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The Achilles Heel of Bulgaria's Far Right: the Linkage between the Extreme Right and the Patriotic Front



This is the 14. article in our series *Trouble on the Far-Right*. For more information on the series, please click [here](#).

by Yordan Kutiyski

Ever since Bulgaria's admission to the European Union (EU) in 2007, the country's domestically weak far right has managed to send its representatives to the European Parliament (EP). Prior to 2014, these MEPs remained largely isolated, retaining a non-affiliated status. Initially, Volen Siderov's far right party *Attack*, the first of its kind in post-communist Bulgaria, won three seats in the legislative body in 2007. Formed in 2005, *Attack* quickly gained electoral support, conveying a strong xenophobic and anti-minority rhetoric combined with emphasis on Orthodox Christian values and opposition to globalization. No other Bulgarian party has previously sought to attract voters using such a strategy. *Attack* participated in the short-lived *Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty* group in the EP. Further efforts for constructing a lasting political grouping on the far right with the participation of Bulgarian parties remained futile, making their influence on debate-shaping and decision-making hardly possible. Winning a seat less in 2009, *Attack* remained outside of any recognized EP political group.

The situation changed in 2014, however, when the *Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Bulgarian National Movement* (IMRO-BNM) propelled [Angel Dzhabazki](#) to the EP and later to the soft Eurosceptic *European Conservatives and Reformists* (ECR) group. IMRO originated as 19th century independence movement and in the early 20th century was engaging in various political activities, including terrorist attacks. During communist rule, IMRO was allowed to exist as a cultural organization, resuming its organizational and political activity after 1989 under the name IMRO-BNM, initially taking part in the democratic opposition, *Union of Democratic Forces* (UDF). As the party gradually moved rightwards, it left UDF to take part in a number of electoral coalitions, some of which leading to

parliamentary representation. IMRO-BNM's rhetoric was less explicitly nationalist in the early years of Bulgaria's transition to democracy and became more and more so during the 2000s and especially after the success of *Attack*. In 2014, together with like-minded parties and formations, IMRO-BNM founded the *Patriotic Front* (PF). Contrary to *Attack*, the newly established far right coalition quickly gained prominence in both the European and Bulgarian political scene and is seen as an acceptable partner. However, PF's links to extreme right movements and activists could negatively impact its reputation and credibility.

The Formation and rise of the Patriotic Front

Disillusioned by *Attack*'s parliamentary support for a short-lived centrist minority coalition government at home, its electorate shrank with nearly 80 per cent from one European Election to the next, leaving the party empty-handed in 2014. Moreover, *Attack* gradually shifted its rhetoric and platform away from the strongly voiced opposition to a perceived "Turkeysation" and "Gypsisation" of Bulgaria to advocating statist economic policy and close cooperation with Russia: a move that did not bring much electoral benefit. This vacuum certainly contributed to the rise of IMRO-BNM, which, in coalition with the centrist conservatives *Bulgaria Without Censorship* (BWC) received two seats in the EP, including one for Dzhambazki, who has attracted criticism for his radical views and [controversial statements](#). The electoral volatility, brought about by the decline of *Attack*, created space for political entrepreneurship on the far right, with the *National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria* (NFSB) led by former Siderov associate and media-owner Valery Simeonov joining forces with IMRO-BNM prior to the October 2014 early Bulgarian Parliamentary election. Both parties failed to pass the four per cent threshold running alone in 2013, with NFSB and IMRO-BNM gaining 3.7 and 1.9 per cent of the vote respectively. In 2014, however, their collaboration product – the PF, became the fifth largest party gaining 7.3 per cent and 19 seats in the National Assembly. Simultaneously, *Attack* was relegated from fourth to seventh political force, and while remaining parliamentary represented, lost more than half of its seats.

The Patriotic Front: an acceptable political player?

Whereas *Attack* has been a political outsider at home and abroad, deprived of government participation domestically and unable to collaborate on the European level, the PF is largely seen as an acceptable partner. The party maintains a rather moderate profile: its 2014 program focuses on national economic revival, modernisation of healthcare and education, as well as fighting corruption. With regard to its stances on ethnic minority issues, the PF acknowledges that all ethnic groups should have equal rights, given that they profess a Bulgarian identity and adhere to Bulgarian legislation¹. At the EU level, its representative Angel Dzhambazki joined the ECR – a club of largely established parties including Britain's incumbent Conservatives. At home, the PF joined a wide coalition government led by the centre-right *Citizens for European development of Bulgaria* (GERB), obtaining a share of governing positions, including these of deputy ministers. Thus, in a very short period, the PF proved to be a much more successful political project than *Attack* ever was. Still, the two parties share a common background², while their voters have very similar socio-economic and ideological outlook. Therefore, it is remarkable that the PF was rapidly integrated into mainstream politics, while *Attack* has remained in isolation for years, especially due to PF's links to extreme right activists who openly profess National Socialist ideology. These links may prove particularly problematic for the image of the PF abroad, as the IMRO-BNM has persistently collaborated with the extreme right and even nominated for office immensely questionable personalities, accused of committing various hate crimes and apprehended by the Bulgarian judicial

