SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF RADICALIZATION AND TERRORISM

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Summary: *The purpose of this paper is to examine the sociological aspects of the radicalization process, their underlying causes and the processes associated with them. The various aspects of the problem of radicalization and its social roots will be presented through sociological theories and concepts such as socialization, convergent settings, social capital and resource networking, overlapping ecosystems, and their denser description will be supported by empirical research data and publicly available sources of information.*

Key words: *convergent settings, radicalization, terrorism, sociology*

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to examine the sociological aspects of the radicalization process, their underlying causes and the processes associated with them. The various aspects of the problem of radicalization and its social roots will be presented through sociological theories and concepts such as **socialization, convergent settings, social capital and resource networking, overlapping ecosystems**, and their denser description will be supported by empirical research data and publicly available sources of information. Although such attempts have been made elsewhere (Magariño & Cabrera, 2019; Jensen & Larsen, 2021), the topic to date has attracted little attention in Bulgaria, as sociologists have rarely attempted to address the question, whereas experts in terrorism studies and national security have barely scratched the surface of the sociological aspects of radicalization and terrorism. Only recently empirical endeavors have been in this direction (Marinov, 2022a), but nevertheless this serves as indication of the applicability of such an interdisciplinary approach towards tackling the roots causes of radicalization.

1. SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF RADICALIZATION AND TERRORISM

Like the concept of 'terrorism', which is difficult to define[1], the understanding of ‘radicalization’ is also subject to critical analysis, especially in the context of the ‘homegrown Islamic terrorists’ debates of the last decade (Crone, 2016). For the purposes of this analysis, as a starting

[1] For a more in-depth theoretical discussion see: Petrov (2005); Marinov (2016); Marinov, Stoykov, & Ivanov, (2023); Richards (2013).

definition, I will take "radicalization" to mean "a process of escalation from non-violent to increasingly violent repertoires of action that develops through a complex set of interactions unfolding over time" (Della Porta, 2018, p. 461). Being a *process* that unfolds over time and not necessarily one-way, in this sense **radicalization is a social phenomenon whose roots can be sought in individual, group, community and national frustrations**. Moreover, it can be divided in several stages (see for example Marinov (2022b); Jensen & Larsen (2021)), that can be summarized as: **The first stage** is often characterized by a feeling or experience of relative deprivation compared with other groups or a personal crisis because of, for example, unemployment or discrimination. **The second stage** is often characterized by blaming the feeling of injustice on society and at this stage it is where the individual becomes susceptible, or cognitively open, to new ideas and worldviews such as those offered by different fundamentalist worldviews and ideologies. **The next stage** often consists of an adoption of these worldviews and a demonization of the group perceived to be at fault for the injustice. **The last stage** is where the individual accepts violence as a legitimate means and/or joins a radical Islamist group. Hence, it can be argued that the process of radicalization manifests itself as a response to social processes taking place in the societies of the XXI century – poverty, marginalization, social exclusion and deprivation, segregation, unequal access to education, globalization processes and the migration processes directly related to them. As relatively stable social processes, I would also add here the **reverse re-secularization of the world**, i.e. the return of religious interpretations of unforeseen events and (the Covid-19 pandemic being a good example, see Ivanova (2022)), and the disproportionate risks we are exposed to, but also **the rise of far-right political movements and ideologies**, as indicated by two recent plots for state coups that have uncovered by the security services in Germany, all linked to the far-right extremist movement Reichsbürger[2] (Goldberg, 2022). The conceptual problems associated with making sense of radicalization are further complicated by the fact that the increasingly clearly visible link between crime and terrorism and to some extent their overlap as it has been documented by a growing body of academic research around Europe.

A study that analyzed 47 cases of religiously motivated violence committed in Western countries between January 1, 2012 and June 12, 2016, found that half of the perpetrators had a criminal record (Mullins, 2016, pp. 26-30). According to another, in a sample of 51 successful attacks across Europe and North America from June 2014, when the ISIS caliphate was declared, to June 2017, at least 57% of the perpetrators of terrorist attacks had a prior criminal record and 1/3 of them had been in prison before in a

[2] See for example Marginalia (2023, February 23), retrieved from https://www.marginalia.bg/nov-opit-za-pravitelstven-prevrat-v-germaniya/

sample of 51 successful attacks across Europe and North America from June 2014, when the ISIS caliphate was declared, to June 2017 (Vidino, Marone & Entenmann, 2017).

