THE MEDIA IN BULGARIA: A SHIELD OR CONDUIT FOR RADICALIZATION AMONG MUSLIMS DURING THE RISE OF ISIS (2014–

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Abstract. The media in Bulgaria played a complex role in the context of (lack of) Muslim radicalization during the rise of ISIS (2014-2019). Bulgaria, as a predominantly orthodox Christian country, has a significant long-established Muslim minority, primarily composed of Turks, Pomaks (ethnic Bulgarians with Islamic faith), and Roma. During the rise of ISIS, there were concerns about the vulnerability of these groups to radicalization due to the influence of global jihadist ideologies. On one hand, the media outlets emphasized the integration of Muslims into Bulgarian society and the peaceful nature of most of the community. On the other hand, several media channels amplified fears of terrorism, often using sensationalized headlines and stories that blurred the lines between Islam and extremism. This media coverage risked alienating Muslim communities and potentially driving marginalized individuals towards radical ideologies, acting as a conduit of radicalization. By portraying Muslims as a security threat, some media narratives fed into Islamophobic sentiments, which could increase feelings of isolation among the Muslim minority.

While the media in Bulgaria had the potential to act as a shield by promoting understanding and countering radical narratives, in some cases, it became a conduit of radicalization by fostering fear, misunderstanding, and division, particularly during the peak of ISIS's influence between 2014 and 2019. The balance of these two roles varied greatly across different media platforms and outlets.

Keywords: Radicalization, Islam, muslims, Islamic State, ISIS

Introduction

The relationship between media narratives and processes of radicalization has become an essential topic of inquiry in recent years, particularly in the context of growing global terrorism and Islamophobia. Between 2014 and 2019, during the height of ISIS's influence, Bulgaria presented a unique case within Europe: a country with one of the largest Muslim minorities in the European Union but without registered cases of domestic Islamist radicalization. This study examines whether the Bulgarian media acted as a shield against, or rather a conduit for, radicalization among Muslims during this period.

Radicalization theory

Scholars continue to debate the definition of this phenomenon and its underlying causes. Still, there is broad agreement that "radicalization is the rejection of the status quo" (Tiflati, 2016, pp. 185–186), whether that status quo is political, social, economic, cultural, or religious. In this sense, nonviolent radicalization is neither unusual nor inherently harmful; on the contrary, it is relatively common and can even benefit society by inspiring essential reforms or by challenging corrupt or regressive elites and governments (Sarma, 2017, p. 280). However, the public - and politicians in particular – often conflate nonviolent and violent radicalization or dismiss the former altogether, leading to biased and negative reactions whenever the term "radical" is mentioned (Githens-Mazer, 2012, p. 561).

Regardless of how individuals are perceived, the reality remains that "terrorist violence is based on radical beliefs but not all radical beliefs (cognitive radicalization) lead to violence (behavioural radicalization)" (Verkuyten, 2018, pp. 22–23). In this study, unless otherwise specified, the term radical and its derivatives refer to violent radicalism, while radicalization denotes the "process of increasing commitment to becoming involved in political violence" (Sarma, 2017, p. 283). Although determining exactly when a person with radical ideas progresses to violent behavior - and why individuals with similar life circumstances diverge so drastically - is inherently complex (Jensen et. Al., 2018, pp. 1070–1072), some insight can be gained through Daniel Koehler's framework, which identifies four principal theoretical schools of radicalization: psychological, social movement, sociological, and empirical (Koehler, 2014/2015, pp. 117–118).

The psychological approach suggests that factors such as emotional instability, political dissatisfaction, empathy with perceived victims, and a diminished moral restraint toward violence are among the primary forces that can lead individuals toward radicalization. The social movement perspective emphasizes that radicalization often develops through "networks, group dynamics, peer pressure and a constructed reality." Meanwhile, sociological theorists argue that an individual's loss of identity and perception of a hostile social environment can push them toward adopting radical methods. Finally, the empirical school distinguishes between different types of extremist participants according to their underlying motivations—whether personal or socio-economic—in joining a movement or engaging in independent acts of extremism (Koehler, 2014/2015, p. 120).

