services warn that the fighting skills being honed in such environments can be used against police or other perceived "enemies"⁽³⁶⁾. Moreover, this is an indication of growing network between European actors of the right-wing MMA scene.

The links between fighting and combat sports and right-wing ideologies are not new. Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) Fighters like Joe Brammer and Donald Cerrone had been sponsored by Hoelzer Reich, a company that sold merchandise propagating RWE views, until it was banned by the UFC in 2009. Despite the UFC stepping up efforts to fight right-wing extremism in MMA, for example by banning RWE fighter Benjamin Brinsa, RWE activities seem to be on the rise. Brinsa went on to found the Imperium Fight Team in Leipzig, Germany: this was the training ground of some of the attackers of a historically alternative and left-wing part of the city in 2016⁽³⁷⁾.

The increasing popularity of the sport as well as its exploitation by extremist groups has created an urgent need for P/CVE actors to intervene within these spheres and to prevent vulnerable youth from unwittingly training with extremist fighters and staff. However, especially in milieus prone to violence and relatively closed to outsiders, such interventions have proved highly challenging in the past. For instance, experience has shown that practitioners working with street gangs and motorcycle gangs active in martial arts have

⁽³⁰⁾ 20min.ch, *Trainings in Winterthur: Thaibox-Champion posiert vor IS-Flagge*.

⁽³¹⁾ Paraszczuk, *The Martial Arts Champions of Islamic State*.

⁽³²⁾ Ibid.

⁽³³⁾ Génération Identitaire, *Université d'été identitaire 2016 - De Covadonga à Calais*.

⁽³⁴⁾ Umland, *Irregular Militias and Radical Nationalism in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine*, p.59ff.

⁽³⁵⁾ Ibid, p. 45.

⁽³⁶⁾ Rietzschel, *Wo Rechtsextreme für den Umsturz trainieren*.

⁽³⁷⁾ Runter von der Matte, „Timo „Teddy“ Feucht im Ring. Rechter Hooligan kämpft im neuen MMA-Format inklusive TV-Übertragung, 10.04.2019.

been the target of violence ⁽³⁸⁾. It is therefore crucial to identify potential means of access for P/CVE practitioners that can also guarantee relative safety. This may require thorough background checks and cooperation with security agencies. And yet, even where this is done, some level of risk persists. Aside from merely repressive measures in cases in which illegal activities can be detected, another alternative for non-security P/CVE could be (digital) awareness-raising campaigns directed at youth from these contexts. Such campaigns could provide information and guidance on which offers exist and where to find counselling and help, should they be interested/in need. In less walled-off instances, it is of particular importance to build relations and cooperate with owners and coaches of local (MMA) gyms and, where possible, league or association representatives (see e.g. project example FULL CONTACT, p. 16). Only when a relatively stable working relationship has been built with the organisers, individual practitioners should begin working in these contexts. Nonetheless, it is evident that more work dedicated to exploring potential modes of access to these hard-to-reach communities is warranted.

Part 2: The positive potential of sport in P/CVE

Existing approaches to sport in P/CVE, and room for improvement

The positive potential of sports for the purposes of youth work or conflict resolution has long been acknowledged in a number of different P/CVE contexts, such as peace-building measures. Most prominently, the inclusion of sports elements has supported crime reduction efforts overall as well as the rehabilitation of offenders (not radicalised or terrorist offenders). It is therefore worth understanding these related efforts before turning to previous and current P/CVE approaches that include sports.

Sport in Crime reduction and offender rehabilitation

The positive effect of sport in rehabilitation and reintegration programmes is particularly evident in the context of crime reduction efforts and offender rehabilitation. While it is generally acknowledged that participation in sports-based interventions alone does not necessarily result in desistance from criminality, sports can contribute indirectly to desistance. By providing an environment in which teamwork and leadership skills are promoted in a socially compatible manner, other factors known to render individuals vulnerable to violent extremism can be addressed (e.g. health and safety or gender inequalities) ⁽³⁹⁾.

