

DERADIKALIZATION OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS/RETURNEES AND SUPPORTERS OF RADICAL ISLAMIST GROUPS - CHALLENGE IN FIGHTING THE THREAT OF RADICAL ISLAMISM IN THE BALKANS

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Abstract: The challenge of tackling the threat of radical Islamism in the Balkans dates back to the break-up of Yugoslavia. The growing number of new adherents of radical Islamism in North Macedonia, as well as returnees from foreign battlefields, raise the alarm about the need for an appropriate response to this challenge. The process of deradicalization, reintegration and rehabilitation are undoubtedly imposed as one of the aspects of the institutional response of the state. Although the initial stages of realization of this process faced difficulties and lack of coordination, still the competent institutions show initiative.

Keywords: radical Islamism, deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration.

Introduction

The disintegration of Yugoslavia left behind unstable and weak states. During the process of disintegration of Yugoslavia, the radical movements in the Balkans received a kind of impetus, which together with a number of additional factors can be considered as one of the important reasons for the radicalization that is happening today.

Of the Balkan countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are most at risk, but radicalism also has a major impact on societies in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia.

The extremism of the (mainly) Muslim communities is an additional problem if it is related to the current migration processes. Namely, many smuggling groups operating in the Balkans have established close ties with radical groups in the Middle East (such as Al Qaeda, ISIS, Al Nusra). Such links between groups have enormous potential for organizing criminal and terrorist acts in Europe.

The recruitment and deployment of fighters to Syria and Iraq, i.e., to the ranks of Islamic State and other terrorist organizations and their training camps, has emerged as a potential global threat. An additional risk is the "importation" of foreign fighters from the Middle East returning to European soil. This process is significantly easier because foreign recruiters only need to get in touch with the leaders of the local radical centers who can provide a steady supply of manpower (fighters) and equipment. This way of conducting the processes contributes to the strengthening of the radical Muslim communities both in the Balkans and in Western Europe (especially Belgium and France) which can be a significant factor for destabilization.

The problems with radicalism in the Balkans date back to the period of the Balkan crisis. Namely, on the side of the Bosnian army during the Balkan conflicts in the ranks of

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powerful Muslim units (Scott, 2011) fought about 1800 mujahideen (but according to some Bosnian sources their number reached 12,000) from Muslim countries in the Middle East and Africa. Individuals from the Middle East, mainly from Iran, were supported by financial means and material aid that arrived in the Balkans through Islamic humanitarian organizations, individual donations (O'Neill, 2007), and through various trade transactions (Besenyő, 2016).

Radical groups consolidated local ties, which at the time favored recruitment, and at the same time began the process of concentrating radical Islamist groups, thus beginning the process of strengthening Islamist settlements.

In the Balkans in almost all countries there is still a confrontation based on religious and social differences. In Kosovo, clashes between Albanians and Serbs pose a daily threat. Radical communities, especially in Bosnia, are gradually moving away from the central administration and setting up an individual administrative system in the areas they dominate or govern. Successful recruitment is currently taking place in communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo where large numbers of young people intend to join radical Islamist groups (McHugh, 2016). The rhetoric of local Islamist groups and their loyal imams helps recruit new followers, but the spread of radical ideologies is also available in more direct forms such as libraries and online propaganda sites (Bardos, 2014).

Taking advantage of the weaknesses of the administrative system, radical religious and political leaders can establish control over many settlements. In some areas, such as villages, these groups work to set up training camps and build a strong community among Muslims that can facilitate the assimilation and infiltration of radical migrants (Besenyő, 2014). Direct maritime connections and the widespread use of modern technology further facilitate contact with Middle Eastern countries (Hill & Wight, 2015). These areas are not only a base for sending new fighters, but also serve as training camps and contact areas with radical groups.

North Macedonia

The spread of radical doctrines in North Macedonia is a significant challenge for the country. Radical Islamists enjoy the support of a significant number of adherents of radical Islam and their numbers are constantly growing. Some of the migrants who transit through the Western Balkans route through North Macedonia are joining the radical Islamist groups in our country but also in the neighboring countries.

The Kosovo crisis of 1999 as well as the conflict in North Macedonia in 2001 have a kind of contribution to the radicalization of ethnic Albanians, and at the same time they have opened the door for radical Islamist groups and their doctrines. The base of the radical supporters is usually located between the Albanian population but also the Bosnian Muslims in North Macedonia and the local Muslim communities which are also a kind of recruitment base. Additionally, the radical organization called Tariqat, which bases its ideology on a fundamentalist interpretation of the Qur'an, is very active in North Macedonia and Montenegro (Guskova, 2015).

