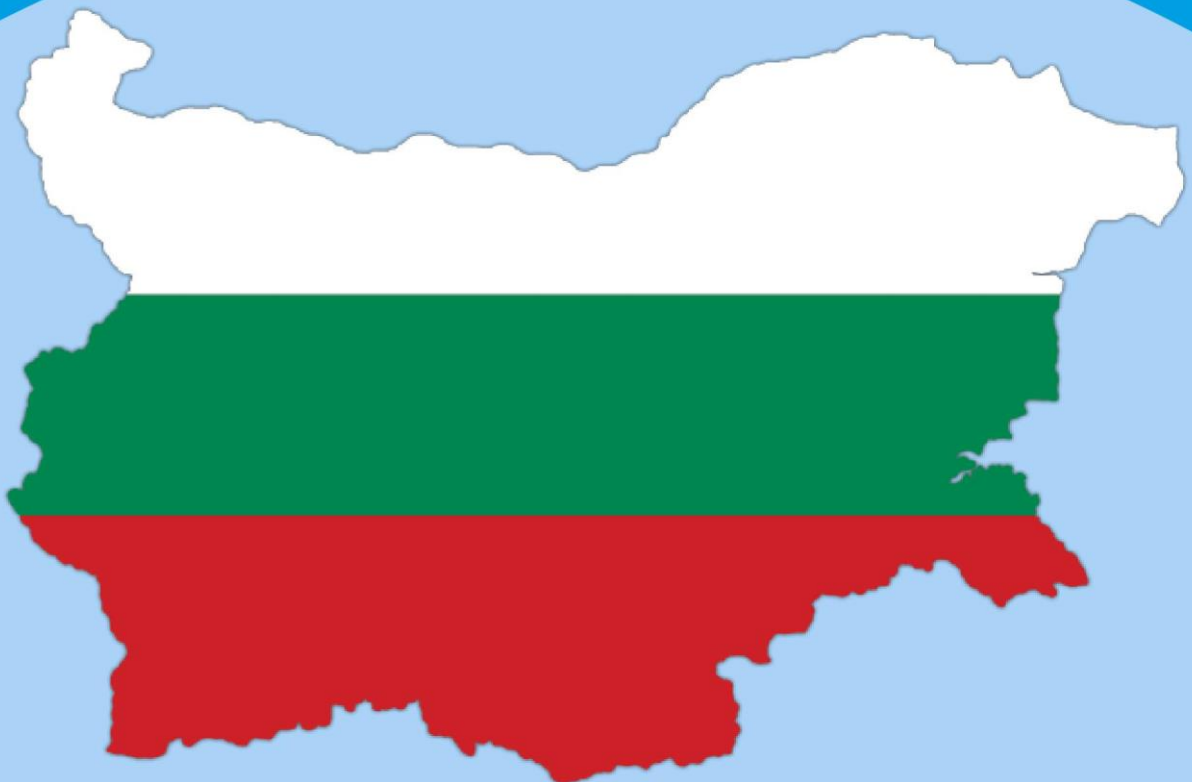


# **FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK?**

## **QUARTERLY REPORT 2018 BULGARIA**



# FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK?

## Quarterly Report: Bulgaria

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The most well-known ISIS terrorist atrocities in Europe, including the 2015 Paris and 2016 Brussels attacks, saw individuals who in the past had been involved in organized crime and illegal trade graduate into the ranks of the world's most successful terrorist organisation. **It is now widely assumed that Europe's terrorists are no longer radicals first and foremost but criminals who turned to political violence at some stage throughout their ordinary crime careers.** Thus, a threat emanating from the "crime-terror nexus" hangs over Europe. GLOBSEC, an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental organisation which aims to shape the global debate on foreign and security policy, responded to this threat by developing a research and advocacy project aimed at addressing the "crime-terror nexus" in Europe. **Our project titled *From Criminals to Terrorists and Back?* will:<sup>3</sup>**

1. **collect, collate and analyse data on terrorism convicts from 11 EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK)** with the highest number of arrests for terrorism offences. We will investigate whether these individuals had prior criminal connections, and if so, whether a specific connection to illegal trade is a precursor to terrorism, and to what extent this trade funds terrorism. In short, we will check whether crime-terror nexus exists and how strong it truly is.
2. **disseminate project findings at high profile GLOBSEC Strategic Forums (GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum, TATRA Summit, Chateau Bela conferences) and other internationally acclaimed gatherings** which attract decision makers, experts, private sector and law enforcement representatives, while also incorporating their expert level feedback into our work.
3. **help shape and strengthen the European counter-terrorism efforts by providing tailor made solutions on combating crime-terror nexus and terrorist financing via education and awareness, and advocacy efforts involving decision makers and security stakeholders in the 11 targeted countries.** This line of activity directly links the project to the widely acclaimed work of the GLOBSEC Intelligence Reform Initiative (GIRI), led by Sec. Michael Chertoff, which is involved in developing and promoting more effective transatlantic counter-terrorism solutions.

