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## The sinking fortunes of Euroscepticism in Bulgaria

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The 2014 European Parliament elections were notable for the remarkable gains for Eurosceptic forces, mainly in a number of the “old” member states such as France, Denmark, and the United Kingdom. Bulgaria represents an interesting case, as it was one of the few countries in which Euroscepticism saw a significant retreat, with none of the parties that managed to cross the electoral threshold and gain seats in the EP espousing anti-EU orientations.

In explaining the disappointing performance of Bulgarian Eurosceptics, it is of the essence to look at the reasons behind the electoral failure of Ataka (which secured only 2.96% of all votes cast for its worst election performance since the founding of the party in 2005), the key progenitor of the Eurosceptic undercurrent. Three main factors could account for Ataka’s dwindling popularity and its inability to establish itself as a viable challenger to the pro-EU status quo in the country.

The first serious blow to Ataka’s appeal occurred in May 2013 when its party members did not vote against the formation of an unpopular coalition government including the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the Movement of Rights and Freedoms (MRF).<sup>1</sup> It has to be noted that the support base of the latter largely consists of ethnic Turks, Romani people, and Muslims of any ethnicity in Bulgaria. While Ataka’s leader Volen Siderov did not endorse MRF’s role at the helm the country and justified his decision to implicitly back the newly formed Oresharski government by referring to the disastrously anti-nationalist policies of the previous administration that had been headed by Boyko Borisov<sup>2</sup> and had been forced to resign in February 2013 after a wave of public discontent that started off as protests against EU-imposed austerity measures, such assurances were not deemed convincing by the majority of Bulgarian citizens. The appointment of Delyan Peevski, a controversial businessman and media magnate, as head of the DANS national security agency in June 2013 by the new Oresharski government (subsequently reversed) immediately triggered a new

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<sup>1</sup> Paunova, Polina. *За да се спаси от оставка и избори, БСП капитулира пред "Атака"* (In order to prevent a resignation scenario and new elections, BSP bowed down to Ataka), 26 June 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Ataka TV. *Сидеров: Борисов иска да ме очерни, защото му попречих да си върне властта* (Borisov tries to smear my name, because I was the one who stopped him from returning to power), 26 March 2014.

wave of massive protests. While the majority of the protesters had a markedly pro-European profile (though some disgruntled former sympathizers of Ataka also participated in them), the demonstrations exhibited a slight anti-Turkish sentiment and a strong dislike of the MRF (of which Peevski is a member), on which Ataka was no longer able to successfully capitalize due to its peculiar position as a “hidden coalition partner” of the new government. In fact, in that period Ataka was frequently lambasted by protesters with centre-right leanings and patriotic parties such as the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB)<sup>3</sup> for betraying its nationalist credentials and acting in an opportunistic fashion and contrary to its underlying principles, among which was an uncompromising opposition to and refusal to acknowledge the MRF’s right to call itself a political party.<sup>4</sup>

No longer in a position to credibly claim to be an anti-MRF bulwark in Bulgarian politics, Ataka’s tacit support for BSP was arguably another serious miscalculation, which further reduced its popularity. From the outset, Ataka attempted to portray itself as a party that would keep the new government in check (the reasoning being that if the Oresharski cabinet decided to implement “anti-Bulgarian” policies such as increases in electricity prices, Ataka would pull the trigger on it by joining forces with the main party in opposition Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (CEDB) and voting in favor of a no-confidence motion).<sup>5</sup> However, among political scientists such as Antoni Galabov<sup>6</sup> and the pro-EU crowd on the streets, Ataka’s underlying identity increasingly started to be seen as mirroring that of BSP.<sup>7</sup>

The vast majority of Bulgarian and foreign analysts<sup>8</sup> are in agreement that BSP was unquestionably Europeanized and pro-integration as early as the late 1990s,<sup>9</sup> but for many citizens on the centre-right of the political spectrum the party remains strongly associated with “archaic communist values” and even mild pro-Eurasianism rather than Europeanism. The Peevski appointment only

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<sup>3</sup> Dnes Plus. *НФСБ: тръгваме на протест за сваляне на правителството „Орешарски“* (NFSB: we will be protesting in order to bring down the Oresharski cabinet), 21 July 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Shemtov, Hristo. *Протест – Лозунги и отзвучи* (Protest – Slogans and Reactions), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Blitz news. *Сидеров: аз съм гарантът, че токът няма да се вдигне* (Siderov: I am the one who could guarantee that electricity prices will not go up), 16 May 2014.

