



CONNEKT COUNTRY REPORTS

National Approaches to Extremism

BULGARIA

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COUNTRY REPORTS ON NATIONAL APPROACHES TO EXTREMISM

Framing Violent Extremism in the MENA region and the Balkans

BULGARIA

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Overview

COUNTRY PROFILE

Government system

Under the terms of the 1991 Constitution, Bulgaria is a parliamentary representative democratic republic and has a multi-party system. It is a unitary state with local self-government. The constitution guarantees human rights, rule of law, separation of powers, and freedom of speech, press, conscience and religion. Executive power is exercised by the government. The prime minister is head of the Council of Ministers, which is the primary component of the executive branch. Legislative power is vested in both the government and the National Assembly. The unicameral National Assembly, or Narodno Subranie, consists of 240 deputies who are elected for 4-year terms through a mixed electoral system. The judiciary is independent of the executive and the legislature. The President of Bulgaria is directly elected for a 5-year term with the right to one re-election. The president serves as the head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

Population

1 Latest official data indicates that at the end of 2018 the population of Bulgaria was 7,000,039 (National Statistical Institute). The country's population has been on the decrease in recent decades. Compared to 2010, the decline is over half a million people (6.7%). The ethnic and religious composition of Bulgaria's population is diverse and dynamic. According to the latest census data (2011) (National Statistical Institute, 2011), the majority of the population are ethnic Bulgarians (84.8%), with Turks being the largest ethnic minority (8.8%), followed by Roma (4.9%). The Turkish and the Roma communities are historical minorities formed during the Ottoman domination between 16th and 19th centuries. Smaller ethnic minorities such as Russians, Armenians, Jews and Vlachs account for less than 1% of the population.

Main ethnic/religious groups

In the 2011 census, 21.8% of the population did not answer the question about their religious affiliation. Of those who answered, 76% identified themselves as Orthodox Christians. The largest religious minority was that of Muslims (10%). Bulgaria is the EU member state with the largest autochthonous Muslim community that has been formed over the centuries following the Ottoman conquest at the end of the 14th century. Muslim communities have been part of the modern national Bulgarian state since its foundation in 1878, hence Bulgarian society is the successor of centuries-long experience of interaction between Christian and Muslim populations. The overwhelming majority of Muslims (95%) self-identified as Sunni, and the rest as Shiite or simply as Muslims. Both the Sunni and the minority of Shi'a profess traditional Islam, which has been developed under the influence of the Ottoman Empire. This Islamic tradition is different from interpretations and practices of Islam in the Arab world and was termed "Balkan Islam" (Popovic, 1986). A number of other religious denominations have very small communities: Protestants 1.1%, Catholics (including Uniates) 0.8%, Armenian-Gregorians 0.03% and Jews 0.01% (Table 1).

TABLE 1. Religious groups in Bulgaria (2011 census)

Religious Denomination	Number	%
Total population	7,364,570	
People who responded to religious affiliation question	5,758,301	100%
Eastern Orthodox	4,374,135	76%
Muslim	577,139	10%
Catholic	48,954	0.9%
Protestant	64,476	1.1%
Jewish	706	0.0%
Armenian – Gregorian	1,715	0.0%
No affiliation	682,162	11.8%

Own production. Source: National Statistical Institute, 2011 census

While Orthodox Christianity is professed almost exclusively by ethnic Bulgarians, Islam is the religion of three historical minorities: Turks, Roma and Bulgarian-speaking Muslims.¹ The latter group is a community formed during the Ottoman domination when under various circumstances Bulgarians converted from Christianity to Islam. Members of this community today self-identify in three different ways: as Bulgarians, Turks or Pomaks. For all of them Bulgarian is the mother tongue. Members of the Roma community share different religious affiliations, including Orthodox Christianity, Evangelism and Islam. Notably, religious conversions among the Roma community are a common practice (Беновска-Събкова and АЛТЪНОВ, 2010).

CONTEXTUALISATION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND RADICALISATION IN THE COUNTRY

Overview of radicalisation and violent extremism

The types of radicalisation discussed in this report are Islamist and far-right. They vary significantly in terms of spread, manifestations, organisation and number of individuals involved, as well as the popular attention. While some Roma (Salafi) communities are considered at risk of Islamist radicalisation, Roma in general experience a high level of stigmatisation and marginalisation and are also targeted by far-right groups. While the factors driving the adoption of Salafism among some Roma communities, and the support for Islamist organisations and ideas emerging among a small group of Salafi Roma, are various, marginalisation and widespread discrimination towards the Roma community as a whole is certainly one of them. Other important contextual factors are hostility towards Islam, which has been a key part of the Bulgarian national discourse developed historically in opposition to the (Islamic) Ottoman Empire, as well as insufficient understanding and research on Islam as a religion and social practice and its history, theological doctrine and practice (Mancheva, 2019).

Bulgaria has been only marginally affected by violent manifestations of Islamist radicalisation and extremism. In 2012, Bulgaria was targeted for the first time by a terrorist attack, which was plotted externally and

¹ Respect to the differentiating ways in which members of this community self-identify, the term chosen to denote them in this report is Bulgarian-speaking Muslims. For a detailed account of the representation of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims in the demographic statistics, see Иванов, М. (2012) Помациите в българската етнодемографска статистика. сп. Население 1-2.

committed against Israeli citizens visiting the country for holidays. In the attack, five Israelis and one Bulgarian were killed together with the perpetrator himself and another 35 persons were injured. On 5 February 2013, the Bulgarian government officially named Hezbollah as the perpetrator of the terrorist act (Лалов, 2013) and as a consequence the military wing of the organisation was included in the EU list of terrorist organisations (Янков, 2013). Since the onset of the ISIS-related conflict in Syria and Iraq, the country has become a transit route for transnational fighters from Europe on their way to combat zones and back. Arrests and prosecutions for terrorist-related offences have also increased since the onset of the ISIS-related conflict and following tightened legislation and new terrorism-related criminal provisions after 2015, but are mainly related to foreign nationals transiting through the country (FTFs) (Dzhekova and Stoynova, 2018/2019).

