

# INVESTING IN THE POWER OF SPORT TO COMBAT RACISM AND INTOLERANCE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE: DESK RESEARCH AND LITERATURE REVIEW

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## *Introduction*

Through desk research and literature review conducted in the framework of the DIALECT3 program «ADDressIng intersectionAL stEreotypes, buiLDing sChool communitiEs of Tolerance through physical education», we have gained deep knowledge about the dynamics of sport in building communities of tolerance. In the following lines, a brief presentation of the main points and conclusions of the desk research carried out in the context of the program follows. The literature review focuses on reviewing existing academic literature, policy papers and reports from European and international organisations on how sport can be used to combat discrimination, intolerance and racist ideology, polarisation and potential violent radicalization of youth. Desk research focused on the EU and the case of Greece, with a view to establish a common understanding of the field of discrimination and racism with that of physical education. The aim was to integrate community building through football methodology to prevent intolerance in the school context.

Desk research confirmed that racism, intolerance and xenophobia are reinforced throughout Europe and Greece as well (ECRI, 2022).

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FRA, 2013; Gazakis, 2014). The literature review also reaffirmed that racism is strongly based on values of intolerance, defined as the unwillingness or refusal to accept beliefs, views, practices or behaviors that differ from our own and that intolerance can take various forms, ranging from avoidance to acts of hate and physical harm of people who differ. Bibliographic findings reveal that many European institutions have called for the immediate attention by member states to issues of increasing racism, the rise of populist parties and intolerant political discourse, reaffirming the fundamental importance of freedom of expression and opinion, tolerance and respect for equal dignity of all human beings for a democratic and pluralistic society (ECRI, 2016). At the same time research is piling up evidence on continuous racist attacks increase in xenophobic sentiments and discrimination against migrants and refugees across Europe (RVRN, 2022). Data show that there is an increase in racially motivated crimes in EU Member States, with racially motivated hate crimes on the rise. Racist violence and hate speech are normalized, while the political polarization that occurs in a wide part of society, creates social climate that provides fertile ground for the development of extreme attitudes and intolerant behaviors (ENAR, 2019).

Within this context, desk research findings have reaffirmed that in times of social and political polarization, populist groups and parties capitalize on this intolerance, especially among young people. Young people, in the process of identity building, are extremely vulnerable and sensitive to campaigns by populist groups and parties, which tend to simplify complex realities, spread political cynicism, and increase racial stereotypes. Thus, they become supporters and representatives of their values, not only in the context of the neighborhood or face-to-face communication, but also in digital worlds, in the field of the media, where racism, sexism, xenophobia and hate speech are easily disseminated (Zaimakis, 2018).

Furthermore, in recent years radicalization leading to violent extremism has also evolved both internationally and within the EU, as it is acknowledged by multiple international and regional organizations such as the United Nations and its agencies, the Council of Europe and the European Union institutions. «The world

has witnessed new waves of violent extremism that have taken the lives of many innocent people. Whether based on religious, ethnic or political grounds, extremist ideologies glorify the supremacy of a particular group and oppose a more tolerant and inclusive society. [...] Young people are an important focus in the prevention of radicalization as they can be both the perpetrators and the victims of violent extremism. Because of their adolescence, they constitute a very vulnerable “at-risk” group. When societies fail to integrate youth in meaningful ways, young people are more likely to engage in political violence» (UNDP, 2016).

