

RADICAL ISLAM. RECRUITMENT MECHANISMS IN IMMEDIATE NEIGHBORHOOD WITH EUROPEAN UNION

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This article attempts to identify the recruitment mechanisms of the Islamists in immediate neighborhood with European Union. The Republic of Moldova becomes a more and more attractive land for the immigrants from other countries, being situated in immediate neighborhood with the European Union. The first signs of specific religious expressions of radical essence in the Republic of Moldova appeared in 90's through some national and international public associations and infiltration of radical clerics in several religious groups. The number and the dynamics of activities developed by the above mentioned organizations had varied from case to case, but the great majority of these were planned by non-governmental organizations from abroad. Such activities were generally led by people already implicated in radical groups or movements, or that were in contact with the members of such groups for different reasons, such as: financing, propagandistic material distribution, organization of religious facilities, trips abroad etc., cooperating with NGO-s from Balkans, Western Europe and Africa/Asia.

As concerns the premises of recruitment process, the following features are identified: the spread of Islamic cult; "abusive proselytizing"; the concentration of Arab community on promoting their values, particularly the attempts to impose these values.

The social and economic vulnerability of the society, as well as the political instability along with the inability of the state to ensure a good living standard of the population, the errors done during the incipient phase of the democratic reforms had weakened the institutions whose main role is to defend the human rights of the population. At the same time the control adulteration over the internal political evolutions, have caused the constant decline of the citizens' trust in the state. As a result, all these reasons created precedents for the recruitment process of the Moldovan citizens.

Key words: recruitment, democratic transformation, conversion, diplomatic relations, legislative framework, constitution, premises of recruitment process, status of religious freedom, terrorism.

I. The actual situation

Every state is responsible for its own national security, including the fight against terrorism. Thus, the state is responsible for designing and implementing national measures to combat radicalization, the phenomenon by which some people adhere to different ideologies and extremist behaviors that might lead them to commit acts of terrorism. Today, the term "radicalization" is widely used. The concept draws its popularity from its descriptive nature in terms of causes of terrorism and the factors that drive acts of terrorism. After the attacks in Madrid and London in 2004-2005, the term "radicalization" played a central role in the analysis of terrorism and policies to combat it.

The Muslim community in the Republic of Moldova is relatively small. As per the 2004 census data, 1.667 people declared to be Muslims, which corresponds to 0, 05% of the total population of 3.383.332 people¹. As per the 2014 census data, 2.009 people declared to be Muslims, which corresponds to 0, 06% of the total population of 2.804.801 people². Most Muslims live in Chisinau (985 people), followed by Gagauzia (176 people), Balti (76 people), Aneni Noi (68 people) and Cahul (54 people)³. Out of the total number of people who declared what was their religion (2,611.8 thousand), 96.8% consider themselves Christian

¹ National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova. (2004). (*Population census. Demographic, National, Linguistic, Cultural Characteristics*). Volume I, Chisinau, 2006. pp. 476-485

² National Bureau of Statistic of the Republic of Moldova. (2014). (*Population census. Demographic, National, Linguistic, Cultural Characteristics*) <http://statistica.gov.md/pageview.php?l=ro&idc=479&>

³ National Bureau of Statistic of the Republic of Moldova. (2014). (*Population census. Demographic, National, Linguistic, Cultural Characteristics*) <http://statistica.gov.md/pageview.php?l=ro&idc=479&>

Orthodox, by 1.3 p.p. more than in 2004. As for other religions, there are Baptists (Evangelical Christian Baptists) – 1.0%, Jehovah's Witnesses – 0.7%, Pentecostal Christians – 0.4%, the Seven-day Adventists – 0.3%, the Catholics represents 0.1%, while 0.5% indicated a different confession than those mentioned above. The share of persons who identified themselves as atheists and non-religious (agnostics) was of 0.2%, by 1.2 p.p. more than in 2004. 193 thousand persons did not declare their religion, which accounted for 6.9% of country's population⁴.

The majority of Muslims came to Moldova from the Middle East and North Africa⁵. Also, the census identified 974 Tatars, 891 Azeri, 416 Uzbeks, 269 Turks, 259 Arabs, 256 Kazakhs, 220 Turkmens, 211 Tajiks, 112 Bashkirs and 108 Chechens⁶. These citizens of the Republic of Moldova have been living here from the time of the Soviet Union⁷. According to the Pew Research Center. The Global Religious Landscape, the number of Islamic followers in the Republic of Moldova constitutes 24 343, the percentage of the total population - 0.6%⁸.

