



CONNEKT

COUNTRY PAPER ON MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

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

BULGARIA

Stefan Ralchev, Nadya Stoynova



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BULGARIA

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Stefan Ralchev, Center for the Study of Democracy

Nadya Stoynova, Center for the Study of Democracy

Editor: Tasmin Chirchi

Reviewers: Lurdes Vidal

Editorial team: Mariona Rico, Aida Traidi and Melania Brito

Layout: Núria Esparza

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Online Conservative Communities

Stefan Ralchev, Nadya Stoyanova

Introduction

Far-right extremist rhetoric and actions are espoused by a spectrum of actors in Bulgaria which roughly fall in the following three categories (Dzhekova et al., 2015): political parties, non-parliamentary activist organisations and informal groupings. The political unrest and wide-spread protests which the country experienced in 2013-2015, coupled with the migrant crisis, provided a suitable environment for the re-ignition of some existing far-right organisations and the emergence of new actors, paramilitary formations which have become known in the public domain for their patrolling activities near the Bulgarian border with Turkey. Similarly, the parliamentary elections of 2017 resulted in the entry into government of the far-right coalition Patriotic Front (PF), which marked the first time in which a nationalist far-right formation became a decisive factor in the executive. This presence resulted in lack of political will to tackle right-wing radicalisation, while at the same time intensifying the already present process of normalisation of hate speech in the public domain (Ivanova, 2018). Despite the rise in incidents involving right-wing nationalists, behind which formal and informal organisations were visibly sitting, counter-intelligence, police and investigative institutions avoided working against right-wing radicalism.¹ The last parliamentary elections of November 2021 resulted in the entry into Parliament of another far-right party, Vazrazhdane (Revival). In parallel, along with the rise in prominence of political actors in the far-right spectrum, research underscores the persistence of widespread prejudice against certain minority groups, mainly the Roma and LGBTQI people (Todorov, 2021), which can readily be exploited by right-wing extremist actors.

Political parties in the far-right ideological spectrum use hate speech against different minorities, most often the Roma but also Muslims, refugees and migrants and LGBTQI people. Generally, however, political parties and their members eschew engagement in violence or direct calls to violence. The use of violence is largely associated with other, more informal, right-wing extremist actors (the second category mentioned above) but is very difficult to estimate in its full extent.² (Apart from the nationalist parties represented in parliament, there are parties in the country that have a small number of supporters and are prone to demonstrative violence against various minority groups in order to gain popularity.³) However, exploiting popular prejudice, political actors proactively organised or took part

¹ In-person interview with an independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

² For detailed information on, see Amnesty International Bulgaria (2015) *Missing the point: Lack of adequate investigation of hate crimes in Bulgaria*. Sofia: Amnesty International, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur15/0001/2015/en/>; Dzhekova, R. et al. (2017) *Situational Assessment of Extremist Trends*. Sofia: CSD.

³ In 2021, supporters from a Facebook group of the Bulgarian National Union (BNU) led by its leader Boyan Rasate attacked Rainbow Hub, an LGBTQI community centre, going as far as to hit one of the activists. See for example "Агитка на БНС, предвождана от Расате, нападна и изпотроши ЛГБТИ център [BNP outfit led by Rasate attacked and vandalised LGBTQI centre]", Mediapool, 30 October 2021, available at <https://www.mediapool.bg/agitka-na-bns-predvozhdana-ot-rasate-napadna-i-izpotroshi-lgbti-tsentar-news328225.html>.

in inflammatory events (e.g. protests against the so-called “Roma criminality”) which have high potential for resulting into violence.

The third category of actors, online and offline informal groupings, is the focus of the current research. Recent developments in Bulgaria have indicated that far-right actors are increasingly engaging in rallying popular support through spreading propaganda and misinformation, both online and offline and forming alliances with other actors 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, result into protests and ultimately achieve the goal of derailing policy reforms (Karaboev and Angelov, 2018). Subsequently, similar tactics (spread of Russian and other propaganda, fake news and disinformation online resulting in protests) by partially overlapping actors were used in opposition to Covid-19 pandemic measures.

The current report focuses on the intersections between the far-right narratives and actions as expressed in online conservative communities focusing on key novel issues for the far-right, such as protection of traditional family values and opposition to Covid-19 measures. It looks into how macro-level drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism, identified previously by CONNEKT, act at the meso level of these communities and their specific social contexts. The issue of violence and the potential for violence is also explored. The report draws on field research carried out in the period December 2021 through March 2022 and aims to examine the interaction between macro factors and meso-level community dynamics.

Research Methodology

RECAP OF RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

General framework

With the 2013 refugee crisis, Bulgaria has seen a series of significant changes in the macro-level environment. The most serious change is in the factors of international dynamics and political/social discontent. After the peak of the refugee flow through Bulgaria in 2015, nationalist parties assigned the issue top importance. The two major parties at the time, both the ruling GERB and the opposition BSP, adopted many of the nationalist parties' theses on refugees, possibly in an attempt to limit their loss of electorate and the emergence of more radical nationalist parties.⁴ With the sharp decrease in the refugee flow in 2017, the topic of the "demographic threat of Muslim refugees" began to fade.

The second line of rhetoric of nationalist parties, the one against the Roma minority, also started to diminish in appeal. With the opening up of the EU labour market by major countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom, France and others, a process of intensive emigration began, including in Roma communities, and criminal incidents and social conflicts in the country as a whole declined sharply, bringing attention away from the so-called issue of "Roma criminality".⁵ A factor for the diminishing crime rate may have also been the very rapid decline in unemployment and growth in income in the country in the period 2014-2019 (National Statistical Institute, 2020).

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However, new issues of division emerged linked to transnational developments. After the elections in 2017, the victorious party GERB formed a government with the new coalition of nationalists United Patriots. Two initiatives of GERB were the ratification by parliament of the Istanbul Convention and the adoption of the Strategy for the Child (2019-30). But the United Patriots stood firmly against both documents. GERB was forced, after a series of shocks, to give in to the nationalist parties in order to maintain its power, thus encouraging the emergence of a strong anti-European and conservative wave in the country.⁶

With the onset of the pandemic, a macro-level factor linked to political discontent was the opposition to the anti-Covid-19 and vaccination measures. The new opposition formations, fearing that the pandemic would give the GERB government a chance to win the next general elections, openly took sides against lockdowns, wearing of masks and later vaccination.⁷ Particularly active in this regard was the nationalist Vazrazhdane. Its entire 2021 election campaign was developed through groups of its supporters on Facebook and against Covid-19 measures.⁸

⁴ In-person interview with an independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

⁵ In-person interview with an independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

⁶ In-person interview with an independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

⁷ In-person interview with an independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

⁸ In-person interview with an independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

Findings of the CONNEKT macro-level analysis

The results from the macro-level analysis demonstrate that Bulgarian institutions' approach to radicalisation focuses mostly on the (perceived) threat of Islamic radicalisation. The official response can be described as out of sync with actual radicalisation dynamics, as far-right radicalisation can be described as much more dynamic, seen in inputs provided by the civil society. Far-right actors were seen as evolving in terms of structure and tactics, as opposed to a largely stagnating and overstated threat of Islamist radicalisation. Thus widely heterogeneous understanding of what radicalisation constitutes was observed. While far-right radicalisation is generally overlooked by institutional representatives and prioritised by civil society actors, some institutional representatives recognise that right-wing radicalisation needs to be addressed. Similarly, more recent narratives of the right-wing, as well as associations with conservative Christian actors, are recognised as problematic and an indication of radicalisation by both institutional representatives and civil society. However, officially, few measures are taken to counteract far-right radicalisation in its various manifestations. Instead, P-CVE is overly focused on Islamist radicalisation and prioritises law enforcement measures while overlooking the prevention dimension.

MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

The meso-level analysis is an essential part of the empirical core of CONNEKT. By shedding light on the views of community members and local-level institutions and allowing for direct observation of community-level dynamics, the meso-level analysis will enable a more accurate and nuanced understanding of which radicalisation/extremism drivers are the most relevant in regard to the specific communities selected, how they manifest and what impact they have on social interactions. Furthermore, the present inquiry will constitute a bridge between the macro- and individual-level analyses and will help to identify and investigate the interactions and relations which exist between the national, community and individual dimensions.

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RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives of this case study align with the overall objectives of CONNEKT's WP5, namely to analyse a sub-national community-level environment which is conducive to or at risk of violent extremism, and determine factors within the social environment which create conditions for violent extremism. Along these lines, a main research objective of this case study is to examine how the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism identified in the academic literature, and also studied by CONNEKT, function in the target ultra-conservative communities as context of social interaction.

DEFINITION OF MESO-LEVEL INSTITUTIONS AND IDENTIFICATION OF LOCAL ONES

Local-level state institutions

The methodological approach for the present case study involves non-participant observation of public Facebook groups and pages identified using Facebook's instrument CrowdTangle and consulted with experts (see below). The target communities are thus not geographically defined but virtual rather. It

is safe to assume that the most active members and followers in the groups and pages come from larger towns and cities, rather than villages. The conducted interviews include representatives of youth organisations youth formations of political parties. In this light, the identifiable relevant institutions are self-regulatory bodies of Facebook, local authorities and political parties.

CRITERIA USED FOR SAMPLE SELECTION (OF PARTICIPANTS)

For the present case study on online conservative communities the team focused on analysing interactions in online groups and eight semi-structured interviews with representatives of civil society organisations, independent experts and political parties. As a result of the team's consultations with the research coordinators of CONNEKT and the present WP5 on the ethical approach to the research, it was decided that only public Facebook groups and pages shall be observed, in line with ethical standards as defined by the project. Following this decision, Facebook' CrowdTangle instrument was used to identify the five most popular ultra-conservative groups in terms of membership and interactions and the five most popular pages in terms of followers and interactions, both for the period 15 September – 15 December 2021. The groups/pages' names directly indicated affiliation of members with a specific ideology or cause or were active in promoting causes associated with the communities (e.g. traditional family values). CrowdTangle itself suggested associated groups. In parallel, a consultation was held with experts about their view of the most relevant groups/pages, mostly coinciding with the CrowdTangle choice. The groups/pages were organised mainly around two issues prioritised by key far-right political actors, namely the protection of traditional family values from encroachment by liberal "gender ideologies" and opposition of the Covid-19 measures and restrictions.

