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BULGARIAN EXTREMIST PARTY ATAKA

Paper by

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In the following summary, two distinct subjects will be tackled regarding the Bulgarian extremist party Ataka. On the one hand, I shall expose the main themes and difficulties concerning a geopolitical analysis of the Ataka vote. On the other, there will be an evaluation of the true threat that this “far-right party” (as it can be classified according to the Western left-right distinction framework, due to its nationalist and racist tendencies) poses to the young Bulgarian democracy.

Using the regional logic as a valid framework through which to study the geopolitical aspect of the Ataka vote implies that such a logic well and truly exists in Bulgaria. Indeed, it would seem that the regional policies applied in Bulgaria due to the influence of the European Union (EU) could trick some into tackling the issue of the Ataka vote through a regional point of view, which, as it will be shown, is impertinent in the case of Bulgaria. Indeed, the regional logic has had very little influence in Bulgaria from a historical and institutional point of view. Historically speaking, today’s Bulgaria doesn’t include a territory which has had a distinct long-term history (such as the Moldavian or Transylvanian regions in Romania) for the simple reason that its territory is the smallest it’s been since the First Bulgarian Kingdom (VII – XI centuries). An interesting illustration of this lack of regional logic in Bulgarian politics and institutions is the fact that amongst the 20 Principles of the Ataka party, not one covers the subject of regions (and their potential threat to the “homogenous” Bulgarian nation) despite covering practically all other aspects of internal and external policies. Finally, a more concrete example can be given: the incoherence of the “Planning regions” (Document 1) created by the EU for statistical purposes. These regions don’t in fact have any institutional value as they aren’t territorial-administrative units in Bulgaria and policies aren’t implemented at that level. Moreover, it is well-worth noting that the South-Western Planning Region includes the capital, Sofia (which is the economic and financial centre of the country), while also including the Blagoevgrad Oblast which has endured significant economic difficulties since the 1990s.

In truth, one has to go lower than the regional level to the “oblast” (province) level in order to study the Ataka vote from a geopolitical point of view. The “oblasti” have traditionally been the territorial-administrative units in Bulgaria and as such, they are territorial levels that have a role to play in the Bulgarians’ self-identification. The oblast, by its structure around a single city which gives it its name and is its political and economic centre, plays an important role in giving Bulgarians their territorial identity. It is well-worth noting that the oblast usually corresponds to the electoral constituency for the legislative, presidential and European elections. However, a comparison between the Burgas and Targovishte constituencies (due to their comparable ethnic and religion composition) in terms of economic activity, unemployment rates and average annual salaries doesn’t seem to explain the Ataka vote (seeing as 19.6% of Burgas residents voted for Ataka, despite having significantly superior economic standards when compared to Targovishte, where only 7.89% of the voters chose Ataka). Indeed, the main problem is that even though some differences can be detected when comparing different oblasti, the numbers (being averages at an oblast-level) don’t take into account the severe differences that lie between the central city of the oblast and the peripheral territory.

It would therefore seem that the true level through which the Ataka vote can be explained is the municipal level, the city and village-level. This extremely local level is the only one that allows for a pertinent geopolitical logic to be deduced, regarding the Ataka vote. Indeed, it is at this level that the profound dissatisfaction of the Bulgarian people can be traced to underlying dynamics. The first point that can be deduced when focalizing at this local level is the fact that when the party is born in 2005, the Ataka vote is mainly an urban phenomenon (60% of the 2005 Ataka votes originated from big agglomerations, 18% came from the capital alone). This is mainly due to the party being young and thus only having time to implement itself in these political and economic centres (mainly Sofia). Nevertheless, since its inception, the party seems to be striving for a provincial foothold, with the