The first signs of some radical religious expressions in the Republic of Moldova have appeared in the '90s through some national and international non-governmental organizations infiltrated by radical representatives. The number and the dynamics of the activities developed by the mentioned organizations varied from case to case, but their absolute majority was implanted from abroad. Although they were working under the legal pretext of providing humanitarian aid, educational, cultural, economic and tourist support, at the same time, they contributed to the spread of radicalism among the Muslims in the Republic of Moldova. This was expressed through funding and propaganda of militant Islam, aggressive proselytism activity, creation of „shariah” structures confronting the local legislation.

These activities were mostly conducted by people who were already involved in radical movements or groups, or who were in contact with its members for various reasons (such as: funding, distribution of propagandistic materials, religious facilities, missions abroad etc.), cooperating with NGOs in Balkans, Western Europe and Africa/Asia. During the latest years, among the members of Muslim-Arabic community in Moldova there are those who sympathize with terrorist/extremist groups or entities: „Hezbollah”, „Hamas”, „Muslim Brotherhood” (this organization is recognized as being terrorist by the Government of Egypt⁹ and by the member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization¹⁰), „Kongra-Gel”, or such radical religious groups and movements as „Tablighi Jamaat” (the organization is recognized as extremist by the member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization)¹¹, „Al Haramain Islamic Foundation”, which, despite the differences, had the

⁴ Key results of the 2014 Population and Housing Census

<http://statistica.gov.md/newsview.php?l=en&id=5583&idc=168>

⁵ National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova. (2004). (*Population census. Demographic, National, Linguistic, Cultural Characteristics*). Volume I, Chisinau, 2006. pp. 476-485.

⁶ National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova. (2004). (*Population census. Demographic, National, Linguistic, Cultural Characteristics*). Volume I, Chisinau, 2006. pp.301-302.

⁷ **Note:** Religious structure of the population in the Republic of Moldova. The 2004 census was the first to provide information on population distribution by religion in the country. Of the total amount of population, 93.3% declared themselves to be Orthodox. People of other religions (confession) than Christian represents 1.1% of the total population.

⁸ Pew Research Center. The Global Religious Landscape (28.05.2019)

https://countrymeters.info/en/Republic_of_Moldova#religion

⁹ Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood declared “terrorist group”. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25515932>

¹⁰ Organizations recognized by the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation as a terrorist organization. (2011) www.cisatc.org/134/160/208

¹¹ Agreement of the Committee of Security Council Secretaries of the CSTO member-states (2009). *A list of organizations recognized as terrorist or extremist in the CSTO member States.* http://odkb-csto.org/news/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=691&SECTION_ID=92

same goal – create a state based on „original interpretation of Islam”, through continuous, systematic and planned activities, inspired by the command centers from the Middle East.

In the Republic of Moldova the following Islamic NGOs are registered: the organization for Islamic culture „Assalam”, funded by Saudi Arabia, founding member of the Islamic League of Moldova, the organization for Islamic culture „Al-Suna”, the organization for Islamic culture „Nurul Islam” (ex Al Ehsan), the Foundation for the support of Islamic culture and traditions in Moldova, the Center for research of the Arabic-Islamic civilization, social-cultural organization „Abn-a-Azah”, NGO „Alhuda”, „Dawa” association, branch of „Dawa Islamic Organization” based in Saudi Arabia etc.

The following Islamist NGOs have a great interest for the territory of the Republic of Moldova: International Islamic Relief Organization, World Assembly of Muslim Youth, Al Waqf Al Islamiya, Al-Fourqan, Muslim Welfare International, Islamic World Committee, Qatari Charitable Society, Red Crescent of UAE.

On March 14, 2011, the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Moldova officially registered the first Muslim organization - the Islamic League of Moldova, which will unite the Muslim communities in Moldova and represent the interests of Muslims in the country and abroad. The Islamic League of the Republic of Moldova is called upon to coordinate the process of Islamic religious development in the country¹².

The perception of a democratic state by western people is different from the radical Muslim vision, being perceived as a set of rules and principles opposite to Islamic values, where the ideal state is founded based on „sharia” laws. The low level of life and social inequality accelerate the radicalization of Islam. The radicalization phenomenon starts developing as part of some religious, ethnic or political groups’ activities.

Nevertheless, Al-Qaida is still an attractive pole for the radicalized youth, although there are differences regarding the actual state and the tactics of Al-Qaida group. According to some experts, its organizational structure has fallen apart; others say that Al-Qaida continues to be an opponent of the West, and keeps planning major terrorist acts, but also regional operations (Iraq, Syria through the terrorist organization al-Nusra Front).

