

## BRIEF HISTORY OF MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN BULGARIA AND THEIR PROBLEMS

*The topic of the side-event: Acts of violence by far-right political party 'Ataka' against Muslims during the Friday prayer in the Sofia mosque*

After the Liberation of Bulgaria, a process of consolidation of the Muslim-Turkish minority began within the Turkish population that remained within the boundaries of the Third Bulgarian State during the second half of XIX century.

The minority rights of the Muslim community were proved on the grounds of some international and bilateral agreements such as the Berlin Treaty (1878), the Istanbul Protocol (1909), the Peace Treaty of 1913, which were signed between Bulgaria and Turkey and these rights were strengthened as well by the Bulgarian legislation, especially the Tarnovo Constitution. They defined the basic civil, cultural and religious rights.

Under these new conditions the Turkish-Muslim minority started to create its cultural and religious institutions, thanks to which it preserved and developed its identity. Above all things, the religious and educational institutions were restored and expanded. They began to adopt in time Bulgaria as their motherland and felt members of the state. They show consideration to its culture, values and traditions.

Towards the mid 40-ies of XX century a new period began in the history of the Bulgarian nation as well as in the history of the Muslim minority that was the period of the totalitarian regime over the Muslim minority which dominated the idea for the ethnic hygiene and the assimilation trends.

From the beginning of the 60s, the regime introduced a drastic change in its policy to the minorities. Under the pretext for "integration" of Turkish minority within the Bulgarian nation, its ethnical, cultural and religious peculiarities were gradually restricted.

In the 70-ies the regime started the so-called process of regeneration, which was a special way of ethnic assimilation.

The culmination point of the "regeneration process" was the campaign for a forcible change of the names of the Turkish population as the campaign took place in the end of 1984 and the beginning of 1985.

In 1989 democratic movements started the changes in the country. In the so originated situation, the Totalitarian regime tried to alter the policy of assimilation by the next following ethnic cleaning, as it expelled a few thousands Turks to western countries, opened the border with Turkey and provoked the "great trip". Over 350 000 people left their homes.

The "regeneration process" with its anti-human nature created serious social-economic and political problems. Above all, drove a wedge between Bulgarian nation and Turkish minority and created the ethnic tensions.

Changes occurred in the life of the Muslim minority in the transition to democracy period. Their political, religious and partially cultural rights began to be restored in accordance with some of the International Treaties that Bulgaria ratified and in accordance with the Constitution from 1991. These documents referred mainly to the political and religious rights.

Notwithstanding that, today we are beset with so many problems with regards to exercise the rights. I will touch briefly on the subjects below.

In our opinion appropriate conditions for exercise these rights haven't provided. There are not real preconditions for preserving the ethnical, religious and cultural identity. Frequently some circles qualify the demands for expansion of the rights as an expression to separate the minorities.

The Muslims in Bulgaria as a religious minority represents by Chief Mufti's Office. The Chief Mufti's office is one of the most important institutions of the Bulgarian Muslims that is established according to the international agreements 100 years ago, that bears historical and strategically importance and a fundamental organization of the Bulgarian Muslim.

Today the Mufti's Office is a religious institution that works in compliance with the Religions Act adopted in accordance with the rights stipulated in the Constitution of Republic of Bulgaria.

The Chief mufti's office represents approximately all of the 1.5 million Muslims in Bulgaria at national and international platforms and delivers to this community religious service.

The main objective of the Chief Mufti`s Office of the Muslim Confession is the Muslims in Bulgaria to continue to live integrated into the society under the conditions of unity and order based on the value-ethnic and cultural tolerance typical for the Bulgarian society. As it is obvious from the clear and sincere conduct of the Chief Mufti`s Office, our basic principle is to adhere to the country`s laws and rules, and show them respect. In this context Office of Chief Mufti is in excellent relationship and perfect harmony with the other religious groups in the country that goes on for ages.

Although the loyalty and propriety which we show to the statutory order in the country, the problems, which we wish to share with you for a more expeditious and reasonable resolution, are not few.

One of the main problems is that the Constitution and the Law of Denominations do not consider the Muslim Confession as a traditional religion, which is leading to many discriminatory moments in the attitude towards us. The method of registration and insufficiently effective Law on Denominations lead to long-standing juridical problems.

