



Why is it difficult to argue against Ataka today?

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Why is it difficult to argue against Ataka today?¹

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Ataka surprisingly appeared on the Bulgarian political scene in 2005. The electoral success of the then loose nationalist coalition was not expected by politicians and not predicted by polling agencies. The surprise was understandable since several other nationalist organizations have failed to attract electoral support after 1989. Having repeated its achievement in the general elections in July 2009 with 9.36% of the valid votes, *Ataka* and its leader Volen Siderov seemed to have stabilized their positions in the national party system. In domestic and international publications this development was often interpreted as a signal for serious concerns about the prospects of democracy in Bulgaria. Statements comparing Siderov with Hitler and *Ataka* with fascist political formations were typical reactions to the new political phenomenon. Given some extremes in the content and style of propaganda and the provocative behaviour of Siderov and other activists of *Ataka*, these judgments appeared to be correct. However, they have to be considered once more against the background of the experience after the parliamentary elections in 2009. At least on the surface of political events, the far reaching negative comparisons and concerns are no more so plausible today. Nobody would currently warn about massive threats to democracy coming from *Ataka* despite the continuing nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric of the party leader and his repeated scandalous behaviour. How could this change come about? Why is it now not trendy to argue against *Ataka* and its leader?

At the first glance, the answer might seem to be obvious. Without being part of a governmental coalition, *Ataka* firmly supports the current government of the *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria* party (GERB). It is an unusual case in Bulgarian political life that one year after the general elections this government still relies on a broad public support. In this specific political constellation *Ataka* is in a rather delicate position. The smashing criticisms against the government which would belong to the typical profile of an extremist party does not characterise the propaganda and politics of *Ataka* any more. The currently ruling elite is no more presented as an isolated group of corrupt power hungry

¹ The present text is the sequel of the publication Genov, Nikolai (2010) *radical Nationalism in Contemporary Bulgaria*. Sofia: Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

politicians who easily betray the national interests in order to get rich fast. Moreover, *Ataka* does not even try to develop any political project deviating from the governmental policies. Instead, it is striking to notice that the negative propaganda of *Ataka* is now focused on the politicians and parties having governed the country before GERB. *Ataka's* political project "Revenge" aims at making publicly known the persons, groups and organizations having illegally privatized the national wealth after 1989. The usual target of the criticisms is the right-wing government of the *Union of Democratic Forces* (1997-2001) headed by the then Prime Minister Ivan Kostov. The repeated appeals of Siderov to make public the conditions of corrupt privatization deals and the politicians who have enriched themselves usually refer to the period of this government which was particularly active in the privatization. There is some irony in Siderov's campaign against Kostov and his former government since the *Blue Coalition* also supports the GERB government despite some reservations and criticisms.

Thus, the backward oriented and practically irrelevant attacks of *Ataka* and Siderov against Kostov and the *Blue Coalition* could be interpreted in a rather simple way: *Ataka* might be already conceived as domesticated in the normality of the democratic Bulgarian political life. This normality should not be identified with any smooth and efficient functioning of democratic political institutions. Bulgarian democracy includes various deviations from this ideal. Therefore, the deviations from the democratic political ideal as represented by *Ataka* and its leader could be regarded as part of this rather specific political normality. If the current constellation of political formations in the country would be interpreted in this way, there is certainly no serious reason any more to attack *Ataka* as a threat to democracy in Bulgaria. In this constellation *Ataka* is part and parcel of the national version of basically democratic political arrangements. Moreover, by supporting the efforts of the current GERB government the present day politics of *Ataka* might turn to be supportive to the stabilization and more efficient functioning of the democratic political institutions in the country in the long run.

