SAFE ZONE

D5 National assesment reports

BACKGROUND PAPER

Radicalization: A fluid concept

In recent years, youth radicalization and the associated use of violence have become a source of growing concern in Europe due to notable increases in hate speech, incidents of aggression generated by hate towards migrants and refugees, propaganda, and violent xenophobia, not to mention increases in religious extremism. The topic has become significant in the political, legal, and media discourse in democratic societies, as well as in a growing body of academic literature striving to understand "how individuals and groups shift from conformist political, religious, or ideological beliefs to 'radical' extremist views and activities" (Silva 2017). The political and media discourses about radicalization are also developing along these line in an attempt to understand the causes of the phenomena in order to develop effective anti-radicalization policies. The relevance that radicalization assumes in the public and academic debate is not, however, reflected in an equally in-depth analysis of the concept in terms of its capacity to define and explain the phenomena. Radicalization remains a fluid and dynamic concept that includes many social, political and religious meanings as well as significant homogeneity in phenomena the causes of which cannot be considered equivalent and comparable.

This difficulty in defining the phenomena emerges, for example, when one considers radicalization in legal terms. Beginning with the premise that the definition of "radicalization" and the content of the associated actions depends on specific cultural and historical conditions from a given context, it is always the state (and, in general, whatever institution wields power within a society) that determines what "radicalization" is and what it is not. Davydov proposes a definition according to which radicalization is "the disruption of the kind of order which Max Weber called the state's monopoly on violence" (2015, p. 149). From this point of view, the line between what is considered acceptable and that which is subject to sanctions is characterized by the use of violence, a dimension that, legally speaking, is to be considered in a different manner when it

manifests itself verbally or via actions undertaken that cause damage to someone else. The challenges that western democracies encounter in relation to *haters* reflects the difficulty of defining the legal measures for discouraging the diffusion of verbal violence online, above all in light of the fact that these measures risk infringing on the individual's fundamental right to the freedom of expression.

If, however, one considers radicalization from a psychological point of view, "the embarrassment in defining terms" that derives is even greater. In an attempt to understand the phenomena, there have been a lot of attempts to create "profiles" or the "root causes", some of which include personality traits or pathological aspects, capable of influencing the genesis of the radicalized behaviours. It is enough to think of the work on profiling promoted not only by the academic literature, but also by international governmental bodies in an effort to understand and contain extremist jihadism. Despite the fact that these profiles take into consideration both psychological and sociological variables (primary reference is made to socio-cultural marginalization as a "cause"), this approach has been subjected to a lot of critique, highlighting how much these profiles fail to reflect the complex reality of the phenomena, thereby risking a partial and dangerously deterministic analysis. To this one adds the equivalence seen between jihadism and violent extremism in the academic literature and documents produced by international bodies that, in addition to creating confusion in the definition of terms, contributes to development of a limited understanding of the phenomena. As Horgan (2008) suggests, radicalization is a phenomenon that has to be analysed using a multi-disciplinary approach within which researchers should start to think in terms of moving "from profiles to pathways and roots to routes". Moving away from a definition based exclusively in individual psychology would make it possible to understand the process of radicalization and the socio-cognitive mechanisms that lead to violent actions in the contemporary context.

In line with the objectives of the SAFE ZONE project, which takes on the educational challenge that youth radicalization poses for western democracies, there will be an attempt to construct a definition of the concept of radicalization that can facilitate understanding and, at the same time, express the complexity of the reality addressed – with the understanding that it is only one of many possible definitions. It is important to not only bring to light the various typologies of youth radicalization (political, social or religious), but also the elements that, to varying degrees, can induce a young person to approach violent extremist groups.

As a first step, it was decided to make a distinction between radicalization in general and **radicalization that results in violence** (physical, verbal and symbolic). This last is in fact the typology of radicalization that will be studied within the project since the use of violence implies an unacceptable violation of human rights and an attack on our society's democratic values and, consequently, marks a clear boundary between what is acceptable and that which is condemnable. This distinction is fundamental in that it underlines the importance of respect for

individual liberties, civil rights and political rights as well as laying the foundation for effective action.

