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## **PROMOTION OF RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM THROUGH FAN GROUPS: THE SITUATION IN NORTH MACEDONIA, SERBIA AND FRANCE**

**Abstract:** *In order for an ideology to “live” regardless of what ideological positions it advocates and promotes, it is necessary for it to find a way, a method and a means to increase its extensive capacity, and to include a larger number of people in the indoctrination process. Right-wing extremism, defined as an ideology in the process of the so-called social expansionism, uses sports fan groups as a means of promoting values and ideological attitudes, policies and positions, as well as measures and activities that are often designated as ultimately correct and socially useful. The use of fan groups in promoting right-wing extremism is characteristic of the Western Balkans countries (North Macedonia and Serbia), but this method may be observed in the countries of Western Europe, especially in France. In this paper, the authors will try to answer the question why fan groups are used as a means of promoting right-wing extremism and why the degree of indoctrination has the greatest value among members of fan groups.*

**Keywords:** *right-wing extremism, promotion, fan groups, indoctrination.*

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## 1. Introduction

In order to achieve and promote its politics, the extreme right-wing organizations and political parties are trying to find new ways, forms, methods and means to make their policies more accessible to the general public. In this regard, it is worth addressing the questions of whether and to what extent sports fan groups are “used” in the process of exercising a certain political influence, i.e. in promoting certain political ideologies and movements.

The choice of fan groups to be the main tool in the process of promoting right-wing extremism does not seem to be accidental. Although they may include elements (members) that are mutually different in terms of economic, cultural, political, educational and other parameters, it is well-known and accepted as a general position that fan groups act as a homogenous group on a certain issue. Thus, it is even more important to get closer to the answer the question why fan groups are a “legitimate target” in the promotion of right-wing extremism. Nowadays, sports events mobilize a large number of direct or indirect spectators (audiences), perhaps more than ever before. The presence of fan groups in everyday life through sports events is a good opportunity to convey a certain message or express a certain attitude and position on a certain issue. The issue of promotion of right-wing extremism is relevant today from several aspects, but the main dilemma in the process of explaining the phenomenon is actually the need for the emergence and promotion of right-wing extremism. Is the phenomenon pertinent only to countries and regions that are underdeveloped and that “cure” certain historical injustices, or does it have “conditionally speaking” a universal dimension and is manifested as such in developed democratic societies and economic systems?

Relying on the comparative analysis of the situation in North Macedonia, Serbia and France, we will try to find an answer to the question why fan groups are the main promoters of right-wing extremism. On the basis of this analysis, we will determine the main reasons (motives) for the ideological indoctrination of fan groups with right-wing extremism as a phenomenon that is currently experiencing its “renaissance”.

## 2. Correlation between fan groups from Serbia and extreme right-wing political parties and movements: Historical aspects

The disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) as a political process, accompanied by military actions in the territories of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, was one of the reasons for the

emergence of intensified nationalism and extremism both among the common people and among fan groups. The formation of organized fan groups in the former SFRY republics began during that period, and in the years to come, they took an active part in certain political and security situations. The disintegration of the SFRY as a process contributed to the emergence, acceptance, promotion and respect of politicians and political parties that basically promoted radical nationalism or right-wing extremism on the territory of the former SFRY republics very quickly and with increased intensity.

The emergence of the so-called stadium (hooligan) nationalism at that time was a process that was more than necessary for the political elites in order to raise the level of intolerance, to generate hatred towards other nations from the former federation, to channel dissatisfaction and manifestation of serious forms of xenophobia, nationalism and chauvinism. Taken either jointly or separately, it is evident that they have always represented an inseparable part of the tissue of the extreme right-wing ideology.