In the European context, one of the principal drivers of radicalization among Muslims has been the persistent rise of Islamophobia. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, prejudice and discrimination against Islam and its followers have steadily increased (d'Appollonia, 2012, p. 190), with far-right nationalist and extremist Muslim groups mutually reinforcing one another. One of the earliest consequences of the 2001 events and the ensuing "War on Terror" (John, 2017, p. 307) was that, in the perception of many citizens and state authorities, Muslims were quickly stripped of any identity beyond their religion. Iraqis, Tunisians, Turks, and others across Europe were effectively detached from their historical, ethnic, and cultural contexts, merged instead into a single, Orientalist construct of a homogenous "Muslim world" (Klandermans, 2010, pp. 184–185).

The media have played a significant role in amplifying these sentiments. Newspapers, television channels, radio, and online platforms have all contributed—intentionally or not—to shaping an image of Islam as a threat, thus fostering radicalization among both non-Muslim and Muslim youth (Klandermans, 2010, p. 190). Research indicates that most European media outlets are not consciously Islamophobic; rather, driven by competition for ratings and audience engagement, they tend toward sensationalism, emphasizing dramatic or "shocking" content (d'Appollonia, 2012, pp. 173–174). This tendency results in biased and unbalanced coverage of Muslims and Islamic-related issues, often exaggerating isolated incidents and perpetuating distorted perceptions of Islam and terrorism.

Radical Islam in Europe

Between late 2000s and 2018, the overall number of terrorist incidents in Europe has declined, yet the proportion of jihadist-inspired attacks has increased, with 2015, 2016, and 2017 marking a sharp escalation in Islamist violence (Europol,

2018, pp. 3–4). It is estimated that between 3,922 and 4,294 European citizens joined the conflicts in Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters aligned with Daesh (ISIS). More than half of these individuals - approximately 2,838 – originated from just four countries: France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Belgium, contributing roughly 900, 720–760, 700–760, and 420–516 fighters respectively. Militants were documented as coming from nearly all European nations, with the notable exceptions of Romania, Lithuania, Malta, Czechia, and Bulgaria (Van Ginkel, 2016, pp. 6–7).

Among the least affected Muslim communities on the continent (and worldwide) are the Shia. First, this is due to the Sunnia character of ISIS and overall international terrorism which not only alienates Shia – and similar groups – but actively targets them (Kadivar, 2022, pp. 70–72). Second, Iran, which is the leader of the Shia world, was among the main countries contributing to the fight against the Islamic State both in the Middle East and North Africa, and in Europe through countering its propaganda or engaging in combat through its allies and proxies (Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United, 2020).

This raises an important question: what distinguishes Bulgaria from the rest of Europe's predominantly Christian states, given its demographic composition? The key factor that makes Bulgaria an intriguing case for this research is that it has the largest Muslim (Sunni) minority (by percentage of population) within the European Union, and ranks second only to North Macedonia and Montenegro across the continent (Hackett, 2017, pp. 2–3).

Estimates suggest that Muslims in Bulgaria constitute between 11.1% (Hackett, 2017, p. 4) and 15% (Sahgal 2017) of the national population - around one million people - a figure significantly higher than the 7.8% (577,139 citizens) recorded in the 2011 National Census (NSI, 2011, pp. 2–3), a discrepancy that will be addressed later. Despite this sizable Muslim community, Bulgaria has reported the same number of citizens fighting for Daesh as Romania (0.4% Muslim population), Lithuania (0.1%), Malta (2.6%), and Czechia (0.2%)—that is, none. Meanwhile, countries such as France (8.8%), Germany (6.1%), the

United Kingdom (6.3%), and Belgium (7.6%) (Hackett, 2017, pp. 2–3) have each contributed hundreds of recruits to ISIS.

Nor is Bulgaria entirely disconnected from ISIS or other terrorist organizations. On 18 July 2012, a foreign suicide bomber attacked a bus in the city of Burgas, killing five Israeli tourists, and their Bulgarian bus driver, who was also a Muslim, while injuring 32 other Israelis. Initially, authorities linked the perpetrators to Hezbollah (BBC, 2013), though the charges against the Lebanese group were later dropped (Bob & Weinthal, 2018).

