CONNEKT

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ON MACRO-LEVEL DRIVERS

Drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism
in the light of state dynamics in MENA and the Balkans

BULGARIA

Rositsa Dzhekova, Stefan Ralchev, Nadya Stoynova

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Rositsa Dzhekova, Center for the Study of Democracy
Stefan Ralchev, Center for the Study of Democracy
Nadya Stoynova, Center for the Study of Democracy

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INTRODUCTION

Bulgaria's approach to countering and preventing radicalisation has been influenced by the European Union (EU)'s evolving understanding of radicalisation as a home-grown problem that also requires soft measures. This understanding was adopted as the basis for the Bulgarian Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020). However, the country was unprepared to ensure the Strategy's implementation. Prevention measures were insufficiently applied and the approach continues to be dominated by law enforcement. The focus on Islamist radicalisation was also adopted even though Bulgaria's Muslim community has shown resilience towards strict interpretations of Islam. This focus has been most pronounced with regard to marginalised Roma Muslim communities, which have shown some indications of religious radicalisation. This has contributed to further encapsulation and stigmatisation of these minorities. On the other hand, the far right has received less attention from institutions despite civil society being very vocal about this more established threat. The understanding of macro factors among institutional and civil society actors revolves around how they view the influence of certain drivers, such as economic deprivation, as contributing to vulnerability to radicalisation and territorial inequalities, translated in the absence of state institutions, and social and educational exclusion. Additionally, there is disagreement between institutional stakeholders and civil society on the influence of religion and political grievances on radicalisation processes.

Perceptions of institutions and non-governmental stakeholders about drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) in Bulgaria can be analysed along several lines. First, contextually, radicalisation and VE as potential threats to society entered the Bulgarian political agenda in 2015, mainly in the light of global and European Union (EU)-wide responses to so-called home-grown Islamist radicalisation, the activities of terrorist organisations such as Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda and the issue of foreign fighters for whom Bulgaria has become a transit zone. Thus, Bulgarian law enforcement and intelligence institutions started to develop more systematic counter-radicalisation mechanisms. Second, the institutional response has focused on reactive and repressive measures. It has been dominated by the law enforcement and security agencies, despite the development of a 2015 counter-radicalisation strategy based on a whole-of-society approach also envisaging a clear role for "soft" institutions and actors in the sphere of prevention. Third, there seems to be a clear distinction between governmental and non-governmental perceptions, as the former place excessive focus on the perceived threat from Islamist radicalisation, and the latter underline the oversight of far-right and nationalist threats of VE. The institutional focus on Islamist radicalisation has had an important side effect: prejudice against the Roma community as a group to be considered at risk by default. On the other hand, far-right discourse has silently become the new normal in societal life, a process also facilitated by the participation of nationalist and populist parties in the ruling coalition since 2017, and in Parliament since 2005.

This paper first takes a look at the main institutional stakeholders (both state and non-state) in Bulgaria linked to preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE), then offers a country-specific analysis of processes and issues deemed pertinent to the country, before analysing the institutional perceptions of the seven drivers set as the basis of the macro analysis. Out of these drivers, those perceived as the

most relevant by actors seem to be religion, political grievances (far-right ideology), poverty, inequality and an additional factor appearing horizontally in most stakeholders' accounts: education. These macro perceptions can serve as a starting point for the subsequent analysis of the meso- (community-level) and micro- (individual-level) drivers of radicalisation and VE in the country.

The report is based on a literature review and 26 in-depth interviews with 18 representatives of state institutions, five civil society actors and three academics (see Interviews). The interviews were conducted in the period January-March 2021 face to face (17 interviews) and online (9 interviews). The respondents include representatives nominated by the key state institutions involved in the development and implementation of P/CVE policies in Bulgaria directly or having an indirect role in prevention: security and law enforcement officers, prosecutors, experts from the Ministry of Education, juvenile delinquency bodies, and social and child protection services. Experts from academia and civil society were selected based on their expertise and activities in the area of P/CVE specifically, as well as on related issues such as child policies, human rights, crime prevention, Roma issues, religious matters, hate crime, and discrimination.

INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

This section provides a brief overview of the key Bulgarian stakeholders on P/CVE as outlined in the CONNEKT Country Report on national approaches to extremism in Bulgaria (Dzhekova, 2020).

STATE INSTITUTIONS

The main actors active in the field of P/CVE so far have been mainly from the public security sector. Prevention of radicalisation is not sufficiently recognised as part of the mandate of frontline practitioners (such as education and social services) and is not well integrated into their work. One factor having a role in this respect is that the drafting of the P/CVE policy framework did not ensure to a sufficient degree cross-integration and harmonisation with other policy areas such as crime prevention, child and education policies or minority integration strategies. Non-state actors are yet to become more involved in implementation of state policies and programmes (Dzhekova et al., 2016). There is no specialised stand-alone coordination body in charge of P/CVE development of specific programmes 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** (MoI). In the *2018 Report on the implementation of the Annual Plan for 2018*, the bulk of the activities were carried out by the MoI as a leading institution, followed by the **State Agency for National Security** (SANS) (Министерски Съвет, 2018).

SANS monitors radicalisation and VE 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. Law enforcement bodies such as the **Border Police** and the **Directorate General for Combating Organised Crime** at the MoI are responsible for monitoring and countering risks related to VE and terrorism.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

The role of civil society in P/CVE initiatives is spelled out in the National Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020) (Министерски Съвет, 2015). Representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were also included in the drafting of the Strategy. In pursuit of the development of a multi-agency approach to tackling radicalisation, NGOs and civil society organisations (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 and implementation of prevention, as well as deradicalisation programmes.
- The development of sustainable channels of cooperation, information exchange and coordination of activities at both national and local level through multi-agency consultation mechanisms for early detection and prevention.

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 multi-agency cooperation mechanisms at local level has not taken place. Outside the scope of the Strategy and Action Plans, 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 same objectives as civil society by implementing means and strategies suited to their own competences and resources.

However, according to the implementation plans and reports, engagement of religious communities is envisioned in only one specific activity, which has not been implemented – the development of a cooperation mechanism between central and local authorities and religious and ethnic communities to prevent terrorist recruitment in Bulgaria (Министерски Съвет, 2017). Due to past and recent political events, the Muslim denomination in Bulgaria has been fractioned and the institution's authority as a spiritual leader diminished (Mancheva, 2019).