<sup>6</sup> As early as 2007, sociologist Antoni Galabov suggested that Ataka was becoming somewhat successful in attracting former BSP sympathizers (Galabov, Antoni. *Социологът Антоний Гълъбов: избирателите на БСП отиват в Атака*/Sociologist Antoni Galabov: BSP voters flocking to Ataka), Ataka newspaper, 10 August 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Galabov, Antoni. *Атака" говори на висок глас това, което БСП мисли* (Ataka is saying out loud what BSP actually thinks), 24 June 2013.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Dichev, Ivaylo (2000). *Европа като легитимация* (Europe as a legitimation); Stoychev, Stoycho (2010). *Европеизация и дестабилизация на българската партийна система: ефекти върху професионализацията на представителния елит* (Europeanization and destabilization of the Bulgarian Party System: Effects on the Professionalization of the Representative Elite); Vachudova, Milada (2008). *Tempered by the EU? Political parties and party systems before and after accession.*

<sup>9</sup> Spirova, Maria. *Europarties and party development in EU-candidate states: the case of Bulgaria* (2008), pp. 795-796.

served to solidify this perception. As political scientist Ivan Krastev commented in its immediate aftermath, “such shenanigans only made sense if the government had decided for the country to leave the European Union”.<sup>10</sup> Thus, going back to Ataka, the role that it played as a lynchpin for BSP for a period of more than a year eroded its image as a legitimate anti-establishment party and a “naughty outsider” with more bark than bite. Ataka (at least in the minds of those Bulgarians fully convinced in the merits of EU membership) is perceived to have begun to evolve in the direction of a government insider with the potential to influence the much larger governing party (BSP has since 2005 consistently been the second most supported party) in an anti-European direction. In this regard, while in the past most political scientists viewed Ataka as an irritant rather than a serious threat to the country’s continued Europeanization,<sup>11</sup> the BSP government’s dependence on Ataka for the political survival of its technocratic government, made the nationalist party appear as a more dangerous force than before to the uncompromisingly pro-EU crowd. It is no surprise that in the early phase of the protests, the demonstrators emphasized the need for “more Europe rather than less” in their exchange of messages with then European Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, Viviane Reding, and expressed concerns regarding the Oresharski cabinet’s conciliatory attitude towards Ataka.<sup>12</sup> When it became clear that the Oresharski government would be unable to fulfill its full mandate after the junior coalition partner (the MRF) called for early elections in June 2014, Ataka followed suit by explicitly withdrawing its support from it,<sup>13</sup> but this did little to repair the damage to its reputation and placate the pro-EU crowds as well as a significant part of its former nationalist sympathizers.

To compound matters further, Ataka did not help itself by adopting a manifestly pro-Russian tone in the aftermath of the Ukrainian revolution and the subsequent Crimean crisis, with Siderov’s party being the only one (with Parliamentary representation) in favor of recognizing the constitutionality of the Crimean referendum.<sup>14</sup> It is certainly possible that the heightened level of threat on the popular level due to Ataka’s misplaced anti-Europeanism in the context of the increasingly lukewarm relationship between Russia and the EU may have played a part in reducing the appeal of

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<sup>10</sup> Dnevnik news. *Изборът на Пеевски има смисъл само ако правителството е решило България да напусне ЕС* (The appointment of Peevski only makes sense in light of a government’s decision for the country to leave the European Union), 14 June 2013.

<sup>11</sup> In this regard, see also Böttger, Katrin & Gabriel Van Loozen (2012). Euroscepticism and the Return to Nationalism in the Wake of Accession as Part of the Europeanization Process in Central and Eastern Europe; Cholova, Blagovesta (2007). The Europeanization of the Bulgarian Party System; and Lilov, Grigor (2013). *Най-богатите българи* (The wealthiest Bulgarians).

