

Major Instances of Anti-Semitism in Bulgaria and their Underlying Reasons

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Bulgaria is a country that prides itself for having saved its Jews during the Second World War, and rightly so: the joint efforts of Bulgarian political and religious elites succeeded to prevent sending Bulgaria's 48.000 Jews to concentration camps. What was until recently less often discussed in Bulgaria is the fact that in March 1943 more than 11.000 Jews from Bulgarian occupied territories in Macedonia and Thrace were deported to Nazi concentration camps. It was only after this shameful event that the Bulgarian elite mobilized itself to protect the Jewish population living within its old country borders. Reflection on and debate about the events in the early years of the Second World War - the local version of the Kristallnacht that took place in 1939, when Bulgarian Nazi youth vandalized several Jewish shops in Sofia, or the "Law for the protection of the nation", voted in 1940, that envisaged the deprivation of Bulgarian Jews' political, economic and civil rights, the deportation of Jewish men to work camps, the introduction of the yellow star and foresaw the eventual annihilation of this population in concentration camps – are still not present enough in the Bulgarian public discourse. And yet some important contributions to this debate have been made in recent years, most notably by the comprehensive study of Rumen Avramov "Salvation and Disgrace" (Sofia, 2012), which analyzes the complex reality of Bulgarian society's standing towards its Jews during the Second World War.

Seventy years after the end of Nazism, are Bulgarians tolerant and protective to those in danger, to those weakened by political or other circumstances? Is Bulgarians' tolerance towards the Jews a myth or a reality today? Every now and again in recent years information surfaces in the media about vandalism, which seems motivated by anti-Semitic sentiment. On June 4, 2014 four boys aged 19-20 drew a swastika on the Sofia synagogue. There have been occasions in the recent past where in

Pazardjik on Hitler's Birthday an unknown person has put the Nazi flag on the highest chimney in the city; where Molotov cocktail was thrown in the courtyard of the Jewish school in Sofia, Jewish cemeteries in the country have been vandalized, anti-Semitic texts have been written on the walls of Jewish buildings... Are these acts a cause for concern?

These instances are certainly troublesome, and have to be countered, but they remain individual acts, and can hardly be described as the established opinion of the entire Bulgarian people. One interpretation coming from literature insights (e.g. "Sanjka" by Zahar Prilepin, an author who himself used to belong to radical groups) explains the mechanism of how young people, in want of a cause, are easily seduced by strong ideologies offering a cause and belonging to a community. Often these young people do not even know or understand the ideology whose signs they draw on the walls, and their acts are more than anything else a signal of the failure of society to integrate and offer young people a perspective in a meaningful way. These are often deeds committed by individuals going through adolescence and looking for a cause or excitement, an exit for them from a life without purpose, rather than the result of a deeply rooted ideology shared by many. In itself the phenomena, which is hardly a representative trend in society, requires attention, and should be acted upon in terms of finding ways to integrate marginalizing youth groups.

The President of the Jewish organisation in Bulgaria, Maxim Benevisti, also seems to be not unduly concerned by these acts, because in 2011 he stated that Bulgaria is the country with the lowest level of anti-Semitic acts in the European Union, and basically tolerant towards Jews. Note that his is the most representative voice of the Bulgarian Jewish community, and that he ought to know well the situation of Jews and anti-Semitism in this country better than anyone else.

At the same time, a world-wide study of anti-Semitic sentiments, commissioned by the Anti-Defamation League and published last year, comes up with surprising results. The study uses an index, comprising of 11 questions that were developed by researchers at the University of California, to provide an analytic tool for identifying respondents who harbour anti-Semitic attitudes and for measuring general acceptance of various negative Jewish stereotypes. According to the study, 44% of Bulgarians are anti-Semites and more than two thirds of the population (67%) state that Jews have too big an influence in the world business affairs and that they dominate the financial markets.

Every fifth Bulgarian (21%) is convinced, the study shows that Jews should be blamed for wars around the world.