MACRO-LEVEL CONTEXT IN BULGARIA

In Bulgaria, the terrorist attacks in New York on 11 September 2011 and in Europe in the early 2000s increased awareness of Jihadist terrorism and led to actions by security services in addressing foreign vectors of potential Islamist radicalisation in the country (Kerem, 2010). The 2012 Sarafovo bus bombing on the airport in Burgas, the only terrorist attack in Bulgaria's recent history, led to a strengthening of the counter-terrorism framework. Radicalisation and VE as potential threats to society entered the Bulgarian political agenda in 2015, mainly in the light of global and EU-wide responses to so-called home-grown Islamist radicalisation, the activities of terrorist organisations such as IS and Al Qaeda, and the issue of foreign fighters for whom Bulgaria has become a transit zone, both to and from conflict zones in the Middle East. Bulgarian law enforcement and intelligence institutions started developing more systematic counter-radicalisation mechanisms. These include relevant amendments to the Bulgarian Criminal Code adopted in June 2015 as well as the adoption of the Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020). Considering the evolving understanding of radicalisation in the EU, the Bulgarian Strategy envisions a broad approach in countering radicalisation, including the establishment of prevention measures and the involvement of a wide array of institutions. However, these policy developments were driven mainly by external factors, which led to the issue not being fully internalised as a priority for institutions.[1] Furthermore, in the process of drafting of the Strategy, there was no sufficient harmonisation and cross-integration between P/CVE priorities and measures with other related key policy areas such as child and education policies, crime prevention, and minority integration strategies.

The measures enforced so far by intelligence, law enforcement and prosecution services have been directed at countering external Islamist threats and potential home-grown risks. The focus of the security agencies is mainly on detecting early on and countering "the supply side" of VE in terms of extremist actors and ideologies. Reducing the demand for such ideologies among society through prevention and resilience-building falls outside their mandate.[2] At the same time, other relevant institutions that can have a more proactive role in prevention are lacking the knowledge and training on the matter, as well as to some extent the normative integration of P/CVE tasks in their mandates.

FACTORS FRAMING RESPONSES TO ISLAMIST RADICALISATION

The prioritisation of Islamist radicalisation in Europe has also been reflected in the national approach despite the country-specific risk dynamics. Islamist radicalisation in Bulgaria is often viewed through the prism of the entry of Salafist interpretations of Islam and their taking root in some Muslim communities in the country. Such strict interpretations of Islam are not typical for Bulgaria (Zhelyazkova, 2014) and are often considered at odds with the traditional Hanafi Sunni Islam professed by the majority of Muslim communities in the country. The adoption of Salafism is far from widespread, being mostly limited to some Pomak villages and to some of the most marginalised Roma communities in Bulgaria. Thus, the

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[1] In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

[2] In-person interview with male representative of the security services conducted on 25 February 2021.

prioritisation of Islamist radicalisation can be contrasted with the resilience of Bulgarian Muslims to the strictest interpretations of Islam (Dzhekova et al., 2015).

This focus is mainly due to the fact that it was members of a Roma Salafi community who in 2014 exhibited signs of Islamist radicalisation[3] and prompted highly publicised trials against an informal Roma Salafi preacher (Ahmed Mussa) and some of his followers (Mancheva & Dzhekova, 2017; Dzhekova, 2020). Mussa and 12 others were charged with incitement of discrimination and hatred on religious grounds and for propagation of war, including by: displaying and spreading Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) propaganda materials offline and on social media; glorifying ISIS/Jihad; integrating Jihadist ideas and appeals in support for ISIS in sermons; and providing logistical support to transiting transnational fighters on their way to Syria. Previously, in 2004 and 2012 Mussa was prosecuted on similar charges (preaching antidemocratic ideology, forcible change of the social and state order, and incitement of interethnic and religious enmity).

The focus on Islamist radicalisation has been further shaped by national factors, most prominently deeply-rooted widespread prejudice against the Roma community (Danova-Roussinova, 2002). Recent analysis has shown that anti-Roma prejudice is also widely observed in the criminal justice system in Bulgaria (Fair Trials, 2020). The handling of the Ahmed Mussa case was criticised for further encapsulating the Pazardhzik Roma community and for stigmatising the Roma as a potential threat to national security (Ivanova, 2020).[4] A number of interviewees focused on the importance of the social marginalisation of the Roma community in increasing susceptibility to radical religious beliefs.[5] Respondents from academia point out that the religious ideas propagated in this case were adopted by the community because they spoke to the deeply-rooted need for belonging, purpose and economic prospects,[6] which had been painfully absent from the lived reality of the local Roma people. One of the interviewed experts[7] suggested that in the Pazardzhik case even Muslim religious institutions recognised that the infiltration of more radical interpretations of Islam could be associated with financial reasons. Poverty and exclusion of the Roma community in Pazardzhik has led some experts[8] to the conclusion that "social radicalisation" can be more accurate in explaining developments in this particular neighbourhood. As one respondent from academia noted, except for the charismatic informal preacher Ahmed Mussa, the rest of his close circle of followers did not have a deep understanding of the religious doctrine of Salafism.[9]

More recently, there have been very few cases of Bulgarian nationals being arrested in the country for offences related to Islamist radicalisation. One man of Syrian descent with a Bulgarian passport was

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[3] In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

[4] In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; Online interview with female representative of the academia conducted on 15 February 2021.

[5] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021; Online interview with female representative of the academia conducted on 15 February 2021.

[6] In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; online interview with female representative of the academia conducted online on 15 February 2021.

[7] Online interview with female representative of the academia conducted online on 15 February 2021.

[8] Ibid.

[9] In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

apprehended on suspicion of being a high-ranking member of IS and of financing its activities through trade in illegal tobacco products (Georgieva, 2017). In 2019, a 16-year-old boy from Plovdiv was detained after police found handmade bomb components in his home (Bnt.bg, 2019). He had reportedly fallen under the influence of IS online.

FACTORS FRAMING RESPONSES OF FAR-RIGHT RADICALISATION

In contrast to the relatively circumscribed threat of Islamist radicalisation, far-right extremism in Bulgaria has become increasingly dynamic in recent years. Diverse actors engage in far-right rhetoric or acts, including political parties, non-partisan organisations and informal groups such as skinheads and football hooligans (Dzhekova et al., 2015). Far-right extremisms have inflicted injuries and even death on members of minorities (Legalworld.bg, 2018). Civil society has been particularly vocal in emphasising the threat of far-right radicalisation.[10] While a number of respondents from law enforcement and the judiciary recognise the threat of far-right radicalisation,[11] few measures targeted towards primary prevention or more systematic sanctioning of far-right violence such as hate crimes have been undertaken (Stoynova & Dzhekova, 2019). One reason for this is the notion among representatives of institutions that the far-right lacks mobilisation potential towards violence.[12] Problems in the registration, classification and investigation of potential crimes with discriminatory motives greatly complicate accurate assessment of the scope of the phenomenon (Dzhekova et al., 2017). At the same time several respondents agreed that there is widespread normalisation of far-right rhetoric in Bulgarian society: "While religious radicalisation is something that many people fear without clear reason, far-right radicalisation is part of everyday life and people get used to it as something normal. Children also get used to that."[13]

A change in government also resulted in lack of political will to systematically assess and tackle far-right radicalisation.[14] The last parliamentary elections of 2017 resulted in the entry of the far-right coalition Patriotic Front (PF) in the governing coalition, which marked the first time the far right became a decisive factor in government. The PF has attempted and partially succeeded in the introduction of a number of legislative proposals targeting religious and ethnic minorities, which have been condemned by experts and minority communities as discriminatory and populist (Paunova, 2019). These include since 2016 a ban on public wearing of niqabs, proposals for a legal definition of "radical Islam" in the Criminal Code (Offnews.bg, 2017) and the draft Strategy for Roma Integration.[15] A respondent

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[10] In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 8 February 2021.