In the UK between 1998 and 2015, 38% of crimes related to radical Islam were committed by people with a criminal record, and half of them (19%) were convicted of non-terrorist offenses (Stewart, 2017, p. 954). Similarly, 2/3 of German foreign fighters who join ISIS had police records before traveling to Syria, and a third had convictions, as reported in 2015. In the same year, the spokesman for the French the justice ministry said 15 percent of the 167 'radical Islamists' detained in France on terrorism charges had been in prison before. In a 2016 assessment of ISIL's modus operandi, a Europol report claimed that 'a significant number of individuals (816 by 27 July 2016)' had been reported to Europol for both terrorism-related offenses and involvement in serious crimes and/or organized crime (Europol, 2016, p. 13).

The fact that criminal and terrorist networks overlap does not mean that prior experience with crime is a necessary and/or sufficient condition to be able to talk about radicalization being driven by crime. For example, in France, nearly 50 percent of jihadists, according to Oliver Roy (2017), have a history of committing petty crimes – mainly drug dealing, but also acts of violence and, more rarely, armed robbery. According to the German Federal Police, about 2/3 of Germany's foreign fighters (504 out of 778) had a criminal record: 'at least 53% were convicted of three or more crimes, while almost two-thirds (32%) were associated with six or more crimes' (FCPO, 2017, p. 18). Of the Dutch foreign fighters in a data set of 140 individuals, 47% had previous convictions (Hegghamer, 2016).

In another study from Spain, 1/3 of foreign fighters have a criminal record (Garcia-Calvo & Reinares, 2016). More recent data collected after 2013 in Spain has also made notice of changes in the profile of radicalized individuals (Magariño & Cabrera, 2019, pp. 69-70): predominantly young people, 45% of all convicted with a Spanish nationality and 40% of all were born in Spain. Of those, born in Spain, more than 75% were born in Ceuta or Melilla[3]. The most vulnerable groups appear to be offspring of Muslim immigrants, known as second-generation immigrants; young people, either university students or not, who are frustrated by their expectations of integration, whether social or economic; those who already have a Salafist ideology; members of dysfunctional families; and those who lack intellectual

[3] Both Ceuta and Melilla are autonomous cities, both situated in the Southern region of Spain and according to publicly available statistical data, they have the highest percentage of local population living at risk of poverty, exceeding 34 percent, according to a data set published by Statista Research Department. For more information see: Statista. (2023, November 3). *Share of population at risk of poverty in Spain in 2022, by autonomous community.* https://www.statista.com/statistics/1259073/share-population-at-risk-of-poverty-by-region-spain/#:~:text=The%20poverty%20rate%20of%20all,percent%2C%20at%20risk%20of%20poverty

resources, either scientific or religious. Often these groups overlap, thus increasing the potential for risk. Children of Muslim immigrants experience a strong sense of rootlessness: they do not identify with their parents' culture nor manage to integrate well into the Spanish society. At first, they often aspire to be recognized as Spaniards, but as long as they do not feel recognized as such, they can turn to a radical version of Islam, thanks to a radicalization agent, who gives them a strong sense of belonging and identity.

Such variation across studies suggests that differences between European domestic contexts may influence the crime-terrorism nexus and the sociological aspects of radicalization.

What can be deduced in the form of an intermediate generalization is that criminals and terrorists are recruited from **sociologically similar groups of people, in this sense we can talk about overlapping social networks, and in Bourdieu's sense, forms of social capital.** Evidence from Spain shows how jihadist cells have in the past established contacts with criminals in order to have access to skills and material (explosives, fake passports, etc.) necessary for their operations. Such collaboration was essential for the 2004 Madrid attacks that killed 192 people and injured around 2000 when, on the morning of 11 March 2004, terrorists placed explosives in four commuter trains. The al-Qaeda network behind the attacks obtained the industrial explosive Goma-2 Eco for their rucksack bombs from smugglers who had stolen it from a mine in Asturias (northern Spain). The group, led by a former miner, José Emilio Suárez Trashorras, smuggled and transported the explosives and detonators to Madrid in exchange for drugs. A key detail is that these contacts were possible owing to the fact that Rafá Zouhier, a member of the jihadist cell, and Suárez Trashorras's brother-in-law became friends during their stay in the Villabona prison in Asturias. After Zouhier introduced Suárez Trashorras to Jamal Ahmidan, a series of meetings in fast food restaurants and over the phone between October 2003 and January 2004 were organized to arrange a deal (Argomaniz & Bermejo, 2019, p. 354).

