

CONCLUSIONS

The current analysis of the main forms that radicalisation takes in Bulgaria in the context of internationally growing radicalisation challenges has allowed the assessment of the main threats, the main actors and their repertoires of action, the main groups at risk as well as the present policy responses. Against this background, gaps are identified and recommendations are made for improving the overall policy, legal and institutional approach with regard to the phenomena of radicalisation in Bulgaria.

Islamist radicalisation

To date, Bulgaria has remained relatively unaffected by international radical Islamist activities. This can be explained by the absence from the Bulgarian context of important factors, considered contributory to Islamist radicalisation in Western Europe, such as colonial history and significant post-conflict immigration.⁷⁰² In addition, Bulgaria hosts a considerable historical Muslim minority and long established mechanisms of inter-religious and inter-community relations, which serve to divert and sustain potential negative influences that might be related to internationally observed phenomena of Islamist radicalisation.

In terms of external threats Bulgaria's engagement in the international anti-terrorist coalition and the involvement of Bulgarian military regiments in different crisis zones exposes the country to potential external terrorist acts. This has been demonstrated by the first terrorist attack perpetrated on Bulgarian territory in July 2012. According to the assessment of intelligence and law enforcement agencies, the security risks for the country have become higher after this attack.⁷⁰³ In the context of the escalating militant Islamist threat with the conflict in Syria and the establishment of IS and in the context of Bulgaria's geographical proximity to countries exporting Islamist radicalism, the country is becoming more prone to risks associated with transiting transnational fighters and the potential for operation of related logistical infrastructures. This is demonstrated in the Europol TE-STAT report for 2014 where Bulgaria is mentioned among the European states (together with Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Macedonia) that serve as land routes for transnational fighters to Syria and Iraq, with frequent arrests having taken place at the Bulgarian-Turkish border.⁷⁰⁴

According to the latest analysis by the Bulgarian intelligence services reflected in the Draft *Strategy to Counteract Radicalization and Terrorism* (2015 – 2020), the internal

⁷⁰² PISOIU (2014), p. 773.

⁷⁰³ Стратегия за противодействие на радикализацията и тероризма (2015 – 2020), Проект, с. 4-5, Министерски съвет, Портал за обществени консултации, available at: <http://www.strategy.bg/PublicConsultations/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=1771>, accessed on: 12.08.2015.

⁷⁰⁴ Europol (2015), European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report. European Policy Office, p. 22.

security risks related to Islamist radicalisation are associated with the accessibility of radical Islamist propaganda on the internet, the stark poverty and social marginalisation of some communities in the country, the risks of provocation and spread of anti-Islamic and xenophobic waves and the ethno-religious confrontations that may stem from them.⁷⁰⁵ Home grown risks of Islamist radicalisation are presently discussed in the context of two trends. One involves processes of proselytism of Salafi interpretations of Islam and heightened religiosity based on Salafism among some Bulgarian-speaking Muslims. The other is associated with expressions of symbolic approval for international Islamist organisations, based on Salafi interpretations of Islam among some Muslim Roma. The representatives of the first group are to be rather associated with the purist branch of Salafism putting focus on non-violent, non-political methods of propagation and education. The representatives of the second group seem to associate themselves with more radical aspects of the Salafi interpretations of Islam which is demonstrated in acts of sympathy with IS and logistical support to transnational fighters. It needs to be pointed that according to experts these acts are not accompanied by a profound internalisation of the Salafi doctrine. Further research should be conducted to trace the root causes and the interplay of social and individual level mechanisms that contribute to this process.

Certain groups may be considered at risk of home-grown Islamist radicalisation in Bulgaria and they include some Muslim converts in the Roma community.⁷⁰⁶ With the imprisonment of some of the leaders and main actors from this community there is a risk that they may influence inmates in the prison.

It needs to be stressed that the prevailing assessment of experts in Islam and Muslim minorities is that neither Salafi interpretations of Islam nor any militant versions of these interpretations can find root among the Muslim communities in Bulgaria.⁷⁰⁷ This is the outcome of a long Islamic tradition in the country based in Hannafi Sunnism, developed in the course of centuries and in co-existence with Orthodox Christianity.⁷⁰⁸ The resilience of Bulgaria's Muslim communities to militant ideas associated with the Salafi interpretation of Islam is strongly demonstrated by the fact that no fighters from the country have been recruited by IS. This is especially impressive given that most EU member states as well as the Balkan countries have had a worrying number of their citizens join IS as transnational fighters.