[11] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for National Security on 25 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

[12] In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

[13] In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Project Concept for Changes in the Policy for Integration of the Gipsy (Roma) Ethnicity in the Republic of Bulgaria. Available at: https://www.strategy.bg/PublicConsultations/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=4289 [Accessed July 2021].

from law enforcement commented that the Strategy "except for purely populist is also dangerous."[16] At the same time, while the Islamist radicalisation threat has stagnated,[17] the far right is particularly dynamic, with the rhetoric and tactics used by far-right actors evolving considerably and moving away from violence and towards more veiled influence tactics, especially with the proliferation of online disinformation in recent years. As a respondent from the security services noted:

"For sure there is no longer a hard core of far-right extremists focused on and gravitating towards the football fan clubs. This thing does not exist anymore for maybe four years. There is a significant change in the profile of members, and the characteristics which are cited in different research differ substantially. There are almost no members with educational deficits or even criminal past."[18]

Illustrative of this shift is the vocal presence since 2018 of conservative Christian actors, supported by far-right and ultra-nationalist actors, who have successfully spread misinformation online, gathering enough support to influence policy-making. The debates around the so-called Istanbul Convention and the proposed Strategy for the Child 2019-2030 showcased how the instrumentalisation of Russian propaganda and fake news by the emerging nexus of conservative Christian organisations, far-right political parties and non-partisan organisations can gather momentum online, resulting in protests and ultimately achieving the goal of derailing policy reforms (Leshtarska, 2019; Karaboev & Angelov, 2018).

Box 1. Opposition to the Istanbul Convention and the Strategy for the Child 2019-2030

2018 saw fierce debates and protests against Bulgaria's ratification of the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the so-called "Istanbul Convention"). The translation of the original text of the document brought about the lack of a specific equivalent for "gender" in the Bulgarian language, which was ultimately translated as "social sex" (Darakchi, 2019). This translation was taken by critics to mean that the Convention is trying to undermine biological sex through the introduction of a third sex and ultimately is promoting transgenderism (Ibid.). A number of organisations and experts have disputed these claims (For Our Children Foundation, 2018).

A year later in 2019, the Strategy for the Child 2019-2030 sparked a similar negative reaction. The main argument of opponents was that the Strategy allows for much easier extraction of children from their homes by social services, supported by Western-funded NGOs. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and other experts, including a former head of the State Agency for Child Protection, have disputed these claims, noting that as in the previous Strategy extraction of children from their home is only possible after a court decision

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[16] In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

[17] In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for National Security on 25 February 2021.

[18] Ibid.

(Svobodnaevropa.bg, 2019). The misinformation further alleged that children would be sent to live in Norway in the homes of gay couples. This resulted in unrest and children being withdrawn from school by concerned parents, mainly in Roma settlements in the district of Sliven (Milcheva, 2019). The rumours were spread by protestant and evangelical churches (Valkov, 2020).[19] As an investigation by the *Capital* newspaper showed, very similar arguments were used in opposition to initiatives for children's rights in Russia and Ukraine (Milcheva, 2019).

A key factor in the activities against both documents was the Society and Values Association (SVA) (Karaboev & Angelov, 2018; Darakchi, 2019), which has ties to conservative international Christian organisations like the World Congress of Families, which lobbies against legal abortion and LGBTQI rights. In Bulgaria, the organisation is associated with the Apostolic Prelom Church. On the issue of the Convention and the Strategy for the Child, the SVA received support from the following actors (Leshtarska, 2019):

- Protestant denominations, the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church and the Christian Reformist Party as well as informal Christian pastors.
- Far-right politicians in and outside the government, including Angel Dzhambazki, a member of the European Parliament from the far-right governing party IMRO and that of the infamous "migrant hunters", Petar Nizamov.
- Far-right activists like the organiser of the "March for the Family" – an opposition to the annual Sofia Pride.
- An advisor to the President and a member of the Strategic Council of the President.[20]
- PR of the Ministry of Defence, close to Defence Minister and Vice Premier Krassimir Karakachanov (Vaksberg, 2019).

The nexus between conservative Christian organisations and far-right actors, as well as their use of misleading information to spread panic, is considered a radicalising dynamic, albeit of a more subtle nature, by civil society representatives in Bulgaria[21] as well as some government officials.[22] Nevertheless, official measures to tackle the misinformation around the policy documents have been circumscribed to official positions in defence of the documents. Ultimately, the proposed Strategy for the Child was withdrawn by the Prime Minister and the Istanbul Convention was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court (Boyadzhiev, 2018).

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[19] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

[20] The President of Bulgaria is generally considered as having pro-Russian sympathies. See Bedrov (2018).

[21] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

[22] In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

IMPLICATIONS FOR P/CVE PROGRAMMING

A key contextual factor shaping P/CVE responses is the way institutions perceive the role of primary and secondary prevention of radicalisation and whose responsibility it is. While purely operational and technical measures foreseen in the Strategy on Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism 2015-2020 that facilitate the work of law enforcement such as the creation of video surveillance registry have been mostly completed,[23] prevention remains insufficiently updated despite being an important component in the Strategy and subsequent Action Plans[24] and largely recognised by interviewees:

"No, there is no development, which is concerning, as 'softer' ministries like the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour and Social Policy are more in the side-lines compared to law enforcement bodies. When it comes time to account for [measures taken as part of] the Action Plan we toss it around like a hot potato as we are uncomfortable with it."[25]

Where prevention activities have been undertaken, they have usually been aimed at awareness-raising and capacity-building of practitioners, mostly from law enforcement. Training has also been provided for juvenile delinquency services[26] and the prison administration.[27] However, the heavier focus on Islamist radicalisation and more specifically on Roma is evident in at least one such initiative aimed at training law enforcement (see Box 2). There is also a lack of dedicated deradicalisation, rehabilitation and resocialisation programmes for (former) offenders,[28] mainly due to the low number of convicted extremist offenders.

One important problem hindering more comprehensive implementation of the Strategy is the fact that no specific funding has been allocated.[29] Activities on countering and prevention of radicalisation are usually carried out in the context of projects supported by foreign donors, most notably the European Commission (EC). However, even donor funding can be used in a potentially controversial way as the case of the MoI project has demonstrated. Even more broad initiatives that can still be considered as general prevention of radicalisation have suffered from poorly targeted funding. As a representative of civil society has noted, EU money for Roma integration in Bulgaria is spent inappropriately and inefficiently.[30]

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[23] In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

[24] In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 17 February 2021.

[25] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of Education and Science conducted on 29 January 2021.

[26] In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021.

[27] Within several EU-funded projects, for example: https://www.integra-project.org [Accessed July 2021].

[28] In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for National Security on 25 February 2021.

[29] In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 15 January 2021.

[30] In-person interview with male representative of the academia on 11 February 2021.

