

# FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK?

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### INTRODUCTION

- ▶ The database has 17 Bulgarian cases (arrested between 2014 and 2017), 5 of which have a foreign background while the remaining 12 are part of the local Salafi Roma community. These two groups of arrestees differ significantly in terms of profile and charges and should be discussed separately.
- ▶ Gender: of the 17 cases, 16 were males and 1 female. The average age of the total dataset is 35, with the youngest individual being 28 years old and the oldest 43.
- ▶ Education and employment: 12 individuals do not have any high school experience, and 4 graduated high school. About half were unemployed at the time of arrest.
- ▶ Nationality/origins: 12 individuals were born in Bulgaria and hold Bulgarian citizenship; 1 individual was born in Syria and holds Bulgarian citizenship; 1 individual was born in Vietnam and has dual citizenship (Bulgarian and Australian); and 3 individuals came from Syria.
- ▶ Foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs): 5 out of the 17 individuals have had FTF experience. However, it is not clear exactly what their level or role in the organisation was. There is 1 foreign fighter who may have been at a higher level in ISIS, but this is not confirmed. The remaining 12 are not linked to FTF-related activities directly but are charged with extremist propaganda and allegedly aiding FTFs in transit.
- ▶ Financing: There is scant evidence about financing sources and it is not clear if they are legal or illegal. The suspected high-ranking member of ISIS was selling contraband pipe tobacco in Bulgaria and Western Europe and allegedly traded tobacco in ISIS-held territories. In the case of he and his followers, the financing of his activities is said to have come from donations from community members (many of whom work abroad in Western Europe) and small-scale informal economic activities, such as selling junk. There is, however, data that earlier in the 2000s, BGR 17 received funding from a foreign Islamic foundation (which operated with Saudi funds illegally channelled to Bulgaria) that was denied registration as a local branch in Bulgaria.

- ▶ Radicalisation factors: Most vulnerable to radicalisation seem to be the marginalised sub-segment of the Roma community along with the penetration of Salafism among some isolated subgroups. Religious affiliation, however, seems to be predominantly superficial with factors of social cohesion, group belonging, identity, and, in some instances, financial stimuli playing a more predominant role. The presence of a charismatic (albeit informal) religious leader, social marginalisation, unstable identity, contacts with radical agents abroad, among others, seem to have contributed to a small group of people from this community displaying support for the ideas of ISIS at a time when the organisation was most influential and vocal internationally.

### SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Bulgaria was mainly a transit route for FTFs to the recent conflicts in Syria and Iraq, and many of the factors associated with the risks of extremist influence are mainly external as opposed to homegrown, as highlighted in the previous report.

Islamist radicalisation is often considered through the prism of the entry of Salafi interpretations of Islam to Bulgaria and its adoption by some, albeit a limited number of Muslim communities in the country. While following stricter religious interpretations should not be equated to radicalisation, it is nevertheless noteworthy due to two important considerations. First, Salafism is not typical in Bulgaria and is often considered at odds with the traditional Hanafi Sunni Islam professed by the majority of Muslim communities in the country.<sup>1</sup> Second, it was members of a Roma Salafi community who exhibited the most serious indications of Islamist radicalisation, including two convictions for one informal Roma Salafi preacher.

The changes associated with the adoption of Salafism are far from widespread. Generally, Salafi interpretations of Islam have been rejected by the majority of Bulgarian Muslim communities.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Salafi influences in terms of dress, polygamy, and piety remain limited to specific cases of some Bulgarian-speaking Muslim villages and Roma settlements in the country.<sup>3</sup> Despite numerous attempts at external penetration or 'import' of Salafism and the exposure of part of the local Muslim population to Salafi interpretations of Islam since the 1990s (through education abroad or via foreign religious emissaries and foundations active in the country) up until the

1 Dzhhekova, R. et al. (2015) *Radicalisation in Bulgaria: Threats and Trends*. Sofia: Centre for the Study of Democracy.