Another problem which refers to the Muslim Community, namely nationalized waqf properties during the Communist regime, that have not been restored after the democratic changes.

Ethnically and religiously motivated offensive acts against the Turkish-Muslim minority and its institutions continue unabatedly. The cases of encroachment on mosques in the form of desecration and vandalization of mosques over 20 years exceed 100. Acts of torching mosques, smashing windows, inscribing offensive and vulgar words and drawing swastikas on the walls and injuring worshippers have been taking place not as an exception, but as a norm of conduct with impunity.

The next one is the attempts to identify Muslims as enemies of the state and the nation which are completely groundless, they are an updated approach familiar to us from the not too distant past.

And today there are attempts accusing us of having links with international terrorist organizations, complicity in separatism and of other unsubstantiated actions, that stain our reputation.

The rise and spread of various nationalistic movements and parties in Bulgaria disturb individual classes and groups of citizens, yet threats and hostile attitude are often directed to the Muslim community in the country as a whole.

To this end political parties and formations are more often and more threatening as they periodically arrange different types of campaigns, share opinions that impair Muslims dignity and that aim to restrict their religious rights.

These parties clearly and explicitly express the idea that the Muslim community should be restricted and strictly controlled during the construction of mosques, the performance of given religious activities, and the religious training should be stopped at all levels. One of these parties is the far-right party named ATAKA.

Racist/xenophobic ATAKA party openly incite hatred against Turks-Muslims in Bulgaria by a persistent defamation campaign through its newspaper and television channel which it owned until recently. SKAT TV, owned by a former ATAKA member still continues to use inflammatory rhetoric against Turks-Muslims. The last events in front of the mosque in Sofia proves all that.

*On 20.05.2011 at around 13.00 hours, just before the Friday prayer, which would have taken place at 13:30 pm, when the worshippers were on the verge of performing their holy Friday prayer, in the immediate vicinity of the fence of the Banyabashi mosque, a group of 100-150 supporters of the ATAKA political party started shouting and chanted insults against the worshippers. By means of the loudspeakers and speaker-systems used by them and installed in front of the mosque fence the group thundered: "This is Bulgaria, you must go to Anatolia", "The Turks – out of Bulgaria", "Turkish stooges", "We do not want these physical drills, we have them neither in Europe, nor in America" (they referred to the Muslim prayer); they tried to exert psychological pressure with the loudspeakers, through which you could hear a police siren. Symbolically they cut a traditional Muslim hat into two by a knife and threatened the Muslims that the same would be applied to them (the Muslims). The speaker systems were placed on the roof of the small building (washroom) in the garden of the mosque so that to play chants and to shout during the prayer as they usually do during the prayer on Fridays. All that stirred up discontent among the worshippers; afterwards a few people got on washroom and tried to stop the protesters to place the speaker systems there. The worshippers' dismay provoked them more and their chanting turned into whirling of stones, hard objects and eggs on the*

*visitors of the mosque. It developed into a fight between the Muslims and the ATAKA supporters. The latter attacked the believers by hitting them with fists and kicking them and using hard and sharp objects. They unstuck and tore off marble tiles from the washroom attached to the mosque and whirled them onto the peaceable Muslims. As a result 5 worshippers were seriously wounded, one of them had grave head trauma. The ATAKA representatives were talking about “Islamic fundamentalists”, “Islamic extremists” in the interviews in the media and accused the Muslims that actually the worshippers attacked the ATAKA supporters. After a while the praying rugs were pulled out under the Muslims’ feet and were put into fire in the middle of the street. Among dozens of wounded were people who were badly injured and were taken to hospital.*

*After the clash the Prosecutor’s office started investigation against an unknown doer.*

*This party in the person of its leader have violated the Constitution of Bulgaria not only once as they have used the religion and faith of the Muslims for political reasons. They have preached hatred on religious and ethnic base, have profaned the religious temple and shrine of the Muslims, have attacked praying people, have thrown stones, wood and eggs at them, have performed xenophobic, racial and Islamophobic actions.*

*Dozens of media members that were shooting the ATAKA protest witnessed this incident. Some of them shot the incident to the end.*