A study by the International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR) reached the same conclusion: 'it is not "the convergence of criminals and terrorists as organizations, but of **their social networks or environment** … **criminal and terrorist groups have begun to recruit followers from the same pool of people**, creating (often unintended) synergies and overlaps that have consequences for how individuals radicalize and act' (Basra, Neumann, & Brunner, 2016, p. 11; *emphasis mine, D.P.*).

Segregated neighborhoods with a high concentration of poverty (e.g. Molenbeek in Brussels, the 'Iztochen' quarter in Pazardjik, 'Stolipinovo' in Plovdiv, to name but a few), European prisons and/or sports clubs can be understood as **'convergent settings'** according to criminologist Marcus Felson (2006). These topographical spaces represent places that promote the

socialization, cooperation and encounter of deviant actors, criminals and potential terrorists, and in this sense can provide the basis for the emergence of short-term or long-term networks of accomplices. Felson's theory emphasizes that certain places cultivate a regenerative pool of potential participants by facilitating informal unstructured activity. These places may only lead to complicity as a by-product of socializing, but they also provide a platform for criminal planning by criminally minded offenders. This concept is directly applicable to various European cases. Argomaniz and Bermejo (2019) offer a broader understanding of a 'criminogenic setting' as it includes both physical (prison, prayer rooms, mosques, youth and sports clubs, bars, etc.) and virtual places (online forums, social media platforms, dark web), which make up this shared environment, and collectively can be thought of as **sites of secondary socialization**, following the classic definition of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman. Although in its original application the concept revolved predominantly around the schools as the main loci where individuals learn the basic values, norms and behaviors that are expected of them outside the main agency of the family (primary socialization), this can be extended to not only physical spaces, but also self-identification with/or affiliation to subcultural groups where the embracing of more radical ideas serves as a coping mechanism for different forms of relative deprivation. Needless to say, a more in-depth understanding of the motivations as to why one decides to socialize and take participations in such settings and environments requires to take into account additional factors linked to the social context and background, including class, ethnicity, and the dynamics of power, as they are all interrelated to individual experiences, thoughts, actions and frustrations and emotions (Clément, 2021).

A RAND report (Persi Paoli and Bellasio, 2017, p. 31) has used the term 'Islamic gangsterism' to describe the Tunisian suburbs where the presence of jihadists overlaps a crime-ridden environment with various types of illicit trade. Shaw and Mahadevan (2018) have termed these kinds of places 'insecure spaces' where governance is contested and 'distinctions between terrorism and mafia-style organized crime begin to break down'. More than 70 percent of fighters who joined ISIS from Sweden were residents of 'vulnerable areas' of Swedish cities (economically and socially deprived areas affected by high crime and low socio-economic status) (Guffstanson & Ranstorp, 2017). Higgins (2015) has spoken of the 'grimy' district of Molenbeek in Brussels, where the lines between crime and Islamic extremism-inspired violence are highly blurred, and the suburb is also a center for counterfeiting (see also UNIFAB, 2016). Such an overlap between slums with disenfranchised youth, illegal markets and petty crime is also seen in other suburban settings of European cities (Weggemans, Baker, & Grol, 2014).

Beyond certain neighborhoods and areas, European prisons as well as other social environments (gyms, cafes, restaurants) are shaping up as places for establishing links between criminals and terrorists. For example, Mohammad Siddique Khan, the mastermind of the 7/7 2005 London bombings, is known to have recruited jihadists at the gyms and Islamic literature bookstore he set up (Bokhari et al., 2006). Similarly, jihadi recruits in Spain have congregated in common places such as hair salons, clothing and food stores or internet cafes, usually located in the same neighborhood (Argomaniz & Bermejo, 2019).

