

Document No. 11: Cable from U.S. Embassy in Sofia to the
State Department, "The Nov 10 CC Party Plenum: Little
Prospect for Major Changes"

November 9, 1989

1. Conf[idential]: Entire Text

2. Summary. The Bulgarian Community [sic] Party Central Committee will hold a plenum on Nov 10 to discuss restructuring efforts and to pave the way for the next party congress. Since Todor Zhivkov has used similar gatherings in the past to announce major personnel changes, rumors abound in Sofia as to who might be demoted, promoted, or reassigned. Given the backdrop of events in other Eastern European countries, rumors of more open dissatisfaction with the pace of reform here, and the frank admissions of the failure of recent reform efforts contained in a published report prepared by Zhivkov for the plenum, there has also been speculation about major reform measures in the political and economic fields or even the possibility of considerable voiced criticism by CC members of the GOB's policies.

3. Zhivkov is probably the only one who really knows the answers to the above questions, however, and he plays his cards close to his chest. Chudomir Aleksandrov, former

Zhivkov heir apparent, doubts that there will be major personnel changes and we tend to agree with him. Even if there are, the result would not be a major change towards a more reform-minded system. It will only be a continuing of Zhivkov's routine reshuffling of his personnel. While criticism of the Bulgarian system does appear to be growing more open and widespread, Zhivkov and company will almost certainly continue the policy of plenty of rhetoric about reform, but little concrete action.

End Summary

4. On November 10, the Bulgarian Communist Party will hold a Central Committee plenum with the announced purpose of discussing progress towards restructuring in Bulgaria and also to prepare for the next party congress. A lengthy report (REFTEL) prepared by Todor Zhivkov was published last week to form the basis for discussion at the plenum. It contained frank admissions that the reform efforts thus far have not been successful and contained a variety of proposals for reforms in the political, economic, and social fields. As has been the case with previous reform efforts, the proposals were long on rhetoric and short on specificity.

5. Similar meetings in the past have been used to announce major personnel changes and rumors therefore

abound in Sofia about senior party and governmental officials who may be demoted, promoted, or reassigned in this instance. Prominent rumors include the outright dismissal of Foreign Minister Mladenov or his reassignment as Chairman of the National Assembly; the retirement of Atanasov as Prime Minister and his replacement by Deputy Prime Minister Danchev; the breaking up of the Ministry of Economics and Planning and reestablishment of a Ministry of Finance; and even the replacement of Minister of the Interior Tanev (for failing to foresee the May demonstrations of ethnic Turks.)

6. Given events in East Germany and other Eastern European countries, there has also been speculation as to whether the Central Committee would maintain its traditional role as rubber stamp for Zhivkov's wishes or begin to voice dissatisfaction with current policies. The [Excision] Ambassador, for example, said he was hesitant to predict how the plenum might turn out. While CC members have always "kept silent and done what they were told," the Ambassador said that there is now an undercurrent of dissatisfaction among CC members and a new willingness to voice criticism openly. There is some chance, he speculated, that that willingness to speak out might be a factor in the plenum itself.

7. During a Nov 9 meeting related to his early December visit to the U.S., Chudomir Aleksandrov, currently chairman of the Committee for Geology, and until mid-1988 the heir apparent to Zhivkov, made the following comments to the Ambassador about the Nov 10 Central Committee plenum. If the plenum really discusses the issues raised in Zhivkov's report (REFTEL), the meeting should last two days and pave the way for preparations for the next party congress. However, things could change as a result of the Politburo meeting which is normally held on the eve of the CC plenum. Zhivkov usually plays his cards close to his chest and may reveal his intentions only at the Politburo meetings. While there were no domestic reasons calling for any major personnel/policy changes, it was hard to know how the "external" factors (i.e., the developments in the GDR) might influence the CC's deliberations.

8. Aleksandrov did not expect any major policy changes from the plenum, a policy which he described as a gradual, controlled opening up of Bulgarian society. There is, as was evident from a reading of Zhivkov's report, a tremendous emphasis on "unity," since everyone was aware of the developments in Poland, Hungary and, most recently, in the GDR. In Aleksandrov's view, foreign observers would be "disappointed" if they expected major personnel changes

from the plenum. At the same time, he did not preclude-- but did not expect--the disappearance from the Politburo of some of its older members to make way for some new blood. This would not, however, mean Zhivkov's replacement now.

9. This same sense of uncertainty about personnel changes was conveyed by a Bulgarian CC staffer during the Soviet Embassy's November 7 reception. This source claimed that no one knows what Zhivkov has in mind about the possible Politburo personnel changes. That people wanted changes (unspecified) was clear; what was equally clear was that no one is prepared to mount any direct challenge to Zhivkov.

10. Comment. On balance, we tend to agree with Aleksandrov that there probably will not be major personnel changes. Even if there are, the basic Zhivkov policy of tight control over a reform process long on rhetoric and very short on concrete action will certainly continue. At the same time, the candid admissions of the failure of reform efforts thus far and the fact that Zhivkov thought it necessary to issue a report on restructuring efforts before this plenum (and to discuss restructuring at the plenum) demonstrate that the question of reform is becoming even more pressing in Bulgaria today.

End comment.

[Source: U.S. Department of State, obtained through FOIA.

On file at the National Security Archive.]