⁷⁰⁵ Стратегия за противодействие на радикализацията и тероризма (2015 – 2020), Проект, с. 4-5.

⁷⁰⁶ Expert interview with a representative of law enforcement/ intelligence institutions, 8.04.2015.

⁷⁰⁷ Zhelyazkova (2014), p. 603; Роев, В. „Арабистът проф. Цветан Теофанов: Не видях нищо страшно в Гърмен“, 20.03.2009, available at: <http://www.politika.bg/article?id=12129>; according to Yordan Peev, one of the renowned scholars of Islam in Bulgaria, Salafi interpretations of Islam spread by Saudi Arabia have much serious influence in Western Europe while in Bulgaria they are not accepted by the overwhelming majority of the Muslim population (Expert interview, 23.06.2015).

⁷⁰⁸ This traditional interpretation of Islam (Hannafi Sunnism) is generally accepted to be the most moderate interpretation of the Islamic religion (Цветан Теофанов в негово интервю за в. Политика, 20.3.2009, available at <http://www.politika.bg/article?id=12129>, accessed on 12 June 2015).

Right and left wing radicalisation

Bulgaria's right-wing scene is rather diverse comprising political parties and non-parliamentary actors, including organisations and informal groups. Both parliamentary and non-parliamentary political parties and the informal right wing groups espouse strong nationalist sentiments that are built on anti-minority, anti-foreigners and anti-immigrant rhetoric. A strong emphasis is put on the Bulgarian nation, which is often discussed in exclusionist strictly ethnic terms. Right-wing actors share ideas of extreme cultural conservatism, racism, anti-Semitism as well as homophobia. They identify with the idea of order imposed by a "strong hand" and espouse a form of populism based on the opposition between the (corrupt) elite and the people. Vocal anti-Europeanism and anti-immigrant and pro-security rhetoric are also strong components of the ideology of right-wing actors. It is important to note that some right wing actors and more particularly the political party Ataka, appropriate aspects of left-wing rhetoric, including proposals to re-nationalise state-owned companies sold to foreign investors or to re-examine privatisation.⁷⁰⁹ Ataka's hybrid agenda is the outcome of complex financial and political loyalties, including Slavophile identification with Russia's interests in Bulgaria and in Europe. The right-left ideological mix propagated by Ataka appears possible through supporters from the far-right and the far-left who share common nostalgia for the strong authoritarian governance and egalitarianism of the former totalitarian regime and perpetuate anti-Western nationalism. However, Ataka's ideological hybridity and opportunism contribute to the isolation of the party from the rest of the right-wing players in the country.

Right-wing groups not in parliament are smaller. While they do not take part in the national and local elections they are very active among certain youth circles and football fans. The less ideological skinhead gangs, often merging with football fan factions, are the youngest and most aggressive part of the radical right. Additional ideological actors can be found in mysticism associations with active publishing activity. They fill the radical right ideological gap by producing alternative history sources, translating foreign occult, Nazi and conspiracy theory literature, or developing their own religious sects worshiping pagan Bulgarian deities. A third type of non-parliamentary actors includes quasi-military groups with relatively consistent ideology. These three types of extra-parliamentary groups often share common membership and both influence and fight one another. Importantly, right-wing radical groups, although fragmented and impermanent, enjoy significant latent support by inactive people. This silent support can be activated by events which have the potential to grow into riot-type violent acts. Presently, right-wing activists' leaders do not have the capacity to rally large number of supporters, as they count predominantly on populist rhetoric and are preoccupied by personal conflicts, which result in further fragmentation of the right-wing political space.

The repertoire of actions of right wing actors is diverse ranging from publishing texts and dissemination of nationalist literature, propaganda through their own TV channels, to mass protests and marches as well as educational activities or concerts. It is important to note that right-wing actors are engaged in acts of

⁷⁰⁹ Ghodsee (2008), pp. 26-39; Todorov, A. (2012) *The Extreme Right-Wing in Bulgaria*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung; Genov (2010), p. 41.

violence varying from hate speech, desecration of Muslim or Jewish temples or cemeteries, to reprisal raids (or violent attacks) against Roma, immigrants, persons of different colour or against those perceived as gay.