The number of new supporters of radical-Islamist groups in Northern Macedonia is constantly growing. The groups operating on the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia establish contacts with religious radical groups from neighboring countries. Members of these

groups often have dual or triple citizenship due to which the exact number of members in a country cannot be determined.

The territory of the Republic of North Macedonia is affected in many respects in terms of radical Islamism. Namely, in addition to being a recruitment base for new fighters, the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia is greatly affected by returnees from the Middle East battlefields. Often our country as part of the Western Balkan migration route is a transit zone of potential perpetrators of terrorist acts across Europe¹¹ for which Islamic State takes responsibility.

Response to the threat

When it comes to responding to the threat of radical Islamism, states have several aspects at their disposal through which they can provide an appropriate response. One of the aspects is the legal framework of the states, i.e. the legislation that covers the crimes related to terrorism and participation in foreign armies. The criminal legal system of the country should be able to adequately respond to the activities related to members and supporters of radical Islamist groups operating on the territory of our country, but also returnees from foreign battlefields. There is also a need for a preventive approach to this problem in order to monitor and prosecute individuals for participating in, financing, recruiting and training radical Islamists. The Balkan countries, including North Macedonia, have decided to update existing laws in order to adequately respond to the threat of radical Islamism and foreign terrorist fighters.

Prior to the audit, the Republic of North Macedonia had a legal framework with provisions for the fight against terrorism, however, it did not contain special provisions that criminalize the participation and recruitment of foreign troops. Macedonian legislation covering the field of terrorism mainly comes from Articles 394-a, 394-b, 394-c of the Criminal Code (*Кривичен законик*, 2014) and the Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism. (*Закон за сиречување на ѝереене ѝари и финансирање на ѝероризмот*, 2014).

In order to strengthen national security and the fight against global threats, especially terrorism, the Macedonian Parliament passed amendments to the Criminal Code which would penalize participation in a foreign army, police, paramilitary or parapolice formations for at least 4 years, while the fine for organizing and financing this work with at least 5 years.

Also, the institutional response to the threat is very important in the efforts to address the challenge of radical Islamism and its consequences. Competent institutions in North Macedonia that have contributed to responding to the threat of radical Islamism are: the Ministry of Interior, the National Security Agency, the Intelligence Agency, the National Coordinating Body for Combating Terrorism, the OSCE Mission to Skopje, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Religious Community, Civil Society, Local Self-Government Units.

These institutions, in addition to contributing to the prosecution of violators of the law, have a significant contribution to the part of deradicalization, reintegration and resocialization of foreign fighters / returnees and supporters of radical Islamist groups. Deradicalization - is a process of changing the belief system of the individual, so that he

¹¹ The Ministry of Interior registered four migrants of Syrian origin who transited through the country under the name of Ahmad Almohammed, a person who is presumed to be one of the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015.

rejects violent extremist ideology and accepts generally accepted, non-violent values. It implies a fundamental change in understanding that occurs as a result of actions taken to help individuals to reject radical or extreme ideas, beliefs and groups that are, in some way, related to violence. (OSCE, 2020)

The need for deradicalization of members of radical Islamist groups can best be demonstrated through the events of August 2020. Namely, during an action of the Ministry of Interior in which three people were arrested in Kumanovo where military equipment, weapons, vests intended for terrorist actions of suicide bombers were found, it was determined that these people were already in Syria where they fought on the side of IS and after returning served a three-year prison sentence. But after being released from prison in 2019, they began planning attacks on vital government buildings (Deutsche Welle). This case is a concrete indicator that the supporters of radical Islamism can negatively affect the national security of the Republic of North Macedonia. This also highlights the need for an appropriate and timely process of deradicalization of returnees from the Middle East battlefields and supporters of radical Islamism in general.

During the OSCE Counter-Terrorism Conference, held in March 2019 in Slovakia, the importance of multilevel cooperation within each country in addressing the problem of radicalism was emphasized. The conference stressed the need and importance of rehabilitation and reintegration of former perpetrators of terrorist acts in society, the return of "foreign terrorist fighters" and their family members, emphasizing that "individuals often return to the same environments in which they were first radicalized into violence (OSCE, 2019)

There are a number of reasons why the competent actors in the countries should pay more attention to the process of deradicalization, ie rehabilitation and reintegration. The relatively low prison sentences handed down to people who have been in some way linked to radical Islamism mean that these people, usually at a young age, will be released quickly and have the opportunity to reactivate. But the danger of a negative impact on national security can also be recognized in the activities of people who are not returnees from the Middle East battlefields, but are radicalized and act at home. And these individuals seek appropriate treatment to deter radicalized ideas and beliefs.