> **Box 2. EU-funded project on prevention of radicalisation among law enforcement**
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> An example of institutional PVE responses that target the Roma population is a project implemented by the Ministry of Interior and specifically the MoI Institute of Psychology. In 2020 the Institute realised an EU-funded project focusing on expanding the expert capacity of members of the Ministry charged with the prevention of aggression, corruption and radicalisation.
>
> One component of this initiative was strengthening early identification and prevention of radicalisation. Research was conducted among nearly 1,000 institutional stakeholders, including experts from the Ministry, along with members of Roma communities in several Bulgarian cities. A major aspect of this research was the identification of factors that could lead to religious radicalisation, particularly among Roma. On the basis of the research results, the Ministry conducted a series of trainings among police officers who work directly with Roma in the field. Based on the results of this research, the Ministry tailored the trainings in such a way that the trainees could more easily grasp the importance of the multidimensionality and interplay of radicalisation drivers.[1][31]
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> This component of the project was very strongly criticised by Roma CSOs. The Citizens for Rule of Law and Democracy Coalition addressed an open letter to the EU Commission claiming that EU funds have been used in discriminatory ways and have resulted in further stigmatisation of the Roma community in Bulgaria by treating the community as a potential extremist threat (Bnr.bg, 2020).

Related phenomena such as hate crime, football hooliganism, racism, discrimination and xenophobia have not been in the focus of the dedicated P/CVE strategy, but are approached within a broader scope of policy themes such as crime, education, protection of human rights, diversity, social policy, and integration. Tackling football hooliganism, for example, has been mainly geared towards preventing violence between rival football clubs (Dzhekova et al., 2015). Some representatives of law enforcement, juvenile delinquency services and the judiciary acknowledge the connections between football hooliganism and far-right extremism.[32] However, other police representatives consider far-right extremism and football hooliganism to be separate issues despite significant overlap identified in studies and numerous attacks against different minorities, including LGBTQI people (Btvnovinite.bg, 2013): "The aggression of the football hooligans is aimed at supporters of rival football clubs, not against [people with] different sexual orientation."[33]

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[31] In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021.

[32] In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

[33] In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021.

This separation of the issues is also obvious in cases where institutions different from law enforcement work with football hooligans, such as juvenile delinquency services. Despite the consensus that youths are a particularly vulnerable group when it comes to radicalisation, there are no avenues for an approach not dominated by law enforcement or correctional approaches.[34] As long as the issue is seen as related only to sports, the local juvenile delinquency bodies can work on such cases. Once there are indications of radicalisation, the case moves to the purview of law enforcement or security services: "We work with cases of football hooliganism for example. The Law on Countering Juvenile Delinquency foresees the administration of a correctional measure. In terms of radicalisation, however, we have no course of action since it happens in a completely different way – its surveillance can only be carried out by SANS and the Juvenile Crime sector of MoI."[35]

The poor implementation of the P/CVE Strategy and the lack of its renewal after 2020 is generally seen to reflect the lack of political priority given to radicalisation in the country, while key institutional actors continue to see P/CVE as the main prerogative of the security actors. At the same time, respondents were generally positive about cooperation between CSOs and institutions[36] and among institutions themselves.[37] Such cooperation is said to take place: 1) when dealing with related (and less sensitive) topics where the relevant stakeholders have more expertise; 2) with regards to security and criminal justice responses;[38] or 3) within project activities.[39] More active implementation of the strategic framework can lead to a strengthening of cooperation between institutions in all aspects of countering and preventing radicalisation.

A central factor shaping current institutional responses to radicalisation is the fact that the understanding and framing of what radicalisation is or is not differs among the stakeholders interviewed, and the boundaries are often blurred. A policy-maker at national level argued that any rejection of official rules should be seen as radicalisation, such as violence on the part of members of the Roma community against state employees or doctors or, more generally, law-breaking behaviour by certain ethnic groups.[40] Violent antigovernment protests have also been mentioned as a form of radicalisation, along with the rejection of vaccination and the spread of conspiracy narratives in relation to child and gender policies that prompted parents to withdraw their children from school.[41] Disinformation campaigns, hate speech and conspiracy narratives affecting societal behaviour as described above (albeit not violent) coming from the far-right spectre have been framed as

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[34] In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 19 February 2021; In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021.

[35] In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021.

[36] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 12 February 2021.

[37] In-person interview with female representative of the State Agency for Child Protection conducted on 15 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for Child Protection conducted on 22 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 19 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

[38] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

[39] In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for Child Protection conducted on 22 January 2021.

[40] In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

[41] Ibid.

radicalisation by most civil society actors. At the same time, the ideological underpinning of some far-right actions (e.g., by football hooligans) is not being recognised as such by some institutional actors. Some civil society stakeholders used the term "social radicalisation" as opposed to religious radicalisation to stress that religion is not the main driver and that domestic radicalisation differs significantly from the "Western" concept of Jihadist recruitment. Meanwhile, religious resurgence among some minority communities has often been conflated with radicalisation, especially among law enforcement institutions. All this raises an important question as to whether the concept of radicalisation, violent or not, a contested term in academic debates as well, is helpful in the Bulgarian context for setting clear priorities for policy and facilitating a common understanding of what phenomena are to be tackled, by whom, and with what measures. A more holistic understanding of prevention among practitioners is also needed, which puts at the centre resilience-building at an early stage, instead of preventing violent attacks.

DRIVERS

RELIGION

Government representatives stressed that religion often acts in combination with other drivers, especially lack of education, sense of isolation and search for identity.[42] "For sure, [religious] factors do push towards such processes, but are they the sole factors?... It is much easier to recruit a supporter if the person in question is uneducated, does not have a perspective and is frustrated by [the presence or lack thereof of] statehood and the attitude towards them."[43]

Institutional responses vis-à-vis religion as a driver of radicalisation have predominantly addressed radicalisation among Muslims, especially in segregated Roma communities. At the same time, the role and meaning of religion and religious resurgence as part of broader and more complex identity dynamics is little understood (such as trends of religious conversion of some Roma communities towards Evangelism or towards Islam – and Salafism more specifically) (see Mancheva & Dzhekova, 2017).[44]

Representatives of CSOs and academia believe that radicalisation among Roma Muslims is overstated, and that religiosity is often wrongly conflated with radicalisation: "What I've seen in Pazardzhik are religiously deeply confused people. I have interviews with tens of people in the villages around Stolipinovo and Pazardzhik who are Muslims and believe in saints, light candles, eat pork, drink alcohol, and, you see, we say that they are radicalising. It simply isn't true. We as state and society are absolutely incapable of identifying this […] These are not Jihadists."[45]

There is recognition among both state bodies and non-governmental actors that Muslim communities in Bulgaria are not homogeneous and some communities are more susceptible to risk than others:[46] "Bulgarian Muslims are not a base for radicalisation; rather, there is a renouncing of such ideas. But the Muslim community is not homogeneous and there are groups that are more prone to such influences, which live in more isolated regions and whose self-perception is in contradiction with the societal perception of their ethnic identity."[47]

Religiosity and low level of education are often discussed together by institutional representatives as factors of vulnerability among the Roma community: "Especially in Roma ghettoes, people are quite uneducated and this contributes to their being easily manipulated on religious grounds. This should

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[42] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for National Security conducted on 17 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 19 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 15 February 2021.

