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Radical nationalism in contemporary Bulgaria

■ The terrain was free for fresh and authentic nationalist initiatives. The cultural and political situation was ripe for them. There was no reason for surprise that exactly a relatively less known “new face” could fill in the vacuum left by the absence of an influential formation with a strong nationalist profile in Bulgarian political life. The man who properly understood the moment and caught it was Volen Siderov.

■ The strategic “20 points...” clearly testify for the truly populist and unrealistic political strategy of the *Ataka* party and its leader. If the points would have been widely read and understood – the political success of *Ataka* and Siderov would be questionable. What is unquestionable is only the electoral outcome.

■ The phenomenon “*Ataka*” has become only possible after some major causes of a long lasting national crisis have been eliminated. This applies first of all to the resolution of strategic tasks of the international security of the country. In the current geostrategic context they could be resolved with the country’s membership in NATO and in the European Union. Now it is possible to speak loudly out what has been long kept silent under the regime of political correctness required by the circumstances.

■ It was not the acute crisis which brought about the allegedly surprising appearance of the radical nationalism in Bulgarian political life. To the contrary, it was the relative stabilization of Bulgarian domestic economic and political life which made this possible. However, the stabilization made *Ataka* possible since the stabilization has been achieved and is being reproduced under precarious conditions.

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RADICAL NATIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY BULGARIA¹

1. Changing Social and Ideological Backgrounds of Nationalism

The parliamentary elections held in 2005 marked the appearance of a new phenomenon in the political landscape of democratic Bulgaria. For the first time a manifestly nationalist coalition called *Ataka* entered the National Assembly. The surprise was overwhelming since the coalition was set up only short before the elections. Soon thereafter it was re-organized in a party with Volen Siderov as its leader. The next surprise was the personal success of Siderov in the Presidential elections held in 2006. Using populist anti-corruption slogans together with anti-Turk and anti-Roma rhetoric he managed to attract the respectable 24% of the votes at the second round of the elections against the popular incumbent Georgi Parvanov. The national and international media reported about the appearance of a Le-Pen-like political figure in Bulgaria. This opinion seemed to be fully corroborated by the performance of Siderov and *Ataka* in the next elections for the European Parliament in 2007. The party sent 3 MEPs who joined the right-wing parliamentary group *Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty* in the Parliament.

These remarkable electoral achievements notwithstanding, Siderov and his party fellows used to attract public atten-

tion only with scandalous news about dubious symbols, traffic accidents, personal quarrels and organizational instabilities. Due to organizational splits, the party's parliamentary group could not survive till the next general elections. The representatives of *Ataka* in the European Parliament were most efficient in speeches causing interethnic tensions. Nevertheless, in June 2009 the party managed to repeat its success in the European elections by sending two representatives to the European Parliament. Even more important was the result achieved in the Parliamentary elections held in July 2009. *Ataka* received 9.36 per cent of the valid votes (8.14% in 2005) and took 21 seats in the new Parliament. Before and after the elections there were talks about possible participation of the party in coalition governments. The major common ground for the potential coalition with the GERB party was the similar nationalist assessment of the interethnic relations in the country by *Ataka* and GERB. Besides that, both parties used to similarly define their political orientation as belonging to the right side of the political spectrum.²

This powerful rise of politically organized and manifestly right-wing nationalism represented by *Ataka* requires close scrutiny since no right-wing political group or movement could be so successful in circulating nationalist slogans in Bulgaria after 1989. Somewhat paradoxically, the influential nationalist groups consisted of members and followers of the supposed-to-be left-wing Bulgarian Communist Par-

¹ This paper was prepared in the framework of the project „Right-wing extremism and its impact on young democracies in the CEE-countries“, coordinated by the Budapest Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. A first draft was presented at the conference „Right-Wing Extremism in CEE-Countries and in Germany: A Danger for Democracy?“, held in Budapest, 27 November 2009

² See Hein, Michael (2009) 'Die Europa- und Parlamentswahlen 2009 in Bulgarien'. *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, N 5, S. 59.

ty which was re-named Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) in 1990. The major media of the left-wing nationalist groups was and still remains the newspaper "Nova Zora" ("New Dawn").³ The explanation of this national specific has to do with the influential perception of the Bulgarian Communist Party and its successor BSP as a representative of national interests. This was not due to BCP's international politics at all. It had been consequently dominated by Soviet interests. The major reason for this perception was the assimilationist policy of the Communist Party concerning the ethnic minorities in the country. This policy was particularly intensive during the seventies and the eighties of the twentieth century. The peak of the measures aiming at assimilation of the ethnic minorities was the forceful campaign for changing the Turkish-Arabic names of the Bulgarian Turks to Christian-Slavic names in 1984-1985.

The campaign became popular as "revival process". Its official claim was the revitalization of the presumably lost Bulgarian ethnic identity of the Turkish speaking people living in the country. Thus, the manifest policy aimed at the ethnic homogenization of the Bulgarian nation. Due to historical reasons connected with the centuries-long Ottoman rule on the territory of present-day Bulgaria, the policy was so understood and therefore supported by large segments of ethnic Bulgarians. They did not recognise the complexity of motives which caused the "revival process". In reality, the major background

motive of its organizers was related to the need for nationalist legitimacy of the ruling position of the Communist Party and its leadership. The nationalist legitimacy was urgently needed in the seventies and eighties since the Communist ideology could no more efficiently function as a factor of personal identification and political mobilization. The official ideology was less and less able to function as a crucial factor of the value-normative integration of Bulgarian society as well.

The Bulgarian Communist Party was no exception in Eastern Europe in its efforts to achieve ethnic homogenization in order to get political legitimacy. The ethnic homogenization in Poland after 1945 was due to decisions of foreign powers. Nevertheless, it was widely used for substantiating the legitimacy of the rule of the Polish United Workers Party. Nicolae Ceaușescu applied the same policy of ethnic homogenization for the same purposes in Romania. In various ideological forms and in a variety of policies nationalism had become a key ideological factor of political life in all Eastern European countries. Thus, the revival of Bulgarian nationalism by the Bulgarian Communist Party was a local manifestation of the efforts of the Eastern European ruling Communist parties *to fill in with nationalism the ideological vacuum*. It emerged after the proletarian and later socialist internationalism was obviously losing its mobilising and socially-integrating power.

Together with other historical circumstances, it was the image of a factor of ethnic nationalism which helped the BCP and later the BSP to adapt to the changes

³ See <http://www.novazora.net/archive.html>. The left-wing intellectuals contributing to the newspaper later established their own political party under the same name *Nova Zora* (New Dawn).

after 1989. The political and ideological mixture of communist egalitarianism with Bulgarian nationalism made it possible that the Bulgarian Socialist Party won nearly half of the votes in the first democratic elections held in June 1990. In this specific context the *re-vitalization of the pro-fascist war-time* radical nationalism of the “National Legions” and of other small groups was doomed to fail. This was not only due to the nationalist profile of the BCP / BSP and its continuing strong institutional presence in Bulgarian political life. Some deeper historical reasons were connected with the re-establishment of the Bulgarian statehood in 1878 as the outcome of a Russian-Turkish war. This historical fact had its impacts on the public attitudes towards Russia and later towards the Soviet Union. The anti-communist and pro-fascist ideologies and policies in Bulgaria between the two World Wars and particularly during the Second World War did not change these basically positive attitudes substantially. The influence of these attitudes determined the position of Bulgaria in the war of Germany against the Soviet Union. The country was the only German ally which did not send troops to the Eastern Front. No widespread feeling of Soviet military occupation could develop after the Second World War since there was only a short presence of Soviet troops in the country. Consequently, it was difficult to develop influential anti-communist propaganda and policy on anti-Russian nationalist basis in Bulgaria after the political changes in 1989. There were certainly slogans of this type, but they did not have the same

strong mobilizing effects which they used to have in the eighties and the early nineties in many other societies belonging to the former Eastern Europe.

Most leaders of the emerging anti-communist Bulgarian opposition were sensitive to this historical heritage and did not lay the stress on anti-Russian nationalist appeals. The famous proposal by Stoyan Ganev⁴ to sue the Soviet Union and later Russia for anti-Bulgarian policies could not be taken seriously. The leaders of the emerging opposition also knew well that nationalistic slogans and policies concerning neighbouring countries and people as well as towards ethnic minorities in the country itself could not be well received by governments and other influential organizations in Western Europe and North America. Since they generously supported the belated emergence of the Bulgarian anti-communist opposition, it had to understand their fears that the political changes may go out of control if they would become guided by radical nationalist ideas. Therefore, the major leaders of the anti-communist opposition had only one choice. They had to present themselves as *liberal cosmopolitans focusing their propaganda and policies on the universal human rights* which were suppressed under the rule of the Communist Party. The strong manifest stress on national interests or on patriotic feelings was not regarded as politically correct in the moment. It was politically correct to mention the national interests by passing and then to underline the future material

⁴ Stoyan Ganev was minister of foreign affairs in the Philip Dimitrov's government of the Union of Democratic Forces (1991-1992).

prosperity under the conditions of liberal free markets, democratic politics and respect of human rights.