A similar example of 'overlapping ecosystems' is the Bulgarian case with the '13 Imams' in a segregated neighbourhood in Pazardzhik from a decade ago, where the illegal Abu Bekir mosque was used as a 'convergent setting' (Panayotov, 2019). After Bulgaria's accession to the European Union in 2007, significant number of both Roma and non-Roma Muslims from the segregated neighbourhoods in Plovdiv have migrated to Western European countries, seeking better life prospects and forming local diasporas in Dortmund, Frankfurt, Gelsenkirchen, Munich. Similar is the case of Ahmed Moussa, the imam of the Abu Bekir mosque in Pazardzhik, who in the mid-90s when went to Austria with a few friends, working there and living in a mosque because they could not afford to rent an apartment. Austria was where young Ahmed started feeling deeply about Islam and decided to convert. Returning to Bulgaria, he joined the illegal local school for imams in Sarnitsa, still unregistered, in which the headmaster at that time was Saiid Mutlu, another defendant in the proceedings against radical Islam. Moussa spent a year in Sarnitsa before graduating and becoming an imam. In 2001, while working in Cologne, Moussa established contact with representatives of the Turkish radical Islamist organization Kalifatsstaat ('Caliphate state'). He even went to Egypt to continue his spiritual education and refine his religious views as a preacher. After returning to Bulgaria, he spent 10 years serving as imam in Chirpan. In 2005, Moussa was given a three-year conditional sentence – for the first time in his life – on charges of promoting the ideas of founding a caliphate, denial of a secular state order and membership in a banned branch of the Saudi Arabian Islamist organization Al Waqf Al Islami (Panayotov, 2019). As previously noted by Mancheva and Dzhekova (2017, pp.15-16) the main factors contributing to the emergence of closed communities where melting pots (that is, places where crime and jihadist networks come together) can flourish and radical ideas are spread are centered around: labor migration across Western Europe and ties with other Muslims who preach non-traditional ideas of Islam; the emergence of a powerful leader who enjoys strong support from the closed community; the opportunity to lead a religious life in their own mosque; trying to outgrow the stigma that they are Roma; and seeking affiliation with the Muslim community.

My own field research confirms the same trend in the territory of segregated neighborhoods in Plovdiv. Belonging to a dzhomaat (a religious community) is often the only social commitment that they have. The sense of importance and belonging to the community gives meaning to the daily life of the majority of members of different mesdzhids. Although almost none of them knows in detail the Koran or any other religious literature (which further empowers their spiritual leaders), their membership in these communities also brings real tangible benefits during the party elections, religious holidays, etc. Easy to handle and manipulate, often the dzhomaat is a bargaining chip for the imam leaders of the separate mesdzhids during elections and in other cases that require the mass movements of human groups (rallies, strikes, conflicts, etc.). It is hard to find in these neighborhoods any cleric who has a religious education. Those who have completed and specialized in religious Muslim schools in the country or abroad are usually employed by the Chief Mufti's Office in one of the two mosques in the city it represents – the Plovdiv Dzhumaya Mosque (Muradiye) or the Shahbedin Imaret Mosque.

The opening and operation of mesdzhids in the impoverished communities is extremely easy and a profitable process that is not controlled by either the state or the Chief Mufti's Office. Self-proclaimed imams without proper religious education and knowledge, supported by relatives and friends, create mesdzhids, transforming parts of private homes. The basic idea in creating these kinds of religious centers is not the religious enlightenment, but the formation of centers of influence in the community and utilization of finances from various international and national NGOs, political parties and other donors.

After 1989, a number of associations and foundations created under the Individuals and Familes Act, have been conducting Islamic religious and religious-educational activity in "Stolipinovo" and other Plovdiv neighborhoods. Organizations like "Al Waqf Al Islami", "Islamic relief", "Al Minar", "Ir Shaad" are associated with the World Islamic League, based in Saudi Arabia and have significant support of Muslim religious centers in Plovdiv. These organizations assist mesdzhids with religious literature, with training in various courses in the country and abroad and with material resources (see for example Ivanova, 2020). In 2016, for example, I came across several religious communities that were conducting their prayers and were congregating in improvised mesdzhids scattered around the territory of "Stolipinovo". One of them particularly, consisting of more radical followers guided by a local imam, were actively involved in the violent confrontations regarding the waquf properties and their ownership in Plovdiv and Pazardzhik back in 2011[4]. Even though currently there appears to be no

[4] Fieldworks materials, July 2016.

serious danger of incidents due to radical extremism in the country, particularly related existing cells of radical Islamists, partly due to the more traditional interpretations of Islam and their coexistence with more heterodoxical practices, **at the core of the problem still remain social problems such as poverty, marginalization and social exclusion**, all of which disproportionately affect the segregated neighborhoods around the country.

