



**NATIONAL AND RIGHT-WING RADICALISM  
IN THE NEW DEMOCRACIES:  
BULGARIA**

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## **National and Right-Wing Radicalism in the New Democracies: Bulgaria**

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### **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 two months before the elections. Soon thereafter the coalition was re-organised as 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 immediately reported about the appearance of a Le Pen like political figure in Bulgaria. This opinion was supported by the election of 3 Members of the European Parliament from the *Ataka* at the elections in 2007. They joined the right-wing parliamentary group *Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty* in the European Parliament.

These remarkable electoral achievements notwithstanding, Siderov and his party fellows used to attract the public attention only with scandalous news about dubious symbols, traffic accidents, personal quarrels and organisational instabilities. Due to 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 only in undiplomatic speeches causing interethnic tensions. Nevertheless, in June 2009 the party managed to repeat its success in the European Elections and sent two representatives to the European Parliament. Even more important was the result achieved by the party in the Parliamentary elections held in July 2009. *Ataka* party received 9.36 per cent of the valid votes at the general elections (8.14% in 2005) and took 21 seats in the new Parliament. Before and after the elections serious debates took place about possible participation of *Ataka* in coalition governments. The major common ground for the potential coalition with the GERB party was regarded to be the similar nationalist assessment of the interethnic relations in the country by *Ataka* and GERB. Besides

that, both parties used to define their political orientation as belonging to the right side of the political spectrum.<sup>1</sup>

This powerful rise of politically organised and manifestly right-wing nationalism represented by the *Ataka* party requires close analysis since long after the political changes in 1989 no right-wing political group or movement could be successful in circulating nationalist slogans in Bulgaria. Somewhat paradoxically, the influential nationalist groups consisted of members and followers of the supposed-to-be left-wing Bulgarian Communist Party 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”).<sup>2</sup> The explanation of these remarkable national specifics has to do with the widespread 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 manifestly and consequently dominated by the Soviet interests after 1944. The major reason for this perception was the consequent assimilationist policy of the Communist Party concerning the national and religious minorities in the country. The assimilationist 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” since 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 homogenisation 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 actually so understood and therefore supported by large segments of ethnic Bulgarians. They did not manage to recognise the complexity of motives which caused the “revival process”. In reality, the major background motive of the process 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

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<sup>1</sup> See Hein, Michael (2009) ‘Die Europa- und Parlamentswahlen 2009 in Bulgarien’. *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, N 5, S. 59.

<sup>2</sup> 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).

and less able to function as crucial factor of the value-normative integration of Bulgarian society.

The **Bulgarian Communist Party** was no exception in Eastern Europe in its aim to achieve ethnic homogenization in order to get grounds for its political legitimacy. The ethnic homogenization achieved in Poland after 1945 due to decisions of foreign powers was widely used for the legitimation of the rule of the **Polish United Workers Party**. Nicolae Ceausescu applied to the same policy of ethnic homogenization for the same purposes in Romania. In various ideological forms and manifest in a variety of policies nationalism had become a key ideological orientation of political life in all other Eastern European countries. Thus, the revival of Bulgarian nationalism by the domestic policy of the less and less internationalist Bulgarian Communist Party was a local manifestation of the common attempt of the Eastern European ruling Communist parties *to fill in with nationalism the ideological vacuum* which emerged after the proletarian and later socialist internationalism had lost its mobilising and socially-integrating power.

It was the political and ideological mixture of communist egalitarianism with Bulgarian nationalism which made it possible that the **Bulgarian Socialist Party** won more than the half of the votes in the first democratic elections held in June 1990. In this specific national context the *re-vitalization of the pro-fascist war-time* radical nationalism of the “National Legions” and other small groups was doomed to fail. However, 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 far-reaching 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 major effect of this influential public attitude was the neutrality 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 had in the

late 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 Ganev<sup>3</sup> to sue the Soviet Union and later Russia for anti-Bulgarian policies could not be taken seriously. In addition, the leaders of the emerging opposition knew well that nationalistic slogans and policies concerning neighbouring country and people as well as towards ethnic minorities in the country could not be acceptable for governments and other influential organisations in Western Europe and North America. Since they generously supported the belated emergence of the 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 manifest stress on national interests or even on patriotic topics was not regarded as politically correct in the moment. It was politically correct to mention the national interests by passing and to lay the stress on the future material prosperity under the conditions of liberal free markets, democracy 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 Forces**<sup>4</sup> 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 war-time “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 quite 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 since 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

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<sup>3</sup> Stoyan Ganev was minister of foreign affairs in the Philip Dimitrov's government of the Union of Democratic Forces (1991-1992).