Thus, in a striking difference to the oppositional forces and policies in most other former socialist countries the leaders of the major right-wing coalition Union of Democratic Forces⁵ had to be very careful about their reference to nationalist slogans and policies. In this ideological and political context the re-established nationalist organization of the right-wing wartime “National Legions” had no chance. It had to join the Union of the Democratic Forces by following the appeal of the common anti-communist ideology and the advice of the international political experts. However, the handful of rather old activists of the Legions like Ivan Dochev was fully marginalized in the Union by the numerous young, dynamic and ambitious representatives of the emerging political counter-elite. They were pressed by the local and international circumstances to avoid nationalism and to choose the profile of liberals and cosmopolitans.

This development had some positive consequences. The manifest non-nationalist liberalism of the major anti-communist political forces together with the careful policies of the BCP/BSP prevented potential inter-ethnic tensions. They were very much possible given the difficult heritage of the “revival process” and the intensive grass-roots nationalist protests following its condemnation at the beginning of the democratization process. The preservation of the ethnic peace became also possible due to the policies of the ethnic

and religious organizations of the Bulgarian Turks and the Muslims in the country. Contrary to some expectations and fears, they did not abuse the political instability for revenge or excessive aspirations. This held particularly true for the Turkish based Movement for Rights and Freedoms established at the very beginning of 1990.⁶

The profound political changes and the cultural uncertainty facilitated the appearance of numerous groups of militant nationalists with a right-wing political orientation like the Bulgarian National Revolutionary Party headed by Dr. Ivan Georgiev, the Bulgarian Christian-Democratic Party with leader Georgi Gelemenov and others.⁷ In spite of the efforts of their leaders to achieve publicity by organizing nationalist manifestations and other events, these groups and parties remained small in numbers and marginal in Bulgarian political life. Nationalist emotions and expectations were connected with the re-establishment of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO). Before the First World War and between the two world wars the organization was internationally known as an incorporation of militant Bulgarian nationalist ideology and politics. However, despite its influence in the South-West of the country and among some groups of the Bulgarian youth, the re-vitalized VMRO did not manage to establish itself as a stable and

⁶ The protests facilitated the establishment of the left-nationalist *Obshtonaroden komitet za zashtita na natsionalnite interesi* [All-peoples's Committee for Defence of National Interests] OKZNI in December 1989. On its part, it accelerated the establishment of the Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms under the leadership of Ahmed Dogan. See about the „Revival Process” and its consequences *Human Development Report. Bulgaria 1997* (1997) Sofia: UNDP, pp. 49-59.

⁷ See Yordanov, Ruslan (2002) ‘Tyachnata borba’ [Their Struggle]. *Tema*, N 19 (32), 13-22 May.

⁵ The coalition was established in December 1989.

influential political force in its own under the new democratic conditions. Its leadership moved in the direction of establishing or supporting dubious coalitions which undermined the trust in it in the long run.⁸

The predominance of left-wingers in the nationalist camp continued till the end of the nineties of the last century. The left-wing organizations and their slogans gradually lost influence after the economic and political turbulences in 1996-1997. Thereafter the new leaders of the Socialist Party re-oriented its programme and policies towards social-democratic and in many respects even liberal ideas and political practices. Some traces of the nationalist traditions of the party could be recognized in its reaction to the Kosovo-War. These traces disappeared in the course of the country's negotiations for membership in the NATO and in the European Union. Both governments of Ivan Kostov (1997-2001) and of Simeon Saxe-Coburggotski (2001-2005) propagated and practiced economic and political neo-liberalism and tried to avoid any manifest expression of nationalist ideology and policies. Thus, under the pressure of international circumstances neither the political left nor the political right or any centrist political formation in the country wanted to be identified with nationalism or even with any special stress on national interests. Nevertheless, all of them paid lip-services to the national interests in presenting their electoral platforms and in the public discussion on their policies.

In the same time, the very economic and political processes raised profound challenges and required clear positioning of the political forces. They had to make manifest their visions about the aims and means of the national development and the national interests in dynamic and controversial transformations. The privatization of the state owned productive and infrastructural assets was definitely needed in order to facilitate the participation of the country in the international division of labour, to increase productivity and the general efficiency of the national economy. However, was the privatization generally and in important particular cases really carried out in accordance with the national interests? Was it necessary to sell the national air carrier "Balkan" for a rather modest price at a bid with practically one bidder in 1999? The question was and remains subject of heated debates since it was known that the selected international bidder used to buy air carriers cheaply only with the intention to sell out their property dear. This was what actually happened immediately after the deal. Facing the harsh facts, the new government of Saxe-Coburggotski was pressed by the circumstances to buy the national air carrier back (to re-nationalize it). The financial loss for the country was substantial. Thereafter, the company was sold to a Bulgarian holding by the next government.

The scandalous story with the privatization of the national air carrier "Balkan" was just one of many similar stories accompanying the privatization of large enterprises like the chemical plant "Plama" in Pleven, the metallurgical plant

⁸ See Karasimeonov, Georgi (2003) *Novata partiynna sistema v Balgariya* [The New Party System in Bulgaria]. Sofia: Gorex Press, pp. 178-179.

“Kremikovtsi” near Sofia or the shipyard in Varna. It was most natural that the Bulgarian public wanted and still wants to know how the national interests have been taken into account in these and in other major privatization deals. They became subject of public debates at national level. Numerous scandals concerning the privatization of smaller enterprises provoked bitter reactions at regional or local levels in the country. The public outrage was typically directed against people or groups who managed to unfairly privatize or just rob the public property. Other targets of public outrage were state administrators who allowed the looting of state property since they were under the suspicion to be generally corrupt. There is a widespread public opinion in the country that the process has been mostly carried out by tightly organized legal, semi-legal or directly criminal networks of entrepreneurs, politicians and state functionaries.⁹ The suspicion is also widespread that there were and still are well established links between national and international networks facilitating the fast enrichment of mediators and the transfer of property rights and profits from Bulgaria to other countries under unfavourable conditions for Bulgaria.

The assumptions and suspicions about the looting of national property used to find support in rumours as well as in domestic and international publications. Until recently the journalists were mostly attracted by the networks of the former

nomenclatura and their involvement in privatization deals, illegal capital accumulation and capital transfers to other countries.¹⁰ Recent investigations lay the stress much less on any specific political colour of the shadow and criminal networks. More important is their omnipresence in the country as well as their long-term destructive impacts on the functioning of the national economy, state institutions and on the culture of trust in Bulgarian society.¹¹ This is the way in which the networks under scrutiny are predominantly perceived by the public mind in the country nowadays. The public outrage against them is understandable.

The issue of economic and general crime was widely conceived by the public mind as the major risk facing Bulgarian society during the nineties. In reality, it just became the major indicator of various negative effects of the profound re-distribution of property, political influence and prestige in the country. Other indicators were the mass and particularly the long-term unemployment, the dramatic impoverishment of large segments of Bulgarian society and the emigration of hundreds of thousands mostly young, well educated and entrepreneurial Bulgarians. Being interrelated, all these processes have been typically perceived as a national catastrophe during the nineties. Thus, the negative evaluation of the profound changes of Bulgarian society quickly replaced the positive expectations which were characteristic for the first months of the transi-

⁹ See about the phenomenon of legal, semi-legal and criminal networking in the development of the „second capitalism” in Bulgaria *Mrezhite na prehoda* [The Networks of the Transition] (2008) Sofia: Iztok-zapad.

¹⁰ Mappes-Niediek, Norbert (2003) *Balkan-Mafia*. Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, pp. 80-85.

¹¹ See Roth, Jürgen (2008) *Novite balgarski demoni* [The New Bulgarian Demons]. Sofia: Slantse.

tion towards market economy and democratic political institutions.

The re-establishment of positive attitudes towards the reforms started some ten years later with the first signs of economic recovery and political stabilization. However, the process has been slow and regularly interrupted by scandals concerning economic mismanagement, corruption, inefficiency of state institutions, convulsions in the national political life and uncertainties concerning the national history and identity.¹² More specifically, uncertainties accompanied the new definition of the aims and means of the geostrategic re-orientation of the country. Unlike the negotiations with Poland or with the Czech Republic, the negotiations of the European Commission with Bulgaria for its membership in the European Union were completed practically without any serious public debate. The information which leaked to the public through the mass media concerned the opening and the closure of "chapters" for negotiation as a rule. What the content of the "chapters" and of the negotiations was – this remained a black box for the public in the country. There were some reasonable excuses for this manner of negotiations carried out in closed circles. Most issues to be negotiated were so complex that only specialists could meaningfully discuss them. The speed of the negotiations was often rather hasty because of the inefficiency of the Bulgarian bureaucracy which used to protract the prepa-

rations of required documents. Moreover, the speed of negotiations had to be high in order not to lose the momentum. The processes after 2007 made it clear that there was already a negative attitude towards the EU enlargement accumulating in the Western European societies. The rising scepticism or even negative attitude towards further enlargement of the EU-25 could prevent the accession of Bulgaria to the EU for a while. Last but not least, due to numerous historical, cultural, geostrategic, economic and even geographic reasons Bulgaria did not have the negotiating power of Poland or of the Czech Republic. Given these conditions, intensive public debates could probably bring even harm to the process.

Whatever the line of argumentation, the open question remained floating in the air: Was the Bulgarian national interest well represented and taken into account during the negotiations for membership of the country in the European Union and in the outcomes of the negotiations? In one case at least, the national public mind became well informed and was unanimous: The closure of reactors of the Kozloduy nuclear power plant as an outcome of the negotiations for membership in the European Union was definitely a decision taken against the national interests.