The case of Ahmed Moussa and the '13 Imams' being a prime example about Bulgaria, some parallels can be drawn with the Barcelona 2017 attacks, where the cell behind the plot was organized around Abdelbaki Es Satty, also a radicalized imam, who also has previous criminal convictions. Several years prior to the attacks, Abdelbaki, also known as the 'Rippol imam', himself served a prison sentence for drug trafficking and whilst in the prison established a strong bond with Rachid Aglif, who at the time was serving a 18-year sentence for his participation in the 2004 Madrid bombing attacks. As far as radicalization in prisons is concerned, it has long been known that European penitentiary institutions have become incubators for radical Islamism (Pantucci, 2019) and have even been called 'universities of jihad' (Selby, 2017). Apart from 'convergent settings', prisons are also 'places of vulnerability' where one can find countless susceptible individuals seeking either a new identity, friendship, protection from other inmates or simply better food. In the case of Bulgaria, the Roma ethnic minorities are heavily overrepresented among the general prison population, hence the potential risk to the national security system, as in many custodial sentences for offenders can lead to the radicalization of prisoners under the influence of other jihadist prisoners. As recent research by Rushchenko (2019) shows, Europe's prisons housing extremists have opened up new channels of communication and new political perspectives for offenders convicted of non-ideological crimes, with interactions within varying intensities.

Alex Schmidt (2018) distinguishes between different levels of intensity in the interactions between organized crime and terrorism, ranging from ad hoc, opportunistic relationships to more regular tactical cooperation and even symbiosis. In practice, **it is often difficult to distinguish the individual stages of opportunistic cooperation, regular association or alliance formation**. Simple coexistence can even be confused with interaction, and this notion adds nuance to the idea of 'overlapping ecosystems': it clarifies that, as more recent research shows, 'Illicit markets and informal economies co-exist in many parts of the world, and the fact that terrorist groups operate in within illicit spaces does not always indicate a genuine connection, let alone an alliance, between organized crime and terrorist groups' (Tinti, 2018).

Research conducted over the last 10 years has highlighted that terrorist acts can be cheap and therefore the little money generated by petty criminal

activity can be enough to finance their operations in Europe (Oftedal, 2015). Indeed, the 'affordability' of these attacks (sometimes involving nothing more than knives and/or a rental vehicle) allows the network of small extremist groups that characterize European jihadism to operate without the patronage of foreign terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. Crime (and limited legal means) allows individuals or networks to operate autonomously and independently and carry out attacks that, although inexpensive, can cause serious social anxiety.

This perspective suggests that participation in terrorism can also be thought of as a progression from one type of illegal behavior to another and is conditioned by a deviant response to deprivation, poverty and marginalization, or through **sociological theories of subcultures, differential association and social learning**. There is compelling empirical evidence behind the argument, including research that found low socioeconomic status generally prevailed in a specific sample of Dutch and European jihadists (Ljujic, Van Prooijen, & Weerman, 2017). The majority of those studied had only completed secondary education (or less) and were unemployed in the year of the crime. Also, criminals, especially those with a history of violent crime, require less preparation and maintenance to overcome disincentives to break the law. Therefore, they can more easily be 'socialized into terrorism'.

As Edwin Sutherland's classic theory of differential association predicts, repeated and prolonged interaction can facilitate social learning and skill exchange between criminals and terrorists. The frequency and duration of the relationship determine the intensity of involvement in a crime, as well as the techniques for committing it, as well provide a milieu where social capital, as mentioned previously, can be exchanged. In conjunction with Felson's theory of convergence settings, this is a useful tool for accounting for the 'overlapping ecosystems' of crime and terrorism, but also can be used as an early indicator for the early proactive identification of radicalized individuals, based on observed changes in their daily routines.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the paper aimed to demonstrate and support with empirical evidence the possibilities for the application of sociological theories in the study of the problem of radicalization as a form of social process that unfolds over time. The path that must be taken in order to be able to talk about successful counteraction and prevention of radicalization is necessarily related to a deeper study of risk factors and the individuals and social groups exposed to them in society, and this by necessity requires an interdisciplinary approach. In the Bulgarian case specifically, more emphasis should be placed on community work in segregated neighborhoods on the level of local authorities and on the national level – a more comprehensive strategy when

it comes to tackling social problems such as poverty, marginalization and social exclusion. The lack of sufficient monitoring over the past few decades has proven that such impoverished quarters, as evident with the case of the '13 Imams', which recently has been re-started due to severe omissions in the process of evidence collection during the pre-trial phase, can in fact be a fruitful ground for the circulation of radical and extremist ideologies, that in the long run might justify engagement in acts of terrorism.

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