## 1. Introduction

An initial examination of people arrested for terrorism or related offences in Bulgaria appears to discount any relation between crime and terrorism, as none of the defendants examined thus far had been convicted of a prior offence and there are no indications of any involvement in crime. As such, the data gathered so far does not support the phenomenon of "gangster jihad."<sup>4</sup> However, the sample examined so far in

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<sup>3</sup> The project is funded under PMI IMPACT, a global grant initiative of Philip Morris International to support projects against illegal trade. GLOBSEC is fully independent in implementing the project and has editorial responsibility for all views and opinions expressed herein.

<sup>4</sup> M. Gallagher, Criminalised Islamic State Veterans—A Future Major Threat in Organised Crime Development?

Bulgaria is highly skewed (the majority of the subjects examined are foreigners arrested in transit, with no prior background in Bulgaria) and information is scarce, hence it is difficult to generalise based on the available evidence. This is because Bulgaria is not a major source of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) but rather a transit country, while the overall risks of homegrown radicalisation are considered low.

## 2. Thematic analysis

To date, four people arrested in 2016 and convicted in 2017 of terrorism-related offences in Bulgaria have been analysed.<sup>5</sup> All of them faced charges, not of terrorist activities but of preparatory actions, more specifically travelling to Syria to participate in combat. The offence, qualified by the Bulgarian Criminal Code (BCC) as *entering the country with the intent to commit terrorist acts, including against another country*<sup>6</sup> was only criminalised with an amendment adopted in late 2015.<sup>7</sup> Three of the convicts are foreigners, while one has Bulgarian nationality but stayed in the country only for a short period, having grown up and lived elsewhere. **Only with regard to one arrestee was enough background information available to allow for an informed conclusion that the defendant does not have prior involvement in criminal activities.**

It should be noted that there are a number of challenges when exploring the crime-terror nexus in Bulgaria. A significant proportion of terrorism arrestees are not Bulgarian citizens, and foreigners are often subjected to what is referred to as **Compulsory Administrative Measures (CAMs)**.<sup>8</sup> As the State Agency for National Security (SANS) indicates, CAMs do not represent a sanction but rather are preventive in character.<sup>9</sup> The CAMs applied to foreigners include three types of measures: expulsion, revocation of

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*Perspectives on Terrorism 10* (5); Burke, J. (2016). *The New Threat from Islamic Militancy*. London: Vintage, 207.

<sup>5</sup> The research in Bulgaria was expanded to include defendants arrested in 2016 and 2017, as there have been no terrorism trials in the country for 2015. The majority of the arrestees reported to Europol for 2015 have been subject to Compulsory Administrative Measures (CAMs). The persons subjected to such measures are foreigners, who are taken out of the country and are therefore not tried in Bulgaria. Background information about these individuals is scarce. In 2016, on the other hand, the first terrorism related trials were completed, enabling data gathering about the defendants.

<sup>6</sup> Art. 108a, par. (7), Bulgarian Criminal Code, available at: <https://www.lex.bg/laws/ldoc/1589654529> (accessed 4.5.2018).

<sup>7</sup> Bulgarian Criminal Code, amended State Gazette N° 74, 26 September 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Official communication with SANS.

<sup>9</sup> ДАНС. (15 февруари 2013). *Наложени принудителни административни мерки по чл. 42 ЗЧРБ*. Available at: <http://www.dans.bg/bg/press-releases-menu-bul/183-chujdenci15-02-2013-art-bul> (accessed 28.4.2018).

right to reside, and a prohibition on entering the territory of the country.<sup>10</sup> **When CAMs are applied, individuals are not charged in Bulgaria at all and consequently, information about their background is scarce, making the establishment of a crime-terror nexus (or lack thereof), very difficult.**

**The application of CAMs because of indications of links to terrorism or terrorist organisations do not always involve an arrest, as indicated by the discrepancies between the number of arrests reported to Europol and the number of CAMs that have been applied by SANS** (see Figure 1). Nevertheless, according to data provided by SANS upon written request, all terrorism arrestees since 2014 have been subject either to court procedures or CAMs and none have been released without the application of any measures,<sup>11</sup> indicating that the arrestees who have not been subject to trial are no longer in the country, diminishing the sample of arrestees that can be meaningfully analysed. At the same time, even with regard to the foreign arrestees who are tried in Bulgaria, there is often a lack of more detailed background information.