The negotiations of Bulgaria for membership in NATO and the accession of the country to the Alliance was still another crucial turn in Bulgaria's geo-political re-orientation. In the beginning of the nineties this very idea seemed to be ridiculous. Some ten years later even the Socialist Party did not have objections against the

¹² See Kalinova, Evgeniya and Iskra Baeva (2002) *Balgarskite prehodi 1939-2002* [The Bulgarian Transitions 1939-2002]. Sofia: Paradigma, p. 242 f.

conditions for membership of Bulgaria in the NATO. The issue became the topic of only sporadic public debates. They were mostly focused on domestic matters like the re-orientation of BSP in the international politics. The most profound issues concerning the national security and the long-term national interests were hardly discussed in a manner one may assume the issues would deserve.

Last but not least, there has been a highly sensitive topic of partly domestic and partly international relevance which has accompanied all discussions concerning the national interests. This was and remains the topic of the representation of the ethnic minorities in the political decision-making, in the implementation and in the control of political decisions at national and local level. So far, the relevance of the topic refers mostly to the political representation and participation of the Turkish ethnic minority. Since the beginning of the political changes this representation has been practically monopolized by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. It is a public secret that the Movement is an ethnically based political party with religiously motivated voters. This situation obviously contradicts Art. 11 (4) of the democratic Constitution of Bulgaria passed on 12.07.1991: "There shall be no political parties on ethnic, racial or religious lines..."¹³ There was a decision of the Constitutional Court which defined the Movement for Rights and Freedoms as established and function-

ing in accordance with the Constitution. Whatever the circumstances of the taking of this decision might be, it should be respected. Nevertheless, many questions concerning the ethnic connection of the Movement still deserve discussion. The most serious open question concerns the very compliance of the so established political model of ethnic representation with the long-term national interests. This and many other questions concerning the activities of the MRF have accompanied the whole period of the democratic development of the country. They were usually based on the assumption that this model of political representation would be unacceptable in constitutional and institutional terms in traditional democratic societies. Various debates have taken place about the alleged involvement of MRF functionaries and particularly of its leader Ahmed Dogan in questionable economic and political deals.

Thus, given the obvious presence, intensity, complexity and relevance of issues concerning the national security, national interests and everyday problems facing millions of people in Bulgaria one could only wonder how it was so long possible not to have influential nationalist political forces in the country. All neighbouring post-socialist countries had or have such forces in their Parliaments – Romania Mare, the Serbian Radical Party and VM-RO-DPMNE in Macedonia. In contrast, in Bulgaria openly nationalist slogans were only sporadically made public by individuals like the populist politician Zhorzh Ganchev or the poet Rumen Leonidov. The situation became particularly strik-

¹³ See Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, <http://www.parliament.bg/?page=const&lng=en>.

ing at the beginning of the new century since all the socialist, the conservative and the liberal political platforms and political actions had already disappointed the Bulgarian voters several times. The same turned out to apply to the political platform and the policies of the highly personalized government of the former king Simeon Saxe-Coburggotski. He came to power on the wake of a typical convulsion of Bulgarian political life. The convulsion was due to the public disappointment of the outcomes of the government of the Union of Democratic Forces (1997-2001). The expectations were high that the former king and his government would really carry out strong and efficient policies focused on the international representation and domestic implementation of national interests in the broadest sense of the word. Most probably, Simeon Saxe-Coburggotski really had such intentions together with some others. However, at the end of his mandate in 2005 the public disappointment with the performance of his government was tremendous. This was somewhat surprising given some obvious achievements of the government in the economic, political and cultural stabilization of Bulgarian society and in the improvement of its international position.

The major reason for the disappointments and for the accompanying electoral convulsions in Bulgarian politics was simple. Neither the socialist and conservative governments nor the government of the former king managed to substantially improve the standard of living and the quality of life of large groups of the impoverished population of the country. Mass emi-

gration became the typical reaction to the unemployment and poverty. Crime and general insecurity used to dominate everyday life during the nineties and partly later on. All changing governments seemed to be ready to comply with all requirements of the new international patrons whatever the implications for Bulgarian people and the Bulgarian state might be. Large parts of Bulgarian economy and particularly the banking system got under full foreign control. One could only ask himself or herself about the very possibility of a national economic policy given the nearly full ownership of the banks in Bulgaria by the foreign capital. Against this experience the feeling that a pro-nationalist ideology and politics might change the situation for better became widespread. But there was no influential political figure and attractive nationalist political formation in sight. In objective scientific terms this was a paradoxical situation. *The lack of explicitly nationalist and influential political actor(s) became obvious.*

The former Prime Minister Ivan Kostov rightly understood the specifics of the cultural and political moment. After his electoral defeat in 2001 he left the liberal Union of Democratic Forces and founded his own party "Democrats for strong Bulgaria". Then he immediately started a vociferous campaign against the Movement for Rights and Freedoms dominated by ethnic Turks. The campaign was particularly focused on the economic and political activities of the leader of the Movement Ahmed Dogan. Taking these activities too seriously, some analysts were quick to predict that Kostov would fast and massively capitalize on the

strong but disoriented nationalist political preferences floating in the air. The immediate effect was discouraging, however. Kostov and his party did not manage to effectively occupy the available broad political niche for nationalist ideology and practice. The explanation for the failure was very simple. Correctly or not, Kostov was still too much remembered as a pro-Western politician who used to implement policies dictated from abroad. New faces and new slogans were needed in order to orient, mobilize and channel the nationalist feelings and transform them into nationalist political activities.

Thus, the terrain was free for fresh and authentic nationalist initiatives. The cultural and political situation was ripe for them. There was no reason for surprise that exactly a relatively less known “new face” could fill in the vacuum left by the absence of an influential formation with a strong nationalist profile in Bulgarian political life. The man who properly understood the moment and caught it was Volen Siderov.

2. Volen Siderov and the *Ataka* Party

The man who registered the electoral coalition *Ataka* in the spring of 2005 was known as a newspaper journalist. However, he was more popular as the moderator of a popular TV talk show called also *Ataka*. Before 2005 Volen Siderov had some sporadic political involvements. In 1992 he happened to be the editor-in-chief of the *Demokratiya* newspaper which was the major periodical publication of the then governing Union of Democratic Forces.

There he used to publish articles supporting its neo-liberal ideology and policies. In 2003 Siderov took part in the elections for a mayor of Sofia on the list of a small peasants’ party and received just a handful of votes. Mutations of this type are not unusual in Bulgarian political life. Even the hasty way in which Volen Siderov established his electoral coalition before the elections was not exceptional as well. The former king Simeon Saxe-Coburggotski also registered his movement (party) immediately before the parliamentary elections in June 2001 and nevertheless won with a landslide of the votes. The electoral coalition *Ataka* could be in no way so successful and received only 8.14% of the votes in 2005. Nevertheless, the surprise was overwhelming. How could this become possible indeed?

There is no simple explanation for this first electoral success of Volen Siderov and his electoral coalition *Ataka* which was transformed into political party under the same name after the elections. One may explain the phenomenon with the inclination of Bulgarian voters to search and opt for new faces, new names and new slogans after the long series of disappointments with well known politicians. In this sense Siderov and *Ataka* could not be identified with persons, organizations and electoral platforms which were already voted for and have disappointed the voters. Contrary to the case of Kostov, the connection of Siderov to the early stage of the neo-liberal Union of Democratic Forces was already forgotten. Moreover, he could be legitimized by the public mind as an authentic nationalist since he was known

for his strong statements on his TV show against the former Bulgarian governments and political establishment for their corruption and allegedly anti-national policies. His strong statements against Roma, against the Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms and against its ethnic leadership were also well known. Thus, he attracted old nationalists, young people disappointed by the corrupt liberal democracy of Bulgarian style and a strong volatile protest vote against policies disrespecting the national identity and the national interests. Protest vote of this type could be attracted from all age groups and from all educational and occupational categories. The first electoral success of Volen Siderov was due to the fact that he spoke out what people representing diverse groups wanted to listen to: corrupt deals in the privatization had to be suspended; corrupt politicians had to be put before the court together with the people from the shadow businesses; no Bulgarian agricultural land had to be sold to foreigners, etc. Due to this populist rhetoric *Ataka* abruptly and substantially changed the political and ideological landscape in the country. Manifest nationalism could not be kept outside the Parliament any more. One could still keep to the understanding that manifestly nationalist speech was just political nonsense, totally out-fashioned or not politically correct. But due to the decision of the voters this provocative speech had to be listened to already in the Parliament.

No agency specialized in public opinion polls could foresee that this type of hate-speech would secure the participation of Volen Siderov in the second round

of the Presidential elections in 2006. At this point of time one could already identify a clear-cut nationalist political formation in Bulgaria. *Ataka* and Siderov were already established as factors in Bulgarian political life.