2 Ibid.

3 Kerem, O. (2010) *New Islamic Actors after the Wahhabi intermezzo: Turkey's Return to the Muslim Balkans*. Oxford: European Studies Centre, University of Oxford.

emergence of ISIS as a new actor on the global Islamist scene, there had been no known signs of similar behaviour associated with openly expressing support for the ideas and causes of extremist organisations.

## RADICALISATION FACTORS

Given the sparse information available from court files and media sources, it is not possible to discuss in-depth radicalisation factors related to the 5 arrestees with a foreign background included in the database. The following is an overview of the key domestic factors related to the group of 14 arrestees belonging to the local Roma community.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note, however, that this case so far appears highly isolated and is not representative of a radicalisation trend among the domestic population or local Muslim communities, which remains limited.

The communities where Salafism managed to take root tend to be the most economically and socially disadvantaged communities, places where the transition to democracy and market economy have had the most severe consequences. According to law enforcement experts, recruitment into Salafi Islam among the Roma is also associated with a financial stimulus for wearing the niqab.<sup>5</sup> More specifically this financial stimulus is considered an initial motivating factor, followed by the development of a more authentic pious attitude and feeling.<sup>6</sup>

Other factors have influenced the openness towards alternative interpretations of Islam.<sup>7</sup> Some Muslim communities in the country, namely Roma Muslims and some Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (as opposed to Muslims of Turkish descent) have displayed unstable religious identities.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the organisation of the official Bulgarian Muslim denomination in Bulgaria in general has been geared more towards servicing the spiritual needs of the ethnic Turkish minority (and, notably, carrying out most of its activities in Turkish). Financing for their activities has been provided mainly from Turkey. This situation has resulted in a spiritual vacuum for the non-Turkish-speaking Muslim

communities (i.e., some Roma and Bulgarian-speaking Muslims), which partly has been filled by radical interpretations of Islam. This is particularly true in areas where Bulgarian-speaking Muslims live together with ethnic Bulgarians and tend to distinguish themselves by their religious identity.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the identity dynamics, problems with the organisation of Bulgarian Islamic educational institutions have facilitated the entry of radical interpretations of Islam. Opportunities for higher education in Islamic studies in the country are limited. The Higher Islamic Institute is not accredited and its diplomas are not recognised in either Bulgaria or Europe. The institute also relies to a great extent on financial support and donations from Turkey and other Muslim countries.<sup>10</sup> It has been described as providing “exclusively a low level of education and suffers from a lack of qualified staff”.<sup>11</sup> Instead, next to the three Islamic high schools, some Muslim boards of trustees (Muslim or mosque boards of trustees) run Qur’an classes while the Chief Muftiate organises summer Qur’an classes.<sup>12</sup> These classes also have no official accreditation and are often funded by various religious foundations or foreign individuals. While the content of these courses is in principle approved by the Chief Muftiate, it is not clear to what extent the Muftiate extends its control over the curricula of some of them.<sup>13</sup> This lack of transparency with regard to funding and the absence of official control over the content was underscored by a media investigation in August 2004 that brought attention to the Qur’an course in the town of Sarnitsa that was teaching orthodox Islam different from the Sunni Hanafi tradition.<sup>14</sup> In addition, as the Bulgarian Muslim religion is mainly geared towards satisfying the needs of the Bulgarian Turkish minority, representatives of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims have chosen to study in Islamic schools in Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Jordan (with the support of the Chief Muftiate and official funding from Turkey or informal funding from various foreign foundations) where more radical interpretations of Islam are often taught.<sup>15</sup>

4 The analysis presented here is based on Mancheva, M. and Dzhekova, R. (2017) Risks of Islamist radicalisation in Bulgaria: A case study in the Iztok neighbourhood of the city of Pazardzhik. CSD Working Paper, February 2017.

5 Dzhekova, R. et al. (2015) Radicalisation in Bulgaria: Threats and Trends. Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy.

