
BULGARIA: WHY DID VON DER LEYEN ENDORSE BAD POLITICS?

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On 29 August, the president-elect of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, paid a visit to Bulgaria to discuss the country's expectations vis-a-vis the new commission and to seek prime minister Boyko Borissov's support.

Her trip will be remembered with her unjust praise for Borissov's government and the fact that for the first time in Bulgaria journalists were not allowed to ask any questions at a press conference with an EU leader.

It has been reported that journalists' microphones were taken away with von der Leyen's approval.

What went wrong?

Safety first

One may reasonably suspect that von der Leyen's advisors tried very hard to find positive developments in Bulgaria which she could compliment as a form of courtesy towards her hosts.

The fragile state of Bulgaria's rule of law is a delicate matter, so Bulgaria's economy may have looked like a safe bet.

At the press conference following her meeting with Borissov, von der Leyen said that when she looked at Bulgaria, she saw "a country which prosper[ed]".

She was very impressed that, in Bulgaria, there was significant investment in schools and universities and that teacher salaries were high.

She was pleased that Bulgaria had the highest GDP growth it had seen.

But von der Leyen's statements merit some unpacking and fact-checking.

Anatomy of prosperity

The traditional definition of prosperity is "a state of economic well-being".

Bulgaria has the lowest GDP per capita, the lowest minimum wage, and the lowest median

earnings in the EU.

According to World Bank data, 22 percent of Bulgarians live below the poverty line.

Recently, Bulgarian teachers had a raise - currently, the average teacher salary after tax is €500/month.

However, it has been estimated that a family of four needs €1,224/month just for basic expenses.

In the latest studies, Bulgarian students performed significantly below the average in all categories -science, mathematics, reading - compared to other countries in the Paris-based club of nations, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Bulgaria has one of the lowest research & development government expenditures as a percent of GDP in the EU, as visible from Eurostat data.

Bulgaria also has one of the lowest researchers to inhabitants ratio in Europe, according to UNESCO statistics.

And there are no Bulgarian universities in the first European University Networks approved by the European Commission.

Myth of growth

Bulgaria's GDP growth may appear impressive only if the number is examined out of context.

The Bulgarian Industrial Association has calculated that, since 2007, foreign direct investment has fallen 10 times in absolute terms.

Most growth can be attributed to EU funds.

Based on publicly available data, I have estimated that Bulgaria has one of the highest GDP to EU funds ratio in the EU - 4.91 percent.

Even Hungary, which is usually treated as a leader in receiving EU funds, has a lower ratio □ 4.59 percent.

In other words, the EU finances an autocracy, but there is also a caveat.

EU funds flow to the economy on paper, but, in practice, they get deviated to private pockets.

A series of investigations by Bivol, the Bulgarian partner of the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, a journalistic club, provide ample illustrations of these abuses of EU finances.

Awkward press conference

Beyond von der Leyen's assertions about the economy, which surely angered many Bulgarians, for they do not reflect reality, one could not help but notice that Borissov used the second person singular to address the president-elect.

The Bulgarian language is conservative, and proper grammar is a sign of respect - on formal occasions, Bulgarians address each other and foreigners in the second person plural.

One may wonder if this is any indication of who had more bargaining power at this meeting.

By agreeing with Borissov not to answer questions by journalists, von der Leyen unwittingly contributed to the suffocation of media in Bulgaria.

The latest World Press Freedom Index by the NGO Reporters Without Borders has ranked Bulgaria 111th in the world after Kuwait and Angola.

Questions remain

Over the summer, von der Leyen stressed that "nobody was perfect" when it came to the rule of law.

She also seems comfortable receiving the support of states with a proven corruption record like Bulgaria.

This philosophy surely worries experts who believe that we have reached a "make or break" moment to uphold the rule of law in the EU.

While it is easy to take the microphone away from a journalist, especially in Bulgaria, many questions will eventually catch up with the new commission president.

For instance: what is the price of the rule of law in the EU?; how does her team gather country information?; how much does she value transparency?; is she worried about the misuse of EU funds?; is prosperity a new EU synonym for poverty in Brussels?

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