The Mainstream Future of the Populist Past
(An Interview with Tudor Barbu, vice-president of People’s Party – Dan Diaconescu)

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The ‘People’s Party – Dan Diaconescu’ (PPDD) was founded in September 2011 by Dan Diaconescu, a journalist who acquired national notoriety via his TV shows, which are filled with sensationalism and combine insignificant matters with big revelations concerning political corruption, murders and extraordinary cases. In 2002, his TV station, OTV (Oglinda TV, The Mirror TV, subtitled as ‘the People’s Television’), after several sanctions imposed by the National Audiovisual Council for harassment, threatening and the use of vulgar language, was subject to licence withdrawal for racism and antisemitism. Diaconescu claimed that the ban on his station’s broadcast was imposed because he refused a political negotiation with Prime Minister Adrian Năstase. Two years later, the ban was lifted and the station recommenced broadcasting. OTV and Dan Diaconescu became notorious for an investigation of the disappearance of Romanian lawyer Elodia Ghinescu, a subject that was debated for almost a full year. In June 2010, Dan Diaconescu was arrested on accusation of blackmailing a mayor. He denied all the accusations, pretending that President Traian Băsescu was trying to eliminate him from the public life because of his intransigence, and decided to prepare for official involvement in politics, announcing his presidential ambitions. After the local election of 2012, with a political program advocating less taxation, state-owned enterprises and market regulation, but also the foundation of a People’s Tribunal, PPDD became the fourth largest political force, after the Social Democrat Party (PSD), the

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1 This interview took place in April 2013. On June 17th 2013, senator Tudor Barbu resigned from PPDD (People’s Party-Dan Diaconescu) and switched to the Conservative Party, party affiliated to the Social-Liberal Union who holds two-thirds of the seats in the Parliament of Romania. However, this change does not affect at all the opinions or the political behavior of Tudor Barbu.

National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Democrat Liberal Party (PD-L). At the parliamentary election of 2012, PP-DD gained third place, having 21 senators and 47 deputies elected on the party’s list. In 2013, OTV was subjected to a second licence withdrawal due to unpaid fines totalling over 1 million lei. This symbolic loss intensified the tensions between party members, some of them already deciding to enroll in other parties. This interview tells the story of these tensions and uncertainties from the standpoint of the moderate faction of the Party. Senator Tudor Barbu, a former employee of OTV, claims that he wants to transform the party into a centre-right political movement, avoiding populist and nationalist propaganda.

Q. Let’s start off by talking about the ideological position of your party. Generally, PPDD was depicted as a party without a clear ideological structure, as a political movement exploiting disparate elements of nationalism, leftism and populism. How do you relate to this portrait?

A. The People’s Party was born during my TV show on OTV called “It’s happening now.” In several editions I succeeded in gathering one million signatures for a new social and economic project, which later turned into a Party. In the beginning, this movement generated by my show’s viewers was a centre-right movement, not a leftist one. When Dan Diaconescu took over the party, after the famous episode of imprisonment, I preferred to remain outside after I saw the party sliding to a leftist, nationalist and populist position. Later, I was strongly courted by the party leadership and after many negotiations I agreed to run on the party list for the general elections. At this moment, our approximately sixty members of Parliament are split between two ideological currents. A left ideology, which speaks of social protection and so on, and another group, an anti-Statist one, mostly concerned with the middle class and economic performance, a group driven by a center-right ideology which I think meets the initial impulse of our electorate. So, now the party is searching for its identity. However, this situation is not very good because we have not succeeded in affiliating our party with any European political family. I have proposed an affiliation with the Popular Party, but the party leadership was not yet receptive to this initiative.

Q. Might these tensions destroy your party?

A. I don’t think that a party can be destroyed! Take the example of PDL. Despite an increase of internal tensions they survived.