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*Football Hooliganism as a Socio-Political Phenomenon:  
Motivation, Manifestations, and Prevention Strategies*

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Chuligaństwo piłkarskie jako zjawisko społeczno-polityczne. Motywacja, przejawy i strategie zapobiegania

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## ABSTRACT

Football hooliganism represents a complex socio-political phenomenon with varying degrees of occurrence and severity in different regions worldwide. The article explores the multifaceted motivation, manifestations, and prevention strategies of hooliganism, drawing on literary sources, political documents, published research, and personal experiences in social work and match attendance. From the historical roots of hooliganism to its current manifestations, including its political dimensions and the dynamics of digital communication, the article provides a thematic analysis of the motivation and expressions of football hooliganism. Furthermore, it addresses strategies for the prevention and elimination of football hooliganism, including efforts to enforce laws, corrective measures, community interventions, and preventive social work. By addressing the challenges posed by football hooliganism, the authors aim to contribute to the development of effective strategies to combat this societal issue.

**Keywords:** football hooliganism; prevention strategies of hooliganism; expressions of football hooliganism; preventive social work; societal issue

## INTRODUCTION

Football hooliganism, as a global phenomenon, exhibits significant differences in its occurrence and severity across various regions. In countries like the United

Kingdom, hooliganism has a rich history intertwined with regional and religious differences (Pearson, 1983). This aptly characterized form of hooliganism has earned the nickname “English disease”, emphasizing its deeply rooted traditions and significance in English football culture. Conversely, in other regions, hooliganism manifests as a relatively new phenomenon, often influenced by external factors and events from other countries. The proliferation of travel and communication channels seems to exacerbate its spread. Hooligan groups manifest as subcultures, carving out their place within broader communities of fans and society as a whole (Gelder, 2007; Gelder, Thornton, 1997; Grinnell College, 2023).

In certain countries, such as Italy, football hooliganism takes on openly political dimensions, with right-wing political parties harnessing fan sentiments for their agendas. For instance, supporters of the Italian team Lazio have been observed using slogans evoking the fascist leader Benito Mussolini, along with erecting memorials in his honor outside their stadium (Broder, 2023; Grasaas-Stavenes, 2023). The consequences of football hooliganism extend beyond purely legal matters, affecting sports teams and social security. For social workers, combating mechanisms that support individual deviance and identity crises within group dynamics, as well as addressing victims of abuse and violence, are part of the challenge. Football, both as a spectator sport and a means of participation, can serve as either an escape from difficulties or a descent into chaos. Many studies, including student theses, have examined football hooliganism from various perspectives (see Armstrong, 2003; Badžgoň, 2014; Dunning, 2000; Spaaij, 2008; Struhár, 2024, etc.).

The aim of the article is to elucidate football hooliganism as a multifaceted phenomenon, drawing on literary sources, political documents, published research, and personal experiences in social work and match attendance. Additionally, it addresses the role of social work in preventing football hooliganism and promoting cooperation with law enforcement agencies, correctional authorities, and other public institutions in the rehabilitation of hooligans.

## METHODOLOGY

In this section of the article, we will briefly describe the methodological approach used in examining the phenomenon of football hooliganism. The design of our research was thematic analysis, serving as an analytical process to identify the main themes presented in selected literary sources related to this topic. When employing thematic analysis, we followed the following procedure:

1. Defining the thematic framework (football hooliganism as a socio-political phenomenon: motivation, manifestations, and prevention strategies) and keywords (football hooliganism; prevention strategies of hooliganism; expressions of football hooliganism; preventive social work; societal issue).

2. Formulating the objective. The aim of thematic analysis of football hooliganism is to provide a thematic socio-political perspective on football hooliganism, analyze its various aspects, and propose effective strategies for eliminating and preventing this social issue.
3. Formulating research questions:
  - RQ1: What socio-political factors influence football hooliganism?
  - RQ2: What are the motivations behind engaging in hooligan activities, and what is their relationship with the social environment?
  - RQ3: What socio-deviant manifestations are associated with football hooliganism, and what measures can help address this issue?
  - RQ4: What strategies are used for the prevention and elimination of football hooliganism, and how can social workers and other institutions collaborate to achieve this goal?
4. Literature search, evaluation of relevance, and processing of source overview. The processed overview of sources for thematic analysis is part of the references section at the end of the article.
5. Identification of main themes, their categorization into conceptual frameworks, contextualization, and interpretation are part entitled “Results”.
6. Summarizing the main themes and findings, discussing the implications and the significance of the results are part of the “Conclusions”.

