

Discussion Paper

PBC Radicalisation in Sports

2nd meeting

**“The Intersection of Sport and
Extremism: State of play, EU case
studies, financing mechanisms and the
external influences”**

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Madrid, Spain

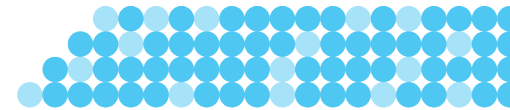
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EU Knowledge Hub on
**Prevention of
Radicalisation**



**European
Commission**



1. Executive Summary

Sport has long been celebrated for its capacity to foster inclusion, community, and positive identity formation. However, as evidenced during the first PBC meeting, sporting environments are also exploited by extremist networks seeking to disseminate ideological narratives. Emerging trends reveal that localised radicalisation in sports has evolved from a subcultural phenomenon into a global security challenge requiring coordinated responses across borders.

This document sets the stage for the second Project-Based Collaboration (PBC) meeting, which will delve into three interconnected issues: the impact of transnational connectivity on radicalisation processes in sports; the intricate financial infrastructures that sustain extremist activities; and the weaponisation by external actors – both state and non-state – of sporting environments for ideological dissemination. The convergence of globalised sports networks, financial opacity, and geopolitical instrumentalisation demands recalibrated EU policy frameworks to address systemic enablers of extremism.

2. Introduction

The intersection between sport and extremism is no longer a peripheral concern but a central issue in contemporary security and social policy. While sports have traditionally served as platforms for social cohesion and cross-cultural dialogue, they are increasingly targeted by extremist networks as fertile ground for recruitment, radicalisation, and the propagation of divisive ideologies. Recent incidents, such as the involvement of ultra-violent far-right groups in orchestrating clashes on the sidelines of the Belgian Cup football final, further highlight how sporting contexts can be exploited by extremist actors to recruit, network, and mobilise radical ideologies. These developments underscore the urgent need to address the risks posed by the infiltration of extremist networks into sports arenas.

This exploitation takes multiple forms – from the politicisation of supporter groups and the infiltration of combat sports clubs to the use of digital platforms for propaganda. Notably, the phenomenon is not confined to any single region or ideology; both far-right and jihadist networks have developed sophisticated strategies to leverage the unique vulnerabilities and social capital inherent in sporting communities (sports clubs, tournaments, and fan associations).

These vulnerabilities stem notably from three intersecting factors: transnational connectivity, financial opacity in sports governance, and geopolitical influence. This PBC will serve to delve into



these multifaceted issues, examining the complex interplay between sporting ecosystems and extremist methodologies through rigorous empirical analysis and case studies.

3. Objectives

This discussion paper sets the scene for the second PBC meeting in our series exploring the complex relationship between sports and extremism. The objective is to inform participants about the critical themes under examination and the specificities in each EU country concerned, while emphasising their urgency within contemporary geopolitical and security landscapes. Additionally, this will allow to facilitate the exchange of best practices and provide an opportunity to develop guidelines and recommendations that can support more effective and coordinated responses across different contexts.

The inaugural meeting of this PBC revealed critical insights that inform this session's focus:

Politicisation of Ultras Groups: While fan loyalty often supersedes ideological commitments (as demonstrated in Italy's "double occupation" model), extremist groups increasingly co-opt these networks to normalise xenophobic narratives and coordinate cross-border activities. The politicisation process often begins subtly, exploiting existing grievances before gradually introducing more extreme content.

Combat Sports as Recruitment Hubs: Finland's case study highlighted far-right groups exploiting MMA and boxing gyms to radicalise youth through hyper-masculine narratives – a tactic now replicated in France's struggle against Salafist recruitment in suburban sports centres. Research shows that troubled young men are particularly targeted with the expectation that they benefit from the structure and discipline they are supposedly subject to in martial arts/fighting clubs. This vulnerability is systematically exploited by extremist actors who present themselves as mentors and community builders.

Digital Amplification: Online platforms and e-sports arenas enable extremist actors to bypass physical monitoring and screenings and use the internet to further their ideological agenda. Social media sites and online messaging services enable users to connect with local or global communities, amplify their message and generate momentum for their causes. These platforms have become integral to extremist recruitment and fundraising strategies within sporting contexts.