The problem situation is more complex, however. Now it might be openly taken for granted that *Ataka* has been successful in electoral terms because it has focused its propaganda campaigns on issues which could and should be recognized as very relevant for the future of democracy in Bulgaria, of the Bulgarian state and nation. No doubt, patterns of rather primitive political thinking and scandalous events used to accompany the rhetoric and behaviour of Siderov and other activists of *Ataka*. In order to be objective, the analyst has to

confess that the rude style of argumentation and behaviour is by far not uniquely related to *Ataka* in the Bulgarian political life. Trying to be consequent, the objective analyst should also notice that the attacks against corrupt politicians of various political formations immediately provoke understanding and support on the part of large segments of the public mind in Bulgaria. This type of electoral campaign secured the success of *Ataka* at the parliamentary elections in 2005 and 2009 but also the landslide of electoral preferences in favour of the GERB party at the elections in 2009. In addition, the propaganda of *Ataka* activists was consistently focusing the public attention on unresolved issues of interethnic integration and on the need to properly represent and defend the Bulgarian national interests on the international arena as well as in domestic political decisions. Exactly these are the key orientations of the declared political philosophy of the ruling GERB government and its day-by-day policies. This philosophy and the related policies still enjoy large public support. This is the crucial reason for the newly acquired legitimacy of the nationalist *Ataka* party, of its propaganda and politics. In order to strengthen this legitimacy, the vocabulary of self-description of the *Ataka* activists increasingly stresses the assumed identity between “nationalists” and “patriots”. The former designation has some negative flavour and raises controversies in Bulgaria, while the latter is fully legitimate and acceptable. This is the effect which *Ataka* currently aims at.

The opening of the Autumn Session of the Bulgarian Parliament (People’s Assembly) on 01. September 2010 offered a telling example of the current political positioning of the nationalists – or patriots - from the *Ataka* party. After having repeated his full support to the politics of the ruling GERB government, Volen Siderov vehemently attacked not the opposition (the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Movement for Rights and Liberties) but Ivan Kostov as representative of the conservative *Blue Coalition*. The formal reason was the *Ataka*’s insistence on carefully checking all privatization deals. The requirement concerns the economic policy of Kostov’s government first of all. It is regarded by Siderov as well as by large segments of Bulgarian society as the government which has robbed the country’s wealth in a particularly unscrupulous way. In his speech Siderov went quite far by threatening that if Kostov’s type of politicians and policies would return to government in Bulgaria he would organize partisan struggle for resistance.²

² Protocol of the 137 Session of the People’s Assembly, sofia, 01. September 2010, <http://parliament.bg/?page=plSt&SType=show&lng=bg&id=746> (22.09.2010)

The above story might be interpreted as one of the plenty anecdotal events in the Bulgarian Parliament. However, some elements of the story are quite indicative for the current overtones in the populist propaganda and politics of *Ataka*. These overtones convey messages which might be regarded as rather imbalanced and sometimes ludicrous but do not provoke indignation because they are understood as a threat to democracy. To the contrary, the simplistic messages of the leader of *Ataka* are usually perceived as a local cultural and political normality and even with sympathy. The latter emotional perception undoubtedly applies to Siderov's insistence to clearly identify politicians who have abused their positions of power for corruptive purposes in the privatization of public property. Numerous cases of this type belong to widely discussed public secrets. Among the most striking ones is the fate of the huge metallurgical plant "Kremikovtsi" near Sofia. Exactly in the time of the opening of the Autumn Session of the Parliament the case was high on the political agenda because of a series of scandals. The major one refers to the fact that this largest Bulgarian industrial enterprise was sold in 1999 to a Bulgarian businessman for 1 dollar despite the fact that the plant was profitable at that time. Nobody from Kostov's government controlled later why the businessman did not pay back the debts of the plant and did not invest in its renovation as this was clearly written down in the privatization contract. Later on the plant was sold to an Indian businessman and went bankrupt. In September 2010 the remaining miserable assets were offered for sale with the assumption that nobody could be really interested in buying them. Thus the plant which was once the symbol of the country's successful industrialization disappeared. One may argue that this has been the fate of many metallurgical plants all over the world. But the tragic fate of "Kremikovtsi" is unanimously interpreted in the country as the outcome of the merger of the grey economy with the grey (corrupt) politics which made the plant subject of protracted and well organized robbery during the last two decades. This is the reason why the accusations of Siderov against corrupt politicians and particularly against Kostov's government as corrupt one do not meet indignation but understanding and even sympathy.