[43] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

[44] In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 15 January 2021.

[45] Ibid.

[46] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021; Online interview with female representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 12 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

[47] In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

not be ignored."[48] According to a representative of a Roma CSO, however, "in the Roma community religiousness has always been strong. Everyone needs to identify with something bigger and that's a fact."[49]

Respondents noted that religion as a driver for radicalisation could be enabled or disabled by three other contextual elements: Islamic education abroad;[50] the role of the Chief Muftiate as important and positive;[51] and the monitoring of Muslim gatherings at risky places by the security services.[52]

A consistent point among representatives of the civil society, but also emphasised by two respondents from the judiciary, is that religious "radicalisation" can happen not only among Muslim groups but also along Christian religious lines; examples were given of the detrimental influence of some protestant denominations among the Roma but also on society as a whole by way of misinformation campaigns and narratives in relation to children's rights ("the new child strategy will have your children taken from you"), domestic violence ("the Istanbul Convention will allow gay marriages"), etc. This has reportedly caused "radical" behaviour among members of society (e.g., Roma parents rushing to take their children from school after rumours they would be taken from them and given for adoption or even trafficked to Norway).[53] This is to be seen not in the classic sense of violent radicalisation, but as fuelling a social polarisation process that can seriously undermine trust and have a corrosive effect on democratic institutions.

ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION

Interviewees primarily perceive poverty in terms of being a factor that could possibly lead to radicalisation, but not specifically as a driver of certain institutional responses in and of itself. This general tendency aligns with the emphasis of stakeholders on whether poverty is a cause for radicalisation or not. In this sense, although stakeholders agree that poverty and economic deprivation are contextually important for radicalisation trends in different parts of the country, not all stakeholders consider this factor to be decisive in one's commitment to radical views and/or violent actions. On the one hand, some institutional representatives are reluctant to support the asserted importance of poverty as a driver of radicalisation, mostly citing examples of poor communities across the country that have demonstrated as negligible to no tendencies for radicalisation and violent actions.[54] Along these lines, stakeholders working with children prone to radicalisation attest that "poverty is not a criterion" and that "more and more children with a stable financial status" are susceptible to the influences of radical ideas (including from the far-right

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[48] In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

[49] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

[50] Online interview with female representative of the social services conducted on 19 January 2021.

[51] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021; Online interview with female representative of the academia conducted on 15 February 2021.

[52] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

[53] In-person interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 17 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

[54] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

spectrum).[55] On the other hand, different experts highlight that economic deprivations are a key component underpinning marginalisation, which is more of a primary risk factor for potential radicalisation and as such should be properly addressed and incorporated into the institutional approaches to tackling VE.[56]

Experts link poverty to radicalisation in the context of its interdependence with social marginalisation, ethnicity and undereducation. Institutional representatives and academics identify such factors as a multidimensional driving force of marginalisation and exclusion, which in turn create vulnerabilities towards radical ideologies. Of key importance in the interpretation of poverty as a factor for radicalisation is ethnicity. The data reveals that the interviewed institutional representatives and academic experts associate poverty with radicalisation almost exclusively when it concerns members of the Roma communities in Bulgaria. These communities supposedly become religiously radicalised in their search for financial/material support and as a way to acquire a sense of belonging in a generally alienating social environment. Thus, when analysing the impacts of poverty on institutional responses to radicalisation, one cannot treat it separately from ethnic vulnerabilities.

TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES

Territorial and social inequalities are generally recognised by the interviewees as contributing and/or enabling factors of radicalisation rather than as drivers or direct causal factors. Their impact may vary with respect to the different manifestations of radicalisation – adding to the risk of some forms of radicalisation, while having less significant implications for others. Territorial and socio-economic inequalities, as contributors to radicalisation, form a complexity of factors, which are not only intertwined with one another, but are also in an interplay with other drivers such as poverty, religion and political discontent. There are three main territorial and social factors that emerge as having a considerable potential to play a part in radicalisation processes: diminished state presence in certain areas and territories, social marginalisation/exclusion, and low educational status (discussed separately as a recurring theme across drivers below), including educational segregation along ethnic lines. The impact of these three factors on institutional approaches and responses to radicalisation may be inferred from the data that states withdrawal and social marginalisation could have significant and far-reaching implications for institutional responses to radicalisation with respect to the territories and groups they affect.

The withdrawal of state institutions from certain areas, coupled with their "ghettoisation", emerges as a factor of radicalisation. The areas in question are primarily isolated neighbourhoods and territories that are predominantly inhabited by members of the Roma minority. Such territories can be found in various parts of the country, but the majority seem to be located in Southern Bulgaria, particularly in the provinces of Plovdiv (including the town of Asenovgrad), Pazardzhik, Stara Zagora, and Sliven (including the town of Nova Zagora).[57] With respect to Northern Bulgaria, the province of Pleven has been cited as a prominent

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[55] In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021.

[56] In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; Online interview with female representative of the academia conducted on 15 February 2021.

[57] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 11 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

example.[58] The degree of state withdrawal varies and may include, but is not limited to, a lack or diminished presence of police authorities, medical services, educational infrastructure, social services, as well as road and communal infrastructure.[59] This diminished state presence could be understood as a form of territorial inequality. It increases the risk of radicalisation by exacerbating socio-economic inequalities and search for alternative "systems" to regulate social relationships. It engenders distrust in state institutions, which leads to an alienation of the inhabitants of these territories from state institutions and official norms, rendering the former more vulnerable to succumbing to alternative structures, including radical religious structures.[60] In this respect, one institutional representative contended: "In fact, one of the causes of radicalisation and this alienation is the fact that state institutions have left these territories."[61]

Several stakeholders also noted that, even within the same Roma "quarters", internal social inequalities and processes of segregation are deepening and becoming more visible.[62] While recent research shows that the overall educational status of the Roma population is increasing along several key indicators, the inequality gap between different Roma communities is widening.[63] When asked which Roma "quarters" are more resilient, an academic expert noted: 1) smaller quarters; 2) more people have secondary, vocational or high education; 3) the state has not abandoned them; 4) there is no ghettoisation. Educational segregation was also mentioned as an important factor to be considered when grasping the overall context and vulnerabilities of these localities.[64]

State withdrawal appears to have far-reaching consequences for institutional responses to radicalisation with respect to these isolated territories, as prevention measures may not sufficiently capture the areas where there is diminished presence of state institutions.[65] For example, initiatives implemented by the Ministry of Education aimed at enhancing digital literacy and critical thinking skills that contribute to individual resilience do not reach the vast majority of children and young people in these territories, although they are the main target group.[66]

Stakeholders maintain that in many territories where state institutions are barely present there is a "rupture" between the inhabitants of these areas and the established socio-political order.[67] This generates uncertainties, which reinforce existing stereotypes and prejudices against the members of this marginalised group, including on the part of state officials (Ibid.). It is these prejudices that could be the underlying

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[58] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

[59] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

[60] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 11 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

[61] In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

[62] In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; Online interview with female representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 15 February 2021.

