



An extreme nationalist "Ataka" demonstration on 3 March 2006, the anniversary of Bulgaria's liberation from the Turkish rule. One of the banners demands "Bulgaria for Bulgarians!"

Bulgaria became a full member of the European Union on 1 January 2007. The country's human rights record, however, did not improve in 2006, and the overall situation with minority rights in fact deteriorated. The European Commission failed to adequately address these failures and to effectively use the pre-accession process in order to achieve improvements.

The regression with regard to minority rights and tolerance included *inter alia* threats of forced evictions of numerous Roma families and ill-treatment of Roma by the police, attacks on mosques and other sites of importance to the Muslim population as well as hate speech against ethnic Turks. An orchestrated nation-wide police campaign to intimidate members of OMO Ilinden-PIRIN, a political party promoting the rights of ethnic Macedonians that Bulgarian authorities refused to register was also underway.

Xenophobic and racially motivated acts and hate speech were encouraged by and embedded in the political agenda of the extremist nationalist party "Ataka" (Attack) that enjoyed increasing popularity in Bulgaria. Throughout the year, it was al-

lowed to spread hate propaganda without interference by authorities.¹

Racism, intolerance and hate speech

The "Ataka" party, which gained representation on an aggressively xenophobic platform in the Bulgarian parliament by winning 8% of the vote in the 2005 general elections, openly advocated hostility and discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities. During 2006 the party used extensively its propaganda mouthpiece, SKAT TV, to preach hate. Neither the media regulatory body, the Council for Electronic Media (CEM), nor any other governmental institution took action during the year to address SKAT TV's clear violations of the media law. The racist rhetoric of "Ataka" was on many occasions picked up also by several other media outlets. "Ataka" and many other extreme racist and xenophobic organizations operated undisturbed throughout the year.

◆ "Ataka" organized an unprecedented picket in front of the Banya Basi mosque in Sofia for several months in the summer demanding that the mosque's loudspeak-

ers be switched off. The mayor of Sofia allowed this action to drag until September although in June he swiftly suspended a modest rally of the residents of the Roma neighborhood of Batalova Vodenitsa, who wanted to demonstrate in front of the municipality against the planned demolition of their houses (see below).

"Ataka's" leader Volen Siderov, an extreme xenophobe and a holocaust denier, qualified for the second round of the October 2006 presidential elections and received more than 24% of the vote.

National and ethnic minorities

Despite government promises and programs for improvement, the Roma housing situation worsened in several cities during 2006.

◆ On 23 June, the residents of Sofia's Batalova Vodenitsa Roma ghetto received an official notice issued by the municipal authorities to vacate their homes within seven days, failing which they would be forcibly evicted by the police. This action was based on a decision of the Supreme



Volen Siderov, "Ataka's" leader.

Administrative Court from 10 June, which judgment upheld a municipal order from September 2005 to demolish the houses of over 100 Roma whose families had been living on this plot of land for nearly a century. No compensation or alternative housing was envisaged. The demolition was stopped in the last moment due to a letter of protest signed by four members of the European Parliament. The municipal government started looking for a plot to relocate Roma and decided to move them to the Ovcha Kupel neighborhood of Sofia, a decision that provoked some negative reactions among surrounding population, with the region's mayor fueling racist attitudes. On 14 November he was reported as saying: "The cows in Ovcha Kupel harm less than a local Gypsy neighborhood... Roma must gradually acquire normal citizens' habits, and before this happens, they cannot live among citizens... A Roma settlement near living quarters is ten times more harmful than a garbage bin." No other authority in Bulgaria took any action against this clear instigation of racist hatred and discrimination. The situation of the Roma from Batalova Vodenica remained uncertain by the year's end.²

Several other incidents provoked by ethnic intolerance resulted in human rights violations. No perpetrators were found and brought to justice in any of these cases.

◆ In March, the mosque in Pleven was painted with swastikas and with the inscription: "Turks – out of Bulgaria!"

◆ In June, a Molotov cocktail was thrown at the house of one of the leaders of the Turkish National Union, "Menderes Kungun." This happened several days after the union, a private citizens association, was denied registration by the Plovdiv Regional Court following a fierce xenophobic media campaign. The court found that a citizens association cannot legitimately have as a goal "development of political pluralism in

order to democratize and de-monopolize the Turkish community.”

◆ At the end of July, the mosque in Kazanluk was burned with a Molotov cocktail.

◆ On two occasions in October, police indiscriminately beat up Roma residents of two neighborhoods in Sofia – Hristo Botev and Filipovtsi. The first incident took place after the police had attempted to brutally disperse a private party, and the second incident in the course of a police search. In both cases police claimed that their actions were lawful.