When discussing the correlation between the fan groups from the former SFRY and the right-wing movements or far-right political parties, it seems that we have to start the process of explaining these relations by referring to the example of the Red Star football club fans (Petrevski, 2021: 52). In the 1990s, the popular fan group "Delije" or "Heroes" was an organized fan group which was the cornerstone for establishing the Serbian Volunteer Guard, a paramilitary organization formed and led by former fan group leader Željko Ražnatović Arkan. This fan group was the source of future recruits who joined the paramilitary formation, whose military operations and activities were linked to Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition to being used to fill the ranks of the paramilitary formation with manpower by mobilizing many like-minded people, the fan group was also used to convey certain political messages aimed at raising the spirit of nationalism and the combat morale of the Serbian people. The role of the fan groups in the process of intensifying certain nationalist political reactions was demonstrated in the "action" that the fan group "Delije" had on 13.05.1990 in Zagreb, where their clash with the Croatian fan group "Bad Blue Boys" resulted in unprecedented scenes of violence at sporting events, accompanied by outbursts of nationalism and extremism (Petrevski, 2021: 53).

The ideology of stadium hooliganism as a phenomenon present at sports matches at the time of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and in subsequent years, was and seems to have remained a common denominator of fan groups from the former SFRY republics. Larger fan groups, especially those from Serbia and Croatia, promoted ideas that were and are close to the far-right

ideological matrix. Basically, the folklore of these fan groups included fan songs, flags, banners, and slogans advocating the ideas of ethnically pure states, the formation of “big” states, and ideas of belonging to a certain denomination as the highest possible good, which automatically implied underestimating or denying other religious groups. For the most part, the situation has not changed much until the present day.

The Republic of Serbia (and particularly Belgrade) is a micro-environment where extreme right-wing organizations and movements have been active both in the past and today. The social, economic, political and, ultimately, the security crisis that Serbia went through in the past, especially between 1990 and 2004, provided a solid ground for the emergence and development of those movements. It is interesting to note that these organizations which are active in the territory of Belgrade have strong connections with identical right-wing organizations throughout Europe. In this context, it should be emphasized that their activities are not incidental, independent, and uncoordinated; being part of the network of right-wing organizations in Europe, Serbian right-wing groups act and take concrete actions. In this regard, we may mention some of the active extreme right-wing organizations in Serbia, such as: “Blood and Honor”, “National Line”, “Serbian National Movement 1389 Nashi”, “Obraz” and “Dveri”.

There are some opinions that the rise of far-right organizations and movements in Belgrade as an urban environment was and is a result of the influence of the political parties and certain important social or religious organizations, such as the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) (Milinovic, Perovic, 2012). The fan groups in Serbia are correlated with right-wing organizations primarily in terms of securing “a sufficient number of people” who can demonstrate the presence of a right-wing organization and advocate its policies. In that regard, we should mention the Red Star fans, as well as the fans of the football club “Rad”, the popular “United Force”.<sup>4</sup>

The question is why Serbia has been a base for the emergence and development of far-right organizations, and thus of fan groups that promote nationalism, and to some extent fascism and chauvinism. The simplest answer is that Serbia is a kind of solid nation-state, conducive to establishing pseudo-patriotic and ultimately nationalist personal identity (Kisič, 2020: 9).

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<sup>4</sup>This fan group is clearly declared as an extremely right i.e. fascist group, which propagates and “fights” for the ideas that “justify” racism and fascism. These organizations usually demonstrate their racist policies through direct participation in breaking-up the gay parades in Belgrade but also through direct attacks on public figures, professors, representatives of student movements who are unacceptable to Serbia (according to their value standards) and pose a direct threat to its future.