In prison, sport is often used as a tool to motivate prisoners, break up their everyday routines and help them let off steam. Sports like football, basketball and athletics are particularly popular in prison settings. They can be a facilitator for change and help to train offenders in handling defeat, complying with rules, and self-discipline – all skills necessary for successful (re)integration into society after release.

Multiple experiences have shown that cooperation between prison initiatives and external sports bodies can be extremely valuable. It provides prisoners with a connection to the outside world which can serve as a (temporary) social network immediately after the inmate's release, as well as a bridge to positive social relationships.⁽⁴⁰⁾ A British study recommends re-evaluation of the “keep apart” policies that can limit inmates' access to sports and other group activities, pointing out that young offenders in particular should learn conflict resolution and mediation – skills that can be enhanced through sport ⁽⁴¹⁾.

The European Prison Rules, adopted by the Council of Europe in 2006, established that “recreational opportunities, which include sport, games, cultural activities, hobbies and other leisure pursuits, shall be provided and, as far as possible, prisoners shall be allowed to organise them” ⁽⁴²⁾.

⁽³⁸⁾ Interview with a former streetworker and current P/CVE expert practitioner in Germany.

⁽³⁹⁾ UNODC, *Handbook on the Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners and the Prevention of Radicalization to Violence in Prisons*, p. 89.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Pan-European Conference, *Sport and Prison*, p.7

⁽⁴¹⁾ Meek, A Sporting Chance. *An Independent Review of Sport in Youth and Adult Prisons*, p.14.

⁽⁴²⁾ Council of Europe, *Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the European Prison Rules*.

Participation in sports, especially team sports that inmates can continue after their release from prison, can form a major motivational factor to refrain from reoffending⁽⁴³⁾. Moreover, the positive effects of sports do not support only the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders, but also increasingly, the prevention of crime in the first place. Sports-related programmes often seek to address pressing social issues such as marginalisation, frustration, drug abuse and crime. They promote a safe space for youth and encourage lessons in cooperation, conflict resolution and communication. They can also initiate individual interventions (e.g. counselling or mentoring) in specific cases⁽⁴⁴⁾. *Line Up Live Up* is one such initiative: aiming to prevent youth from engaging in crime, it was set up by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and entails a training curriculum that practitioners working with youth can adapt and integrate in their daily work. The UNODC aims at promoting vital skills and capacities, such as communication and self-confidence, so as to support young people to better cope with anxiety and peer pressure (e.g. to engage in criminal activity)⁽⁴⁵⁾. By strengthening young people's resilience and other protective factors, the initiative sets out to decrease crime, violence and drug use.

While large-scale evaluations of the efficacy of sport-based crime prevention programmes are still lacking, a study of University College Cork suggests "that sport participation reduce[d] crime rates for both property and person crimes in English local authorities between 2012 and 2015"⁽⁴⁶⁾. These are all promising indications for future approaches to further include sports (elements) in P/CVE measures, both on primary and secondary prevention levels and at the tertiary level, which includes the rehabilitation of radicalised and terrorist offenders.

Existing approaches to sports in P/CVE

As mentioned earlier, sports are often used in the context of crime prevention and reduction, and when working with at-risk youth. Additionally, sports initiatives are often set up as part of youth or social work programmes targeting marginalised youth. Many of these initiatives implicitly also reference P/CVE, but are often subsumed under the larger umbrella of empowerment work and civic education. In addition to these initiatives, P/CVE-specific approaches including sports in one form or another have been implemented across all prevention levels.

In terms of primary prevention, the focus of such programmes is predominantly on measures to create spaces and opportunities for adolescents to exercise and boost their self-esteem and to convey a positive attitude towards body image and health⁽⁴⁷⁾. For secondary prevention, providing guidance for self-discipline plays a crucial role, as does working towards a higher frustration tolerance and learning to properly channel aggression. Additionally, teaching the importance of fair play, conflict resolution and the acceptance of rules of conduct are significant elements of secondary prevention. In tertiary prevention, on the other hand, the focus lies on dealing with physical assertion and self-assertion strategies, the prevention or interruption of violence through educational follow-up work, and sports as part of anti-violence training and drug addiction therapy⁽⁴⁸⁾.

