Voting for the Xenophobic Party "Ataka" in Bulgaria.
Reshaping Symbolic Boundaries after Socialism

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the reasons behind the electoral support for the xenophobic party Ataka [Attack] in Bulgaria since its founding in 2005. While some authors have emphasized the salience of ethnic prejudices as an explanatory variable, others have insisted that Ataka mustered its strength by voicing some voters' drive to radically denounce the Bulgarian post-socialist political, social, and moral order. This paper argues that understanding the Ataka vote requires a focus on the intertwining of changing socioeconomic inequalities and the territorialization of ethnocultural differences. Bulgaria is currently undergoing a hardening of social boundaries that goes hand-in-hand with a defensive reassertion of ethnic and cultural boundaries in a context where new intra-state and international geographic mobilities challenge former modes of ethnicity negotiation.

"Some in my family voted for Ataka but are not xenophobes. I asked them why. They believe Siderov, unlike everyone else, speaks about the real issues in Bulgaria."[1]

"Volen [Siderov, Ataka's leader] is the first one who – based on facts – has nailed Dogan [the leader of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms /MRF/ representing the Turkish minority], Parvanov [the president of the Republic, a socialist], Tukey's Islamist policy towards Bulgaria and lots of other things. Now everyone denounces Stanishev's [the former socialist prime-minister] corruption yet when Siderov raised these issues they made fun of him. I wish him well as he is the one who talks about our problems and stands for our interests."[2]

In June 2005 Ataka [Attack] – an extreme nationalist coalition bringing forth an anti-Roma, anti-Turkish and anti-Semitic discourse – stormed the Bulgarian parliamentary scene winning 21 seats (out of 240) and 296 848 votes

(8, 93% of the total vote). This breakthrough was surprising in a number of ways: the time in history (Bulgaria had just signed its European accession agreement, and the economic recovery was beginning to bear fruit); the vote structure (one third of those who cast their votes for Ataka belonged to the educated classes); and some of the themes in Ataka's pitch (the anti-Semitism, which had hardly reared its head during the post-communist period in Bulgaria). A year later, based on extensive field research in villages where Ataka had scored high, the social scientist Evgenia Ivanova accurately sketched the Ataka constituency as "medium educated, relatively successful and working"[3]. She emphasized the social nature of the vote denouncing the new inequalities as well as the corruption among political elites. While reminding of the nationalist beliefs among some voters and the power of anti-Roma and anti-Turkish prejudices, she saw the political expression of these stereotypes as a result of the "ethnicising" of social divisions. The quotes at the start of this paper may also suggest the Ataka sympathizers' drive to

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[1] A conversation with G., 27, Sofia, 7 June 2011.

[2] A 2009 opinion in an Internet discussion forum responding to an article published in Capital, a liberal weekly, discussing the falling out between V. Siderov and the owner of the Scat television channel, which at the time played a key role in promoting Siderov. See http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2009/12/04/825940_novite_patrioti/.

[3] Evgenia Ivanova, A Majority of Innocent, Screwed-Up Bulgarians, Balkan Studies Forum, 1-2, 2008, pp. 63-72.

radically denounce the political, social and moral order of post-Communism as well as to seek an alternative in a setting where the key parties are regarded as identical, i.e. as equally corrupt and indifferent to the expectations of ordinary citizens.

Yet how much do we know about Ataka and the reasons behind its success? Should we view this organization as a paradoxical champion of social grievances and/or a fruit of an ethnicization of social cleavages? These two interpretations need a closer look. The former is reminiscent of some research dedicated to the National Front in France. Some commentators held the view that the Front mustered its strength – particularly after it was headed by Marine le Pen – by giving visibility to political and social issues that its opponents try to evade (among them: globalisation-triggered social marginalisation; some mass-spread insecurities, the loss of clear-cut ideological distinctions among established political parties, etc.) The second interpretation seems likely to hold a stronger analytical potential. Ernest Gellner's work has brilliantly demonstrated how social and economic divisions were translated into ethnic and cultural terms by the emergent European nationalism at the turn of XVIII and early XIX century.[4] Yet both assumptions have to be treated with caution. Firstly, as Evgenia Ivanova makes clear, large segments of Bulgarian society hold acutely negative attitudes towards both the political

class and the post-communist period and not all of them vote for Ataka. These critical views do not sufficiently explain the support given to an organisation preaching rabid nationalism. Secondly, if understanding the Ataka vote requires a focus on the intertwining of socioeconomic inequalities and ethnocultural divisions, the whole problem boils down

