

The Berlin International Center for the  
Study of Antisemitism (BICSA)

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*The Burgas Attack and  
Antisemitism in Bulgaria*

by Elena Zaharieva

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## About the Berlin International Center for the Study of Antisemitism (BICSA)

We have faced high waves of antisemitism in the last years, especially since the second Intifada in 2000, and the horror of 9/11. From the Gaza flotilla in May 2010 to the Iranian threat, from Nazi marches in Latvia or Hungary to the obfuscation of the Holocaust, from antisemitic and anti-Zionist rallies in Berlin, London, San Francisco to scholarly works on "Islamophobia," promoting, supporting or downplaying Islamism and Islamic Jihad: antisemitism is still an issue, 67 years after National Socialism and Auschwitz. *The Berlin International Center for the Study of Antisemitism* (BICSA) will provide scholarly research. The main focus of the institute is antisemitism in the 21st century, particularly hatred of Israel. The purpose of the Center is to conduct high-profile scholarly research without being stuck in the ivory towers of academia.

BICSA encourages scholars, students, authors, public intellectuals, and others to send us their ideas for possible future working papers; we are curious about your projects, please contact us via e-mail: [clemens.heni@gmail.com](mailto:clemens.heni@gmail.com)

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About the founder of BICSA:

Clemens Heni, born in 1970, holds a PhD in political science from the University of Innsbruck (Austria) in 2006. He worked on the New Right, political culture, antisemitism, national identity and anti-Americanism in Germany from 1970-2005. He was a Felix Posen Fellow of the Hebrew University in 2003 and 2004, 2008 and 2009 he was employed at Yale University as a Post-Doctoral Associate. He published three books in German so far, including his doctoral dissertation (2007, 509 pages), *Germany and Antisemitism. Preliminary Studies of a 'heartfelt' relationship* (2009, 330 pages), and his last book *Schadenfreude. Islamic Studies and Antisemitism in Germany after 9/11* (2011, 410 pages); his next book will be his first book in English, *Antisemitism: A Specific Phenomenon. Holocaust trivialization – Islamism – Post-colonial and Cosmo-*

*politan anti-Zionism* (ca. 630 pages), and will be published in January 2013. Heni was published by Jewish Political Studies Review, Journal for the Study of Antisemitism, Tribüne (German Quarterly), Jerusalem Post, allgemeiner.com, San Diego Jewish News, among others. In recent years he was invited to speak in Jerusalem (Global Forum for Combating Antisemitism), New Haven (Yale), Edison (New Jersey), Riga (Latvia), Kiev (Ukraine), Berlin, Stuttgart, Oberhausen, Nuremberg, Plzen (Czech Republic), Hartford (Connecticut), Southbury (Connecticut), New York City, and Miami.



## About the author:

Elena Zaharieva was born in Sofia in 1979. She studied at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” from where she obtained a BSc degree in Biotechnology and a MSc degree in Biophysics. In 2007 she successfully completed the European Master’s programme in Radiation Biology organized by University College London and in 2012 completed a PhD in Biomedical Sciences at Queen’s University Belfast, United Kingdom (awaiting graduation). Current events and history, especially Israel, have been among her major interests for years. Since 2006, spending time in both the UK and Bulgaria and following closely the Bulgarian media has given her the opportunity to observe the differences in attitudes of the British and Bulgarian societies towards Israel and the Jewish people, as well the changes in these attitudes.





# The Burgas Attack and Antisemitism in Bulgaria

## Introduction

**T**he recent terror attack against Israeli tourists in the city of Burgas on the coast of the Black Sea brought to Bulgaria the painful realization that Islamic terrorism is no longer something that “doesn’t happen here.” Bulgarian politicians and many ordinary people naively thought that “balanced” foreign policy would deter those who desire to shed innocent blood. Others also naively thought Bulgaria too insignificant to be of interest to terrorists.

Bulgaria has been for a long time a popular vacation destination for Israelis, 140,000 of whom visited the country in 2011. For most Bulgarians, the warm relations between our nations and the safety we could offer vacationing Israelis were things we prided ourselves on. Naturally, ever since July 18 2012, the horrible terror attack which claimed the lives of five Israelis and one Bulgarian citizen and left dozens injured has been the topic of many debates in political circles, in the media, and among intellectuals and ordinary people. Most of the debate has been concerned with national security and foreign policy. Many among the political elite are unwilling to admit the unpleasant truth: that Bulgaria has not done much to offer security to its own citizens or to foreigners, and it had just been lucky to remain until now unaffected by terrorism. But besides security and foreign policy, there is a problem which the de-

bates and conversations in recent weeks have highlighted and that needs deeper examination – Bulgarian antisemitism.

While the majority of Bulgarians were deeply upset by the tragic loss of life, and by Bulgaria's failure to prevent it, there were those who looked for explanations in conspiracy theories and those who more or less openly expressed their hatred for the Jewish people. These two groups are a minority that Bulgaria chooses to ignore. Antisemitism is practically absent from public discourse. Bulgarians view the rescue of almost 50,000 Bulgarian Jews in WWII as an immunization that will protect the country against the virus of antisemitism for centuries to come. While the low incidence of aggressive and organized manifestations of antisemitism makes reasonable to assume that antisemitism is not a serious problem in Bulgaria, a shallow non-aggressive form of dinner-table antisemitism is widespread and the absence of a reaction to the phenomenon is alarming. Bulgarians are very used to trivializing the ills of their society as an inevitable boring banality – a situation in which a rise in antisemitism could easily remain unnoticed.

