

How successive governments and the media in Bulgaria are feeding conspiracy theories and anti-Semitism

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On the 5th of February 2013, after six months of conflicting reports in the media and hesitant statements by authorities, the government of PM Boiko Borisov officially attributed to Hezbollah the attack against Israeli tourists in Burgas, which claimed the lives of five Israelis and one Bulgarian citizen. It was the beginning of a turbulent month which ended with the collapse of the GERB government under the pressure of public protests against high electricity bills. Preliminary elections were held in May and a coalition government was formed by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the ethnic Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). Holding exactly 50% of the seats in the Parliament, the coalition fell hostage to the ultra-nationalist Ataka, on which it relies for Parliamentary majority. This is how the outspoken antisemite and infamous vandal Volen Siderov and the 22 far right extremists who constitute his parliamentary group became the key ally of the fragile socialist-led coalition government.

In total Ataka and other far right formations received 12.9% of the votes (equal to 456 453 votes) in the May 2013 elections. Ataka itself got 7.3%, i.e. 258 581 votes.[i] Ataka is a fiercely anti-Western party, whose name was taken from Goebbels' Nazi newspaper "Der Angriff" (the Attack).[ii] Ataka, which appeared to be well funded ever since its creation in 2005, started in the Fall of 2013 a massive

campaign. Hundreds of billboards in the capital and elsewhere around the country advertise Ataka's TV channel Alfa as "the channel of truth", Ataka's newspaper is being distributed free of charge in metro stations.[iii] Even though every Bulgarian sees Siderov's huge face on billboards a dozen times every day, not many have seen his photo in the company of Holocaust denier and Ben Laden admirer Ahmed Rami and David Duke from the Ku Klux Klan, taken at the "revisionist" conference in Russia in 2002, where Siderov gave a lecture entitled: "Globalization as the last stage of colonization of the Christian Orthodox East"[iv]. Being circulated in social media, the picture never appeared in mainstream outlets[v]. Not that Siderov's antisemitism is a secret, or that the mainstream media does not pay attention to him – the opposite is true. A day doesn't go without Ataka members being invited in the studio of some mainstream TV channel, where they invariably insist on parading their anti-Americanism and antisemitism. Recently, in response to a comment by a TV host on poverty in Cuba, an Ataka MP and admirer of the Castro regime, erupted on the air of the popular bTV, repeating several times that bTV is a "Jewish television". Intending to offend the TV host he suggested that she changes her name to Zuckerberg (since her name is rooted in the Turkish word for "sugar"), then kept calling her Mrs Zuckerberg until the end of the interview.[vi]

It's alarming that the reactions by authorities and the media to xenophobic outbursts on TV and radio stations are spineless at best, and that this kind of behaviour is not limited to Ataka and its supporters[vii]. When Misho Shamara (Misho-the-Smack), a rap singer who became the face of pro-government demonstrations, made a blatantly anti-Semitic comment on the nationwide TV7 calling former finance minister Simeon Dyankov "a worthless Jewish vermin", the ruling Socialists not only did not react, but few days later they readily accepted a petition in support of their government brought to them by the same person.[viii]

The leader of the BSP Sergei Stanishev is also the leader of the Party of European Socialists (PES), and not surprisingly the absurd coalition of a socialist, an ethnic Turkish and a neo-Nazi party has brought the BSP under fire from Europe. Surely the BSP are keen on replacing Ataka with another stabilizing factor for their government, but a serious harm has already been inflicted. After the Borisov government had been tolerant to Siderov, the current government gave him a leading role, and the mainstream media gave him a tribune, public conscious has been anaesthetized, xenophobia has been legitimized and even for the conscientious ones anti-Semitism and conspiracy theories have become an unimportant side effect of the political manipulations in our troubled country. Journalist Ivan Bedrov commented that “the refusal of the other political parties to isolate Ataka, and the refusal of the institutions to apply the law against Siderov” has lead to the spread of “aggression against everything non-Bulgarian and non-Christian, reaching a peak with the formation of “civic patrols” against the [Syrian] refugees; conspiracy theories and accusations in anti-Bulgarian activity against human rights NGOs”. [ix]

The day Hezbollah was officially incriminated for the Burgas bus bombing, in an article entitled “The dirty order of the Israeli Prime-Minister” Siderov wrote the following: “For many years no country wanted to play the dirty games of Tel Aviv, to call Hezbollah a terrorist organization and justify an attack on Lebanon, Syria or Iran. This is the plan of those who determine matters in the World, who instigate wars ..., this is the plan which the Bulgarian government has walked in blindly, like a calf following its mother, without a thought of the future of our nation.” [x] There is no surprise in Siderov blaming Israel for involving Bulgaria in its “dirty games”, the big problem is that a pantheon of Arabists, analysts, left-wing politicians and mainstream journalists

echoed his message.