Radicalization in the European framework is a process with different history and manifestation form case to case. Along with the increase of international contacts with religious aspect, the radical activity is often an integrant part of some political platforms and an expression of the activity of some religious groups, movements or organizations of terrorist-extremist character. In some cases they are created to protect the interests of some fundamentalist groups, which implies participation of people of different affiliation, ethnicity or nationality in armed conflicts or terrorist acts, for example the situation created in Syria¹³.

These tensions might turn into resentments towards Israel, and also towards Western countries, increasing the risk of Islamic fundamentalism propaganda. Moreover, the expansion of Jihad ideology in Europe is a problem reported by the Netherlands and Germany, both countries being concerned about the increased number of their own Muslim-citizens who chose to leave in order to actively engage in the fights in Syria. "Those who had left in order to join the Jihad cause can suffer from deep traumas, can come back being radicalized and ready to commit violence acts, which undoubtedly turns them into a threat to our security", said Dick Schoof, the Dutch Chief of Counterterrorism¹⁴. Thus, the Syrian crisis

¹² Population and Housing Census in the Republic of Moldova, May 12-25, 2014

<http://statistica.gov.md/pageview.php?l=en&idc=479>

¹³ Munteanu R. *Right-wing extremism – a new asymmetric threat*. (2013).

http://adevarul.ro/international/in-lume/extremismul-dreapta-noua-amenintare-asimetrica-1_513f4ac300f5182b85fc072d/index.html

¹⁴ Ibid

is an asymmetrical form of a threat with new features compared to the classical ones, and the extremist parties were granted more support during the latest elections in some European countries, such as the Netherlands, France or Hungary.

II. Legal Framework. Freedom of religion statute

According to art. 10 of the Republic of Moldova constitution, the state recognizes and guarantees the right of all citizens to maintaining, developing and expressing their ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity¹⁵.

The law on the freedom of conscience, thought and religion regulates the relation regarding the freedom of conscience, thought and religion guaranteed by the Republic of Moldova Constitution and international treaties on human right, to which Moldova is part, as well as by the legal statute of religious cults and of their integrant parts. The art. 15 of the same Law stipulates that: religious cults are autonomous, separate from the state, equal in rights when facing the law and the public authorities¹⁶.

On March 14, 2011 the ministry of Justice registered the religious cult Islamic League of the Republic of Moldova (LIM), which unites several Muslim associations in Moldova and represents their interests in the country and abroad. The main goal of the Islamic League of Moldova is to ensure proper conditions for the believers to manifest their religious canons.

III. Causes of appearance and expansion of religious radicalism

Geostrategic factor

The geostrategic factor positions Moldova in the global interests sphere of the radical-religious structures, being situated on the intersection between the European Union and the Black Sea region, where interests of important regional actors are present. The territory of our country can be used not only as a logistical or recruitment base, with human potential and refuge territory for religious extremists, but also, in future, as the territory from which third parties facilities can be attacked. The majority of activities are developed in the capital of Moldova. Still, there is a tendency of expansion to other important cities and regions in the country. Along with the extension of the border of NATO and European Union member states to Prut river, there is an increased tendency to reevaluate the surrounding territories by the international Islamist organizations, such as the Transnistrian region, which is no longer controlled by the Moldovan authorities. The *status-quo* of this region allows the self-proclaimed authorities from the Eastern regions of Moldova to illegally keep military forces, produce and trade various types of weapons which are being used by international Islamist organizations in regional conflicts, or to support criminal groups.

The religious radicalism, as basis for the perpetuation of terrorism, is present in Balkans, varying from country to country, but actually existing as a separate society, with prevailing expansion and civic disobedience tendencies. In this context, the Balkans are not the unique source of financing or exclusive refuge, but it is a transit area, and a potential recruitment center of radical-Islamic followers, ready to prepare, commit and facilitate terrorism acts. The militant dimension of radicalism is a priority security issue for the international community, due to its global character, which requires a complex study, planning and organization of counteracting actions and combined efforts from international actors. In this sense, it is important to intensify the cooperation between the law enforcement

¹⁵ Constitution of the Republic of Moldova. (1994). *Official Monitor of the Republic of Moldova, no.1.*

http://lex.justice.md/document_rom.php?id=44B9F30E:7AC17731

¹⁶ Moldovan law on freedom of conscience, thought and religion, no.125 of 11.05.2007. *Official Monitor of the Republic of Moldova no.127-130 of 17.08.2007.*

<http://lex.justice.md/index.php?action=view&view=doc&lang=1&id=324889>
<http://lex.justice.md/index.php?action=view&view=doc&lang=1&id=324889>

structures in order to share the information of forms and methods of radicalization sources of funding, logistic support etc.