It would be somewhat over-hasty, however, to immediately define the political formation *Ataka* and its leader Volen Siderov as belonging to the right-wing political spectrum as well. In fact, Volen Siderov and the leader's party *Ataka* represent a political platform which is not easy to specify in terms of the traditional conceptual opposition between political "left" and political "right".¹⁴ This is not surprising at all. On the one side, it is difficult indeed to draw a clear distinction between the left and right political platforms and political actions in all post-socialist societies. On the other side, in a typical populist manner Siderov attacked in his first speech in the Bulgarian National Assembly the deal with the national air carrier "Balkan" in 1999 as a deal carried out against the national interests.¹⁵ One has to note that the deal was implemented by the explicitly right-wing government of Ivan Kostov. Thus, Siderov takes the typical pose of a populist politician who is entitled to criticise everything and everybody provided the audience would be interested exactly in this. Not only left-wing politicians, political forces and gov-

¹⁴ The first electoral success of *Ataka* immediately provoked a vivid discussion about the proper classification of the new political phenomenon. There were voices that *Ataka* should be classified as an extremist left-wing party since Volen Siderov insisted on a strong state control on the economy. See Zhecheva, Kristina (2007) „*Ataka*“ mezhdu nacionalizma i populizma [Ataka between Nationalism and Populism]. *Politicheski izsledvaniya*, N 3, p. 49.

¹⁵ Siderov, Volen (2007) *Moyata bitka za Balgariya* [My Fight for Bulgaria]. Sofia: Bumerang, p. 4

ernments have been generally inefficient, corrupt and anti-national. Only with the exception of Siderov and his *Ataka* party all other left and right politicians, parties and governments in Bulgaria have been inefficient, corrupt and anti-national.

The famous programmatic “20 Points of ATAKA Party”¹⁶ provide abundant evidence for the difficulties in clearly identifying the place of the *Ataka* party in the traditional polar distinction between left and right in the European politics. The four points at the beginning just repeat the content of articles of the current democratic Constitution of the country by stressing their relevance for the unitarian character of the Bulgarian state. Point 5 reads that “The Bulgarian state is obliged to provide for the health, social security and conditions for cultural and material prosperity of all Bulgarians with all means of the state power”. The text is strikingly similar to numerous formulations in programmatic documents of the Bulgarian Communist Party before 1989. Unfortunately, no modern state could be able to materialize the promise for all-embracing welfare without the active individual participation of responsible citizens. Point 6 manifestly proposes state protectionism for Bulgarian entrepreneurs. Protectionist policies of this type are strictly forbidden by the legal regulations of the European Union. Should Bulgaria already leave the Union? Another requirement of the same kind suggests Bulgarian ownership of production facilities, trade and banks in the

country. However, banks in Bulgaria are largely owned by foreign banks. The requirement would imply a full-scale nationalization of financial assets owned mostly by banks from the EU countries. If taken seriously, this could be done indeed by means of a full-scale political revolution. Is this what *Ataka* really suggests?

Point 7 stipulates a correspondence between incomes, taxes and the needs of the Bulgarian population. This sounds quite attractive, but the absence of any reference to the productivity of work is striking. Point 8 suggests that privatization deals could be generally revised. One could only try to imagine the way in which this general requirement should be made compatible with the Bulgarian legislation and with the internationally accepted legal norms. The strong formulation “Bulgarian agricultural land should not be sold to foreigners under whatever conditions” once more implies that Bulgaria should leave the European Union. Together with the direct requirement for leaving the NATO (point 13) the indirect requirements for leaving the EU raise the profound question about the very possibility of a small country to be fully sovereign and neutral on the Balkans. Since 1878 all governments of modern Bulgaria were confronted with this question and no one could give a satisfactory answer. To the contrary, their decisions brought about a long series of national catastrophes. One can only wonder if Volen Siderov and his *Ataka* party really have the magic solution to this puzzle. The suggested solution “To return Bulgaria to the Bulgarians!” makes the puzzle more complicated, not less.

¹⁶ 20 točki na partiya ATAKA [20 Points of ATAKA Party]. See http://www.ataka.bg/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=51.

The strategic “20 points...” deserve the above sketchy analysis since they clearly testify for the truly populist and unrealistic political strategy of the *Ataka* party and its leader. If the points would have been widely read and understood – the political success of *Ataka* and Siderov would be questionable. What is unquestionable is only the electoral outcome. *Ataka* managed to attract the support of 395, 733 voters at the general elections held in July 2009 and thus to improve its electoral result as compared to the par-

liamentary elections held in 2005. This success should be seen in the context of the very substantial differences in the results achieved by other parties in both parliamentary elections. The repeated electoral success of the *Ataka* party should be also placed in the context of the general instability of the electoral preferences in the country due to numerous and volatile protest votes. They were the major factor for the electoral convulsions accompanying the political development of democratic Bulgaria:¹⁷

**Table 1: Electoral results of the major political parties in Bulgaria
(Parliamentary elections 1990-2009, % of the valid votes)**

Party	June 1990	Oct. 1991	Dec. 1994	April 1997	June 2001	June 2005	July 2009
Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and electoral alliances	47.15	33.14	43.58	22.07	17.15	30.95	17.70
Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) and electoral alliance	36.20	34.36	24.17	52.26	18.18	7.68	6.76
Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union (BZNS)	8.0	3.9	-	-	-	-	-
Movement for Rights and Liberties (DPS)	6.03	7.55	5.43	7.60	7.45	12.81	14.50
National Movement Simeon II (NDSV, NMSP)	-	-	-	-	42.74	9.88	3.02
<i>Ataka</i>	-	-	-	-	-	8.14	9.36
Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB)	-	-	-	-	-	6.44	-
Bulgarian National Alliance (BNS)	-	-	-	-	-	5.19	-
Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	-	-	-	-	-	-	39.70
Order, Legality and Justice	-	-	-	-	-	-	4.13

Given the average of 9.36% votes for *Ataka*, what groups were particularly at-

tracted by the party and its leader at the parliamentary elections in 2009?¹⁸

¹⁷ The data stem from the official Bulletins of the Central Electoral Commission in Sofia.

¹⁸ The following data has been collected and processed by the Alfa Research agency for market and social research in Sofia.

Table 2: Votes for Ataka (in %)*a) By the type of settlement*

Sofia	Regional Town	Small Town	Village
4.7	10.0	10.0	10.0

b) By age

18-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61+
8.7	7.7	8.6	9.3	11.5

c) By education

Higher/ University	High School	Primary and Lower
6.2	10.9	10.0

d) By gender

Male	Female
11.8	7.0

e) By ethnic group

Bulgarian	Turk	Roma	Other
10.7	0.8	1.7	7.8

Briefly summarized, the voters of Ataka were substantially overrepresented among the male Bulgarians older than 61 years of age. They were underrepresented in Sofia, among the voters having higher education, among the women and among the voters of Turkish and Roma ethnic origin.

Thus, a nationalist but conditionally right-wing party has stabilized its position in the Bulgarian parliamentary life. This is an important development which deserves a close analysis focused on this party, its real political platform and future prospects. The major reason for this focus on the ideology and politics of Ataka is the fact that there are no other nationally relevant right-wing nationalist formations in Bulgaria although all right-wing formations currently use nationalist argumentation. There are several small and politically negligible neo-nazi groups. The best known among them

is the Bulgarian National Alliance established by Boyan Rasate in 2006. The organization is rather small in numbers but received large publicity because of its "national guards" wearing uniforms which very much resemble SA uniforms. The "national guards" were established to defend Bulgarians from Roma attacks. Without underestimating the relevance of the issues connected with the specifics of the Roma population and the domestic and international echo of the activities of Rasate's "national guards", these activities are marginal and most probably do not have any future in the form they have been conducted. To the contrary, the somewhat "softer" nationalist and xenophobic propaganda and politics of Ataka is already a relevant factor in Bulgarian political life and correspondingly deserves analysis in the context of the instable Bulgarian political environments.

3. *Ataka* in the Environment of Bulgarian Politics

The belated appearance of *Ataka* as a truly nationalist political force in Bulgaria after 1989 requires a detailed explanation. It should refer to the controversies of the national political and cultural history and traditions as well as to the social-structural processes in the country in the course of the democratic political changes.

Like in most European societies, nationalist movements and organizations were well represented on the Bulgarian political scene between the two world wars. There were good reasons for their variety and changing influence. The country lost large territories in the wake of the Berlin Congress (1878), the Second Balkan War (Treaty of Bucharest, 1913) and the First World War (Treaty of Neuilly, 1919). The reparations after the First World War were heavy. Nevertheless, petit-bourgeois democratic parties and internationalist leftists became more influential after the World War than the nationalist and revanchist parties and movements. Fascist-like organizations could only take over the power after *coup d'états* in 1923 and 1934. The king (tsar) Boris III who ruled the country in an authoritarian way till 1943 was an ally of Nazi Germany during the Second World War. He officially tolerated the fascist organizations of "National Legions", "Ratnik" and "Brannik". But it was a public secret that he had personal preferences to the British model of political institutions and government. Besides the influence of non-fascist ideologies and political organizations, this was one of

the reasons why no large and politically relevant radical-nationalist and pro-fascist movement or party similar to the Iron Guard in Romania could be established in Bulgaria. Prof. Alexander Tsankov's efforts to develop the parties "Naroden sgovor" [People's Alliance] and "Democraticheski sgovor" [Democratic Alliance] as powerful pro-fascist parties failed. The major reason was the ability of the monarchy to keep the political left in the country under control without using radical right-wing organizations.¹⁹ On their part, both monarchs Ferdinand I and Boris III tried to implement active nationalist policies against the neighbouring countries although in rather different ways. Boris III hoped to achieve major national aims mostly by diplomatic activities and not by mobilization of radical domestic forces. However, policies of ethnic suppression and ethnic assimilation were regularly carried out by Bulgarian governments and were supported by the monarchy.