Despite the high levels of support for radical left ideas in Bulgarian society, radical left parties in the country enjoy very weak voter support. The main non-parliamentary actors involved in radical left-wing groups in the country are the communist left, the anarchist left, the new left and the greens. Unlike the latter two groups, the communist and the anarchist left have a revolutionary ideology and rhetoric that does not envision social change through the process of representative liberal democracy, but just like the new left and the greens they believe that real social change can only be achieved when society is ready. Thus, there are no significant differences in the four groups' repertoire of actions, which are almost exclusively non-violent and focused on the popularisation and discussion of left-wing ideas, and struggles for social justice particularly concerning the rights of migrants, minorities, and workers. It can safely be claimed that there is no immediate threat of left-wing violence, although according to non-official sources, radical left-wing ideas are growing in popularity.

A particular group at risk of far right radicalisation involves youngsters in the age group 14 – 18. The influence of radical ideologies over juveniles in Bulgaria has been insufficiently explored. It is important to design and conduct studies to explore root causes and triggers that push young persons to engagement and activity within the right-wing scene.

Football hooliganism

Football hooliganism in Bulgaria is connected to factors such as the levels of football game spectators' attendance and the participation of entrepreneurs from the grey and criminal sector in the ownership of football clubs. In addition, two trends related to political instability and inter-ethnic tensions seem to provoke risks of radicalisation of football fans.

The decrease in the number of spectators of football games since the 2000s has affected a decrease in the number of hooligan incidents. This is the case as smaller audiences reduce the risks of radicalisation of the football fans. This trend, however, is offset by a countertrend whereas reduced audiences have led to a growing influence of the well-organised core of fan groups, which pose a higher risk of violent conduct.

Following series of bankrupted and restored football clubs previously owned by entrepreneurs from the grey and criminal sector, the ownership of the big football teams is now considerably more transparent and legalised. This development leads to a decrease of criminal influences over the football factions.

Following a period of political instability in 2013 – 2014, a number of new risks of radicalisation of football fans became visible. The most serious of these is related to the use of football fans as participants in political demonstrations. There have been a number of instances of remunerated participation in protests, counter-protests, provocations and bodyguard services to politicians. On certain

occasions, fans recruited by political parties for participating in otherwise genuine protests engage in violence, even against the police. Further analysis needs to be carried out to understand: 1) what are the factors and conditions leading to such phenomena; 2) whether the radicalisation of the ultras and the football fans takes place only in situations of political and economic instability; 3) what is the extent to which the participation of football fans in political protests is the outcome of authentic political affiliations or is only motivated by financial stimuli; 4) what is the volume of finance needed to mobilise several thousand ultras.

A serious long term risk of radicalisation of football fans is posed by the ethnic tensions between Roma and Bulgarian communities at the local level or in some of the big cities. A critical factor in this regard might also be the frequent institutional changes in the Ministry of the Interior following changes in government and leading to loss of expertise and resources.

Intelligence and law enforcement experts should be aware that the trend of using football fans in political protests or in ethnic conflicts at the local level bears the risk of radicalisation of not only football fans but of the conflicts in which they are called to participate. Therefore, it is very important to monitor such processes and accumulate expert knowledge of the operational mechanisms involved, as well as to design well informed policies to counteract them.

Institutional response

Although the Bulgarian government has formulated a national strategic policy approach to the complex issues of radicalisation that might lead to violence, relevant authorities are in the very early stages of developing working methods for identifying, preventing and countering processes and manifestations of radicalisation. Radicalisation is not sufficiently understood at the level of government institutions, including the pull and push factors involved, pathways and vulnerabilities of individuals or groups of people; consequently there is not enough knowledge on how to prevent and address such issues.

While law enforcement and intelligence bodies have been active in applying monitoring, repressive and deterrence actions towards radicalisation, there is a lack of any systematic and organised institutional effort towards early recognition and prevention of such trends. Furthermore, the involvement of other key public actors such as the educational and social systems in these efforts is limited. Law enforcement and security agencies play an important role in countering violent radicalisation, but their intervention should be the last resort of government response.