These evolutions underscore why examining the development of transnational networks, financing streams and external influence operations constitutes the logical next phase in identifying the sources of radicalisation and developing transnational preventative strategies. The



vulnerability faced by sports clubs, tournaments, and fan associations alike stems from **three intersecting factors**:

The Globalised Nature of Sports: Transnational fan networks and digital communities enable extremist ideologies to bypass national borders, leveraging shared passions for teams or athletes to normalise radical viewpoints. The international dimension of sporting competitions provides extremist groups with opportunities to forge connections across borders, as seen in organised combat sports events that attract participants from multiple countries.

Financial Opaqueness in Sports Governance: Weak oversight in amateur leagues and grassroots organisations permits uncontrolled or illicit funding streams to infiltrate sporting institutions. Extremist networks rely on a variety of financing mechanisms to generate funding for their activities. The FATF has identified that “donations-based crowdfunding, noted by countries across the Global Network to be the most vulnerable to TF abuse given its characteristics, often falls outside of AML/CFT regulations”¹. Merchandise sales constitute another important revenue stream largely used by these networks. Such regulatory gaps create significant opportunities for extremist networks to generate and move funds through sporting ecosystems.

Geopolitical Instrumentalisation: State and non-state actors increasingly exploit sports diplomacy to advance agendas antithetical to democratic values. This strategic exploitation takes advantage of the popularity and social cohesion inherent in sporting activities to spread radical ideologies and values contrary to democratic principles.

The convergence of these dynamics necessitates a recalibration of EU policy frameworks to address not only radicalisation pathways but also the systemic enablers of extremism within sports. These challenges are compounded by the dual-use nature of sports infrastructure, where the same stadiums that host international tournaments become staging grounds for hate speech dissemination, and combat sports gyms intended for physical empowerment transform into radicalisation hubs. The struggle resides in reconciling the paradox of simultaneously leveraging athletics for social cohesion while dismantling its exploitation by adversarial networks. This tension manifests in the gap between macro-level prevention strategies and micro-level realities, where local sports clubs lack the resources and knowledge to identify early radicalisation signs amidst complex member demographics and transnational funding streams.

4. Context

¹ *Crowdfunding for Terrorism Financing*, FATF Reporting, FATF, Paris, October 2023, page 1. Available at : <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/content/dam/fatf-gafi/reports/Crowdfunding-Terrorism-Financing.pdf.coredownload.inline.pdf>



From Local Fan Culture to Transnational Security Challenge

The case of the German “**National Socialists Rostock**” – a right-wing association active in Germany until its ban in 2021 – and their “**Baltik Korps**” sports wing² exemplifies this transnational dimension of extremist network building³. While rooted in a local context, the “Baltik Korps” strategically cultivated connections beyond state borders, as evidenced by the organisation of martial art training sessions at the “Thinghaus” scene facility in Grevesmühlen⁴. This highlights how extremist groups are leveraging sports as a means to forge international alliances, share tactics, raise fundings and propagate ideologies across national boundaries. This necessitates a coordinated EU-level response that addresses both local manifestations and transnational linkages.

Organised Combat Sports Events & International Networking Through Events

In Europe, large-scale far-right martial arts tournaments have emerged both as networking and recruitment places and as lucrative platforms⁵. The “**Battle of the Nibelungs**” (KdN)⁶, an MMA competition organised between 2013 until its ban in 2019⁷, exemplifies this model by a transnational network of far-right groups across Germany, Russia, and Hungary. The event charged entry fees (€20–€50 per attendee), sold branded merchandise, and secured sponsorships from extremist-aligned businesses.

A 2023 iteration in Budapest, “**European Fight Night**”, replaced and expanded this template by incorporating concerts and partnerships with far-right fashion labels, attracting over 800 participants from 12 countries. Such events often evade scrutiny by prohibiting photography and

² Both the association and its sports wing were banned in 2021 by the German Ministry of the Interior and Europe. Available at:

https://www.regierung-mv.de/static/Regierungsportal/Justizministerium/Inhalte/Rechtliches/AmtsBl.M-V/Dateien/AmtsBl._M-V_2021/3.AK_AmtsBl_26_21.pdf

³ https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/publikationen/EN/right-wing-extremism/2022-07-right-wing-extremism-symbols-and-organisations.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=12

⁴ Interior Minister bans “National Socialists Rostock” including its sub-organization “Baltic Corps”/ Renz: Right-wing extremism has no place in our society, German Ministry of the Interior and Europe, nr. 100, 24.06.2021. Available at: <https://www.regierung-mv.de/Landesregierung/im/Aktuell/?id=171301&processor=processor.sa.pressemitteilung>

⁵ *Ihr Kampf: Wie Europas extreme Rechte für den Umsturz trainiert*, Robert Claus, Die Werkstatt GmbH (1st edition), 2020.