Risks of domestic Islamist radicalisation are most often associated with the entry of Salafi interpretations of Islam in Bulgaria and their adoption by some Muslim communities in the country (Todorov and Shentov, 2016). Salafism is not typical for Bulgaria and is often considered as being at odds with the traditional Hanafi Sunni Islam professed by the majority of Muslim communities in the country. Even though the Salafi interpretations of Islam have been rejected by the majority of Bulgarian Muslims, Salafism has managed to reach Muslims in Bulgaria through four main channels: 1) foreign missionaries; 2) foreign charities from Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Kuwait; 3) young Muslims from Bulgaria who receive education at prestigious religious universities in Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia; and 4) migration to Western European countries and encounters with local (immigrant) Muslim communities (Todorov and Shentov, 2016). In Bulgaria the spread of Salafism is limited to a small number of Bulgarian-speaking Muslim villages and Roma settlements. While Salafi interpretations of Islam should not be equated with radicalisation, in some isolated instances, the adoption of Salafism has been manifested through endorsement of radical Islamist organisations and their ideas by some Roma. The first such act was reported as early as 2003 when a flag with the sign "The state is a Halifat" was displayed above two houses in the Roma Quarter of Iztok in the town of Pazardjik, where followers of the banned Islamist organisation Halifat were gathering together (Николов, 2004). About 10 years later in cities like Pazardjik, Plovdiv and Asenovgrad some acts demonstrating sympathy with organisations such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and later ISIS were observed (Mancheva and Dzhekova, 2017). In 2015 a criminal trial was launched against the chief Islamic preacher in the Pazardjik Roma quarter Ahmed Musa (previously convicted in 2004 and 2012 on similar charges) and 13 of his followers from the local Salafi Roma community on charges of anti-democratic propaganda, religious hatred and inciting war (Mancheva and Dzhekova, 2017). The defendants were reportedly involved in disseminating ISIS-inspired propaganda and calls for jihad, while also allegedly providing logistical support to transiting foreign fighters going to Syria (Ibid).

Far-right radicalisation and extremism, despite being more prevalent and resulting in more violence in comparison to the highly publicised instances of so-called Islamist radicalisation, has not received as much public attention and has not been subject to any sustained efforts at assessment or counteraction. In Bulgaria, far-right and ultra-nationalist groups have been associated with numerous completed violent acts, including by political party members), (Nova, 2016) as opposed to violent manifestations of Islamist radicalisation. Far-right extremism operates in and is enabled by an environment of widespread prejudice towards minorities like the Roma (Галъп Интернешънъл, 2015) and worsening attitudes towards other minorities like homosexuals (Дневник, 2019). On the other hand, recent surveys show that Muslims in Bulgaria, while experiencing religious resurgence since the fall of the socialist regime, do not support more fundamental aspects of religion such as the wearing of *niqab* and the use of *Sharia* law to decide on community matters (Иванова, 2017).

Non-violent activities of the far-right groups include demonstrations and protests, commemorations of controversial historical figures, sports events and even charitable activities. However, numerous acts of hate speech, hate crime and vigilante incidents against ethnic, religious and sexual minorities have been associated with different far-right organisations. During the peak of the refugee crisis in Europe, there have been spontaneous and organised vigilante activities against migrants at the Bulgarian border, including violent apprehensions (Stoynova and Dzhekova, 2019: 164-182).

Citizens reported to have joined ISIS and other violent movements inside and outside the country

Only one Bulgarian citizen of Syrian descent is alleged to have joined ISIS (ICCT, 2016).² He was allegedly involved in fighting for the terrorist organisation from 2013 to 2016 (ДНЕВНИК, 2017) before returning to Bulgaria in 2017. Generally, however, the country acts primarily as a transit zone for foreign fighters as reported by the Ministry of the Interior and the State Agency for National Security (SANS) (Друмева, 2019).

Since the mid-1990s state authorities imposed a more restrictive regime to the operations of externally funded Muslim organisations and foundations in Bulgaria, including rejection of the renewal of registrations or subjecting them to investigations (Троева, 2012),³ while there have been several deportation and arrests of foreigners for their radical religious proselytising. Cases of suspected Islamist extremism or international terrorism in Bulgaria have been relatively few in recent years, as described above. As per the latest reports by the Bulgarian State Agency for National Security and by Europol, 14 arrests related to terrorism were made in 2018, and 15 Compulsory Administrative Measures (CAM)⁴ were implemented in Bulgaria (ържавна агенция „Национална сигурност, 2019; Europol, 2019). According to the State Agency for National Security, around 332 FTFs passed through Bulgaria between 2013 and 2015 en route to Syria and Iraq (Stollova, 2016). Since 2016 there have been at least four criminal trials against several (mostly foreign) defendants on terrorism-related charges.⁵ It is not possible to provide the exact number of Bulgarian nationals who have joined violent movements abroad, as such information is gathered by security authorities and is subject to classification.⁶

ISIS has managed to directly and indirectly inspire radicalisation in Bulgaria in some isolated cases, as well as among Bulgarian citizens residing abroad. In 2018, a Bulgarian citizen and an Austrian citizen with Bulgarian-Turkish ethnicity were sentenced in Austria for preparing a terrorist attack and for recruiting others to travel to Syria and join ISIS (bTV Новините, 2018). In 2019, a teenager who fell under the influence of ISIS was arrested in Plovdiv for planning a suicide bomb attack (Бързакова, 2019). The state prosecution has so far opened three court trials against Bulgarian citizens (mostly Roma, but also some imams from Bulgarian-speaking Muslim communities), who, based on adopted Salafi interpretations of Islam, are charged with propagating anti-democratic ideas, participation in a banned Islamic organisation, propagating hatred on religious grounds and incitement of

² While foreign sources have claimed that up to 10 Bulgarian citizens may have joined Daesh at some point, these suggestions have not been confirmed.