Generally, the Balkan region continues to be a region which provides stable and continuous financial and logistic support to extremist or terrorist groups, mainly due to its geographic position, ethnic structure, illegal migration, economic problems and perpetuation of reforms in the social, political and national security systems. According to some experts, the majority of radical-religious groups from Balkans are in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia (Kosovo)¹⁷.

Socio-political factors

The founding of a state based on democratic principles, with a market economy, but which is still going through a transition process, impoverished the population of the country, which encouraged the penetration of the Islamic radicalism in particular social communities. Religious emancipation was used by foreign emissaries to focus the efforts of Muslim believers towards accomplishing the goals set from abroad. Some of them were suppressed by radical religious ideas, conditioned by the humanitarian aid, by accepting and practicing the so-called “original” interpretation of Islam in daily life, by granted financial aid to newly converted members, free school education, particularly in the Middle East centers. The economic situation in the country is used by some adherents for their criminal intentions (illegal migration, drugs and human trafficking, money extortion from co-nationals etc.), the revenues from such activities being used for funding radical religious activities.

Making an analogy with other European countries, local corruption and external financial flow can provoke a change of the social situation during a few decades. In immediate perspective, there is no possibility for the creation of a Moldovan radical Islamic party, but along with the increase of Islam followers, they could promote their interests through the foundation of such a party.

IV. Demographic situation and ethnic structure

The constant flow of migrants from Muslim-Arabic countries provides favorable ground for further penetration of religious radicalism. The estimated number of religious radicals varies, but it is too small to be able to influence the socio-political situation in the country. Still, even if the number of the supporters of this ideology cannot be estimated, their continuous increase is obvious. The followers of radical ideas are usually young men, indoctrinated through special youth programs, who arrived in Moldova for education or business opportunities. Since the youth arriving to Moldova usually come from disadvantaged or medium social communities (the elite prefers Western Europe), who are often exposed to radical ideas in their countries of origin, the spread of radicalism is just a matter of time. Religious indoctrination includes also the female citizens of Moldova who converted to Islam, as a result of a marriage with a Muslim husband. The practice shows that in such cases, the financial situation of the husband is totally superior to the financial situation of his Moldovan wife, consequently, she becomes totally dependent on him. In case of a divorce of the mixed couple, there are practically no efficient mechanisms to ensure the tutorship of the mother, if the children are moved to a Muslim country, which is often used as a powerful tool in the failed relationship. Mixed marriages, especially those when young Muslims “convert” Moldovan females within a marriage, are used for legalizing their stay on the territory of the Republic of Moldova.

¹⁷ Leca V. New extremism take steps in the Balkans ... (2012). <http://www.balcanii.ro/2012/10/noul-extremism-face-pasi-in-balcani/>

In addition to the mentioned above, there is a part of the population having an indirect relation with Islam. Therefore, the Gagauz communities (orthodox Turks from the South of Moldova) would be of a great interest for us, as Turkish culture and traditions have a big impact on their mentality and their way of life.

In the Republic of Moldova there are no institutions of Islamic theology. Still, various higher education institutions provide courses referring to specific countries with Muslim population, although, they do not ensure an objective knowledge in the Islamic religion¹⁸.

V. Characteristics of religious radicals

In order to characterize religious radicals, it is necessary to make a difference between a religious cleric *per se*, and an exponent of a radical-terrorist organization, infiltrated with a mission in a foreign country (who will show a visibly laic behavior).

Thus, religious radicals are mainly young men, of the age of 25-35 or younger, with specific haircuts and barbs, wearing clothes with some traditional elements. Partially Western style is acceptable for men, but his wife will definitely wear traditional clothes. Spiritual leaders are graduates from religious institutions from Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Pakistan or Malaysia, and the followers are students at the Moldovan universities. These groups are totally isolated, access being granted only to those introduced by active members and have passed a previous check.

VI. Methods of radicalization and *modus operandi*

At the moment, there is no information about the possible terrorist risks from terrorist organizations both for the Republic of Moldova, as well as for companies, buildings or foreign citizens present on the Moldovan territory. To date only a few operating methods have been identified, and they should be counteracted, in order to discourage the extremists:

- use of humanitarian organizations (NGOs) as a shield for illegal activities;
- use of illegal migration branches for transiting the national territory by members of terrorist organizations or for financing terrorism;
- use of refugee institution;
- use of false identity documents;
- religious indoctrination - internet, brochures, recruitment of moderate coreligionists.