Today, a total of twenty-three far-right organizations are mapped in Serbia. The common features that connect these organizations in one way or another are: their representation as humanitarian or nongovernmental organizations, the general public experience as patriotic organizations, the use and justification of violence to achieve higher goals, the EU experiences as a threat to the country's survival, orientation towards Russia, anti-LGBTQ+ advocacy policies, denial of war crimes committed by Serbs, glorification of the Hague prisoners, and glorification of the opus of Draža Mihajlovic, Milan Nedić, Dimitrija Lotić, etc. Another common feature of these right-wing organizations is that their leaders, and most of their members or supporters, have police records, maintain relations and contacts with organized criminal groups, and some of them have been convicted. Lately, their actions have been aimed at entering the real-political processes in Serbia and playing a more prominent political role. Another interesting fact about Serbian fan groups is that they are building their fan identity by using nationalism and chauvinism, which is a characteristic of the Eastern European fan groups. This is the so-called Weimar Syndrome.

Beside the use of fan groups in political elections, Serbian organizations have been used in "eliminating civil movements and activities" which were against the (violent) urbanization of Belgrade or the work of different industrial capacities. Furthermore, some fan groups have been used as parapolice for achieving different political and economic goals.

The process of recruitment or political indoctrination with ideas and politics of the elites is aimed at a small number of members, including only the ones that have highest ranks in the group. The close relations between the political elites and fan groups are generated through their participation in the management structures of Serbian sport clubs. This is the case in the two football clubs, whose management teams include important political figures.

In the process of political indoctrination and in the process of building cooperation between politics and fan groups, these organization use not only "ideological relations and connections" but also business relations which fan groups are "connected" with, as well as the cooperation with the political elites and with members of the security services (Pavlović, Jovanović, 2022).

The criminogenic environment, which is typical for hooligan groups, is an ideal ground for the recruitment of various types of executors of criminal and extremist actions. The misuse of parapolitical or fan groups to achieve certain political goals or to oppose the policies of the current government has always been present; certain social layers, which are often part of the ruling circles or the circles close to the opposition, are used even today. This

is not surprising given the fact that parapolitical and fan groups are generally composed of young people who are “easily combustible material”. When such a “material” is supported financially, ideologically or with artificially induced fear or panic, then an image is created among the general public and the dominant opinion is that the group that is being attacked is corrupt, incompetent, etc. In such circumstances, for the members of parapolitical and fan groups it is not important at all who and what will be the target of an attack, whether it will be certain political groups, some layers of society (oligarchs), people of different ethnic and religious affiliations, or fans of some other club.

### **3. The right-wing movements in France: Fan groups as a basis for living force mobilization**

From the 12<sup>th</sup> century to the present, the game of football has been claimed, defined, refined and reclaimed by every stratum of society. In the end, moral guardianship of the game has gone to those who shout, chant, clap and cheer the loudest - the supporters. There are heated debates among social scientists on how and why the current hooligan situation evolved into sometimes violent battles for dominance on stadium stands.

Right-wing extremism as a phenomenon is not a characteristic of the countries of the Balkans. If we make a conditional historical digression, we will notice examples of parapolitical groups across European countries which were active were from the 1970s onwards (such as “the Red Brigades” in Italy, “Bador Meinhof” in Germany), as well as other similar groups in South America. At the same time, hooligan groups emerged and gained prominence in England, demonstrating overt destructiveness; as it was later established, their activities were in the interest of certain organizations, parapolitical groups and secret services of certain countries.

The Balkan is not the only example of collaboration between the extreme right-wing movements and the fan groups. The stadium ideology is not a phenomenon exclusive to the former SFRY countries. The ideological indoctrination of the fan groups was especially present in Germany in the mid-1980s when the process of resurrection of National Socialism, and ultimately Nazism, was observed in the stadiums in this country (Petrevski, 2019: 52). Strong ideological movements were and are still present in certain Western European countries.

If the extreme right is analyzed as a phenomenon and as an ideological movement, it should be emphasized that the extreme right organizations and

movements in France differ from each other primarily by the approach they have in relation to the right ideology, i.e. by the identity features or local characteristics which distinguish them from each other. Today, in France, there are three main extreme right-wing directions: local nationalism aimed at defending the Corsican identity; right-wing extremism based on the use of violence against all dissenters; and the French extreme right that defends national preferences (Terazzoni, 2020:22).

