

A different kind of massive attack: How the Bulgarian Ultranationalist Party Ataka engineered its political success using electronic media



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ABSTRACT: This study explores the role of media in securing the electorate success of Ataka, Bulgaria's ultra-right-wing party, as well as their contribution to the rise of nationalistic tendencies among the Bulgarian electorate. To accomplish this, the study sets two goals: first, to explore the political and socio-cultural environment which has allowed for the growth of ultra-nationalist rhetoric in Bulgaria, and second, to examine how Ataka's media publicity machine, with a specific focus on their new media tactics, have contributed to securing popular support for the virtually unfettered expression of ultra-nationalistic ideas. By conducting a critical analysis of Ataka's use of electronic media, including websites, online forums, and other social networking tools, the study analyzes the importance of electronic media to a right wing party such as Ataka, that catapulted it from complete obscurity into a political force of national importance.

KEYWORDS: media, nationalism, populism, xenophobic rhetoric



INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of the totalitarian regimes in Southeastern Europe and certainly, dating back to the Ottoman Empire, the Balkan region has been synonymous with nationalism and ethnic strife. So much so, that the term "balkanization" has become a routine expression in political lingo to describe any process of fragmentation and break up at the national, international or institutional level. Nationalism, whether civic, ethnic or cultural, has defined to a great extent the nature of the political process of a nation inhabiting the Balkan Peninsula. Among those, Bulgaria has often been described as a model of ethnic tolerance, where groups of different ethnic backgrounds co-exist and co-share power without political turbulence and violent struggles.

In the last few years, however, the Bulgarian model of ethnic tolerance has come under threat by the powerful insurgence and formidable media presence of ultra-nationalist right wing political formations, which have quickly grown into full-blown political parties. The ultimate manifestation of these trends is the rise

Anderson (1983) went as far as identifying the “technology or communications,” or print in particular, as one of three distinctive paths to imagined communities (p. 46). He contended that national consciousness emerged as a result of “print capitalism” since the newspaper “implies the refraction of ‘world events’ into a specific imagined world of vernacular readers” (p. 63). It is in the ritual of simultaneous ritual consumption, where spatial and temporal experiences of nationhood happen (Anderson, 1983). But as Demertzis, Papathanassopoulos and Armenakis (1999, p. 28) pointed out, “this does not mean that old and contemporary nationalisms are caused by the media of communication, but the media have been one of the structural prerequisites that facilitated their genesis and spread.”

Indeed, the idea of nations as imagined political communities suggests that national consciousness is primarily a mediated consciousness and that mass media, not just newspapers, can play a role in the way members of a community understand the nation or experience their national identity. In this vein, Law (2001, p. 301) pointed out that “national identity is not directly reducible to either state or civil society. Rather, it mediates them semiotically, hence the significance of mass communications for the national idea”.

Therefore, it becomes quite clear that the media, as Erajavec and Volcic (2006, p. 305) argued, “are clearly not neutral agents.” The media hold a particularly important place in defining the political and social power structure, but even more so, they play a crucial role in articulating and interpreting the meaning of news events and matters of national importance. In other words, the media do not passively describe or record news events but actively reconstruct them, mostly based on their own ideological affiliations. As Volcic (2005) put it:

Members of the (national) media audience are variously invited to construct a sense of who “we” as nationals are, and who “we” are not. As such, media ideology can be understood as the “glue” of the social world, binding people to the concrete practices of daily life that reproduce a shared sense of national identity. (p. 288)