Secondly, it is necessary to clarify the difference between **radicalization and extremism**, terms that are often used as synonyms in the literature. The term extremism derives from the latin term "extremus" and means "the furthest" or "outermost" position. In this sense, extremism is an ideology or activity that aims to eliminate the existing political, social or religious system and substitute it with an alternative. In contrast, the term radical has its origins in "radix", which means "root". Radicalization is thus a process that "goes to the root". From an epistemological point of view, it means "anchoring yourself in knowledge, opinions, values, and believes to define one's own behaviour"(Alava et al. cited in Šiňanská et al. 2019, p. 239). In accordance with Khosrokhavar (2014), rather than using the terms as synonyms, we can define radicalization as the process by which an individual approaches a group or extremist ideological position based on social, religious or political contents that undermines the established political, social or cultural order.

Within the SAFE ZONE project, then, radicalization is viewed as a **process**, while extremism is conceived as that which characterizes the ideology upon which the group is based. Radicalization that leads to violent extremism is defined as a process within which a person accepts the use of violence in order to achieve political, ideological or religious objectives, including terrorism (European Union, 2017).

Since every path is different and influenced by multiple factors, radicalization should be considered "not as the product of a single decision but the end result of a dialectical process that gradually pushes an individual toward a commitment to violence over time" (McCormick cited in Borum 2011, p. 15).

As a process, radicalization that leads to violence implies: 1) the adoption of an extremist ideology within which the contents defines a way of life and framework for significant actions for the individual; 2) the choice to use violent means to promote a cause; and 3) the fusion between ideology and violent action. This is precious, even in the absence of an attempt to provide an absolute definition of violent extremism, in that it both underlines the phenomenon's natural process and is broad enough to include all of the various forms and manifestations.

Various scholars have also shed light on the group dimension within the radicalization process as a more important factor than the ideological message (whether it be political, social or religious) used by the group. Reitman (2013) affirms that radical ideology first and foremost serves as an instrument that allows the individual to project the blame for his/her internal suffering on the surrounding society. Consequently, the group serves as a spokesperson for the ideology, providing the subject with consent and support in regards to the adoption of extreme views and behaviours as well as a sense of belonging. In providing a central role to the group and the recruitment strategies it adopts, the ideological message can be analysed in terms of a narrative; by analyzing

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the narrative through which the contents of the extremist ideological message are articulated, it is possible to better understand the appeal exercised by the discourse, above all for youth, as well as the tactics used to lead youth towards violent radicalization.

Sport, the educational relationship and radicalization

Glaser and Grzemny (2017) affirm that young people often join extremist groups or movements guided by the desire to make a difference, to change the world and contribute to the society in which they live. Furthermore, adolescence is a developmental phase characterized by the desire to be part of a group and to understand one's place in the world via opposition to authority (e.g., family, teachers) as well as the search for radical solutions and meaning in one' life. This makes youth especially vulnerable and easily influenced in terms of radicalization in that extremist and violent groups can offer "solutions" and "answers". Focusing then on the factors that can take youth closer to radicalization, rather than on the specific characteristics of the ideology used by the extremist group, it becomes possible to construct an educational methodology capable of preventing or curbing the phenomenon.

These considerations bring us to the project's central topic, or rather the **educational relationship** that develops between coach/educator and youth in sports. The aspects mentioned above as characterizing adolescence, such as the group dimension and rebellion against authority, are also present in sports where they constitute an integral and structured part of the activities involved in sports. Sports clubs can constitute an "observatory" for youth radicalization for various reasons. First, via observation of group dynamics in the sporting activities where the coaches/trainers can identify eventual "signs of alarm" that could indicate radicalized behaviours. Consequently, coaches/educators can utilize educational and pedagogical methodologies that make it possible to offer alternatives and/or solutions, promoting an inversion of the radicalized behaviour towards the positive values embodied in the educational relationship. This is also a precious context because its characteristics make it possible to intervene in youth radicalization in a "discreet" manner, this means exercising a repressive or categorizing function and making the most of the relational work between the youth and the peer group as well as the youth and the coach as an adult role model. In a recent article published in the online journal *La Città*, Enrico Clementi (2019) brings into evidence what, in his opinion, is the *quid* of the educational relationship between coach and youth that play sports, affirming that:

> "In the educational helping relationship the coach …. is next to the athlete, that is neither behind "pushing", or in front "training" or conducting. The educational helping relationship provides the capacity to know how to provide support in those areas of "confusion" and unease that necessarily preclude growth and change."