A multitude of government institutions in the national law enforcement and security sector and the judiciary are tasked with preventing and countering radicalisation. Other authorities are also involved in countering radicalisation, including courts, registering religious denominations and political parties, as well as private actors, having tasks with regard to sports hooliganism. A more pro-active approach by all institutions concerned is required, which starts with the proper recognition and prioritisation of radicalisation-related issues in their strategic planning and day-to-day activities.

Insofar as the national security and law enforcement agencies are concerned, the challenges in countering radicalisation stem largely from the overall challenges to the Bulgarian security sector and law enforcement. Frequent restructuring within SANS and the Mol pose risks for the effective work of the police and security personnel, especially in complex cases like radicalisation-related acts. The effect of recently adopted laws regulating security services remains to be seen. At the same time, high turnover of staff within the security agencies endangers the accumulation of sustainable expertise, knowledge and know-how in understanding and countering radicalisation.

As for the judiciary – prosecutor's offices and criminal courts – they are faced with the growing complexity of left and right wing, as well as Islamist radicalisation, and with the necessity to further build their expertise to prosecute and administer justice in such cases.

Countering specific radicalisation challenges and trends

The issue of potential **Islamist radicalisation** in Bulgaria needs to be approached first from a prevention perspective with serious attention to be paid to the design of soft measures for developing of dialogue with groups and individuals at risk, combined with attendant integration alternatives. Such an approach should involve a range of civil institutions at the central and local levels with law enforcement actors to come into play as the last resort of institutional response. The design of soft policies needs to be based on studies of the factors and social dynamics that put certain local groups and individuals at risk of radicalisation. Respectively, policies for preventing and countering potential risks need to be directed at the specific social, economic and cultural realities at local level. It is telling that the close monitoring, the arrests, the three consecutive court trials and the two convictions of Ahmed Musa of Pazardjik since 2003, have not effectively restrained his activity. On the contrary, his influence is growing, the community that considers him a leader is expanding and the acts that they commit go beyond manifestations of religious purism and piety. Against this background, it could safely be claimed that the case of Ahmed Musa demonstrates that **measures that are solely repressive are not sufficient to prevent or counteract processes that have complex social roots.**

Potential home-grown Islamist radicalisation cannot be addressed and counteracted without the involvement of Muslims themselves. Therefore, any policy approach that relies solely on repressive prevention or reactive repression without the engagement of the Muslim leadership will be ineffective and if applied without caution it may serve to jeopardise the inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in the country. Prevention policies need to be designed in such a way as to reinforce the mechanisms within the Muslims communities which prove to make them resilient to external influences associated with non-traditional interpretations of Islam. The role of the Chief Muftiate in such a process needs to be acknowledged and policies developed to facilitate the dialogue between Muslim religious leadership, policy makers as well as relevant institutions. Given the main reasons for the penetration of Salafi interpretations of Islam among some segments of the Muslim community in the country identified in this report, it is advisable to consider supporting the autonomy of the Chief Muftiate from powerful external

Islamic centres. Such an approach may involve – but not be limited to – the development of strategies by the Directorate of Religious Denominations at the Council of Ministers for communication and regular dialogue with the Muslim religious leadership; developing strategies for ensuring better financial self-reliance of the Islamic denomination; support for securing the financial independence and improvement of the quality of education in Islamic educational institutions throughout the country. Last but not least, the role of the Chief Muftiate could be more proactive in the context of the global radicalisation challenges, for example by way of taking official positions on key issues related to the Islamic profession and by tightening the control over the Islamic denomination and education throughout the country.

The Roma quarters where some symbolic demonstrations of approval with Islamists jihadism have taken place, will benefit from strong social and educational programmes to help local communities disentangle from such influences.