As with work with regular offenders, (team) sports elements can be beneficial for the rehabilitation and reintegration of radicalised or terrorist offenders⁽⁴⁹⁾. Partaking in a sport can offer offenders a new social network, away from former extremist networks, and can provide structure and enhance social skills⁽⁵⁰⁾. This could support the individual in changing their lifestyle, disengaging from their old social circles and settling into a new life. The post-release phase from prison can be extremely difficult, and it carries a high risk of relapsing. As is generally the case for rehabilitation processes, it would therefore be useful if sports-based programmes started inside prison and continued outside prison, to reinforce continuity and stable structures.

⁽⁴³⁾ Meek, *How sport in prison could stop reoffending*.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Public Safety Canada, *Crime Prevention – Research Highlights 2017-H03-CP – Sports-Based Crime Prevention Programs*.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ UNODC, *Crime Prevention through sports*.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ Brosnan, *The Impact of Sports Participation on Crime in England between 2012 and 2017*, p. 1.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ Pilz, *Sport und Prävention – Wie viel Soziale Arbeit, Prävention kann der organisierte Sport leisten?*, 8f.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ In England and Wales football coaches from over 30 football clubs offer sports sessions, as well as leadership and refereeing courses in prisons in order for inmates to gain self-esteem and find employment post-release. The goal is to reduce the chances of reoffending once individuals are out of prison. This example could be applied to the context of (V)EOs in prison, as VEOs often face double stigmatisation post-release and struggle to find access to social structures. For more information see: Foster, *Football clubs are linking up with prisons to offer coaching – and hope*.

⁽⁵⁰⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, *The role of sports and leisure activities in preventing and countering violent extremism*, p.9.

At the same time, as noted in this overview, sports can also be misused as a recruiting ground for extremist actors. Consequently, sports clubs can and should be key partners in P/CVE work. There are already many sport-based or sport-related programmes and initiatives throughout Europe and internationally that use sport as a tool in P/CVE, crime prevention or to build social bridges. Most of them seek longer-term, sustained impact by combining sport with educational, vocational or mentoring activities as well as addressing social needs ⁽⁵¹⁾. In light of the large amount of different varieties of sports-related P/CVE efforts, three larger categories of approaches can be identified:

1. **P/CVE initiatives by sports clubs/associations or programmes executed in cooperation with sports clubs;**
2. **sport-focused P/CVE programmes;**
3. **sports elements within larger P/CVE approaches.**

In the following section, each of these larger categories will be discussed.

1) P/CVE initiatives by sports associations and sports clubs

P/CVE programmes initiated by sports clubs and associations are implemented when extremist attitudes and offences related to xenophobia, racism or antisemitism become visible, e.g. among fans and hooligans of a certain club or within a specific type of sports. As sports clubs and their members have been targeted by RWEs in recruitment efforts, it should be in the interests of clubs to prevent and counter such attempts. For example, the German football club Energie Cottbus has developed a strategy plan to fight the issue of RWE among their fanbase. Apart from educational trainings and school visits, the club has established a “Round table for diversity” consisting of network partners such as state ministries, local authorities and anti-racist fan projects ⁽⁵²⁾. The German football association Hessen (HFV) introduced “democracy trainers for conflict resolution in sports” to their clubs. They support the HFV in their anti-violence and anti-racism efforts and act as spokespersons for their campaign “No to discrimination and violence” ⁽⁵³⁾. Joint initiatives by multiple clubs or sport schools have also become more popular in recent years. To date, most of these initiatives do not seem to go far beyond awareness-raising campaigns and activities.