Secondly, it is necessary to keep in mind that this is an area within which the same athleticactivity can be associated with an extremist or violent view of the world, whether or not this is supported (more or less consciously) by coaches/educators. In this sense, it is essential to increase

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coaches'/educators' awareness of youth radicalization and the associated implications of the educational relationship.

Youth radicalization: A complex phenomenon

One of the greatest difficulties encountered by those who promote preventive work in the area of youth radicalization is the absence of a deep understanding, in the various bodies that work with education, of the nature of the phenomenon of youth radicalization and its causes. Due to their heterogeneity and complexity, it is impossible to determine all of the factors at basis of radicalization processeswith any precision. Keeping this in mind, it is nonetheless possible to identify some of the most common tendencies. The factors that can lead a young people to undertake a process of radicalization can be identified at various levels of the experience, from the individual level to the broadest socio-cultural system.

1. From an **individual** point of view one can consider the factors that can render a person more vulnerable or easily subject to certain influences. Bronfenbrenner (2009) affirms that young males are more sensitive to these influences, especially during the phases of development and adolescence as they more open and more sensitive to various "promises and influences". Šiňanská et al. (2019) demonstrated a series of factors, closely connected to particular phases of adolescent development, that can lead youth towards radicalized tendencies. The authors begin with the premise that adolescence is a phase of development characterized by rapid physical, mental, socio-cultural, and cognitive changes during which the individual defines him/herself and implements changes in the relationships that s/he has with other people and social institutions. The construction of the identity and his/her autonomy is an important characteristic of this phase of development that leads to "turbulence" that is not insignificant: the search for his/her place in the world and his/her independence is obtained via separation from/opposition to the primary caregivers, generating possible sentiments of loss of faith in oneself or in adult role models, as well as fear of solitude and abandonment. This conflictual dynamic also presents the adolescent with the problem of how to manage violence.

   Furthermore, adolescence is a phase of development in which risk-taking behaviours manifest themselves with greater frequency. This is due, in part, to the fact that adolescence is characterized by the need to have exciting experiences, to test one's limits and to expose oneself to potentially dangerous situations; this can lead a young person to get involved in destructive activities such as criminality, drug abuse, and political and violent extremism (Bartlett, Birdwell and King, 2010).

2. Secondly, the risk factors can be brought back to the relational dimension of the individual. The study "Young and Extreme" commissioned by the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, for example, demonstrates that the sharing of certain stereotypes withina group

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plays a significant role in the development of radicalized and violent behavior.In particular, gender discrimination is a factor that should be taken into consideration as it can have a not insignificant role in the construction of masculinity and the development of violence within extremist groups.

3. In their study on youth radicalization, Šiňanská et al. demonstrate the prevalent role that social relations take on during adolescence. In this phase of development, the individual looks for his/her place in the world, fights for emancipation from the family environment and for independence and, at the same time, needs to identify with a peer group. In this sense, adolescents with fragile or unmet needs can undertake risk-taking activities or behaviours in order to receive recognition from the peer group or to defend his/her identity in opposition to the identity imposed by those who "repudiate them". Naturally, as demonstrated by Jaccard (2005), it is important to understand if the youth already has a group of friends involved in risk-taking activities and behaviours.Within the group dimension, the youth may find it easier to accept the opinions and convictions of the more extremist group members, consequently risk-taking behaviours can be conditioned by the attempt to obtain or maintain a high social status within the group. Furthermore, as Borum (2010) reminds us, for youth that have experienced or perceived social exclusion, being part of a radicalized group represents a real experience in social inclusion.