Interview respondents were selected based on two main criteria, namely: being active in (or at the very least a sympathiser of) the most prominent far-right parties or other conservative civil society organisations; and age (12-30 years of age), considering the target group covered by the CONNEKT project. In some cases, the team suspended the second criterion, as prominent figures in these movements are often older; the independent expert, also not within the target age group, was interviewed for additional data triangulation. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents fit both criteria (five out of eight interviewees were considered were in the age category). One interview carried out is with a young citizen activist, who while not a sympathiser of a specific party is socially active in supporting traditional family values and expresses views in line with those of far-right parties.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The content analysis focused on online interactions in terms of posts and comments found in the most active and popular Facebook group according to CrowdTangle, "Свободата е отговорност" Freedom is responsibility" (focusing on different issues but mostly on opposition of Covid-19 related measures and restrictions) and Facebook page, "David Aleksandrov" (focusing on different issues but mostly on protection of family values) were observed by two independent coders and coded against macro factors as adopted in WP4 of the CONNEKT project. According to the CrowdTangle data collected for the period 15 September – 15 December 2021, the "Freedom is responsibility" group had 12,821 members,

contained 3,696 posts and had 76,708 interactions; the “David Aleksandrov” page had 6,056 followers, contained 160 posts and had 10,771 interactions. According to Facebook’s website, as of May 2022, the “Freedom is responsibility” group had some 13,500 members, and the “David Aleksandrov” page had 6,728 followers.

In addition, a total of eight respondents were interviewed, including three youth activists (two young representatives of two prominent far-right parties, one of whom a leader of the youth chapter of the party and one youth conservative club), one youth sympathiser of a far-right political party, an independent expert, a leader of a conservative non-governmental organisation (not a youth representative) and another representative of a prominent far-right party (not a youth representative) as well as a young citizen activist.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH TOOLS DESCRIPTION

As described above, for the current case study, a triangulation of methods was employed. After consultations with stakeholders, the research team decided that online observation would be applied to online (Facebook) communities as part of the current case study on far-right groups within football and/or MMA clubs. The insights of the online observation would be supplemented with data from semi-structured face-to-face interviews with key individuals active in the respective community. The online observation would aim to answer the following research questions:

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- How do identified macro factors of radicalisation relevant to these communities’ influence and manifest in their interactions and core narratives?
 - How are the contexts identified by CONNEKT present in (or relevant to) these communities?
 - How does the online environment influence interactions between the participants (e.g.citing “right” or “wrong” positions/beliefs/practices picked from social networks; how the content of specific posts correspond to certain comments; how the format of the online environment predispose certain interactions)?
 - What are the common narratives of these communities and how do these common narratives develop and get reproduced in the online space?
 - To what extent is there space to discuss or challenge common narratives of the groups?
 - How popular are the Facebook sites and groups of these communities and how active are participants in them (in terms of posts, likes, shares, comments)?

Only open and publicly accessible Facebook groups and pages would be considered as sources of information. The data gathered was to be used to analyse the narratives espoused and the interactions within the communities, including the role of macro factors of radicalisation in informing narratives and how they manifest in community interactions.

The method employed would be non-participant or unobtrusive observation of the public posts and interactions of the selected communities. The method was chosen in order to mitigate negative outcomes that are likely to occur in the event of revealing the aim of the research. There is widespread

mistrust among the selected communities towards civil society, which is often described as an advocate of the very harmful ideologies that these communities stand against. In addition, non-obstrusive observation would allow the team to observe the organic development of interactions and narratives among the communities.

The observers (coders) would rely on relevance (purposive) sampling of posts/comments. In this thematic approach, the codes used will correspond to the drivers assigned by CONNEKT in the WP5 methodology but also as suggested by CSD for the current case study (online conservative communities): political dissatisfaction, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, social digitalisation. The end result of the observation would be a selection of relevant posts/comments for the case study, with assigned codes (drivers), which will serve as a basis for the data analysis.

In addition to this qualitative aspect of the observation, the team was to make use (as an illustration) of quantitative data offered by CrowdTangle (number of likes, shares, responses, etc.) in order to justify the choice of Facebook groups and pages which will be the subject of the qualitative analysis (see CrowdTangle statistics in Section 2.6).

The team carried out non-participant observation of interactions and content analysis of posts and comments in one public Facebook page and one public Facebook group. "Freedom is responsibility" was observed from 10 to 20 January 2022 and from 23 to 31 January 2022. "David Aleksandrov" was observed from 26 January to 8 February 2022 and from 14 to 20 February 2022.

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Apart from the online observation, the research approach involved semi-structured interviews with representatives of ultra-conservative communities (political parties, youth organisations and online groups). The questionnaire for the interviews was prepared in consultation with research coordinators and comprised questions linked to the relevant macro-level drivers, identified by CONNEKT, as well as specific questions about the respective group and the dynamics of the interviewee's joining it. Six semi-structured face-to-face interviews were held and two sets of written answers to a questionnaire were provided in the period January through March 2022 as follows: activist of Vazrazhdane political party (January); member of Youth Conservative Club civil society organisation (February); member of ROD International association (February); citizen activist (February); youth leader of IMRO political party (February); independent expert (March); member of Vazrazhdane political party (March); member of Vazrazhdane political party (March). The data from the content analysis of posts and comments as well as from interviews was coded to uncover the most relevant macro-factors and their manifestations in community-wide dynamics.

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

One challenge was that Facebook's tool CrowdTangle is not able to scrape content from comments under posts, and for the purpose of this research comments would be the main source of data (they tend to contain more extreme reactions to news published as posts). Because of that, the researchers had to do the observation manually, checking all the posts and comments for the designated time period.

A second important challenge the team encountered when carrying out the non-participant online observation was the inability to carry out the initially envisaged, much longer, period of observation of three months. The problem was that the selected group and page generated very large amounts of content, making it technically impossible to track interactions for longer periods of time due to the pages crashing. As a result, the team opted to shorten the period which was technically feasible. The generation of high volumes of data in the selected page and group, however, meant that there was enough data for the team to analyse with the shorted period as well.

A third challenge encountered by the team related to the initially planned methodology, which involved two coders coding a sample of 10% of the data and later involving a third coder to compare and verify that intercoder differences are within acceptable limits. Ultimately, the plan was to calibrate the approaches of the two coders to minimise inter-coder bias, allowing the team to divide the work. However, upon carrying out the test, it turned out that the two coders, while coding content under the same macro factors, tended to code different data. A repeat of the sample testing showed the same results. Ultimately, the team decided to proceed with two coders going over the same data for the same period of time and subsequently analysing all content coded. This approach was chosen in order to ensure comprehensiveness of the data collected and to avoid coder bias.

A third setback concerned delays in the data collection due to the Bulgarian parliamentary elections in late 2021 and contamination of some of the staff as well as respondents with COVID-19. It was important to postpone the fieldwork until after the elections as political actors relevant to the research were busy with campaigning.

A final difficulty concerned the fact that some interviews were cancelled due to respondents' unwillingness to be associated with the labels "extremism" and "radicalisation". Mistrust of project aims upon was expressed by some prospective responses upon getting acquainted with the consent form for taking part in interviews.

Meso Level Dynamics

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE RESULTS OF THE MACRO LEVEL ANALYSIS

Ultra-conservative groups and their beliefs and behaviour can be analysed within the WP5 pre-defined social context of urban and peri-urban spaces: urban areas where social interactions take place in a dimension of daily relationships. To put things into context, the ultraconservative communities which formed around defence of traditional family values and specifically against legislative initiatives considered to undermine these values, most notably the Istanbul convention and the proposed Strategy for the Child 2019-2030, included a number of diverse actors, such as far-right political actors then in government as well as conservative Christian denominations and associated non-profit organisations (Karaboev and Angelov, 2018). These actors were supported in their opposition by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church⁹ and the Mufti's office.¹⁰ Online support was also rallied against the documents resulting in protests. (Ultimately, the Istanbul convention was ruled as unconstitutional and the proposed Strategy for the Child was withdrawn.)

Upon the withdrawal of the two legislative documents, a new issue around which online conservative communities rallied was in opposition to measures taken to combat and manage the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, a reconfiguration of the opposition against pandemic measures and vaccination was observed in contrast to the issues of the Istanbul convention and the Strategy for the Child.

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What is specific about informal groups organised around right-wing conservative causes is that they often emerge through social networks around certain causes. Over time these groups around causes begin their own life, find new directions and often right-wing nationalist parties begin to borrow these new ideas.¹¹ Two far-right parties emerged as main opponents of all types of measures – the oldest far-right party Ataka and, most prominently, the newest far-right party Vazrazhdane, which managed to gain seats in Parliament in the last elections held in November 2021 (See for example Webcafe, 2021). In addition, as a journalist investigation by Kirkova, Kostadinova and Marchev (Factcheck, 2021) for the initiative Factcheck launched by the Alliance of European Journalists in Bulgaria showed, a number of actors who were active in spreading online misinformation in defence of traditional family values later moved on to do the same with regard to Covid-19 measures and vaccination.

The organisation behind the conservative communities in focus is different – online or within friends' circles. Usually there is no clear leadership in the groups, and the inclination to engage in protest

⁹ "Обръщение на Светия Синод относно Истанбулската конвенция [Address by the Holy Synod on the Istanbul Convention]". Pravoslavie.bg, 22 January 2018. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2p8mncbn> Nevertheless, it should be noted that the position of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church against the Strategy for the Child has not been clearly stated. A position against the document was posted on the official website of the Church but was later withdrawn and argued to be a personal position. See "Скандал в Синода по стратегията за детето [Scandal at the Synod on the strategy for the child]". StandartNews, 12 February 2019, available at <https://www.standartnews.com/balgariya-obshtestvo/skandal-v-sinoda-po-strategiyata-za-deteto-384884.html>

¹⁰ Grand Mufti's Office (11 April 2019). "Национална стратегия за детето 2019-2030 или когато пътят към ада бива постан с „добри“ намерения [National strategy for the Child or when the road to hell is paved with good intentions]". Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3sfzvn5c>; "Главното мюфтийство се обяви против Истанбулската конвенция [The Grand Muftiate declared it is against the Istanbul Convention]". Eurocom, Available at: <https://eurocom.bg/new/glavnoto-miufiistvo-se-obiavi-protiv-istanbulskata-konvencija>.

¹¹ In-person interview with independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

actions is spontaneous.¹² They have found sustainability and a sense of belonging in the virtual realm, giving them the specific online social context.

HOW MACRO LEVEL DRIVERS WORK AT THE MESO- LEVEL STUDIED (THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF FOCUS)?

The main macro-drivers actualised at the meso-level within conservative online communities are political dissatisfaction and transnational dynamics. Another prominent factor was identified, namely the role of the (social) media and social digitalisation.