<sup>4</sup> The coalition was established in December 1989.

the difficult heritage of the “revival process” and the intensive nationalist protests following its condemnation at the beginning of the democratisation process. The preservation of the ethnic peace was also due to the policies of the ethnic and religious organisations of the Bulgarian Turks and the Muslims in the country. Contrary to some widespread 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.<sup>5</sup>

The profound political changes and the cultural uncertainty facilitated the appearance of numerous small 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.<sup>6</sup> In spite of the efforts of their leaders to organise nationalist manifestations and other events, these groups and parties remained marginal in Bulgarian political life. Many nationalist emotions and expectations were connected with the re-establishment of the **Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation** (VMRO). Before the First World War and between the two world wars the organisation 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-vitalised VMRO did not manage to establish itself as a stable and influential political force in its own under the new democratic conditions. Its leadership moved in the direction of various coalitions which undermined the trust in it in the long run.<sup>7</sup>

The predominance of left-wingers in the nationalist camp continued till the end of the nineties of the last century. The left-wing organisations and their slogans gradually lost influence particularly 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 recognised in its reaction to the Kosovo-War. These

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<sup>5</sup> The protests facilitated the establishment of the left-nationalist *Obshtonaroden komitet za zashtita na natsionalnite interesi* [All-peoples’s Committee for Defence of National Interest] OKZNI in December 1989. On its part, it accelerated the establishment of the Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms under the long lasting of Ahmed Dogan. See about the „Revival Process” and its consequences *Human Dvelopment Report. Bulgaria 1997* (1997) Sofia: UNDP, pp. 49-59.

<sup>6</sup> See Yordanov, Ruslan (2002) ‘Tjachnata borba’ [Their Struggle]. *Tema*, N 19 (32), 13-22 May.

<sup>7</sup> See Karasimeonov, Georgi (2003) *Novata partiynna sistema v Balgariya* [The New Party System in Bulgaria]. Sofia: Gorex Press, pp. 178-179.

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 tended to raise profound issues concerning the aims and means of the national development and concerning the national interests in the 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 privatisation generally and in important specific cases really carried out in accordance with the national interests? For instance, 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 privatisation of the national air carrier "Balkan" was just one of a the many similar stories accompanying the privatization of large enterprises like the chemical plant "Plama" in Pleven, the metallurgical plant "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 many other privatisation deals. They became subject of public debates at national level. Numerous scandals concerning the privatisation 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 privatise or just rob the public good. Another

major target was the 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 carried out by tightly organized legal, semi-legal or directly criminal networks of entrepreneurs, politicians and state functionaries.<sup>8</sup> In addition, 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 both in rumours and in domestic and international publications. Until recently the journalists who conducted investigations on the criminal and semi-criminal phenomena in the country were mostly attracted by the networks of the former *nomenclatura* and their involvement in privatisation deals, illegal capital accumulation and capital transfers to other countries.<sup>9</sup> 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 state institutions and on the culture of trust in Bulgarian society.<sup>10</sup> 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 the so presented networks 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 generally 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 transition towards market economy and democratic political institutions.

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<sup>8</sup> See about the phenomenon of legal, semi-legal and criminal networkin in the development of the „second capitalism” in Bulgaria *Mrezhite na prehoda* [The Networks of the Transition] (2008) Sofia: Iztok-zapad.

<sup>9</sup> Mappes-Niediek, Norbert (2003) *Balkan-Mafia*. Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, pp. 80-85.

<sup>10</sup> See Roth, Jürgen (2008) *Novite balgarski Demoni* [The New Bulgarian Demons]. Sofia: Slantse.