Volen Siderov speaking before Ataka sympathisers in a Sofia central square.
(poligraff.net)

to explaining the nature of this connection. What we have to understand is how the perceivably descending trajectories of social mobility might be converted to denouncing the ethnic "other", and what makes this kind of stigmatisation conceivable or legitimate for the Ataka constituency. We should not exclude the possibility that the hardening of social boundaries we are witnessing in Bulgaria today goes hand-in-hand with a defensive hardening of ethnic and cultural boundaries in the context where both the contours of citizenship and multiple identities are being reshaped.

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[4] Ernest Gellner, Nations and Nationalism, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983.

For a start, let us assume that Ataka – a heterogeneous formation, including individuals from the former intelligence community, the security services, the former Communist Party as well as a host of others who passed through a number of political affiliations – articulates grievances, and among them issues or sources of discontent, which had never made it properly to the political scene before: the desire for a profound revamping of political practices; the angst amidst a political order that is perceived as unfair and immoral; the annoyance triggered by the frequent resorting to a "schoolboy" rhetoric (both on the part of local political elites and Western partners) and the brandishing of Euro-Atlantic integration as the only possible political project.

Indeed, by the start of the new millennium – after a decade dominated by the face-off between "the reds" (the former communists) and "the blues" (the anticommunists) – the Bulgarian political process was already coming across to the broader public as a string of governments, which actually offered no alternative: whatever their political affiliation, once in power, the political actors seemed to forget the change they had promised and only busied themselves multiplying the clientele-sustaining practices of their predecessors. The time of opaque privatization was followed by the time of murky procurement deals and fishy management of European funds. Condemning the corruption of the elites and the plea to restore a strong state capable of warranting the rule of law turned into powerful electoral arguments. Back from his exile, the former Bulgarian king Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha pledged his 2001 campaign on restoring

morality in politics. However, the fallout from his mandate strengthened even further the aspirations for a more transparent public life. Consternation towards the political class was further exacerbated as the rulers started to epitomise – next to the business community – the "nouveaux riches" who helped themselves to the national riches and lived high on the hog. During communism, social gaps were not obliterated but yet were softened, with wealth accumulation and ostentatious consumption forbidden (at least officially). Having transformed the capitals (in Bourdieu's meaning) bringing social success, post-communism yielded social discrepancies among the former "equals" from the communist era, and, to boot, gave them an unprecedented financial and material visibility. A subject of bitter confusion (how was it possible that a cash exchange point owner could make a fortune while a teacher or a midwife dropped near the poverty line?), this new social stratification was soon felt as unwarranted and/or illegal, with the two notions often mixing up. The perceived injustice of the social order was compounded by seeing the "transition to a market economy" as the "plunder of the state" – an interpretation shared by large sections of the upper middle classes as well. The daily experiences of post-communism seemed to radically clash with the messages the political class was trying to put across. The contrast was never as strong as during Ivan Kostov's government (1997-2001, right-wing), which actually played a decisive role in preparing the country for its Euro-Atlantic accession: while the ruling classes kept talking of reforms, achievements and progress, voters felt their world (and social safety net) were crumbling under their feet. Having expressed some degree of solidarity in denouncing the evils of post-communism,

Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha subsequently adopted the vocabulary of his predecessors – achievements, reforms, etc. – while at the same time government technocrats and experts dismissed public perceptions as "incorrect"… In this kind of milieu, voters' grievances went largely unheeded.