6 Ibid.

7 See Mancheva, M. and Dzhekova, R. (2017) Risks of Islamist radicalisation in Bulgaria: A case study in the Iztok neighbourhood of the city of Pazardzhik. CSD Working Paper, February 2017.

8 Ibid; Троева, Е. (2012). „Традиционен” и „нов” ислям в България. Български Фолклор 3-4: 5-23.

9 Dzhekova, R. et al. (2015) Radicalisation in Bulgaria: Threats and Trends. Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy.

10 Zhelyazkova, A. (ed.). (no year of publication). Relations of Compatibility and Incompatibility Between Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria. Sofia: IMIR

11 Evstatiev, S., (2006). Public Islam on the Balkans in a Wider European Context. Budapest: Open Society Institute, p. 57.

12 Zhelyazkova, A. (2014) Bulgaria. In Cesari, J (ed.) Oxford Handbook of European Islam. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 592.

13 Ghodsee, K., (2010) Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe. Gender, Ethnicity, & The Transformation of Islam in Postsocialist Bulgaria. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

14 Tavanier, B. (2005) Bulgaria: Mysterious Mosques and School. Transitions Online 2 (1); Йорданова, Я. (21 август 2004). Ислямските училища не са това, което са. Capital.bg. Available at: [http://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/bulgaria/2004/08/21/227583\\_islamskite\\_uchilishta\\_ne\\_sa\\_tova\\_koeto\\_sa/](http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2004/08/21/227583_islamskite_uchilishta_ne_sa_tova_koeto_sa/)

15 Dzhekova, R. et al. (2015) Radicalisation in Bulgaria: Threats and Trends. Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy.

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Penetration of Salafi influence as well as some initial signs of Islamic radicalisation have been observed in particular among some Roma communities. Law enforcement and intelligence consider close monitoring is needed for some groups in Roma communities in the towns of Pazardjik, Plovdiv, Nova Zagora, and Asenovgrad where groups of Muslims and recent Muslim converts profess simplified interpretations of Salafism and among whom instances of manifestations of sympathy with ISIS have been observed.<sup>16</sup> The core group of Salafi followers is composed of 50-60 people based in Pazardzhik and motivated by an informal preacher BGR 17, with similar groups emerging in the Roma quarters of the other mentioned cities.<sup>17</sup> Recruitment usually targets young people with addiction problems who are offered social support or informal jobs in the community.

A limited number of people from the Salafi Roma community in the Iztok quarter of Pazardzhik also demonstrated allegiance to the cause of ISIS and 14 of them have been arrested and put on trial; however, this case has so far remained an isolated instance of such activity. What led to it is also complex.<sup>18</sup>

The factors that potentially contributed to the formation of a Salafi community (social segregation, discrimination, stigmatisation, seeking new meaning and social identification, strong group solidarity and support, integration within the community by participating in informal economic activities, shared identity and religious practices, cosmopolitanisation through increased travel to Western Europe and exposure to new religious practices and ideas abroad) are likely to have created vulnerabilities to the penetration of more radically charged ideas channelled through the internet, the local informal leader, or through contact with Islamist influences abroad.<sup>19</sup> In particular, the rise of a strong spiritual leader who enjoys a high degree of moral authority and trust and is able to mobilise support can be viewed as a vulnerability factor that can potentially make certain members of the community increasingly receptive and more easily manipulated by simplified interpretations and answers to important questions about life, adapted to be accessible and to resonate with an uncritical and uneducated audience.<sup>20</sup> The majority of his 13 co-defendants are unemployed, have a low education level, 3 of them had substance

dependence, and 3 had previous criminal records. Upon joining the group, some of them started preaching informally.

It is also important to look at the timeframe in which a certain mobilisation on the part of the followers and closest associates was registered, which resulted in the sudden visibility and intensification of symbolic acts of approval for ISIS, a change in rhetoric towards accommodating some of the ideas of the jihadi branch of Salafism, the consumption and dissemination of online content expressing approval or glorification of ISIS, its fighters, or the jihadi cause (including online materials related to violence), and open and proactive propaganda activities within the community.<sup>21</sup> According to court files, this happened mostly since late 2012 and the beginning of 2013, which coincides with two major events internationally and domestically.