Since the participation of Bulgaria in the Second World War under the banner of monarchy-led rightist nationalism ended once more with national catastrophe, the revanchist and aggressive nationalism was largely discredited in the public mind. Therefore no influential right-wing nationalist cultural and political tradition could be continued after 1944. Even the personal continuation of right-wing ideas and policies became impossible since most functionaries of pro-fascist organizations were severely persecuted and physically

¹⁹ See about the specifics of fascism in Bulgaria and its complicated relationships with the monarchy Poppetrov, Nikolai (2008) *Fashizmat v Balgariya* [Fascism in Bulgaria]. Sofia: Kama.

eliminated after 1944. Others lost the connection to the processes in Bulgaria due to the decades spent in emigration.

Paradoxically enough, after some internationalist efforts to support the cultural development of all ethnic groups in the country after 1944, it was Todor Zhivkov's regime which step by step returned back to the pre-war tradition of the nationalist policies of ethnic suppression and assimilation. The non-Slavic or non-Christian names of the Roma were "streamlined", then the names of the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims. In 1984-1985 the massive operation for changing the Turkic-Arabic names of the Bulgarian Turks was carried out. No teaching in Turkish was allowed any more, traditional dresses were forbidden. It was not advisable to speak Turkish on public places. Having in mind the intensity of the ethnic pressure on people having Turkish ethnic identity in Bulgaria during the eighties, it was an achievement in the domestic politics that the feared clashes between Bulgarians and Turks did not come true after 1989. Bloody interethnic confrontations like on the territory of former Yugoslavia were avoided in Bulgaria. In the course of time it became politically correct to speak about the successful Bulgarian ethnic model. The expression mostly refers to the relationships between the two major ethnic groups of Bulgarians and Turks in the country. Given the perspective of EU membership of Bulgaria and the accomplishment of this task, the Bulgarian Turks themselves officially and unofficially accepted the ethnic status-quo. The anti-Turkish propaganda lost momentum. One of the major reasons

for this development is the experience of losers in the reforms which is commonly shared by Bulgarians and Turks. However, this common experience of losers in the transition to market economy could be used and abused in the search for ethnic scapegoats and for re-vitalizing Bulgarian nationalism on this basis.

The re-vitalization of ethnic hate-speech and xenophobic political actions took two rather different directions. The first one openly referred to the ethnic based Movement for Rights and Freedoms, its activities and particularly against the activities of its founder and leader Ahmed Dogan. There is no doubt that the well thought through political activity of Ahmed Dogan had the consequence that the MRF is currently the most stable political organization in Bulgaria and the only one which has had permanently increasing electoral outcomes during the whole transition period (with the negligible exception in 1994). The party is very well rooted in the administration of ethnically mixed regions and dominates the local governments in some of them. As seen from another angle, it was at least partly due to the politics of Dogan and the MRF that the interethnic peace has been maintained. This made the MRF legitimate and respected partner in two coalition governments after 2001.

However, despite all efforts of the leadership of MRF to change its ethnic composition and ethnic support, the party still remains ethnically based. At the general elections held in July 2009 the party was voted for by 87.4% of the ethnic Turks and only by 1.6% of the ethnic Bulgarian

ians in the country.²⁰ Given this obvious result, one still may ask about the practical relevance of constitutional arrangements and about the long-term effects of voting along ethnic preferences in a unitarian state. Some serious political problems pose the authoritarian organization of the party itself. Many questions have been publicly debated about the ways of the financing of the party activities, the involvement of party functionaries in corrupt networks and about the aspirations of the party concerning key positions in the state administration. Last but not least, mass media have regularly shown special attention to speeches and behaviour pattern of Ahmed Dogan. A video recording of his pre-election speech of 18 June 2009 was broadcasted by the "Nova Televiziya" channel several days later and stirred a controversial discussion since he particularly stressed his personal role in distributing the state funding in Bulgaria.²¹

The discussions on issues related to the Roma as the second largest ethnic group have rather different content and style. They are mostly focused on scapegoating. Under the conditions of extremely high unemployment and mass misery among Roma and the weakening of the Bulgarian state some Roma habits and traditions became increasingly perceived as an immediate threat to the property, dignity and life of both Bulgarians and Turks particularly in the rural areas. In the towns the tragedy of Roma is even more visible due to their territorial concentration

in ghetto-like areas. Typically, Bulgarians tend to lay the blame for this situation on Roma themselves. In the critical times of the nineties, however, the widespread negative attitude to Roma took situational overtones: Why should they not pay for electricity when Bulgarians are definitely expected to pay? Why should Roma receive child benefits and social benefits if they don't pay to the budget? The echo of these discussions was and remains strong. The issues of Roma way of life became increasingly a hot topic and nourishment for nationalist propaganda and actions.

Thus, there were and there are enough historical and social-structural reasons for the development of influential nationalist and xenophobic right-wing political organization(s) in Bulgaria. However, it turned out that the inefficiency of the protracted economic and political reforms did not immediately bring about influential nationalist and extreme right-wing organizations on the Bulgarian political scene. Under the conditions of a general insecurity about the content and direction of domestic and international developments moderate parties took the lead. Once the relative stabilization of the domestic economy and politics was achieved and the membership of the country in the NATO and in the European Union clarified the international political orientation of the country, the dormant right-wing nationalism could better define its ideological and political niche.

The self-positioning of Volen Siderov and *Ataka* on the Bulgarian and international political scene was made in his detailed interview which was published days before the parliamentary elections

²⁰ According to data of Alfa Research Agency for Market and Social research.

²¹ See <http://sofiaecho.com/print.php?storyd=743487> (30.11.2009).

held on 05. July 2009.²² Already the title of the interview conveyed the message that Siderov has learned what kind of speech is politically correct nowadays. He very much insisted on the point that the attack-symbolic of his party should have nothing to do with similar symbols in Germany during the thirties. The real reference of the symbols was supposed to be only the successful Bulgarian attack and capture of the Turkish fortress of Edirne in 1912. Since he defined himself as a Christian, nothing could connect his political thinking and behaviour with the pagan style of thinking and behaviour of Hitler. Thus, the terrain was prepared for his original visions and practical approaches. As to the development of Bulgarian economy, they included a preference towards the real production and not towards virtual monetary economy. Interventions of the Bulgarian state into the national economy should be seen as unavoidable as this has had already happen in Japan or in South Korea. The state interventions should be particularly targeted on the dishonest foreign companies which just pump out profits from Bulgaria without investing into the national economy. The Czech state owned electric company CEZ was mentioned as an example since it supports the Czech pensioners at the expense of the poor Bulgarian pensioners. The whole system of old age pensions should be radically reformed since the private pension funds already collapsed all over the world. Additional money for

pensions should come from the reduction of the state administration. Generally, less openness to the world economy and more state regulation of the national economy was needed according to Siderov.

As to the most urgent tasks after the elections, they had to include the reform of the justice system, support to the real sector in the national economy and reform of the old-age pension system. National agreement should be reached on these issues and *Ataka* would actively participate in the preparation and implementation of these reforms - in coalition with the GERB Party or not. Special attention should be paid to the fact that the active involvement of *Ataka* in the reform process might temporarily strengthen the support to the Movement for Rights and Freedoms since its leaders speculate with the threats to the ethnic peace. However, so Siderov, the ethnic peace in Bulgaria used to be disturbed only by Turkey between 1985 and 1989. There were actually no Bulgarian Turks in the country but Bulgarians converted to the Muslim religion. MRF itself were unconstitutional and should not take part in the executive power. As to the Roma they should no more have the privileged position not to pay to the state budget and only to receive support from it. State intervention would be needed in order to change their economic situation and educational level. This understanding of the ethnic situation in the country by *Ataka* were based on its sound patriotism and permanent reference to the national interests. Other nationalist organizations should join *Ataka* in its efforts to represent and defence the national interests.

²² See Ivan Dikov (2009) *Bulgaria nationalist „Ataka“ Party Leader Siderov: I Can't be Follower of Hitler* (Interview) http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=105072 (30.11.2009).

As to the international politics, the relations with Macedonia were complicated since long brain-washing had changed the ethnic identity there and created an artificial nation. The support of the USA to Macedonia is similar to the support provided to the country by the Comintern. NATO was an instrument of American domination. *Ataka* was against the setting up of NATO military bases in the country. International policy of national dignity was needed for Bulgaria. The European Union should develop as Europe of nations.

Reading the interview carefully one may say "*déjà-vu*". It was Todor Zhivkov's propaganda which interpreted the inter-ethnic tensions in the country only as a result of foreign interventions. It was this propaganda which generally interpreted the presence of Turkish speaking Muslims in Bulgaria only with the conversion of ethnic Bulgarians to the Muslim religion. One may have difficulties in the search for originality in the ideological slogans, in the suggested organizational measures and patterns and in the public standing of Bulgarian nationalists so far. Some nuances are important, however. One may no more come across slogans like "NATO out of Bulgaria", "banks in Bulgaria – in Bulgarian hands", "prohibition of ethnic parties", etc., which dominated the famous "20 points of the *Ataka* party". Obviously, its leader was calculating possibilities for participation in the government and tried to become nationally and internationally acceptable. As to the coalition partners, GERB was seen as the best one but the Bulgarian Socialist Party was seriously

taken in consideration in the discussions before the parliamentary elections as well.