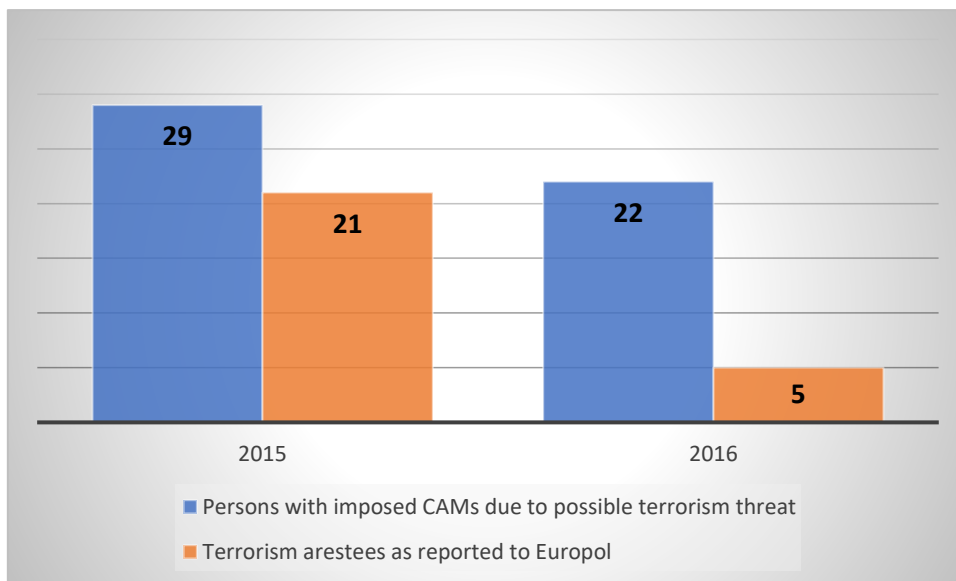


Figure 1: Number of imposed CAMs related to terrorism and terrorism arrestees reported to Europol. Source: SANS annual report 2016, 2017; Europol TE-SAT reports 2016, 2017.

**The high proportion of foreigners among the terrorism arrestees can be explained by the fact that Islamist radicalisation and home-grown religious extremism are not**

<sup>10</sup> Compulsory administrative measures are applied by SANS in accordance with the Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Law on Entering, Staying and Departing from the Republic of Bulgaria of Citizens of the European Union, who are not Bulgarian Citizens and of Members of their Families.

<sup>11</sup> Official communication with SANS.

**widespread in the country and terrorism can largely be described as an external threat.** As noted in GLOBSEC's *From Criminals to Terrorists and Back? Kick-Off Report*, Bulgaria has so far experienced only one terrorist attack in its modern history, the Bourgas bus bombing in 2012, which was organised outside the country. Those responsible for the terrorist act are an Australian and a Canadian citizen, both of Lebanese descent. The two are being tried in absentia.<sup>12</sup>

The situation in Bulgaria with regard to these issues has not changed significantly since the intensification of the conflict in Syria and the mass-migration crisis, which gave rise to a number of security concerns, including those related to terrorism. **According to the Ministry of Interior, the terrorism threat level remains at the lowest, third, level.**<sup>13</sup> Due to Bulgaria's proximity to the conflict in Syria and its location on the route of both outgoing and increasingly returning foreign fighters, coupled with radicalisation in other countries in the region, Bulgaria is by no means shielded from the potential terrorist threat.<sup>14</sup> Still, as has been noted in a report on the security risks associated with the migration crisis, "the terrorism risk is not that Bulgaria might be a target. Bulgaria is a transit [hub] for terrorism".<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, there are certain risk factors with regard to Islamist radicalisation in the country that should not be disregarded. Most important among these are processes of increased adoption of Salafi interpretations of Islam by certain sections of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims and conversion to fundamentalist strands among marginalised Roma communities in some, so far isolated parts of the country. The latter development is exemplified by one prominent case that included proclamations of sympathy and support for terrorist organizations such as ISIS among a closed Salafi Roma community.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Банкова, А. (17 януари 2018) Делото "Сарафово" започва по същество. *dariknews.bg*. Available at: <https://dariknews.bg/novini/bylgariia/deloto-sarafovo-zapochva-po-syshtestvo-2072891> (accessed 5.5.2018)

<sup>13</sup> Гатев, Х. (23 май 2017) МВР: Няма непосредствена заплаха от терористични актове в България. *dariknews.bg*. Available at: <https://dariknews.bg/novini/bylgariia/mvr-niama-neposredstvena-zaplaha-ot-teroristichni-aktove-v-bylgariia-2025392> (accessed 5.5.2018)

<sup>14</sup> ДАНС. (2017) *Годишен доклад за дейността на Държавна агенция „Национална сигурност“ (2016 г.)*. София: ДАНС.