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.<sup>11</sup>

Uncertainties accompanied the new definition of the aims and means of the geostrategic re-orientation of the country as well. The negotiations for membership of Bulgaria in the European Union were completed practically without any serious public debates like in Poland or in the Czech Republic. The information which leaked to the public through the mass media just concerned the opening and the closure of “chapters” for negotiation. What the content of the “chapters” was – this remained in most cases a black box for the broad audience. There were certainly 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 hasty because of the inefficiency of the Bulgarian bureaucracy which used to protract the preparations of required documents. The speed of negotiations had to be high in order not to lose the momentum. The processes after 2007 have clearly shown that there was already a negative attitude towards the EU enlargement accumulating in the Western European societies. The accumulation of scepticism or even negative attitudes towards further enlargement of the EU-25 could eventually prevent the accession of Bulgaria to the EU for a while. Last but not least, due to numerous historical, cultural, geo-strategic, 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 more harm than real help to the process.

Whatever the subject of discussion or the line of argumentation, the open question remained floating in the air: Was the Bulgarian national interest well represented and taken into account in 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 was unanimous: The closure of reactors of the Kozloduy nuclear power plant as outcome of the negotiations for membership in the European Union was definitely understood as 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

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<sup>11</sup> See Kalinova, Evgeniya and Iskra Baeva (2002) *Balgarskite prehodi 1939-2002* [The Bulgarian Transitions 1939-2002]. Sofia: Paradigma, p. 242 f.

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 conditions for membership in the NATO. The issue became the topic of only sporadic public debates. They were mostly focused on domestic issues 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 and 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 monopolised by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. It is a public secret that the Movement is an ethnically based political party with religiously motivated membership and voters. This situation obviously contradicts Art. 11 (4) “There shall be no political parties on ethnic, racial or religious lines...” of the democratic Constitution of Bulgaria passed on 12.07.1991.<sup>12</sup> There was a decision of the Constitutional Court which later defined the Movement for Rights and Freedoms as established and functioning 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 remain open in the public mind in the country. The most serious of them concern 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 democratic development of the country. In comparative terms they were 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 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

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<sup>12</sup> See Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, <http://www.parliament.bg/?page=const&lng=en>.

political forces in the country well represented in the National Assembly. All neighbouring post-socialist countries had or have such forces in their Parliaments – Romania Mare, the **Serbian Radical Party** and **VMRO-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 Rumén Leonidov. This became particularly striking at the beginning of the new century since both 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 personalised government of the former king Simeon Saxe-Coburggotski. He came to power on the wake of a typical convulsion of Bulgarian political life 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 of the performance of his government was tremendous despite some obvious achievements of the government in the economic, political and cultural stabilisation of Bulgarian society and in the improvement of its international position.

The major reason for the repeated disappointments and 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 emigration 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 largely 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 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, mobilise 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 and opens 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 in the spring of 2005 registered the electoral coalition *Ataka* was known as a newspaper journalist. He was more popular as the moderator of a popular TV talk show called also *Ataka*. Before 2005 Volen Siderov had also 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 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 just two months before the elections was not unusual as well. The former king Simeon Saxe-Coburggotski also

registered his movement (party) immediately before the parliamentary elections in June 2001 and nevertheless caused a landslide in 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. In this sense Siderov and *Ataka* could really not to be identified with persons, organisations 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 attacks on the Skat TV against the former Bulgarian governments and political establishment for their 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 the representatives of diverse groups wanted to listen to: corrupt deals in the privatisation had to be suspended, corrupt politicians had to be put before the court together with the people from the shadow businesses, no Bulgarian agricultural 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 keep to the understanding that manifestly nationalist speech was just political nonsense, totally out-fashioned or not politically correct but had to listen to it in the Parliament.

No agency specialized in public opinion polls could foresee that this type of provocative 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". 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 forces 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.<sup>13</sup> 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. Not only left-wing politicians, political forces and governments 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"<sup>14</sup> 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 materialise 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 leave the Union? Another requirement of the same point 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 nationalisation of financial assets owned mostly by banks from the EU

<sup>13</sup> Siderov, Volen (2007) *Moyata bitka za Balgariya* [My Fight for Bulgaria]. Sofia: Bumerang, p. 4

<sup>14</sup> *20 tochki na partiya ATAKA* [20 Points of ATAKA Party]. See

[http://www.ataka.bg/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=51](http://www.ataka.bg/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=51).

countries. It is only a rhetoric question if this could be done indeed without a full-scale political revolution. It 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 the 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” practically 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.

