

# Building Resilience through Sport:

## The North Macedonian Experience in Preventing Youth Radicalisation under the “SCORE” Project



In recent years, North Macedonia has found itself navigating the complex intersections of youth vulnerability, ethnic diversity, and the growing influence of online radical narratives.

The *SCORE* project emerged as a practical and human-centered response to these challenges, grounded in the belief that sport can build bridges where politics, ideology, and institutions often fail. Within the Macedonian context, this initiative demonstrated that sport is not merely a leisure activity—it is a powerful pedagogical and social tool that cultivates tolerance, belonging, and resilience among young people.

North Macedonia's multiethnic composition—58.44% Macedonians, 24.3% Albanians, 3.86% Turks, 2.53% Roma, 1.3% Serbs, 0.87% Bosniaks, and 0.47% Vlachs—has long shaped its social fabric <sup>1</sup>. This diversity is one of the country's greatest strengths, but also one of its deepest vulnerabilities. The post-conflict years following the 2001 interethnic tensions have been marked by slow but steady progress in reconciliation and inclusion. However, inequalities persist, particularly among young people in rural and multiethnic municipalities. Many young Macedonians continue to experience social exclusion, unemployment, and limited civic engagement opportunities—conditions that create fertile ground for extremist ideologies.

According to the *OSCE Mission to Skopje report Perceptions, Views and Challenges of Young People in North Macedonia (2024)*, 38% of surveyed youth recognize that radicalisation exists in their communities, while a majority report low trust in institutions and limited understanding of how to counter extremist messages <sup>2</sup>. This distrust, combined with weak civic education and low participation in democratic life, makes young people susceptible to radical movements that promise identity, purpose, and belonging. The need for positive alternatives—spaces where youth can express themselves, connect, and feel seen—is therefore urgent.

It is precisely this need that the *SCORE* project sought to address. Within the North Macedonian component of the initiative, the consortium launched an open call for civil society organisations (CSOs) to develop local sport-based programmes tackling youth radicalisation. The call specifically targeted municipalities previously identified by the OSCE and local authorities as facing heightened risks of extremist influence. Twenty CSOs applied, reflecting both the urgency of the issue and the willingness of local actors to respond. Eleven were selected based on their expertise, community reach, and readiness to apply innovative socio-sport methods. Ultimately, nine organisations successfully implemented activities that directly engaged more than 250 young people across different municipalities.

The selected CSOs came from diverse local contexts—urban and rural, monoethnic and multiethnic—and shared a commitment to using sport as a medium for dialogue and cooperation. Their activities involved structured socio-sport sessions designed to strengthen key psycho-social skills such as empathy, teamwork, and conflict resolution. Unlike conventional training, these sessions used sport as a metaphor for society: participants learned about fairness, discipline, and respect not through lectures but through lived physical and emotional experiences.

For example, youth from different ethnic backgrounds were randomly grouped into teams, encouraged to communicate and strategize across language barriers. Post-session reflections guided by trained facilitators helped translate these experiences into lessons about coexistence and trust. This simple yet profound format gave young people a sense of agency and belonging—key protective factors against radicalisation.

Many of the young participants had never before worked closely with peers from other ethnic or religious groups. For them, *SCORE*'s sessions were not only educational but transformative. They created a rare space of equality, where performance was measured not by ethnicity or ideology but by cooperation and fairness. Feedback from youth coordinators

highlighted that this experiential approach “opened hearts and minds” far more effectively than traditional workshops.

At the institutional level, the project also addressed another pressing Macedonian need: the capacity of grassroots organisations to work on sensitive issues like radicalisation. Prior to SCORE, many CSOs focused on youth engagement but lacked structured tools for socio-sport work. Through SCORE’s training programme, educators, coaches, and youth workers were introduced to an evidence-based methodology combining physical activity with reflective dialogue. They received toolkits translated into Macedonian and Albanian, as well as continuous mentorship from regional experts. This approach not only improved the immediate quality of interventions but also built sustainable local capacity to continue similar initiatives beyond the project’s lifetime.

The relevance of such approaches in North Macedonia is supported by broader European evidence. The *Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN)* of the European Commission notes that sport “provides a positive identity, fosters social cohesion, and offers a credible alternative to extremist group belonging” <sup>3</sup>. In the Western Balkans, where nationalist narratives still resonate and online radicalisation targets disillusioned youth, sport-based interventions offer a peaceful and engaging counter-narrative.

Moreover, North Macedonia’s experience echoes the findings of the 2020 study *Perception about Radicalization by Young People in the Western Balkan Region*, which concluded that “offering young people opportunities for spending their time and energy in a constructive and meaningful way” is one of the most effective strategies to prevent extremist recruitment <sup>4</sup>. In that sense, the SCORE project provided not just activities but meaningful alternatives—replacing idle frustration with shared purpose.

Beyond the immediate impact, the initiative strengthened local cooperation between schools, municipalities, and CSOs. For many youth participants, their involvement in SCORE marked the first time they saw civil society, education, and sport institutions working together for a common goal. Such cross-sectoral collaboration is essential for addressing the deep structural causes of radicalisation in North Macedonia—namely social exclusion, inequality, and lack of civic participation.

The outcomes of the Macedonian component of SCORE demonstrate that countering radicalisation does not have to rely on fear-based or punitive policies. Instead, it can build on empathy, cooperation, and the transformative power of shared experience. Through sport, more than 250 young Macedonians discovered that diversity is not a threat but a resource, and that resilience grows through connection rather than isolation.

In a society still healing from its past and striving for a more inclusive future, initiatives like SCORE serve as blueprints for peacebuilding. They show that the fight against radicalisation begins not in courtrooms or police stations but on football fields, in gymnasiums, and in the hearts of young people who learn that their differences can unite them.

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## References

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