Undoubtedly, the key trigger for the emergence of such behaviour was **the rise of ISIS as a new actor** on the Islamist scene, a group whose powerful propaganda machine operates both online and through recruiters in Muslim communities in Europe. The evidence provided within the third trial indictment against BGR 17 and his 13 followers shows clearly that they had been **exposed to ISIS propaganda online** but possibly also through **direct contact between with radical mosques and individuals** in Western Europe (mainly in Graz, Austria, and Cologne, Germany) and in Turkey.<sup>22</sup>

The external influence and contact to which BGR 17 and the group were potentially exposed is another key factor that deserves more attention. While there is evidence that he preached online to followers in Germany and Austria, i.e., members of the Iztok Salafi community living permanently or temporarily abroad,<sup>23</sup> much less is known about the community's contact with radical Islamist mosques and organisations abroad.

His **contact with radical Islamist circles mainly in Austria and Germany** dates back to the early 2000s.<sup>24</sup> In 2004, he was convicted of being part of a radical Islamist organisation active in Germany. There are some indications that during the incriminating period of the third trial against him (2013-2014), he maintained contact with a radical Islamist organisation in Germany and Austria charged with propagating ISIS

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 For in-depth analysis see Mancheva, M. and Dzhekova, R. (2017) Risks of Islamist radicalisation in Bulgaria: A case study in the Iztok neighbourhood of the city of Pazardzhik. CSD Working Paper, February 2017.

19 Ibid.

20 Interviews with law enforcement and intelligence representatives, June 15 and 18, 2015.

21 According to evidence brought under criminal case 44/2016.

22 According to evidence brought in the indictment of criminal case 44/ 2016, part of the ISIS advertisement materials distributed in the neighbourhood were bought in Turkey.

23 Court indictment for criminal case 44/2016

24 Mancheva, M. and Dzhekova, R. (2017) Risks of Islamist radicalisation in Bulgaria: A case study in the Iztok neighbourhood of the city of Pazardzhik. CSD Working Paper, February 2017

ideas,<sup>25</sup> and is said to have travelled several times to Graz and met with the leader of a local extremist cell.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the information that BGR 17, himself, and his close associates provided logistical support to foreign terrorist fighters from Western Europe and the Balkans on their way to Syria via Turkey also raises the question of the scope and nature of the links maintained by the group with Islamist circles and the transnational community that enabled the establishment of contact with transiting foreign fighters.<sup>27</sup>

The second potentially relevant contributing factor to the sudden change in behaviour of the group towards openly expressing sympathies for ISIS and its ideas may have been the opening of the second trial against BGR 17 in September 2012, as this is reportedly the point when their online propaganda activity in relation to disseminating and consuming materials related to jihadist activities in Syria and Iraq intensified.<sup>28</sup> The increased public and media attention surrounding the start of the trial may have fuelled the **glorification and martyrdomisation of BGR 17** in the community, as well as increased the feeling of “us versus them” within the group.

In terms of individual motivations or push factors, the group’s actions are likely to have been motivated also by individual ‘demand’ on the part of members of the community, namely by personal trajectories and the need to connect with and feel part of the transnational Muslim community, to respond to individual grievances, seeking and needs, for which the widely accessible and popular rhetoric of ISIS provides a suitable channel for venting at this particular moment in time.<sup>29</sup> A potentially relevant factor at the group level is the increased feeling of **social ‘prestige’** through the projection of a particular image by the group (as a result of its demonstrative association with ISIS) to the rest of the community, and as a result of being suddenly looked upon as different, ‘important’, even ‘scary’ and surrounded by a degree of mysticism. This may have contributed to further **cohesion and mobilisation within the group**, combined with the perceived ‘external’ attack on their religious leader, as he was put on trial in 2014 for a previous offence.

