

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms: A convenient target for Kostov's populism

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Recently, the former Prime Minister Ivan Kostov inspired a stormy public reaction with his openly populist rejection of the political parties, concentrating in themselves a large ethnic electorate, by "monopolising the vote"* of ethnic constituencies. The MRF is the actual target of his attacks. In a series of publications Kostov enumerates the shortcomings of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, underestimating and denying the role of the party by "demythologising it", as he himself said. The weakness in his arguments is not in their half truthful implication, but in their unilateral nature. In his analysis, the ex prime minister speaks predominantly about the fact that the MRF is not what it pretends to be; how it boasts of merits for realities, which, with or without the MRF, are a fact (such as the ethnic peace in the country); it manipulates its constituency and monopolises the votes of the Turkish ethnic group, obstructing the right of the individual to make a conscious and independent choice. At the same time, he forgets to explain the reasons for his acute attacks against the MRF; is the party dangerous for the political future of Bulgaria, and, if yes, how; does it work against the political interests of the voters and the society as a whole; does it function illegitimately and provocatively, etc. Eventually, the free existence of political parties enjoying the broad support of a given ethnic group, is a definite indication of a functioning democracy.

Ivan Kostov denies the right of the MRF to existence, but what solution does he offer to this end? Is it banning the party or the voters from supporting it? The ethnic Turk has the self-confidence of being a politically represented citizen of full capacity in the Republic of Bulgaria, exactly because of the existence of the MRF. Would it have been so without the MRF? The answer is clear only by virtue of the following free association: do the Pomaks in Bulgaria feel self-confident, for instance? Most of them are embarrassed to even admit who they are? The same goes for the Roma. The Roma Muslims usually identify themselves as Turks and are hostile to any attempt to attribute to them a Roma identity. This is due to the lack of civil confidence. The situation of ethnic Turks is different. If Mr. Kostov will, he may try and deny that this is due to the participation (in a decent manner, at that) of the MRF in the government of Bulgaria.

To demand the restriction of parties like the MRF, the leader of the newly formed party of the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, will have to prove at least, that the disadvantages from the existence of such parties are greater than the benefits for a given society. I will leave aside the argument that any restricting actions on the behalf of any governmental power would be a manifestation of totalitarianism in its pure form, if this envisions measures against a party like the MRF.

In this case, can we speak of a normally developing democratic state, and does this abide by the principles of the European Union? The threat is not in the existence of the MRF in general, but in the passion, with which politicians of the class of Ivan Kostov preach for its restriction, although for obviously populist reasons. Of course, in an effective democracy, the freedom of speech is unrestricted, including when it refers to populism, because even Kostov may not afford to effect his passions in practice, but he would rather act exactly to the contrary: by signing the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, etc. As it is the EU, which identifies with the aspirations of Bulgarian voters, and any undesired deviation could bring another party to power.

The argument that "the Bulgarian Roma do not perceive their adequate representation through a single party" because of the group's internal differences, does not apply for the ethnic Turks, nor would it apply so much for the Pomaks, if they had their political representation. Irrespective of the seriousness of the MRF attempts (if any) to manipulate its voters, they are not all-embracing and may not hamper any individual from voting for a different party, if this is his/her conviction. It is a fact, however, that almost 100% of the ethnic Turks (and most of the Pomaks and the Roma Muslims) in Bulgaria would have answered in the affirmative to the question of whether the MRF (of all other political parties) is the best representative of their interests in the country. It is logical to assume that most of the Roma Muslims would answer negatively if asked about a possible "Roma party" defending their interests, because they merely refuse to identify themselves as Roma. And a large portion of the Roma population in Bulgaria are Muslims.

Ivan Kostov believes that "there is no space for a Bulgarian ethnic model in the European Union", obviously drawing a sign of equality between such "ethnic model" and the MRF. However, he seems forgetful of the fact that this "ethnic model" is supported by at least 10% of the Bulgarian citizens, entitled to representation, for which they can vote themselves. If the ethnic Turks want the MRF, then it will exist; if a part of the Roma insist on having their own party, it will also exist for as long as it functions in compliance with the legislative provisions effective in a democratic state. It is very true that there is "a deficit in the domain of political representation" of (particular) minorities and that "a political palette" is required, and this cannot be done at the expense of "the ethnic" parties, but in a natural way: when voters withdraw their support from a party. ■

* The quotations are from the Capital newspaper, 16-22 October, 2004. The publication covers a public dispute on the issue: "Ethno-Political Matters and Bulgaria's Membership in the European Union" carried out at the Radisson Hotel on 27.09.2004.