*The incident is an alarming escalation of xenophobia and religious hatred instigated by political circles as they turned such provocation into a profession. It is a grave infringement on the physical inviolability and religious rights of the Bulgarian citizens.*

*I would like to state clearly that the protest meeting of the ATAKA party was held against the loudspeakers on the mosque, which were actually in the within the range of the lawful decibels. I would like to underline that the loudspeakers are used to enable the bigger part of the worshipers who are obliged to pray outside in front of the mosque to listen to the imam or the preacher. It is the only mosque in Sofia and it cannot hold all worshipers.*

In this sense I would like to draw attention to the the Article 12 from the LAW ON ASSEMBLY AND MANIFESTATIONS OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA.

**Art. 12. Paragraph** (2) reads as follow: The President of the Executive Board of the Municipal People's Council, or the mayor, respectively, is entitled to prohibit the holding of a gathering, a meeting or a manifestation in those cases where there exist unquestionable data evidencing that:

2. they endanger the public peace in the respective population centre;
4. they infringe the rights and freedoms of other citizens.

**But the Municipality didn't do this...**

*Only 20 days after this case a group of unidentified people jumped over the fence of the same mosque, broke the windows of the cabin at the entrance, broke open the door and got into the mosque. When they were going out they encountered a worshiper who came for the morning prayer. The boy was attacked and beaten badly, he was left helpless and covered with blood.*

***The response of the Bulgarian community, state institutions and non-governmental organizations to this abominable event was praiseworthy. They condemned this act of violence. The Grand Mufti expresses gratitude to them...***

To our regret, a constant practice has been established as every idea and intention of the Muslim confession in Bulgaria related to the development and the proper and complete functioning encounters suspicion, disapproval, and sometimes even grows into accusations.

Such is the case which has been widely debated and criticized by statesmen, politicians, media and part of our public - namely our intention to build a Cultural Education and Administrative Centre in Sofia, *dated from 2001*, which includes a mosque. We have witnessed horrendous speeches and attacks by politicians and public figures in the media against the institution of the Muslim confession regarding this project. By the way this case is indirectly relevant to the today's discussion.

The nationalist media has engaged in a brutal campaign of misinformation against the construction of this facility by presenting it as merely a mosque.

The Project of the complex submitted by the Office of the Chief Mufti to the Municipality of Sofia in November 2008 was returned with the request that it be devised so as not to include a mosque. Once the Office of the Chief Mufti handed over another project which did not include the mosque, Office of the Chief Prosecutor launched an investigation to determine the financial source with which the lot was purchased in the first place. Whereas no tangible result was achieved at the end of the investigation, it was decided that the lot was not fit to build an Islamic Center thereupon.

The reality is that the only existing mosque in the capital is not enough to accommodate the flow of worshippers. It has a seating capacity of 500-600 people. However, on Fridays more than 700-800 worshippers enter the mosque and, depending on the season, around 300 people remain outside. The situation is most striking during both Muslim holidays. *The fact that 30.000 strong Muslim population residing in Sofia is another matter of discussion.*

Every time they unsuccessfully try to hear the sermons, to pray and perform the prayer together with those who are inside for nearly 2 hours. During the winter season or when the weather is very hot and sometimes rainy, visitors often return without having performed their prayers. The mosque is visited by ambassadors, representatives and employees of foreign diplomatic missions, foreign and native students who often have to pray outside in the street and we cannot provide them with the necessary comfort and sufficient protection. Despite these undisputable facts and difficulties, the Sofia Municipality does not allow and cooperate for the construction of a second mosque even if it is part of the Islamic Centre where it is embedded in a natural and logical way.

Our demands are dictated by our need and desire to develop and provide better conditions for the Muslim community for development in religious aspect, which is a necessary condition for good co-existence of citizens of different faiths..

**Thank you for the attention.**

## ADDENDUM

News from: <http://www.mediapool.bg> ; <http://society.actualno.com> - September 9. 2011

### *The technical organizers of the protest in front of “Banya Bashi”:*

## Volen Siderov Provoked the Fight in Front of the Sofia Mosque

Volen Siderov is the main instigator of the fight in front of the Sofia mosque “Banya Bashi” in May this year. This is what the two former partners in the Ataka headquarters, Ivaylo Minov and Martin Martinov, put forward in front of Mediapool. They were the technical organizers of the nationalistic protest on 20<sup>th</sup> May, that was permitted by the municipality but which grew into serious clashes between the Ataka supporters and the Muslims who came to pray.