<sup>15</sup> Център за превенция и противодействие на корупцията и организираната престъпност. (2017) *Кратък доклад на тема „Рискове за националната сигурност, произтичащи от бежанската криза в Европа“*. София: БОРКОР, стр. 13.

<sup>16</sup> The support for ISIS was expressed in four ways: displaying, spreading and selling ISIS propaganda materials (e.g. flags); sharing ISIS videos online as well as posting photos and collages showing identification with a transnational community of 'Warriors of Allah'; incorporation in sermons of appeals for support to ISIS and of ideas characteristic of jihadist doctrines by the leader of the Roma group; providing logistical support (e.g. housing and arranging smuggling through the state border) to FTFs. Mila Mancheva and Rositsa Dzhekova, *Risks of Islamist Radicalisation*

These developments are also often prompted by the activities of external actors or of Bulgarians who have come into contact with extremist preachers, mosques or groups abroad, most prominently in countries like Germany and Austria, where there is a large community of Bulgarian migrant labourers, including those from the Roma and Turkish minorities. The four main factors driving these processes include proselytism by foreign missionaries in Bulgaria, the activities of foreign charitable aid coming from Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, the migration of young Muslims from Bulgaria to study at prestigious religious universities in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, as well as labour migration to Western European countries and encounters with local (immigrant) Muslim communities.<sup>17</sup> Despite such processes, however, in general the Bulgarian Muslim population is resilient to attempts at radicalisation because of long-standing traditions of peaceful co-existence with Orthodox Christians.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the most prevalent type of Islam in the country, Hanafi Sunni Islam, can be described as being at odds with the fundamentalism of Salafism, leading to limited adoption.<sup>19</sup>

**Generally, therefore, Islamist radicalisation as well as terrorism can largely be described as “imported” and “external” threats, respectively, to the extent to which foreign terrorist actors might target the country, or to the extent to which the most fundamentalist and militant versions of Islam might produce home-grown terrorists are foreign to the beliefs and customs of the country’s long established Muslim minority.** Nevertheless, as noted in the *Kick-Off Report*, a spate of arrests in 2014 and 2015 of several Salafi Roma indicates there might be fertile ground for radicalisation among some communities. These arrestees were later charged with spreading anti-democratic ideology and religious hatred. Moreover, there are indications that the defendants also provided logistical support to foreign fighters going to Syria.<sup>20</sup>

It became necessary to expand the dataset for Bulgaria to include individuals arrested in years other than 2015. This presents an opportunity to examine more Bulgarian defendants for whom more information is available, which could shed light on any

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in Bulgaria: A Case Study in the Iztok Neighborhood of the city of Pazardzhik (Sofia, Center for the Study of Democracy, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Dzhekova, R. et al. (2015) *Radicalisation in Bulgaria: Threats and Trends*. Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Стоилова, З. (1 ноември 2016). *Ромите и радикалите: предполагаемата българска подкрепа за ИДИЛ*. [www.capital.bg/https://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/obshtestvo/2016/01/11/2681285\\_romite\\_i\\_radikalite\\_pr\\_edpolagaemata\\_bulgarska\\_podkrepa/](http://www.capital.bg/https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/obshtestvo/2016/01/11/2681285_romite_i_radikalite_pr_edpolagaemata_bulgarska_podkrepa/) (accessed 5.5.2018).

potential link between crime and terrorism. The expected number of remaining arrestees to be analysed is 15.

With the scarcity of information about the examined defendants, few commonalities can be identified. Perhaps the most important similarity between defendants examined to this point are their age, foreign nationality, and sex. All defendants are young males between the ages of 21 and 25 years of age. In addition, all of them have a high school education. Conversion has played a role only in one of the cases examined, but it is likely to be a more important variable among the sample that remains to be analysed, since publicly available information about these defendants indicates that some or all of them are converts.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

The data gathered in Bulgaria so far suggests that a relationship between crime and terrorism is tenuous, both in terms of crime financing terrorist activities and with regard to criminals evolving into religious extremists. However, because of the size and nature of the sample analysed and the information available, it is not possible to discount the existence of a crime-terror nexus. The collection of information is complicated by a number of factors, as explained in more detail above, namely that the arrestees are often foreign nationals, who are subject to compulsory administrative measures and removed from the country without trial. At the same time, there is often insufficient information even about foreigners who are convicted in Bulgaria. More data is needed to be able to advance meaningful conclusions and recommendations. The inclusion in the sample of defendants of Bulgarian nationality in subsequent stages of the project (although these have been tried for less grave offences such as spreading anti-democratic propaganda and religious hatred as opposed to involvement in terrorism) will serve to shed more light on any possible relation between crime and terrorism in the country.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.