### **Antisemitism in political circles and in the media**

In 2009 the nationalist party Ataka (Attack) won 9.4% of the popular vote, gaining 21 seats in Parliament (out of 240). Later some members left the party and remained in Parliament as independent MPs. Ataka also won 12% of the vote in the European Parliament elections, gaining two seats in the Europe-

an Parliament (out of 18).<sup>1</sup> Party leader Volen Siderov is known for his anti-Turkish attitudes (the Turkish minority is about 8% of the Bulgarian population) but less is known about his antisemitic beliefs. Siderov is the author of two antisemitic books – *The Power of Mammon* and *The Evil Boomerang* – which can be easily purchased at many places such as the largest open air book market in the centre of Sofia. The books offer the full gamut of conspiracy theories, classic antisemitic stereotypes and Holocaust denial.

The Bulgarian Helsinki committee, a non-government human rights organization, has written an open letter to the Bulgarian parliament concerning Siderov's antisemitism.<sup>2</sup> The letter calls for the adoption of a resolution condemning Siderov's books. In it, the committee points out that although in the second edition of these books the "lie of the Holocaust" from the first edition is replaced by "the plot of the Holocaust" and "the legend of the Holocaust" with "the history of the Holocaust," these cosmetic changes do not change the general message of the books – that Jews are the cause of all evil (capitalism, communism, revolutions, mass killings, etc.), that they are instructed by the Talmud to stir up conflicts in order to bring nations to financial collapse, and that the Holocaust is an American plot funded with Jewish money.<sup>3</sup> In the absence of any reaction whatsoever from the Bulgarian Parliament, a second letter with a similar content was sent by the Helsinki committee, also to no avail. There was no formal condemnation. A letter was received in reply, in which it was explained

on behalf of the Speaker, Tzetzka Tzacheva, that the Parliament does not have the power to “interpret or evaluate Siderov’s actions as a journalist,” and if they [the committee] believe he has broken the law, they should notify the Chief Prosecutor’s Office.<sup>4</sup> Such notification to the Prosecutor’s Office has been sent by the B’nai B’rith organization.<sup>5</sup>

Although none of the other political parties is in formal coalition with Ataka, Siderov’s anti-Turkish, anti-Israel and anti-American ranting from the tribune of the parliament is met with complete silence; most MPs use the occasions of his speeches to catch up with personal phone messages or newspapers. In May 2011, Ataka was allowed to protest the loudspeakers of the Mosque in Sofia. The protest took place on a Friday at 1 pm, the time for prayer for the Muslim community which is too big for the Mosque and uses the area around it. The rally turned out to be far from peaceful: supporters of Ataka are seen on video attacking Muslims while they pray, kicking the speakers off the roof, and burning prayer rugs.

Siderov is seen among his supporters, screaming at policemen: “Why are you arresting us and not the Muslims? Are you Bulgarian or Turkish?”<sup>6</sup> The imam could be heard urging Muslims not to respond to the provocation in any way and it appears that Muslims only engaged in self defence. Many media sources reported “clashes” between Muslims and nationalists. In spite of the fact that Parliament promptly passed a resolution condemning the actions of Ataka,<sup>7</sup> it remains unclear why

the party was allowed to organize the protest at this particular time and place.

Ataka has its own newspaper and its own TV channel – TV Alfa.<sup>8</sup> Until 2009 the private nationalist TV channel SKAT<sup>9</sup> supported Ataka but then withdrew its support for political reasons having nothing to do with Siderov's racism.<sup>10</sup> SKAT remains the biggest source of antisemitic ideas, and the one closest to the mainstream. The channel is offered by most cable providers in the country (as is TV Alfa) and can be viewed online for free. No levels of hatred are off limits for SKAT TV which is willing to host in its studio any racist including people like Dr. Emil Antonov, known as “the Bulgarian Hitler.” He ran for mayor of Sofia in 2009 winning slightly less than 500 votes, and is the author of 14 mostly antisemitic books, such as *The Diary of a Jew* (2000), *How Zionists Killed Stalin* (2001), *The End of the World and the New Global Order of the Third Israel* (1999), and *Their Struggle – how Jews Conquered the World* (2001).<sup>11</sup>

Emil Antonov has appeared on SKAT numerous times<sup>12</sup> and he has stood trial for inciting hatred and had to pay the petty fine of \$334.<sup>13</sup> His appearance on the air was too much even for some regular SKAT viewers. When a caller told him that he is as bad as Hitler, he took it as a compliment. This is just one example of the kind of people that can always rely on SKAT TV to give them an opportunity to speak.