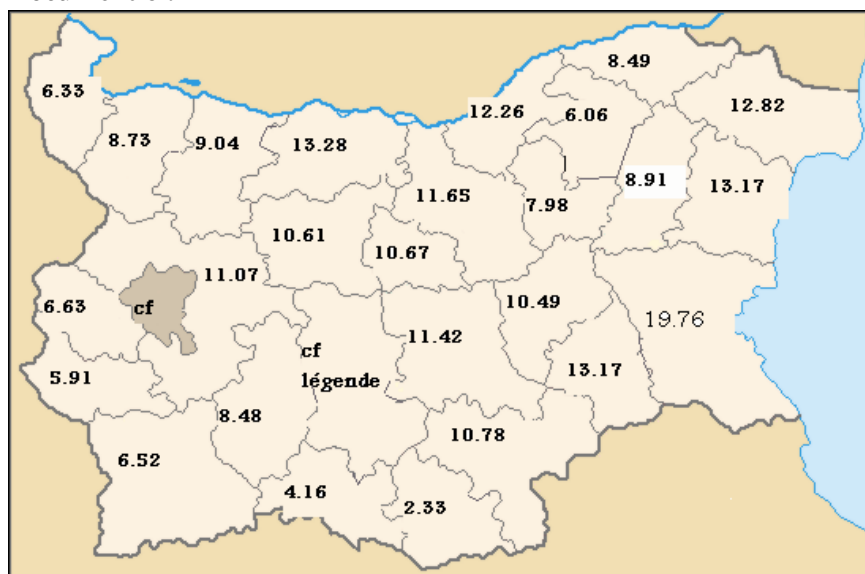
creation of local Ataka cells (which spread the Ataka ideology) far beyond the key Bulgarian cities. This tactic seems to have worked, as in the 2009 parliamentary elections, Ataka lost 1231 votes in Sofia (compared to the 2007 elections), but gained 34 046 in the Bulgarian province. Beyond the city-province logic, centre-periphery logics can be detected at an oblast level. Indeed, Ataka is now mainly a peripheral phenomenon. This can be tied to the severe inequalities between the centre and the periphery, the periphery being the main “victim” of the profound 1990s changes. There’s also a feeling of being “forgotten” by the new democratic regime and moreover, the urban area is perceived as being corrupted and as immorally profiting from the country itself. These same logics can be detected at an urban level as well, the centre being the place where the “corrupt elites” live lavishly and immorally while the periphery suffers in misery. Overall, Ataka does good work at channelling these deeply-rooted frustrations and turning them into votes.

But can Ataka really be considered a threat for the newly-founded Bulgarian democracy? Ironically, it would seem that the extremist party has actually had a positive democratic effect in the sense that since 2005 it has been at the source of a considerable enlargement of the political debate. Indeed, during the first 15 years of the new regime, the political debate was severely limited due to the political elite’s consensus on key issues: they all agreed on EU and NATO memberships being prime goals, no matter the cost, they also seemed to agree on the Bulgaria having to play the good student role before Western Europe and the United States. From an internal politics point of view, the political elite also agreed on the wild liberalization and privatization of the Bulgarian economy and the destruction of practically all remains of the communist regime in economic and social policies. Ataka has the merit of breaking the shackles of the political debate in Bulgaria, and by enlarging it and bringing it closer to the people (who felt alienated by the political elite, which seemed to refuse to take into account issues that were dear to the Bulgarian voters), bettering Bulgarian democracy. It would however be a democratic disaster if some of Ataka’s solutions to the new problems that have entered the political debate were to be implemented.

Moreover, it would seem that Ataka’s response to the economic crisis that has ravaged Bulgaria in the last couple of years is actually much softer than one could have expected. It’s well worth noting that the crisis hit Bulgaria later than it did the United States or Western Europe, difficulties weren’t being felt before 2009 (when economic growth indexes fell below 100 for the first time since 1999 and the average salary per household fell by 12,6%). Therefore, it can be said that any evaluation of the July 2009 parliamentary elections in terms of the influence that the economic crisis has had on Ataka’s popularity has to be taken with a pinch of salt. Nevertheless, other statistics and factors can be taken into account. Indeed, concerning the crisis, Ataka seems to have taken a stance worthy of a traditional opposition party, more than that of a far right party. This can be placed into the following wider context: in the last few years, Volen Siderov has significantly softened his stance on a number of issues, at least in the party’s public discourse, in order to gain access to power and appeal to a wider “audience”. Moreover, it’s well worth noting that following the 2009 elections, Ataka has become GERB’s fulcrum in the Bulgarian Parliament (GERB is Bulgaria’s current most influential party, it holds 116 out of 240 seats in parliament and is the party of Prime Minister Boiko Borisov), GERB being a centre right party and certainly not adhering to the xenophobic and racist discourse.