[63] In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 11 February 2021; Online interview with female representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 12 February 2021.

[64] In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

[67] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021.

reason why, as one institutional representative points out, in responding to (perceived) threats of radicalisation in territories and areas where historically there has been diminished institutional presence, the state tends to prioritise the establishment of structures of the internal security apparatus.[68] The cases of the towns of Asenovgrad and Nova Zagora are examples of this securitised state response: with a view to countering the spread of religious and political far-right radicalisation among the members of the Roma communities in these towns, the presence of police officials was intensified. However, even at the time there were government representatives who recognised that this approach was ineffective and that what was needed in reality was increased institutional presence, in particular of offices of the social services.[69]

Social marginalisation and social exclusion also emerge as factors that may play a part in radicalisation processes. The experience of social marginalisation/exclusion produces certain psychological effects, such as feelings of underprivilege, rejection by the larger society, and lack of development opportunities. This leads to an increased susceptibility to the messages of those that propagate radical ideas, but seemingly offer a recourse where the psychosocial needs of marginalised/excluded individuals (for a sense of belonging, recognition and respect) can be met.[70]

It has been noted that marginalisation influences state responses to radicalisation and VE through the stereotypes it engenders and perpetuates; namely, it has the effect of limiting the focus of counter- and prevention measures to marginalised groups in a stigmatising way.[71] For example, a CSO representative emphasised that marginalised groups were more readily perceived as being at a higher risk of radicalisation: "We more easily 'spot' radicalisation in groups, such as Bulgarian Muslims and the Turkish and Roma minorities, than we recognise radicalisation that is taking place in [majority groups, such as adherents of] Protestantism, Orthodoxy."[72]

DIGITAL LITERACY AND THE INTERNET

The Internet and social networks have been pointed out by government stakeholders as a key channel for radicalisation of youth in Bulgaria.[73] However, there is little academic or practical knowledge on how digitalisation affects youth radicalisation. Non-governmental actors especially stress the role of the Internet in spreading far-right ideologies and misinformation campaigns about children's rights by protestant organisations.[74] Bulgarian Roma working in Western Europe and returning home are considered more exposed to online propaganda when abroad.[75] According to a civil servant in a child protection agency, the Internet is a factor for more intelligent youths with more opportunities, as they usually are children

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[68] In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

[69] Ibid.

[70] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021; Online interview with female representative of academia conducted on 15 February 2021.

[71] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021.

[72] Ibid.

[73] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

[74] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

[75] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 17 February 2021.

whose other more basic needs have been met.[76] Representatives of the national police gave an example of a youth in Plovdiv who allegedly was assembling an improvised bomb in 2019 and was radicalised via the Internet.[77] A key actor with a role in this respect identified by both social workers and law enforcement is the Chief Directorate for Combating Organised Crime under the MoI,[78] as it is in charge of monitoring dangerous online content.

As regards digital literacy, most civil society stakeholders agree that these skills are lacking among youths: "Attracting the interest of the youngsters happens through social networks and if they are unable to recognise such behaviour, there is danger. They do not have such skills."[79]

A government official noted that the Ministry of Education's programmes on digital literacy and critical thinking had to a great extent failed to reach vulnerable communities, while inequalities related to digital literacy were to become insurmountable.[80] CSO representatives also stressed the issue of digital literacy and critical thinking deficits and the lack of prevention and resilience-building approaches in schools, not only vis-à-vis vulnerable communities such as the Roma, but in the general youth population.[81] A Roma civil society activist mentioned a pilot programme focusing on "digital intercultural lessons" involving youths, social mediators and parents as a step in the right direction.[82] An education ministry official said that the shift to online classes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic may have actually increased the level of information among parents and youths.[83]

A recent study by the Centre for the Study of Democracy, funded by the EC Internal Security Fund Police (ISFP) programme project YouthRightOn,[84] focused specifically on youths (aged 14-19) and their vulnerabilities towards far-right narratives online and shed light on the opportunities to effect positive change through a combination of digital and offline engagement and communication campaigns (CSD, 2021). The analysis shows that factors influencing the receptiveness of young people towards far-right ideas and the acceptance of violence include: exposure to hostile online content combined with its uncritical "consumption", lower level of trust in family and negative self-image, previous exposure to violence (in school or neighbourhood), political discontent and disenfranchisement, need for social belonging through civic activism for some, and lack of knowledge of any positive social engagement channels, among others. Anti-minority narratives are accepted by the majority of young people, especially anti-Roma narratives. While approval of violence is relatively low, it is mainly associated with "vigilantism" against migrants or actions against Roma.

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[76] In-person interview with female representative of the State Agency for Child Protection conducted on 15 January 2021.

[77] In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021.

[78] In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for Child Protection conducted on 22 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

[79] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 8 February 2021.

[80] In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

[81] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 17 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

[82] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

[83] In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of Education and Science conducted on 29 January 2021.

[84] Available at: https://youthrighton.com/ [Accessed on July 2021].

The data served as a baseline for designing a social media campaign "Find Another Way"[85] engaging young people around positive/alternative messages and building core social and emotional skills in school in order to render youngsters more resilient to manipulation and hostility and empower them to take constructive action. The results of the campaign are largely positive, yet such efforts remain isolated and unsustainable if not integrated within a systematic multi-agency approach to resilience-building (CSD, 2021).

POLITICAL GRIEVANCES

Political grievances and religion are the two groups of drivers of radicalisation that best illustrate the distinction between institutional perceptions and attitudes of civil society and academia. According to most stakeholders, including representatives of the MoI, a problem in Bulgaria is that far-right ideologies have been quietly mainstreamed in institutional behaviour:[86]

"With the entry of patriotic formations into government these things occurred normally. Society no longer perceives this as radical behaviour and for them it is rather normal. And this is very frightening. It is real radicalisation and it is a quiet and dangerous form. This is not a terrorist act, a military coup – it is something much more frightening and subtle."[87]

In the words of a civil servant from the MoI, the far right is present in the rhetoric of some political parties, which in turn reflects upon law enforcement.[88] The affinity for a "hard approach" expressed in the rhetoric of some political parties is linked to nostalgia for old Communist times and may in fact be linked to a renouncement of the current model as too liberal. A representative from academia agreed: "This is [the former] State Security, these are no 'patriots'. The 'patriots' have one mask for the crowd and an entirely different mask for behind the scene."[89]

In Bulgaria, as in many other European countries, far-right radicalisation is often linked to football hooligans. But one specific feature of football hooliganism in Bulgaria is that hooligans are often used by political parties for political goals (paid involvement in protests, sabotaging antigovernment protests, sparking ethnic conflict) (Dzhekova et al., 2016). This suggests that institutional responses to far-right radicalisation expressed in football hooliganism may be reluctant. A law enforcement representative argued that during the COVID-19 crisis, football fans participated in protests because they honestly wanted to be allowed to attend football games, while dismissing any linkage with fans of a recent attack on LGBTI people in Plovdiv, which was reported by the media to have been organised by supporters of a local football team: "Football hooligans' aggression is directed at supporters of other teams, not at those with different sexual orientation… Rather, what we see is a conservation of these groups, they are in stagnation."[90]

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[85] Available at: https://anotherway.bg/ [Accessed on July 2021].