The sense of loss was further exacerbated by the over-the-top use of NATO and European Union integration as primary sources of legitimacy by the ruling classes. Rumen Vodenicharov, running for a seat in Parliament on the Ataka 2005 ticket trashed "the European fixation hypnotizing both the left and the right"[5]. The urge to meet the expectations and requirements of the western allies led to a number of profoundly unpopular government decisions (e.g. the support for the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo or the shutdown of the third and fourth reactor of the Kozloduy nuclear station). A growing number of constituents already regretted the forfeiture of sovereignty Bulgaria hoped to attain in the early 1990s. Having become somewhat more familiar with life in the West, quite a few Bulgarians felt that the overly stringent standards imposed by NATO or the EU on aspiring countries were not applied with the same zeal by the member states themselves. The slogan "Let's get Bulgaria back" raised by Siderov in 2005 keenly caught the popular sentiments and the drive to refocus on the national.

Yet restricting our interpretations to the above would be a mistake. First and foremost, ever since Ataka was created, the political and moral lambasting of post-Communism – on topics like reigning in corruption, establishing the rule of law, providing security to common

[5] Roumen Vodenicharov, "Towards a New Dawn for the Fatherland with Ataka, Nova Zora (New Dawn, a nationalist weekly), 24, 14 June 2005.

citizens, etc. – was tapped into by a broad range of political formations, among them GERB (the Bulgarian acronym for Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), the party of the former Sofia mayor and current prime minister Boyko Borisov. If Ataka had owed its success at the polls to a monopoly on this agenda alone, it would have lost its support as early as in 2009 (the year when the party got 9,36% of the vote and 21 seats in Parliament)[6]. Besides, it would be misleading – and dangerous – to assume that extremist political formations address good issues the bad way. It is not a matter of pushing neglected grievances onto the political agenda, but a matter of how they are articulated to become part of the public agenda: no public issue exists outside the way political actors name it – or construct it.

Let us take corruption as an example. Even though Volen Siderov has denounced corruption as a whole, the predominant target of his discourse has always been and still is the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (the political representation of Muslim minorities in Bulgaria). Yet is there an MRF-specific corruption issue in Bulgarian political life or does the conduct of some in its leadership merely reflect the culture – widespread in both the ethnic majority and the minorities – of collusion between politicians and businesspeople? Even if we allow – something that indeed needs to be proven – that corruption is more endemic amidst MRF than in other political parties, should we not seek the reason in the structure of political

[6] By the way, it has to be pointed out that between 2005 and 2009 several political players tried to fit into the populist niche in the fight against corruption, e.g. the Order, Law and Justice Party (currently having 10 seats in Parliament) or the Leader Party (which could not make it over the 4% barrier only just).

competition within the Turkish minority (the long absence of political alternative restricting the opportunities for a penalty vote and accountability pressures upon the elites) or should we accept – as Ataka claims – that the core of the problem is the very existence of a "Turkish party in power"? Defining what constitutes a problem is political business in itself rather than a given Actually, one of the most stunning phenomena in Bulgaria today is the way in which Ataka and MRF have become more and more often perceived as "twin parties" that feed off one another. The way that Ataka has articulated the "MRF issue" has, at final reckoning, influenced the whole public debate: the existence of a formation aimed at representing the interests of minority groups has increasingly been presented as an issue in itself.

Now let us go back to the second, much more insightful, hypothesis: the ethnicising of social divisions. Building up on Evgenia Ivanova's work, we shall pursue the idea of a partial shift and hardening of the symbolic boundaries correlated with social and territorial changes during post-Communism that affect majority and minorities alike.

ETHNIC CONVERSION OF SOCIAL DIVISIONS? THE TRANSFORMATION OF INTERNAL BORDERS WITHIN BULGARIAN SOCIETY

How could we clarify the dynamics that enabled the ethnicising of social contrasts? To start with, we can revisit the longer existence of negative images of the (minority) Other in Bulgaria. In an earlier article, I highlighted the fact that the nationalist and xenophobic arguments resorted to by Siderov have gathered their strength from three sources: the unitary conception of the nation-state dating back to the XIX century; tying up the idea of

national unity with the (forced) assimilation of minorities (having reached its climax during the 1980s); and xenophobic folklore notions borrowed from the international market of conspiracy theories (the example here is Siderov's anti-

The cover page to Volen Siderov's book "My Battle for Bulgaria" (images.ibox.bg)

Semitism).[7] This analysis however does not enable us to understand why this radical discourse crystallized in 2005 rather than in the early 1990s (when many commentators were apprehensive that ethnic tensions might be aroused) or, for that matter, in the late 1990s (when the effects of social marginalizing, triggered by the transition to a market economy, were already visible).