Effective law enforcement measures and prosecution of acts associated with potentially violent Islamist radicalisation need to be based on legal measures updated to the dynamics of developments in Europe and in Bulgaria. One good step in this direction is the amendment of the *Criminal Code* of 25 June 2015 with provisions incriminating acts of transiting and assistance thereof through the territory of Bulgaria for terrorist aims.⁷¹⁰

With regard to **right-wing radicalisation** the legal and institutional structures in the country appear well-prepared to monitor and prosecute related acts. However, there is no evidence of any preventive measures currently being employed by the relevant authorities. Law enforcement institutions seem well acquainted with the processes underway in the most radical groups and appear to have sufficient capacity to react to acts of violence. However, some forms in which right-wing radicalisation is manifested, such as crimes with racist and xenophobic motives and other hate crimes remain insufficiently prioritised by the government and its agencies. For example, hate crimes are not prosecuted as such but as acts of hooliganism. Without recognition of the actual scope, nature and potential harm of such trends by a wide range of institutional actors, the issues of radicalisation and violent extremism cannot be tackled at their roots. If remaining unaddressed, they could further advance division and polarisation and trigger reactionary and extremist attitudes in other parts of society. Both government institutions and families neglect the role of preventive measures among schoolchildren who are most vulnerable to radicalisation. Indeed, the need for political and multi-cultural education and the overall role of education in preventing radicalisation both in the family and at school has not yet been addressed in public debate.

With regard to **football hooliganism**, Bulgarian authorities have undertaken a number of measures aimed to monitor and curtail the changing face of this phenomenon. In 2000, a working group at the MoI General Directorate of National Police was established to exercise systematic monitoring over football hooliganism. Given the growing seriousness of the phenomenon the group was extended to

⁷¹⁰ Закон за изменение и допълнение на НК, Чл. 108А, 3 (6,7). Приет на първо четене от НС на 25.06.2015 г.

include employees from other MoI departments. Respectively, the Bulgarian police and the BFU started conducting risk evaluation of football matches in accordance with established international practices in order to deploy the necessary measures for maintaining public order before, during and after matches. A respective legal framework was also established with the introduction in 2004 of the *Law on the Protection of Public Order during Sport Events* (LPPOSE) which includes provisions aimed at ensuring better security and safety at football matches, as well as stricter sanctions for acts of football hooliganism.

However, there are a number of problems associated with the law enforcement response to football hooliganism. The centralised automated register on football hooliganism that is prescribed in the LPPOSE has not yet been established. As the register is an instrument to aid both monitoring and prosecution of acts of football hooliganism efforts need to be invested in its establishment.

There is a lack of *Criminal Code* provisions which differentiate football hooliganism from other violations of public order, which hinders the systematic monitoring and statistical measuring of the phenomenon. Acts of football hooliganism are presently recorder by police and courts under the heading of “general” or “serious” hooliganism, which does not allow the authorities to take stock of the actual scope of the problem. Despite legal developments and the specialisation of law enforcement in tackling football hooliganism, **there are still no systematic public police statistics and analysis of the phenomenon.**

The monitoring and systematisation of information relating to football hooliganism as well as the enforcement of well informed and timely preventive and repressive measures is weakened by frequent institutional restructuring at the MoI and high turnover of staff. Such factors disrupt the accumulation of skills and expertise for tackling football hooliganism.

It should be pointed out that the police have so far avoided working on prevention or disruption of high-risk relationships between political parties and fan factions. The approach is “asymmetrical” and includes measures to caution the football fans, but not the political intermediaries. Given the high risk presented by the use of football fans in political protests or in local ethnic tensions, measures need to be enforced to effectively discourage and curtail the financially motivated and disruptive cooperation between political parties and fan factions. The phenomenon should be curtailed not only by agencies responsible with football hooliganism but also by those dealing with political radicalisation and extremism (such as SANS).

Over the past few years, and especially since the terrorist attacks on European soil have intensified, the Bulgarian government has undertaken several steps towards the gradual development of a much needed holistic policy approach that combines early identification and prevention of radicalisation with strengthened controls and repressive measures against violent extremist and terrorist activity. At the same time, developing institutional preparedness to monitor, counter and prevent violent radicalisation and related risks in a systematic manner is facing multiple challenges. Inter-agency cooperation, information exchange and joint interventions are key prerequisites for the success for the planned measures, as well as the development of analytical capacity, expert knowledge and know-how

within the government administration and other key stakeholders, especially as frontline practitioners are concerned. In this context, efforts should be invested in the development of well-established channels for multi-agency collaboration and community engagement at the local level. The experience in designing and enforcing preventive and repressive approaches to radicalisation accumulated in other EU member states should be consulted. Their application – and, if need be modification – in Bulgaria should proceed from a careful analysis of the features and needs of the Bulgarian context.