In the aftermath of the Burgas attack, SKAT devoted many hours to the topic of terrorism and hosted a number of “political analysts” who educated the people about the evils of Zionism and blamed the attack on Israel. Literally every day another “expert” explains from the SKAT studio that Israel is the only side that benefits from the Burgas attack, because it can be used as a reason to attack Iran. One such “expert” was Anton Todorov who explained that the Bulgarian Foreign Minister Nikolai Mladenov is a MOSSAD agent who was educated in the IDF and his loyalties lie only with Israel.<sup>14</sup>

Apparently Todorov could not understand why the World is so upset about a few people being killed in Syria instead of being outraged at “the massacres in Gaza.” As his hatred was gaining momentum he continued to enlighten his listeners about the “alarming” levels of popularity of the Talmud in South Korea, which he called “a part of the expansionist Zionist plot,” and also how massive amounts of Middle East oil were in fact in Jewish hands. SKAT is not the only TV channel willing to host this individual. In a programme on Eurokom TV, Todorov decided to bring the story closer to home, and declared that Lukoil, which has more than 200 gas stations around the country, as well as several Bulgarian banks are owned by the Rothschild family.<sup>15</sup> TV channels other than SKAT sometimes host ultra-nationalists just for the spectacle, if they fear their programmes might be getting boring. The former leader of the nationalist organization Bulgarian National Union and current leader of a small party named Guar-

dia, Boyan Rassate, has been a guest on numerous TV programmes. In a programme on the most popular TV channel bTV he said that to think one can integrate “niggers” is to ignore the reality of “millions of years of evolution” (who knew that humanity existed for millions of years?).<sup>16</sup> While in rare cases TV hosts invite the scandalous Rassate in order to expose him for the mad racist that he is, others don’t care to oppose his views on air. In addition, certain TV personalities might themselves hold racist and antisemitic views.

A TV host from the past – Kevork Kevorkyan, who is now coming back on the air of the very popular Nova TV (New TV), is known to have said that he dislikes the Foreign Minister Nikolai Mladenov because the Minister “danced to Jewish music at his wedding.”<sup>17</sup> Regardless of whether Kevorkyan ever makes an antisemitic statement during his programme, antisemites feel their views endorsed by his mere presence on the air.

Unfortunately, conspiracy theories suggesting that the state of Israel is behind the Burgas attack and anti-Israel statements in general are not limited to SKAT TV or the far right in general. Politicians and experts from the political left are also willing to subscribe to such ideas. Krasimir Raidovski, former Head of the Press Office of the Socialist government of Jan Videnov, commented for the news agency Faktor that the political gain from the attack in Burgas goes to the state of Israel, which could have prevented the attack “if it had wanted to.”<sup>18</sup> Socialist MP Prof Andrei Pantev in an interview for the newspaper

“Trud” (Labour) refrained from saying clearly that Israel killed its own citizens in the Burgas terror attack, but hinted that “all terrorist acts are hidden in fog.” Apparently, Prof Pantev thinks that 50 years from now “we will see 9/11 in a different way” and that “the Americans needed the Pearl Harbour attack in order to attack Japan.”<sup>19</sup> The analogy was rather transparent.

There is no lack of conspiracy theories and anti-Zionism in the official newspaper of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). It should be noted that BSP is the second largest party in Parliament and has realistic chances of winning the next elections. Their newspaper *Duma* (Word) calls the accusations of Israel against Iran baseless, and suggests that the attack in Burgas may have been perpetrated by Al Qaeda or “is a personal revenge of a Palestinian, Arab or any Muslim.” The article goes on to suggest that if the Israelis knew the minute the blast went off who did it, maybe they knew before the blast that it would happen but closed their eyes so they could blame Iran.<sup>20</sup>

In 2010 *Duma* called the actions of the IDF in the Flotilla incident “...pirate action and an act of state terrorism as many in the West called it” and expressed satisfaction that the EU seemed to distance itself from “Israeli aggression.” In the same article Israel is sarcastically referred to as the “Promised Land.”<sup>21</sup> According to *Duma* the children of Gaza “are born among shootings, have lost parents and siblings, live in ruins

begging for a glass of water, but they all want to study, and trying to find their books under the rubble, pray to God that one day they will be useful to their fellow Palestinians.”<sup>22</sup> The newspaper dismissed Israel’s desires for peace, explaining that the peace offers of the Israelis are “humiliating” for the Palestinians who are left with the only option of riots and terrorist attacks. Bulgarian socialists are strongly influenced by Western and Russian left-wing anti-Zionism and conspiracy theories are gaining popularity among their younger supporters. Being especially close to the Russian left, Bulgarian socialists most probably have respect for and regularly read the Russian newspaper *Pravda*, which claimed that Israel benefits from the attack in Bulgaria and that “after Barack Obama said Israel should go back to the 1967 borders, Israel is like a cornered animal and when pressed in the corner animals can do crazy things.”<sup>23</sup>

The Internet is clearly the biggest source for dissemination of antisemitism and Holocaust denial. However, it is not only used by anonymous bloggers.

One example is journalist and former TV host Georgi Ifandiev, whose programme “Diagnosis” was taken off the air of the private TV channel “Eurokom” in February 2012. Since then Ifandiev is left with his personal blog as a venue to pour out his hatred and he does so every day.<sup>24</sup> Today he informs us that mental illness is six times higher among Jews compared to non-Jews, the cause of which is the Talmud, and also that

Jews “lack independent thought” and “they can’t even decide with which foot to make the first step in the morning because there are conflicting instructions in the Talmud about it.” The citations chosen here do not represent the height of his hatred; rather, much of the rest is too disgusting to be cited. Ifandiev is the author of *The Zion Shadow* – a series comprising of at least five books, as well as other antisemitic books. He also translates antisemitic books and books denying the Holocaust.<sup>25</sup>