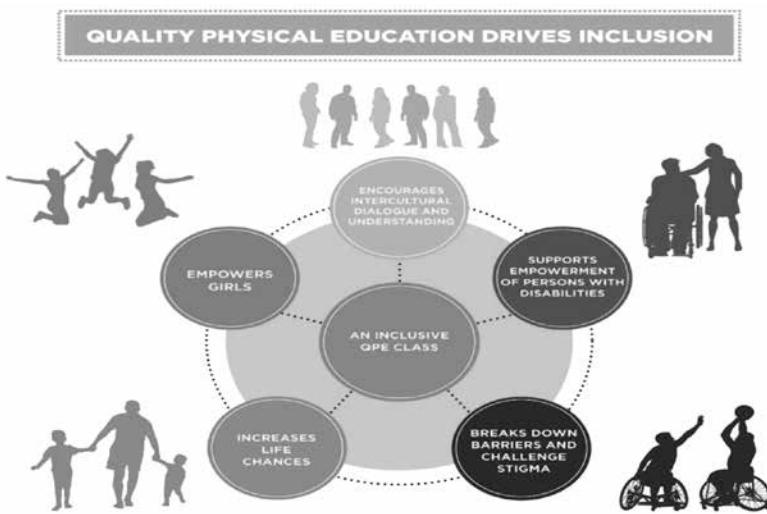
### *Physical education and sports as tools to promote diversity and social inclusion*

Bibliographic findings confirm the rising need to address racism, intolerance and xenophobia, especially among young people, through educational initiatives in the context of formal, non-formal and informal education. As UNESCO points out «informal and non-formal educational initiatives complement formal education. Such inter-group interactions organically broaden youth’s understandings of other belief systems and help confront prejudices and assumptions. [...] sports can build bridges between diverse cultures and religions. Sports activities can be used to promote intergroup cooperation and unite diverse individuals in achieving a common goal. Repeated experiences of intergroup contact or, more simply, interactions with the “other” contribute to building more inclusive societies and more empathetic, mindful citizens. They foster values such as teamwork, leadership, and goal setting. [...] Participation in sports provides young people with a sense of inclusion and purpose, reducing isolation from the larger community. In addition to building stronger communities, sports provide benefits to the individual, including improved self-esteem, leadership skills, greater academic achievement, and longer attention span. Such advantages improve the resilience of young people and increase the probability that they will better handle challenges, rebound more quickly from disappointments, and maintain a healthy sense of community engagement» (UNESCO, 2017).

The potential of physical education and sports to create a climate of tolerance and respect for diversity has long been confirmed by academics, researchers, educators, sports professionals and a plethora of international organisations. Sport plays an important role in building cohesive societies and can be a driving factor in the development of tolerant attitudes and democratic values. Sport can be a means of transmitting positive values and developing a climate of tolerance and mutual understanding. It teaches respect and understanding of diversity, while promoting social skills in young people. Sport provides positive experiences such as a sense of belonging, belief in achieving a common goal, trust and mutual support, cooperation, understanding, tolerance and acceptance among participants from different backgrounds. Sport can become a powerful tool for promoting the social inclusion of marginalized or at-risk young people, strengthening social cohesion.

The Council of Europe recognizes that sport and physical education have great potential to educate respect for diversity and mutual understanding of diversity and that physical education and sport have real potential to engage young people, provide easily accessible learning opportunities and develop social skills. «Physical education and sport policies can include learning objectives that support the development of an inclusive society which respects diversity and improves tolerance and mutual understanding of its members. Diversity is a natural aspect of human communities and modern societies, and physical education and sport can play an important role in supporting people to learn how to live together in different communities» (Council of Europe/EPAS, 2015, 2018).

It has long been recognized that physical education and sports can be used as a vehicle to promote the social inclusion of marginalized populations. Moreover, sport can play an important role in reducing social tensions and conflicts at the community and national level by addressing the sources of this exclusion and providing an alternative entry point into the social and economic life of communities. At the most fundamental level, well-designed activities that incorporate the core values of physical education and sport — self-discipline, respect, fair play, teamwork, and adherence to mutually agreed upon rules — help individuals to build the values and communication



Source: UNESCO (2015), Quality Physical Education

skills necessary to prevent and resolve conflict in their own lives (UNESCO, 2015).