Obviously startled from the fact that accusations could be laid against them and that they could be sentenced due to Siderov, at the moment they are playing the part of the next people disappointed by their leader and who are leaving him. They suddenly opened their eyes about the fake nationalistic motives of Siderov’s public actions whose unreserved loyalty to the currently governing party GERB has had its price – literally in cash.

Up to now Volen Siderov has not picked up his mobile phone to comment on the revelations of his former colleagues in the party on whose services and loyalty he has counted.

### **A new version about “The Peaceful Protest”**

On May 20<sup>th</sup> while about 50 Muslims were performing their afternoon prayer on rugs in front of the mosque in the centre of Sofia Ataka supporters came there and started playing patriotic songs at first in order to drown the hodja’s voice. The tension escalated when the Ataka supporters started shouting “janissary”, “toadies”, “Ataka”, “victory”. Some minutes later, when the protesters attacked the praying people in front of the mosque with flags and other materials they had at their disposal, fights began. Some policemen who interfered were injured during the bully.

### **"Ataka" denies and threatened with court procedures**

In a letter sent to the Mediapool editorial on Friday the Ataka administration denied the statements of their two members and announced that they would apply to the court for their rights.



"After an internal investigation about what had happened in front of the Sofia mosque on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011 the management of the party took a decision to dismiss Ivaylo Minov and Martin Martinov from the party headquarters. It was established that on this day at the Ataka meeting they did wilful actions which were in discrepancy with the management orders by means of which they contributed for causing a provoking situation of evil-doing factors for the Ataka party" reads the statement.

Volen Siderov's party added further that the approach would be the same to anybody who lowered the prestige of the Ataka party in such a manner. The lies that particular media respond to orders and that were spread by the two persons would be succeeded by legal procedures having the same development as we had already witnessed during Volen Siderov's legal procedures against Slavi Trifonov who had defamed him."

The same day, Ivaylo Minov, who was a member of Ataka party and worked in the party headquarters, said that the Muslims had instigated the protesters and the policemen had not done their job as no Muslim was arrested. "We are protesting against the loudspeakers not against the Muslims. The people in the region complain from the noise coming from the mosque", said he at that time.

Four months later Ivaylo Minov gave a totally different account of the events. He said before Mediapool that the clashes started after Volen Siderov's interference.

**"The idea was to have a peaceful protest 15 metres far from the shrine"**

"I was the organizer of the protest. Volen appointed me to be responsible for it", confessed the former Ataka party member.

"Siderov ordered me to summon young people for the protest and I organized it together with our supporters from Sofia region and from Gabrovo – Luibomir Linkov's boys; this group is a bit more extreme than us", explained Minov.

"It took us two days to organize the people and they were in front of the headquarters at 11.30 am. Desislav Chukolov was appointed to be the leader of the procession, but neither he nor Volen Siderov were there. I phoned Volen, he explained to me to go on without him because he had a lecture in Shumen. As I had already summoned all those people for the protest and as he had ordered me and I went there", carried on the organizer.

"We positioned the speakers, gathered together but quite far from the mosque. My idea was to gather at about 15 metres from the mosque in the garden for a silent protest. Actually, we shouted "Ataka", "Victory" and so on for a while; that was all; there was no other aggression", added the member who quitted the party.

"Shortly before the beginning of the protest, about 15 minutes earlier, Volen Siderov and Desislav Chukolov appeared. Then Volen said: "why did you move so far, come forward" –

and all the people followed him. Then he started shouting “What are these rugs, what are these things here!?”. Then he wanted me to place the speakers at a higher and nearer location so that people to be able to hear him when he was speaking. So, I climbed up the toilet and put the speaker there. Then we were attacked from the mosque and then the fight started”, explained Minov before Mediapool.

“If he had not been there, we would have protested at a greater distance”, assured he.

### **“I did not participated in the fighting, but I am leaving because of the mosque”**

“We are leaving Ataka because of the fighting in front of the mosque” stated Martin Martinov and Minov. They also emphasized that they had not participated in the fights but they assumed that if they had kept silence until the elections, they would be sacrificed after that.