⁶ *Nibelungen-Adaptionen im Rechtsextremismus*, Georg Schuppener, *Litera*, 34 (1), 2024, 157-180. Available at: <https://cdn.istanbul.edu.tr/file/JTA6CLJ8T5/DB31574F41B44604977B10099CFF2720>

⁷ <https://www.fairobservers.com/region/europe/michael-c-zeller-richard-wagner-opera-nibelungenlied-nationalist-symbolism-far-right-germany-news-915421/>



withholding locations until the last minute⁸. Tournaments like “European Fight Night” facilitate cross-border collaboration. The 2023 Budapest event, co-organised by Germany’s KdN, Hungary’s “**Legio Hungaria**” and France’s “**Pride France**”, enabled far-right groups from Italy, Poland, and Scandinavia to share tactics and consolidate hierarchies. These gatherings often feature ideological workshops disguised as “activist weekends,” combining combat drills with lectures on white nationalism.

Similarly, the Active Club network⁹, linked to the violent far-right California-based **Rise Above Movement (RAM)**, has leveraged online platforms to finance boxing and MMA tournaments and combat sports events that double as recruitment hubs¹⁰. This hybrid model, combining digital crowdfunding campaigns with physical sporting events, enables extremists to exploit the legitimacy of athletic pursuits while laundering ideological recruitment through martial arts academies and fitness communities.

Financing Mechanisms: The Lifeblood of Extremist Operations in Sports

Understanding how extremist activities in sporting contexts are financed is crucial for developing effective countermeasures and disrupting their operations. Recent developments point to increasingly sophisticated financing mechanisms used within sporting ecosystems by extremist networks spanning both far-right and jihadist ideologies, to generate funding for their activities. These mechanisms range from traditional approaches such as **merchandising sales and membership fees to innovative digital financing methods**, creating a multi-layered challenge for regulatory authorities and necessitating a closer scrutiny from security professionals, policymakers, and sporting organisations. In the context of sports-related extremism, these financing mechanisms fund various activities, from organising supporter groups with extremist ideologies to sponsoring events that serve as recruitment opportunities.

Commercialisation of Extremist Branding

⁸ <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2023/05/03/international-far-right-fight-night-comes-to-budapest/>

⁹ Active Clubs constitute a decentralised network of white supremacist groups operating across the United States and internationally, founded in January 2021 through the collaboration of Robert Rundo (leader of the Rise Above Movement) and Denis Kapustin, a German neo-Nazi. Their operational model combines localised fitness activities—such as sparring sessions and hiking meetups—with transnational networking. Their rationale resides in weaponising combat sports culture for radicalisation, blending physical training with extremist indoctrination under the guise of preserving “European heritage”.

¹⁰ The Southern California “Frontier” fight night serves for example as a key networking and fundraising mechanism for transatlantic chapters. See <https://www.counterextremism.com/press/extremist-content-online-active-clubs-celebrate-frontier-boxing-and-mma-event-white>



Far-right organisations have institutionalised merchandise sales as a core financing strategy, extending beyond basic apparel to specialised combat gear. The French martial arts brand “**Pride France**”¹¹, affiliated with neo-Nazi fight clubs, operates an online store selling gloves, rash guards, and shorts adorned with Nazi insignia such as the *Totenkopf* (skull emblem) and runic symbols. These products serve dual purposes: generating revenue (with items priced between €50–€150) and reinforcing group identity through visual propaganda. “**Pride France**” functions as the French subsidiary of “**White Rex**”, a Russian neo-Nazi clothing line that markets itself through international MMA tournaments and far-right networks. This example underlines **the emergence of a far-right combat sport scene in Europe**, focusing on the pivotal role of the Russian brand “**White Rex**” and its founder, Denis Kapustin. Through its sponsored events and merchandise, “**White Rex**” has cultivated a transnational network of professionally organised, politically charged tournaments appealing to a white nationalist audience. This network **provided a space for the performance of far-right identities** and the growth of a related subculture. Even as “**White Rex's**” direct influence wanes post-2019 due to Kapustin's Schengen ban, the **established infrastructure of brands and events continues to shape the far-right cultural landscape** within combat sports through decentralised networks that prioritise ideological signaling and financial sustainability via branded merchandise and combat spectacles¹².