Practice example: The German Association of Martial Arts Schools against Violent Extremism (DVKE), Berlin/Stuttgart

The DVKE is an initiative of the German Institute on Radicalization and De-Radicalization Studies (GIRDS) and the Sports School Choi in Berlin, a training centre for several martial arts such as Kickboxing, Taekwondo and Krav Maga. It is a network of martial arts schools in German-speaking countries cooperating to detect extremism and counter influences of both, Islamist and right-wing groups in martial arts. As part of the programme, coaches and instructors are trained to identify (early) signs of radicalisation and act as mentors among their club members.

As the first network of martial arts schools which introduces P/CVE approaches and counter-radicalisation into their training schedules, DVKE mentors are able to use their expertise to advise other MMA-related P/CVE programmes ⁽⁵⁴⁾.

⁽⁵¹⁾ UNODC (2018): *Desk review on sport as a tool for the prevention of violent extremism*, p. 57.

⁽⁵²⁾ FC Energie Cottbus, *FC Energie hat Maßnahmenplan erarbeitet*.

⁽⁵³⁾ Deutsche Sportjugend, *Demokratietrainer im Hessischen Fußball*.

⁽⁵⁴⁾ German Institute on Radicalization and De-radicalization Studies (GIRDS), *The German Association of Martial Arts Schools against Violent Extremism*.

2) Sports-focused P/CVE programmes

There are many sports-centred P/CVE programmes built around the idea that sport is an effective way of gaining low-threshold access to vulnerable, at-risk or already radicalised individuals. Particularly for young people, who are often sceptical of government-related institutions, programmes based principally on sports activities can be a helpful tool in finding a common starting point.

Moreover, the implementation of sports-based programmes provides a useful space to engage with children and adolescents outside their regular contexts (i.e. the school system, their families and their wider communities) ⁽⁵⁵⁾. The Irish NGO Sport Against Racism Ireland (SARI), for instance, runs several projects that use sport as a means to promote social inclusion and peacebuilding by addressing discrimination-related issues. Besides facilitating workshops (e.g. “Stick with diversity”) to raise awareness of difference in gender or ethnic groups through sport, SARI regularly organises inclusive football events ⁽⁵⁶⁾.

Another example of sports-focused P/CVE programmes is the charity organisation Luton Tigers. In response to violent outbreaks by both Islamist and right-wing extremists in the city of Luton, the organisation set out to reduce instances of radicalisation among young people in the community by combining educational elements with sports. To achieve this goal, Luton Tigers closely cooperates with local schools, through the Luton Tigers Curriculum, designed for this purpose with conflict resolution in mind ⁽⁵⁷⁾. The organisation has also founded the Luton Tigers football club, which now plays in the Bedfordshire Youth League. According to Youssif Meah, Curriculum director of the Luton Tigers, initial programme evaluations have shown remarkable results in participants’ behaviour ⁽⁵⁸⁾. In 2019, the initiative extended its programme, to include online courses on radicalisation and sexual exploitation.

While most initiatives include some educational modules or elements at a later stage of the programme, the following examples of initiatives are predominantly sports-centred.

Practice example: Open Fun Football Schools, Denmark

The Open Fun Football Schools are part of a programme run by Cross Cultures, a non-profit and non-governmental organisation based in Denmark. It uses sport as a tool to work with communities affected by conflict and to enhance social cohesion in these communities.

The schools seek to unite young people regardless of ethnicity, religion or social background, in a bid to reduce conflict, create understanding and mutual respect, and effect reconciliation. Particularly in conflict-ridden regions such as the western Balkans and the Caucasus, the Open Fun Football Schools provide young people from different ethnic and social backgrounds with a rare space to meet and interact with each other. The concept benefits from the spontaneity that football allows: it can be played anywhere, without much preparation, and immediately attracts the attention and interest of diverse people ⁽⁵⁹⁾.

