

## **Far Right Storms Ahead in Bulgaria**

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Ataka's extremist programme sounds barely credible, but it has already become parliament's fourth largest party.

On the first day Ataka took power Bulgaria would withdraw from NATO.

On the second it would reconsider its agreement with the European Union, reopen the two oldest reactors of its Soviet-era nuclear power plant at Kozloduy and announce plans to double the size of the army.

On the third day, Ataka would terminate its relationship with the World Bank and the IMF, ban ethnic minority parties and cut programmes in minority languages in the state media.

This is how the first three working days of a government led by a popular new nationalist party in Bulgaria would pan out according to the pronouncements of its flamboyant and controversial leader, Volen Siderov.

Ataka, which was founded in April, is a political phenomenon.

Siderov is a former journalist who once edited a reformist newspaper, *Demokratsia*. He drifted into radical nationalism, publishing books that were attacked for alleged racism, and was expelled from his post as a commentator on a national daily newspaper.

Over the last year, his cable television programme, *Ataka*, has drawn protests from most human rights organisations, often on account of its crude generalisations about the Roma or Turkish communities.

Siderov claims that gypsies were guilty of committing "genocide against Bulgarians".

In April, Siderov and a dozen other politicians registered a party named after his controversial TV programme.

While the big centrist parties wrestled each other for votes in the June 25 parliamentary elections, *Ataka* slipped ahead of them.

As a result, it emerged the fourth largest party in parliament, after the Bulgarian Socialist Party, BSP, the former ruling National Movement Simeon The Second, NDSV, and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, DPS.

Moreover, its success in the June 25 vote may mark only the beginning of the rise in *Ataka*'s fortunes, as Bulgaria's political crisis continues to unravel.

After the BSP failed to form a coalition government with the DPS earlier this week, there was widespread talk of a new round of parliamentary elections that could well see *Ataka* leapfrog even further ahead.

A government espousing Ataka's policies would clearly stun the world.

In reality, the shock tactics are deliberate. The party exists to reject the last government's policies and it has no intention of leaving the opposition ranks for now.

"We are not going to form coalitions or participate in governments," one Ataka member of parliament explained to the local press.

He compared his party's role to that a horse fly, which stings and torments the big beasts around it.

Bulgaria's politicians are uniformly hostile to the new group, and all the parties in parliament ruled out cooperation with Ataka, which many have accused of espousing Nazi-style policies.

Party members furiously deny the charge. "We are tired of responding to ridiculous accusations about us being racist xenophobes or endangering minority rights," Pavel Shopov, a member of Ataka, told Balkans Crisis Report, BCR.

However, Siderov has hardly allayed concerns with his most recent stunts. A day after the election, he repeated an earlier Ataka demand that minority language TV broadcasts be shut down and those who had allowed such programmes to start in the first place be prosecuted.

"One of the first things we will do is shut down the hateful news in Turkish on national TV," Siderov declared on June 26. "We will demand punishment for those traitors who allowed the broadcasts."

Ataka's programme is an equally colourful ragbag of populist, nationalist and socialist slogans. It calls for a ban on foreigners buying land in Bulgaria, the revision of major privatisation deals, the enlargement of the army, the return of the death penalty and a new all-encompassing law defining "national treason".

Pavel Shopov, however, insists his party has been widely misunderstood and that its basic orientation is pacifist. "Which neo-Nazi party, as some wrongly define us, would advocate peace?" he asked.

He defended the party's right to demand "a monolithic country, which is not subject to division on the basis of ethnic, religious or cultural differences".

Tackling the question of minority rights, Shopov added bluntly, "We think there are no minorities in Bulgaria."

Shopov would admit only that there exist certain ethnic and religious groupings, which should not be encouraged to isolate themselves from the mainstream through the use of different languages.

Ataka's strong opposition to the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, which represents ethnic Turks, was based on a strict reading of the constitution that bans ethnic parties, he added.

Siderov refused to answer BCR's questions on the party's identity and policies.

For all its loudly proclaimed moderation, there is little doubt that Ataka sees itself - and is seen - as a similar phenomenon to France's Front National and other far-right parties in Europe.

After the Bulgarian elections, the Freedom Party in Austria, the Front National, the Polish Samoobrona and the Russian Rodina all indicated that they recognised Siderov's group as an ally.

However, some observers say these relatively well-established parties may well draw back from forming explicit ties to such an overtly racist organisation.

"No EU countries would allow a party with such a degree of explicit racism or xenophobia to enter parliament," said Krasimir Kunev, from the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee.

Kunev's colleague, Yonko Grozev, alleges that some of Siderov's statements violate national laws and international agreements signed by Bulgaria.

If that is the case, no one threatened Siderov with legal action. In fact, at this stage, he is the one who is publicly dismissing Bulgaria's politicians as criminals and claiming that their proper place - not his - is in jail.

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