

DEMOCRATS GO POPULIST

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The Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), the backbone of the ruling coalition in Bulgaria, United Democratic Forces, as well as their junior coalition partner, the Democratic Party (DP), held simultaneously their party conventions last weekend.

The Democratic Party congress elected a young leader, a lawyer with ten years of political experience. It succeeded in voting a program based on neo-conservative values. As October 1999 elections demonstrated, it is attracting UDF voters but it is relying on the same pool of people. DP (as a partner of the Agrarian Party in a smaller coalition, the People's Union) has power sharing agreement with UDF. It seems secured for the time being.

Voters expected especially from UDF:

- to reflect on the results of the last (October 1999) municipal elections, deriving relevant lessons¹;
- to point out and replace disappointing leaders (all of them already sacked from the cabinet and sent back to the parliament), thus answering corruption allegations;
- to discuss and explain to the citizenry what is the actual direction of reforms and what economic steps the government visions to undertake in order to ensure growth and prosperity, after ten years of reforms and pleading a new electoral victory in 2001 and a second mandate.

UDF conference delegates failed to respond to any of these expectations. They were interested in the second topic, although not to the extent to the initiative but rather waiting for an instruction from the leaders. Leaders, including the chairman of the party and the prime minister, Mr. Ivan Kostov, had to be elected as well and did not risk internal fights. They even issued a collective report which carefully avoided all issues related to the responsibility of those who were or still are in charge of running both the party and the country.

The ruling party failed to respond to the major public concern, namely to the allegations of corrupt practice and clientele favoring behavior. To compensate for this obvious omission, the report focused on local elections and anti-corruption rhetoric, blaming such "weaknesses" as: feudal mentality of the leaders and "incomprehensible leap of the family living standards" of the leaders; substitution of the work with voters with business and privatization; embezzlement; nepotism, "oriental partisan attitude", etc. At the same time, Mr. Kostov dismissed corruption allegations, referring to the fact that corrupt practices were introduced by previous governments.

Missing discussion on economic policies and prospects prevented debates on systemic sources of corruption, including those sustained from the past and "invented" by the UDF government. A case was made against preferential privatization to insiders, though such deals rose three to four times since UDF came into office. And this policy was, in fact, sanctioned by the previous forum of the same people. Thus, the calls "to free the top party line from discredited politicians with low public morals" were doomed to fail.

Economic ideas, to the extent they were shared in the deliberations and the resolution of the conference, made little sense. In the best cases they resembled poorly-read Keynes but more often desired to seek rents, soft loans and subsidies from the European Union. Three speakers had ideas to use EU pre-accession fund to help the poor, to enhance standard of living, and for the involvement of the youth in economic development. The prime minister pleaded for deregulation and privatization of natural monopolies "but without increases in the energy prices". He also underlined that "UDF is a people's party, not a party of the rich". The ex-minister of justice promised that a law to confiscate properties and assets of those "who can not prove where the money comes from" will be passed ("in accordance with the Constitution") "not now, just before the end of the mandate", before next elections.

The conference demonstrated that UDF suffers from a lack of right-wing criticism. It suffers from its loneliness in power, from its unsuccessful fighting with its own mentality. It is obvious that the only correction to UDF populist temptations can come from two sources, the creditors and the independent market oriented opinion of economic and political observers.

¹ See for comments, IME Newsletter, 1999, vol. 5, No 9-10, p.1