“By promoting local participation, volunteering and cross-cutting social communities, and by showing and putting people’s experiences into words as well as putting their resources at stake in a new way, the programme contributes as an inspiration to those seeking to find a new, peaceful and sustainable way of solving common problems.”

⁽⁵⁵⁾ Richardson, *The Role of Sport in Deradicalisation and Crime Diversion*, p.31.

⁽⁵⁶⁾ Sport against Racism Ireland (SARI).

⁽⁵⁷⁾ The RecoRa Institute & Violence Prevention Network, *The Art of seeing promise over risk*, p. 110.

⁽⁵⁸⁾ Patel, *Luton charity uses football to educate children*.

⁽⁵⁹⁾ Cross Cultures, *What we do*.

Practice example: Not in God's Name (NIGN), Vienna, Austria

Another example of a sports-focused P/CVE programme is facilitated by the Austrian non-profit organisation NIGN. The NGO was established in 2015 in Vienna by political scientist Alexander Karakas and professional Thai boxer Karim Mabrouk. It aims to counter and prevent radicalisation, to encourage dialogue and to reach out to vulnerable youth. The programme, which is run from a martial arts training centre, chiefly targets potentially disaffected young Muslims. More than 20 trainers from different social and cultural backgrounds are currently active in the initiative ⁽⁶⁰⁾. A key component of the programme, which is principally funded by the Austrian government and through donations, is the use of martial arts to channel energy, aggression or other challenging emotions. The trainers, who often come from similar social or religious backgrounds as the participants, function as positive role models. The programme's social media accounts and website feature popular athletes acting as ambassadors for NIGN.

NIGN programmes consist of three components.

Training. Starting off with a 45-minute workshop in which topics such as democracy and tolerance are discussed, the martial arts training aims to reinforce team spirit and trust, as well as build self-confidence. Over time, participants learn to support each other and build relationships with their mentors and peers through the experience of the joint physical training. The coaches provide a safe space for them to discuss their fears and disappointments, which helps participants to manage feelings of frustration and lowers their vulnerability to extremist ideologies ⁽⁶¹⁾.

Visiting schools. NIGN also cooperates with schools, refugee homes and other places where potentially vulnerable persons might be represented. They facilitate workshops on subjects such as radicalisation, gender stereotypes and extremist violence. In order to gain easier access to the target group, NIGN invites popular athletes to join their workshops. According to the organisation, 40 different institutions have been reached so far ⁽⁶²⁾.

Street work. NIGN meets adolescents in their social environments and in places where they spend their free time. For this purpose, NIGN staff visit youth clubs and bars once a week to start open conversations about their interests and problems, and provide counter-narratives to extremist or conspiracy-theoretical arguments ⁽⁶³⁾.

3) Sports elements within larger P/CVE approaches

Providing sports activities within the frame of larger P/CVE approaches has been used as a tool for gaining potentially low-threshold access to a target group and/or individuals. Spontaneous ball games during lunch breaks can fall under this category, as can pre-planned sports activities within a broader programme schedule. Sports activities can broaden the P/CVE staff's perspective on behaviours and potential developments or areas warranting further attention, by providing a different setting in which to observe group dynamics and how they interact with others under pressure, in contrast to more formal surroundings such as classrooms or offices.

Particularly within prison settings, where organic spaces for observing an individual's behaviour are rare, sports – and especially group sports activities – can offer valuable lessons for P/CVE practice, and additionally act as an welcome alternative to distract prisoners from monotonous routines and everyday life. However, in all P/CVE contexts, but particularly in rehabilitation and reintegration contexts, due to their sensitive nature, sport should not constitute the sole component of a P/CVE programme. It should always be supported by a well-grounded methodological framework (e.g. based on pedagogy or social work).

Some approaches combine sport with other creative activities such as theatre or music. The German project *Spiel dich frei!* aims to prevent and counter radicalisation processes in adolescents by connecting theoretical modules with a variety of creative practices. For instance, participants can attend educational

⁽⁶⁰⁾ Goldmann, *Deradikalisierung durch Kampfsport und Religion*.