The literature review confirms that sport can be used as a tool to promote tolerance and diversity since it enhances inclusiveness, regardless of gender, ability, age or origin and it enhances respect for women and girls, gender equality, fair play, responsibility and accountability, participation in the community and digital worlds. It also develops critical thinking aiming to strengthen and promote democratic participation, fundamental rights and dialogue (UNESCO, 2017). Moreover, sport is an integration platform with real potential to engage young people and manages to integrate those who feel disconnected from the community or school system. It provides easily accessible learning opportunities, challenges stigma and transcends stereotypes and provides positive experiences such as a sense of teamwork and identity, a sense of belonging, belief in achieving a common goal, trust and mutual support, cooperation, understanding, tolerance and acceptance among participants from different backgrounds. It also enhances personality with self-esteem, leadership skills, and other life skills that improve young people's resilience and increase their likelihood of maintaining a healthy sense of belonging to the community. Sport also provides

opportunities to build collective identities and strengthen social cohesion, especially in times of uncertainty. Finally, it serves as a platform for integration, acting as a deterrent to polarization, violence and crime.

The power of sports to contribute to protecting and countering youth intolerance, radicalization and violent extremism has been emphasized in existing literature, policy papers and reports of European and international organizations. Sport and physical activity are vital to the development of young people as they foster their physical, social and emotional health. They can also provide positive experiences such as a sense of belonging, loyalty and support, and can promote positive changes in relationships by encouraging collaboration, understanding, tolerance and acceptance between participants from different backgrounds. What is more, sport has clear educational benefits, as it can help skills development to empower young people to make positive changes in their own lives and their communities. While sport alone cannot tackle crime prevention, it is recognized that sport-based approaches may offer an effective means of engaging youth in a meaningful way and building life skills that enhance protective factors and reduce risk factors linked to crime, violence and substance use. In addition, sport can help develop life skills to empower young people to make positive changes in their lives. Key life skills developed through sport, which can play an important role in strengthening young people's resilience, promoting tolerance and respect, and reducing their likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors, are coping with stress and emotions; critical thinking; decision-making and problem solving; effective communication and relationship skills; denial skills and self-awareness and empathy (UNODC, 2017, 2020).

### *Physical education and sports as tools to counter polarization and crime*

The bibliographic findings also confirm that sports can be used as a tool to counter polarization and crime, especially among young people. Polarisation is highlighted as a major risk factor for young

people's radicalisation. It is characterized by a division of identities "us" versus "them", leading to negative attitudes and hostility towards "other" groups. Young people are the largest group involved in violent radicalisation processes, and the number of women involved has increased. The use of sport has proven to be an effective tool to protect young people from a cycle of anti-social behaviour, violence and crime. Through sport, young people can gain greater self-esteem and confidence and acquire resilience skills to overcome adverse life experiences and reject polarization. Moreover, sport can be used as a means of halting polarisation, particularly in relation to marginalised young people and young people at risk, since it provides a useful space to engage children and adolescents outside their normal contexts (i.e., school, families, and communities).

Literature reveals that breaking polarisation through sports relies on the power of sport "to change perceptions, combat prejudice and improve behaviour, as well as inspire people, break down racial and political barriers, promote gender equality and combat discrimination" (UN, 2020). By promoting mutual respect and tolerance, sport teaches important social and interpersonal skills. The use of sport to help people, especially young people, has proven to be an effective tool to protect them from the cycle of anti-social behaviour, violence, crime and drug use (UNODC, 2018). In this way young people can gain greater self-esteem and self-confidence, acquire resilience skills to overcome adverse life experiences and reject polarization. Sport disseminates and shares a universal framework of values: honesty, fair play, respect for oneself and others, observance of rules and teamwork. Sport can teach values such as fairness, teamwork, democracy, diversity, tolerance, equality, discipline, empathy, inclusion, perseverance and respect, the dissemination and adoption of which is more important today than ever in a world that seems to be becoming increasingly polarized (UNESCO, 2018· Council of the European Union, 2018· UNODC, 2020).

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) emphasizes that sport is increasingly used as a means of preventing crime, violence and substance use, especially among young people. «Crime prevention requires promoting inclusion and social cohesion, and



*Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)*

sport can play a unique role in this respect, creating social capital and helping to mobilize communities and promote social inclusion and solidarity. Sport promotes important human values and can be used as a tool to promote, among others, respect for rules and others, teamwork, a sense of belonging and community, tolerance and empathy, which are important elements of youth violence and crime prevention efforts. In addition, sport can help develop skills to empower young people to make positive changes in their lives and communities» (UNODC, 2021).