The Ukrainian brand “**Sva Stone/Perun**” exemplifies this emulation, targeting young Europeans with nationalist-themed sportswear and combat gear, such as their “WhiteOn” line and “Idu na vy” gloves, which reference to medieval war declarations. Their self-declaratory mission is “*to be a leader in quality of cloths for ideological people whose time has come!* [and who are looking for a] *casual style with an appropriate ideologic context* [enshrined in] *basic European values*”¹³. These brands weaponise cultural nostalgia and militarised aesthetics to create a marketable far-right identity, leveraging combat sports as both a recruitment tool and a radicalisation platform.

Membership Fees and Digital Fundraising

Similarly, networks like **Active Club**, monetise membership not only through merchandise sales¹⁴, but also through **subscription-based Telegram channels** (€5–€20 monthly). These platforms offer exclusive training videos, ideological content, and coordination for local MMA chapters¹⁵. Since the creation of the first AC in 2020, new branches have opened all over Europe. AC’s UK branch,

¹¹ <https://www.2yt4u.com/>

¹² *White Rex, White Nationalism, and Combat Sport: The Production of a Far-Right Cultural Scene*, René Nissen, Kiril Avramov, and Jason Roberts, *The Journal of Illiberalism Studies* Vol. 1 No. 2, 2021, 19-37. Available [here](#).

¹³ https://svastone.com/en/about_us

¹⁴ RAM launched their “Right Brand Clothing” in 2018.

¹⁵ See example of Active Club France. Moto: “*Communauté - sport – nationalisme. Agissons aujourd'hui et demain nous vaincrons*”. Available at: <https://t.me/s/ActiveClubFrance?before=1168>



established in 2023, amassed 6,000 subscribers within a year, illustrating the scalability of digital recruitment¹⁶.

The EU's 2022 Terrorism Situation and Trend Report notes that some violent extreme right-wing groups have shifted to online funding methods, including crowdfunding¹⁷, a trend with significant implications for sports-related extremist activities and their financing infrastructure. The ability to quickly reach a global audience makes crowdfunding particularly attractive for extremist fundraising, including activities connected to sporting environments. The scale of such operations is notably facilitated by online platforms' lax moderation policies. These funds flow into sports-adjacent radicalisation pipelines, financing everything from neo-Nazi fight clubs' equipment purchases to legal defenses for members arrested during violent demonstrations at sporting venues.

Some Spanish clubs have also been involved in organizing and sponsoring fights that generate income for their networks. Details on these Spanish-sponsored events and their financial implications will be presented during the meeting. **External Influences and Strategic Exploitation of Sporting Environments**

External actors increasingly recognise the potential of sports environments for spreading radical ideologies and values contrary to democratic principles. These influences emanate from diverse sources, including state actors pursuing geopolitical objectives, transnational extremist networks seeking recruitment opportunities, and well-funded ideological movements attempting to exploit the popularity and social cohesion inherent in sporting activities.

The exploitation of sports by both state and non-state actors highlights the complex interplay between soft power projection, ideological influence, and security threats in contemporary Europe. While state actors like Qatar and Turkey primarily seek to enhance their international standing and promote specific cultural or religious values, non-state actors such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda use sports environments as recruitment and propaganda platforms, often with the aim of undermining democratic societies and inciting violence.

This convergence is particularly evident in the digital realm, where the boundaries between state-sponsored narratives and extremist propaganda are increasingly blurred. The widespread use of social media, online fan communities, and digital sports content provides a vast and largely unregulated space for the dissemination of radical ideas, the mobilisation of supporters, and the orchestration of influence campaigns.

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5ydnqdg38wo>

¹⁷ *Terrorism Situation and Trend Report*, Europol, 2022.

Available at: www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/Tesat_Report_2022_0.pdf



Qatar: Sports Diplomacy, Soft Power, and Ideological Controversy

Qatar's engagement with European sports is perhaps the most visible and controversial example of state-driven sports diplomacy aimed at reshaping international perceptions and furthering geopolitical interests¹⁸. The Qatari state, through its sovereign wealth fund and affiliated entities, has made substantial investments in European football, most notably the acquisition of Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) in 2012. This move was part of a broader strategy to enhance Qatar's global visibility, project soft power, and rebrand the nation as a modern, influential international actor¹⁹. Beyond financial controversies, Qatar's use of sports as a branding and influence tool has faced scrutiny for its underlying values and implications. While Qatar's primary objective has been to enhance its international image and secure geopolitical leverage, some analysts and policymakers have raised concerns about the potential for such sports diplomacy to serve as a Trojan horse for more conservative or illiberal values. The extensive visibility and influence gained through sports ownership and event hosting provide opportunities for subtle narrative shaping, cultural normalisation, and the promotion of ideologies that may not align with European democratic standards.