Besides the abovementioned books, some other titles that can be easily purchased on the book market are *The World Conspiracy* (N. Nikolov), *The Bulgarian People and the Jews* (A.Radev), *Masons, Jews, Revolutions* (N. Ivanov) and others. Translations of *Mein Kampf*, Goebbels speeches, *The Protocols* and others can also be easily found.<sup>26</sup>

The general wisdom regarding the expression of antisemitism in Bulgarian media and political circles is that such expressions are marginal and Ataka and SKAT are rather the exception. This was also the conclusion from the analysis of 5000 mainstream media articles authored by the late Alfred Krispin in 2003 and most people believe it to be valid today.<sup>27</sup> But how can we say that everything is fine because we have only one TV channel with coverage all over the country that pours Jew hatred on daily basis, and only one Far Right party in Parliament whose leader is a Holocaust denier.

Although it is true that the vast majority of Bulgarians haven't even heard some of the names mentioned here, undoubtedly these pseudo-intellectuals have their circles of supporters, and it is alarming that they are tolerated and don't even have to disguise their antisemitism in any way.

There is only one well-known journalist who regularly talks about his concern with antisemitism in Bulgaria. Ivo Indjev is a former correspondent from Lebanon for Bulgarian National TV and former TV host whose programme was taken off air in 2006 when he asked then President Parvanov an inconvenient question. Currently Indjev only has a personal blog.<sup>28</sup> In articles on his blog he rightly asks why antisemitism is "his" topic, why he is the only one to talk about it. This is indeed a question that should worry us.

### **Antisemitism among ordinary Bulgarians**

Bulgaria has always been proud with her ethnic model of tolerance, the symbol of which is the coexistence, in very close proximity, of church, mosque and synagogue in the centre of the capital Sofia. However, in recent years, incidents of people being attacked because of their race, sexual or political orientation are on the rise. On June 6, 2010, a group of young people were savagely attacked by neo-Nazis with metal rods and knives, as they were going to a protest against the detention of illegal immigrants. A medical student was killed in a park in Sofia because "he looked like he was gay." Another student

was severely beaten by neo-Nazis for having radically leftist views<sup>29</sup> and in November 2011 a Roma student from the Christian Seminary was beaten on a bus in Sofia. The bus driver was too scared to do anything and even opened the doors for the neo-Nazis who got off undisturbed.<sup>30</sup> In a short footage from a small anti-fascist rally, a young Afghan man says he has been attacked several times.<sup>31</sup> Plamen Dimitrov, leader of the ultra-nationalist organization Bulgarian National Union (BNU), has expressed his satisfaction with the low attendance at the anti-fascist rally, which indeed appeared to be no more than 30 people strong. In a post on their website, the anti-racist NGO HoRa rebuts his statement with the argument that there were many condemnations and letters of protest against fascist marches.<sup>32</sup> The truth is that “many letters” are not very impressive when you can only turn out 30 people while ultra-nationalist groups manage to gather 500. A video of an ultra-nationalist rally, organized by “Blood and Honour” shows what looks like several hundred people with black flags in front of the Turkish Embassy screaming “Turkey out!”<sup>33</sup>

For nine years now the Bulgarian National Union (BNU), “Blood and Honour” and other far right fractions hold their annual “Lukov march” in honour of General Hristo Lukov, minister of war between 1935 and 1938, known for his close connections with National Socialism/Nazi Germany. The European Network Against Racism (ENAR) has sent a letter to the mayor of Sofia asking her to ban the march on the basis that it incites racial, religious and ethnic hostilities.<sup>34</sup> Against all evi-

dence the BNU denies any dissemination of fascist ideas during the gatherings, and the rally has not been banned. In 2012 the BNU announced their march as an event in commemoration of Gen. Lukov and Vasil Levski. Levski is a Bulgarian national hero who all Bulgarians revere, and by including him in their annual rally, ultra-nationalist organizations tried to deter people from protesting against them. The 2012 Lukov march was attended by more than 1000 people.<sup>35</sup> It was covered by print newspapers, not so much by television channels, and nobody seemed to be bothered by it. The only ones who asked “Who will stop the Lukovs?” were the NGO HoRa and a group of anti-American anti-Israeli communist youth. In other words besides one small NGO, the only ones to oppose the radicals from the Right were the radicals from the Left, who organized a rally in support of Palestinian prisoners on May 10, 2012.<sup>36</sup> Although it looked encouraging that no more than 30 people attended the rally, it should be noted that an event in support of the people of Israel during Operation Cast Lead in 2009 had gathered only about 20 people.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, a weak attendance at an anti-Israel event organized by socialists does not necessarily mean lack of anti-Israel attitudes in the general population, but rather reluctance by most people in a former communist state to be associated with the far Left.

Indisputably, the bigotry that is to a highest degree part of the mainstream is the prejudice against the Roma people. The

challenges Bulgaria meets in the process of integration of the Roma minority, a big part of which lives below the poverty line, should not be used as an excuse for anti-Roma racism but they often are. The prejudice against the Roma is so widely spread that it doesn't impress anybody anymore. When an elderly lady whose necklace had been stolen in broad daylight said on the national Channel 1: "I knew I had to watch out for gypsies but I didn't expect a white person to do it," the TV host didn't even find the need to comment on the remark.

