

# NADEZHDA - WHY I SAID 'NO' TO THE EX-KING

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The glamorous public face of the Union on Democratic Forces in its early days, when the party led the struggle to uproot Communism in Bulgaria, party spokesman Nadezhda MIHAILOVA became foreign minister in the 1997 - 2001 government.

At last month's party congress she was elected party leader with a crushing majority of 2,374 votes against 1,365 for her incumbent namesake Ekaterina MIHAILOVA.

Nadezhda - whose name means 'hope' in Bulgarian - now faces the huge task of opposing the government of the former king, Simeon SAXE-COBURG, who on his return from exile in Spain last year created a new party, the NMSS, and swept the UDF from office in the June elections.

In an interview with Edward Steen, the UDF's new leader explains why she refused a job offer from the new government, why Simeon's triumph has turned sour for a disillusioned population, and she defends the achievements of a government which she says was confronted by "a non-man's land" when it came to power in 1997.

**EPP News:** *What decided you against joining the Simeon Movement after the UDF fell last year? Were you at all tempted by the offer of a place back in government?*

**Nadezhda Mihailova:** It was only natural to want to continue Bulgarian foreign policy on the same path - a path that was favourably received both in Bulgaria and abroad. But the offer was unprincipled. It was a futile attempt to demonstrate continuity where there was none. Through me, they (the National Movement government) wanted to lend legitimacy to a group with obscure political interests on the right of the political spectrum. It was an attempt to defeat the UDF at a time when we were weak, and to turn us into an appendage of the fantastic commitments of Mr. Saxe\_Coburg Gotha to the Bulgarian people...



**EPPN:** *You don't see the Movement government lasting?*

**NM:** It is chaotic. It plainly cannot last very long. Either the ruling circles in Bulgaria will find the strength for a robust political about-turn, or the citizens will look for a way out. In the UDF we are watching things with two clocks. One clock measures the time we need to reform the UDF and to stabilise the Right. The other marks the rapid and inexorable collapse of Bulgarians' trust in their current rulers. The hands of the second clock are turning very - disturbingly - fast.

**EPPN:** *You told the UDF delegates not to vote for you unless they were "100 %" for change in the party. Congress hyperbole?*

**NM:** The 13th National Conference of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) voted for change, for a new dialogue with society. Our members and supporters showed they are ready for our renewal of the party, a process we shall accomplish together. It is unimportant whether talk about change in the party sounds hyperbolic. The point is that it must be sincere, and that change becomes a reality...

We remain the strong party of the centre\_right in Bulgaria, and an integral element of the EPP family. We are the guarantors of parliamentary democracy and of the multi\_party system in Bulgaria, and we will defend the achievements of the 1997 - 2001 UDF government.

But we are changing the image of the party. The leadership bodies will work as a team, and speak to society with one voice. The interests of the party and of society stand above the personal interests of individual members. There will be a radical change in this respect.

**EPPN:** *Your criticisms of the past imply a break with (former prime minister and UDF leader) Ivan KOSTOV...*

**NM:** There would have been a break if the UDF has been the private party of Ivan Kostov or of Nadezhda Mihailova. But it was not and is not. The Conference demonstrated that we are a party which represents a cause. I simply realised that 2.5 million of our voters want another strategy, and different ways of working - but leading to the same goal. I believe I have the strength to go to the end of that road. And that I have a duty to try.

**EPPN:** *Organised crime, and the activities of the Russian mafia, have been a big problem for Bulgaria and the whole of Eastern Europe. Or has this been exaggerated?*

**NM:** In early 1997 Bulgaria was like a no-man's land. The state was in a state of collapse. Believe me, it was extremely hard. The fight against domestic and cross\_border crime was one of our government's top priorities. It was a fight for Bulgaria. The invitation in December 1999 for Bulgaria to begin negotiations for EU accession was in effect a glowing endorsement of our efforts and achievements. To a great extent it was also a recognition of the progress made in the fight against crime, drug smuggling and the illicit trafficking of women and children. In just one year we changed all identity documents of Bulgarian nationals to meet European standards. The EU visa restrictions for Bulgarian nationals were lifted after April 2001.

As to the fight against the Russian mafia, and against individuals who worked against Bulgaria's national interests, in August 2000 and again in April 2001 we expelled several citizens of the former Soviet Union, about whom there was evidence that they are threatening our national security.

Unfortunately, I see no continuity in this respect. Individuals serving foreign interests are gravitating around the present government. Let me give you just one example: thanks to our efforts in Parliament, we were able to stop the government 's attempts to bring back to Bulgaria precisely those foreign nationals whom the UDF expelled - and who are now being defended by none other than the Minister of the Interior! And as for the intensified influence of dubious capital, that issue alone would fill a separate interview.

I perceive in this context the special importance of our future membership in NATO and the EU. The struggle for Bulgaria is a struggle for Europe and its values.

**EPPN:** *One of the crucial failures of the 1997 government was its relations with the press. By the end of your time in office the press was largely hostile: politicised and/or cynical.*

The UDF is a party of the centre-right. It has fundamental goals for the development of society. For certain strata of society to identify with that position, and with a developed market economy, there also have to be adequate media: media which will defend their place in the market on the basis of right\_of\_centre arguments. This process is not yet complete. Our policies were understood by individual journalists, but not by the media groups. On the other hand, we do need make much greater efforts to explain our actions to the people, and not to haughtily overlook the criticisms addressed to us. The remedy is to go into the 'media market'.

**EPPN:** *José Maria Aznar remarked the other day that he wanted to be remembered as the man who made Spanish politics boring.*

**NM:** Mr José Maria Aznar has the good fortune to work in a country where such political dreams are feasible. I am a realist, however, and I am only striving towards a Bulgaria with a predictable foreign policy oriented to EU and NATO membership, and a successful domestic economic policy, which delivers social security and a chance to our taxpayers to be worthy citizens of Europe. I still don't know what they will remember me for.

**EPPN:** *How are you engaging young people in the party?*

**NM:** The most important thing for a person is to be sincere and to know what he or she wants to do. Young people hate pompous phrases, conventionalities, compromise. They understand that this is a debate about their future in Bulgaria. Young people are our natural allies in the efforts to turn our dreams into reality, and so one of my priorities will be to work with them. My first public meeting after the victory was with the students of the University of Sofia.