³ A total of 30 such organizations operated in Bulgaria until 1994. Since then most of them are banned with only 5 remaining by 2004 (Николов, Й. (2004)

⁴ The CAMs applied to foreigners include three types of measures: expulsion, revocation of the right to reside and prohibition to enter the territory of the country.

⁵ Among them three Syrian nationals with refugee status residing in Germany, one Bulgarian national of Syrian origin, one Swiss national and one dual Bulgarian-Australian citizen.

⁶ It is worth mentioning that, according to the Mirotvorets Center established by the pro-Western Ukrainian government, five Bulgarian citizens have either fought in Donbas or aided pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine. (Club Z., 2016).

war (a trial against Ahmed Musa⁷ from 2004; a trial against 12 acting imams and Ahmed Musa from 2012 to 2015; a trial against 14 Muslim Roma, including Ahmed Musa, from July 2015).

Incidents related to far-right extremism, especially hate crime, which are much more numerous, get much less attention both by law enforcement and the media. As per official police statistics, the number of recorded crimes against religious denominations, as well as incitement of discrimination, violence or hate-based on ethnic or racial bias (Art. 162-166 CC) were as follows: 21 (2017), 29 (2016), 10 (2015), 17 (2014), 21 (2013), and 18 (2012).

Estimating the spread of far-right extremism offences is particularly challenging, mainly due to problems in recording and investigating hate crimes. As per data reported by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), a record high number of hate crime-related sentences have been passed in 2018 (most for crimes committed in previous years), while only six such crimes have been prosecuted in 2018 and nine in 2017.

TABLE 2. Hate Crime in Bulgaria, 2014-2018*

Year	Hate crimes recorded by police	Prosecuted	Sentenced
2018	46	6	158
2017	22	9	9
2016	28	299	71
2015	704	752	135
2014	617	750	117

*The data includes offences with a hooligan motivation
Own production. Source: OSCE/ODIHR (n.d.)

It should be noted that estimating the actual extent of hate crime is difficult and there are reasons to believe that hate crime is severely underrepresented. Latency is an important problem. Another significant issue is that certain hate crimes remain hidden within more general criminal classifications.⁸ A review of judicial cases reveals that despite evidence of a discriminatory motive in some cases, the crime was still prosecuted as hooliganism. Therefore, a proportion of hate crimes remain unrecognised as such.

Presence of radical and violent groups in the country

There are no publicly known domestic violent Islamist (or other religious) groups or organisations active in the

⁷ The activities of Ahmed Musa, the chief Islamic preacher in the Roma quarter of Pazardjik and the informal leader of the group around him, have been monitored by law enforcement since the early 2000s. He has been the subject of a series of arrests and three court trials. His first trial took place in 2004 and ended with a three-year suspended sentence for participation in banned Islamic foundation, rejection of the secular state and preaching in favour of a Halifat (Telekabeltv, 2015).

⁸ A number of Criminal Code articles explicitly deal with specific extremist offences or hate crimes (Art. 162-166 CC) – see numbers above. However, with regard to murder and bodily injury, the Criminal Code does not allow for the separation of xenophobic and racist motives from hooligan motives as aggravating circumstances. Homophobic motivation is not included as an aggravating circumstance for any crime. As per police statistics, hundreds of bodily injury offences are recorded annually, but it is not possible to assess what share are bias crimes. Exact numbers are as follows: 609 in 2015, 780 in 2016, and 887 in 2017. Complete data for 2018 is not available; in the first half of 2018, 414 incidents were recorded by police. Source: Ministry of the Interior, Police Statistics.

country and there is increased scrutiny and control exerted by security agencies in the context of global Islamist terrorist threats. The perpetrators of the only terrorist attack in recent Bulgarian history were foreign nationals (Николова, 2013) and some experts connected it to Hezbollah (Dariknews, 2019). Since the mid-1990s, state security authorities have increasingly restricted the operations of foreign-funded (e.g. Saudi Arabia) Islamic charitable organisations proselytising Salafism through prosecutions or refusing renewals of registration.

As elaborated above, it is difficult to estimate the support base of far-right groups as data about their acts is incomplete both in terms of official statistics and as a subject of research. The far-right scene in Bulgaria includes a spectrum of actors roughly falling in the following three categories: political parties, non-parliamentary ultra-right organisations and informal groupings (incl. skinhead or neo-Nazi gangs) (Todorov, Shentov, ed. 2016). The most prominent political actors include АТАКА, the first far-right party to be represented in parliament, following elections in 2005, and the Patriotic Front, a three-party coalition (including АТАКА), which is the first far-right political entity to become a decisive factor in government as a partner of GERB in the current cabinet (since 2017). There are several non-parliamentary ultra-right organisations and movements active in the country, some of which have political ambitions. The most notable and longest-running is the *Bulgarian National Union* (BNU), founded in 2001, which in the past was refused registration as political party. Other informal organisations such as *Blood & Honour*⁹ and *National Resistance*¹⁰ are dominated by skinhead youths and football hooligans, who share racist views against Roma, migrants and refugees. Informal groups represent gatherings mostly involved in hooligan acts and hate crimes without a particular ideological base, such as skinhead and neo-Nazi gangs. Their members are usually young males, sharing a common subculture based on football team support, a certain style of music or extremist symbols such as swastikas, “SS”, the Celtic cross, or White Pride. For a brief period during the 2015 migration crisis, there was activation of vigilante groups aimed at preventing irregular migration and carrying out illicit “arrests” of migrants close to the Bulgarian border with Turkey, but they quickly diminished in visibility after the dissipation of the migrant crisis (Ibid).