Based on recent practice, organizations use for terrorist attacks local members or followers with a valid living permit in the target-country, previously active members being sent to their targets abroad. Therefore, radicalization of youth is a *modus operandi* of the Islamic-fundamentalist organizations that through selection and training of religious fanatics can create inactive terrorist cells, which will initially serve as logistic bases. This is the way terrorist activity will develop in Europe, taking over some other dimensions and operation mechanisms. The most spectacular transformation of terrorism was the evolution from the **imported** radical-religious/terrorist threat (from the first wave migrants) to the **indigene** (the second or the third generation of migrants or converted followers). In the West this recruitment process will continue in the indigene area of European Muslims, especially among young population, considered appropriate by the authorities. The process of selection and recruitment by radicals has several stages:

¹⁸ Gemaledin S. (2012). *Status of Muslims in the Republic of Moldova*.
http://www.academia.edu/2388739/Statutul_Musulmanilor_in_Republica_Moldova

- establishing control on religious facilities and Muslim education institutions (mosques, madrasas, cultural centers) for Islamic-fundamentalist propaganda;
- selection of necessary persons who would correspond to the criteria set, for transportation to specialized training centers (of indoctrination or military-subversive);
- return to the host country, where, depending on the needs of the group, they will be placed either in a local religious structure, or in the laic community (under cover).

The initial approach towards a person by a terrorist/extremist is an important factor during the recruitment process. Although the pretext for contact varies from case to case, still, there is a number of **factors which contribute to perpetuation and strengthening of dependency**. These could be:

- frequent visits to the locations controlled by fundamentalists where continuous “brainwash” is applied;
- influence of a charismatic extremist spiritual leader;
- manipulation with religious sources, wrong interpretation for changing the person’s position and exposure to a radical message;
- further aggressive training, in different locations or even other countries, so that the person is not able to focus on some inconsistencies. Therefore, contacts made in such conditions can lead to participation in or support of terrorist networks in future;
- the feeling of inferiority, „injustice” or insurgency state are implanted and exploited by leaders to change the situation „through action”;
- in the case of migrants, alienation from the origin country and lack of hospitality in the host-country can force the individual to find himself in the middle of a radical ideology, where he will be welcomed unconditionally;
- development of communications, radio, satellite television and internet. These serve as means of propaganda for extremist ideology. Moreover, internet facilitates the recruitment of members of the terrorist groups, being used as a fast, secure and effective communication channel. Another element is identification of extremist internet sites’ visitors by the authors, in order to study their psychological profile, and, eventually, contract them on behalf of a terrorist organization.

Recruitment process premises

As regards the premises of the recruitment process, the following methods have been identified:

- spread of the radical Islamic religion;
- "abusive proselytism";
- imposing radical Islamic values.

Social and economic vulnerability of the society, as well as political instability along with the state incapacity to provide better financial situation for its population, and the errors during the initial phases of democratic reforms weakened the law enforcement institutions. Also, it altered the control of internal political evolutions, causing a constant decrease of population trust into their state. As a consequence, all these lead to precedents for recruiting Moldovan citizens.

Today, there are no tensions between the local population and the Muslim community. Still, some negative factors can favor the radicalization of both sides, balancing the situation being a perspective social policy issue.

Furthermore, a future danger in the Islamic recruitment is to be considered also the children of the mixed families that are present in Moldova. This can be illustrated by the words expressed once by the former President of Algeria (1965-1978), Houari Boumediene in his UN speech of 1974, which says the following: "One day, millions of men will leave the Southern Hemisphere to go to the Northern Hemisphere. And they will not go there as friends. Because they will go there to conquer it. And they will conquer it with their sons. The wombs of our women will give us victory."

Religious radicalism is a constant subject of interest for Intelligence services (at both national and international level) as a threat for national security and regional stability, especially due to its expansion tendencies.

Conclusions:

It is important to mention that the existence of the problem related to recruitment process in the Republic of Moldova is augmented by the following features that definitely require more attention and a solution in the near future:

- population exodus from East/Africa to EU creates unfavorable conditions for the harmonious raise of the young generations;
- Syrian crisis – catalyst of the auto-radicalization, asymmetric threat with new features;
- the auto-radicalization – Western objectives in Moldova, possible terrorist attacks in future;
- extremist ideologies in poor regions, lack of hope and favorable ground for conflicts;
- regular analysis of the current situation and continuous monitoring of the level of radicalization in the country, as well as work with particularly vulnerable, high-risk groups;
- lack of efficient control on migrant flows in the Republic of Moldova on the Transnistrian segment.

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Note: Religious structure of the population in Moldova. The 2004 census was the first to provide information on population distribution by religion in the country. Of the total amount of population, 93.3% declared themselves to be Orthodox. People of other religions (confession) than Christian represents 1.1% of the total population.