A focus on the anti-Roma stereotypes preyed on politically by Ataka – a phenomenon partially new in its nature – could help us shed light on the inner works of ethnicizing the social dynamics in today's Bulgaria. Prejudice towards the Roma population is not something new. In varying degrees, depending on the times and places, Romany people have been associated with poor hygiene, laziness and stealing. What Siderov's discourse does, though, is to push these widespread perceptions out into the political arena and

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[7] See Nadege Ragaru, «Un parti nationaliste radical en Bulgarie: Ataka ou le mal-être du postcommunisme», Critique interntionale, 30, janvier-mars, 2006, p. 41-55, http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/publica/critique/article/ci30p41_56.pdf.

use them as arguments in political debates. Why? This evolution can, on the one hand, be explained with the growing tensions in some bigger city suburbs where a large number of unemployed Roma, who had previously lived in rural areas, moved into after 1989 in search of a better life. In such places, where the majority feel exposed to social marginalization, heightened competition over scarce resources turns the Romany population into an issue that can be instrumentalized for political purposes (we might recollect the May 2005 incident in the Sugar Factory neighborhood in Sofia, when a local fight between some Roma and non-Roma residents have left a well-known Bulgarian historian and archeologist dead and several people hurt on both sides, causing much uproar in the Bulgarian media, and offering the newly created Ataka coalition a pretext to denounce the "tsiganization" of the country. Although traditionally good, interethnic relations in the neighbourhood had been deteriorating over the previous years in a context where economic opportunities were scare and social policies unable to accommodate existing needs). Another development however looks even more fundamental.

As did Ilia Iliev, a number of Bulgarian social scientists have emphasized that pauperization, or social marginalization, in Bulgaria is at times perceived amongst Bulgarian citizens as a form of creeping "tsiganization" and associated with the fear that Gypsies might some day prevail in the national population. In other words, the crossing of some social borders is on occasion symbolically linked with the trespassing of established ethnic borders. At the same time, while most of the Roma became even poorer after 1989, a minority of them struck it rich, mainly by filling a few entrepreneurial niches. As a consequence,

some of the Roma neighbourhoods (mahali) started featuring a handful of oversized houses with opulent aesthetics in a stark contrast with the makeshift shacks or crumbling tenement blocks from the Communist past inhabited by the ordinary Romanies. The social fabric in Bulgaria prior to 1989 was ethnically based on a pecking order putting the Gypsies firmly at the bottom rung. In other words, Romani "otherness" was negotiated and accepted so long as their integration with the rest of society did not question the social or ethno-cultural hierarchies.

Faced with the two-way rupture of a symbolic border previously deemed impermeable – on the one hand, the social marginalization of some ethnic Bulgarians and, on the other, the upward mobility, real or conceived, of the Roma – some Bulgarians became prone to strengthen, to essentialize and even to racialize the demarcation line between themselves and the former. The more fuelled by demographic anxieties, the more persistent the tsiganizatsiya bashing exercise grows: the Romany quite often come across as a young, fertile group whereas Bulgarians see themselves as an aging, declining nation.

In actual facts, only an in-depth research into the forms of spatial expression of social and ethnic hierarchies and their recent changes might explain the response to Siderov's anti-Roma discourse. The communist regime, a period of great territorial mobility, had already initiated the spacing out of ethnic and cultural divides, a process that expanded and partially intensified after 1989. The liquidation of the former collective farms and the socialist industrial conglomerates, the development of a private farmland market – excluding the Roma population in their vast part – as well as some urban renewal projects ill-adapted to the Roma way of life and livelihood or squeezing

the Roma out into the suburbia, have resulted in a dramatic increase in the share of Roma who live in a segregated universe: from 40% in 1989 to 78% in 2007. But the process did not only affect the Roma community: the migrations between villages and towns, or across the national border, have transformed the public mobility routes as well as the living spaces for Turks, Bulgarian Muslims and the majority of ethnic Bulgarians. These new mobilities – compounded by the monetarisation of social interactions accompanying the transition to capitalism – have called for a renegotiation – at times painful and incomplete - of the relations between newcomers and previous settlers in a number of neighbourhoods.