Bulgaria has also served as a transit corridor for foreign fighters traveling to or returning from Syria and Iraq (Europol, 2018, p. 2). In 2017, authorities detected 58 such individuals (State Agency NS, 2018, pp. 2–3). The State Agency "National Security" reported issuing expulsion orders, entry bans, and residence revocations for 31 persons involved in terrorist activity that same year (State Agency NS, 2018, p. 4); similar measures were applied to 22 individuals in 2016 (State Agency NS, 2017, p. 2) and 29 in 2015 (State Agency NS, 2016, p. 2).

Furthermore, several sources have confirmed that Daesh militants have used vehicles registered in Bulgaria (Hristov, 2015). Reports also indicate that Bulgaria ranks as the fifth-largest supplier of weapons to Syria and Iraq—after Hungary, Russia, Romania, and China—with "more than 50% of the weapons documented in Syria and manufactured after 2000 originating in Bulgaria" (CAR, 2017, pp. 2–5). The country likewise holds the fifth position in ammunition production used by ISIS in these conflicts, and is the leading producer of 40 mm rockets for Syria and 73 mm rockets for Iraq (CAR, 2017, p. 7).

Despite the government's indirect involvement in the recent wars in Syria and Iraq, there been no signs of religious radicalization or expressions of support for international terrorism; all identified perpetrators have been foreign nationals (State Agency NS, 2018, pp. 2–3). It is important to note, however, that Bulgaria has a long history of discrimination and repression against its Muslim communities, most notably manifested through several waves of forced Christianization that left enduring scars on interreligious relations and minority identity.

History of Islam in Bulgaria

Evidence of a Muslim presence in the Balkans dates as far back as the 10th century, when groups of Muslims from the Middle East migrated to territories within the Byzantine Empire and other parts of the peninsula, including present-day Bulgaria (Bojkov, 2004, pp. 352–354). Their numbers, however, remained relatively small and carried little demographic significance until a succession of Ottoman military campaigns, from the mid-13th to the late 15th century, dismantled the existing Christian states. In this process, the Bulgarian tsardoms were gradually conquered between 1345 and 1393 (Eminov, 1997, p. 219).

After consolidating their control, the Ottoman authorities undertook a deliberate program of demographic restructuring aimed at stabilizing their rule and safeguarding strategic transport and military routes deeper into Europe. These measures included the colonization of Bulgarian lands with Turkish peasants, soldiers, merchants, and religious preachers from Asia Minor and Anatolia (Eminov, 1997, p. 233); the enslavement of the native Christian population and the forced marriages between Muslim men and local women (Mutafchieva, 1995, pp. 57–58); and mass conversions to Islam under threat of execution or severe punishment (Nitzova, 1994, p. 99). While some conversions were voluntary—motivated by economic, social, or political advantages—the exact proportion remains contested among historians. Additionally, the Ottomans carried out large-scale deportations of Christian nobles and commoners alike to Asia Minor, further altering the region's demographic and cultural landscape (Eminov, 1997, pp. 220–221).

Between the late 15th and 18th centuries, segments of the Bulgarian population—whether by coercion or personal choice—converted to Islam in the Rhodope Mountains, located in the southern part of modern-day Bulgaria. These converts became known as Pomaks (Nitzova, 1994, p. 100) and retained the Bulgarian language as their exclusive means of communication, since most did not speak Turkish or Arabic, and they continued to identify ethnically as Bulgarians (Georgieva, 2001, pp. 304–305).

During this same period, the Roma population across the Balkans also gradually embraced Islam. Originally migrating from India to Persia in the 9th century and reaching Europe by the 11th, the Roma were initially baptized Christians. However, following the Ottoman conquest, many converted to Islam, largely due to the social and economic advantages it provided (Crowe, 2000, pp. 113–114).

In 1878, Bulgaria was liberated by the Russian army under Alexander II, ending nearly five centuries of Ottoman rule. Despite the upheavals of the period, Turks in Bulgaria were not subjected to widespread state-organized repression and, for the most part, continued to enjoy religious freedom and communal autonomy (Broun, 2007, p. 125). The same was true for the Muslim Roma population, which numbered around 122,000 by the end of the 19th century and remained largely undisturbed (Crowe, 2000, p. 97). The Pomaks, however, faced a different reality. They became the targets of government-led campaigns of Christianization and assimilation during the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s (Bojkov, 2004, pp. 360–361).