In February 2013 it became an everyday scenario to hear PM Boiko Borisov or FM Nikolay Mladenov confirming the results from the investigation and rejecting the accusations that they have acted under pressure from the US and Israel, and then members from the BSP, Arabists and journalists to come out and try to feed uncertainty and even conspiracy theories again. It didn't help matters that authorities made bolder statements for the foreign media and more hesitant ones in Bulgarian for internal use. In statements in English the evidence was "solid", in Bulgarian it was "reasonable". The general atmosphere in the media in the last month of the Borisov government can be summarized in a statement made by journalist Georgi Milkov from the popular newspaper "24 chasa": "Bulgaria has been pushed into a [Israeli] scheme that starts with Hezbollah and ends with Iran".[xi] On the 15th of February the same Georgi Milkov conducted a rather friendly interview with three Hamas officials who had entered Bulgaria under unclear circumstances.[xii] Ismail al-Ashqar, Salah al-Bardawil and Mushir al-Masri had been invited by the Center for Global and Middle East Studies (MESBG). The director of the organization, Mohammed Abu Assi – a Palestinian holding Bulgarian citizenship, stated that he invited the Hamas MPs in an attempt to "improve Bulgaria's image in the Arab world" and "to prove that Bulgaria is not an absolutely pro-Israel country" after the country's government "made a blunder" by blaming Hezbollah for the 2012 bus bombing.[xiii] Hamas official Ismail al-Ashqar told Georgi Milkov that Bulgaria is the gate to Europe and so it can "spread our message" among Europeans. Milkov did not feel the need to ask al-Ashqar inconvenient questions about the terrorist nature of the organization whose message he wanted him to spread. To their credit no Bulgarian authorities or members of the Socialist Party met with the Hamas representatives, and both the ruling party GERB and the BSP distanced themselves from the visit. However, according to information in the Jerusalem Post, the

visitors had been scheduled to meet members of the BSP.[xiv] Bulgarian security forces ordered the Palestinians out of the country 48 h after their arrival.

MESBG[xv] was created in 1999 by Mohd Abu Assi and Vladimir Chukov.[xvi] It endorses the comparison between Israel and Nazi Germany, publishes Bulgarian translations of the series "The ethnic cleansing of Palestine" by Ilan Pappé[xvii], as well as "reports" that the IDF is killing Palestinians to sell their organs[xviii] and in general blames Israel for every evil in the World. The MESBG also had a role in sending Bulgarian journalists from TV7 in Lebanon to conduct anti-Israel interviews via the Hezbollah controlled Al Manar TV.[xix] In his latest appearance on bTV Abu Assi was asked to comment on the trip of socialist MP Strahil Angelov to Syria and his meeting with Syrian officials, which Angelov had explained as a private visit. Abu Assi erupted: "Why do you call this a scandal? A scandal is former foreign minister Nikolay Mladenov going to Israel a year ago and saying that every attack on Israel is an attack on Bulgaria. ... Is this a balanced foreign policy ... Why is Hanukkah celebrated in the foreign ministry (not that I mind...)." [xx]

If one follows carefully the commentary in Bulgarian media one would notice that the same faces and names appear whenever the topic is security, terrorism and the Middle East, and most of them are well connected with the MESBG. For example, the most prominent Arabists and terrorism experts such as Vladimir Chukov or Slavcho Velkov[xxi] have served on the editorial board of Abu Assi's anti-Zionist propaganda magazine East-West.[xxii] This explains the strange consensus in the media that not Hezbollah but Al Qaeda is the perpetrator of the Burgas bus bombing, and every attempt to blame Hezbollah is part of an Israeli scheme to justify an attack on Iran. To put it simply, Bulgarians may see several different faces in talk shows, but they are not offered several different points of view, they are offered Abu Assi's point of view.