## RESULTS

In this part, we present a commented overview of the results in the form of a summary of responses to research questions.

### **1. Socio-political determinants of football hooliganism**

The first research question aimed to identify the socio-political factors influencing the emergence and maintenance of football hooliganism. Based on thematic analysis, the following conceptual frameworks were identified.

Football hooliganism as a socio-political phenomenon fandom and a general phenomenon. In his recent work, legal professor Campos (2023) addresses fandom as an extended phenomenon encompassing followers of political parties, sports teams, and artists. Drawing from his own experiences as a devoted fan of the Michigan football team, Campos portrays fandom as a passionate obsession akin to love, capable of eliciting both camaraderie and hostility among individuals (Davies, 2023, p. 9). Being a fan, he argues, entails abandoning notions of fairness and independence and instead embracing a spectrum of emotions from joy and triumph to despair and outrage (Campos, 2023; Davies, 2023, p. 9). Campos characterizes modern fandom as an industrial phenomenon

driven by significant economic interests in the entertainment industry. He argues that the internet, functioning as a marketplace for passions rather than ideas, fosters obsessive fandom and serves as fertile ground for political interest groups. This digital space often promotes the creation of distorted and adversarial narratives against perceived adversaries (Davies, 2023, p. 12). An illustrative example of contemporary fandom was the match between Swedish teams AIK and Malmö, where despite limited incidents of hooliganism, the use of flares, smoke, and sound prompted a 45-minute interruption during the match. The atmosphere was filled with excitement, with spectators, captivated by the spectacle, turning the match into a scene reminiscent of a discotheque (Käck, Ashara, Wahlberg, 2023; Palmqvist, 2023).

Political utilization of football. Sporting events, including football matches, often conceal underlying political dimensions, whether at the national, regional, religious, or ideological level. Historically, political ideologies such as communism, fascism, and Nazism have exploited sports to promote their agendas, with football serving as a significant vehicle for fascist propaganda (Broder, 2023; Dunning, Murphy, Williams, 2014; Grasaas-Stavenes, 2023). Claus (2017) provides an example of how a Russian neo-Nazi served as a model for German counterparts, highlighting the transnational transmission of values and ideologies in an era of digital interconnectedness and global travel. As a result, ideals and ideologies find resonance in new contexts and regions.

Active fans as bearers of political ideologies. Political expressions of fans are a common part of their presented narrative (Doidge, Lieser, 2018). Often, they are a result of the ideologization of fandom, which, while not necessarily leading to specific political actions, at least provides a certain starting point. Ideology has several social functions, which can also be demonstrated in the example of football fans (Struhár, 2024). Ideology can mobilize fans for direct action or legitimize actions already taken, e.g. the use of violence against the police. Ideology provides a specific view of the world and answers questions about its functioning (e.g. attitudes towards the commercialization or globalization of football). It also justifies the need for struggle or protection against the enemy (e.g. the state, oligarchs, foreigners, or other countries). It helps maintain discipline and loyalty, unites, socializes, and educates (cf. Heywood, 2008).

Digital communication. Research into the digitalization of football violence is addressed, e.g., by Lawrence and Crawford (2019), who point to the hyperdigitalization of football cultures, the topic of football on social media, and football cybercultures. Digital platforms serve as key tools for communication and coordination among football hooligans, facilitating clandestine activities that evade traditional methods of police surveillance. This digital space fosters the emergence of international and transboundary subcultures, changing the dynamics of hooliganism in contemporary society (Gelder, 2007).

## 2. Motivational factors of football hooliganism and their eco-social impact

Investigating individual and group motivations of football hooliganism and their relationship with the social environment was part of the second research question. Conceptual frameworks categorized based on identified themes within this research question are as follows.

Players as role models. Reports from Copenhagen shed light on a disturbing shift in football culture among young players, characterized by aggression towards opponents and referees, signaling a potential transition to hooliganism not only among fans but also within the player community (Jørgensen, 2023). Similarly critical voices in Sweden point to growing dissatisfaction with prevailing fan culture (Aftonbladet Sportsbladet, 2023). In the conclusion of the European League sixteenth-finals match between Sparta Prague and Galatasaray (22 February 2024), an unpleasant skirmish broke out among the players. According to fan David Horn, who watched the incident from the stands, such player behaviour may have a negative impact on present fans.