⁽⁶¹⁾ Not in God's name, *Sport mit Vorbildern*.

⁽⁶²⁾ Not in God's name, *Schulbesuche*.

⁽⁶³⁾ Not in God's name, *Proactive Streetwork*.

sessions that focus on strengthening their ability to counter extremist narratives or to detect extremist content on social media. In the second step, participants apply this knowledge in music-, theatre- and sports-related activities, to allow for a low-threshold and creative processing of the theoretical input. Spiel dich frei coaches use the sport dimension to convey values of fair play and gender equality and to promote dialogue and conflict resolution ⁽⁶⁴⁾.

As part of street work or “open youth work” approaches targeting children and young individuals who are vulnerable to extremism, sport can play an important role in the development of trusting relationships with staff. For instance, Open Youth Work in Austria regularly organises sports events in youth centres and clubs, in addition to their individualised socio-pedagogical and educational work ⁽⁶⁵⁾. Such sports elements may constitute a smaller but nonetheless potentially promising component of P/CVE programmes for some target groups, as they are perceived as fun and distracting in contrast to other dialogue- or education-based course modules or project components.

The Danish School, Social services and Police (SSP) collaborative network, which organises local and municipal crime prevention efforts designed to support children and adolescents, also uses recreational actions such as sports and other leisure activities to reach out to target groups ⁽⁶⁶⁾.

Gaps and recommendations

It is clear that sport-based programmes **can** be useful for practical P/CVE work, both inside and outside prison. The positive benefits which sports offer (e.g. in terms of conflict resolution, identity-building, respect and tolerance) can support the prevention of violent extremism on a primary level, but also in intervention and deradicalisation work.

However, there is still a lack of relevant evaluations or other reliable data that can provide concrete evidence rather than positive indications. Apart from this need to evaluate existing practices, there are also other gaps to overcome and key learnings to be considered. As is often the case with P/CVE, blurred boundaries and a lack of agreed definitions render debate over sport in relation to P/CVE programmes difficult.

This paper has shown that sport can be integrated into P/CVE, in a number of different formats. Not all formats will be useful for all potential objectives and circumstances, so programme designers will need to carefully evaluate the context(s) in which they are going to work, set up a programme and define clear objectives tied to a logical theory of change.

Some general questions and topics for further discussion are listed below.

- **What is a sports-based P/CVE programme?**

Most initiatives that do not solely incorporate sports elements into their P/CVE programmes; they also further support participants by creating a safe space for dialogue and incorporating educational components (e.g. aimed at awareness-raising). Therefore, a sports-based programme aimed specifically at P/CVE should not offer just the opportunity to train or engage in sports in a safe setting (potentially as an alternative to problematic clubs or studios typically available to young people). It also needs to provide space for joint learning, awareness-raising, fostering critical thinking skills, mentoring, a community in which emotions and vulnerabilities can be discussed and shared, or other clearly distinguishable pedagogical or social and youth work elements ⁽⁶⁷⁾. Providing the opportunity for sport outside problematic contexts alone is not sufficient to qualify a programme for P/CVE.

- **How should a sports-based P/CVE programme be labelled and communicated?**

While there are many sports-based programmes working with vulnerable and marginalised youth, very few are labelled specifically as P/CVE – instead they are characterised much more generally as youth work ⁽⁶⁸⁾.

⁽⁶⁴⁾ Streetfootballworld, *Spiel dich frei! Innovative Radikalisierungsprävention durch Bildung, Theater, Musik und Sport*, p 5.

⁽⁶⁵⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism. Approaches and Practices*, p. 428.

⁽⁶⁶⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Collection of Approaches and Practices*, p. 604.

⁽⁶⁷⁾ See also Puvogel, *Hymermaskulinität und Ansatz der Präventionsarbeit im Kampfsport*.