In 2002 Abu Assi's colleague Chukov created the Center for Regional and Confessional Studies.[xxiii] One of his latest articles posted on the website of the CRCS focuses on Jewish fundamentalism. Apparently Chukov does not exclude the possibility of the "establishment of a cruel fundamentalist Jewish regime in Israel." In order to equate Jewish and Islamic fundamentalism he developed the theory of the "Semitic origins of Jewish fundamentalism". Unfortunately, the circle of ME experts with anti-Israel views has found a more direct way to influence the Bulgarian government, than via the media. Vladimir Chukov's brother Boyan Chukov, also an Arabist has served as a security council in the Socialist government of PM Sergei Stanishev (2008 – 2009) and is currently a foreign policy advisor to Socialist PM Oresharski. Around the time of publicizing the investigation results Boyan Chukov maintained the idea that if in the absence of evidence Bulgaria points Hezbollah as the perpetrator, that means that Bulgaria is serving certain geo-political circles (i.e. Israel and US). He remained completely unimpressed by the actual existence of the evidence.[xxiv]

As elsewhere in Europe, Bulgaria has not been spared Palestinian propaganda. Recently, the State TV channel BNT showed the documentary "'Alphabet of sadness'", portraying the IDF as child-beating monsters,[xxv] and currently a film festival of ME cinema is being organized with the assistance of the Embassy of Iran and the Embassy of "the State of Palestine" as the program of the festival says.[xxvi] It should be worrying us greatly how much has been done by successive governments and the media in Bulgaria to make sure this propaganda falls on fertile soil. Ruling parties have been irresponsible and cynical and have used Ataka for political gains without thinking of the consequences – a tradition that has culminated in the current Red-Brown

alliance. In addition, the media that for 25 years of democracy has so far failed to establish high journalistic standards and continues to serve governments and power circles, has allowed a clique of intellectuals with radical anti-Israel views to ascertain themselves as the most prominent Bulgarian experts on security and the Middle East.

Nevertheless, I would like to end on an optimistic note. The latest developments have brought up a debate about racism and antisemitism that was non-existent in Bulgaria before. Journalists and bloggers have started to write regularly about racism and antisemitism, civic leaders and NGOs have been active in condemning antisemitic statements, Facebook groups such as “Bulgarians against antisemitism” and “Friends of Israel in Bulgaria” have emerged. Even though the reaction and debate are still on a small scale, it is an important start for people who desperately need a more constructive and introspective approach towards their national identity, instead of our typical wavering from self-loathing to self-righteousness with little in between. Anti-government protests have not ceased for 226 days since the red-brown coalition came to power. What is very encouraging is that the protesters are for the most part not stressing on poverty or high bills but are disgusted by the political situation and would like to see their country as a respectable European member. As small-scaled and indecisive as the protests might sometimes seem, they are not simply protests for a higher standard of life, they are a fight for true democratic values in Bulgaria.

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[iii] Maria Manolova, 'Ataka's Massive Campaign', 13 November 2013
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[iv] Dejan Lucic, 'Revisionists of the World Unite!'
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[v] Milen Radev, 'The Red-Brown-green Axis', 2011
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[vi] 'A trip to Cuba – an interview with Ilian Todorov (Ataka)', 2013
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[viii] 'Oresharski received 327 000 strong support', 30 July 2013
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[ix] Ivan Bedrov, 'Immunity Doesn't Matter. Siderov Already Won', 2014 <<http://ivanbedrov.com/?p=3761>>. *accessed 01/28/2014*

[x] Volen Siderov, 'The Dirty Order of the Israeli PM', 2013 <<http://volensiderov.com/?p=296>>. *accessed 01/28/2014*

[xi] *Referendum* (Bulgarian National Television, 2013).

[xii] Ismail al-Ashqar, 'Bulgaria giving a sign to Europe to remove Hamas from terrorist list', 2013
<<http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1772864>>. *accessed 01/28/2014*

[xiii] 'Hamas Says Delegation Ordered to Leave Bulgaria', 15 February 2013
<<http://www.maannnews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=565499>>. *accessed 01/28/2014*

[xiv] Benjamin Weinthal, 'In Depth: Making Sense of the Hamas Visit to Bulgaria', 17 February 2013
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[xv] 'Center for Middle East Studies' <<http://www.mesbg.org/>>. *accessed 01/28/2014*

[xvi] 'Vladimir Chukov – Wikipedia'
<<http://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%92%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B8%D>

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[xvii] Ilan Pappé, 'The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine' <<http://www.mesbg.org/index.php/studiesall>>. *accessed 01/28/2014*

[xviii] Donald Bostrom, 'They are stealing the organs of our sons', 2009 <<http://www.mesbg.org/index.php/9079786564537676/489-34354545351511>>. *accessed 01/28/2014*

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The author, Dr. Elena Zaharieva, in October 2012 published BICSA's Working Paper No. 1: The Burgas Attack and Antisemitism in Bulgaria.