The political right-wing extremism in France recognizes in its ideological matrix political anti-liberalism, economic anti-liberalism, and political fights against authoritarian ethnocentrism.

In 2012, the right-wing movement “Generation Identity” reappeared in France and spread very quickly. We mention this movement to present the connections that the movement has established with some of the right-wing fan groups in France. At the time when the movement was formed, first in Lille and then in Paris, the only “disadvantage” that the movement had from a logistical point of view was the lack of young people who would spread the idea faster and thus mobilize more people. To reach a position to dispose of a critical mass of people, the members of “Generation Identity” infiltrated among the fan groups of a right-wing ideological matrix and thus initiated the process of ideological indoctrination of a larger number of people.

The first fan groups whose members became part of the “Generation of Identity” were the fans of Lille and Paris Saint-Germain (PSG). Today, there is a subgroup of the PSG fan group, called “Zouaves Paris”. It is proclaimed as an extreme right-wing group, which propagates ideas that are close to right-wing ideology, and maintains close ties with the “Generation Identity”. Until recently, its leader Marc de Cacqueray-Valmenier has been active in the hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh on the side of the Armenian forces; he is also one of the major figures who provide communication and cooperation between the fan group and the “Generation Identity”. In addition, Marc de Cacqueray-Valmenier is also known as a man who has a close relationship with Eleonore Revel, a well-known politician from the extreme right-wing party of Marie Le Pen.

Besides the “Zouaves Paris” group, “Group Union Defense” is another fan group close to PSG which is part of the network of “Generation Identity”. A prominent member of this group is Aloys Vojinovic. In this regard, the behavior of the subgroup “Hold the Street”, which as a subgroup is an integral part of the fan core of PSG, should be closely monitored. The core of this subgroup consists of members who advocate extreme right-wing views and who proclaim extreme right-wing ideology. Basically, joining the group

is practically impossible if the potential member does not previously prove that he is an advocate and a loyal supporter of the far right and that he is a person who is willing to promote and spread the idea.

Another group that is related and collaborates with “Generation Identity” is “Arsouille Naoned”, a small neo-fascist group that is part of the network of far-right organizations in France, which are directly or indirectly connected, i.e. are part of the fan groups.

Some time ago, the French government felt the danger of further spread of “Generation Identity” in this country, as well as the large number of activities of right-wing organisations. In that regard, the idea of the French government was to ban this movement. However, as the political situation in France is not simple, the representatives of Marie Le Pen’s party defended the “Generation Identity” (Liang, C.S., 2022).

The danger encountered by France internally lies in the fact that the fan groups that establish certain close ties with political parties or political party leaders have the opportunity and the means to start acting as part of a particular political party. Thus, most fan groups in France that declare themselves to be the extreme right have different financing opportunities (via ownership of catering facilities, ticket sales commissions, funds from criminal activities, etc.), which only confirms the thesis that fan groups and right-wing organizations have some maneuvering space that they can use at some point. Such an opportunity to act could lead France to a position that would not be easy to manage politically at the internal level. In particular, if the current activities of extreme-right fan groups are manifested solely in the football stadium stands through verbal expression of their ideological values or by promoting certain fan props, the accumulated energy can easily be misused by some political stakeholders for the purpose of demonstrating dissatisfaction with the political elites on the streets of France.

#### **4. Political use of fan groups in the republic of North Macedonia**

The period of creation of the Macedonian independent state was the period when the process of creating organized fan groups started on the territory of North Macedonia. Basically, the first fan groups were formed in Bitola and Skopje, and proclaimed as groups that propagate or are close to the right-wing ideology. In addition, one should not disregard the causes of extremist conduct that the researchers in England pointed out to: social crisis, disintegration of the value system, end of great ideas, loss of the meaning of life, lack of perspectives, unemployment, the state of affairs in football (criminalization,



score rigging, departure of the best players and personnel), institutionalized hooliganism in the form of fan groups, patronizing attitude of clubs towards their supporters. and a general atmosphere of tolerance of improper conduct (Petrevski, 2019). Clubs and sport organizations (managers, coaches), political and other organizations, all use the supporters as their instruments.