The core narrative of the online communities examined during this research feature two interconnecting themes that also illustrate how the two macro factors of political dissatisfaction and transnational dynamics interact:

- The Bulgarian political elite is corrupt and inept
- The Bulgarian political elite is executing the agenda of foreign actors, variably pointed out to be the EU, the US, NATO, Big Pharma, all of which are representations of shadow global elites
- Russia is defending traditional family values, as well as itself from the encroachment of the US, the EU and NATO and their “gender ideology”
- The pandemic is planned and executed with the idea of reducing world population and/or controlling leftover population by shadow global elites
- The pandemic is used to limit individual rights and freedoms and thus to usher in a new type of fascism under the guise of public health policy
- The narrative of international elites controlling and exploiting the Bulgarian population through the corrupt national elite is well-established and used by far-right extremist actors in country (CSD, 2019) and elsewhere (Lee, 2021) and as the current research shows has also been employed widely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bulgarian institutions are represented as being controlled by foreign actors and to merely represent as a conduit for their interests:

“MH [Ministry of Health], as part of the Global Health Mafia, financed by the World Bank (read the Federal Reserve of USA – Fed), represented in Bulgaria by the “Ministry of Health”¹³

This narrative of victimisation and being under threat is often observed in far-right discourse and has adapted well to opposition to Covid-19 related measures and restrictions. Not only are these national institutions (and by extension their foreign masters) corrupt and not protecting the national interest, or humanity’s interest, they are actively undermining it by chipping away at individual freedom with the goal of establishing an ever-advancing dictatorship:

¹² In-person interview with an independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

¹³ Post in Facebook group, 15 January 2022.

“But already 100% of people feel that this is not about vaccines, neither about science, nor about the people but about something...which we have all seen during the time of Stalin, Trotsky, Hitler and all other dictators.”¹⁴

The more traditional far-right thesis of the elite’s betrayal not only of inherent values of the Bulgarian people but also of the economic ruin of the country is also often expressed:

“At the moment the EU is exactly this. The West but mainly Germany, bribes the local elite through Eurofunds. The elite gets the country in EU and makes membership an absolute religion, including instituting repression for whoever is against. Going out becomes heresy. Once the country is in, it is sucked out through other mechanisms – local monopolies are bought out, trade chains, unprofitable long-term contracts are concluded which cannot be changed by subsequent governments etc. The EU funds and the highly paid positions in the EU for a handful of bureaucrats are the “bribe”.¹⁵

Similar arguments are presented both online and by respondents with regards to traditional family values, which considered as being under attack. Nevertheless, it should be noted political dissatisfaction is more strongly pronounced in online settings and among those who are not actively socially engaged in proactively advancing their causes offline. Interview respondents, especially those associated with organisations such as far-right political parties or conservative civil society organisations, are less likely to express very strong feelings of injustice.¹⁶ As one respondent stated: “I believe we live in a moderately just country.”¹⁷ Injustice and the presence of double standards for the political elite and the general population are recognised are however viewed as highly problematic.¹⁸ Still, it appears that getting actively involved in political or civil society organisations tempers more radical views by giving a sense that injustices can be addressed by being socially active.

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While respondents also consider traditional family values are under threat due to foreign encroachment in Bulgarian politics,¹⁹ online communities tend to be more radical in emphasising that liberal values of tolerance and respecting and protecting minority rights, which are inherently incompatible with Bulgarian identity are pushed on the population:

“We have to be confident that Bulgaria will be there when the third gender is gone, gone are the several transnational structures which today are leading international geopolitics. There won’t be COVID, climate change, multiculturalism, open society, feminism and gay parades. But we will be here, like we have been for many centuries.”²⁰

¹⁴ Post in Facebook group, 28 January 2022.

¹⁵ Post in Facebook group, 30 January 2022.

¹⁶ Written responses to a questionnaire by the leader of a conservative CSO, February 2022; Written responses to a questionnaire by a member of a conservative youth club, February 2022; In-person interview with a leader of a youth chapter of a prominent far-right party, 24 February 2022.

¹⁷ In-person interview with a leader of a youth chapter of a prominent far-right party, 24 February 2022.

¹⁸ In-person interviews with representatives of a prominent political party (one youth), 27 March 2022.

¹⁹ In-person interview with a citizen activist, February 2022; In-person interviews with representatives (one youth) of a prominent far-right party, 27 March 2022.

²⁰ Post in Facebook group, 15 January 2022.

Transnational dynamics also manifests on the meso level in the fact that the narratives, arguments and specific content shared in online conservative communities are often imported in ranging from citing foreign sources of information (e.g. a video in Italian showing positive tests, which emphasises that the most positive results are of people with various rates of vaccination). Referring to events happening abroad (e.g. protests in different cities around the world against Covid-19 measures) or through repeating arguments originating from abroad.

Opposition against the Strategy for the Child in Bulgaria spread both online and offline the information that the Strategy will make it possible for children to be more easily extracted from their families and given to gay couples in Norway. As an investigation of the Dnevnik newspaper showed very similar allegations were used in other countries in opposition to juvenile justice initiatives (Lehstarska, 2019). Similarly, the Great Reset theory has been spread in other countries and with regard to other disease outbreaks (Fatcheck, 2022).

Another manifestation of the transnational dynamics factor, especially in terms of the protection of traditional values is the presentation of Russia as a defender of traditional values. Nevertheless, there are indications that misinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic originating from Russia has also been spread actively in Bulgaria by one of the most fervent opponents of vaccines and pandemic-related restrictions. Despite being a veterinarian, this opponent of Covid-19 measures was particularly active in Bulgaria but also often appeared on Belorussian TV, where he has been variably represented as a virologist, economist or political scientist. (Bedrov and Lavchiev, 2020).

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As the present research has shown, political dissatisfaction and the use of foreign propaganda and misinformation have been adapted well to support both the causes of opposition to encroachment of liberal values and opposition to COVID-19 measures. On the other hand, the convergence of far-right narratives and religious conservatism has not translated well to the opposition towards COVID-19. There are only limited allusions to religion in online interactions on the topic of the pandemic. On the other hand, religious arguments are often expressed in opposition of encroachment of gender ideologies from the West. Any attempts to challenge the male-female dichotomy is perceived as an affront to the holy order as created by God:

This photo session is targeted and aims at the primordial values and traditions of our nation in order to tarnish them but not only this – it is aimed against the primordial and divine structure of man and the world. It is not at all random.²¹

Another key factor identified in the research is social digitalisation. The growing reliance on accessing information through social media is coupled with algorithms that promote the formation of echo chambers is exacerbated by the general failure of social media platforms to counter the spread of misinformation related to Covid-19 (Milmo, 2021). This failure is particularly pronounced in tackling misinformation in languages other than English (Rishi, 2021). As research has demonstrated “users

²¹ Comment under post in Facebook page on an art project featuring trans models re-enacting classic paintings of the prominent painter Vladimir Dimitrov – the Master.

online tend to prefer information adhering to their worldviews, ignore dissenting information, and form polarised groups around shared narratives” (Cinelli et al., 2021). This has important effects on decision making as research has shown that even in neutral situations people tend to disbelieve others with opposing views even when they are more competent (Marks et al. 2019). In fact, some of the respondents themselves tend to recognise the potential of social media to foster violence.²²

The above dynamics of being exposed to information that only confirms already existing beliefs in examined online communities is coupled with strong demonisation of the mainstream media as another conduit of the foreign agenda. This serves the dual purpose of de-legitimising content contradicting the views of the community and legitimising the “alternative facts” spread within it:

“The world of media is over...get rid of the TV and watch the real alternative news related to the liberation of the people and not on the infliction on them of newer and newer psycho attacks...”²³

It should be noted that despite the concerning messages observed in the online community, outright calls for violence are rare. Instead, most actions that the online community calls for fall in the remit of the legitimate – protests, resignation, investigation and sanctions for the political elite. Protesting as a strategy for achieving goals is particularly referenced both by respondents who are not part of any organisation²⁴ as well as by the online community as evidenced by the numerous shared videos and other content on protest actions against Covid-19 measures taking place around the world.

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Similarly, interview respondents tend to not view violence as a solution for the problems they identify in Bulgarian society. This more moderate position expressed by interviewees can partially be attributed to several factors – the tendency for people to express more extreme views online (Stern, 2018) as well as the fact that as representatives of more organised far-right actors (e.g. political parties and youth clubs), they would tend to eschew violence in comparison to other far-right actors such as skinhead gangs and hooligans (Dzhekova et al., 2015). Respondents associated with political parties and formal clubs not only do not condone violence but directly oppose it as a means of combatting injustice.²⁵ Instead, more legitimate means are emphasised, such as increased control over and sanctioning of unlawful behaviour.²⁶

Some isolated calls for physical violence can nevertheless be found in online interactions, especially directed towards the Bulgarian political elite:

²² In-person interview with a far-right party sympathiser, 12 January 2022; Written responses to a questionnaire by a leader of a conservative CSO, February 2022.

²³ Post in Facebook group, 28 January 2022.

²⁴ In-person interview with a citizen activist, February 2022; In-person interview with far-right party sympathiser, 12 January 2022.

²⁵ In-person interview with two representatives (one youth) of a prominent far-right party, 27 March 2022; Written responses to a questionnaire by a member of a youth conservative club, February 2022; In-person interview with a leader of a youth chapter of a prominent far-right party, 24 February 2022.

²⁶ In-person interview with a member of a prominent far-right party, 27 March 2022.

"I would go even further than this! All who allowed this national treachery should be SHOT (the way they do in China)."²⁷

Nevertheless, it should be noted that while there are no indications of far-right violent radicalisation, the dynamics described above are highly problematic as they bring about and exacerbate already existing societal schisms and polarisation. In addition, while serious violent incidents related to opposition towards initiatives seen as undermining traditional family values or against Covid-19 measures have not taken place, concerning events coming close to violent confrontation have been observed. In the city of Varna, the staff of a mobile vaccination point was verbally assaulted by opponents of vaccination.²⁸ Similarly, protest actions, despite being legitimate, do have the potential to escalate into violence if crowd dynamics are not properly controlled or if protesters are riled up by far-right actors.²⁹ While the protest organised by the Vazrazhdane party's 12 January 2022 did not turn violent, there were unsuccessful attempts to break into Parliament (Mitov, 2022). Similarly, a shared video of protestors from Varna trying to reach the Vazrazhdane protest show threatening behaviour towards police, despite not turning violent.³⁰

In terms of the narratives expressed, the online communities examined tend to focus on specific current events on the global stage and their expressions on the national and local level and thus repeating theses associated with the far-right. Even the most extreme of far-right messages occasionally make it to the communities examined and go unchallenged. One such example was the case with a shared video of Ursula Haverbeck detailing why the Holocaust has never happened.³¹

²⁷ Comment under post in a Facebook group, 19 January 2022.

²⁸ "Няма да им позволим". Пункт за ваксинация е бил нападнат от "антиваксъри" ["We won't let them": vaccination point attacked by anti-vaxxers"]. Svobodna Evropa, 20 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/31468719.html>.

²⁹ There are a number of examples of inflammatory protest actions organised by far-right actors which escalate into violence, such as the case of the Ataka protest in front of the central Sofia mosque.

³⁰ Shared video in Facebook group, 12.1.2022

³¹ Shared video in Facebook group, 26.1.2022

Analysis Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS ON THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

Interviews with participants in conservative informal groups and experts monitoring these processes revealed some common features in the dynamics of the groups. The motivations for their organisation in protest actions on the street emerge mainly on Facebook and among friends at the local level. These are heterogeneous groups, and Facebook appears as a platform of their organisation. Participants perceive themselves as “different” from the rest of society. There are no expressed leaders, as most are horizontal organisations. There are representatives and supporters of far-right parties, but when an everyday issue of common interest arises, the groups begin to produce content and eventually a live event such as a protest occurs. In this sense, on the one hand there are Facebook groups with an ideology, and on the other there is live organisation.