Such an approach evokes notions of media as ideological apparatuses. As the prominent cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1988, p. 118) argued, the mass media are a “major cultural and ideological force standing in a dominant position with respect to the way in which social relations and political problems are defined and the production and transformation of popular ideologies in the audience addressed.” More importantly, as Volcic (2005, p. 288) contended, “among other types of ideological labor, the media construct for us a definition of what nationalism is, what meaning the imagery of nationalism carries, and what the problem of nationalism is understood to be.” In this sense, media discourse can be viewed as directly related to expression of power relations in society. Consequently, it is natural to expect that those members of society who seek entrance in the structure of political power will resort to the media for generating and maintaining discourses that will help them build a political platform and place them firmly within the sphere of politics. This

were instigated by Turkish “circles [that] harbored hope that they could turn the wheel of history back, to the times of the Ottoman Empire” (RFE/RL, June 1989). This period was ironically called by the government “the Grand Excursion” and was characterized as the largest movement of people since the Second World War — 350,000 ethnic Turks left the country, the majority of whom forcefully, leaving behind their homes and their possessions (Helsinki Watch Report, 1989, p. 1).

Following the collapse of the communist system in 1989, Bulgaria witnessed a dynamic change in inter-ethnic relations, impacted both by a long history of ethnic tension and even more so, by the economic and political uncertainties of the transitional period. The country was experiencing an escalation of ethnic tensions; however, full blown ethnic conflict was avoided in large part because of the engagement of pluralistic policies, integration of the Muslim minorities in the political structure, culminating in the establishment of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms¹ (essentially, a political party of the Bulgarian ethnic Turks) and through negotiation and compromise (Vassilev, 2001; Warhola & Boteva, 2003). However, it is important to note that this relative victory for the so-called “ethnic tolerance model” in Bulgaria was not entirely free of nationalistic polemics and ethno-nationalistic political discourse — both the socialist and democratic forces, the two main competitors for political power in the early years of democratic transition, engaged in xenophobic rhetoric, becoming “a standard act in Bulgarian politics, shifting with the political wind through the years as a part in the electoral platforms of broad-based parties” (Volgyi, 2007, p. 37). Although some have argued that ethno-national rhetoric did not materialize, and was only utilized as a defensive mechanism in times of political uncertainty (Creed, 1990), others have argued that the Balkan region, including Bulgaria, is flooded with “successive waves of popular ethno-nationalism” (Smith, 2000, p. 10). As Petkov (2006, p. 110) points out, “the growing ethnicization of public life inevitably penetrated politics after which the issue of nation and civil rights is substituted by that of ethnic groups and their representation in power.”

ATAKA: THE TRANSITION’S PROBLEM CHILD

Ataka’s rise to the political arena in Bulgaria was secured by its unexpected 8% of votes in the parliamentary elections of 2005, which also secured it the position of the first nationalist party to enter Parliament since Bulgaria embarked on its road to democracy in 1989. Ataka’s 21 seats in a 240-seat parliament meant that the rest of the political parties had to at least acknowledge a movement that got 300,000 ballots (Alexandrova, 2005). While the other parliamentary groups denounced any future

¹ As Vasilev (2001, p. 37) pointed out, although the MRF is not officially registered as an ethnic minority party, “virtually everyone in Bulgaria is aware of and recognizes its status as an ethnic minority party comprising over 100,000 ethnic Turks and just 3,000 ethnic Bulgarians (most of them Muslim Bulgarians or Pomaks).”

by a series of internal conflicts and frictions caused in part by Siderov's leadership style, leading to the dwindling of the members of the group down to fourteen. However, in the 2009 elections, Ataka was able to regain its 21 seats in the new parliament (only three members of the parliamentary group are female) and more importantly, since the election, has been one of the strongest allies of the government at the time headed by the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), another populist party, led by an equally charismatic leader in the face of former Zhivkov's personal bodyguard, the mayor of Sofia, and current Prime Minister Boyko Borisov (also known as the General). GERB, similar to Ataka, yet in a much more carefully measured tone of ethnic tolerance, bases its national identity on a heightened degree of Bulgarian patriotism. However, as Pencheva (2009) noted, the two populist parties differed a great deal in the style of leadership Siderov and Borisov espoused, often reflected in their engagement and interaction with the media. As a result of their moderate approach to engaging the ethnic and religious minorities in Bulgaria, GERB has on several occasions not only initiated collaborative actions with the MRF, but also agreed to include the MRF in the ruling coalition — a political strategy which Siderov strongly condemned. This essentially signalled the beginning of the ideological rift between the two populist camps. It should also be noted that Ataka and GERB were among the dominant political bodies able to win a majority of votes during the elections for the European Parliament, with GERB practically winning the elections with five seats (Ghodshee, 2007). In the case of Ataka, the party secured three seats in the 2007 European Parliament and two seats in the 2009 European Parliament, winning 14.2% and 12% of the popular vote, respectively, positioning Ataka in fourth place in the European Parliament elections.