Comparing the content of the above important interview with statements by leaders of other parties and coalitions and analyzing the electoral results, one may reach a conclusion which seems to be most relevant concerning Bulgarian political scene and the major actors on it. The massive, repeated and loud reference to national interests, the promises to revise privatization deals with dishonest international investors, the general rejection of the participation of the MRF in the executive power, the personal attacks against Ahmed Dogan's policies, etc. were part and parcel not of the *Ataka* electoral campaign alone. In one way or another, they were part and parcel of the electoral campaign of the GERB party as well. Similar slogans were repeated by Ivan Kostov who was the most vociferous partner in the Blue Coalition uniting the rests of the Union of Democratic Forces. Yani Yaney made the entrance of his party "Order, Law and Justice" into the National Assembly possible by focussing the public attention just before the elections on the teaching of fundamentalist Islam in some villages with Muslim population. Even the Socialist Party returned back to the nationalist electoral propaganda and decided to include the strongly patriotic party "Nova Zora" in its *Coalition for Bulgaria* for the parliamentary elections.

How to interpret this fever of all major political formations in Bulgaria to compete with each other by stressing the nationalist rhetoric? Obviously, the surprising electoral success of the *Ataka* coalition at all

elections since 2005 has influenced the strategists of all parties and electoral coalitions. They had to make their own *nationalist turn* in the electoral campaigns. This is a new pattern in the political strategies and most probably of political action. During the period of settling the international situation of the country by means of its membership in the NATO and in the European Union the nationalist rhetoric was not the best electoral asset. A major political party moving openly in this direction could thus commit political suicide. Now the situation has changed profoundly. It is hardly imaginable that a member-state of NATO and of the European Union or a political force in such a country could be internationally or domestically punished for applying to nationalist rhetoric and even to nationalist policies. A punishment for this reason could be hardly substantiated and implemented even concerning Bulgaria or Bulgarian political forces since there are political parties or movements propagating nationalism in all Western European countries. In some cases these parties or movements propagate nationalism in more extremist versions than *Ataka* does it in Bulgaria. Therefore, one may expect that the nationalist turn in the Bulgarian politics will become a phenomenon with long-term presence in the Bulgarian domestic and international politics.

This seems to be confirmed by the political decisions and actions after the parliamentary elections. Three political parties expected to be invited by the GERB party as partners in a ruling coalition, but only *Ataka* among them did not mention any conditions for the potential partner-

ship in the coalition. This was understood as a general support to the GERB party and made the decision easier to build its minority government. *Ataka* expressed its full support to it. On its turn, *Ataka* certainly expects support by the GERB government to its patriotic initiatives. In fact, at the Opening Session of the 41th National Assembly Volen Siderov suggested a Resolution for condemnation of the genocide on the Bulgarian people during the Ottoman rule between 1396 and 1913. A memorial and a memorial day should remember about undeniable tragic facts in Bulgarian history. This initiative could receive no open support by any of the prime ministers of Bulgaria after 1989 since all of them were well aware of the sensitivity of the political circles in neighbouring Turkey about the issue of genocide. Considering also the implications for the Bulgarian domestic policy, no one would dare to express opinion on the issue. Obviously, the international and the domestic situation of the country has changed. The new Prime Minister Boyko Borisov positively evaluated the initiative in the mass media. The readiness for mutual support of *Ataka* and GERB on nationalist basis is obvious.

How to explain these somewhat striking developments on the surface of Bulgarian political life? What are their short-term and long-term determinants? What are the prospects of nationalism as a factor of political orientation, decision and action in Bulgarian politics? How to place the phenomenon of Bulgarian nationalism in the Eastern European processes?

4. New Reasons and Long-term Causes of Nationalist Fashions

One may take the rise of radical nationalism in recent Bulgarian political life as just one of the many short-lived cultural and political fashions. In fact, the organized nationalism appeared on the Bulgarian political scene suddenly like a fashion which would not last for long. The last assumption is most probably false. There are socially relevant reasons and causes for the recent appearance of radical nationalism. They were hinted at above and should be put under close scrutiny in the remainder.

The task of the proper interpretation of the phenomenon is not easy. It is usually taken for granted that political radicalism thrives as a reaction to acute critical situations in society. Was this the case in Bulgaria in 2005 or in 2009? No, Bulgarian society was not in whatever way in an acute economic, political or cultural crisis at that time. Given this fact, one could try to explain the rise of nationalist radicalism from the opposite side. One may assume that the phenomenon "*Ataka*" has become only possible after some major causes of a long lasting national crisis have been eliminated. This applies first of all to the resolution of strategic tasks of the international security of the country. In the current geostrategic context they could be resolved with the country's membership in NATO and in the European Union. It was well known by politicians that manifestly nationalist slogans could put obstacles on the way of the integration of the country in both organizations. This danger is over. Now it is possible to speak loudly out what has been long kept silent under the re-

gime of political correctness required by the circumstances. The justification of the presence of a radical nationalist party in Bulgaria is not difficult now. In fact, radical nationalist groups, movements and parties are part of the political spectrum in most NATO and EU member countries. Why should Bulgaria be an exception from this rule?

The argumentation might go deeper, however. The country moved through an existential crisis of rapid economic decline and slow recovery, acute political instability and cultural disorientations. Nevertheless, no radical movement or political organization had managed to establish itself as an influential political factor during this critical period. The simple explanation is that there was no attractive political platform promising an easy way out of the grievances. The concentration on survival dominated the everyday life. People, who could not find resources for survival in the country they could try their chances abroad. Now the situation has changed. Even in the conditions of a global financial and economic crisis the real issue for individuals and households in Bulgaria is rarely the biological survival. Political life can return to normality. It includes radical nationalist movements and parties practically all over the world.

Therefore, it was and it is not the acute crisis which brought about the allegedly surprising appearance of the radical nationalism in Bulgarian political life. To the contrary, it was the relative stabilization of Bulgarian domestic economic and political life which made this possible. However, the stabilization made *Ataka* possible since the stabilization has been achieved and is being reproduced under precarious conditions.

Recent international comparative studies provide the evidence that the current economic, political and cultural situation in the country is full of tensions which intensity is higher than in most other post-socialist societies. This applies to the perception of the economic situation in the country first of all. The majority of the interviewees in a rep-

resentative national survey in Bulgaria insist on the point that the current economic situation of the Bulgarian people is worse than in the times before 1989. This is a clear indication for the availability of a strong protest potential in Bulgarian society which might be mobilized by radical forces on the left or right side of the political spectrum:²³

Table 3: "Would you say that the economic situation of most people in your country is better, worse, or about the same as it was under communism?" (in %)

Country	Better	Worse	About the same	DK
Poland	47	35	12	6
Czech Republic	45	39	12	3
Russia	33	45	15	7
Slovakia	29	48	18	5
Lithuania	23	48	15	14
Bulgaria	13	62	18	7
Ukraine	12	62	13	12
Hungary	8	72	16	5

The situation is even more precarious in the field of the quality and the efficiency of the state administration. In this respect the Bulgarian interviewees lead in the negative side of the scale of satisfaction concerning the functioning of the

state administration. The dissatisfaction with the corrupt politicians and with the inefficient handling of crime and illegal drugs has been repeatedly and successfully used in the propaganda campaigns of the *Ataka* party:²⁴

Table 4: National problems today beyond the economy in the former Eastern bloc (in %)

Country	Corrupt political leaders	Crime	Illegal drugs
Bulgaria	76	76	74
Czech Republic	71	55	51
Hungary	76	69	54
Lithuania	78	76	66
Poland	58	49	49
Russia	52	51	54
Slovakia	52	55	46
Ukraine	70	56	46

²³ *Two Decades After the Wall's Fall* (2009) Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, p. 40. The representative national surveys were conducted in August-September 2009.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Last but not least, in a clear contradiction to the official diplomatic declarations about the fully settled issues concerning state boundaries, the public opinion in the country has substantial reservations in this respect. Moreover, the public opin-

ion polls carried out in Eastern Europe by the Pew Research Centre in 1991 and in 2009 provide the evidence that the feelings of dissatisfaction with the existing state borders have become in the meantime more intensive in Bulgaria:²⁵

Table 5: Do parts of neighbouring countries belong to us? (Answer “Agree”, in %)

Country	1991	2009	Change
Bulgaria	52	66	+14
Hungary	70	61	-9
Russia	22	58	+36
Poland	60	51	-9
Lithuania	46	40	-6
Czech Republic	42	40	-2
Slovakia	34	29	-5
Ukraine	24	24	0

Therefore, the data of Table 4 and discussions on Bulgarian history and Bulgarian national identity indicate that the issues related to the causes and reasons of radical nationalism are much more complex and complicated than the tensions in the current economic and political situation or the pragmatic efforts of persons to attract public attention in order to be elected in the Bulgarian National Assembly might suggest.