The meso-level analysis shows that the macro drivers also emerging on the meso level are political or social discontent, transnational dynamics and social digitalisation, as expressed in the essence of the observed online groups. In terms of political discontent, what unites these groups are a few basic statements, the most common being the demand for “justice and punishment of politicians”. At the same time, sensitive issues in the far-right discourse in society from the recent past (e.g. the “problematic” Roma minority) are no longer relevant in the presence of new issues (such as the Istanbul Convention, the Child Strategy and Covid-19). Very often conspiracy theories are involved in the groups’ explanation of reality. This is also one of the main lines as concerns the transnational dynamics factor. In this light, the interplay of drivers is a central characteristic, with the most frequent combination being political grievances and international influence. One conclusion of the meso-level analysis is that online communities tend to express their disagreements more radically than what was observed in interviews, which is a manifestation of how the social digitalisation driver plays into their attitudes. This and the fact that Facebook is a basic platform for their organisation for offline action makes this factor highly relevant. Another conclusion from both Facebook groups and interviews is that violence tends to not be endorsed as a legitimate means in pursuing one’s goals and protests are seen as the acceptable way to go. However, risk for extreme behaviour is present, manifested in specific verbal attacks on vaccination points or tensions at anti-government protests.

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO ANALYSIS

The data point to problematic areas which could be addressed in future prevention efforts. Key elements of prevention of potential far-right radicalisation should address rampant political dissatisfaction which leads to extreme distrust towards institutions, including institutions based on expertise (e.g. the Bulgarian Alliance of Doctors). Political dissatisfaction is deeply ingrained in Bulgarian society. As Avramov (2015) has argued, that this has led to development of a “systematic crisis feeling” - the persistent and deep-seated dissatisfaction with the political class, the socio-economic state and living standards in the country observed during transition which persisted after entry in the European Union (EU). Decisive actions and a multi-faceted approach on all levels of society are needed to restore some degree of social trust in institutions and the media, diminishing trust in conspiracy theories.

In addition, the appeal of conspiracy theories, misinformation and fake news has been underscored in debates around the Istanbul Convention, the Strategy for the Child and especially the COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of misinformation thus needs to be tackled by a multifaceted approach. With regard to youth, fostering critical thinking and media literacy is particularly important. Critical thinking is insufficiently prioritised at Bulgarian schools, as shown by the subpar results of the last PISA study, carried out in 2018. The study showed functional literacy rates in Bulgaria are low and have, depending on the specific components either remained stagnant or worsened for the last three editions of the research, carried out in 2012, 2015 and 2018 (Dimitrov, 2018).

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO ANALYSIS

The present research does not indicate that online conservative communities formed in protection of traditional family values and against Covid-19 measures and associated with the far-right actors show significant potential for violent radicalisation. On the other hand, the spread of propaganda and misinformation as well as narratives generally espoused by the far-right narratives to large, receptive audiences online has the potential to bring about worsening of societal polarisation. Supporters of far-right and pro-Russian party Vazrazhdane present the highest risk of being radicalised and of taking to extreme actions, demonstrated in several recent anti-government protests organised by the party.

General Conclusion

Ultra-conservative communities in Bulgaria, online and offline, tend to organise along ad hoc issues of interest, most often “in defence of traditional family values” and against Covid-19 restrictions. Their membership and agenda is often intertwined with that of far-right, populist parties of the day. Facebook serves as a strong platform for their organisation and motivation, including for live protests. The relevant drivers from the macro-level analysis, which are manifested at the meso level and are frequently interplaying, are political grievances, transnational dynamics and social digitalisation. A strong role in the dynamics of meso-level interactions is played by conspiracy theories and Russian propaganda. While violence is not endorsed by these groups, a risk for violent action exists linked to protests organised by them, especially ones associated with the Vazrazhdane party.

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Interviews

In-person interview with a far-right party sympathiser, 12 January 2022.

In-person interview with a leader of a youth chapter of a prominent far-right party, 24 February 2022

In-person interview with a citizen activist, February 2022

In-person interview with an independent expert, 15 March 2022.

In-person interview with a representative of a prominent political party, 27 March 2022.

In-person interview with a representative of a prominent political party, 27 March 2022.

Written responses to a questionnaire by the leader of a conservative CSO, February 2022.

Written responses to a questionnaire by a member of a conservative youth club, February 2022.

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Football supporters

Stefan Ralchev, Lily Yakova, Nadya Stoynova

Introduction

This report presents the results from research on meso-/community-level dynamics among young football supporters in Bulgaria related to processes and risks of radicalisation and violent extremism. It follows up on a macro-level analysis conducted earlier as part of the CONNEKT project and tries to establish what the relations of meso dynamics are to the macro-level drivers setting the frame of the previous research, within the specific social contexts. The targeted communities were online public Facebook groups or pages, and the research was complemented by interviews with football fans of popular clubs. The communities were selected based on previous research by CSD (Dzhekova *et al.*, 2015) and after consultations with stakeholders as part of CONNEKT's Stakeholders Seminar. In addition, in the run-up to the data collection phase for this effort, there were media reports of alleged violence on the part of football fans against vulnerable groups or the police.³² The four macro factors identified to play a role at the meso level are social digitalisation, political grievances, territorial differences and transnational dynamics. One additional driver, specific for the context of football supporters in Bulgaria, was identified, and namely nationalism, often manifesting itself as xenophobia and hate speech. One conclusion of the meso-level analysis is that social networks serve to amplify extreme attitudes among fans; another is that violence is considered a legitimate means to achieve an end. These conclusions will help endorse an adequate prevention approach in the future and select appropriate micro-paths to individual dynamics and drivers for radicalisation and violence among football supporters.

³² See for example "Малките ултраси, вилнели в центъра на Пловдив, скочили заради спонтанен ЛГБТ парад [Young ultras rampaging in the center of Plovdiv jumped because of a spontaneous LGBT parade]", *Trafficnews.bg*, 27 September 2020. Available at: <https://trafficnews.bg/plovdiv/malkite-ultrasi-vilneli-tsentara-plovdiv-skochili-zaradi-190322/>; "56-та вечер на протести: Ултраси нападат полицията, мощни бомби всяка секунда [Ultras attack the police, powerful bombs every second]", *168 Chasa*, 2 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.168chasa.bg/Article/8969365>.

Research Methodology

RECAP OF RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

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.³³ Far-right extremists have inflicted injuries and even death on members of minorities. (Hristova, 2018). Civil society has been particularly vocal in emphasising the threat of far-right radicalisation. The macro-level analysis for Bulgaria, while a number of respondents from law enforcement and the judiciary recognised the threat of far-right radicalisation, showed that few measures targeted towards primary prevention or more systematic sanctioning of far-right violence such as hate crimes have been undertaken (Dzhekova and Stoyanova, 2019). One reason for this is the notion among representatives of institutions that the far-right lacks mobilisation potential towards violence. 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.

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 anti-government protests, sparking ethnic conflict) (Dzhekova et al., 2016). This suggests that institutional responses to far-right radicalisation expressed in football hooliganism may be reluctant. In the macro-level analysis for Bulgaria, one 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. He believed that football hooligans' aggression is mostly directed at supporters of other teams and what we see is a stagnation in these groups.

Other conclusions were that 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. Particularly as regards football supporters, as shared by a respondent from the security services in the macro-level research, there is no longer a hard core of far-right extremists focused on and gravitating towards the fan clubs. There is a significant change in the profile of members, and the characteristics which are cited in different research differ substantially (Dzhekova, Ralchev and Stoyanova, 2021).

MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

The meso-level analysis is an essential part of the empirical core of CONNEKT. By shedding light on the views of community members and local-level institutions and allowing for direct observation of

³³ Ibid.

community-level dynamics, the meso-level analysis will enable a more accurate and nuanced understanding of which radicalisation/extremism drivers are the most relevant in regard to this social group, how they manifest and what impact they have on social interactions. Furthermore, the present inquiry will constitute a bridge between the macro- and individual-level analyses and will help to identify and investigate the interactions and relations which exist between the national, group-level and individual dimensions.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives of this case study align with the overall objectives of CONNEKT's work package (WP5), namely to analyse a sub-national community-level environment which is conducive to or at risk of violent extremism, and determine factors within the social environment which create conditions for violent extremism. Along these lines, a main research objective of this case study is to examine how the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism identified in the academic literature, and also studied by CONNEKT, function in the community as context of social interaction.

DEFINITION OF MESO-LEVEL INSTITUTIONS AND IDENTIFICATION OF LOCAL ONES

The methodological approach for the present case study involves non-participant observation of public Facebook groups and pages identified using Facebook's instrument CrowdTangle and consulted with experts from law enforcement and independent observers (see below). In this light, the identifiable relevant meso-level institutions/stakeholders/communities are football supporters of specific teams; factions within supporters of a team; metropolitan police; neighbourhoods; and towns.

CRITERIA USED FOR SAMPLE SELECTION (OF PARTICIPANTS)

The research methodology for this case study included non-participant observation of public Facebook groups and pages (posts and comments below them) of football supporters and four in-depth interviews with football supporters of specific teams in the age range 18 to 30. The research team chose to use online group observation rather than face-to-face field activities to collect data because (i) the access to an adequate number of respondents for the purpose of the research would be difficult, given the closed nature of these communities and the suspicion with which they treat scholars and journalists; and (ii) in this way it could focus on the increased online presence of football fans over the recent years and correlate it with the digitalisation driver of CONNEKT. The narrower age range for the interviews (rather than the entire target population of CONNEKT of 12-30), was chosen because it would be problematic to seek the consent of parents when interviewing minors. The criteria used in the selection of the sample are as follows. As a result of the team's consultations with the research coordinators of CONNEKT and the present WP5, it was decided that only public Facebook groups and pages shall be observed, in line with ethical standards as defined by the project. Following this decision, Facebook' CrowdTangle instrument was used to identify the five most popular football supporters' groups in terms of membership and interactions and the five most popular pages in terms of followers and interactions, both for the period 15 September – 15 December 2021. In parallel, a consultation was held with representatives of the national police and Sofia metropolitan police about their view of the most relevant groups.

The selection of interviewees was based on popularity of the football team they supported and accessibility.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The Facebook groups and pages unite supporters, mostly youths, of the respective team and contain posts and comments about ongoing matches, transfers of players, relations with the football governing body (the Bulgarian Football Union, BFU), rival teams and supporters, topical political events and patriotic posts about national holidays and figures. The latter two were of specific interest to the observers. Posts and comments on all mentioned topics contained allusions or outright qualifications that could be characterised as racist or discriminatory.