ATAKA'S MEDIA STRATEGIES: BEYOND CONVENTIONAL THINKING

While the surprising success of Ataka cannot be attributed solely to its access to media outlets, it is imperative to recognize the importance of its ability to control and manipulate its own media, and to do so, virtually free of the oversight of media regulatory bodies, whose sole responsibility is to monitor and sanction hate speech meant to incite ethnic or religious intolerance. Ataka's media outlets, both print, internet-based and broadcast, became vital ideological vessels and a propaganda mouthpiece of the party in its struggle to promote a new "symbolic reality" that thrives upon economic uncertainty and political instability. As Sommerbauer (2007, p. 5) quoted Orlin Spassov, Bulgarian media expert and analyst, "for both Ataka and SKAT there is no difference between media publicity and political publicity. The party Ataka started out as a media party. It is no coincidence that the name of the party and the name of the newspaper were assumed from Siderov's TV program on SKAT. Since the changes in 1989 SKAT is the only TV station which has a party in this way." More importantly, Ataka's use of new media — mainly their website

and online forums — provided Siderov and his political allies with the opportunity to engage directly with disgruntled Bulgarian voters, while at the same time, employing highly inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech, virtually unsanctioned by media regulations or legal consequences.

Siderov's foremost media forum was his signature show *Ataka*, which started in 2003 on Skat TV. Skat started operations as a cable operator in the Black Sea region of Bourgas, and soon gained popularity among local subscribers because of its relatively low prices, as well as its emphasis on entertainment shows and discussion forums. What the shows lacked in professional execution, it largely made up in its array of colorful guests and frank verbal (and sometimes physical) exchange of arguments. This is how Siderov became the lead figure of his own show. The show's nationalistic theme was underscored by its opening, featuring Wagner's Valkyries and shots from the First Balkan War (Ditchev, 2006). The 15-minute show was loaded with compromising facts about leading political figures, their corrupt practices and "criminal" neglect of domestic and foreign policy. Siderov's show was just like most of Skat's productions — a very low cost production, shot in an amateur TV studio against the backdrop of the Bulgarian Customs Authorities at the border with Turkey — a symbolic representation of Siderov's distrust and open dislike of Bulgaria's southern neighbor.

In his shows, Siderov uses harsh and often insulting language regarding the Turkish minority. His main thesis, one that has been repeatedly articulated in nationalistic discourse by many sources, claims that the Movement for Rights and Freedoms — a major player on the political scene in the post-communist transition, claiming to represent the interests of Bulgaria's ethnic minorities — is unconstitutional because of its ethnic membership base, and should be disbanded, while the leader of the movement, Ahmed Dugan, should be expelled from the country because he is a traitor to the Bulgarian national idea. In fact, Ghodshee (2007, p. 35) stated, "Siderov has put many politicians in the uncomfortable position of having to agree with him or seem anti-Bulgarian." While some of Siderov's rhetoric is not necessarily new to the political climate in the country (Kanev, 2005), he also took a completely different tone — one openly prompting ethnic hatred and intolerance not only towards the Turkish minority, but also towards the Roma minority as well. As Kanev (2005, p. 7) argued, this rhetoric is truly an "equivalent of the *Libre des Mille Collines* radio and television in Rwanda, from the time leading up to the genocide."