With the very process of legal prosecution of persons involved in radical Islamist groups, participants in foreign armies cannot be considered that a final solution to the problem has been reached, ie that it is a way of successfully dealing with the threat. Another aspect of this problem is the fact that despite the fact that in North Macedonia prison sentences have already been imposed on persons of this profile, still those sentences are not harmonized with those in the countries of the European Union. Namely, in the Western Balkan countries, the prison sentences for such crimes are twice lower than in the European Union. Although longer prison sentences are not an ideal solution in themselves, longer stays in prisons where convicts are under the direct supervision and control of state institutions also allow for the implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration programs.

Most often, the countries in the region do not have sufficient capacities for specialized expertise that will enable successful and appropriate rehabilitation and reintegration into society. This situation is due to the fact that the networks that implement, support and finance the Islamist radicalization of people who have undergone deradicalization are still active in various ways in the everyday environment. These networks are considered in some ways to be a pillar of radical jihadist movements in the region and as such they continue to

pose a significant risk to the national security of the countries in the region. This challenge for countries is growing given the fact that with the reduction of hostilities in the Middle East and the extinction of hotspots, more foreign terrorist fighters from the battlefields in Syria and Iraq are returning to their home countries, but also the fact that many of the convicts are serving their prison sentences and will soon be released.

In this regard, rehabilitation and reintegration efforts and activities include two approaches: one approach focuses on the prison environment where those accused of spreading and financing radical Islamism and participating in foreign armies are serving their sentences, and an approach focused on the non-custodial environment which include those who have already served prison sentences but also those who have been associated with radical Islamism but have not been convicted.

Prison rehabilitation and reintegration

In the case that a radical Islamist is sentenced to prison, there are two main areas in which prisons can apply specific methods and interventions:

- Security and safety (To ensure the safety and well-being of prisoners, the prison population, staff and the wider society - this can be seen as short-term security while serving a prison sentence);

- Rehabilitation and reintegration (Support the prisoner in renouncing radical Islamism and prepare to lead a life without crime when he returns to society. This should ensure long-term security after serving a prison sentence) (European Commission, 2017).

The approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration of radical Islamists and returnees into a prison environment are very similar to the approaches to other offenders. The length of a prison sentence for a returnee or radical Islamist will affect how long it takes to rehabilitate and reintegrate into a prison environment. Given that returnees and radicalized individuals are viewed with prejudice by the public, there are usually difficulties in securing resources for reintegration and rehabilitation programs, without assuming the risk if such programs are not provided.

In this regard, the working group of the EU Center for Excellence RAN¹² Z&P¹³ has established guiding principles in terms of rehabilitation that are tailored to the individual. Most rehabilitation plans are a combination of interventions based on the offender's risk assessment and needs. The plans are prepared by a team of different professionals (prison guards, prison warden, psychologists, staff leading rehabilitation interventions) and discussed with the offender. Whether participation in the programs is voluntary or mandatory will depend on the conditions of the sentence and the prison policies. Voluntary participation is believed to yield better results due to motivation to participate. Here it is especially important to take into account the needs and desires expressed by the offender in terms of whether he wants to learn a foreign language, craft and the like. Incorporating these inmate needs into the rehabilitation plan will contribute to good cooperation by providing a focus on the future.

In practice, programs and specially developed rehabilitation plans include elements of deradicalization and cancellation. How the rehabilitation plan will be implemented depends

¹² Центар за извонредност на ЕУ – РАН (RAN – Radicalization Awareness Network)

¹³ Radicalization Awareness Network Prison and Probation (Working Group). Мрежа за свест за радикализација Затвор и пробацација (Работна група).

on the risk assessment and the needs made by professionals within the penitentiary system, the availability of funds and the will or obligation of the offender to participate in them.

Deradicalization in a non-custodial environment

When they return to their countries of origin, supporters of radical Islamist groups and fighters from the Middle East battlefields, national police and / or intelligence services first determine the level of risk posed by the radical Islamist or returnee and whether or not there is a need for prosecution. When these people are not in prison (not yet detained, or have already served their sentences), they return to society. Preserving the security of society can best be guaranteed through the promotion of social welfare and the rehabilitation of returnees and members of radical Islamist groups. People who see themselves as part of society are unlikely to be attracted again by terrorist or other radical groups. The process of resocialization must be done exactly according to the condition and characteristics of the individual. In the process of resocialization in terms of supporting the individual it is important to consider the reasons for his return, such as his personal social status, mental state and his ideological beliefs (European Commission, 2017).