The team arrived at the selection of four specific groups/pages: CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS (supporters of CSKA Sofia) – by far the most active group in terms of posts; and Ultras Levski, National Fanclub of Supporters of PFC Levski and Levski Sofia Zapad (supporters of Levski Sofia) – pages which were much less active, hence their higher number and longer observed period. The first group was observed for the periods 14-25 January and 17-21 February 2022; the three other, less active, were observed for the periods 11 November 2021 – 11 February 2022 and 17-21 February 2022.

According to the CrowdTangle data collected for the period 15 September – 15 December 2021, the CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS, had 3,216 members, contained 2,576 posts and had 120,866 interactions; the Ultras Levski page had 29,783 followers, contained 37 posts and had 29,860 interactions. According to Facebook's website, as of April 2022, the National Fan Club of the Supporters of Levski Sofia page had 24,045 followers, and the Levski Sofia Zapad page had 1,041 followers. The interactions among football fans observed in the virtual realm can be characterised as intensifying in certain periods, especially when a major or controversial event occurs in reality, as well as more radical in terms of language, often resorting to hate speech about certain groups.

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The four interviewees were as follows: two fans of Levski Sofia, one of the two most popular teams in Bulgaria; one fan of CSKA Sofia, the other most popular team; and one fan of Beroe Stara Zagora, one of the teams with most active supporters outside the capital Sofia. One of the Levski fans identified with a faction within the supporters as a whole; the CSKA fan described himself as active in the past but not so active at present; and the Beroe fan described himself as currently active.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH TOOLS DESCRIPTION

After consultations with stakeholders, the research team decided that online observation would be applied to online (Facebook) communities as part of the current case study on far-right groups within football and/or MMA clubs. The insights of the online observation would be supplemented with data from semi-structured face-to-face interviews with key individuals active in the respective community. The online observation would aim to answer the following research questions:

- How do identified macro factors of radicalisation relevant to these communities influence and manifest in their interactions and core narratives?

- How are the contexts identified by CONNEKT present in (or relevant to) these communities?
- How does the online environment influence interactions between the participants (e.g. citing “right” or “wrong” positions/beliefs/practices picked from social networks; how the content of specific posts correspond to certain comments; how the format of the online environment predispose certain interactions)?
- What are the common narratives of these communities and how do these common narratives develop and get reproduced in the online space?
- To what extent is there space to discuss or challenge common narratives of the groups?
- How popular are the Facebook sites and groups of these communities and how active are participants in them (in terms of posts, likes, shares, comments)?

Only open and publicly accessible Facebook groups and pages would be considered as sources of information. The data gathered was to be used to analyse the narratives espoused and the interactions within the communities, including the role of macrofactors of radicalisation in informing narratives and how they manifest in community interactions.

The method employed would be non-participant or unobtrusive observation of the public posts and interactions of the selected communities. The method was chosen in order to mitigate negative outcomes that are likely to occur in the event of revealing the aim of the research. There is widespread mistrust among the selected communities towards civil society, which is often described as an advocate of the very harmful ideologies that these communities stand against. In addition, non-obstrusive observation would allow the team to observe the organic development of interactions and narratives among the communities.

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The observers (coders) would rely on relevance (purposive) sampling of posts/comments. In this thematic approach, the codes used will correspond to the drivers assigned by CONNEKT in the WP5 methodology but also as suggested by CSD for the current case study (far-right football supporters): political dissatisfaction, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, social digitalisation. The end result of the observation would be a selection of relevant posts/comments for the case study, with assigned codes (drivers), which will serve as a basis for the data analysis.

In addition to this qualitative aspect of the observation, the team was to make use (as an illustration) of quantitative data offered by CrowdTangle (number of likes, shares, responses, etc.) in order to justify the choice of Facebook groups and pages which will be the subject of the qualitative analysis (see CrowdTangle statistics in Section 2.6).

Apart from the Facebook group observation, a total of four interviews were held with fans of Levski Sofia, CSKA Sofia and Beroe Stara Zagora. The first two Sofia-based clubs are the most popular nationwide, while the third is one of the most popular clubs outside the capital Sofia. Three interviews were held in-person on 23 and 27 December 2021 and on 4 January 2022. The fourth one was completed in the form of detailed written responses to questions, according to the preference of the interviewee, sent over the email on 21 February 2022.

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

One challenge was that Facebook's tool CrowdTangle is not able to scrape content from comments under posts, and for the purpose of this research comments would be the main source of data (they tend to contain more extreme reactions to news published as posts). Because of that, the researchers had to do the observation manually, checking all the posts and comments for the designated time period.

A second important challenge the team encountered when carrying out the non-participant online observation was the inability to carry out the initially envisaged, much longer, period of observation of three months. The problem was that the selected group and page generated very large amounts of content, making it technically impossible to track interactions for longer periods of time due to the pages crashing. As a result, the team opted to shorten the period to two weeks which was technically feasible. The generation of high volumes of data in the selected page and group, however, meant that there was enough data for the team to analyse with the shorted period as well.

A third challenge encountered by the team related to the initially planned methodology, which involved two coders coding a sample of 10% of the data and later involving a third coder to compare and verify that intercoder differences are within acceptable limits. Ultimately, the team decided to proceed with two coders going over the same data for the same period of time and subsequently analysing all content coded. This approach was chosen in order to ensure comprehensiveness of the data collected and to avoid coder bias.

A final difficulty concerned the fact that some interviews were declined or cancelled. One reason was, given the thematic focus of the research, that the potential respondents did not accept labelling them as 'radicalised'; another was the respondents' general mistrust towards non-governmental organisations and the aims of scholarly research.

Meso Level Dynamics

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE RESULTS OF THE MACRO LEVEL ANALYSIS

Football supporters and their beliefs and behaviour can be analysed within the WP5 pre-defined social context of urban and peri-urban spaces: urban areas where social interactions take place in a dimension of daily relationships. A thorough study of football hooliganism by CSD shows that for young people in Bulgaria, the neighbourhood is the most decisive factor which determines their club allegiance, i.e. where they grew playing football with their friends, went to school and were seeing graffiti about a football club. (Dzhekova et al., 2015).

The school environment can be also a factor of youth aggression: "Peer pressure at school and on the streets of the neighbourhood and association with juveniles prone to aggression and crime are also important factors leading to radicalisation, since as a person prone to aggression displays less aggressiveness when in a group of non-aggressive peers." (Dzhekova et al., 2015). By joining a fan club, the supporter experiences a belonging to a particular group which they perceive as "family". "They seek support, understanding and the respect of others within the group. The group is deemed to share the same values as the individual – prowess, bravery, honour and a sense of justice... Furthermore, belonging to a group waters down the sense of responsibility and makes football fans ready to commit criminal offences they would be reluctant to commit outside the group. Thus very often violence at stadiums is a result of minor incidents in which gradually non-aggressive people are embroiled in escalating fights." (Dzhekova et al., 2015). Criminality is strongly linked to the activities of some factions, including drug sale, assaults (including with firearms), usury, etc.³⁴

According to the CSD study, those joining the hooligan scene are aged between 15-23 years and young members need to pass certain acceptance ceremonies such as inflicting damage on the enemy club's property, beating up a schoolmate supporting the rival club, "and can escalate into beating up a member of ethnic minorities." (Dzhekova et al., 2015).

Indeed, the neighbourhood and the hometown emerged as the main social context relevant to football supporters interviewed for the present analysis, along with family tradition. Three respondents mentioned it as a factor, and three also mentioned family.³⁵ The dynamics of interaction during football matches generally follow the pattern of gathering in groups in the neighbourhood and then going to the stadium. The bigger clubs' supporters organise themselves into factions, which are sometimes hostile to each other. Typically, the strongest or most popular faction sets the rules of behaviour at the stadium – chanting, choreography, etc. – and also before the game, at the gathering point in the vicinity of the stadium.³⁶ A comment under a post in the Facebook page Ultras Levski illustrates the role of the

³⁴ See for example "Знакови лица от агитката на Левски зад решетките заради мокри поръчки [Flagship Levski supporters behind bars for ordered hits], TrafficNews.bg, 24 April 2020. Available at: <https://trafficnews.bg/krimi/znakovi-liitsa-agitkata-levski-zad-reshetkite-zaradi-mokri-176414/>.

³⁵ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021; In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022; In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021; Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

³⁶ In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021.

faction leader: "The Tall One – this is the man who currently leads a whole empire. This is the man who demonstrates what Levski-ness is. This man is our leader. The whole stadium, the whole crowd, each person is guided by his signs, his words, his movements. Yesterday I watched him give himself away, give his soul and heart so that the last person in the stadium could sing and my heart would be filled. And when he climbed the railing and the whole Block was looking at him, I think he realised that he was our "Emperor." Thank you!"³⁷

Not all fans are organised, though – the majority of people supporting their team at matches go independently, in small groups, and sometimes there are frictions with the organised supporters, who are trying to impose certain behaviour ("you are going to sing this or that song," "you are going to wave this flag," etc.).³⁸ Both organised and unorganised supporters tend to meet not only on match days but socially.³⁹ Groups can vary in their size and in time: official fan clubs are larger, with several thousand supporters,⁴⁰ while factions usually comprise less than a hundred people.⁴¹ Leaders, at the neighbourhood level, are often established by their ability to show bravery and successfully engage in fist fights with other supporters.⁴² All respondents shared that the biggest loyalty among fans is to the club and country, and one respondent from outside Sofia mentioned loyalty to the hometown. As for loyalty towards the specific group or faction, the same supporter said that the biggest betrayal would be a member of the group to talk to the police about other members. This could result in ostracism for the 'traitor' and even in the group falling apart.⁴³

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One interesting feature of organised fans which this research showed but was not observed in the CSD study of 2015 was the tendency to engage in sports. One respondent said interest in sports and practicing them was a motivating factor to become a devoted supporter.⁴⁴ Another shared that his and other factions of supporters have established fight clubs in mixed martial arts (MMA) in order to "canalise their energy." He added that football supporters today no more find it fashionable to drink alcohol but rather do sports and lead a healthy life.⁴⁵

Another notable tendency as regards social contexts vis-à-vis football supporters in Bulgaria is that match attendance has steadily decreased since the 1990s. According to the CSD study, average attendance has fallen from 6,500-7,000 in the 1996-97 season to some 2,000 in the 2014-15 season (Dzhekova et al., 2015). Indeed, in informal discussions with police as part of this research, in order to determine the most relevant target groups (Facebook and respondents) as part of the methodology,

³⁷ Comment under a post in Ultras Levski, 20 February 2022.

³⁸ In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021; In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022.

³⁹ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021; In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022; In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021; Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁴⁰ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021;

⁴¹ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁴² Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁴³ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁴⁴ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁴⁵ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

interlocutors shared that interest in football games has dramatically fallen, especially in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, and hard-line supporter groups have become less and less active.

One specific social context linked to this research are of course online groups or pages in Facebook (see CrowdTangle statistics about the specific groups observed in Section 2.6). There is the sense of group belonging mostly linked to the respective football team and the Bulgarian nation. One of the open groups which the research team joined had the practice to officially welcome new members with a public post seen by all members, suggesting a sense of belonging to the specific Facebook group.