<sup>12</sup> Vesti news. *Граждани до Вивиан Рединг: Още Европа? Да, моля!* (Bulgarian citizens reacting to Viviane Reding’s visit: More Europe? Yes, please!), 22 July 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Novini bg. *Сидеров поиска незабавна оставка на кабинета и избори на 20 юли* (Siderov demands immediate government resignation and early elections to be held on 20 July), 11 June 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Mediapool newspaper. *Петима от "Атака" заминават за Крим като наблюдатели на референдума* (Five Ataka members will be heading to Crimea in order to assume the duty of election observers),

Russophilia in Bulgarian society – until then most Bulgarians with admiration of Russia and Russian culture did not necessarily consider themselves opponents of or “hard” Eurosceptics concerning EU membership. While some pro-Russian demonstrations took place in Bulgaria during the 2014 spring season, the turnout was quite small.<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, new challengers on the nationalist front have been more than willing to use the situation to their advantage and steal the thunder of Ataka. The formation of a Patriotic Front electoral alliance in August 2014 that includes the IMRO – Bulgarian National Movement (the oldest nationalist party in Bulgaria) and the NFSB, which openly acknowledge that they are softly Eurosceptic and fully opposed to Ataka’s virulently anti-EU rhetoric and potent nationalism,<sup>16</sup> may in the near future provide a new niche for those citizens whose outlooks combine conditional Euroscepticism and strong identification with Bulgarian nationalism. The Patriotic Front has been praised by some political scientists such as Ognyan Minchev<sup>17</sup> as having the potential to offer an authentic nationalist alternative due to so far resisting the temptation of donning the Russophile mantle (despite the strongly pro-Russian views of a minority of its members).<sup>18</sup> In the early Parliamentary elections that took place on 5 October 2014 (following Plamen Oresharski’s resignation in July 2014 and the prior agreement between the main political parties), it garnered 7.3% of the votes, emerging as a 5<sup>th</sup> electoral force (while Ataka occupied the 7<sup>th</sup> spot in terms of popular backing), earning 19 seats in the National Parliament in comparison to Ataka’s 12.<sup>19</sup>

In essence, Ataka will certainly have a mountain to climb if it is to successfully rebound to its previous heights in the near future (though it did manage to find representation in the 43<sup>rd</sup> National Parliament, contrary to the expectations of most pre-election pollsters and some sociologists).<sup>20</sup> The nationalist party has almost exhausted its policy options and to an extent lost its way with the patriotic-minded electorate, even if it still tends to be viewed favorably by those Bulgarians who are

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<sup>15</sup> Vesti bg. *Русофили срещу русофоби на протест в София* (Russophiles against Russophobes at a protest in Sofia), 7 March 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Angelov, Georgi (Trud newspaper). *Валери Симеонов: управляващите разбират само от уличен натиск* (Valeri Simeonov: the people in the upper echelons of governance are only willing to change under pressure from the streets), 13 April 2014.

<sup>17</sup> See also Petkov, Krastyo. *Патриотичен фронт в България – защо не?* (A Patriotic Front in Bulgaria? What’s wrong with that?), Pressa Daily, 30 July 2014 and Daynov, Evgeniy. *Очаквам пробив на Реформаторския Блок и “Патриотичен фронт”* (I expect the fortunes of the Reformist Bloc and the Patriotic Front to rise), Sever newspaper, 27 August 2014. Daynov has described the Patriotic Front as the only nationalist force in Bulgaria that is not pro-Russian.

<sup>18</sup> Izbori Pik Bg. *Русофилът Павел Чернев все пак бе приет в Патриотичния Фронт* (Pavel Chernev, known for his pro-Russian sentiments, was eventually accepted as a member of the Patriotic Front), 28 August 2014.

<sup>19</sup> СИК. *Резултати от избори за народни представители 05.10.2014 г. за страната* (Results from the Parliamentary elections held on 5 October 2014), October 2014. <<http://results.cik.bg/pi2014/rezultati/index.html>>

<sup>20</sup> Focus News. *Кънчо Стойчев: Най-вероятно следващото правителство ще бъде коалиционно* (Kantcho Stoychev: the next government will most likely be in a coalition format), 5 October 2014.

concerned that the country may be unnecessarily distancing itself from Russia. A full rebranding of the party may be needed or a steep descent into fringe status in Bulgarian politics appears to be in the books. Bulgaria remains one of the poorest EU member states, but no obvious Eurosceptics (on the right or the left side of the political spectrum) interested in picking up the baton from Ataka are lurking in the shadows.