Framing radicalisation and violent extremism

Scientific and academic state of the art

In Bulgaria, radicalisation and violent extremism as potential threats to society entered the political agenda relatively late, around the mid-2010s, and mainly explore the domestic implications of global and EU-wide responses to so-called home-grown Islamist radicalisation, the activities of terrorist organisations such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda, and the issue of foreign fighters transiting through Bulgaria to and from the conflict zones in the Middle East. Factors of vulnerability among the local Muslim population discussed in the literature include external influences such as the penetration of interpretations of Islam that are uncommon to the Hannafi Sunni tradition in Bulgaria, the influence of high religious educational institutions abroad over Bulgarian citizens who graduate from them, the transit of FTFs through the country and the global reach of ISIS and similar violent extremism groups (Todorov and Shentov, 2016; Проданов и Тодорова, 2005;

⁹ ‘Кръв и чест’ in Bulgarian. This website provides information about the organisation’s activities but it is not clear whether it is the official Blood & Honour Bulgarian site: <https://28bulgaria.blogspot.com/>

¹⁰ ‘Национална съпротива’ in Bulgarian. The organisation does not seem to have currently any online presence. Its Facebook page has been closed down several times, following complaints about its xenophobic, anti-Semitic and anti-Roma content.

Министерски съвет, 2015а). The internal security risks identified by experts are associated with the social deprivation and exclusion of some communities that make them vulnerable to radical (religious) ideologies; the accessibility through the internet of radical propaganda; and the potential of provocation and spread of Islamophobic and xenophobic attitudes (Todorov and Shentov, 2016; Проданов и Тодорова, 2005; Министерски съвет, 2015а).

The public (and academic) debate on the threat of home-grown Islamist radicalisation in Bulgaria revolves around two main questions that are often mixed together (Mancheva, 2016: 27-53). The first is how and why an orthodox-based religious resurgence took root in some Muslim communities in the country. The second is whether and to what extent these processes may be considered a sign of Islamist radicalisation. There is a vast body of literature focusing on various aspects of the history and the present situation of historical Muslim communities in Bulgaria¹¹, exploring, among other aspects, to what extent the processes of religious resurgence among some segments of the Muslim communities influence individual and collective expressions of religious profession along the axis moderate – radical Islam (Evstatiev, 2016; Ghodsee, 2010; Троева, 2012; Иванова, 2014). Experts on Islam and religious and ethnic minorities strongly caution against a simplistic equation of religious resurgence based on orthodox interpretations of Islam with radicalisation.¹² Scholars conducting research among communities considered “vulnerable” stress that “while the strong religiosity does not favour (up to now) extreme behaviour,” there is “direct dependence between the religious zeal and increase in its external attributes on one side and the degree of pressure which is systematically implemented by the state and society” on these Muslim communities (Иванова, 2019).

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The factors that contributed to the adoption of orthodox interpretations of Islam by some Muslim communities (Roma and Bulgarian-speaking Muslims) discussed include the unstable religious identity among Roma and Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, dire socio-economic situation and marginalisation, deficiencies of the Islamic training of imams in Bulgaria, the weakness of the Muslim leadership after 1989, and the political instrumentalisation of religion, leading to the neglect of the religious needs of certain segments of the Muslim community and perpetuating a “theological vacuum” (Evstatiev, 2016).¹³ The formation of a Salafi community among the Roma is attributed to social segregation, discrimination, stigmatisation, seeking new meaning and social identification, strong group solidarity and support, integration within the community through participating in informal economic activities, shared identity and religious practices, cosmopolitanisation through increased travel to Western Europe, and exposure to new religious practices and ideas abroad (Mancheva and Dzhekova, 2017).

The factors leading to members of some Roma communities expressing support for violent extremism causes or organisations such as ISIS, on the other hand, have not been explored in depth. A study on the root causes and the social meaning of certain manifestations of sympathy with radical Islamist ideas and organisations among Roma from the Iztok neighbourhood in the city of Pazardzhik found that, while the adoption of Salafism

¹¹ It deals with a range of topics such as the history of relations between the state and minorities, the post-1989 social and economic development of Muslim communities, their migratory practices, identity dynamics, and mutual attitudes with the majority Christian population. Some representative studies include: Eminov, A. (1997) *Turkish and other Muslim Minorities of Bulgaria* (New York: Routledge).; Желязкова, А. (1997) *Мюсюлманските общности на Балканите и в България*. София: ИМИР.; Градева, Р. (2001) *История на мюсюлманската култура по българските земи* София: ИМИР.; Карамихова, М. (2003) ред., *Да живееш там, да се сънуваш тук. Емиграционни процеси в началото на XXI век* София: ИМИР.

¹² Experts such as A. Zhelyazkova, S. Evstatiev or V. Chukov draw a line between adoption of Salafi interpretations of Islam and Islamist radicalisation.

¹³ See also: Ghodsee (2010).; Троева, Е. (2014) *Традиционен“ и „нов“ ислям в България*. *Български Фолклор* 3, 4.; Zhelyazkova (2014; 565-616).

among this community did play a role in this process, additional factors need to be considered, such as ISIS online propaganda as an external pull factor, the rise of a charismatic spiritual leader and an informal local mosque, contacts with Islamist circles abroad, as well as group capsulation as the result of increased negative public and media attention following a much publicised trial on “radical Islam” (Mancheva and Dzhekova, 2017). Deficiencies in the government and institutional approach towards the Muslim denomination as a whole, and responses to the perceived threat of home-grown radicalisation in particular, are emphasised by a number of authors (Иванова, 2019; Dzhekova, 2016). Field research on attitudes among Muslim communities has found that capsulation is strongly associated with such responses and the rise of Islamophobia and nationalism, rather than with increased religiosity (Иванова, 2017).

On the other hand, factors fuelling the rise of the populist radical right in post-socialist period discussed in the literature include: rising populist counter-narratives to democratic liberalism in the post-socialist period, capitalising on social and economic discontent (especially after the economic crisis), systemic institutional distrust, political alienation, rising welfare chauvinism, and the fear of the rise of “radical Islam” (Avramov, 2015; Krasteva, 2016; Genov, 2010). At the same time the issue of reciprocal radicalisation (far-right and Islamist) remains highly under-researched.