HOW MACRO LEVEL DRIVERS WORKS AT THE MESO- LEVEL STUDIED (THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF FOCUS)?

Outside CONNEKT's frame, according to the CSD study, most observers see the macro-level factors conducive to radicalisation among football supporters as linked to the overall political and economic characteristics of the country: the slow economic development and the accompanying unemployment, poverty, corruption and various political crises. "Although these political and socioeconomic problems should not be underestimated, they can only be viewed as aggravating factors contributing to the increase of manifested violence in society as whole." (Dzhekova et al., 2015). This research has found that four of the pre-defined macro factors employed by CONNEKT are applicable to the meso-level analysis of the communities of football fans and underline risks for radicalisation among them: social digitalisation, political dissatisfaction, territorial divergences⁴⁶ and international dynamics. A strong additional factor has been identified: nationalist convictions which tend to manifest themselves as intolerance to "the other" (Roma, Turks, the Macedonian nation), often resulting in hate speech in Facebook groups.

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Social digitalisation

The very methodology selected for the meso-level research – one that includes observation of public Facebook groups and pages – demonstrates the relevance of the social networks phenomenon, which the research team deemed important for the purpose of this analysis. The online environment tends to magnify extreme sentiments shared by the target group, allowing them greater anonymity and freedom. This was confirmed in the interviews conducted in parallel as part of the research. All respondents said they actively used social networks and channels for communication.

"Social networks nowadays are everything, they have replaced and changed communication. It is much easier to say something to someone, especially more unpleasant, on social networks. Everything presented on social networks can deceive someone, or leave him with the wrong impression of an event or something else. We believe that social networks are the tool for imposing today's values. Their use, especially by young people, can certainly be linked to potential violence. Behind the keyboard, many of them show inspiration and courage, which is lacking in a face-to-face situation."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ For the purposes of the analysis, territorial differences in this case study are understood as self-perceived distinctive traits or beliefs of certain football club's supporters that sets them apart from a rival club's supporters or from supporters from other cities: e.g. dedication to anti-communism, charitable activities, etc.

⁴⁷ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

*“Social networks are very influential, especially in fan circles where everyone wants to prove themselves, more and more often, due to certain, how to say, feelings of shyness, people would rather say it on the Internet than live. But it’s natural, it’s everywhere. This can be seen when there is some scandalous case in the country, everyone shares five thousand opinions and statuses and what not.”*⁴⁸ Asked whether a Facebook post can provoke violence, this respondent said that it was possible (“Small things can start the big fire”) but often the case was that no significant attention was paid to the person posting. Another respondent said social networks posts can provoke violence and shared that because of some posts the location of rival factions was identified.⁴⁹

Social digitalisation played a role even before the advent of social networks. One interviewee agreed that internet certainly contributes to violence, not least because of explicit visuals, and mentioned specific websites where stories were published about fights between factions, confiscated paraphernalia (scarves, etc.) as trophies and choreography during games.⁵⁰

Political grievances

Political dissatisfaction manifests itself as a radicalisation factor at the meso-level (visible in the online observation and interviews) along three main lines: 1) negativism towards the current leadership of the football governing body, the BFU, which is most of the time linked to the political leadership of the country, previous or incumbent; 2) general indignation against corrupt government and political parties; and 3) calls to protests against the current order, including violence. All three lines were evident in data obtained in the online observation, while interviews demonstrated clearly negative attitude towards Bulgaria’s communist past, disapproval against current political leadership and a specific attitude towards violence as a legitimate instrument, in some cases, to achieve one’s goals.

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As mentioned earlier, understandably the most exploited topics in the observed Facebook groups/pages were linked to football: the respective teams’ performance, transfers of players and rival teams. However, a clear tendency registered by the research team was for criticism of the BFU president, Borislav Mihaylov, and his team, often associated with the general political situation and governance of the country. As his background is from one of the two biggest Sofia football clubs, Levski Sofia, most of the criticism came from the rival team’s supporters in the group CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS.

*“Until in the government of the state (in football and all other sports and institutions) there are people without education, we will never be okay.”*⁵¹ *“What is this kind of State? The people do not want to see any more of them, and they are explaining that there is no one like them and everybody wants them”; “It seems it is time that we threw them out, the ‘other’ way. This democracy is starting to be too much for me”; “Scum!”*⁵²

⁴⁸ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

⁴⁹ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022.

⁵⁰ In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021.

⁵¹ Comment under a post in CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS, 17 January 2022.

⁵² Comments under a post in CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS, 18 February 2022.

However, supporters of Levski Sofia, while criticising the planned appointment for sports minister of Radostin Vasilev, with a CSKA background (*"Let's show we are against Radostin Vasilev's becoming sports minister!"*⁵³), have also expressed negative attitude towards the BFU leadership, linking it to the political establishment previously in power in Bulgaria: *"The Bulgarian Football Union, under pressure from Boyko Borissov [the former prime minister] and then sports minister Kralev, changed all its regulations in order to put Litex Lovech under its new name CSKA-Sofia in the top division and change its licence."*⁵⁴

A very strong sentiment across Facebook groups/pages concerns the perceptions of the corruption of football management and the political class.

*"Until the Prosecutor's Office visits the BFU and the Ministry of the Interior, there's no going for the better"; "What can you expect from corrupt people, this BFU has hit one bottom after another, where's the Prosecutor's Office?"*⁵⁵; *"How do you sustain a football club without any sponsors and audience? How much money did you and Madzho [a mafia boss] receive from Boyko Borissov [the former PM] to get him in power?"*⁵⁶

Distrust in political parties and institutions and perceived social injustice in Bulgarian society emerged as shared sentiments in some Facebook comments and throughout interviews made for this research. Online comments are far more intense than statements from respondents.

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*"Bulgarians, wake up, get out of the running amok in which you find yourselves! Use your chance that your bloodsuckers from the [political parties listed], the 'red' trade unions, the Prosecutor's Office, the courts, corrupt journalists... have well shown themselves under the spotlight and 'beat' them until they are moving, and even after that!... When we sweep them forever out of our fatherland, we'll be free and richer in every respect!"*⁵⁷

*"There are many injustices in society. From economic to social and all kinds. For example, there is a need for legislative changes that need to be resolved ... In Bulgarian society, the word [political] party is dirty... There are very few people who like something, even I am no longer one of them, and even fewer who are actively involved in something. I think that's bad."*⁵⁸; *"Well, there is [lack of justice], in my opinion, because for some people the rules apply, for others they do not"*⁵⁹; *"Most of our group does not see democracy as a positive thing for our nation."*⁶⁰ Indeed, interviewees were divided as to whether democracy is an effective system for society, with others expressing greater trust in it.⁶¹

⁵³ Post in National Club of the Supporters of Levski Sofia, 29 November 2021.

⁵⁴ Comment under a post in National Club of the Supporters of Levski Sofia, 1 January 2022.

⁵⁵ Comments under a post in CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS, 18 January 2022.

⁵⁶ Comment under a post in CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS addressed to a rival club's boss, 20 January 2022.

⁵⁷ Comment under a post in Ultras Levski dedicated to an anniversary of a national hero, 19 February 2022.

⁵⁸ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

⁵⁹ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022.

⁶⁰ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁶¹ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

Regarding violence, what was observed in online comments shows not infrequent calls for its use against officials and the political class. Interview respondents were generally against it but some of them admitted that it can be a legitimate means to an end when other methods fail.

"This MP should be careful... I say again, the cattle should be careful."⁶² "Away with the wig [pejorative for the BFU president] or I will find an iron bar and make him beautiful";⁶³ "Ready for protest against the traitor Kiro [the incumbent PM]"⁶⁴

"Violence is an extreme measure, when the feeling of injustice is already so accumulated and the instruments of democracy and governance have obviously not worked, so in the end there is escalation, etc. I hope such a thing never happens, but at some point, if the levers of democracy do not help, violence remains the last refuge of justice... Look, violence is rooted in human nature... There cannot be no violence in society";⁶⁵ "Extreme views inevitably lead to violence";⁶⁶ "I can definitely say that violence is a part of all of us, especially as a group that has defended the honour of its city and club many times through fistfights... The link between violence and radical views is that it is only the tool through which the enemies of our ideas must be broken... Everyone in our group knows violence and what it leads to."⁶⁷

Some interviewees insisted that violence is not a universal response: *"Radicalisation in our circles is not greater and different from that in our whole society. It must be understood once and for all, that football fans are not a separate society in society"; "Nowadays, I don't think [violence] can be a solution to anything, but back in the day, to a large extent, maybe";⁶⁸ "For the injustice we all live with, violence is not the answer to all questions. Not even violence can always defeat our enemies. The truth and the belief that we are on the right track is the only weapon that can make us stronger than our opponents when we talk about society, not football stories. Violence yields temporary results, not lasting solutions."⁶⁹ Yet violence often accompanies activities of football fans even outside games. For example, in the anti-government protests in the summer and autumn of 2020, it was widely believed, including by the police, that some violent outbursts and provocations were made by organised fans of major football clubs.⁷⁰*

Territorial inequalities

As mentioned above, for the purposes of the analysis, territorial differences in this case study are understood as self-perceived distinctive traits or beliefs of certain football club's supporters that sets

⁶² Comment under a post in CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS, 25 January 2022.

⁶³ Comment under a post in CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS, 26 January 2022.

⁶⁴ Comment under a post in National Club of the Supporters of Levski Sofia, 17 January 2022.

⁶⁵ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

⁶⁶ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022.

⁶⁷ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁶⁸ In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021.

⁶⁹ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁷⁰ See for example "НОЩ НА СБЛЪСЪЦИ В СОФИЯ: Десетки ранени полицаи и протестиращи [Night of clashes in Sofia: \Dozens injured police and protesters]", Nova TV, 3 September 2020. Available at: shorturl.at/dlyO7.

them apart from a rival club's supporters or from supporters from other cities. Most often supporters of a club or a faction within a club's supporters view themselves as unique and in a way superior to others. They tend to emphasise participation in sports and a healthy way of living and charitable actions.

