

Lyudmila Simeonova, Chief Inspector of the Bulgarian Civil Protection Directorate General, tells Gwyn Winfield about their CBRN responsibilities and the challenges they face

An Inspector calls

The economic recession has had an impact on everyone, whatever end of the GDP scale they are from – but Bulgaria has been hit harder than most. The country has recently undergone a change of government, during which stories of corruption and patronage littered the front pages (and

this in the country with the lowest press freedom in the EU, where a government ministry has only recently been prevented from spying on journalists), and is faced with a major organised crime problem, so any attempt to make CBRN close to the top of any funding schedule is an impossible task. In many

cases, therefore, this is a story of business as usual; there are no major procurements that have sparked this story – it is, instead, a case study of how countries that are lower on the threat spectrum try to do more with less.

Indeed, it is hard to find CBRN on the threat spectrum in Bulgaria even though, according to the BBC, they had a “chloropicrin” attack in April 2004. This apparently saw 40 people hurt when a “bomb” containing the agent was thrown into a visitors’ area at the Sofia traffic police office. Ms Simeonova admitted her knowledge of this attack was slight. “We didn’t know about this until we read your questions,” she said. “This situation was dealt with by the Ministry of Interior; it occurred inside Ministry buildings and was dealt with. It had no larger impact.” It has not helped the Civil Protection Directorate that it has recently been formed out of the Ministry of Emergency from within the Ministry of Interior, and that the process that caused it is still fresh – and in some cases painful. So the Directorate finds itself starting off anew, and is still finding its feet.

One of the reasons I suggest CBRN is hard to find on the threat spectrum is that the terrorist threat in Bulgaria is low, and that much of the response is set up to deal with a nuclear/radiological attack or accident. The chemical and biological threats have been much more recently added, and this skews Bulgaria’s capability. Their radiological and nuclear industry response is excellent – well-trained and knowledgeable teams – but, in my opinion, their chemical, and especially biological, capabilities lag behind. This is plain to see in the legislative framework; of the eight pieces of legislation that the Directorate are involved with, half (Act on the Safe Use of Nuclear Energy; Procedures for... Radioactive Accidents; Regulation on Emergency Planning... [for] radiation accidents; and Regulations on Basic



Bulgaria has a small number of highly specialized Civil Defence Teams to deal with CBRN emergencies ©CBRNe World

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Norms for Radioactive Protection) mention radioactive incidents while the other four make no specific mention of chemical and biological.

Bulgaria has 31 rescue teams. These are spread between Bulgaria's seven regions (NW, N, NE, SE, S, SW and Sofia) and are regionally varied depending on what the threat might be – for example whether Bulgaria's nuclear reactor is in your section – and that will have an impact on how many physicists will be in the team. These rescue teams are the detection eyes and ears of all Bulgarian civil response, so whether it is hazmat or terrorist attack it requires the rescue teams to go and do their analysis before the rest of the responder organisations can swing into action. Once there is an initial identification, the team can call on additional response from other national assets – such as the Nuclear Regulatory Agency. “All of these institutions have special responsibilities,” said Ms Simeonova. “Civil Protection does the initial detection and assessment of the situation. We will work with the representatives from the Nuclear Regulatory Agency [NRA] in case of an emergency with radiological materials and work together with the Ministry of Interior to make security control zones. In case of fire we work with firefighters and the chemical specialists from our units. Civil protection specialists are also involved in the decontamination of victims; we move victims from hot zone and make initial decon, and medical teams help later.”

In terms of decontamination, the Directorate does both ambulant and non-ambulant patients – but the size of the teams is relatively small, so large numbers of affected individuals will have to wait for the support of the Bulgarian MoD. The teams themselves are located near to the local centres of population/industry deemed to be at most risk, as this allows them a faster response time – since they don't have helicopter support they can't be centrally located – and the teams are confident they can be on the scene within 40 minutes. The teams arrive with “gas analysers”, spectrometers, radiometers and dosimeters, but currently no field biological detection.

The teams are then trained in taking samples, which they will then send back to a national laboratory. “They will analyse the samples at the scene, since they don't have a fixed lab; they have a small mobile unit. They can only measure the samples, but if it is something unusual only the Academy of Science will be able to provide confirmatory analysis, and we will take a sample and send it off,” said Ms Simeonova.

As well as its work on the scene, the Civil Protection Directorate is also responsible for providing the National Plan, which outlines all the roles of the various other directorates. The National Plan also outlines that the Directorate is responsible for managing activities related to emergency planning, emergency response and maintaining emergency preparedness for protection of the population in case of disaster or accident. An offshoot of this is the National Emergency Response Team, which combines members of Directorate with individuals from the Nuclear Regulatory Authority, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Environment and Water (among others) to combat major accidents or terrorist uses of CBRN material.

When it comes to the next capability steps, and when they will be implemented, Ms Simeonova laughs; there is too much to do elsewhere to expect much of an increase in funding. “I don't know,” she said. “Maybe we need more time, as the situation in Bulgaria is very complicated. We are in financial crisis like everyone else, but Bulgaria is poorer than other countries. We will be involved in biological detection in some way; maybe we should buy more equipment for biological. We have no good practices in this area; we don't have specialists and we don't have the education or curriculum for our rescuers for biological attacks or accidents. My opinion is that we should develop our responsibilities in this area. We should also provide more training for our rescuers. The equipment is enough for an emergency – for chemical and radiological – but maybe we need more training for our rescuers.”