Another personalized target of Siderov's smashing criticisms is the leader of the Turkish ethnic party *Movement for Rights and Liberties* (MRL) Ahmed Dogan. In most reactions to his attacks against Dogan Siderov is presented as a politician with a strong xenophobic and specifically anti-Turk bias. The careful reading of his speeches shows, however, that the real target of his attacks has only exceptionally been the Turkish ethnic minority in the country.

The target has been the leadership of the MRL party and first of all Ahmed Dogan as a rule. Siderov's accusations against Dogan are numerous. They include the supposed political manipulation of the Turkish ethnic group, the assumed manipulation of Bulgarian governments, the way in which Dogan leads the MRL party, the design and implementation of domestic and international policies in favor of Turkey, etc. However, the most intensive accusations concern the corrupt practices of Dogan aiming at his personal enrichment. Since the accusations concerning personal enrichment of politicians are common place in Bulgarian politics, nobody used to be particularly impressed by Siderov's anti-corruption rhetoric against Ahmed Dogan. However, the peculiarities of Bulgarian political life were recently enriched by legal investigations on the sources of income of Ahmed Dogan. It turned out, for instance, that he has received 1.5 ml. Bulgarian Levs (some 750 thousand euro) as consultant in the construction of water power plants. Dogan is Doctor in philosophical sciences. Currently a court has to decide if he really has the expertise in hydrology and hydro-engineering in order to be selected and paid as consultant in this type of construction activities. It would not be impossible that the court's decision could be unclear or even directly supporting the case that Dogan should be regarded as fully competent in matters of natural sciences and engineering. But the Bulgarian public has already clear opinion on the issue. This opinion sympathises with Siderov's claims about involvement of Ahmed Dogan and other leaders of the MRL party in grey politics in close relations with the grey economy. So, one might ask himself about the reasons for interpreting *Ataka's* accusations against corrupt practices of the MRL's leadership as xenophobic extremism if legal investigations confirm the existence of such practices.

In a sharp contrast to Siderov's distinction between the Turkish minority group in Bulgaria and the leadership of the Turkish ethnic party he is openly generalizing his negative attitude towards the Roma ethnic group. This approach is fully unacceptable in moral and political terms. One may even wonder how this type of negative approach is possible in a society in which each person should be regarded as a value and judged according to his or her ideas and behaviour in the context of the universal human rights. As seen from another point of view – and this point of view is widely shared in the country – the ethnic relations in Bulgaria should be perceived and dealt with not only in the context of the universal human rights, but also in the context of the citizens' obligations. In this latter context there are hardly any reservations concerning the representatives of the Turkish ethnic group. Whatever the historical resentments in the ethnic majority in the country due to the centuries of Ottoman rule on

Bulgarian lands, Bulgarian Turks are generally regarded as responsible citizens of the country in the sense of work performance, payments of taxation, behavior according to the legal rules, etc. To the contrary, in all these respects there are widespread opinions in the country that the representatives of the Roma ethnic group do not think and behave as responsible citizens of the Bulgarian state as a rule.

No doubt, in many particular cases this opinion is rooted in prejudices. The propaganda of the *Ataka* activists exploits and reinforces these prejudices thus undermining the very much needed interethnic integration of the Bulgarian society and nation. However, it is also a public secret that due to various historical, economic and cultural reasons the propaganda campaigns of the *Ataka* activists concerning Roma do rely not on prejudices alone but on facts as well. It is a statistically proven fact that the representatives of the Roma ethnic group contribute disproportionately less to the state budget and receive disproportionately more support from the state budget. It is a proven fact that there are only very rare cases of ethnic Bulgarian households which are connected to the electricity supply and do not pay for the consumed electricity while this is a widespread practice among ethnic Roma households. It is a proven fact that the payment of child benefits is related to the obligation of the parents to send their children to school and that many Roma families do not fulfil this legal obligation. Given these and many other facts, the public in the country is not inclined to be particularly critical against the biased approach of the *Ataka* activists to issues related to the education, employment and civic responsibilities of many representatives of the Roma ethnic minority. To the contrary, many people in the country are grateful to these activists since they point out at real and very serious issues which need very well designed, properly funded and tightly organized long-term measures in order to improve the situation. Otherwise it really threatens to get out of control due to the rapidly changing ethnic composition of Bulgarian society.