However, it should be stressed that this case remains isolated and no similar trends have been observed in the country. Furthermore, the arrests in November 2014 and the charges brought against the group members in court seem also to have diminished the ‘attractiveness’ of the group among the community members and their activities have become much less visible.

## RADICALISATION CHARGES

**The manifestations of radicalisation** exhibited by members of the Pazardzhik Salafi community, who were charged in 2014 and 2015 for radicalisation-related activities, can be grouped under four types.<sup>30</sup> First, some of the defendants are charged with displaying and disseminating/selling ISIS propaganda materials. Second, some of the defendants are accused of using social networks, Facebook in particular, to share videos of ISIS military successes and containing calls for jihad, as well as photos and collages testifying to their identification with the transnational community of ‘Warriors of Allah’. Third, the leader of the Salafi community, BGR 17, is charged with integrating in his sermons appeals of support for IS, as well as certain ideas characteristic of so-called jihadist doctrine. Some of the ideas professed by the preacher included calls to his followers to fulfil their religious obligation to join the caliphate and its army. He also urged the faithful to be ready to enter the battle in Syria and fight on the side of ISIS, as well as to collect cash to assist ISIS fighters. Fourth, some of the defendants allegedly provided logistical support to foreign fighters transiting to Syria.

## CRIMINAL HISTORY

Of the 17 individuals, 3 have a record of a previous arrest but in only 2 of the cases is there data of a conviction. However, given the small sample size and scant information available in several of the cases, it is not possible to comment in-depth on a link between prior criminality and terrorism, especially when it comes to the arrestees of foreign origin who had a limited stay in the country. Furthermore, the cases included in the database are very diverse in terms of background and charges and no generalisations can be made of the sample as a whole.

25 БНР, „Ахмед Муса е част от международна група, разпространяваща идеите на „Ислямска Държава““, 23.12.2015. A reference was made in a Bulgarian National Radio newscast to a report by the Austrian State Prosecutor’s Office that was forwarded to the Pazardzhik Provincial Prosecutor’s Office under the treaty on mutual judicial legal assistance between the authorities of the Member States.

26 PZ.24info.bg, Един от осъдените за тероризъм българи живял в пазарджишката циганска махала. 30 November 2018. <https://pz.24info.bg/%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD/criminal/item/3570-ediniyat-ot-osadenite-za-tepopizam-balgapi-imal-hosh-besh-s-pazapdzhishkite-tsigani>

27 The evidence presented in the court indictment suggests that this support includes transport facilitation, supply of mobile phones, and accommodation of at least 3 confirmed foreign fighters travelling via Turkey to Syria. Potential contact with ‘smugglers’ was also mentioned in relation to facilitating the transportation and passage of foreign fighters (Interview with a representative of the intelligence and law enforcement institutions, June 15 and 18, 2015).

28 Court indictment of criminal case 44/2016, p. 8.

29 Mancheva, M. and Dzhekova, R. (2017) Risks of Islamist radicalisation in Bulgaria: A case study in the Iztok neighbourhood of the city of Pazardzhik. CSD Working Paper, February 2017

30 Ibid.

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### Organised crime-terrorism links

One case in particular stands out, though, namely an individual of Syrian origin who received Bulgarian citizenship in 2008 and then was arrested in 2017 and is currently on trial on terrorism and organised crime charges simultaneously. The charges against him include participating in a terrorist organisation, financing terrorism, and leading an organised criminal group involved in the illicit tobacco trade.<sup>31</sup>

He is said to have been a part of the ISIS forces during his stay in Syria.<sup>32</sup> As per the indictment cited in the media, he went to Syria in 2013 and stayed until the beginning of 2016. During this time, the prosecution claims that he was part of ISIS and engaged in combat. He is present in ISIS videos, including one picturing the defendant and severed heads. His exact role in the organisation has yet to be clarified, but so far there are claims that he was a high-ranking member of ISIS due to a document he possessed allowing him free passage through all territories where combat activities were in progress. According to the spokesperson of the Specialised Prosecution, the defendant's activities as a merchant served as a cover for his terrorist activities. Other experts claim he was most likely simply a merchant or a marginal member of the organisation, rather than a high-ranking functionary or combatant.