If we analyze the fan scene in North Macedonia, we may conclude that some of the fan groups have certain right-wing attitudes. The fan groups in North Macedonia do not have a pronounced continuity in terms of ideological action. On the contrary, fan groups or members of fan groups in R. Macedonia most frequently decide to approach the process of presentation of extreme right-wing ideological views at the moment when teams compete whose natural environment is determined by their ethnicity, i.e. national group. Namely, while we previously noted that Serbia is a strong national state, we cannot draw the same conclusion about North Macedonia because it is a civil state. But, although it is not a solid national state, it does not mean that North Macedonia has been amnestied of the presence of the far right. To manifest the policies that are characteristic of the extreme right, it is legitimate to talk about the abuse of the fan groups for the manifestation of the extreme right policies.

North Macedonia may be the only country in Europe which has a fan group whose name directly derives from an extreme-right organization which was active in the western part of the Republic of Macedonia during WWII and which maintained close ties with the fascist countries of that period (Nazi Germany, Italy and Bulgaria). The fan group "Ballisti", which is active even today during the sports matches of FC Shkendija from Tetovo, promotes certain banners and slogans that glorify the character and role of the Albanian nationalist and ballistic leader, Dzemo Hasa. In addition to this "pictorial manifestation" of right-wing extremism, the members of this fan group openly talk about the hatred they feel towards Macedonians, Macedonian fan groups, and openly promote the idea of the Greater Albania in interviews for the Italian newspaper "Ravista Contrasti" (Freda, 2019).

Since independence, there have been a few examples where members of fan groups have been involved in certain incidents of a political (national, religious, ethnic) nature. Republic of Macedonia is a good example of how a member of a fan group enters politics and becomes the holder of certain high political positions in the country.

The Kale incident (2011) is one of the examples we want to present in order to reveal the connections between politics and fan groups. The incident involved members of two fan groups that differ on many grounds (the

different nationality, ethnic and religious background). They were instructed by different factors to organize a serious security incident. The motive that was directly correlated with the specific event was the construction of a religious temple (church) on the Skopje fortress Kale, which the members of the fan group "Komiti" wanted to support and thus urge the authorities to continue construction works. The other fan group directly involved in the incident "Shverceri" took a stand and protested to stop the construction of the church, explaining that there was never a church there and that the territory was under their control. Additionally, the different national and ethnic backgrounds of the members of the two fan groups acted as catalysts to inflame the incident itself. The presence of senior political and police officials, their direct participation in both the physical confrontation and the process of releasing some of the arrested members of fan groups was a typical example of the abuse of fan groups for political purposes, as well as an example of causing a controlled crisis for the purpose of achieving certain political goals. The conclusion from this incident is that it is very easy to provoke an incident which would be motivated by various issues related to the different ethnic, religious and national affiliation of the population living in North Macedonia. (Petrevski, 2019)

Another significant incident that confirms the presence of strong ethnic intolerance in the Republic of North Macedonia was the murder that happened in Skopje in 2018. The members of different nationalities and cultures, which do not know each other enough, tend to develop prejudices which in turn deepen misunderstanding and hatred. The lack of potential for understanding and accepting diversity provide fertile ground for the emergence, development and implementation of policies that are close to the extreme-right political ideology.

Besides the use of the fan groups by the political parties from the Macedonian and the Albanian block, in the last period, there is a phenomenon of using fan groups for certain religious purposes. This phenomenon primarily refers to the participation of certain fan groups or members of fan groups in certain religious events, which as a rule end with certain political speeches, positions, thoughts and directions. The participation of fan groups in religious events may cause the emergence of clergy-fascism in the future, as well as the presentation of messages that will mean nothing more than giving priority to one faith at the expense of the other.