⁽⁶⁸⁾ UNODC, *Desk Review on sport as a tool for the prevention of violent extremism*, p. 18ff.

This may lower the threshold for people to take part in such programmes; a more general label might also attract people who are not actively aware of the fact that their behaviour could be tied to extremist radicalisation or might one day lead there. Determining the scope of the label is part of the programming process that should be discussed and assessed extensively. Establishing a strategy on how to communicate about and identify a programme should be directly tied to the definition of clear objectives.

- **Cooperation**

Depending on the programme's objective, establishing good cooperation is likely to be crucial for successful work. In the sports field, this may include cooperation with high-profile clubs or associations. Particularly when working with radicalised or vulnerable at-risk youth, who often feel excluded from many aspects of society, cooperation with (popular) athletes and sports clubs could counter this sense of being overlooked and restore self-esteem – as well as making engagement with a programme appealing and presenting an initial external motivation to participate. However, such clubs should avoid using the P/CVE label to improve their own public image; a coherent and sustainable strategy should always be in place. It must be taken into account that sports clubs may not be familiar with the processes of radicalisation, with different extremist phenomena or with social and youth work. There might well be discrepancies in terms of methodology, implementation and approach. In order for cooperation to be sustainable, these differences must be addressed and overcome⁽⁶⁹⁾, through timely and long-term planning and honest collaboration between all partners involved.

Apart from sports clubs, other community partners, such as volunteers or local community organisations, can offer a valuable addition to P/CVE programmes in the context of sport, especially when they endorse or provide additional “legitimacy” to the programme and encourage broader engagement. In the case of popular sports clubs, aside from the potentially positive aspects to their involvement, their branding and profile might also have an intimidating effect for some people; this issue can be resolved by community partners⁽⁷⁰⁾.

- **Reconsidering martial arts/boxing in P/CVE programmes – and the role(s) of women in them**

Experiences from prison settings in the United Kingdom have shown that boxing-related programmes are highly valued and may be able to reach a number of young people⁽⁷¹⁾. However, while boxing initiatives have often had positive outcomes in the past, findings indicate that fighting sports could potentially contribute to increased aggression and antisocial behaviour, if “taught without the philosophical and moral aspects”⁽⁷²⁾.

It is therefore extremely important first to carefully screen martial arts clubs before engaging in cooperation with them, and second, to communicate with them about the approaches and aims of the P/CVE programme. This is particularly important because MMA sports in many countries are not monitored by an overarching governing body. Martial arts as part of targeted interventions or in larger P/CVE approaches should be carefully piloted and should draw on the success of existing and evaluated programmes⁽⁷³⁾.

Additionally, the fact that these sports often foster and encourage hypermasculinity and emphasise “male strength” should be carefully considered. While women also practice such sports, this remains a predominantly male environment. Prevention work should not unconsciously reproduce gender assumptions propagated by extremist ideologies, but should rather try to unpack these narratives by deconstructing the notion of the stereotypical male and the “strong provider”. This could be achieved by including female role models in the context of P/CVE and martial arts, for example, as the German prevention project [Islam-ist](#) has done (the name is a wordplay on the term ‘Islamist’ and the German translation of ‘Islam is’) by deconstructing the clichés around Muslim women’s participation in martial arts.

There is no doubt that further analysis and information are sorely needed, especially in the field of martial arts and P/CVE. The project described below is a promising example of practitioners attempting to meet this need by bridging the gaps.

⁽⁶⁹⁾ UNODC, *Desk Review on sport as a tool for the prevention of violent extremism*, p. 7.

⁽⁷⁰⁾ Meek, *A Sporting Chance. An Independent Review of Sport in Youth and Adult Prisons*, p. 64.

⁽⁷¹⁾ Meek, *A Sporting Chance. An Independent Review of Sport in Youth and Adult Prisons*, p. 57.

⁽⁷²⁾ UNODC, *Desk Review on sport as a tool for the prevention of violent extremism*, p. 33.