Upon returning to Bulgaria from Syria in 2016, the defendant reportedly initiated an illicit operation trading in shisha tobacco. Three other people were arrested with the defendant and two of them are facing charges for crimes involving the illicit production and distribution of tobacco products, as well as participating in an organised criminal group in these offences. It is unknown at this point if the fourth person was charged as well.

The raw tobacco was gathered from producers across the country and delivered to Sofia, where it was further processed by unregistered workers without any regard to hygienic or legal standards. Subsequently, the tobacco was exported to Western Europe, mainly for Germany, the Netherlands, and France, with a small proportion sold in Bulgaria. The buyers in Western Europe and Bulgaria were of Arabic origin. The tobacco was sent to Western European countries through courier companies in large quantities of up to 300-500 kilograms per day. The other two defendants, a Bulgarian woman married to a Middle Eastern man owned a shop selling tobacco products where the illicit tobacco was sold. During searches carried out by police, a total of three tonnes of cut tobacco was discovered.

31 Dnevnik.bg. (14 October 2017). Задържаният в София командир на "Ислямска държава" е заснет във видеа на групировката. [https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2017/10/14/3059754\\_zadurjaniat\\_v\\_sofia\\_komandir\\_na\\_isliamska\\_durjava\\_e/](https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2017/10/14/3059754_zadurjaniat_v_sofia_komandir_na_isliamska_durjava_e/); Попов, А. (14 October 2017). Търговец или командир на ИД е арестуваният сирец у нас?. Dnes.bg. <https://www.dnes.bg/crime/2017/10/14/tyrgovec-ili-koman-dir-na-id-e-arestuvaniat-siriec-u-nas.356207,image4#photo>

32 Ibid.

33 See Mancheva, M. and Dzhekova, R. (2017). Risks of Islamist Radicalisation in Bulgaria: A Case Study in the Iztok Neighbourhood of the City of Pazardzhik. CSD Working Paper, February 2017.

34 Ibid.

The trial has yet to begin and information at this stage is scant.

### Local radical religious leader

The other case where a previous arrest was significant is that of BGR 17 the informal religious preacher and leader of a group of members of a small Salafi Roma community who proclaimed support for the ideas and cause of ISIS. He was arrested, tried and convicted two times before the current charges, for similar offences related to anti-democratic propaganda and radical Islamist ideas. He started preaching radical Islam in 2001.<sup>33</sup> He was put on trial for the first time in 2004 when he was 28-29, charged with preaching anti-democratic ideology/violent overthrow of the constitutional order, preaching hatred, and violence or discrimination on the grounds of religion. In 2012, another trial was initiated against him and 12 imams on similar charges, including for being a member of an illegal religious organisation with foreign funding. His first conviction was for preaching anti-democratic ideology and hate, violence or discrimination on the grounds of religion (he received a 3 years' suspended sentence). The second conviction entered into force in 2019 (1 year in prison) and was for preaching anti-democratic ideology, participating in an illicit organisation, and for preaching religious hatred. A third trial against him and his 13 associates is ongoing.

Of his followers and current co-defendants, 3 have previous criminal records (2 have been arrested for petty crime, namely theft, and 1 of the 2 was convicted of theft, served a suspended sentence and was rehabilitated. The third member of the group was convicted of bodily injury/hooliganism, however this individual is not included in the database). According to a qualitative study<sup>34</sup> of what led to the formation of this coherent group of followers and small Salafi community in the Roma quarter of Pazardzhik, some of the pull factors include the possibility that members of the marginalized community experienced social support and group belonging, received moral guidance, escaped crime and addiction, and received new social roles and informal jobs.



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