4. The **school environment** is another "external" factor capable of influencing the processes of youth radicalization. Arman (2007) showed that specific characteristics of the school can have a negative impact on the youth and contribute to an increase in risk-taking behaviours. In particular, students' low expectations, incorrectly defined rules and behavioural models, issues of security and discipline, scholastic satisfaction, bullying and victimization, students' involvement in sports and extra-curricular activities can influence radicalization processes. For example, students that do not achieve minimum academic requirements, and that are often excluded from extra-curricular activities because of this, can lose a sense of security in themselves and the motivation to keep trying. Adolescents that have low levels of academic achievement can try to make the most of their position in other areas of daily life in which they do not feel inadequate. Eccles et al. (1997) affirm that these youth risk, more than others, adopting risk-taking behaviours (like smoking and drinking alcohol), in an attempt to compensate for the negative academic feedback by looking for recognition from a peer group. In this sense, radicalization can constitute an effective response to this form of distress.

5. It is also necessary to consider the influence of **socio-cultural systems** at the macro level, or rather those factors that do not directly influence people's lives, but that can define the "models" of how various social contexts should be structured. The media also fall in this category due to the means by which the messages transmitted via the media influence

society creating a context in which individuals act. In reference to our epoch one must take into consideration the creation of the **internet**, which has drastically transformed our society.From the moment the internet revolutionized social interactions and the number of young people that dedicate a considerable amount of time to online activities is constantly increasing, "it is important to draw attention to the dark side of the online environment" (Šiňanská et al. 2019, p. 241). Cyberspace is in fact used by extremist and terrorist groups that use information/communication technologies and the social media to spread extremist ideology. By using the internet, these groups can spread their propaganda and ideology throughout the world, creating an international community via websites, blogs, chatrooms, discussion groups, online videogames, and much more. The primary reason for which the extremist groups focus on youth is that they spend more time online and there is a greater probability of coming into contact with material shared by the groups. This level of analysis also includes material changes in society such as migratory flows and armed conflicts.

At all of these levels of influence there are various "recruitment opportunities" or rather spaces, contexts and situations that can facilitate the radicalization process that leads to violence. It is important to underscore that the factors identified to date are concentric: they overlap and influence each other. They can therefore not be analysed separately, but must be considered as reciprocally reinforcing and interdependent.

Sport as an instrument for the prevention of youth radicalization

If the trajectories that can lead a youth towards violent radicalization are heterogeneous, then the strategies adopted by European associations that have become active in trying to prevent or fight youth radicalization in the last few years are even more heterogeneous. Among these, great value has been attributed to sports due to its significant educational and pedagogical role.

Some scholars have proposed taking into consideration sports as a "total social fact", or rather that which Marcell Mauss (1923) described as a unit of activities that embrace different meanings (the athletic, political, cultural, legal, and economic) and is capable of transmitting lifestyle models and behaviours that are more or less virtuous. Above all for youth, the experience of athletics is a moment of training that is not only based in motor skills, but also affective/emotional and relational psychology that contributes to the development of their personality. In 1995 Daniel Tarschys, former secretary general of the Council of Europe, declared:

> "*The hidden face of sport is the thousands of enthusiasts who find in their football, rowing, athletics and rock-climbing clubs, a place for meeting and exchange, but above all the training ground for community life. In this microcosm, people learn to take responsibility, to follow rules, to accept one another, to look for consensus, to take on democracy. Seen from this angle, sport is par excellence the ideal school for democracy*".

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The research conducted by Hall (2011), Moreau et al. (2014) and Spaaij (2014) demonstrates that youth who participate in sports programmes have strong a sense of inter- and intragroup responsibility, dedication and camaraderie, greater interpersonal confidence, the freedom to challenge habits and social boundaries, as well as a renewed sense of belonging. This is due to the fact that the youth incorporate and live the experiences associated with being actively involved in competition sports and being part of a team with emotion. For example, Hall's study shows that, in developing self-discipline through physical activity and training, the youth had a greater sense of control and confidence that transferred to other contexts outside of sports.

