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Bulgaria: an anti-Muslim incident as an element of the pre-election game

On 19 May in front the main mosque in Sofia a few dozen members of the ultra-nationalist party Ataka clashed with praying Muslims. This incident is being used by opposition parties in vehement criticisms of the minority government formed by GERB which is in an informal coalition with Ataka. However, the risk of a collapse of the government of Boyko Borisov and the escalation of tensions on ethnic or religious grounds in Bulgaria is now quite insignificant.

The unrest erupted after a rally was organised by Ataka against broadcasting Friday prayers through loudspeakers fixed next to Sofia's main mosque, Bania Basha. The fight was provoked by Ataka militants, a few dozen people took part in it, two participants and five policemen were injured. The incident was condemned by the president, prime minister and the majority of Bulgarian political parties. A firm protest note was also issued by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (the majority of the 10% Muslim community in Bulgaria are Turks) and the parliamentary group of Liberals in the European Parliament.

This incident should not be interpreted as evidence of increased ethnic tensions or xenophobic sympathies in Bulgarian society. Currently Ataka enjoys the record lowest support of approximately 1%. Ultra-nationalists instigate clashes as they count on mobilising their electorate before the local and presidential elections scheduled for October. The incident will also encourage the mobilisation of the electorate of the party representing the Turkish minority – the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – which has been hit by a serious crisis.

With regard to the incident, the discussion about the delegalisation of Ataka was resumed and the stability of the minority government of Boyko Borisov was brought into question as it is supported by Ataka MPs. GERB needs five more MPs in order to secure a majority in the 240-seat parliament. Given this, even in the case of them losing backing from Ataka or the delegalisation of this party, the Borisov's government should not have problems with finding additional votes in the ranks of a dispersed opposition. <dab>