The nationalistic discourse reached its pinnacle during the 2005 parliamentary and 2006 presidential campaigns, conducted both through the channels of Skat and Skat+, but also aided by the fueling of nationalistic sentiments among readers of the *Ataka* newspaper, first published in October of 2005. The circulation of the newspaper is unknown, but its website featured in 2006 a forum which shows more than 296,391 posts on topics concerning Bulgarian politics and social life, and 58,847 posts on topics of international nature. The web edition of the newspaper represents an expanded print version of the TV show and has become a popular venue for

the expression of the views and opinions of the Ataka parliamentary group members, who also link their Facebook profiles to the newspaper's main page. Selective and biased in its coverage, the online edition chooses to highlight interviews with Siderov, his statements in various media, as well as the news of the day that fit Ataka's ultra-nationalist agenda.

What is more, the nationalistic discourse, which so successfully morphed political issues with issues of ethnic strife, was Ataka's trump card in the Bulgaria mediascape. All of Skat's TV shows, the majority of which have a clear Bulgarian affiliation (were either produced by Bulgarians or are on topics about Bulgaria), allowed the channel to build a strong patriotic identity which fortified Ataka's nationalism platform. Table 1, for example, displays a typical 24-hour programming schedule for a week day during 2006, which shows the almost exclusive concentration on local productions and talk shows with a political theme, hosted for the most part by members or sympathizers of the Ataka party.

Table 1. Skat TV 24 Hour Programming Schedule (September 9, 2006)

Time slot	Program
07.00 a.m.	Early News
10.00 a.m.	Psychoanalytical show
11.15 a.m.	Comedic sketches
12.00 a.m.	Bulgarian Folklore
12.30 p.m.	<i>Health-wise</i> with Hristo Deyanov
13.10 p.m.	Discussion Studio
13.40 p.m.	<i>Love for Bulgaria</i>
14.00 p.m.	<i>International Folkloric Festival Varna 2006</i>
14.30 p.m.	<i>Thoughts and Passions</i> with Prof. Julian Vuchkov (live)
17.30 p.m.	<i>Pacifier</i> — Program for New Mothers
18.00 p.m.	<i>Folk songs</i> medley
18.15 p.m.	<i>Health-wise</i> with Hristo Deyanov
19.00 p.m.	<i>News</i> — Central Evening Newscast
19.20 p.m.	<i>Ataka</i> with Volen Siderov
19.30 p.m.	Discussion Studio
20.30 p.m.	<i>This Cannot Be True!</i> A commentary by Tsvetan Nachev
21.30 p.m.	<i>Between the Lines</i> — press review with Georgi Ifandiev
22.00 p.m.	<i>Ataka</i> with Volen Siderov (repeat)
22.10 p.m.	News. Weather
22.30 p.m.	<i>Broken Chains</i> — Fight Bulgarian Independence (1908) documentary

23.00 p.m.	<i>Life Predictions</i>
23.00 p.m.	<i>Premonitions and Suggestions</i>
00.00 a.m.	<i>Music Festival Emil Chakurov</i>
00.30 a.m.	News. Weather
00.50 a.m.	<i>Ataka</i> with Volen Siderov (repeat)
01.00 a.m.	Discussion Studio (repeat)
02.00 a.m.	<i>Health-wise</i> with Hristo Deyanov (repeat)
02.45 a.m.	<i>At the Artist's Studio</i> Nikola Markov (a cultural program)
03.10 a.m.	Concert of Palas Band (Bulgarian)
04.10 a.m.	<i>Italian Parks</i> (a documentary)
04.30 a.m.	<i>A Feeling of Eternity</i> (a documentary)
05.00 a.m.	<i>Percussion Concert</i>
05.30 a.m.	<i>Monuments of Culture in Sofia</i>
06.00 a.m.	<i>Uncompromising</i> A political commentary

Source: data from www.skattv.net, currently www.skattv.bg, Skat TV official website.