Prominent studies

One of the earlier academic publications discussing comprehensively the threats of Islamist radicalisation in Bulgaria in the context of external developments and internal risks was published in 2005 (Проданов and Иванова, 2005). However, while it drew a general frame of discussion, no in-depth exploration of any of the outlined risks has been undertaken.

Therefore, research from the field of anthropology and Islamic studies, as well as sociological studies exploring state-minority and majority-minority relationships discussed above is central to an in-depth understanding of the complexity of contextual factors related to risk factors of Islamist radicalisation in Bulgaria.

One of the most comprehensive recent reviews of trends in radicalisation and violent extremism is the 2016 study *Radicalisation in Bulgaria: Threats and Trends* by the Center for the Study of Democracy (Todorov and Shentov, 2016), exploring how and to what extent internationally observed radicalisation processes are manifested in Bulgaria, taking into account a number of contextual specifics. It takes stock of existing research but also draws extensively on statistical data and interviews with experts and stakeholders. It provides systematic overview of main actors, ideas, manifestations and risk factors associated with radicalisation (including Islamist, right-wing and left-wing, and football hooliganism), while critically examining institutional responses and offering policy recommendations. The Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD) has published a comprehensive review of academic concepts of radicalisation, as well as topical studies on different aspects of the phenomenon, which serve as a foundation for further research and are often used as a reference guide by other scholars and public institutions. CSD has also produced practical tools and guides to improve understanding and knowledge of the phenomenon among practitioners and policy-makers (Dzhekova et al, 2017a; Dzhekova et al, 2017b).

Since 2015, a number of studies have examined radicalisation and violent extremism from a security perspective (e.g. in the light of the recent migration wave, the rise of ISIS and FTF movements; review of national and EU-level legislation and policy responses, among others) (Солаков and Христов, 2019; Krastev,

2016; Dimov, 2015; Антонов, 2019; Димитров, 2017; Хаджийска, 2019). However, most of these rely on secondary sources and analysis of court trials.

Studies of far-right radicalisation are mostly focused on far-right political parties and the fluctuations in their popular appeal (Avramov, 2015; Krasteva, 2016; Genov, 2010). These are produced mainly by NGOs and academic scholars. A number of studies examine the genesis and rise of political far-right and national populism movements as typical for Bulgaria's post-socialist period and democratic consolidation, highlighting their cyclic and paradoxical nature, the diversification of actors and the eclectic ideological positions occupied by its most prominent actors, including hard and soft versions of populism and nationalism (Avramov, 2015; Krasteva, 2016; Genov, 2010). The research on other (informal) far-right movements is limited (Ivanov and Ilieva, 2005; Stoyanova and Dzhekova, 2019).

Nevertheless, hate crime against minorities as an important manifestation of radicalisation is examined by scholars (Спасова, 2018) and addressed by reports of human rights and advocacy organisations (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 1992; Богданов, 2019; Amnesty International, 2015). Some of these studies view hate crime as a form of radicalisation "in the everyday life" that is often overlooked (Спасова, 2018). There are several studies on topics related to radicalisation, such as prejudice (Накова, 2001), stereotyping (Пампоров, 2008) and hate speech (Фондация Фридрих Еберт, 2017; Иванова, 2016; Иванова, 2018), which find that in the past decades there has been a more frequent and overt use of hate speech on the part of the media or even political actors for the spread of negative stereotypes in relation to different ethnic, religious and sexual minorities (Пампоров, 2013). Research on social distances and on majority-minority attitudes is also prominent, drawing on representative surveys (Пампоров, 2020; Иванова, 2017).

Main research and knowledge producers

Despite increased governmental attention, state-sponsored research is very limited in the area of radicalisation and violent extremism,¹⁴ despite the adoption in 2015 of the National Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (Министерски Съвет, 2015). Instead, the most comprehensive academic research on the issue is published in a number of studies by the CSD,¹⁵ as well as by university scholars and academic research centres with a long-standing track record in studying minority issues, religion and security aspects, as well as the political far-right, followed by human rights and advocacy organisations.

Defining violent extremism and radicalisation

Official definitions of radicalisation and violent extremism are provided in the National Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020):

¹⁴ Тренд ООД, Ранно разпознаване на признаци на радикализация с оглед успешно прилагане на ранна превенция (forthcoming).

¹⁵ The following studies of radicalisation by CSD have been published since 2015: Rositsa Dzhekova et al. (2020 – forthcoming) Far-right Narratives and Youth Vulnerabilities in Bulgaria. Sofia: CSD.; Dzhekova, R., Moravec, L., Bláhová, P., Ludvik, J., Stejskal, L., Anagnostou, D., Skleparis, D. and Stoyanova, N. (2017) Situational Assessment of Extremist Trends. Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy.; Dzhekova, R., Mancheva, M., Stoyanova, N. and Anagnostou, D. (2017a) Monitoring Radicalisation. A Framework for Risk Indicators. Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy.; Mancheva, M. and Dzhekova, R. (2017) Risks of Islamist Radicalisation in Bulgaria: A Case Study in the Iztok Neighbourhood of the City of Pazardzhik. Sofia: CSD.; Todorov, B. and Shentov, O., eds. (2016) Radicalisation in Bulgaria: Threats and Trends. Sofia: CSD.; Dzhekova, R. and Stoyanova, N. (2018/2019) From Criminals to Terrorists and Back? Quarterly Report Vol 1 and 2. Bratislava: GLOBSEC.

Radicalisation is a process of adopting extreme opinions, views, beliefs and ideologies, to the extent of fierce rejection of all alternatives. It is characterised by a decisive readiness for imposing one's views and principles over the rest of society, through rejecting the constitutional foundations of democracy and non-respect for fundamental human rights. In some cases it can lead to adopting the ideology of violence.