The first long-term cause for the relevance of the debates on Bulgarian nationalism concerns *the ethnic and religious structure of Bulgarian society*. Bulgaria is the country in the European Union with the largest share of Muslims in its population. By far the largest part of them keeps to the Turkish ethnic identity. It is closely related to their Muslim identity. This statistical fact reveals its real relevance against the background of the historical experience which had been accumulated

in the course of five centuries of Ottoman rule in the Bulgarian lands. In addition, this long historical experience receives real meaning in the context of the much shorter but rather important co-existence of sovereign Bulgaria with the economically and militarily strong Turkey on the border of the country. Given these facts and their historical contexts, one should have understanding about some attitudes of ethnic Bulgarians. They are often uncertain about the degree of state loyalty of their compatriots who firmly keep to their Turkish-Muslim identity. The uncertainty does not play any special role at the level of the everyday communication. At this level the mutual understanding between ethnic Bulgarians and ethnic Turks has been usually marked by the predominance of ethnic and religious tolerance. This tradition is strong and it explains why the recent political attacks of Bulgarian

²⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

nationalists are only in very exceptional cases directed towards the Turkish ethnic group in general. Instead, the attacks are focused on the Turkish political elite organized in the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. Its leadership has been repeatedly described as posing risks to Bulgarian political life and Bulgarian sovereignty. In particular, the leader of the MRF Ahmed Dogan had become a personalized target of accusations for illegal enrichment, political intrigues and conspiracies in favour of Bulgarian Turks and Turkey. Given the intensity of the accusations, one cannot be really sure about the clear distinction made between the ethnic group of Turks in Bulgaria and the political elite of the ethnic group. The distinction might become easily blurred in times of domestic or international tensions. No political force in Bulgaria is currently interested in such development or working in this direction. But the ethnic composition of the electoral support for *Ataka* is indicative that this option for development in the interethnic relations in Bulgaria cannot be excluded under specific domestic and international circumstances.

The above distinction between the attitudes towards the ethnic group and its political representation does not apply in the case of the numerous and increasing Roma population in the country. These attitudes are negatively generalised in rather stable stereotypes. They reproduce a substantial social distance between the Bulgarian ethnic majority and Roma. They are widely perceived and treated as the excluded others. Neither the internationalist policies nor the policies of ethnic assimila-

tion during state socialism did change the situation. It got much worse in the times of transition to market economy since the Roma were the first to pay the bill of unemployment and impoverishment. Moreover, they became an easy pray for general accusations since they are in reality underrepresented among the tax payers and overrepresented among the receivers of social support of various kinds.²⁶ As a result, slogans and activities having Roma as target of insults and attacks easily attract public support. Roma are increasingly conceived as the threatening others. These negative stereotypes can be always used for the purposes of the right-wing nationalism. Taking the national interests seriously, the anti-Roma propaganda alone is not less destructive than the political passivity concerning the problems of Roma. This policy has been practiced for twenty years. An interview of Volen Siderov with a journalist from the Austrian radio was internationally widely commented. After being asked by the journalist about the integration of Roma in Bulgaria he suggested to the journalist to take one hundred thousand Bulgarian Roma to Austria and to integrate them there. The Austrian journalist could not find the proper words to react to the suggestion. Certainly, nobody could take the option seriously. Active and constructive policies are very much needed for resolving the long accumulated problems connected with the education and vocational training of Roma and their realization in the labour market.

²⁶ See Genov, Nikolai (2007) 'Globalisierung und Lebenslagen ethnischer Gruppen: Veränderungen in Bulgarien'. In: Heller, Wilfried et al. Eds. *Ethnizität in der Globalisierung*. München: Otto Sagner, pp. 87-108, part. p. 97.

The problems are burning since Roma will soon become the second largest ethnic group in the country. The nationalist anti-Roma slogans lead to a political blind alley if they come without long-term projects and efforts for economic, political and cultural inclusion of this ethnic group into mainstream Bulgarian society. Nevertheless, the nationalist slogans might be also useful. Paradoxically enough, they might foster the upgrading of the efficiency of state institutions which have to deal with the Roma issues. Without this upgrading even well designed and financed efforts concerning the inclusion of the Roma ethnic group are doomed to failure. Ethnic Bulgarians cannot be interested in such negative development in the long run.

As seen in this broader context of interethnic relations in Bulgarian society, the anti-Turkish slogans and actions of right-wing Bulgarian nationalists are very questionable in two respects. *First*, they spoil the cultural and political situation in the country currently and in the future. *Second*, they motivate Bulgarian Turks to leave the country. There is nothing new in this policy. Manifestly or not, it has been on the agenda during the whole history of the third Bulgarian statehood. But the intended solution is dubious. Due to the mass emigration of ethnic Bulgarians the country already lost a substantial share of the ethnic majority group. This is one important reason why the ethnic composition of the country is changing in the direction of the larger and larger presence of Roma in the population of the country. As seen in this historical perspective, the slogans and policies for pushing Bulgarian Turks to emi-

grate are very short-sighted and objectively contradict the national interests.

Some clarifications are needed concerning the sporadic anti-Semitic slogans spread by some right-wing nationalists in the country. The slogans do not have any specific domestic meaning at present. The Jewish community was numerous in the country before the Second World War but practically disappeared due to the emigration thereafter. Without any specific local reference the slogans about global Jewish conspiracies etc. do not make too much sense and could hardly mobilize any relevant political activity. The slogans and policies against allochthonous ethnic groups (new migrants) are also rather general since the new migrants are still relatively few in Bulgaria. Nevertheless, the migrants from Africa and Asia are visible. They are currently the target of xenophobic propaganda and victims of racist attacks. One may assume that together with the rise of the attractiveness of Bulgaria as a stable EU member this type of xenophobic and nationalistic activities might become more intensive.

The second point of relevance concerns the *international references of the slogans and potential actions of Bulgarian nationalists*. They are realistic in one respect at least. In spite of the widespread critical attitudes to state borders (see Table 5), the questioning of the international borders is not manifestly on the agenda of Bulgarian radical nationalists yet. In fact, direct questioning of borders is a rarity in the slogans of nationalists all over Europe. As a rule, their slogans and activities have mostly domestic targets or international organizations as targets. However, given

the increasing Bulgarian Diaspora one may expect that the preservation of the ethnic identity of Bulgarians outside of the Bulgarian borders would be of increasing importance for the propaganda and policies of the *Ataka* Party. So far, this has not been the case. In the famous 20 programmatic points the issue is just absent. Most probably, this will change in the context of the collaboration between the government of the GERB Party and *Ataka*. The appointment of a special minister for the Bulgarian Diaspora in the GERB government gives the signal that this might be expected.

The third point of relevance concerns the participation and activities of Bulgarian nationalists in the very wide and rather controversial area of the discussions concerning the Bulgarian history and the Bulgarian ethnic and national identity. The heated debates on the occasion of a project which was misleadingly renamed "The Myth on Batak" have clearly shown that the various related issues touch upon rather sensitive perceptions of a wide audience. Professionals in social sciences and humanities and representatives of the broader intellectual audience, left wing and right wing nationalists as well liberals of various nuances reacted emotionally. The discussion signalled that a relatively small group of liberal intellectuals opting for the universal rights of free speech and free scientific research met the joined opposition of state institutions and the ethnic Bulgarian public at large.²⁷ Obviously,

after decades of uncertainties concerning the national identity, national history and national interests there is a widespread need to return back to some uniting national myths and legends. In fact, there is no nation or state in the world living and surviving without this type of myths and legends concerning the common origin, common heroes, common sufferings and common historical paths. The need for a return to the common ethnic roots comes usually to the fore of the public agenda after periods of profound changes in property and income structures, of standard of living and way of life. This is what happened in Bulgaria together with the profound economic and political reforms after 1989. Now the nation has approached the historical point of redefinition of values. One may wish and expect that this re-definition would move in the direction of strengthening the values of democratic tolerance. Under similar circumstances, however, many nations have experienced a landslide of value-orientations in the direction of ethnic fundamentalism and ethnic intolerance.²⁸ The present-day international situation is definitely not favourable for the establishment of powerful nationalist right-wing movements. The Bulgarian tradition is also not much favourable in this respect. But some nationalist feelings of people who have been or are socially out-rooted might be supportive to political platforms and organizational actions resembling the platforms and actions of the radical nationalist right-wing move-

²⁷ The debate had its peak in 2007. However, it will certainly continue. See *Liberalen pregled* [Liberal Overview], http://www.librev.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=687&Itemid=97

²⁸ See Parsons, Talcoott (1954 [1942]) 'Some Sociological Aspects of the Fascist Movements'. In: Parsons, Talcott. *Essays in Sociological Theory*. New York: Free Press, pp. 124-141.

ments during the thirties. The somewhat charismatic leader Volen Siderov and his leader's party *Ataka* definitely profited from such feelings influencing segments of the voters in Bulgaria.

The most profound issue behind the search for belonging to a respectable and respected ethnic community concerns the new identity of the Bulgarian nation and the Bulgarian state. The new definition of identity is needed in the aftermath of the profound changes in the domestic social structures and in the geostrategic situation of the country. This new identity is still in making.²⁹ The vacuum might be filled in at least partly by radical or moderate nationalistic self-definitions. Some of them might be just due to efforts to compensate feelings and assessments of low national status in international comparisons. Nationalist slogans, political platforms and actions might well thrive on this emotional and intellectual soil. They might be the expression of a compensatory mechanism for national or ethnic humiliations. The only way out of the imaginary world of compensatory illusions is the mobilization for achieving real results in the ethnic and national development and in the international competition. Exactly the missing of this realistic effort seems to be the major weakness of the Bulgarian nationalists so far.