Last but not least, one can only wonder whether Ataka hasn’t reached its natural limits as a far right wing party with its racist and xenophobic ideology. Volen Siderov, the party’s face and “spiritual leader”, has seen a sharp fall in his popularity since the 2009 elections, moreover, more and more people seem to be becoming indifferent to the party leader. The party’s performance as a whole seems to follow the same trend, with its popularity falling since 2009 and it being negatively perceived by as up to 66% of the people questioned in December 2010. In general terms, Ataka seems to be limited by a certain electoral “ceiling”, which it can eliminate by drastically changing its position at the risk of alienating its current (very constant and loyal) electoral base. It would seem that Ataka is far from

Document 6 :



Ataka vote share in the different electoral constituencies (parliamentary elections of 2009)

Source: Statistics courtesy of the Central Electoral Commission http://rezultati.cik2009.bg/results/proportional/rik_16.html

Cf : the Sofia constituency is divided in three sub-constituencies with the following distribution : Sofia 23 (4,41 %) ; Sofia 24 (5,35%) ; Sofia 25 (5,34%)

Cf légende : The Plovdiv oblast is divided into 2 sub-constituencies : Plovdiv 16 is the city itself (6.33%) et Plovdiv 17 represents the oblast's periphery (11.27%)

Document 7 :

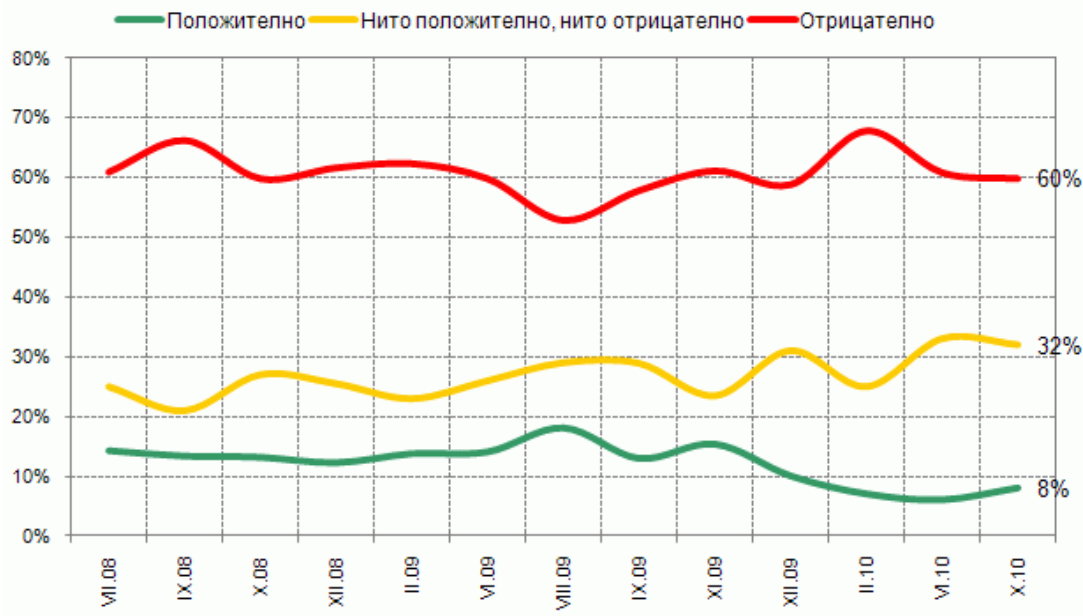
Quarter	Gross domestic product
2007Q1	106.28
2007Q2	108.01
2007Q3	105.41
2007Q4	106.28
2008Q1	107.18
2008Q2	107.06
2008Q3	107.12
2008Q4	103.83
2009Q1	94.70
2009Q2	96.20
2009Q3	95.14
2009Q4	94.25
2010Q1	96.03
2010Q2	100.51
2010Q3	101.00