Even if Hall (2014) affirmed that the shared of experience of risk-taking (from injury or failure) in sport functions as a "driving force for social cohesion" promoting a strong sense of unity and belonging, the author specifies that sports is a sort of "managed risk" in the sense that if the risky behaviours are "pleasurable" forms of social learning for young males, then these activities can lead to a negative outcome when the boundaries and clear rules of conduct are not defined. Moreau et al. (2014) deepens this aspect, sustaining that the role of coaches and educators isfundamental to the extent that it is their responsibility to encourage the creation of an atmosphere characterized by trust, confidence, solidarity, and reciprocity within the group in order to create a "driving force for social cohesion". Furthermore, these experiences "serve to dispel fears…bringing a team spirit experienced as caring and protective by members" (Moreau et al. cited in Johns et al. 2014, p. 62).

Spaaij (2014) adds to Hall's conclusions, reflecting on the potential of sports to create that which is defined as bridging capital between the participants.As an example the author points to the participation of young refugees and immigrants in team sports who, by playing sports with youth from other socio-cultural groups, develop a strong sense of active belonging to the community. According to Spaaij, within the context of sports one constructs fluid and situational boundaries; in other words, it is a place in which social boundaries are continuously being "shifted and crossed, while others are preserved and created" (Spaij, 2014 cited in Johns et al., 2014, p. 62).

In the end, sports are an area that the sociological tradition has always described as a set of recreational activities capable of providing an outlet for aggression, anger and repressed tensions. Aggression can in fact be vented via physical activity or by sports fans without causing damage to others. In the first case, sports make it possible to channel physical aggression in an ordered manner, or rather in a way that is regulated and defined by stable confines that, when violated, result in various types of sanctions. In regards to sports fans, the stadium is an exemplary context; this is in fact a space that allows spectators to express their aggression against the athletic adversary verbally (for example by screaming slogans or singing choruses). This is then a context in which aggression is tolerated given that it is expressed within socially defined spaces and times. Russel analyses the special status that sports enjoys in relation to aggression and violence:

> *"Outside of wartime, sport is perhaps the only setting in which acts of interpersonal aggression are not only tolerated but enthusiastically applauded by large segments of*

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society. It is interesting to consider that if the mayhem of the ring or gridiron were to erupt in a shopping mall, criminal charges would inevitably follow. However, under the umbrella of 'sport', social norms and the laws specifying what constitutes acceptable conduct in society are temporarily suspended. In their stead is a new order of authority, namely the official rules of the sport. These dictate the forms of aggression that are illegal (e.g. a low blow) and the conditions under which aggressionis unacceptable (e.g., a late hit)" (Russell 1993, p. 181).

This is also one of the reasons that explains why so many programmes for youth that practice sports – both at the national and international level – are always proposed in disadvantaged areas or involve "at risk" individuals in an effort to contribute to the reduction in juvenile delinquency by promoting social inclusion strategies.

The other side of the coin: When sports supports radicalization

As demonstrated by Hall (2011), the possibility that sports lead to a positive outcome, above all in regards to the prevention of youth radicalization, depends in large part on the educational/pedagogical work done by the adult role models, or rather the coaches, educators and physical education teachers. Sports, as with most activities, are not in and of itself good or bad, but have the potential to produce both positive and negative results.

The risk of radicalization connected to sports should be considered in relation to two distinct aspects. On the one hand, it is necessary to consider the possibility that sports in and of themselves or the teaching method adopted by the coaches/educators can provide an incentive for or promote violent behaviours that could lead the youth to approach various radicalized groups; on the other hand, one needs to consider the role that sports have in recent history (and can have today) in regards to promoting extremist ideologies of a political nature.

In regards to the first aspect, one needs to recognize that there is violence, diseducation, and aggression in various sporting contexts that are minimally or not at all sanctioned by the adults present. Numerous studies have demonstrated how "sport had become a school of sexism, racism and militarism", but also how "under the right circumstances, with astute leadership, sport can become a favourable ground for change" (Gusmeroli and Trappolin 2018, p. 7). This ambivalence of the sports culture is evident if one considers the phenomenon of competition sports: the pressure and extreme competitiveness, essential traits within these sports, can also be considered as potential risk factors in that they generate an atmosphere of reciprocal intolerance between peers, parents, coaches and managers in sports, exacerbating social and cultural tensions. To this one adds the overabundance of warlike and military metaphors that have become part of the common language in sports. Even if most cases involve a language intended to emphasize and reinforce the emotional element of sports, this can embody a violent connotation within the sport and lead to the symbolic or physical translation of the verbal violence.