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 – this is the electoral outcome. *Ataka* managed to attract the support of 395, 733 voters at the general elections held in June 2009 and thus to improve its electoral result as compared to the parliamentary elections held in 2005. This success should be seen in the context of the very substantial differences in the results of 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:<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The data stem from the official Bulletins of the Central Electoral Commission in Sofia.

**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	19.88	3.02
Ataka	-	-	-	-	-	8.14	9.36
Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB)	-	-	-	-	-	6.44	-
Bulgarian National Union 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 attracted by the party and its leader at the parliamentary elections in 2009?<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The following data has been collected and processed by the Alfa Research agency for market and social research in Sofia.



**Table 2: Vote 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 summarised, the voters of Ataka are substantially overrepresented among the male Bulgarians older than 61 years of age. They are 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 not definitely right-wing party has stabilized its position in the Bulgarian parliamentary life. This is an important event 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. 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 Wars 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'état 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 and 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 organisations, 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 organisations.<sup>17</sup> 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 mobilisation of radical domestic

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<sup>17</sup> See about the specifics of the fascism in Bulgaria and its complicated relationships with the monarchy Poppetrov, Nikolai (2008) *Fashizmat v Balgariya* [Fascism in Bulgaria]. Sofia: Kama.

forces. However, domestic policies of ethnic suppression and ethnic assimilation were regularly carried out by the Bulgarian governments and were supported by the monarchy.

Since the participation of Bulgaria in the Second World War under the banner of right-wing nationalism ended once more with national catastrophe, the revanchist and aggressive nationalism was largely discredited in the public mind. Therefore, no influential nationalist right-wing cultural and political tradition from the times before 1944 could be continued after 1989. Moreover, even the personal continuation of right-wing ideas and policies became impossible since most functionaries of pro-fascist organizations were severely persecuted and physically eliminated after 1944 or lost the connection to the processes in Bulgaria due to decades of emigration.

Paradoxically enough, after a decade of internationalist efforts to simultaneously support the 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. First 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 very much feared clashes between Bulgarians and Turks did not come true. 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 mostly with a view 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 commonly shared experience of losers in the reforms - both by Bulgarians and Turks. However, it was exactly this common experience of losers in the transition to market economy which 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 directly 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 organisation 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 practically dominates the local governments in some of them. It is 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 Bulgarians in the country.<sup>18</sup> 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 poses the authoritarian organisation 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 preferences of the party concerning positions in the state administration. Last but not least, mass media have regularly shown special attention to speeches and behaviour 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 funding in the Bulgarian state.<sup>19</sup>

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 Bulgarians and Turks particularly in rural areas. In the towns the tragedy of Roma was and 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

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<sup>18</sup> According to data of Alfa Research Agency for Market and Social research.

<sup>19</sup> See <http://sofiaecho.com/print.php?storyd=743487>.

strong. So, 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 organisations 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 newly define its ideological and political niche.

The most recent self-positioning of Volen Siderov and *Ataka* on the Bulgarian and international political scene is Siderov's detailed interview which was published by the Bulgarian news agency *novinite* on 26. June 2009 in English. The timing of the publication was well chosen days before the parliamentary elections held on 05. July 2009.<sup>20</sup> 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 reference was only with the successful Bulgarian attack and capture of the Turkish fortress of Edirne in 1912. Since he were 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 the virtual monetary economy. Interventions of the Bulgarian state into the national economy were to be unavoidable as this has had already happen in Japan or in South Korea. The state interventions should be particularly focused 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

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<sup>20</sup> 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](http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=105072)

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

As to the most urgent tasks after the elections, they had to include 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 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, 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* was based on its sound patriotism and permanent reference to the national interests. Other nationalist organisations should join *Ataka* in its efforts to represent and defence the national interests.

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 interethnic 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 dominate 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.