To the question what made them think in that way the two organizers explained that after the clashes in front of the mosque Siderov congratulated them for the “well done job”.

“Then he took food for all the protesters in front of the mosque and praised us. Now he is explaining to me that the rating of the party has lowered by 30 % because of me”, said Minov.

Siderov points at me because I placed the speakers up on the public toilet”, explained he. “But he is saying it now, he made me do it then though”, added Minov.

### **The Prosecutor’s office extended the investigation until the end of November**

As an answer to a question asked by Mediapool the Sofia Prosecutor’s Office (SPO) announced that the investigation for the spread of ethnic hatred, which started at the end of May, was extended until the end of November. The lawsuit is still against an unidentified doer.

“All members of the Mufti’s Office management are going to be interrogated; technical experts’ note is going to be made about the video recordings from the security cameras around the mosque”, clarified the spokesman of SPO, Margarita Nemska.

The investigation started with the city prosecutor Nikolay Kokinov’s assurance that his colleagues would lay charge only after having collected all evidence. The proceedings before the prosecution were preceded by another scandal generated by Ataka party leader Volen Siderov who rushed to fight with another independent parliament member Korman Ismailov during a programme on the Bulgarian National Radio.

### **Ataka supporters’ wage - 100 leva per meeting**

Meanwhile Minov and Martinov admitted that some of the protests were “paid” by the party headquarters. “For the protest in front of the mosque no money was paid, but there were other protests organized by me again for which the attendees took 100 leva”, gave details Minov.

“Well, the protests we held in front of the Serbian embassy was paid and I was the one who took care of the organization”, admitted he.

Minov and his associate Martinov brought forward another reason for their decision to quit Ataka party – the people from the party paid them only half of the salary they were due to have and which became a tradition.

“Our social security contribution is 1300 leva, actually we are receiving only 500”, they said.

Even the accountant of the party, Daniela Radkova, tried to make them sign documents that entitle Siderov to decrease their salaries without any notification but they refused.

### **“The advice from a friend: I will ruin you”**

When Siderov got aware of his subordinates’ intention to leave him he threatened them: “I will ruin you”. Before Mediapool Minov and Martinov said that having been asked the question whether he had threatened them the party leader uttered that it was only “advice from a friend”.

“I simply cannot stay by such a person”, said Minov as he shared his political disagreement to Volen Siderov’s line. “I will give an example right now – it is not possible, after the events in front of the mosque, on the same day when the fighting took place, to request Tsvetanov’s resignation and the other day Tsvetanov to be the best. It is a double standard”, pointed out Minov as he repeated the arguments given by other people who had left the Ataka party and who are against their former leader now.

### **GERB pay to Ataka for the support**

“What Volen makes is not due to a noble cause to improve the standard of life of the people in Bulgaria. On the contrary, the only thing that he is improving is his life. Because the truth is that Siderov takes money from GERB so that Ataka to support Boyko Borisov”, also stated the former party member. He did not point out specific amounts of money, neither showed he the manner of how “the payments” were made.

The two people who left Ataka also retold before Mediapool about the instructions they used to have from their boss regarding the support their party rendered to the governing party. “At a meeting in the party headquarters he told us that when we would go to a place we should say that we supported GERB without any conditions, without asking for any offices because it was the smaller evil thing than the coalition of three parties”.

## **Siderov demonstrates economic prosperity**

In order to support their words with facts, Martinov and Minov said that since the party started supporting the government Volen Siderov's financial status has suddenly improved.

“In Dimitrovgrad, for instance, he paid a bill to the amount of 5000 leva for about fifteen people. Only the wine that Siderov ordered was approximately 1000 leva”, stated the two people who left the party. “Volen drinks 18-year-old whiskey and smokes cigars at the price of 120 leva each. If somebody can explain to me in what way it is related to our poor voters, I would be very pleased”, said Minov.

According to his colleague Martinov's words repair works amounting to 300 000 leva were made on the third floor of the party headquarters however, only the floor tiles and the parquet were renewed.

Sources:

<http://www.mediapool.bg>

<http://society.actualno.com>