Radicalisation which leads to violence is a phenomenon where individuals or groups of people adopt opinions, views and ideas, which might lead to acts of terrorism.

Violent extremism is a phenomenon where individuals or groups of people support or carry out ideologically motivated violence to achieve their ideological goals.

Source: Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria. Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015 – 2020), 2015.

Numerous studies published by the CSD since 2016 also adopt these definitions, but also provide a review of the state of the art in academic discourses on definitional issues (Dzhekova et al. 2015), which is used as a reference point for other authors. CSD often points to the difference between violent and non-violent radicalisation in its work. CSD also uses definitions by EU and United Nations (UN) institutions such as EC's definition of radicalisation as "a process of socialisation leading to the use of violence" (European Commission's Experts Group on Violent Radicalisation, 2008: 5), as well as the Council of Europe definition of violent extremism: "promoting, supporting or committing acts which may lead to terrorism and which are aimed at defending an ideology advocating racial, national, ethnic or religious supremacy and opposing core democratic principles and values" (Council of Europe, 2015). Other authors either adopt the official state definitions, refer to foreign academic works, or do not provide a definition at all. An academic discussion on concepts and definitions of radicalisation is lacking.

Definition targets

The definitions are broad enough to cover all types of violent extremism. However, in reality Islamist radicalisation has been the main focus of law enforcement and intelligence efforts, while far-right radicalisation and acts of violence have remained under-reported, under-researched and often under-prosecuted.

Ethnic or religious communities considered by violent extremism and radicalisation approaches

Roma communities are often considered as being at risk of Islamist radicalisation, due to some isolated cases of Salafism being proselytised among some of these, and to a lesser extent Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (Pomaks) and recent Arab migrant communities. In terms of non-Muslim communities, members of far-right groups and movements are mainly ethnic Bulgarians.

Methodologies employed to study violent extremism and radicalisation

Studies employ mostly qualitative methodology, drawing mainly on interviews and focus groups with stakeholders. There are a number of anthropological studies on Muslim communities' social life and culture although few of those focus on the issue of radicalisation per se. Some of the main shortcomings of studies on Islamist radicalisation are that they do not rely on primary data. The few that do draw mainly on interviews

and/or focus groups with experts and stakeholders (police, social workers, teachers, policy-makers) rather than with representatives of “at risk” communities such as Roma or youth (Иванова, 2019).

Quantitative methods such as structured interviews and representative survey research are used in studies of discrimination and intolerance, social distances and minority issues, some of which also include questions probing radical views (Спасова, 2018). Prominent among these are a study on attitudes of Bulgarian Muslims conducted in 2011 and 2016 (Иванова, 2017), as well as a 2019 study on majority-minority attitudes (Иванова, 2020). The latter uses a mixed-method research design (representative survey with standardised interview questionnaire and in-depth interviews among minority groups) to show that 24% of respondents believe that there is religious extremism in the country. Members of the Muslim minority groups are seen as primary proliferators, and most people believe the phenomenon is foreign to Bulgaria (i.e. it comes from networks outside the country) rather than an internal process.

Strategies to Counter/Prevent Violent Extremism and Radicalisation C/PVE

C/PVE INITIATIVES

Mapping of C/PVE actors

The main actors active in the field of P/CVE so far have been mainly from the public security sector, while prevention of radicalisation is not sufficiently recognised as part of the mandate of frontline practitioners (such as education and social services) and is not integrated in their work, while non-state actors are insufficiently involved in prevention (Dzhekova, 2016). There is no specialised stand-alone coordination body in charge for P/CVE development of specific programs and overseeing their implementation. The Security Council at the Council of Ministers is responsible for strategic decision-making related to P/CVE and provides overall assessment of security threats, proposes measures and coordinates and guides the work of security agencies. The coordination of the strategy and action plan implementation monitoring is designated within the Ministry of the Interior. In the *2018 Report on the implementation of the Annual Plan for 2018*, the bulk of the activities were carried out by the Ministry of the Interior as a leading institution, followed by the State Agency for National Security (SANS).

SANS monitors radicalisation and violent extremism using overt and covert means (use of agents and informants, surveillance, etc.) and on the basis of information received from foreign intelligence services. SANS also monitors the activities of high-risk extremist groups and organisations operating in the country, although there is no publicly available information on which groups are considered high-risk. Various law enforcement bodies such as the Border Police and the Directorate General for Combating Organised Crime are responsible for monitoring and countering different risks related to violent extremism and terrorism.

Public policies and programmes

The Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020) was adopted by the Council of Ministers in December 2015, along with a Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy (Министерски Съвет, 2015b). In the following years, annual plans were adopted for 2016, 2018 and 2019. Implementation reports were published for 2017, 2018 and 2019. The objective of the Strategy is to establish a comprehensive multi-agency approach towards preventing and tackling radicalisation. Next to more traditional law-enforcement methods for prevention of terrorism, this goal is to be achieved through the establishment of cooperation and information exchange mechanisms between different stakeholders, the establishment of mechanisms for early detection of vulnerable individuals and those on the path to radicalisation as well as de-radicalisation programmes for those already radicalised. However, as per annual activity reports (Министерски Съвет, 2017; Министерски Съвет, 2018a) a significant amount of the concrete actions are experiencing delays. In addition, some planned activities are under consideration for suspension.

It should be noted there have been several attempts in recent years to govern religion (and restrict religious freedoms), mostly initiated by far-right political parties in government and prompted by increase threat

perceptions related to the rise of “radical Islam”.¹⁶ For example, the heightened public attention to the ongoing court trial against Ahmed Musa and his followers from 2015 contributed to a series of resolutions enacted at local level by the municipal councils in a number of Bulgarian cities to prohibit the full face veiling of women. (Mancheva, 2019) The process culminated in the adoption of the Act to Limit the Wearing of Clothing Partially or Completely Covering the Face.¹⁷ Such resolutions were passed by the municipal council of the city of Pazardzhik, Stara Zagora and Burgas. Furthermore, on 4 May 2018 a Project Law for Revision of the Denominations Act in Bulgaria was submitted to the National Assembly. The proposed revisions were justified with the need to impose stricter state control (by the Directorate of Denominations at the Council of Ministers) over the financial and denominational activities of Bulgaria’s denominations as a means to prevent and fight religious radicalisation (Манчева, 2019). The overarching objective of the proposed amendments was to tackle “radical Islam” by way of imposing strict control over the activities of the Muslim denomination in the country. The proposal faced the concerted opposition of all religious denominations (Mancheva, 2019). Although it was not adopted, it demonstrates that religion is prone to instrumentalisation on the part of political actors with populist agendas.