*"The good thing about us is that we have fighting clubs and there the desire of man for primacy and violence is channelled into something good and useful, such as sports. We have several sports clubs and dozens or hundreds of champions in various martial arts that we are proud of: boxing, MMA, kickboxing, grappling... Brazilian Jiu Jitsu... This is the idea of martial arts in general. Better to be in the hall than on the street."*⁷¹

*"We do charity, there is humanity after all, before divisions along football lines. We have united to help sick children, for example, for fans with health problems. All [Levski] fan clubs deliver products to people in need. With money collected by themselves, not given by someone else... We collect between ourselves and donate."*⁷²

Hate is often demonstrated against other teams' fans, and Facebook groups and pages are abundant with insulting and derogatory language.⁷³ There is animosity even between factions of supporters of the same team. *"For me, the biggest nonsense I have seen is to fight Levski fans. One fan to beat another Levski fan or several other fans from factions to come and beat unorganised fans ... This is done because, for example, we unorganised fans see things differently, or in our opinion something is not right or, for example, they pushed my phone and told me to "stop filming" or "I'll take your phone or beat you up"... They want to impose themselves in some way and no one dares to say anything to them."*⁷⁴

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Transnational dynamics

According to the CSD study, Bulgarian football hooligans have established friendly ties with certain Western European or Balkan football club supporters, visiting games abroad or welcoming their fans to games in Bulgaria, thus exchanging experience and beliefs (Dzhekova et al., 2015). Sometimes local animosities of friendly clubs abroad can be the cause of violence against visiting Bulgarian supporters, leading even to fatalities (See for example Trifonova, 2020). In the present case study, transnational dynamics is less observed as a macro factor replicating itself at the meso level. One line of agitation, especially among Levski Sofia fans, is linked to the harmful influence of Russia on Bulgarian society. One interviewee said a lot of money is invested in fake news and that's why the EU is fighting Russian propaganda.⁷⁵

"Is it accidental that Levski and Botev, Zahari Stoyanov, Stambolov, Rakovski and so many Bulgarian revolutionaries are killed by Russian proxies or Bulgarian traitors?... Do you not understand that for

⁷¹ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

⁷² In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

⁷³ Posts and comments in all observed groups throughout the observation period.

⁷⁴ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022.

⁷⁵ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

centuries we have been killed and “modelled” slaves of the Empire of Evil and Despotism – Russia... This animal, the Russophile, should be called by its real name, and it is: Bulgarophobe-traitor.”⁷⁶

One respondent mentioned that foreign films about skinheads influenced the culture of his supporters' group, including hairstyle and fashion. He also cited American drill music: *“This style is based entirely on how you hurt your opponent, you brag to someone about how you killed somebody, absolutely extreme things.”⁷⁷*

Nationalism, xenophobia and hate speech

In this case study, one specific factor has been identified as a meso-level driver of radicalisation among football supporters which was not part of the macro analysis. It can be roughly described as nationalism, very often degrading to xenophobia and hate speech (in online groups). As a rule, football supporters in Bulgaria tend to identify with patriotic and nationalist causes. (Dzhekova et al. 2015). This was confirmed in this research, with interviewees sharing the importance of the Bulgarian nation when it came to allegiance and loyalty.

“First, it can definitely be said that among Levski’s⁷⁸ supporters, patriotic sentiments are strong. Commitment to Bulgaria, to history, our organisation has funded many charitable initiatives in the educational aspect, more precisely the promotion of Bulgarian history among young people, maintenance of monuments... Ultimately, the Westphalian Peace Treaty created the idea of the nation state, the idea that the state is to be of one nationality, so when a person wants to be an active citizen and part of a community, it is normal to have an affinity to defend one’s own.”⁷⁹ “We do not want to dissuade the fans of the opposing team from being its fans, but we definitely want to dissuade the enemies of nationalism from their activities.”⁸⁰

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In the observed Facebook groups and pages, posts and comments commemorating national holidays and figures have been regular, collecting the greatest number of positive interactions (along with posts about team wins on the pitch).⁸¹ Controversial historical figures linked to Nazism have also been mentioned.⁸² These sentiments are sometimes directed at topical political developments. For example, a visit of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov to North Macedonia in January 2022, aimed to improve bilateral relations and possibly open the way for North Macedonia’s launch of European Union accession negotiations, invoked negative reactions and warnings.⁸³ (The national narrative in Bulgaria is that Macedonians have a Bulgarian historical and cultural background, which they fail to recognise, and Bulgarian public opinion is in favour of vetoing North Macedonia for EU membership talks until

⁷⁶ Comment under a post in Ultras Levski dedicated to the anniversary of the death of Vasil Levski, 19 February 2022.

⁷⁷ In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021.

⁷⁸ Levski Sofia football club is named after Vasil Levski (1837-1873), believed to be Bulgaria’s most prominent revolutionary and fighter for liberation from Ottoman rule in the late 19th century.

⁷⁹ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

⁸⁰ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁸¹ For example, in the observed period, there were posts about the anniversary of Gotse Delchev’s birth (4 February) and Vasil Levski’s demise (18-19 February).

⁸² Post in Ultras Levski about historical figure Gen. Hristo Lukov, 12 February 2022.

⁸³ Posts in in National Club of the Supporters of Levski Sofia, 17 January 2022.

controversies about history and the rights of Bulgarians in the country are settled (Atanasova, 2022)) Sometimes events from everyday life can provoke strong reactions by football fans, unifying them along ethnic, Bulgarian lines against other ethnicities. One respondent invoked the mass anti-Roma protests from 2011 (when an ethnic Bulgarian youth in the village of Katunitsa was run down and killed by members of a notorious Roma family linked to criminal activity). The protests were attended by fans of all major football clubs alike, expressing indignation at the perceived social injustice.⁸⁴

Nationalism can turn into xenophobia or outright racism among certain factions of supporters. As one interviewee shared, *"This [nationalism] was maintained. I even thought that these values were much more extreme, because we were instilled with nationalism, but more extreme one, towards racism. Black people, gypsies and all such ethnic groups, were not be tolerated if seen in the stand. It has happened more than once that people from the stand have been chased out."*⁸⁵ Xenophobia, racism and hate speech are visible in the observed Facebook groups and pages. Most often, pejorative terms and slurs for Roma people, Muslims, Jews or homosexuals, sometimes combined with threats, are used to express anger at footballers or management.⁸⁶

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND INTERACTIONS AMONG DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

The nature of the methodology used for this case study – namely, the element of observation of public Facebook groups and pages – points to the obvious intersection between the above analysed drivers and social digitalisation, one of the initially identified macro drivers by CONNEKT. One observation, as mentioned earlier, is that the online environment tends to enhance radical statements and provides thriving milieu for hate speech: extreme language was missing in interviews and abundant in comments on Facebook. Another intersection concerns political dissatisfaction and nationalism/racism/hate speech: anti-government and anti-establishment statements by football supporters often contain hate words. A combination of territorial differences and nationalism was also observed: one respondent said that *"Belonging first to the neighbourhood, then to the city and then to the state is fundamental for the group. This affiliation has always been a source of pride. For example, I will give the modern inter-neighbourhood wars in our childhood - to defend your neighbourhood was a matter of honour. Defending the colours and the name of your city and football club, defeating the enemy on the streets and in the stadium - this is a great reason to be proud. It is the same with our homeland, Bulgaria is in the first place when it comes to a national cause."*⁸⁷

⁸⁴ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

⁸⁵ In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021.

⁸⁶ Comments in CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS and Levski Sofia Zapad throughout the observation period.

⁸⁷ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

Analysis Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS ON THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

The meso-level research for this case study showed that four macro-level drivers of radicalisation are present at the group/community level too: social digitalisation, political grievances, territorial differences and transnational dynamics. The team identified one additional driver linked to nationalism and racism and manifesting itself in xenophobia and hate speech. Activities in the observed Facebook groups and views shared in the interviews demonstrate that the social networks driver is a very strong factor presenting a risk to incur violence. Political dissatisfaction is against football management and its links to the political class, corruption of the governing elites in general and political parties in particular. Bulgaria's communist heritage is viewed negatively. Territorial differences arise from perceptions of rivalry with competing supporters and factions or towns, as own groups are viewed as "unique". Transnational influences are seen in friendly relations of Bulgarian fans with certain Western European football supporters' groups and in the access to foreign far-right videos and materials. Negativism against foreign influence (mainly Russia) is also observed.

One observation of previous research and the macro-level analysis was confirmed at the meso level: extreme supporters are less active because of lower attendance levels and interest in football in general and the Covid-19 pandemic. However, risks of far-right radicalisation are discernible in the "patriotism" and nationalism cherished by fans and certain factions specifically. Violence is accepted as a legitimate means to an end. A very important conclusion of the meso-level analysis is that online communication has the tendency to magnify extreme sentiments among football supporters' groups, resulting in xenophobia and hate speech.

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO ANALYSIS

As regards prevention, according to the macro-level research, 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 particularly 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. 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.

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. 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. Drawing from the meso-level analysis, a useful prevention avenue would be to pay particular attention to hate speech in the education system and to try to limit hate speech in social networks.

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO ANALYSIS

According to the above cited CSD study, “For the majority of interviewed football fans violence is a determining factor for the identity of hooligans. Violent conduct of some football supporters is sometimes interpreted as being determined by one’s ‘nature’.” As one football fan put it: ‘I’m just that kind of person. Even if I wasn’t a football fan, I would have committed hooligan actions. This is my nature’. Another respondent compared football hooliganism with war in peacetime and the desire of men to fight with opponents, make ambushes, dispatch scouts, capture banners and scarves.” The study also states that “Characteristics such as low level of education, poor professional realisation, maladjusted behaviour in childhood (behavioural problems), and attention difficulties are also predictive of potentially aggressive behaviour.” (Dzhekova et al., 2015).

The meso-level research showed that family is a strong determining factor in the building up of values systems among fans, especially visible in the interviews. Most respondents shared that “traditional family values” are something they have been brought up with and that family ranks high as an object of their loyalty, together with club and nation.⁸⁸ In this light, possible micro-paths into the next level of research could be individual and emotional drivers, including within the family and within the specific educational environment. Indeed, according to Bulgaria’s Ombudswoman, Bulgaria ranks among the top countries with violence and bullying at school, with 50% of the children having reported psychological violence at school in 2021.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021; In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021; Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁸⁹ “Омбудсманът: Пандемията е задълбочила проблема с насилието в училище [The Ombudswoman: The pandemic has deepened the problem with violence at school]”, bTV News, 8 February 2022. Available at: <https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/ombudsmanat-pandemijata-e-zadalbochila-problema-s-nasilieto-v-uchilishte.html>.

General Conclusion

This report has tried to identify how CONNEKT's macro-level drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism operate on the meso/community level among young football supporters. The processes were analysed within the WP5 pre-defined social context of urban and peri-urban spaces: urban areas where social interactions take place in a dimension of daily relationships. The research used as a method online observation of public Facebook groups and pages and was complemented by interviews with fans. Some conclusions which can be drawn is that risks of far-right radicalisation are discernible in the "patriotism" and nationalism cherished by fans and certain factions specifically and shared online. Violence is accepted as a legitimate means to an end. A very important conclusion of the meso-level analysis is that online communication has the tendency to increase extreme sentiments among football supporters' groups, resulting in xenophobia and hate speech. The implications for prevention are that it will be useful to pay particular attention to hate speech in the education system and to try to limit hate speech in social networks. A relevant micro-path into micro-level research would be to investigate the increasing violence, physical and psychological, happening at Bulgarian schools and the psychological and emotional drivers leading to it.