Most of these shows, such as Prof. Vuchkov's *Thoughts and Passions* as well as *This Cannot Be True*, are categorized as "commentaries," however, the shows usually feature a host who either invites purposively selected guests, or maintains a phone line, allowing for viewers to call in with comments. Often, these shows openly provoke and encourage the audience to voice nationalistic and inflammatory ideas, some of which clearly resonate with *Ataka's* tone of ethnic hatred against Turks and Romas, which sometimes exacerbates into pure "xenophobic propaganda" (Cohen, 2007, p. 10).

In the public sphere and the media world, racist and xenophobic speech is to be monitored by the Committee on Electronic Media (CEM), Bulgaria's media regulatory body.² While the CEM initiated a variety of measures to define hate speech and sanction its use in public discourse, they have also remained largely neutral in aggressively implementing these measures, particularly in the case of *Ataka*. One particularly blatant example of CEM's failure to act in sanctioning *Ataka's* hate speech is connected to the case of another Bulgarian TV station, Den TV. Den was cited in November 2002 for inciting hate speech in its program *From Telephone to Microphone* and the license of the TV station was revoked in 2003. The program *From Telephone to Microphone* depended on the active participation of viewers, who called in with different, and often, inflammatory remarks on national, political

² CEM is a board of public figures and media practitioners whose regulatory functions are dictated by the Bulgarian constitution and amendments to the law. Members of CEM are usually political appointments and represent the political forces in power.

and religious issues, similar to the format of the populist shows on Skat TV (IHF Report, 2003). Prior to closing down Den, the CEM issued a fine to the amount of 15,000 BGN (\$10,000), a sum that was unprecedented in Bulgarian TV history and by Bulgaria standards (IHF Report, 2003). While the CEM cited provisions of the law that prohibits the dissemination of religious and ethnic enmity, many critics have argued that the demise of Den was a result of returning political favors (Kanev, 2005; Cohen, 2007). Ironically, after the closure of Den, the host of the show which triggered the sanction of the CEM, Nick Stein, a German citizen who has become a mouthpiece of “vulgar and virulent” rhetoric against minorities in Bulgaria, was invited to host a similar show on Skat TV, where his polemics have even intensified in tone and boldness (Kanev, 2005; Cohen, 2007). The fact that Den’s license was later renewed and that Skat has never been sanctioned by the CEM for hate speech or any other violation over its decade-long run in the ether is evident of the short-lived successes of the regulatory body to institute a meaningful and effective regulation that oversees these matters in the case of electronic media.³

In addition to their TV blitz, Ataka managed to create a solid web presence as early as 2005, which has only expanded in recent years to include a version of its web site in Russian and a website featuring their 24-page-newspaper Ataka, a new TV network ALFA featuring video clips from Ataka TV, as well as a plethora of other materials, including user-generated videos and taped speeches given by Siderov. The website has grown both in popularity and technical sophistication, and now features along with Facebook and Twitter links downloadable cell phone ringtones, featuring music used in the Ataka TV show, various propaganda clips, as well as desktop wallpapers and audio and video files, featuring scenes from classic Bulgarian movies that celebrate the glorious past and rich cultural history of the Bulgarian nation.

In addition to maintaining the memories of Bulgarian military might and its regional cultural dominance — memories which Ataka has considered to be largely ignored and deliberately neglected by the current political class — Ataka found a particularly savvy use of their web presence during election times. For example, during the parliamentary elections of 2005, in order to further inflame feelings of ethnic intolerance, Ataka’s home page (www.ataka.bg) featured the map of Bulgaria covered with Turkish and Israeli flags fronting a huge “for sale” sign (Tavanier, 2005). These provocative illustrations, pointing to Ataka’s long standing opposition to the influence of foreign forces in Bulgarian politics and business, will normally be considered both anti-Semitic and xenophobic. However, given the fact that the Internet is a censorship-free environment, Ataka’s inflammatory rhetoric’s went virtually unsanctioned and with no consequences for the popularity of the party’s nationalistic platform.