### *Physical education and sports as tools to prevent youth radicalization and extremism*

Desk research also reveals that young people are more exposed to abuse, exploitation, manipulation or recruitment by violent or criminal groups, and intense radicalization towards violent extremism, for religious, ethnic or political reasons. Adolescents are a vulnerable group at risk and at the same time are in an important position to

prevent radicalization. They may become equally perpetrators or victims of violent extremism and are easily drawn into more radical ways of thinking. The vulnerability of young people increases as family control over their education and lifestyle decreases, especially when young people leave the family home. When societies fail to integrate young people in meaningful ways, the more likely they become to engage in political violence. Young people are the largest group involved in violent radicalization processes, and the number of women involved has increased (RAN, 2021).

According to the EU Recommendations on preventing radicalization leading to extremism, young people need to be reached through innovative tools in education and training and sport, beyond formal structures. Sports interventions promote a sense of teamwork and identity and manage to integrate those who feel disconnected from the community or school system. With the aim of preventing intolerance and xenophobia at the local level, strengthening community cohesion is based on the same tools that are often used to radicalize young people: sport, especially football, and social media. Special emphasis is placed on dialogue and conflict resolution that allows players to understand the power of consensual decision-making and bridge cultural and other differences (European Commission, 2016· European Parliament, 2022).

Literature review reveals that one of the ways to prevent youth from entering extremist groups is to strengthen the role of education through sport. Especially during childhood and adolescence, sport can play an important role in the development of personality and abilities and can enhance social and cognitive skills. Sport is a social space where community and identity building are of great importance to youth. Sports communities provide opportunities to build collective identities; especially in times of frustration and uncertainty (e.g., in times of increased migration, economic crisis, pandemic). «Sport can make a substantial contribution to preventing radicalization and violent extremism. [...] Studies suggest that participating in sports can improve self-esteem, strengthen social bonds and give participants a sense of purpose. Sport can boost their self-confidence and offer young people opportunities to meet and make friends with other young people. This can lead to positive

identity development and a sense of belonging – two protective factors when it comes to preventing violent extremism. In this way, playing sport could help reduce the risk of radicalization leading to violent extremism» (RAN, 2021).

### *Negative side effects and prevention policies*

Concluding this article, it is important to note that, according to literature findings, in addition to the positive points mentioned above regarding the value of sport in empowering young people and maintaining social cohesion, sports initiatives do not automatically lead to positive results. Sport is not a panacea. The literature identifies possible negative side effects, especially when sports initiatives are not accompanied by social protective prevention interventions aimed at enhancing tolerance, collectivity and social cohesion. «The uncomfortable truth about all these positive factors is that, as is often the case with many supposed protective or ‘resilience’ factors, they can also turn out to be negative factors, depending on the social context and individual needs of each individual. First, “performance” as a category of success in sports can lead to a “body cult,” where performance enhancement is the only focus. Second, the dynamics of sports competitions can create a “cult of victory,” where winning and defeating opponents is the main concern. The consequences are usually excessive ambition, overestimation and hostile attitude towards opponents. And third is the “cult of violence”, where the dynamics of competitive sports lead to verbal and physical violence, both between competitors and in the social context of the struggle. These negative aspects in sport offer potential entry points for recruitment strategies by violent groups of hooligans and extremists» (RAN, 2021).

### *Concluding remarks*

Desk research and literature review show that the potential of physical education and sport in creating a climate of tolerance and respect for diversity has been confirmed by academics, researchers,

sports professionals and numerous international organizations. Physical education and sport play an important role in building and cohesion of society and can be a factor in promoting tolerant attitudes and democratic values. At a time when discrimination, intolerance and social and political polarisation are a fact, leading people, especially young people, to extreme behaviour and extremism, physical education and sports can become tools for strengthening social cohesion and respect for human rights. In conclusion, physical education and sports have an important role to play in the development of a world where no one is left behind and where citizens are healthy, resilient and equipped with the socio-emotional skills needed to navigate life transitions.

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