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“Малките ултраси, вилнели в центъра на Пловдив, скочили заради спонтанен ЛГБТ парад [Young ultras rampaging in the center of Plovdiv jumped because of a spontaneous LGBT parade]”, *Trafficnews.bg*, 27 September 2020. Available at: <https://trafficnews.bg/plovdiv/malkite-ultrasi-vilneli-tsentara-plovdiv-skochili-zaradi-190322/>

“Знакови лица от агитката на Левски зад решетките заради мокри поръчки [Flagship Levski supporters behind bars for ordered hits], *TrafficNews.bg*, 24 April 2020. Available at: <https://trafficnews.bg/krimi/znakovi-litsa-agitkata-levski-zad-reshetkite-zaradi-mokri-poruchki-176414/>.

“НОЩ НА СБЛЪСЪЦИ В СОФИЯ: Десетки ранени полицаи и протестиращи [Night of clashes in Sofia: \Dozens injured police and protesters]”, *Nova TV*, 3 September 2020. Available at: shorturl.at/dlyO7.

Facebook groups/pages observed

CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/cskasofiahooligans/>

Levski Sofia Zapad: <https://www.facebook.com/%D0%9B%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%A1%D0%BE%D1%84%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%97%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%B4-518199714891473/>

National Club of the Supporters of Levski Sofia: <https://www.facebook.com/NKPLevski/>

Ultras Levski: <https://www.facebook.com/UltrasLevski1914/>

Interviews

In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021

In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022

In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021

Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

ANNEX I – Observation Guide for Case Studies 1 and 2

Centre for the Study of Democracy

CONNKT Work Package 5

Observation Guide for Case Studies 1 and 2: Ultra-conservative Facebook groups and pages and Far-right Facebook groups and pages of football supporters

Goal

The observation of online Facebook communities and their interactions will be one of the methods used to analyse the role of drivers of radicalisation on the community or meso level. Online observation will be applied to communities as part of Case Study 1 on Online ultra-conservative communities and Case Study 2 on Far-right groups within football and/or MMA clubs. The insights of the online observation will be supplemented with data from three semi-structured face-to-face interviews with key individuals active in the communities of each case study. The online observation will aim to answer the following research questions:

- How do identified macro factors of radicalisation relevant to these communities influence and manifest in their interactions and core narratives? Following are questions related to the specific drivers for each case study:

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Driver	CS1: Online ultra-conservative communities	CS2: Far-right groups in football supporters
Political dissatisfaction	<p>Are target groups identifying with their country/nation?</p> <p>How do they understand democracy, rule of law, human rights issues?</p> <p>What are the most important values for them: family, tradition, freedom (e.g. from pandemic-related restrictions and/or medical intervention such as vaccination)?</p> <p>How do they perceive the upholding of these values should happen: complaints to institutions, peaceful protest, violence?</p> <p>What political parties and/or activist organisations do they support?</p>	<p>Are target groups identifying with their country/nation?</p> <p>How do they understand democracy, rule of law, human rights issues?</p> <p>What are the most important values for them?</p> <p>How do they perceive the upholding of these values should happen: complaints to institutions, peaceful protest, violence?</p> <p>What political parties and/or activist organisations do they support?</p>
Transnational dynamics	<p>Are target groups giving examples of positions/beliefs/practices from abroad</p>	<p>Are target groups mentioning collaboration with far-right groups from</p>

as correct or as wrong? Which international actors are they mentioning (e.g. Russia, conservative evangelist organisations in the US, etc.)? Is there any evidence that group members/page followers endorsed a position/belief/political action after they heard of it in being implemented or professed in another country?

abroad (e.g. other football supporters know to be ideologically influenced)?

Social digitalisation	Are target groups influenced from what they read in social networks? Are they citing and/or rehashing/reposting fake news or conspiracy theories? Can they distinguish between scientific evidence and unconfirmed claims?	Are target groups influenced from what they read in social networks? Do target groups organise themselves via social networks for football games? Do they communicate with other football fan groups via social networks?
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Religion	Do orthodox denominations of religion play a role in forming the positions/beliefs of target groups (e.g. Evangelism, Catholicism)?	X
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Territorial inequalities	X	Do target groups from one region (e.g. fans of Plovdiv football clubs) display more or less intense support for far-right beliefs than target groups from other region (e.g. Sofia or Stara Zagora)? Do ultras from localities which are more economically disadvantaged show higher incidence of far-right beliefs?
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• How are the contexts identified by CONNEKT present in (or relevant to) these communities?

	CS1: Online ultra-conservative communities	CS2: Far-right groups in football supporters
Contexts tested	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political and social participation • Socialisation / education • Urban and peri-urban spaces • Ethnic community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethnic community • Socialisation / education • Urban and peri-urban spaces • Political and social participation

- How does the online environment influence interactions between the participants (e.g. citing “right” or “wrong” positions/beliefs/practices picked from social networks; how the content of specific posts correspond to certain comments; how the format of the online environment predispose certain interactions)?
- What are the common narratives of these communities and how do these common narratives develop and get reproduced in the online space?
- To what extent is there space to discuss or challenge common narratives of the groups?
- How popular are the Facebook sites and groups of these communities and how active are participants in them (in terms of posts, likes, shares, comments)?

Sources of information and criteria for selection

Only open and publicly accessible Facebook groups and pages will be considered as sources of information. The data gathered will be used to analyse the narratives espoused and the interactions within the communities, including the role of macrofactors of radicalisation in informing narratives and how they manifest in community interactions. In case these information sources prove insufficient to answer the research questions posed, the team will identify additional sources to include in the analysis.

For Case Study 1 on Online ultra-conservative communities the targets will be Facebook groups and pages organised around the protection of traditional family values from encroachment by liberal “gender ideologies” and groups and pages propagating COVID-19-related conspiracy theories and advocating against vaccination. Under Case Study 2 on Far-right groups within football and/or MMA clubs will target online groups around the team will examine Facebook groups and pages of supporters of various teams across the country.

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Method

The team will select Facebook groups and pages based on the following criteria:

- Public groups and pages of organisations active in promoting causes associated with the communities (e.g. traditional family values, protection of the children and anti-vaccination activism).
- By the name of the groups, where it directly indicates affiliation of members with a specific ideology or cause associated with the communities.
- Related groups and pages as suggested by Facebook and its CrowdTangle tool (the extension function).⁹⁰

Once the initial pool of groups/pages is identified, the team will use CrowdTangle to make the following lists:

- List A containing the five groups with most members and the five pages with most followers (Case Study 1 Ultra-conservative);
- List B containing the five groups and five pages with most interactions (likes, shares, comments) (Case Study 1 Ultra-conservative);

⁹⁰ An explanation of how this function works is available here: <https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/articles/2566227-the-crowdtangle-chrome-extension>.

- List C containing the five groups with most members and the five pages with most followers (Case Study 2 Far-right football supporters);

List D containing the five groups and five pages with most interactions (likes, shares, comments) (Case Study 2 Far-right football supporters).

The next step will be to consult independent experts about which of the List A and B groups/pages produced by CrowdTangle are the most influential and relevant for the purposes of the WP5 research; based on their opinion and internal discussion, the team will select 2-3 groups and 2-3 pages to be the object of observation of Case Study 1. Similarly, experts dealing with football hooliganism in the Ministry of the Interior will be consulted about which of the List C and D groups/pages produced by CrowdTangle are the most influential and relevant for the purposes of the WP5 research; based on their opinion and internal discussion, the team will select 2-3 groups and 2-3 pages to be the object of observation of Case Study 2.

The method employed will be non-participant or unobtrusive observation of the public posts and interactions of the selected communities. The method was chosen in order to mitigate negative outcomes that are likely to occur in the event of revealing the aim of the research. There is widespread mistrust among the selected communities towards civil society, which is often described as an advocate of the very harmful ideologies that these communities stand against. In addition, non-obstrusive observation will allow the team to observe the organic development of interactions and narratives among the communities. As the main target group of this project is youth between 12 and 30 years old, the research team will look at public posts/comments by profiles falling into this category – either profiles explicitly stating age in their profile information or profiles which can be inferred to fall into this category by the content of the respective post/comment. In addition, the interviews which will be conducted with members of online ultra-conservative communities will serve to fulfill the age requirement – the interviews will be conducted with youth between the ages of 12-30.

The period covered by the observation will be set to three months (15 September – 15 December 2021), as the team's initial assumption is that it will be sufficient to generate data for analysis and since this timeframe is expected to present a rich basis for analysis. This timeframe will allow a balanced coverage of both a pre-election and a post-election period in Bulgaria (general and presidential polls were held on 14 November). The presence of elections will, on the one hand, provide more data for analysis (a wealth of interactions in the form of posts, comments and reactions), but on the other hand the opinions expressed may be somewhat more influenced by the dynamics and topics of the elections. The latter should be kept in mind when collecting and analysing the data.

The core team will consist of three observers (coders) relying on relevance (purposive) sampling of posts/comments. In this thematic approach, the codes used will correspond to the drivers assigned by CONNEKT in the WP5 methodology but also as suggested by CSD for each of its case studies: Case Study 1 (Ultra-conservative communitiies): political dissatisfaction, transnational dynamics,

social digitalisation, religion; Case Study 2 (Far-right football supporters): political dissatisfaction, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, social digitalisation. It will be possible to assign more than one code/driver to a single post/comment, if relevant.

In order to avoid bias, two coders will initially code a 10% random sample of posts/comments and then compare their results. Where there are discrepancies (e.g. a post was included by the first coder but not included by the second one, or differing codes were assigned to a comment), the third coder will provide an additional opinion which will be complied with. This will serve as a calibration exercise for the first two coders, who will afterwards be able to divide between themselves the quantity of all posts/comments in the selected observation period and work separately.

The end result of the observation will be a selection of relevant posts/comments for each case study, with assigned codes (drivers), which will serve as a basis for the data analysis.

In addition to this qualitative aspect of the observation, the team will make use (as an illustration) of quantitative data offered by CrowdTangle (number of likes, shares, responses, etc.) in order to justify the choice of Facebook groups and pages which will be the subject of the qualitative analysis.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

The employed research approach is in line with CONNEKT's ethical requirements. Initially, the method of participant observation was considered for the research on these two case studies. However, due to the widespread mistrust towards civil society as carriers of alien values, especially among the target groups, non-participant observation was selected instead. One of the main ethical concerns related to non-participant observation of online communities is the issue of informed consent. However, as a number of scholars have argued, ethical research of online communities is possible also in the absence of informed consent (Willis, 2019). In this sense, the distinction between public and private is a key distinction. As Townsend and Wallace have noted "working with social media data, there are some conditions in which researchers will be more ethically bound to seek informed consent, such as when accessing data which social media users expect to be private". (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). For the research on the online communities, the CSD team will only look at interactions between users in common online spaces which can reasonably be considered as public (organisational pages and open and public groups), without examining individual profiles or including individual profile names in the analysis of the data.

DATA PROTECTION AND GDPR

No personal data will be specifically gathered from the non-participant observation and all data gathered during the research will be anonymised in the final report, in line with CONNEKT's Data Protection Policy document (D1.2).