Although these campaigns were repressive in nature, they were sporadic, inconsistently enforced, and achieved limited success; importantly, they were not generally accompanied by extreme violence or coercion. This changed dramatically with the establishment of communist rule in Bulgaria - de facto in 1944 and de jure in 1946 – which ushered in an era of militant atheism.

Consequently, the communist government initiated a series of assimilation campaigns aimed at absorbing ethnoreligious minorities into a unified Christian/atheist Bulgarian identity through forced changes of names, religious affiliation, and cultural expression. These efforts included the Muslim Roma in the late 1950s and the Pomaks in 1973–1974 (Nahodilova, 2010, pp. 41–42). The most extreme phase occurred between 1984 and 1989, during the so-called "Revival Process", which imposed a total ban on all Muslim religious customs and forcibly renamed 847,584 Turks (Bojkov, 2004, pp. 343–344). In May 1989, as tensions reached a breaking point, the government opened Bulgaria's borders, prompting approximately 370,000 people to flee to Turkey (Broun, 2007, p. 120).

The media fear factor

A media monitoring (via online tools and physical archives) was conducted between January 1st 2014 and December 30th 2019 of the Bulgarian National TV (BNT) and six of the most popular national newspapers and news websites (Dnevnik, OFFNews, Vesti, 24 Chasa, Trud, Standart) (Bakalov, 2017) that are not tabloids. Of a little bit more than a the million articles published in the period, only about 6.5% were related to religion, with the research taking into account only materials on Christianity and Islam, not any other religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. – because they represent far less than 0.01% of the whole "news flow". The 6.5% of religious news further separated into negative and positive (or ones that contribute to a positive or negative view towards religion and its followers):

Christianity
- 0.1% negative
- 2.2% positive
Islam
- 4.1% negative
- 0.1% positive

Although the articles that have something to do with religion account for only 6,5% of all news produced for the duration of the research, the pattern is clear: 4,2% is about Islam, with only 0,1% of them being positive/neutral and 4.1% negative. 2.2% of all the articles represent Christianity in a positive/neutral way, while 0,1% of them are negative. By negative, I refer to news coverage that portrays Muslims and their faith in a way that fosters a negative or distorted public image. The majority of such reporting focuses on religious terrorism or Muslim immigration, while other stories highlight themes of cultural incompatibility or social backwardness - for instance, the coverage of the lifting of the driving ban for women in Saudi Arabia, which served mainly to reinforce stereotypes of Islam as sexist and inflexible.

In contrast, positive or neutral portrayals were extremely rare, limited to a few isolated stories such as Donald Trump's hosting of an Iftar dinner or the case of the "Spider-Man of Mali", a Muslim migrant celebrated for heroically saving a child in Paris. Domestic reporting on Islam was similarly scarce, restricted to a handful of articles covering the Iftar reception hosted by Bulgarian President Rumen Radev, a church construction funded by a Muslim, and commemorations of the Revival Process.

Meanwhile, coverage of foreign Christian events (of any denomination) was virtually nonexistent, whereas domestic Christian news received extensive attention – spanning religious celebrations, holidays, analyses, interviews, sermons, and community events.

These findings align with Ariane d'Appollonia's observation that European media frequently conflates foreign and domestic Islam, emphasizing the most negative global examples while neglecting local Muslim realities. This tendency constructs a distorted and exaggerated image of Islam, which in turn fuels fear, misunderstanding, and social hostility. Importantly, this pattern does not apply to Christianity, which enjoys balanced and contextually accurate domestic representation and is rarely blended with coverage of Christianity abroad.

The Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) stands out as the only national outlet making tangible efforts to address the informational and cultural needs of Bulgaria's Muslim population. Given that BNR operates multiple regional stations rather than a single centralized network, a comprehensive review of all its programming is beyond the scope of this research.

However, according to Martin Minkov, BNR's program director (June 2016–September 2019), stations in regions with significant Turkish-speaking populations – such as Kardzhali, Shumen, Razgrad, and Targovishte – broadcast three hours daily in Turkish, including a live one-hour program every Friday hosted by Vedat Ahmed, Chair of the High Muslim Council (Minkov, 2018). The radio also makes its content available online, offering accessible coverage on topics ranging from religion and culture to politics and agriculture.