So where does this striking discrepancy between the assessment of local opinions by the most legitimate representative of the Bulgarian Jewish community versus a world-wide study come from?

The methodology of the study is the following: the respondents are presented 11 questions about stereotypes and then asked whether they think this is true or not true: Are Jews more loyal to Israel than to your country? Do Jews have too much power in international financial markets? Do Jews have too much control over global affairs? Do Jews think they are better than other people? Do Jews have too much control over the global media? Are Jews responsible for most of the world's wars? Do Jews have too much power in the business world? Is it true that Jews don't care what happens to anyone but their own kind? Do people hate Jews because of the way Jews behave? Do Jews have too much control over the United States government? Do Jews still talk too much about what happened to them in the Holocaust? Bulgarian respondents (the study is representative) have given the above-mentioned worrying results.

The explanation of the different analysis regarding anti-Semitism in Bulgaria given by the local Jewish community representative and the global study is rooted, I believe, in the very methodology and the selection of study questions. The questions, it seems to me, are formulated with Arab anti-Semitism and American anti-Semitism in mind, and are rather irrelevant to the Bulgarian context. The questions “Do Jews have too much control over the United States government?” is bizarre in Bulgaria, where the public is rather ignorant about US politics. “Are Jews more loyal to Israel than to your country?” also resonates in a peculiar way in Bulgaria, where there is nothing resembling of a Jewish lobby with any influence over Bulgarian government's policy towards Israel (as much as Bulgaria does have one). Such questions are apparently formulated with the most popular anti-Semitic claims in the United States in mind, and can receive only abstract answers from Bulgarian respondents.

“Are Jews responsible for most of the world's wars?” on the other hand, seem to have the most popular anti-Semitic claims in the Arab world in mind, and are again irrelevant in the Bulgarian

context. And as long as in the Bulgarian public space current and recent wars receive prominent attention, these are the wars in the Former Yugoslavia, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the Georgia-Russia conflict, where there is no way to imagine Jewish involvement, even if one tries hard. Even the war in Iraq - where one could expect the respondents to see “Jewish conspiracy” involvement (because of the role of the US), a war where Bulgarian soldiers were involved, as much as there was a public attention (and it was far less than one could expect) - was debated in Bulgaria more in terms of the financial interests of great powers (petrol), rather than a “Jewish conspiracy”.

Finally, questions like “Do people hate Jews because of the way Jews behave?” and “Do Jews think they are better than other people?” are quite abstract in a country where most people have hardly any personal experience of interaction with Jews. In 2010, only 2000 Jews lived in Bulgaria, 0,03% of the total population: the majority of people simply have no personal interactions with Jews, so they are unable to answer such questions.

After the political change of 1989, a new “exit” of Jews from Bulgaria to Israel and Western countries took place. In 1992, after the first “Jewish exodus” wave from Bulgaria, there were 3461 Jews. If the tendency continues, soon there will be hardly any Jews left in the country, and not because they were forced out by wide-spread anti-Semitic sentiments, but mainly because of the worsening living conditions in Bulgaria in the last decades, a reason that drove another 2 million people to leave the country during the same period.

If there is a tendency to be observed in Bulgarians' anti-Semitic sentiments, it is that anti-Semitism becomes more and more abstract, targeted rhetorically against Jews, of which however Bulgarians know little, as they hardly have a chance to confront them in their everyday life.

Where anti-Semitic sentiments are still to be observed in Bulgaria today (and it is a very marginal fraction of the public that occasionally expresses such), one can see how the Jew is becoming a synonym for “the elite” that is to be blamed for all our troubles, a metaphor for the political and economic almighty that people do not have control over. Globalization fuels the frustration of the masses with these elites, people feel more and more dis-empowered, and their frustration finds surprising expressions. The list of the usual suspects of conspiracy theories is long, and it includes

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local oligarchs, media moguls, and of course the political class. The figure of the almighty Jew is just one of them, and way not the most popular one.

So, if there is any anti-Semitism left in Bulgaria today, it is in fact an anti-elite sentiment in disguise.