A document concerning the national plan for integration of the Roma was uploaded on the website of the President with a file name: "13.NationalStrategyIntegrateMangali.pdf."<sup>38</sup> The word "mangali" is a derogatory word used to describe the Roma people, which they find offensive. The file was soon removed and uploaded with a different name, "IntegrateRoms" which is grammatically incorrect since the plural form is Roma. Such manifestations of indifference, irresponsibility and ignorance at the highest levels of the government discourage ordinary people from taking an active stand against racism.

The first newsletter on antisemitism in Bulgaria issued by the organization of Jews in Bulgaria "Shalom" covers the period 2009-2010 and represents an objective collection of antisemitic manifestations in the country, without offering evaluation or analysis. The document also includes reactions of the media and political forces to the incidents listed in it. It shows no incidents of violence against Jewish individuals in the time

interval covered by the report, although there have been threats of violence, and the cases of antisemitic vandalism have become more frequent.<sup>39</sup> Here are some selected examples from the newsletter. In the morning on Yom HaShoah in 2009 the city of Pazardzhik woke up with a 10 m long fascist flag flying from the chimney of a former factory; several months later a Holocaust memorial was smashed at the place where Jews from Aegean Trace spent the night in the city of Blagoevgrad before being deported to Auschwitz; another Holocaust Memorial in Pleven has been profaned; Molotov cocktails were hurled at the Jewish centre and synagogue in Burgas, setting on fire the doors of the art gallery situated in the building. In September police in Assenovgrad discovered that a rock concert in the town library was a disguise for an international neo-Nazi party, attended by Bulgarians, Canadians and Swiss nationals aged 18–30.

According to the website of the organizers, a Canadian singer gave a speech about “our struggle” and those present were summoned to collect money. In April 2010 a celebration of Hitler’s birthday in the city of Stara Zagora was attended by a former deputy mayor and present leader of a small nationalist party Nova Sila (New Power) and another politician from the same party. In June 2010 in the largest park in the centre of the capital Sofia an exhibition of pictures from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict carried strong anti-Zionist and antisemitic messages. The exhibition was displayed for a second year.

More than 30 gravestones in the Jewish cemetery in Shoumen were smashed, Swastikas scribbled on others and the entire inside of the fence wall filled with antisemitic slogans. The culprits have not been found. Jewish cemeteries in other cities have also been vandalized. New images of profaned memorials and fascist messages on buildings are posted regularly by a small, 150-strong Facebook group “Friends of Israel in Bulgaria.”

The reactions from officials and the public to these manifestations of hatred have been in most cases weak, sometimes limited to protest letters from the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria “Shalom” to authorities. The incidents have received insignificant media coverage. While fascist symbols and scribbles have been promptly removed from places such as the Jewish school (by the students themselves) and synagogues, most “decorated” buildings are never cleaned. Following the publication of the abovementioned newsletter the news agency news.bg cited the President of “Shalom” Maxim Benvenisti who declared at a press conference that Bulgaria has the lowest level of antisemitism in the EU.<sup>40</sup> However, it is impossible that he actually knows this since surveys of the public opinion have not been carried out. Even if other countries experience more frequent cases of vandalism, having in mind the open expression of antisemitism on certain Bulgarian media sources and antisemitic statements one hears on a daily basis, it would be more correct to say that antisemites in Bulgaria

may be less active and aggressive, but not necessarily fewer in number, in comparison to other European countries.

Nevertheless, Maxim Benvenisti commented that websites from North-East Bulgaria are full of hateful comments, although in this region of the country there are no Jewish communities, and a lot of people living there probably have never met a Jewish person.<sup>41</sup> The increase of antisemitism Benvenisti attributes to the growing contempt for the mythical foreign influence. Of course it is well known that when people talk about foreign influence they mean the United States, and from anti-Americanism to antisemitism is only a small step.

Interest in conspiracy theories, anti-Americanism and anti-Israelism are more pronounced among the younger generation. Among older generations, who have firsthand experience with communism, one often finds feelings of admiration for the history of the Jewish people and for the accomplishments of Israel. These feelings can be tainted with a touch of Christian antisemitism among the religious ones, or with the “there were so many Jews among the communists” stereotype among those with strong anti-communist views, leading to a peculiar mix of antisemitism and admiration.

In a recent conversation I had with an elderly person, I asked him why he uses the derogatory word “chifut” for a Jew, and he first explained to me that the word just means “Jew” in Albanian, then admitted that it is most often used to express a

negative attitude towards Jewish people, then said he only used it for “bad” Jews (in this case about a Bulgarian politician of Jewish descent) and finally concluded that he had always had a very positive attitude toward Jews and greatly admires them. Indeed, the same person has numerous times defended Israel in conversations. But if you are not prejudiced why do you need to have a separate word for “a Jew you don’t like?”

Among the younger generations, the admiration for Israel certainly has decreased due to anti-Israel propaganda in the media. Coverage of the Middle East in Bulgarian media mostly comprises translations of Western sources, often those leaning to the left. One recent piece translated from Deutsche Welle (DW) on “Actualno” describes the treatment of children by Israeli soldiers as constant humiliation, torture and killings “in retaliation for each stone thrown at them.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the title of the article is: “Israel: Kill a child to stay out of trouble.” In addition to the translated sources, younger Bulgarians, who are more proficient in English in comparison to their parents, are directly exposed to liberal Western media. A typical cable TV package contains CNN, BBC and Aljazeera, all leaning strongly to the Palestinian side, and the only pro-Israel channel is the Russian language RTVi which is broadcast from New York. However, younger people are much less likely than their parents to understand Russian well.