[86] In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 8 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

[87] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 8 February 2021.

[88] In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

[89] In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

[90] In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021.

In a similar vein, a security expert claimed that potentially vulnerable communities did not feel oppressed vis-à-vis their political rights, and this is one reason why they do not go on the radicalisation path.[91] This line is challenged by interviewees from CSOs active in Roma matters:

"Of course, the lack of political representation is a factor [for radicalisation]. If there was such a mechanism, when confronted with a problem to seek a solution via representation in the institutions it would be considerably safer. This is well observed in the Turkish community. The fact that it has its representation in the MRF party turns out to be extremely significant. For the ordinary Turk it is much more achievable, when there is a problem in the community, to join the political life because he has a party and representation, rather than to seek participation in extreme religious movements."[92]

CULTURAL FACTORS

According to institutional representatives, Bulgarian society is traditionally very tolerant and peaceful – hence resilient to radicalisation –, which is exemplified by the century-long peaceful coexistence of different religious groups in the country.[93] At the same time, the majority of interviewed state representatives shared that in their opinion the Roma people have a "different way of life" which can be a factor, though some insisted that Roma communities are not homogeneous or that culture interplays with other factors as well.[94] Civil society and academia representatives argued that VE has no direct link to the cultural characteristics of a group: radicalisation manifests itself in minority groups as well as in the majority; in the majority it is far more widely expressed, yet society sees it much more easily in minorities due to prejudice.[95] An example was given with the non-payment of monthly electricity bills in the largest Roma neighbourhood in Plovdiv, Stolipinovo, which is often considered behaviour typical of the Roma communities. When the local grid operator invested in personalised meters, the percentage of bills paid rose sharply, and currently the regular payment rate is higher than in many Bulgarian neighbourhoods.[96] Experts agreed that the cultural and identitarian complexities of minority communities are not well understood or accepted among state institutions or society at large, and this is reflected at multiple levels, including, for example, in the national census, which does not provide flexibility for multiple self-identifications along lines of nationality, ethnicity and religion.[97] According to academic experts, these perceptions of the majority, also seen in present-day institutions, can be traced historically:

"The fear of the complex identity dates far back. If we turn back to Ferdinand I [of Bulgaria, reign 1908-18] and the laws he adopted then – repressive laws against Roma and Muslims. Actually most Roma neighbourhoods in the cities were destroyed. The fear of Roma radicalisation dates back to these times,

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[91] In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

[92] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

[93] In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

[94] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021.

[95] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021.

[96] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 8 February 2021.

[97] In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

when suffrage was taken from these people, and orders were issued for de-concentration of their neighbourhoods."[98] "The Roma people were discriminated against by the Ottoman Empire. They didn't have the millet status, as Orthodox people in the Balkans did – they were in between, even if they did adopt Islam, Muslim Roma did not have equal rights with other Muslims. This is a practical cultural policy that is not linked to Islam… This, in my opinion, continues today, it's a continuity of the last centuries."[99]

Culture as a factor for perceptions of radicalism is not only attributed to local minority groups. A representative of the judiciary gave an example of how, following the crisis with mixed migration flows from the Middle East and Africa towards Western Europe in 2015 and onwards, perception of migrant groups as having a different culture may have led to radicalisation among nationalist and far-right groups in Europe.[100]

TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS

Institutional and organisational perceptions of transnational dynamics as drivers of radicalisation go along several main lines: the rise of IS and the movement through Bulgaria of foreign terrorist fighters returning to Europe; the 2012 Sarajevo terrorist attack as an example of an actual foreign involvement in a terrorist act; conservative disinformation campaigns coming from Russia and protestant factors in the United States; Salafist influences over Bulgarian Roma working in Western Europe and the influence of Turkey on Bulgarian Muslims. Some stakeholders stress that Bulgarian Muslims are generally not vulnerable to detrimental international influences; there is no risk for Bulgaria from returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and from Russian misinformation campaigns. Government stakeholders generally recognise the impact IS has had internationally, including potential influences in Bulgaria:

"With all these processes happening around us, we cannot be isolated. Many of those preachers who come here actually come from Western Europe, they are recruited in Austria, France, Belgium, and there they provide refuge to [Bulgarian] Roma who go for work there and include them in some groups. They give them shelter, food, find jobs for them with the idea that these people will have some commitments."[101] "The conflicts in the Middle East [are a factor]. While some years ago there were foreign fighters' movements towards the conflict zones, now the problem comes from their return and interaction with local vulnerable communities."[102]

Representatives of the Prosecutor's Office noted that global terrorism trends are inevitably echoed in Bulgaria: the migration wave that passed through Bulgaria after 2015 and the movement of FTFs through our territory has led to a rise in the religiously-motivated crimes linked to terrorism.[103]

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[98] Ibid.

[99] Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

[100] In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

[101] In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021.

[102] Ibid.

[103] In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 19 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

The role of Turkey for the Bulgarian Muslim communities has also been discussed by respondents:

"The MRF [Movement for Rights and Freedoms, the ethnic Turkish party in Bulgaria] and the Chief Mufti Office has been linked to Sunni Islam and the official policies of Turkey […] that is since 1908 when Bulgaria declared its independence… All Islamic communities in the country and the Chief Mufti Office are to be subordinate to the supreme Islamic leader… Turkey recognises our independence, but at the expense of these Islamic principles."[104]

Another line of potential impact of transnational dynamics on Bulgaria is the conservative misinformation campaigns about liberal values:

"The lines of influence are two – Russia and America. In the last few years they have worked in sync on a disinformation war that is going on and is not receding in the future. They are linked on the grounds of religion [Christianity]."[105] "Specifically regarding the [campaign against the ratification of the] Istanbul Convention, we had really bad luck. The bad luck was in that the interests of Russia, Trump and Catholicism aligned… and the sabotage [was successful]."[106]

There were government stakeholders with an alternative opinion vis-à-vis the impact of transnational factors in general. They noted Bulgarian Muslims were generally immune to harmful (extremist) influences, there was no risk from foreign fighters passing through Bulgaria on their return to Western Europe and that there was no proven role of Russia in antiliberal campaign.[107]

EDUCATION AS A RECURRING THEME ACROSS DRIVERS

There is widespread consensus among the interviewees that a low level of education is an important vulnerability factor when it comes to potential radicalisation.[108] This has two dimensions that respondents emphasised to a varying degree – the low level of education among marginalised minority groups but also the overall low quality of education and its effect on society as a whole. More specifically, it is seen as an enabling factor of radicalisation – correlating with a diminished ability to think critically, thus rendering an individual more easily manipulated and making it easier for radical ideas to take hold.[109] Institutional stakeholders perceive the low level of education as the main source of vulnerability related to education, including illiteracy and an inability to speak Bulgarian, among the Roma population.[110] At the same time,

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[104] Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

[105] Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021.