Bulgarian GDP Index (previous year's corresponding quarter = 100 (%))

Source: <http://www.nsi.bg/otrasal.php?otr=10>

Document 8 :

Волен Сидеров



The Bulgarian public's evaluation of Volen Siderov's performance as political leader

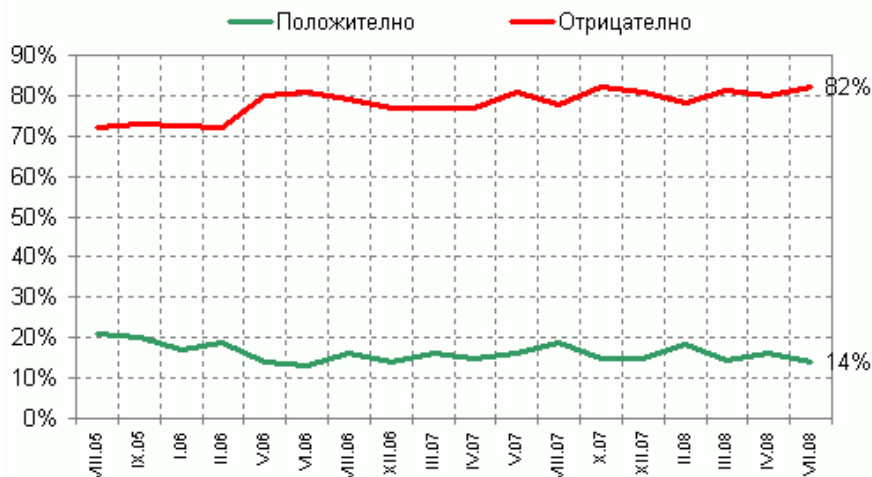
Source: <http://www.aresearch.org/bg/figures/730.html>

Caption:

- ed : Negative opinion R
- ellow : Indifferent (nor positive, nor negative opinion) Y
- reen : Positive opinion G

Document 9 :

Атака



Bulgarian public's evaluation of Ataka's political performance (July 2005 – December 2008)

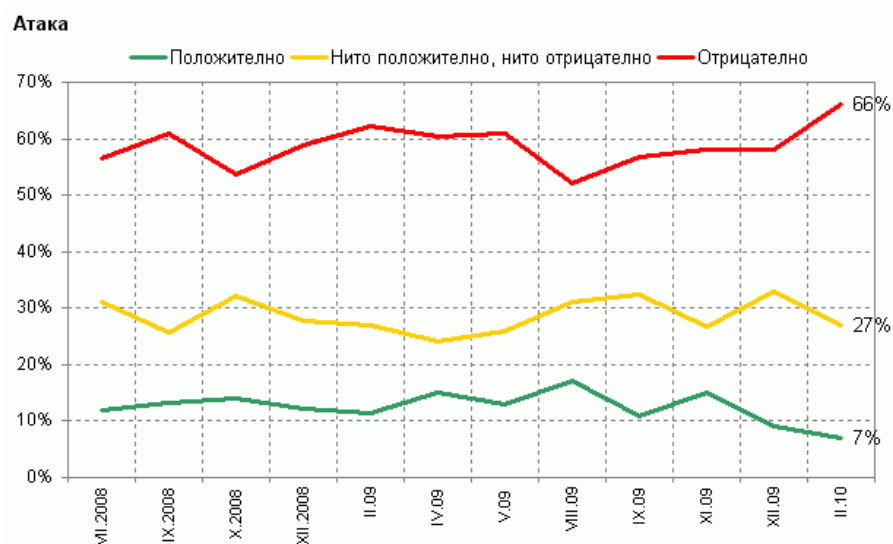
Source: <http://www.aresearch.org/bg/parties/71.html>

Caption:

- ed : Negative opinion R

reen : Positive opinion

Document 10 :



Bulgarian public's evaluation of Ataka's political performance (December 2008-December 2010)

Source: <http://www.aresearch.org/bg/parties.html>

Légende:

ed : Negative opinion

R

ellow : Indifferent (nor negative, nor positive opinion)

Y

reen : Positive opinion

G