Turkey: State-Linked Organisations and Ideological Networks in European Sports

Turkey's approach to sports diplomacy in Europe is characterised by the active involvement of state-linked religious and cultural organisations, such as the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and the Islamic Community Millî Görüş (ICMG). These organisations, while primarily focused on serving the religious and social needs of Turkish diaspora communities, have also played a role in promoting ideologies that sometimes diverge from secular and democratic norms prevalent in Europe.

The Diyanet, with its vast network of mosques and cultural centers across Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark, has been instrumental in fostering a sense of Turkish-Islamic identity among diaspora populations. Celebrations of Turkish national holidays, the promotion of Turkish historical narratives, and the organisation of sports and youth activities among diaspora communities all serve to reinforce a collective identity closely linked to the Turkish state. Millî

¹⁸ *Qatar Fifa 2022 World Cup: A Game of Sports Diplomacy Mixed with International Scrutiny*, Ginevra Vercesi, *International Relations Review*, 28 March 2023. Available at <https://www.irreview.org/articles/qatar-fifa-2022-world-cup-a-game-of-sports-diplomacy-mixed-with-international-scrutiny>

¹⁹ *Sports Diplomacy: A Strategic Challenge for Qatar*, Thierry Côme and Michel Raspaud, *Hermès, La Revue*, No 81(2), 2018, pp. 169-175. Available at <https://shs.cairn.info/journal-hermes-la-revue-2018-2-page-169?lang=en>



Görüş, originally founded as a political movement advocating for the Islamisation of Turkey, has established a significant presence in Europe, operating over 500 mosques and cultural centers, many of which include sports clubs and youth organisations. The use of sports clubs as venues for community engagement and ideological socialisation is well documented, with sports serving as both a means of integration and a platform for the reinforcement of values aligned with the movement's original Islamist agenda. While there is limited evidence of direct incitement to violence or explicit radicalisation through these networks, the sustained promotion of illiberal, anti-secular, or anti-Western narratives through sports and youth activities contributes to the broader challenge of parallel societies and ideological polarisation within European democracies.

Non-State Actors: Extremist Networks and the Exploitation of Sports for Recruitment and Propaganda

ISIS has demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the social power of sports, particularly football, as a tool for recruitment and propaganda in Europe. With increased surveillance of mosques and religious institutions, ISIS recruiters have shifted their focus to less conspicuous environments, including sports clubs, youth leagues, and online fan communities. A notable tactic employed by ISIS has been the hijacking of social media hashtags associated with major sporting events, such as the FIFA World Cup and the English Premier League, to disseminate extremist propaganda and attract recruits²⁰. By embedding their messages within popular hashtags like *#Brazil2014*, *#ENG*, *#France*, and *#WC2014*, ISIS operatives have been able to reach millions of unsuspecting fans, leveraging the global reach and emotional engagement of these events to amplify their narratives. This approach has been particularly effective in targeting young, digitally connected individuals who may be drawn to the excitement and community of international sports.

Beyond online propaganda, ISIS has also tried using sports clubs and informal sporting activities as recruitment grounds. In countries such as Jordan, recruiters have organised soccer games and sports gatherings outside of traditional religious settings to identify and groom potential recruits²¹. This strategy exploits the camaraderie, trust, and sense of belonging fostered by team sports, making it easier to introduce radical ideas and build loyalty to the group. Within Europe,

²⁰ *Iraq crisis exclusive: Isis jihadists using World Cup and Premier League hashtags to promote extremist propaganda on Twitter*, Cahal Milmo, Independent, 23 June 2014. Available at : <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-crisis-exclusive-isis-jihadists-using-world-cup-and-premier-league-hashtags-to-promote-extremist-propaganda-on-twitter-9555167.html>

²¹ *ISIS Turns to Soccer for Recruitment*, James Dorsey, Fair Observer, 18 August 2016. Available at: https://www.fairobservers.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/isis-turns-soccer-recruitment-23203/



there is still little evidence that ISIS-linked cells have utilised sports clubs and youth organisations as points of contact for recruitment.