Reading the above important interview, comparing its content with statements of leaders of other parties and coalitions and analyzing the electoral results, one conclusion 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 privatisation 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 Yanev 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 strongly influenced the strategists of all parties and electoral coalitions. They had to make their own *nationalist turn* in the electoral campaign. 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 the means of its membership in the NATO and in the European Union the nationalist rhetoric was obviously not the best electoral asset. Manifest nationalism could prevent the achievement of these goals which were largely understood as the new cornerstones of the national security after the fall of the Berlin Wall. 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 efficiently 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 and North American 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 not remain a temporary fashion but 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 partnership in the coalition. This was understood as general support to the GERB party and made the decision easier to build a 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. Most probably, this initiative would 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 on nationalist basis is obvious.

#### **4. The Lasting Reasons of Nationalist Fashions**

One may take these developments in recent Bulgarian political life as just one of the short-lived political fashions. Recent discussions on Bulgarian history and Bulgarian national identity show that the issues are much more complex and complicated than the pragmatic efforts to reach public attention in order to be elected in the Bulgarian National Assembly might suggest.

The first lasting reason 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 closely connected to their Muslim identity. Given the historical experience which had been accumulated in the course of five centuries together with



the economically and militarily strong Turkey on the border of the country, one should have understanding why many ethnic Bulgarians are uncertain about the degree of loyalty of their compatriots who firmly keep to their Turkish-Muslim identity. Nevertheless, at the level of everyday communication the mutual understanding between ethnic Bulgarians and ethnic Turks has been predominantly marked by ethnic and religious tolerance. This tradition is strong and it explains why the recent attacks of Bulgarian nationalists are only in exceptional cases directed towards the Turkish ethnic group. Instead, the attacks are focused on the Turkish political elite organised 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 been the personalized target of the accusations for illegal enrichment, political intrigues and conspiracies in favour of Bulgarian Turks and Turkey. The distinction between the ethnic groups of Turks in Bulgaria and the political elite of the ethnic group is important but somewhat uncertain. It might easily turn to become 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 electoral support for *Ataka* is certainly 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 attitudes towards the numerous 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 assimilation during state socialism could 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.<sup>21</sup> As a result, slogans and activities having Roma as object of insults and attacks easily attract public support since Roma are increasingly conceived as the threatening others. These negative stereotypes can be always instrumentalised for the purposes of the right-wing nationalism. Taking the national interests seriously, the anti-Roma propaganda alone is not

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<sup>21</sup> 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.

less destructive than the passivity practiced 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. Can one expect that Roma would leave the country and thus the problems concerning their integration would be resolved? Nobody could take this option seriously. Active and constructive policies are needed for resolving the problems connected with the education and vocational training of Roma and their realization in the labour market. 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 integration 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. Without this upgrading even well designed, financed and organised efforts concerning the integration of the Roma ethnic group are doomed to failure. The experience after 1989 has empirically proved this statement. 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. Second, they can potentially motivate Bulgarian Turks to leave the country. There is nothing new in this policy. Manifestly or not, it has been permanently on the agenda during the whole history of the modern 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. In addition, 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 emigrate are very short-sighted and objectively contradict the national interests.

Some clarifications are also 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 but practically disappeared due to the emigration thereafter. The slogans and policies against allochthonous ethnic groups (new migrants) are also rather general since the new migrants are relatively few. Nevertheless, the migrants from Africa and Asia are visible. They are and will most probably become more often target of xenophobic propaganda and victims of racist attacks.

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. Questioning of the international borders is not on their agenda. In fact, manifest 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 organisations 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 first rate 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 are quite sensitive for a wide range of participating professionals and representatives of the broader intellectual audience, left wing and right wing nationalists as well liberals of various nuances. More precisely, 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.<sup>22</sup> 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 path. 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 of 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

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<sup>22</sup> 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](http://www.librev.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=687&Itemid=97)

intolerance.<sup>23</sup> 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 organisational actions resembling the platforms and actions of the radical nationalist right-wing movements during the thirties. The somewhat charismatic leader Volen Siderov and his Leader's party *Ataka* definitely profit 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 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.<sup>24</sup> 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 status at home or in international comparisons. It is well known that nationalist slogans, political platforms and actions might well thrive on this emotional and intellectual soil. It is compensatory mechanism which might affect big and small ethnic groups. The only way out of the imaginary world of compensatory illusions is the mobilisation for achieving real results in the ethnic and national development. 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 presumably or actually failed elites as its usual target. 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 weak will, corrupt, egoistic, cosmopolitan, etc. ruling group which brought about the catastrophe and the common suffering. This type of scape-goating 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 re-establishment of the national statehood in 1878 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 dynasties of members of the elite practically impossible. The elite of the state-socialist times 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

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<sup>23</sup> 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.