system. Since no parliamentary represented party openly associates itself with National Socialism, such linkages need to be closely scrutinized and condemned, in an effort to keep Bulgarian and European politics free from any form of anti-democratic influence.



MEP Angel Dzhambazki (centre) and defendant Dimitar Lazarov (left) in court before a hearing © Tsvetan Tomchev

Links with the extreme right

Angel Dzhambazki, arguably the most prominent representative of Bulgaria's far right, has been personally involved in numerous campaigns aimed at securing the release of individuals (currently not in custody) well-known in the Bulgarian neo-Nazi milieu – Nikolai Yovev and Dimitar Lazarov. Yovev, an extreme right activist from Bulgaria's south-west, was arrested in 2012 in relation to the murder of a security guard at a branch of *EuroRoma*, a party promoting Roma rights, in the town of Sandanski. The guard died as a result of an explosion, after a [bomb was planted at the party office](#). Previously familiar to police due to his involvement in the [assault of a Roma family](#), in the aftermath of a protest that took place after the vehicular [homicide of 19 years old Bulgarian](#) by a Roma man in the village of Katunitsa, Yovev is also well-known for dissemination of National Socialist propaganda materials and his involvement in the football hooligan movement. IMRO-BNM has publically announced its support for Yovev, claiming that the accusations against him constitute "[repression against nationalists](#)". The party went as far as nominating Yovev for parliament prior to the 2013 election, in an attempt [to secure his release](#), while Dzhambazki has attended several protests [against his detention](#).

Glorified by the extreme right, the activist remains a strongly controversial figure. It is regrettable that somebody occupying the immensely influential position of a MEP has voiced public support and provided assistance to a well-known neo-Nazi. Even though, to this day, it remains unclear whether Yovev was involved in the murder, his open propagation of anti-democratic ideology is a reason strong enough for those with a democratic mind-set to distance themselves from such a questionable personality. Yet, Dzhambazki and IMRO-BNM have rallied behind Yovev's candidature.

This is not the only instance in which Dzhambazki and IMRO-BNM have provided support for arrested extreme right activists. In 2010, on their way to a demonstration against the detention of undocumented

immigrants, a group of far left activists was attacked and severely beaten in a tram in Bulgaria's capital – Sofia. The victims recognised Dimiter Lazarov – an IMRO-BNM member with ties to neo-Nazi groups such as the militant white supremacist movement “Blood & Honour” and the organisation of radical nationalists National Resistance, as one of the perpetrators. After Lazarov was detained in relation with the crime, IMRO-BNM has used the same tactics, nominating the right-wing extremist for office prior to the 2014 parliamentary election. At the time, the court has still not delivered a verdict on Lazarov's involvement. Rather than distancing himself from representatives of the extreme right, Angel Dzhambazki personally attended the trial and publically defended Lazarov.





Nikolai lovev via snews.bg

Conclusion

The Bulgarian far right has only recently emerged as a credible political partner both at home and abroad. At the European level, the clear linkage between a MEP and the extreme right can easily impair or even destroy a political career. In Bulgaria, however, PF's role as a junior coalition partner is unlikely to be undermined within the current parliamentary configuration, given the close ties between the Prime Minister and the party's leadership. It remains to be seen whether PF's European partners will ever question Dzhambazki for his links to the Bulgarian neo-Nazi movement. These links may prove to be the Achilles heel of Bulgaria's acceptable far right, destroying its international, if not domestic, credibility.

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1. As written in the political program of the Patriotic Front from 2014. Available [here](#). 
2. Rashkova, Ekaterina R. & Zankina, Emilia (2015): How Radical, How Much For Women? Examining the Gender Question in Radical Right Parties in Bulgaria. Available [here](#). 

Tags: [Angel Dzhambazki](#), [attack](#), [Bulgaria](#), [Dimitar Lazarov](#), [IMRO](#), [IMRO-BNM](#), [Nikolai Yovev](#), [Patriotic Front](#)

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