While these initiatives are commendable, they primarily serve distinct communities rather than fostering interfaith understanding. As such, they do little to bridge the gap between Muslims and Christians – or even between Turkish-speaking and non-Turkish-speaking Muslims – in Bulgar-

ia. Despite Minkov's rejection of the notion that Bulgarian media contributes to anti-Muslim sentiment (Minkov, 2018), both this research and other studies (Liakova, 2012, p. 14) suggest otherwise, identifying BNR as a rare exception.

Research indicates that ethnoreligious stereotypes are most effectively addressed through greater communication and information exchange between different groups (Bosakov, 2006, p. 39). However, in Bulgaria Muslims tend to live in compact, relatively insular communities, with limited interaction with the majority Christian population. As a result, public perceptions of Islam and ethnic Turks are largely shaped by a biased media landscape as well as by cultural and educational narratives that reinforce division rather than understanding (Ivanova, 2017, pp. 35–37).

Within this context, it is unsurprising that between 2005 and 2018, three nationalist parties - Ataka, VMRO, and NFSB – entered parliament, all of which eventually became part of the ruling coalition. These parties capitalized on widespread public frustration with political corruption (Zhelyazkova & Angelova, 2007, pp. 455–458), reframing it as an ethnoreligious issue centered around the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MFR / DPS – Dvizhenie za prava i svobodi), a Turkish minority party established in 1990. The DPS has consistently won seats in every parliamentary election since 1991 and has participated in three governing coalitions making it a frequent target of nationalist rhetoric and resentment.

The nationalist parties in Bulgaria have employed a range of strategies aimed at portraying the Turkish and Muslim minorities as disloyal or culturally incompatible with the Bulgarian nation. Their actions have included accusing Turks of disloyalty (Arndt, 2013, p. 17), organizing petitions to silence mosque loudspeakers (Zhelyazkova & Angelova, 2007, pp. 447–449), calling for the ban of the 10-minute Turkish-language news segment on Bulgarian National Television (BNT) (CSD, 2015, pp. 2-5), and even physically attacking mosques and Muslim worshippers in Sofia (Paunova, 2011). Each of these parties - Ataka, VMRO, and NFSB – also operates its own media outlets, including TV channels and newspapers, which amplify their nationalist messaging (CSD, 2015, p. 7). As a result, the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) has classified VMRO and NFSB as "ultranationalist/fascist" parties (Ilieva, 2015, pp. 2–5).

ECRI reports from 2015, 2016, and 2017 consistently warn of a rising threat of hate speech and violence directed against Turks, Muslims, Roma, and Muslim migrants (Ilieva, 2017, p. 2–5). In 2016, the situation escalated when several vigilante groups and self-proclaimed "migrant hunters" began patrolling Bulgaria's borders, targeting and abusing Muslim migrants. These individuals were favorably portrayed in mainstream media, and even the then Prime Minister Boyko Borisov publicly thanked them for their efforts (Ilieva, 2017, 1–2).

Conclusion

The findings suggest that while Bulgaria's Muslim population remained immune to violent radicalization during the rise of ISIS, the country's mainstream media often perpetuated biased or negative representations of Islam. By disproportionately associating Islam with terrorism, extremism, and cultural backwardness, the media indirectly reinforced social divisions and validated nationalist political narratives. In contrast, initiatives such as Turkish-language programming by the Bulgarian National Radio demonstrated limited but positive steps toward inclusion. However, these efforts were fragmented and rarely reached beyond ethnic or linguistic boundaries.

The influence of far-right parties, historical legacies of discrimination, and sensationalist reporting practices collectively undermined intercommunal understanding. Consequently, although Bulgaria did not produce radicalized Muslim actors, the media's tendency to amplify fear and prejudice arguably functioned as a latent risk factor for future polarization. The Bulgarian case thus highlights the crucial role of responsible journalism in multiethnic societies and underscores how balanced media representation can act as a genuine shield – rather than an inadvertent conduit – for radicalization.

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