<sup>24</sup> See Genov, Nikolai (2006) 'Bulgaria's New Identity'. *South east Europe Review*, Vol. 9, N 3, pp. 43-56.

against “the ruling mafia” have hardly any identifiable focus and would 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 generally non-democratic or anti-democratic programmatic statements and action patterns of Bulgarian right-wing nationalists are publicly known. However, are their statements and actions really dangerous for the young democratic institutions in Bulgaria? Hardly anybody 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 marginalisation. Volen Siderov clearly takes a moderate public approach to the issues under discussion. Recently he has not participated in scandalous public actions which accompanied 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 has not come yet. In fact, 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 to the extent to become socially explosive. The efforts to develop scenarios for the economic and political development of the country in the context of the current economic crisis and after the parliamentary elections do not lead to conclusions about foreseeable economic catastrophes, acute political crises and mass public unrests.<sup>25</sup> Thus, under conditions which are not expected to change radically, one could hardly expect a radical move of the public political preferences in favour of any radical political action headed by *Ataka*. To the contrary, one may expect continuing efforts on the part of its leadership to adapt to the mainstream democratic politics 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 conflict for implementing radical anti-democratic politics seems to be even less realistic. No doubt, neither the domestic developments nor the international processes could be foreseen precisely. However, there are no signs so far that dramatic changes of the international

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<sup>25</sup> See Meinardus, Marc (2009) ‚Bulgarien und die globale Krise – Wirtschaftliche, soziale und politische Implikationen‘. *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, N 2, pp. 6-21. here pp. 20-21.

constellation are on the near horizon. In particular, there are no signs that any change of any borders of the country could be on the international agenda in the foreseeable future. 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. After the lost Second Balkan War in 1913 and after two unsuccessful national efforts to resolve the territorial issues by participating in two World Wars it would be extremely difficult to raise broad public support to ideas and actions supporting revanchist foreign policies. This might only occur under strong foreign pressure which is not in sight or hardly to imagine indeed in foreseeable future. Without foreign incentives and massive foreign support Bulgarian nationalists cannot be a serious force preparing or implementing undemocratic foreign policies.

What Bulgarian nationalists of the type of *Ataka* can still rely on is mostly the spreading of nebulous nationalist slogans without any clear constructive content. They 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 even dares to question the reasons for the membership of Bulgaria in the European Union. Nationalists are against victimizing of Bulgarian soldiers in NATO wars. In which different way the international security of the country could or should be achieved and maintained – this is a topic which remains beyond the topics discussed by Volen Siderov. Bulgarian nationalists are anti-globalists 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 ground in the efforts to mobilise 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 that Volen Siderov and *Ataka* have only two options. Moreover, both of them do not seem too much promising since they do not open any prospect for any important role of *Ataka* in the national political life. This would be a strong conclusion, however. Bulgarian political life is so unstable that a variety of options are basically possible although 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 organisational form which too much centred on the decisions of the party leader. Even of 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 leadership of Volen Siderov and the necessity to cope with it by establishing stronger collective bodies of party leadership.<sup>26</sup> The experience from the scandals and splits of the *Ataka* parliamentary group in the 40th National Assembly is rather instructive in the sense that organisational 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 in their speeches together with direct offenses to the opponents. These habits are not an exception in the Bulgarian political debates. Hate speech and the uncultivated expressions were largely present even in the Parliament 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. But large segments of society have accumulated so strong feelings of national deprivation during the last two decades that they have some understanding for the specifics of discussion and action of Volen Siderov and his followers at least. For some segments of 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 which have been put under strong pressure if not generally in question for long. 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 the positioning of Volen Siderov and the *Ataka* party in these constellations. It is still too early to make any conclusions about the political fate of the nationalist party and its leader.

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<sup>26</sup> See *EUROREX Watchblog* (2009) 30. June, <http://www.eurorex.info/2009/06/30/bulgarien-fuehrungskrise-bei-ataka>