Hooligan as a macho ideal. Literature like *Harry the Dog: The Story of a Football Hooligan* celebrates the macho personality of the football hooligan, elevating violence and intimidation against rival fans to signs of honor (Drawie, 2022). Despite statements from the law and public condemnation, the ability of a hooligan to attract attention persists, supported by involvement in illegal activities such as drug dealing (Blaney, 2013; Little, Cleur, 2019).

Local, national, and international dimension of football hooliganism. Hooliganism in football is a global challenge, not only in an international context but also in a national and local context. During the last Danish national match of the second division season on 17 June 2023, between two Danish teams Kolding IF and Esbjerg fB, there was a large police presence due to previous hooliganism. During the match, disagreements arose over the use of pyrotechnics and some scuffles occurred after the match. One person was arrested and will be prosecuted for violence against the police, another for violence against another fan, and two for the use of pyrotechnics during the match (Messer, 2023). Similarly, a local match in Oslo on 1 October 2023 had to be handled with a large police presence, which uncovered iron bars that could be used as dangerous weapons (Dagsavisen, 2023). Both local examples, one Danish and one Norwegian, show that hooliganism can be a problem even in local matches between fans of local teams. Traditional local rivalries, as well as imported conflicts between ethnic groups, can provoke such conflicts. In both cases, it is likely that groups of antisocial youths and young men used matches as an excuse for conflicts unrelated to the match itself.

### **3. Social-deviant contexts of football hooliganism and possibilities for its elimination**

The third research question focused on identifying the social-deviant manifestations of football hooliganism and measures that can help address these issues. Based on thematic analysis, the following conceptual frameworks were identified.

Audience violence at football stadiums. According to research conducted by Struhár (2024), three important facts need to be mentioned for a better understanding of the significance of violence in football fandom:

- violence has accompanied football since its inception, and it was more or less accepted by authorities and the public;
- even though the public or moderate fans react critically to overt physical violence at stadiums or beyond, they subconsciously accept other forms of violence;
- physical violence among football fans may have certain rules and the character of fair fights.

Reducing fandom to violence is a flawed conclusion, often resulting from the inaccurate work of some media or politicians (Spaij, 2008; Waiton, 2014).

Substance abuse as part of hooliganism. Blaney (2013, pp. 157–163) describes extensive involvement in drug dealing among English football hooligans since the 1990s. His relatively literary and autobiographical interpretation was that half of the football hooligans he was associated with were involved in selling drugs and heavily engaged in the rave culture of the 1990s. Significant substance abuse is certainly part of football hooliganism, and drug dealing seems to be often part of hooliganism. It could also be argued that drug use fuels violence and is used as a doping agent to create a mood of hooliganism and violence (Weihe, 2019). Hooliganism could also be part of a pattern of risky behaviour and gambling (Overå, Weihe, 2016).

Racism and sectarian hatred. The issue of why racism and football hooliganism ruin football is addressed by, e.g., Brimson (2011), who points out that behind football's "clean" corporate image lie its dark sides, including racism. Football hooliganism often manifests as expressions of racism and sectarian hatred, reinforcing historical conflicts, social injustices, and religious divisions in its fabric.

Sexual abuse and intolerance towards homosexuals. Cases of aggression and discrimination against women and homosexual individuals highlight the group dynamics of hooliganism, which reinforces sexist and homophobic attitudes (Dunning, 2000; Grinnell College, 2023; Hype, 2022; William, Dunning, Murphy, 1986).

#### **4. Prevention and elimination strategies of football hooliganism**

Exploring prevention strategies of football hooliganism and the collaboration of social workers and other institutions in achieving this goal was part of the last research question. Conceptual frameworks categorized based on identified themes within this research question are as follows.

Monitoring football hooligans. Activities aimed at suppressing football hooliganism represent a significant priority for law enforcement agencies, especially in countries with a historical prevalence of such incidents, such as the United Kingdom (Stott, Pearson, 2007). Various strategies have been deployed, including undercover operations dating back to the 1960s in the UK, which resulted in numerous convictions. Additionally, a system of observers, where allied officers embed themselves within specific clubs to identify and monitor hooligans, has proven effective. During Euro 96, this system facilitated cooperation among multiple European police forces. Technological advancements, such as widespread CCTV use in stadiums, have enhanced monitoring capabilities, with dedicated police control rooms monitoring all activities and disturbances (University of Exeter, 2023). A poignant example of the challenges faced by law enforcement authorities occurred in August 2023, when a fatal altercation occurred before a football match between AEK Athens and Dinamo Zagreb, resulting in one fatality and six injuries. Greek police reported the involvement of 83 individuals in the brawl, leading to the subsequent arrest of 102 Croatian and three Greek football fans in Greece. Several faced charges, including intentional homicide and association with a criminal organization, confirming the transnational nature of hooliganism and the necessity of cross-border cooperation among law enforcement agencies (Euronews, 2023; Hansen, 2023; Thomsen, 2023).