The returnee's family members play an important and perhaps key role in the period of resocialization and reintegration into society. Most of these people break off relations with their social environment before going to the battlefields and occasionally contact the closest family (mother, father, brother, sister). Upon their return, immediate family members are often the only social contact they have maintained. In such situations, it is important to build a bond with the family of returnees or radicalized individuals, as strong and established family contacts will support cooperation upon their return from the battlefield. Family members are the ones who can influence him to return to society, especially his wife and children. An important factor here is the support of those who have a positive impact on the returnee. However, not all family members and friends are good company during resocialization, as there is a possibility that they may support or be part of a terrorist or radical movement. Such opportunities need to be assessed before involving these individuals in the overall resocialization process.

When the returnee wants to reintegrate, mentoring and counseling during that process is essential. He or she needs to integrate and re-integrate into the community, between neighbors, employers and in front of many institutions and trade organizations (banks, insurance companies, etc.). Mentoring and advising a returnee when he or she returns to society is called exit work. Exit interventions and tools used to provide assistance to radicalized individuals seeking to break out of the violent extremist organization of which they were a part are also useful in dealing with returnees (European Commission, 2017).

Conclusion

The presence of supporters of radical Islamism in the Balkans and in the Republic of North Macedonia has been a clear and present reality for several years ago. Returnees from foreign armies are becoming more and more relevant with the extinction of military hotspots in the Middle East, and thus their likelihood of operating in their home countries is increasing. The threat that these individuals pose to the national security of the country can be considered from several aspects. If we speak from the aspect of probability of carrying out

a terrorist attack on the territory of North Macedonia, from the knowledge and experience so far it can be concluded that there is a small probability of this type of threat. This claim stems from the fact that in previous cases when certain persons - supporters of radical Islamism in North Macedonia and returnees from foreign battlefields were associated with certain terrorist activities, it turned out that they had a role in logistics, i.e., were not directly involved in terrorist acts. Namely, the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia and the Balkans in general, served only as a transit area to Western European countries which were the ultimate target for the perpetrators of terrorist acts for which the Islamic State claimed responsibility. From the aspect of other activities that are subject to criminal responsibility, in the past period activities of spreading propaganda, financing and assisting a terrorist organization have been determined.

However, what should be paid special attention to, and as stated above in the text, is what should be done after these people return to the territory of our country regardless of whether they will be convicted or no and are a potential security threat. One of the key moments in response to the threat of foreign terrorist fighters and supporters of radical Islamism is of course their reintegration into society as well as their deradicalization, i.e. rejection of radical ideology. Which of the approaches to deradicalization, reintegration and resocialization will ultimately be chosen depends on each individual case based on the individual characteristics of the person undergoing such a process.

In conditions when the state and the whole society are required to offer an appropriate response to such a threat and to be the main pillar in the processes of deradicalization, reintegration and resocialization, it is necessary to emphasize the challenges we face as a state in this regard. One of the biggest challenges facing the state and at the same time a weakness is the ability of institutions to deal with this type of threat. Among other things, the poor coordination between the competent institutions that have their role in the processes of deradicalization, reintegration and resocialization has proved to be a key problem. Also, the weak cooperation between the government, the judiciary, non-governmental organizations and religious communities is another drop in the sea of challenges facing the Republic of North Macedonia and the Balkan countries in general (Balkan insight, 2020).

The involvement of minors is also a problem. "Child soldiers" in foreign armies and consequently their reintegration in the case that their parents are killed or detained for an extended period. A similar problem is women for whom it is difficult to prove the nature of involvement in foreign armies, in terms of whether their participation is voluntary or not and in what capacity.

However, in the last few years, the first positive steps have been taken in the field of dealing with the threat of foreign terrorist fighters - returnees as well as supporters of radical Islamism. Within the Office of the National Coordinator for Prevention of Violent Extremism and Fight against Terrorism in North Macedonia, there are a number of projects aimed at successful deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration of radical Islamists. All measures and activities undertaken by the institutions are based on the obligations of the National Plan and the procedures for reintegration, resocialization and rehabilitation of returnees from foreign armies and members of their families, adopted by the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, and for which Coordination and implementation is the responsibility of the Office of the National Coordinator for Prevention of Violent Extremism and Fight against Terrorism. The Republic of North Macedonia is among the first countries

to develop a national framework with a multidisciplinary approach to addressing the complex risks and needs of returnees. But the problem here is located in the legal solutions regarding the specific programs for the returnees after their release from prison. Here, the institutions are committed to preparing indicators that would monitor the level of radicalism, and social workers are expected to play a key role in this process. To this end, the National Committee for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and the Fight against Terrorism is making efforts and undertaking activities to prepare municipalities on how to reintegrate returnees at the local level and to include them in social life.

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