Moreover, the public is seriously concerned since the tasks of the needed purposeful economic, political and cultural integration of Roma in the Bulgarian nation have been neglected for too long after the political changes in 1989. The loudly propagated decade for social inclusion of Roma between 2006 and 2015 has already reached the half of the period without any visible accomplishments. The recent questionable treatment of Bulgarian and Romanian Roma by the French authorities seems to strengthen the argumentation of the *Ataka* activists since the majority of French society obviously could not accept the Roma life stile.

As a result the French authorities applied measures which are certainly not in full accord with universal human rights and with key legal regulations of the European Union.

However, this latter case does not strengthen the political position of *Ataka* by necessity. Firmly following the policies of the ruling party GERB, *Ataka* and its leadership decided to keep silent in an obvious case of humiliation of Bulgarian citizens. While the Romanian government and the European Commission openly argued against the deportation of Romanian and Bulgarian Roma from France, the official position of the Bulgarian government and respectively of *Ataka* was and remained that the French government did not act against legal or moral rules. The critical point raised by *Ataka* only concerned the double standards of French politicians requiring the integration of Roma during the debates in the European Parliament and deporting Roma from France.³ This is just one specific moment in the controversial ideas and policies of *Ataka* concerning the national interests and national dignity on the international scene. The party raises political claims which could be hardly implemented in policies or cannot be implemented indeed. This applies to the claim not to sell Bulgarian agricultural land to foreigners, for instance. The claim definitely contradicts the legal regulations of the European Union. The implementation of the claim would signal the readiness of the country to leave the Union. However, *Ataka* has never required that Bulgaria should leave it. The effect is that the public might enjoy the firm nationalist position of *Ataka* and the *Ataka* representatives in the European Parliament could enjoy their presence there. This discrepancy between propaganda and policies cannot remain without destructive consequences in the long run.

The controversies marking the propaganda and the political practices of the activists of the *Ataka* party do not concern issues of international politics alone. They are typical for the domestic situation and the political prospects of the party as well. It must keep to the radical rhetoric in order to continue attracting attention. In the same time, the radical rhetoric of *Ataka* is gradually losing its power of attraction since the party is obviously not able to develop any constructive political platform on its own. Instead, Siderov and his party uncritically and firmly support the policies of the GERB government which cannot be popular and widely supported for long. The reason is very simple. The expectations for fast and substantial improvement of the living standard of the population in the country have been

³ See newspaper *Ataka*, Vol. V, N 1419, 14 September 2010, p. 3.

disappointed by the results of the policies of all governments after 1989. It is not surprising, no one could be re-elected. The disappointments will certainly accompany and question the legitimacy of the GERB government as well. The electorate will not forget that the policies of the government have been fully and uncritically supported by the *Ataka* party. Most probably, this will have implications in undermining the electoral support to the party. Given the fact that it did not manage to develop any constructive political profile on its own, the results might be far reaching. It is not sure at all if *Ataka* will manage to get into the next parliament and thus to really establish itself in the party system. Given the outcomes of the policies of the party so far, this seems not to be too realistic as a political perspective.

In this broader context the threats to democracy in Bulgaria stemming directly from *Ataka* are probably negligible. But the rise and the temporary success of *Ataka* are very much indicative for very serious structural problems in Bulgarian society and for the problems in the functioning of democracy in the country. It is also indicative that learning from the rise of *Ataka* and under the pressure of these structural and functional problems all other political parties in Bulgaria strengthened the nationalist rhetoric in their political platforms. It would be rather desirable to see the serious and efficient handling of these problems as a result of this development as well – whatever the fate of *Ataka* might be further on.