A second factor for the redefining of symbolic borders in post-communist Bulgaria should also be highlighted. It refers to the loosening of relations between citizenship and ethnicity in the context of global circulation and fluid identities. In the course of the development of the Bulgarian nation-state a distinction between the two had been established. Among the members of the majority, as true nationals are regarded those who speak Bulgarian language, confess the East Orthodox Christianity and are ethnically Bulgarian whereas all others are admitted into the realm of Bulgarian citizenship yet rather to its symbolic periphery than to its core. Since the late 1950s, the communist regime embarked on the uprooting – initially through enticements and subsequently through force – this discrepancy between the outlines of Bulgarian citizenship and Bulgarian ethnicity. This policy reached its climax between 1984 and 1989 bringing forward an unlikely ideological mix: on the one hand, the Turkish minority's "otherness" was wildly overblown (and presented as a radical threat), and on the other, it was denied with the same zeal

(epitomized by the campaign to forcibly change their Turkish names with Bulgarian ones, to ban their cultural or confessional practices as well as the use of Turkish in public places, etc.).

Ataka's discourse is reminiscent to a certain degree of the Communist regime rhetoric when the party reaffirms the legitimacy of the Bulgarian Turks' compulsory assimilation, when it denies their Turkish identity or when its leader rants, "if he's Bulgarian but has opted for a Muslim name, he has to be asked what he thinks he is. If he said "I am a Turk", my advice would be to go settle in Turkey. If he says he is Bulgarian, it means he is Bulgarian"[8]. Without claiming that every member of the Ataka constituency would support this argumentation to the same degree – or that they are the only ones likely to share attitudes of this kind – one may put forward two factors behind the public appeal of this exclusive notion of national citizenship. The first one is that after 1989, with the institution of a political party designed to champion the interests of Turkish and Muslim minorities in Bulgaria (MRF), with Bulgaria's adoption of international documents warranting minority rights (especially the 1995 Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities) and the emergence of a nongovernmental sector taking to heart the close follow-up on the enforcement of these rights, the fiction (long cherished in Bulgarian national ideology) of Bulgaria as a single-nation state becomes increasingly difficult to uphold. This transformation presents a challenge to a part of the Bulgarians that were largely socialized back in communist times in the spirit of a unitary state. It is perceived as even more threatening in a context where (…)

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[8] "If GERB are Reasonable, they Would Back me for President", 4 April 2011, www.ataka.bg.

people tend more and more often to work, live, belong and vote in different places at a given point in time. Coupled with the evolution of citizenship regulations (e.g. an increasing number of countries recognizing dual citizenship, joined by Bulgaria in 1998 as well as the implications of European integration for the definition of European citizenship) these multiple, at times disconnected, spaces of existence have yielded fluid and multifaceted ways of belonging. The popular appeal that the "patriotic" quest to protect "Bulgarianness" from "the Turks" has enjoyed is probably a symptom of a society struggling to adapt to the plurality of implications – both individually experienced and politically instituted – of being a Bulgarian nowadays. The anti-Turkish repertoire is today instrumentalized for the very role it had been historically granted throughout the XX century in the factory of Bulgarian identity – despite its inability to meet the challenges of modern identities.

Conclusion

With the forthcoming presidential and local elections in October 2011, the likelihood that Volen Siderov, running for head of state, revisits his 2006 performance (when he reached a runoff with 24,05% of the vote) looks insignificant. Since the autumn of 2009, his support for the Borisov government (GERB, right-wing) has been undermining his credibility as a force of protest; in-house wrangles have weakened his structures; and the May 2011 incident triggered by Ataka activists in front of the Sofia mosque (where believers were subjected to physical aggression) was denounced by the whole political class and led to the withdrawal of sympathizers unwilling to see the inter-faith and inter-community peaceful coexistence in the country threatened. Nevertheless, even if Ataka scored lower than in the previous vote, this electoral retreat would not imply an erosion of the attitudes that the party has tapped into. Six years to its creation, some of its ideas, which would have been regarded as populist and/or extremist not so long ago, have already become run-of-the-mill among the mainstream parties.

Translation from the Bulgarian by Georgi Pashov

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