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In regards to the second aspect, however, an eloquent example can be found in totalitarian regimes that during the last century instrumentalised sports to reinforce propaganda used to promote the political ideology. In this regard, Grant (2014) shows the transformation that sports played in the Soviet Union in the years immediately following the revolution up until the Cold War. If at the dawn of the Russian post-revolution sports were almost entirely valued in relation to military training or in the name of the health benefits for the population, with the beginning of the Cold War sports were increasingly instrumentalised as an effective means of promoting that which became known as "soft power"; athletic competition between the Soviet Union and the United States aimed at obtaining Olympic medals became one of the most effective narratives during the war, only preceded by the "conquest" of outer space.

The cases of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany are even more exemplary. In an article examining the connection between sports and political ideology, Bairner (2019) underscores the extent to which fascism is an ideology essentially oriented towards action that places great emphasis on the cult of the body. The fascist regime was the first to recognize the propaganda potential of sport: "sport for the sake of national fitness and the demonstration of it was nothing new at the time of the fascist governments in Europe, but the extensive use of it for indoctrination to establish a totalitarian system was new") (Krügercited in Bairner 2019, p. 17). The same strategy is evident in Nazi Germany: "historically, the use of sport by the Nazis seems to have been the most extensive and efficient of the fascist regimes" (Krügercited in Bairner 2019, p. 17). In part, the Nazi interest in sports was, similar to the Soviet Union, connected to military training. Nonetheless, from the moment that belief in the superiority of the Arian race became an integral part of Nazi propaganda it was fundamental, both ideologically and strategically, to encourage physical activity with "the Nazis as a male-dominated cult of youth and strength, who believed in genetic and racial endowment, on the survival of the fittest, used the sports movement for their purpose on national unity" (Bairner 2019, p. 18).

The relationship between sports and the promotion of ideologies is important in understanding the phenomena that still today demonstrate this relationship in an evident way: it is enough to think of hooligans and ultras, both characterized by a cult of violence that is often associated with the ideologies of politically radicalized groups (above all the far right, less frequently the far left). The historical relationship between sports and ideology becomes significant for the objectives of the SAFE ZONE project in that it permits the identification of an additional element that can play a significant role in youth radicalization. One should not forget that many youths that are more less close to extremist violence groups, especially those on the far right, can see in sports a significance that is closely connected to the ideology they embrace (think of the cult of the body and physical prowess transmitted by fascist and Nazi ideology). In this sense, the coaches/educators should acquire greater knowledge of the phenomena in order to identify situations in which youth involvement in sports feeds the ideology.

Conclusions

Radicalization and violent extremism, tied to religious, political and social factors, represent an increasingly complex challenge in Italy and the entire European Union. The SAFE ZONE project responds to the educational challenge that radicalization poses with the objective of intervening in the affiliation processes that can lead a young person to approach extremist violence groups. In line with this objective, the project focuseson the educational relationship that is established in sports between the coaches/educators and the youth that play sports.

The world of sports is in fact in a strategic position in the fight against radicalization and youth violence; sports represents a priority area for informal socialization for the vast majority of youth in all of Europe and hence, as recognized in many EU documents, an ideal context for defining an adequate strategy for preventive interventions, focused on the promotion of a culture of respect for the adversary, fair play, living together, and peace. Sports can also be an "observatory" that allows for the individuation youth who are at-risk or have radicalized tendencies via the monitoring of violent behavior (physical and verbal).

Nonetheless, as underscored by the collected data and literature, little has been done in the area of sports, not only in regards to increasing the awareness of youth, but also in regards to reinforcing the educational capacity of coaches in sports clubs. The SAFE ZONE project therefore intends to give coaches/educators in various sports, recognizing the relevant pedagogical role that they exercise – also informally – in relation to youth, tools to reinforces their educational capacity, above all in relation to possible behaviours, between the youth, that point to the promotion of extreme violence amongst peers. In this sense it is necessary to develop greater understanding of the risks and methods of educational methods in sports in order to reduce the risk that these methods act as "radicalization agents".

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