Official definitions of violent extremism and radicalisation

As quoted before official definitions are provided in the National Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020). An attempt to introduce the vague term “religious radicalism” in the Denominations Act in 2018 has failed following fierce opposition by all religious denominations to this and other amendments proposed, as discussed above (Mancheva, 2019).

Civil society

The role of civil society in P/CVE initiatives is spelled out in the National Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020). Representatives of NGOs were included in the drafting of the Strategy as well. In pursuit of the development of a multi-agency approach to tackling radicalisation, NGOs and CSOs are to take part and contribute towards:

- The development of indicators for early identification, monitoring and risk assessment and early warning system by first line practitioners as well as citizens.
- The development of prevention programmes.
- The development of sustainable channels of cooperation, information exchange and coordination of activities at both national and local level, through a consultation mechanism bringing together first line practitioners, state institutions, and local government and non-governmental organizations in order to implement early prevention initiatives in cases of radicalisation.
- The development and implementation of de-radicalisation/disengagement programmes.

However, despite the active role afforded to NGOs and civil society in the Strategy, its implementation has experienced significant lag. The few measures implemented in which NGOs/CSOs were involved were actually related to EU-funded research, seminars or training projects (Министерски Съвет, 2017). Their envisioned engagement in key actions such as the development of prevention programmes and multiagency cooperation

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis see: Иванова, Е. (2019) Законотворчеството като експеримент. Балканистичен Форум 2: 277-294.

¹⁷ Passed by the National Assembly on 30 September, 2016 and promulgated in issue 80 of the State Gazette (SG) of 2016,

mechanisms at local level has not taken place. Outside the strategy and action plans' scope, NGOs independently implement a number of EU-funded actions (not reported in the government's implementation reports) focused on research, community engagement and capacity-building in the field of prevention of radicalisation as part of broader European partnerships across different member states.

Religious communities

Similar to civil society, religious and ethnic communities are afforded a role in the multi-institutional approach towards preventing and tackling radicalisation envisioned by the Strategy. Religious communities are to participate and contribute towards:

- The development of prevention programmes.
- The development of mechanisms and indicators for early identification, surveillance and threat assessment and the development of a system for early notification by first line practitioners as well as citizen reports.
- The development of sustainable channels of cooperation, information exchange and coordination of activities at both national and local level.
- The development and implementation of de-radicalisation/disengagement programmes.

However, according to the implementation plans and reports, engagement of religious communities is envisioned in only one specific activity, which has not been implemented – namely the development of a cooperation mechanism between central and local authorities and religious and ethnic communities in order to prevent terrorist recruitment in the territory of Bulgaria (Министерски Съвет, 2017). It is important to note that in the post-communist period the Muslim religious leadership appeared deeply divided by struggles for control over the Chief Muftiate (Mancheva, 2019). These were manipulated by political parties, among which the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)¹⁸ played an active role. The control over the Chief Muftiate and the resources which the institution was managing translated into a political capital and provided opportunities for consolidation of the Muslim/Turkish vote. As a result, since the early 1990s two High Muslim Councils have existed, each backed by a different political party and electing two different Chief Muftis. The conflicts between the two factions of the Muslim denomination remained up until 2011 and served to weaken the authority of the institution as spiritual leader of Muslims in Bulgaria (Chodsee, 2010).

Methodologies

Stakeholders involved

The Strategy envisions a broad involvement in prevention and counteraction initiatives, including the involvement of diverse sets of first line practitioners (police, teachers, social and health workers) and wide involvement in programme development and implementation including state institutions, local government NGOs and civil society, as well as religious and ethnic communities and media. However, this ambitious vision has not been implemented as evidenced by the significant lag in realisation of the concrete actions planned. The Ministry of the Interior, the State Agency for National Security and the Prosecution Office have so far been the leading, if not the only, institutions enforcing measures in this regard. Respectively, government measures implemented

¹⁸ The Movement for Rights and Freedoms was established in 1990 as the political party of the Turkish and Muslim population in Bulgaria

so far have been rather-security oriented with no systematic effort being laid in the field of prevention and addressing root causes and drivers, or building resilience. Moreover, some security measures have been enacted as prevention measures.

Targeted populations

The targets of the government response towards radicalisation and terrorism are those vulnerable to radicalisation, those who have already radicalised and those who are on the path towards radicalisation. The Strategy aims to address both Islamist and far-right radicalisation and extremism, and adopts a broad definition which in principle encompasses all types of radicalisation. However, the risks of Islamist radicalisation are examined in more detail suggesting that there is a bias with regard to religious radicalism. Law enforcement response has also been largely targeted at potential Islamist extremists (Todorov and Shentov, 2016). In addition, since most prevention initiatives have experienced delays, persons vulnerable to radicalisation or those on the path towards radicalisation have likely not been targeted successfully and systematically through comprehensive measures. Radicalisation risks among inmates or probationers has not been addressed so far in the Strategy.

Enforcement mechanisms for the C/PVE initiatives

An inter-institutional working group, summoned by the Ministry of the Interior is in charge of developing the strategy and action plans and drafting implementation reports. These are approved by the Council of Ministers. Many of the planned measures under the National Strategy and action plan are pending implementation. There are no established multi-agency cooperation platforms or referral mechanisms at local level to monitor and prevent radicalisation and support at-risk persons, although such mechanisms are envisioned in strategic documents.