The above discussed compensatory mechanism has the political elite as its usual target since it is regarded in Bulgaria as a failed elite. The typical argumentation is rather simple: It was or it is not the failure of the ethnic group or the nation

or the nation-state, but it was the failure of the small, intellectually unable and with weak will, corrupt, egoistic, cosmopolitan, etc. ruling group which brought about the catastrophe and the common suffering during the transformation. This type of scapegoating anti-elitism is omnipresent in the propaganda of the Bulgarian right-wing nationalists. It meets some difficulties in the argumentation, however. Due to the long Ottoman rule Bulgarian society has no aristocracy or aristocratic traditions. Since the belated re-establishment of the national statehood in 1878 the economic, political and cultural elites have mostly consisted of self-made people. The sharp turns in the elite building after 1944 and then 1989 made the establishment of elite dynasties practically impossible. The elite of the state-socialist administration had mostly its origin from the peasantry. The present day political and economic elite mostly consists of self-made people from the academia and the businesses. Thus, the slogans against "the ruling mafia" have hardly any identifiable focus. They will immediately turn counter-productive in the moment in which the *Ataka* party would in one way or another take some governmental responsibility. Having given signals that they are willing to take governmental responsibilities as political elite, the leaders of the *Ataka* are facing the danger to be immediately discredited by their own slogans against all ruling groups as "the ruling mafia".

The fourth crucial issue concerns the impact of the ongoing globalization on the Bulgarian nation state and particularly on its capacity to manage the burning problems

²⁹ See Genov, Nikolai (2006) 'Bulgaria's New Identity'. *South East Europe Review*, Vol. 9, N 3, pp. 43-56.

of the welfare state. The current financial and economic crisis has provided abundant evidence about the potential for constructive solutions and for potential conflicts. On the one side, the restrictive monetary policies imposed on Bulgarian economy by the global institution of the International Monetary Fund in the form of currency board turned out to be efficient in passively preventing the national financial system from the deep crisis which affected the finances of other Eastern European states. On the other side, the far reaching predominance of foreign property in the banking sector of Bulgaria manifested its controversial character. During the previous years the domination of big foreign banks on the Bulgarian banking sector was a guarantee for its stability. However, in the times of the global financial crisis the big foreign banks got mostly concerned with the stability of

the Western European countries where their headquarters are located. The credits in the branches in Bulgaria dried out. The Bulgarian government did not have legal mechanisms to influence this policy which was obviously detrimental for the national economy in the context of the global financial crisis. The general nationalistic slogans about “banks in Bulgarian hands” could be thus supported by the facts.

The membership in the European Union has been long regarded by the Bulgarian public opinion as a major factor for the economic prosperity of the country and the households in the context of globalization and its uncertainties. Two years after the country has become a member of the Union the public mind has changed and this is still another source for strengthening nationalist emotions and nationalistic policies:³⁰

Table 6: “In the long run, do you think that Bulgaria’s overall economy has been strengthened or weakened by the economic integration of Europe?” (in %)

Country	Strengthened	Weakened	Neither/Nor	DK
Poland	53	28	15	4
Slovakia	41	33	21	6
Czech Republic	31	37	25	7
Lithuania	28	34	27	11
Bulgaria	14	63	16	7
Hungary	9	71	15	4

The generally non-democratic or anti-democratic programmatic statements and action patterns of the Bulgarian radical nationalists are publicly known. Are their statements and actions really dangerous for the young democratic institutions in Bulgaria? Few would positively answer the question. To the contrary, the political behaviour of the leaders of the nationalist

Ataka party shows that they are ready to adapt to the existing democratic political order in order to avoid marginalization. Volen Siderov increasingly takes a moderate public approach to the issues under discussion. Recently he has not participated in scandalous public actions which accompa-

³⁰ *Two Decades After the Wall's Fall* (2009) Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, p.68.

nied the short history of the party. It is still difficult to say if this policy is just a camouflage or an attempt to make nationalist slogans and policies acceptable in broader circles. One may assume that the leadership of the party understands well that the time for radical nationalist propaganda and action is not fully ripe yet. The country has not been so dramatically hit by the financial and economic crisis like Hungary or Latvia. The major explanation is the efficiency of the institution of the currency board. Thus, the accumulated public disappointments from the repeated promises for a fast and substantial improvement of the living standard have accumulated but not so far to become socially explosive. The attempts at developing scenarios for the economic and political development of the country in the context of a deep economic crisis did not lead to conclusions about foreseeable economic catastrophes, acute political crises and mass public unrests.³¹ Thus, under conditions which are not expected to change profoundly, one could hardly expect a landslide move of the public political preferences in favour of radical political actions headed by *Ataka*. To the contrary, one may expect continuing efforts on the part of its leadership to adapt to the mainstream democratic politics of Bulgarian style in order to become more and more acceptable as partner in ruling coalitions.

The assumption that the leadership of *Ataka* could use and abuse international tensions and conflicts for implementing its radical anti-democratic politics seems

to be even less realistic. There are no signs so far that dramatic changes of the international constellation are on the near horizon. Thus, it is hard to expect that international issues would strengthen the domestic position of *Ataka* and would make the party able to discredit or undermine the democratic political institutions in the country. Bulgaria lost the Second Balkan War in 1913. Two national efforts to resolve territorial issues by participating in World Wars were unsuccessful. Against this historical experience it would be difficult to raise broad public support to ideas and actions in favour of aggressive foreign policies. This might only occur under a strong foreign pressure. It is not in sight. Without foreign incentives and massive foreign support Bulgarian nationalists cannot be a serious force preparing or implementing undemocratic domestic or foreign policies.

Therefore, what Bulgarian nationalists of the type of *Ataka* can still rely on is mostly the spreading of nebulous nationalist slogans without constructive content. For instance, nationalists are and will continue to be against the giving-up of national sovereignty to the bureaucracy in Brussels. But they readily participate in the work of the institutions of the European Union. Nobody of them questions the reasons for the membership of Bulgaria in the European Union. Nationalists are against victimizing of Bulgarian soldiers in NATO operations. However, it remains unclear in which different way the international security of the country could or should be achieved and maintained. Bulgarian nationalists are anti-globalists

³¹ See Meinardus, Marc (2009) 'Bulgarien und die globale Krise – Wirtschaftliche, soziale und politische Implikationen'. *Südos-teuropa Mitteilungen*, N 2, pp. 6-21. here pp. 20-21.

in the sense that Bulgaria is understood to be on the losing side in the globalization. What should be really done in order to change the unfavourable situation of the country in the global competition – this is the topic which remains so far beyond the content of the public statements of Siderov as well. Thus, he and his party mostly profit from the protest votes so far. This will be increasingly difficult under the GERB government which came to power with the manifest intention to act in favour of the national interests. *Ataka* might have the option to openly and consequently support these efforts and thus to lose identity in its efforts to mobilize protest. Or, the party might continue to opt for protest without constructive proposals and thus to move in the direction of political irrelevance.

Thus, it seems at the first glance that Volen Siderov and *Ataka* have only two options which are not too much promising. They do not open prospects for any important role of *Ataka* in the national political life. This might be a strong conclusion, however. Bulgarian political life is so unstable that a variety of options are basically possible and their probability is difficult to assess. One of these options is the development of *Ataka* in the direction of a long-term factor of instability in Bulgarian politics due to the instability of its own organizational form which is too much centred on the decisions of the party leader. Even in the very eve of the parliamentary elections in July 2009 there were serious debates in the leading circles of the party concerning the authoritarian personal style of Volen Siderov. The suggestion was to

cope with it by establishing stronger collective bodies of party leadership.³² The debates continued after the elections. The experience from the scandals and splits of the *Ataka* parliamentary group in the 40th National Assembly is rather instructive. Organizational instabilities might continue to trouble the party, its parliamentary representation and various bodies in the legislative and executive in which activists of *Ataka* are represented.

Another source of political tensions and conflicts caused by the activists of the *Ataka* party might continue to be the rude language which dominates their speeches which often contain direct offenses to the opponents. However, rude and offensive speech is not the monopoly of *Ataka* in the Bulgarian political debates. Hate speech and uncultivated expressions have been largely present in the Parliaments after 1989. However, it seems that the nationalist speakers go through the same learning process like most other activists of political parties in the country. So far, the direction is towards more civilized forms of political presentation and action.

The public opinion in the country is very much divided concerning this relatively new phenomenon. The primitivisms of right-wing nationalists are mostly subject for jokes in intellectual circles. However, large segments of society have accumulated strong feelings of national deprivation during the last two decades. So, they have some understanding for the specifics of discussion and action of Volen Siderov and his followers. For some segments of

³² See *EUROREX Watchblog* (2009) 30. June, <http://www.eurorex.info/2009/06/30/bulgarien-fuehrungskrise-bei-ataka>

society both the left-wing and right-wing nationalists seem to be even the very much needed speakers and defenders of the national identity and national interests. Thus, the Bulgarian politicians, the Bulgarian public and the international observers are still looking carefully at the development of the political constellation in the country and at the positioning of Volen Siderov and the *Ataka* party in these constellations. It is still early to make any strong conclusions about the political fate of the radical nationalist party and its leader.

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