Football hooligans in correctional system. Some football hooligans are convicted for hooliganism, arson, violence, murder, and rape. Some cases have gained significant media attention. The rehabilitation of such criminals will partly be the task of social workers. Such rehabilitation ranks among the most demanding tasks a social worker may face and will involve other professionals from fields such as psychiatry, psychology, and prison guards. Offenders often have a plethora of issues, such as drug problems and mental health issues (cf. Drawie, 2022; Jørgensen, 2023; Messer, 2023).

Action and principles of social work. Social workers play a crucial role not only in rehabilitating individual offenders but also in implementing preventive measures within communities, especially among children and adolescents (cf. Hawkins, 2006; Hutchinson, 2009; Twelvetrees, 1991; Weihe, 2004). Rehabilitation often forms part of conditional release or follows addiction or mental health treatment. Participation in sports and community activities may also be part of rehabilitation efforts. Furthermore, social workers engage with the families and communities of hooligans, addressing multidimensional social and

socio-institutional problems, including child welfare. Prevention of recruitment into negative subcultures is a key aim of social work, requiring adaptability in the face of evolving challenges such as hooliganism. However, formalist social states face challenges in allocating resources for community intervention measures, underscoring the need for political commitment and scientific evidence to support such efforts.

Preventive work. The topic of football hooliganism prevention is addressed, e.g., by Jusko (2012), who highlights the importance of youth social work in this area. Preventive social work aims to suppress antisocial behaviour and promote positive values and integration within communities. Football hooliganism epitomizes such antisocial behaviour, threatening the cohesion and positivity associated with fan culture.

## CONCLUSIONS

Football hooliganism is a complex socio-political phenomenon with various motivations, manifestations, and degrees of severity worldwide. This article has addressed several aspects of football hooliganism, from its political and social contexts, individual and group motivations, to the possibilities of eliminating this socio-pathological phenomenon. Thematic analysis has shown that football hooliganism is not an isolated phenomenon but is closely linked to political and social factors, individual motivations, and group dynamics.

Within the strategies for preventing and eliminating football hooliganism, various approaches have been discussed. Law enforcement agencies play a key role in suppressing hooligans and enforcing laws, with technological innovations such as CCTV improving crime monitoring and investigation. Correctional measures and the rehabilitation of hooligans are important for their reintegration into society, and preventive social work aims to intervene even earlier to prevent the onset of hooliganism. Collaboration between social workers, law enforcement agencies, and communities is essential for the successful implementation of these strategies.

In conclusion, it is important to recognize that football hooliganism is a challenge that cannot be addressed in isolation. Comprehensive and holistic perspectives and approaches are needed, including political commitments, financial investments, education, and cooperation at all levels of society. Only then can we achieve significant changes in combating this societal issue and provide a better environment for all football fans.

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## ABSTRAKT

Chuligaństwo piłkarskie to złożone zjawisko społeczno-polityczne o różnym stopniu występowania i nasileniu w różnych regionach świata. W artykule omówiono wieloaspektowe motywacje, przejawy i strategie zapobiegania chuligaństwu, opierając się na źródłach literackich, dokumentach politycznych, opublikowanych badaniach oraz osobistych doświadczeniach związanych z pracą społeczną i frekwencją na meczach. Artykuł zawiera analizę tematyczną motywacji i przejawów chuligaństwa piłkarskiego od jego historycznych korzeni po jego współczesne przejawy, w tym jego wymiar polityczny i dynamikę komunikacji cyfrowej. Ponadto omówiono strategie zapobiegania i eliminowania chuligaństwa w piłce nożnej, w tym wysiłki na rzecz egzekwowania prawa, środki naprawcze, interwencje społeczne i prewencyjną pracę socjalną. Odnosząc się do wyzwania, jakie stwarza chuligaństwo w piłce nożnej, celem autorów jest przyczynienie się do opracowania skutecznych strategii zwalczania tego problemu społecznego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** chuligaństwo piłkarskie; strategie zapobiegania chuligaństwu; przejawy chuligaństwa piłkarskiego; prewencyjna praca socjalna; problem społeczny