

I. POLICY APPROACHES TO COUNTERING, MONITORING AND PREVENTING (VIOLENT) RADICALISATION

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the policy environment, the terminology and concepts used, as well as the strategic and conceptual documents that set out government policy, instruments and measures that are used in countering radicalisation and extremism in Bulgaria. Across Europe, radicalisation that might lead to violence has been increasingly recognised as a significant threat to democratic systems, human rights, citizen's security and social cohesion. While terrorism is not a new issue in Europe, many large scale 'softer' policies were rolled out in the past decade, especially in older EU member states after the rise of militant Islamism and the attacks on European soil. Instead of focusing exclusively on the immediate prevention of attacks, these policies focus on identifying and reversing the radicalisation process which often precedes the use of violence. Meanwhile, EU member states' perspective on the threat posed by radicalisation has widened to include the more traditional threats of right- and left-wing extremists, and nationalist separatists. Counter-radicalisation is approached through the prism of security, human rights or social policy, or through a more holistic integrated approach. The density of specific counter-radicalisation policy programmes and measures is proportionate to the level of threat and the scope of radicalisation processes in societies, while the focus could be on one or more types of radicalism depending on historical circumstances and the changing external environment.

In Bulgaria, radicalisation and violent extremism as potential threats to society have been only recently raised in policy debates and entered the political agenda, mainly in the light of global and EU-wide responses to so called home-grown Islamist radicalisation, the activities of terrorist organisations such as Islamic State (IS) and al'Qa'ida, and the issue of foreign fighters for whom Bulgaria has become a transit zone, both to and from conflict zones in the Middle East. Other forms of violent radicalisation, although having been in existence longer (such as right-wing extremism and football hooliganism), have received considerably lower attention.

Furthermore, the terrorist attack on a passenger bus with Israeli tourists that took place in 2012 in the city of Burgas prompted a thorough review of the preparedness of government institutions to prevent and cope with the consequences of terrorist activity in Bulgaria. As a result, the Bulgarian government has stepped up its efforts to strengthen its legislation and institutional framework in responding to potential terrorist threats, and also to counter more effectively the transit of foreign fighters through its territory. Besides strengthening of the *Criminal Code*

provisions on prosecuting acts of terrorism, the institutional framework was also further developed through enhancing information exchange, coordination and intelligence gathering in the area of counter-terrorism. However, the Bulgarian government and public institutions are yet to develop a more comprehensive understanding and knowledge of radicalisation that might lead to violence, the risks it poses to society, and how to counter it. The policy response so far has been focussed on fending off and preparing to respond to potential terrorist activity, while approaches to addressing factors and processes conducive of such violence are yet to be developed.

In Bulgaria, radicalisation (as defined in this report) has been traditionally perceived as limited to small groups of people or individuals and has been predominantly approached from a national security standpoint, and hence handled mainly by security and intelligence services. Measures have included imposing increased monitoring and repressive measures by the security structures and the judiciary over individuals, groups and organisations whose activities are perceived as posing a risk to national security or facilitating the radicalisation of local Muslims (see further the chapter “Risks of Islamist radicalisation”). Other radicalisation-related phenomena such as hate crime, racism, discrimination and xenophobia have been partially addressed within a broader scope of policy themes such as crime, education, protection of human rights, diversity, social policy, and integration.

The crime of terrorism is defined in the *Criminal Code* (see further the chapter “Legal framework and institutions”). The terms ‘radicalisation’, ‘extremism’, ‘political violence’ and ‘religious violence’ are not well established in the Bulgarian policy or legislative framework, although the latter two are incriminated. The *Criminal Code* includes a number of provisions that can be used for prosecuting radicalisation-related crimes, such as crimes against the republic, crimes against equality of citizens and the crimes against religious denominations. Radicalisation and extremism have not been defined separately as they are not subject to any specific policy, although occasional references to these terms can be found in some documents related to security or social policies, as well as in parliamentary debates. The concepts of radicalisation and extremism are utilised within the policy and operational domain of the intelligence and security services and are embedded in their statutes although not specifically defined. Countering football (sports) hooliganism falls traditionally within the portfolio of the Ministry of Interior (Mol) and is regulated by a separate law.