## 5. Conclusion

The cooperation between the fan groups and the right-wing extreme organizations or political parties is a phenomenon that should not be marginalized. This “cooperation” should be the subject matter of a continuous discussion. Such an approach will mean that society is aware of the problem and that it recognizes the harmful consequences of such cooperation. The social, economic, political and security situation in which we live today, accompanied by a very high level of distrust in the institutions of the system, are just some of the conditions that can affect the future emergence of a new political entity that will propagate and advocate nationalist and extreme right ideology.

Although fan groups are currently passive, this does not mean that this situation will be long lasting. Thus, even in times of passivity, the state authorities should pay attention to fan groups, their activities, and particularly to some of members of the fan groups who establish close contacts with certain political entities. Given the fact that that sports clubs are generally funded with state or municipal money, the fan group contacts with political parties may in the future lead to the situation where the fan groups are used for certain political purposes. Close cooperation does not always mean sharing the same values and ideologies.

The Republic of North Macedonia, as a relatively small country, should think in terms of providing appropriate conditions for working with young people to present them with appropriate materials that should contribute to reducing their nationalist drive and need for proof. In this regard, all capacities available to the media should be used, primarily to present the harmful consequences of the extreme right-wing views and positions of an individual or a political party.

The Republic of North Macedonia should also closely monitor the situation of connecting certain members of the fan groups with clerical circles from the ranks of the Macedonian Orthodox Church but also with certain representatives of the Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia because that cooperation can give rise to a certain ideological indoctrination that can cause serious consequences for the survival of the state itself. Entering the process of elevating and glorifying one religion at the expense of another means nothing but a guaranteed collapse of the state.

The preventive policy-making process should be an inter-institutional and interdisciplinary approach. Inter-institutionalism means joint and coordinated action of a number of state institutions in order to reduce the possibilities for cooperation between fans groups, extreme right-wing organizations

and political parties. The creation of an inter-institutional system entails the inclusion of different institutions which would apply different approaches in the process of preventing this phenomenon, which would in turn increase the chances and opportunities to come to an acceptable and sustainable solution. The interdisciplinary approach to problem solving implies that different scientific profiles will be part of the process of preparing a specific solution that will be based on empirical research related to the phenomenon. The approach should take into account different perspectives because only such an approach offers certain guarantees that we will be able to come to a situation to analyze the different characteristics of the phenomenon.

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**ПРОМОЦИЈА ДЕСНИЧАРСКОГ ЕКСТРЕМИЗМА КРОЗ НАВИЈАЧКЕ ГРУПЕ:  
СИТУАЦИЈА У СЕВЕРНОЈ МАКЕДОНИЈИ, СРБИЈИ И ФРАНЦУСКОЈ**

**Апстракт**

Да би идеологија „живела“ без обзира на то које идеолошке позиције заступа и промовише, потребно је пронаћи начин, метод и средство да се повећа њен екстензивни капацитет, тј. да се већи број људи укључи у процес индоктринације. Десничарски екстремизам, дефинисан као идеологија у процесу тзв. друштвеног експанзионизма, користи навијачке групе као средство за промовисање вредносних и идеолошких ставова, политика и позиција, као и мера и активности које се често одређују као и друштвено корисне и крајње исправне. Употреба навијачких група у процесу промоције десног екстремизма карактеристична је за земље Западног Балкана (Северна Македонија и Србија), али овај тренд је присутан и у земљама Западне Европе, посебно у Француској. У овом раду аутори ће покушати да одговоре на питање зашто се навијачке групе користе као средство промоције десничарског екстремизма и зашто степен индоктринације има највећу вредност код припадника навијачких група.

**Кључне речи:** десничарски екстремизам, промоција, навијачке групе, индоктринација.