Available resources

No specific budget has been dedicated to the implementation of the Strategy, Implementation Plans or Implementation Reports, nor is there a dedicated coordination body overseeing strategy development and implementation with its own budget. Instead, measures are spread among a wide array of institutions that have not been awarded additional funds specifically for the implementation of radicalisation-related measures. Several project-based actions addressing different aspects preventing and countering radicalisation have been initiated under European Council (EC) funding programmes managed by the Ministry of the Interior (Internal Security Fund Police, among others).

Main objectives of the strategies or initiatives implemented

The approach as elaborated in the Strategy clearly encompasses objectives of detection and countering, as well as prevention and reversing radicalisation. In reality, however, the emphasis so far has been placed on detection and countering through the security sector (law enforcement and intelligence), while efforts to apply a multi-agency, holistic approach to prevention are at a very early stage.

Existence of critical evaluation systems

Impact of CVE-PVE on the threat of radicalisation

No officially mandated independent evaluations of the C/PVE performance of law enforcement and intelligence institutions have been undertaken. Reports of the Ministry of the Interior and of the State Agency for National Security (mainly annual reports of activities) provide minimal data about radicalisation and violent extremism and no analysis of the effectiveness and impact of existing counter and prevention efforts. The

Annual Implementation Reports on the Strategy only track the progress of specific activities. Instead, non-governmental and human rights organisations have mainly acted as a corrective to partial government response. Reports by such organisations have consistently identified shortcomings in the approach and legislative framework which hinder radicalisation threat assessment and prevention (Amnesty International, 2015; Todorov and Shentov, 2016; Amnesty International, 2012) and have attempted to make up for blind spots in hate crime analysis by gathering victimisation data (Богданов et al, 2019). Evaluating the spread of hate crime, NGOs have pointed out various gaps in registration, investigation and prosecution.

Another issue raised by CSOs is the insufficient capacity and experience of frontline practitioners for prevention of radicalisation, and the predominantly security-oriented approach to a complex phenomenon requiring multi-agency cooperation and a culture of trust between various stakeholders, such as local police, local communities and civil society (Todorov and Shentov, 2016).

SPECIFIC INITIATIVES ADDRESSED TO WOMEN AND YOUTH

An example of a specific initiative targeting Bulgarian youth is the EU-funded campaign Find Another Way under the project Resilient Youth against Far-Right Extremist Messaging Online (YouthRightOn), led by CSD. It tackles the problem of far-right influence over youth (14-19 year olds) in Bulgaria by providing alternative narratives to confront extremist messages and ideas propagated online, as well as offline guides for teachers aimed at building resilience and core skills such as critical thinking, tolerance and conflict resolution. No initiatives targeting women have specifically been identified.

Conclusion

Bulgaria has been only marginally affected by violent manifestations of Islamist radicalisation and extremism, be it domestic or foreign. Since the onset of the ISIS-related conflict in Syria and Iraq, the country has become a transit route for transnational fighters from Europe on their way to combat zones and back, which resulted in an increase in arrests and prosecutions for terrorist-related offences. At the same time, orthodox-based religious resurgence among some segments of the domestic Muslim communities have often been linked in public debates and institutional responses with Islamist radicalisation. Even though the Salafi interpretations of Islam have been rejected by the majority of Bulgarian Muslims, Salafism has managed to reach some segments of the community through various external channels. In some isolated instances, the adoption of Salafism was manifested through endorsement of radical Islamist organisations such as ISIS and their ideas by some Roma. There is an urgent need to better understand the underlying drivers of the two processes and take these into account when designing policy responses. Such factors include the weak religious leadership within the Muslim denomination, dire socio-economic situation and severe social exclusion and stigmatisation of communities concerned, deficiencies in the Islamic training of imams and state funding, and social identity dynamics. Government and institutional responses to the perceived threat of home-grown radicalisation, coupled with rising far-right sentiments, minority prejudice, and hate speech remain areas of concern. At the same time, violent manifestations of far-right extremism such as bias crimes are under-reported and under-investigated.

Bulgaria has undertaken important steps in establishing its approach towards preventing and tackling radicalisation and terrorism through adopting a comprehensive strategic and legislative framework. However, key challenges in implementation remain. The focus is primarily on Islamist radicalisation, despite the fact that far-right extremism and associated phenomena such as hate crime and hate speech, as well as rising xenophobic attitudes are significant challenges. The Bulgarian government and public institutions are yet to develop a more comprehensive understanding and evidence-based knowledge of radicalisation that might lead to violence, the risks it poses to society, and how to prevent and counter it. The policy response so far has been focused on fending off and preparing to respond to potential terrorist activity, while approaches to addressing conducive factors and drivers are yet to be developed. The engagement of key non-state actors such as civil society and religious communities in such initiatives is limited.

Academic research has been advancing, as scholars have analysed radicalisation and different aspects thereof. However, with some notable exceptions, there is still a lack of in-depth analyses based on primary data to significantly enhance understanding of the issue of radicalisation and violent extremism in Bulgaria.

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What drives youth to violent extremism? How can they turn from being “the problem” into “the key” for a solution? By engaging youth in the research, CONNEKT will raise young voices to become stakeholders in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.

CONNEKT is a research and action project which analyses seven potential radicalisation factors among youth aged between 12 and 30: religion, digitalisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, socio-political demands, and educational, cultural and leisure opportunities and evaluates them on three levels: transnational/state, community and individual.

Its aim is to establish a multi-dimensional map of drivers of extremism among youth in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bulgaria, and to identify the interplay between them. Based on the empirical research findings, the project will end up recommending tools and measures for the prevention of violent extremism from a social and community perspective both for the regions of study and the European Union.

Under the coordination of the European Institute of the Mediterranean, (IEMed), the project gathers a multidisciplinary Consortium involving 14 partners from MENA, the EU and the Balkans.



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