The fact that the large majority of people are too rational to believe *The Protocols* does not make them immune to antisem-

itism. “Dinner-table” antisemitism is common – references to Jewish clannishness, Jewish obsession with money, etc. Such references are not even seen as antisemitism. The very popular Bulgarian Internet portal gbg.bg has a separate section of Jewish jokes, most of which are blatantly antisemitic. And usually one is seen as weird and pretentious if one is outraged by antisemitic jokes. The general public dismisses not only antisemitic jokes and references to antisemitic stereotypes, but also acts of antisemitic hooliganism as unworthy of attention.

Arguments such as the one that the people who scribble swastikas on buildings, or express their hatred on the web or on SKAT TV are just the same few people, may not be good for explaining why there is barely a building in Sofia without Nazi symbols drawn on it, but are nevertheless convenient and comforting. Most people completely dismiss hateful comments on Internet forums and antisemitic websites as if they were not posted by real individuals. It is indeed impossible to judge the level of antisemitism from the Internet, but it should be noted that antisemitism and anti-Zionism on Bulgarian language websites has increased in recent years.

Discussions on antisemitism in Bulgaria are almost limited to the anonymous blogosphere, and are often simple and naive. Just one typical example is an otherwise well-written article in a personal blog by a Lyuboslava Ruseva. She tells the story of the drunken social outcast N. who reads conspiracy theories

and hates the Jews.<sup>43</sup> While I agree with the author's conclusion that personal failure and low self-esteem can lead to hatred of others, I strongly disagree that lack of opportunities and social status is the reason for antisemitism at large. It is hard to believe that the author has never met a highly educated and sober person who has read *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and believes this atrocious forgery. It is hard to believe because they are everywhere. This article, however, illustrates the generally accepted wisdom on the matter which threatens what debate does exist by portraying people who bring up the topic of antisemitism as paranoids who give too much attention to drunken social outcasts.

Maxim Benvenisti rightly points out that in Bulgaria it is not appropriate to talk openly about antisemitism and that this has to change. The rescue of almost 50,000 Bulgarian Jews during the Holocaust did not make us immune to antisemitism. We should not forget that 50 years of communism followed WWII, years during which Bulgaria was a satellite of the Soviet Union, years during which people no longer knew the power of individual voices or the burden of personal responsibility, when one's life was decided for him by the communist party. This period destroyed the values of the nation and left a vacuum that we are still trying to fill. A rather troubled transfer to democracy followed, where barely working institutions and rampant corruption have left in many people the feeling of powerlessness, resulting in indifference to many social problems. In addition, the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews is a

part of history that most Bulgarians don't know too well. As former president Petar Stoyanov puts it: The communist regime didn't like to talk about saving the Bulgarian Jews, because it didn't want this most noble page of Bulgarian history to be attributed to its class enemies, to those who the regime used to call "Bulgarian fascists."<sup>44</sup>

As a result of this 50-year gap in history a sanitized version of this rescue story has emerged in which the deportation of 11,363 Macedonian Jews from territories under Bulgarian control is not even mentioned in history textbooks. The omission of parts of history is harmful because it makes people defensive when they finally learn about these events, as they feel that one of the biggest reasons for national pride they have is flawed. Bulgaria needs to have an open debate about this matter instead of ignoring it or giving way to Macedonian versions which are often not objective either. It is true that Bulgarian authorities are responsible for the deportation of the Macedonian Jews, but it is also true that the local Macedonian population was passive and did not attempt to intervene.

As President Petar Stoyanov says: "We cannot hide, deny or interpret wrongly the deportations to the death camps of these 11,000 Jews from the occupied countries, but at the same time it is not fair to have another interpretation imposed on us, when it differs from the objective truth." In his book *Beyond Hitler's grasp* Michael Ben-Zohar writes: "The Bulgarians differed from them [the French]. They cared about their

country's honour and its image throughout the World. They took their Constitution seriously [which guaranteed absolute equality of minorities]." And Bulgarians still care about their country's image throughout the World. It's only that back then they worked for it, now they complain about it. Or simply choose not to see the flaws of their society, such as antisemitism.

### **The Bulgarian reaction to the anti-Israeli terrorist attack in Burgas**

The terror attack in Burgas occurred on the 18th anniversary of another attack on the Jewish people – the bombing of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association in Buenos Aires on July 18, 1994, by an Iranian-backed Hizballah suicide bomber, which killed 85 people. On the same date in 2012 Israeli tourists who arrived in Burgas on an Air Burgas charter flight (carrying 151 Israelis and three foreign nationals) were boarding three buses that were supposed to transport them to a local hotel. About 40 people were on one of the buses when an explosion ripped through it at 17:25 while the bus was still standing in the terminal of Sarafovo Airport. The blast claimed the lives of 6 plus the terrorist. An additional 34 Israelis were injured, the majority of whom were hospitalized in Burgas and three patients in critical condition were transported to the capital Sofia. The Prime Minister Boiko Borisov, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior Tzvetan Tzvetanov, Foreign Minister Nikolai Mladenov and the President Rosen Plevneliev arrived shortly at the scene. The country watched in

shock the images of thick black smoke that had engulfed the burned-out bus, several horrific graphic videos appeared on the Internet for few hours before being taken off YouTube. Witnesses still shaken up revealed bloody details on different programmes and TV channels.