[106] Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

[107] In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for National Security conducted on 25 February 2021.

[108] Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for National Security conducted on 25 February 2021.

[109] In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.; Online interview with female representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 12 February 2021; Online interview with female representative of the social services conducted on 19 January 2021.

[110] Online interview with female representative of the academia conducted on 15 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021.

experts from academia and civil society critiqued as a major vulnerability the systematic and long-standing inability of an unreformed educational system to develop the cognitive abilities and independent thinking of society at large, which fuels polarisation and susceptibility to simplistic narrative frames and worldviews.[111]

An interesting example demonstrates how the increased vulnerability to misinformation of a Roma community in the town of Blagoevgrad, brought about by the low level of education of its members, led local institutions to step up inter-institutional cooperation. A health mediator working with local Roma communities pointed out that it was only the inhabitants of the most marginalised of the three Roma neighbourhoods in Blagoevgrad that were influenced by narratives disseminated by radical opponents of the draft National Strategy for the Child 2019-2030, arguing that children would be taken away from families for arbitrary reasons.[112] The average level of education in the so-called "Predel mahala" (or "End Quarter") is very low, which the interviewee believed was a critical factor increasing vulnerability to such messages. If left unaddressed, this could have led to parents to withdraw children from school. In seeking to prevent this outcome, the health mediator's institution utilised and built upon existing mechanisms of cooperation with educational mediators. Furthermore, it successfully employed techniques for bolstering counter-propaganda narratives, thus reassuring the parents of their children's safety in educational institutions and assuaging their fears.[113]

Education, or lack thereof, was mentioned as a factor in far-right radicalisation, too: "I see the low level of education as leading to participation in such [far-right] groups… To me, education is the number one factor […] Over the years, the figure of the teacher started to fade, because of low pay."[114]

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[111] Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of Education and Science conducted on 29 January 2021; In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021.

[112] Online interview with female representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 12 February 2021.

[113] Ibid.

[114] In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of Education and Science conducted on 29 January 2021.

CONCLUSION

Bulgaria's response to countering and preventing radicalisation has been influenced by both international and domestic factors, as well as the interplay between them. Strengthening of counter-terrorism focusing mostly on the neutralisation of security threats emanating from abroad was prompted by the terrorist attacks in New York on 11 September 2001 and subsequent attacks in Europe. The 2012 Sarafovo bus bombing, the only terrorist attack in recent Bulgarian history, also resulted in strengthening of the counter-terrorism framework. Subsequent intensification of terrorist acts in Europe in the 2010s and especially in 2014-2016, coupled with the emergence of IS and the foreign fighter phenomenon, brought the issues of radicalisation and VE centre stage. As the understanding of radicalisation in the EU evolved in response to these events and the need for a wider, whole-of-society approach including prevention was recognised, this expanded the scope of the Bulgarian Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020). However, while the Strategy establishes a comprehensive whole-of-society approach to countering and preventing radicalisation, its prevention pillar in particular has not been updated in practice.

Bulgaria's Muslims have been largely resilient to the entry of more conservative representations of Islam, with only isolated instances of Islamist radicalisation emerging in the most marginalised Muslim Roma communities. The fact that Roma communities have exhibited the most publicised case of Islamist radicalisation has led to an undue focus on this community as a potential breeding ground for extremism. Importantly, deep-rooted prejudice among the majority Bulgarian population against the Roma community has coloured the institutional response to potential radicalisation. On the other hand, the far right has been more dynamic, including a variety of actors espousing far-right rhetoric (including as part of the government since 2017) online and offline. Since 2018, a tendency towards more covert means of influence, mainly over social media campaigns and disinformation, has been observed in the far right. While some institutional representatives recognise far-right radicalisation as a risk, the general tendency is to consider it a less pressing threat, having limited potential to trigger violence. In contrast, civil society has warned that the mainstreaming and normalisation of far-right narratives and more decisive action against hate speech and hate crimes need urgent attention, while considering Islamist radicalisation as driven by factors such as poverty and social exclusion. The presence of far-right parties in government has meant that there is no political will to focus on far-right extremism.

The understanding of macro factors among institutional and civil society actors differs along key aspects, while aligning along others. The Internet is considered by all stakeholders as an important medium for radicalisation, which is very potent considering the lack of media literacy and critical thinking skills among significant portions of Bulgarian youths. Poverty and social exclusion are accepted by different stakeholders as background factors contributing to vulnerability, especially to Islamist radicalisation. On the other hand, some respondents have also underscored that poverty is not a necessary pre-condition, emphasising that far-right radicalisation is often displayed by youths who are not disadvantaged and many other marginalised communities have not shown any tendencies towards extremism. Territorial inequalities, translated in the absence of state institutions, social exclusion and educational underachievement, are considered as important factors behind potential radicalisation in

disadvantaged communities. In addition, the encapsulation of these communities and the absence of state institutions can make it particularly difficult for targeted prevention efforts to reach them. Transnational dynamics are considered to have the potential to affect radicalisation trends in Bulgaria.

When it comes to religion, institutional representatives tend to more often emphasise it as a driving factor behind radicalisation, although religious resurgence is often conflated with radicalisation. In contrast, respondents among civil society consider it as a secondary factor, while emphasising the more central role of far-right ideology and populism, marginalisation and social exclusion. Another dividing line is the political grievances factor, which is largely discounted by institutional interviewees. In contrast, civil society considers that addressing political grievances, lack of political representation and supporting informal authoritative figures in marginalised communities can be important to preventing the spread of extreme narratives.

More importantly, there are varying and sometimes conflicting norms on what radicalisation is. One of the key findings of this research is that a shared, evidence-based understanding of the concept of radicalisation, how it is manifested and what drives it is yet to be developed among state and societal institutions. Academic research on the issue is scarce, while there is practically no expert-led public or academic debate. This is also reflected in the way different stakeholders interpret the role of different macro factors as drivers of potential radicalisation and violent estremism. This is a major obstacle for setting clear priorities for policy and facilitating a common understanding of what phenomena should be subject to intervention, by whom and to what end. There is a strong need for a wide and evidence-based stakeholder debate on this issue in order to develop a common and more holistic understanding of radicalisation and the role of society as a whole in prevention to avoid the implementation of P/CVE measures that will only fuel societal polarisation.

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INTERVIEWS

State institutions

Online interview with female representative of the social services conducted on 11 January 2021.

In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021.

In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

In-person interview with female representative of the child protection services conducted on 15 January 2021.

Online interview with female representative of the social services conducted on 19 January 2021.

In-person interview with male representative of the child protection services conducted on 22 January 2021.

In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of Education and Science conducted on 29 January 2021.

In-person interview with four police representatives (all males) from Ministry of the Interior, conducted on 12 February 2021.

In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021.

In-person interview with male representative of the security services conducted on 25 February 2021.

In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 19 February 2021.

In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

Civil society organisations

Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021.

Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 8 February 2021.

Online interview with female representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 12 February 2021.

Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 17 February 2021.

Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

Online interview with female representative of the academia conducted on 15 February 2021.

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.