⁽⁷³⁾ Meek, *A Sporting Chance. An Independent Review of Sport in Youth and Adult Prisons*, p. 58.

- **Looking beyond martial arts**

While boxing and MMA are much discussed topics in the context of prevention and deradicalisation work, and may have a role to play there, practitioners must remember to look beyond martial arts in the discussion around sports-related deradicalisation measures. To reach as many young people as possible, it is necessary to broaden the scope and consider all kinds of relevant mass sports in a given context or country. Since P/CVE in the context of sports can take so many different forms and shapes, this field holds a great variety of opportunities for low-threshold P/CVE work.

- **The need for gender-sensitive approaches**

Extremist ideologies often reproduce stereotypical gender roles, typically promoting the notion of supposedly traditional “male strength” and of women as caretakers and housewives. When incorporating sports into P/CVE work, practitioners must take care not to unconsciously reproduce such stereotypes themselves – a point valid not only for martial arts, but for most types of sports. Masculinity, strength and competition are often considered vital aspects of these sports, and they may well be valuable tools for reaching out to some target groups, especially young men. However, more consideration is needed in this context if the aim is to create a space where critical thinking and dialogue are encouraged, where traditional gender roles are deconstructed, and where alternative interpretations of gender roles and less destructive notions of strength are advanced.

Furthermore, efforts to reach out to women and girls with sports activities linked to P/CVE must be stepped up. P/CVE actions targeting martial arts mostly fail to take into account this target group. Unfortunately, this is the case in the larger deradicalisation and rehabilitation sphere as well: the specific needs of women have been widely overlooked, even though they play important roles within extremist groups and organisations ⁽⁷⁴⁾, and even though women’s experiences of radicalisation, extremism and deradicalisation are typically different to those of men. So implementation of gendered P/CVE programmes remains a crucial goal for P/CVE as a whole (including the sphere of sport).

When implementing such programmes, gender-based barriers should be identified. For example, women and girls in prison settings have expressed concerns about feeling intimidated when exercising alongside men ⁽⁷⁵⁾. In light of the need for positive role models, discussed earlier, it is vital that programmes for women and girls are led by female coaches and instructors. Ideally, a diverse range of activities should be offered to support women’s engagement in P/CVE programmes.

⁽⁷⁴⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Gender-specific approaches in exit work*, p.1f.

⁽⁷⁵⁾ Meek, *A Spring Chance. An Independent Review of Sport in Youth and Adult Prisons*, p. 55.

Project example: FULL CONTACT – Democracy and Martial Arts, Germany

To better understand what is needed from sport in a P/CVE context, and how this can best be implemented in practice, initiatives bringing together different actors in the field and focusing on the intersection of research, sport and P/CVE work are a necessary first step.

The project [FULL CONTACT – Democracy and Martial Arts](#) ⁽⁷⁶⁾ aims to prevent the abuse of martial arts and self-defence sports by (violent) RWE actors in Germany and other European countries, and encourages multi-stakeholder dialogue between authorities, sports associations and NGOs to strengthen preventive measures and standards.

To achieve this objective, the project employs three courses:

- 1. Investigation of the current state of preventive measures in martial arts contexts.**
- 2. Awareness-raising activities and the development of dialogue platforms:**
 - a. to facilitate exchange among relevant actors in the field, such as sports clubs/associations, youth and social workers, as well as local authorities;
 - b. to provide a framework for the creation of joint P/CVE strategies.
- 3. Analysis of RWE activities in martial arts:** findings will be included in a monitoring report.

Further resources

Recording of the online conference on [Right-wing extremism and combat sports in the European Union](#), hosted by Viola von Cramon, MEP, and featuring presentations and discussions from renowned experts of the field (including RAN).

Radicalisation Awareness Network (2019). [The role of sports and leisure activities in preventing and countering violent extremism](#). EX POST PAPER. 6-7 March 2019.

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⁽⁷⁶⁾ Vollkontakt, *Prototype project*.

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