Around 9 pm two Israeli relief planes landed in Bulgaria carrying Israeli doctors and paramedics. Later on, around 10:30 pm, media reported that IDF Chief Benny Gantz instructed the home front command, air force and medical corps to prepare a plane with a second medical team, which was set to depart later the same night. A disaster victim identification unit was also dispatched from Israel, as well as a police forensic team and Israeli diplomats to help Israeli citizens who lost their identification documents in the attack. The Israeli foreign ministry had immediately formed a team of experts to fly to Burgas and assist local authorities in the investigation. The Israeli Embassy in Sofia was mobilized and ready to assist the Israeli teams in identifying the victims and ensuring that the injured and other, unharmed Israelis return to Israel as soon as possible. Bulgaria agreed to send planes carrying uninjured Israeli citizens back to Israel.

The names of those killed were announced on the 19th – Maor Harush, 24, and Elior Price, 25, from Acre; Itzik Kolangi, 28, and Amir Menashe, 28, from Petah Tikva; and Kochava Shriki, 42, from Rishon Letzion. Kochava Shriki had been pregnant following long years of infertility treatment. The sixth victim

was the Bulgarian bus driver, Mustafa Kyosov, 36. The bodies of the five Israelis were returned to Israel early on Friday and laid to rest, escorted by hundreds of mourners. Mustafa Kyosev, a Muslim Bulgarian from Yurukovo, was laid to rest on Friday in his hometown. Unlike the Israeli victims whose remains were deplaned from an Air Force airplane at a ceremony attended by Israeli government officials, Kyosev's funeral was not attended by any representatives from the Bulgarian government – an irresponsible and insensitive act that was noted not only in Bulgarian<sup>45</sup> but also in foreign<sup>46</sup> media.

Immediately following the attack, an event was created on Facebook and people were invited to take a stand against terrorism in front of the Israeli Embassy on the next day. About 300 people confirmed their attendance online. However, less than a dozen actually turned out on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July. Even among those who attended the event, some insisted on asserting their political neutrality and repeated numerous times that they are against “all kinds of terrorism.” One cannot refrain from thinking why after Israelis had been killed on our territory, some people had such difficulty to say “I stand with Israel,” and why a young man in front of the Embassy refused to hold an Israeli flag with me and my friend. Because of the interest expressed by people on Facebook, numerous TV channels arrived at the site and documented the total failure of the event.<sup>47</sup>

The participation of Israel in the relief and rescue operations in the aftermath of the attack triggered some reactions which revealed the insecurity Bulgarians feel about the reputation of their country abroad. The almost immediate airlifting of the wounded, including those in critical condition who have been hospitalized in Sofia, was shown on every TV channel. The images of injured people hooked to machines being rolled toward the Israeli airplanes while the newsreaders cited praises by Israeli officials for the Bulgarian authorities and medics, made many people see the airlifting as a sign of a low evaluation of the Bulgarian rescue efforts. No matter what the real quality of the Bulgarian services was, it was only natural for Israel to assist its injured or even its scared citizens to return home as soon as possible. Online media occasionally translated Israeli sources citing eyewitnesses who expressed criticism of the Bulgarian services. The twist the media gave to such reports helped to channel the insecurity of some Bulgarians into contempt for the victims and their country. The title of one such article reads: "Ingratitude! Survivor in the Burgas attack calls her treatment in Bulgaria disrespectful."<sup>48</sup> From the roughly 50 comments posted by unique users under the piece, about five were not hateful, and almost all of the hateful comments pointed at the Jewishness of the patient as a reason for her "ingratitude." Apparently, according to some readers, not her shock from having lost her husband in the blast and being stranded in a hospital in a foreign country (assuming that she was correctly quoted), but her hatred for non-Jews was her strongest emotion at the time.

Yet another group of people reacted with strong frustration to reports such the one, according to which some of the survivors will be questioned again because the officers who questioned them in the night of the blast could not read their handwriting.<sup>49</sup> Such reports are highly embarrassing for Bulgarians and sometimes lead to contempt for one's own country and kill one's desire to better his society. Frustration with the inefficiency of institutions in Bulgaria is a significant cause for the apathy of the general population.

A number of factors contribute to the insecurity of many people not only about the image of Bulgaria abroad but also about the functioning of the country itself. Why did the terrorists succeed here after they failed in so many other places? In February a number of attempted attacks on Israeli targets in India, Georgia, and Thailand were linked to Iran. Other plots against Israeli targets have been thwarted since then in Cyprus and Kenya. These cases should have served as a warning. But even without them one should know that Israeli citizens can be a target anywhere and should take every precaution for their safety.