³ It must be noted that the matter of sanctioning hate speech becomes even more complex when it comes to monitoring hate speech on the internet where the regulatory mechanism are even more evasive and difficult to enforce.

Bulgaria, and in particular stressing the military victories of the Bulgarian army in the Balkan Wars, WWI and WWII, as well as user-generated materials, featuring famous Bulgarian historical figures, widely seen as tokens of the liberation movement for independent Bulgaria. The BNU website is certainly rich — in addition to news materials and active input from various local branches of the organization, there are also a number of links to video materials, featuring the BNU's leaders' TV appearances, forum presentations and public debates as well as a very active online forum, which congregates discussions on topics of national importance that hyperlinks to Ataka's as well as all other nationalistic forums. These forums require registration but are not moderated and frequently highlight diatribes and angry rants against minorities in Bulgaria, the foreign presence and their political influence in Bulgarian politics as well as the gay and lesbian population.

It becomes evident that electronic media has afforded the far-right movement in Bulgaria new and unprecedented means of organizing their base and propagandizing their ideological platform. A notable example is the BNU's website, which was specifically launched to commemorate the political idol of the movement, general Hristo Lukov, and organize a national march in his honor on the date marking his assassination by Violeta Yakova, a Jewish communist woman who was later murdered by fascists seeking revenge for their leader's death. Launched as a cyber-headquarters central of the organizing effort to mobilize the so-called "Lukovmarch," the website features an impressive array of links and materials, including imbedded video materials, posted also on YouTube, showing how to be a BNU activist. The website also instructs users how to place graffiti and distribute posters, leaflets and postcards, as well as how to connect to other activists using social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter.

CONCLUSION

Historically, the media have played an essential part in the imagination of national communities, and the creation of a national culture and national identity would have been impossible without the contribution of print and broadcast media. The widespread dissemination of newspapers and novels led to an awareness of the "steady, anonymous, simultaneous experience" of communities of national readers (Anderson, 1983, p. 31). As Schlesinger (1991, p. 131) noted, the question of the relationship of the media to national cultural identity received "an easy and obvious answer: the media must be important because they are so prevalent."

Although the link between media, social order and political culture has been a common theme in critical studies to the media, this link has not been thoroughly explored in the literature on the discursive production of nationalism, and particularly so in the condition of the growing popularity of new technologies and means of communication. In addition, taking the discussion on nationalism and the media to the region of the Balkans is important considering the virulent, omnipotent and incredibly

what Billig (1995) called “banal nationalism,” which more or less encompasses the customary “us vs. them” divisions ingrained in people’s habits of speech, the never-questioned and ever-communicated beliefs about the glory of a nation’s past that reproduces national identity at the level of people’s discursive experience: “[...] an identity is to be found in the embodied habits of social life. Such habits include those of thinking and using language. To have a national identity is to possess ways of talking about nationhood.” (p. 8). Similarly, a new wave of insurgent nationalism is also taking place, facilitated by new media tools, including social networks such as Facebook and has a very strong following among the younger population segment of Eastern Europe. This trend was documented by Vladimir Milovanovic, a Serbian activist, who has followed the growing popularity of “Facebook nationalism” among Serbian youth — a trend he also described as “emotional nationalism” (Facebook Wars, 2010). Milanovic noted that the appeal of this type of free-ranging nationalist rhetoric is particularly potent and often serves as a catalyst for inciting ethnic intolerance, even among youth who won’t usually describe themselves as particularly nationalistic. He called this trend “civic fascism,” where “people who stand for liberal ideas are compelled to engage in discussions with people with different political opinions in a banal and vulgar way. The ideology is not crucial here. There is aggression, anger, and discontent on all sides” (p. 2). Today, with the ease of access to online media and digital content, talking about nationhood has become a conversation that takes place virtually unmediated in cyber-space, with a discursive power and ideological potential which needs to be at a minimum acknowledged, if not duly recognized, for its potential to ignite intolerance and inflame ethnic strife.

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