In another problematic development, the Sofia City Court decided in October 2006, in a proceeding conducted in gross violation of due process standards, to refuse registration to OMO Ilinden-PIRIN, a political party that draws support among the country's ethnic Macedonian minority. This decision was made despite an October 2005 ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), according to which a previous ban on the party violated the right to freedom of association. The ECtHR has found violations of freedom of association and assembly in a total of five cases involving ethnic Macedonians from Bulgaria, but these rulings have not been effectively implemented by the Bulgarian government and have not resulted in any concrete positive changes.

◆ On 5 May the mayor of Blagoevgrad, Lazar Prichkapov prohibited a group of Macedonians from commemorating the anniversary of the death of Gotse Delchev, a famous leader of the struggle for Macedonian independence from the Ottoman rule. The ban was motivated by a children's festival taking place at the same place and time. On 15 September mayor Prichkapov again denied a group of Macedonians to commemorate the “Day of the Macedonian Genocide” in Blagoevgrad, claiming that a music festival was taking place in the same place at the same time.

In an unprecedented campaign of intimidation in November and December, Bulgarian police questioned thousands of members of OMO Ilinden-PIRIN summoning them one by one to police stations throughout the country. There they were asked about their membership in the party, as well as about the circumstances in which they signed its founding papers. Several persons reported threats and harassment in addition to questioning. The action was reportedly ordered by the Sofia Regional Prosecutor's Office in order to prove irregularities during the founding of the party.

The orchestrated police campaign coincided with a demand by several European Parliament members that Bulgaria should recognize its Macedonian minority and should stop obstructing the registration of OMO Ilinden-PIRIN. Representatives of all Bulgarian parliamentary political parties stated that there is no Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. On 22 November the speaker of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dimitar Tsachev went as far as to declare that there are no minorities at all in the country.³

Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities

The Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities published its opinion on Bulgaria on 5 April 2006.⁴ While the opinion had already been adopted in 2004, it applied well to the 2006 situation of minorities since no progress had been made in the meantime to improve the realization of minority rights in Bulgaria.

The advisory committee *inter alia* criticized the narrow scope of application of the convention for the Protection of National Minorities by Bulgarian authorities by excluding from its protection ethnic Macedonians and Pomaks who claim a distinct ethnic identity. In this context the advisory committee also expressed its con-

cern over the categorization of minority groups in the last two population censuses (1992 and 2001), which did not include Pomaks at all. The committee's opinion also pointed to the persistence of a high degree of discriminatory attitudes and behavior toward persons belonging to more vulnerable groups, particularly Roma, which resulted in discrimination against them in all sectors of life.

In addition to calling for measures to remove the problems mentioned above,

the advisory committee required, among other things, efforts to ensure full observance of the right of persons belonging to minorities to freedom of peaceful assembly and association; measures in the legislative sphere and at the practical level to remedy inadequacies in the use of the languages of persons belonging to minorities and also in topographical indications; and expanding teaching of (and in) the languages of persons belonging to minorities within the compulsory curriculum.

SOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

- ◆ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, at www.bghelsinki.org

Other organizations:

- ◆ Tolerance Foundation, at www.tolerancefoundation.org
- ◆ European Roma Rights Centre, at www.errc.org
- ◆ European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, at <http://eumc.europa.eu>
- ◆ Amnesty International, at www.amnesty.org
- ◆ Eumap.org, at www.eumap.org
- ◆ Center for the Study of Democracy, at www.csd.bg
- ◆ Bulgarian Lawyers for Human Rights, at www.blhr.org
- ◆ Access to Information Programme, at www.aip-bg.org
- ◆ Center for Independent Living, at www.cil-bg.org

Publications:

- ◆ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, *Objektiv*, a quarterly magazine on human rights.
- ◆ Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Opinion on Bulgaria (adopted on 27 May 2004), ACFC/OP/I(2006)001, published on 5 April 2006, at www.coe.int

Endnotes

- ¹ See also IHF, "Helsinki Committees Denounce Anti-minority Rhetoric and Discrimination in Bulgaria," 21 November 2006, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4347.
- ² See also IHF and the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, "Bulgaria: Roma residents of Sofia's Batalova Vodenitsa ghetto face forceful eviction and demolition of their houses by the Sofia Municipality," 27 June 2006, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4272.

-
- ³ This was the official policy of the Communist regime during the forcible campaign to change the names of the Bulgarian Turks in mid-1980's.
- ⁴ Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Opinion on Bulgaria (adopted on 27 May 2004), ACFC/OP/I(2006)001, published on 5 April 2006, at www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/minorities/2._framework_convention_%28monitoring%29/2._monitoring_mechanism/4._opinions_of_the_advisory_committee/1._country_specific_opinions/1._first_cycle/List%20of%20Opinions.asp#TopOfPage.