According to the site for investigative journalism Bivol, the airport authorities in Burgas were sharply criticized by an Israeli security expert according to whom the success of the assault was not inevitable: "It's a matter of fact that thousands of people from Israel visit Bulgaria and the whole world knows that these people are a target and a purpose for terror-

ists. We all know how many times the Israeli authorities had received information about prepared assaults which they have prevented. We also know very well that even the best intelligence could not detect each prepared assault. And because of this the most simple thing the security services could do at the airport was to have well-trained agents who could do one and only thing – to walk around the terminal and to look for suspicious persons, who also stroll indolently and have the most different behaviour amongst all the other passengers. But the services didn't do it.”<sup>50</sup>

Maybe it is understandable that a country with zero experience with terrorism will fall into confusion after an attack. But there were some truly illogical actions in the first few hours. Why were the Health Minister and even Finance Minister at the site of the attack? Why was the Health Minister instead of doctors from the Burgas hospital talking to the press? Are we being kept in an informational blackout?

The conflicting and unclear media reports made many of us follow the Israeli rather than the Bulgarian press. The spreading of unconfirmed pieces of information such as one according to which a call to the office of the bus company warned that the Israelis will be met by two bombs, also contributed to the panic. There was a feeling that the government is concerned more with its approval rating than with anything else. Prime Minister Boiko Borisov stated that the attack was impossible to prevent and there was no breach in national secu-

rity.<sup>51</sup> How is it possible for terrorists to succeed if there is no breach in national security?

The discussions about Bulgarian foreign policy seem to be for the most part an attempt to deflect attention away from the inefficiency of Bulgarian national security authorities. Not only is “balanced” foreign policy not enough to protect a country against terrorism, but this government’s understanding of “balanced foreign policy” is at best unserious. A year ago Borisov was cited saying that Bulgaria does not have enemies, because we are everybody’s friend and we don’t have problems with “the Arabs” because there are doner-kebabs on every corner.<sup>52</sup> He said: “I hope the people who make decisions where to carry out a terror attack will consider that.” Now when the balanced, doner-kebab based foreign policy has been proven a failure, the Prime Minister is surprised.

Israeli spokesmen including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that Israel has rock-solid intelligence proving that Hizballah was behind the Burgas terrorist attack, and that the attack is part of the Iranian terrorist campaign against Israel. Hizballah denied responsibility, which is to be expected since it is not in the EU list of terrorist organizations and is trying to preserve its status as a political organization. Therefore, there is no reason why Hasan Nasrallah’s denial of any connection to the attack should be taken seriously. American officials also confirmed that the terrorist was sent by Hizballah.

Bulgarian authorities seem to disagree with the Israelis on the Hizballah version. And among journalists and analysts there is a strange consistency in the opinion that not Hizballah but Al Qaeda is responsible for the attack. None of the experts gave any reasoned arguments to support his position. Arguments have been as phantasmagorical as the one that Hizballah doesn't use suicide bombers and has not been involved in attacks against civilians in the last 20 years.<sup>53</sup> Many demonstrated complete misunderstanding of the Middle East situation with comments that Hizballah and Iran do not benefit from being involved in terrorism. For example, Rumen Kanchev was one of the experts who said that "in the inflamed situation in the Middle East it would be madness on the part of Iran to attack Israelis anywhere in the World."<sup>54</sup> No matter what the real reason for the stubbornness with which the Hizballah version and Iranian link have been rejected, it gives the impression of an attempt to demonstrate independence from Israeli and US sources. According to the newspaper 24h the Israelis have usurped the investigation and are not allowing the Bulgarian experts to do their job.<sup>55</sup>

Nationalist Siderov further aggravates the phobia about external meddling in those Bulgarians inclined towards anti-American and anti-Israel views by screaming from the Parliament podium that the Bulgarian government does not have its own vision on the matter, that the US are trying to manipulate Bulgaria in their political games, that we cannot wait for the CIA and the MOSSAD to keep us safe, and that the Israeli au-

thorities in Bulgaria after the attack had acted “like they’re at home.”<sup>56</sup> Voices from the left have also pointed out to the closeness of Bulgaria with the West and particularly the United States as a factor making the country more vulnerable.<sup>57</sup> Reactions like these, in addition to the lack of significant progress in the investigation and identification of the perpetrators of the attack, make easier the spreading of all possible unconfirmed pieces of information or explanations that people find for themselves.

### Conclusion

Antisemitism in Bulgaria is a largely unexamined phenomenon. A shallow non-violent form of prejudice against some mythical Jews, which is not usually transferred to real life Jewish people, is common. Such feelings could be easily detected by a public opinion survey, since political correctness, so deeply rooted in Western societies, is only beginning to be a common practice and Bulgarians are more open about their views. On the other hand, antisemitism is a sensitive topic, and there is significant resistance against discussing it, as Bulgarians pride themselves on the history of the country and feel that talking about antisemitism taints this history or might harm the officially warm relations with the State of Israel.

Antisemitic vandalism is limited to the Far Right, but it is worrying that the phenomenon is growing and that the first reports of radicalization of Bulgarian Muslims have already emerged.<sup>58</sup> Influenced by the Western and Russian Left, the

Bulgarian Left is bringing anti-Zionism closer to the mainstream.

Weak institutions, corruption and difficult economic conditions create insecurity about the functioning of the country and its image abroad, and might lead to primitive patriotism and/or searching for explanations in conspiracy theories – factors that facilitate the growth of antisemitism. Widespread social apathy in the general population can allow this growth to pass unnoticed. Bulgaria needs a more open debate both on its history and current situation and more objective information about the Middle East and Israel written in Bulgarian. But most of all it needs to encourage its majority, which is traditionally very ethnically tolerant, to take a stronger stand against antisemitism.

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