

Ex-King Simeon II named new prime minister of Bulgaria

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Four weeks after parliamentary elections, Bulgarian President Petar Stojanov officially called upon the former king of Bulgaria, Simeon II, to form a new government. The future head of government commented on his appointment, “With strong feelings, but with my typical sense of duty, I accept the proposal. May God be with us and show us the right path.”

It was not until this past April that “Tsar Simeon” established his political party, the National Movement for Simeon II (NDS). In the June 17 elections the party was able to win 43 percent of the vote. This meant it needed only one additional seat for an overall majority in parliament.

Since the elections the NDS has established a coalition with the political party of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, the Movement for Rights and Freedom (DSP), which had won just 7 percent of the vote.

Bulgaria’s former ruling party, the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), led by head of government Ivan Kostov, suffered a bitter defeat in the elections. The party’s share of the vote slumped from 52 percent at the last election to 18 percent in June.

Living standards for the vast majority of the population had suffered dramatically under the Kostov government.

The main opposition movement in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP—successor party to the Stalinist party that ruled until the collapse of the Stalinist regime), won 17 percent of the vote, just behind the UDF. The BSP governed the country between 1994 and 1997, until losing power following an economic crisis and hyperinflation that led to hunger demonstrations in the country’s capital of Sofia.

In common with most other East European countries, the policies of the UDF government that succeeded the BSP in power were directed toward entry into the European Union (EU). The result was an IMF-inspired programme of radical economic reforms and severe budget cuts. With this programme Kostov was able to improve his standing abroad, but he earned the hatred of the Bulgarian masses.

Factory closures and drastic cuts in education and health care led to intolerable living conditions. According to official figures, the average rate of unemployment nationwide is 18 percent. According to Sheliasko Christov, the chairman of the confederation of independent trade unions, the real figure is around 28 percent. In some towns, such as Montana, a former industrial centre 100 kilometres from Sofia, the jobless rate stands at 50 percent.

Some 65 percent of the population live in poverty. In some areas of the country running water has been rationed for years due to the dilapidated infrastructure. The monthly average income is \$112, and monthly pensions average \$38—the level of the minimum wage. At the same time the average rate of inflation is around 240 percent. Since

the collapse of the Stalinist system in Bulgaria in 1989, 700,000 from a total population of 7 million have left the country.

The electoral victory of Simeon is a result of the desperation and lack of perspective of the Bulgarian people, whose living standards have continually deteriorated over the past 10 years. The parties and governments associated with this decline are viewed with contempt and hatred by the general public.

According to polls, Simeon was able to draw upon support from the broadest layers of the population. In the course of the election campaign he successfully utilised the media and the support of television stars, a well-known model, a magician and various sports figures.

In a populist manner he appealed for a “new morality” in politics and economic life. He promised that a government under his leadership would fight corruption and substantially improve the living standards of the majority of the population within 800 days of taking office. At the same time he assured the West that Bulgaria would compete for foreign investment and strive for rapid membership into the European Union and NATO. “This home will be beautiful and wonderful... The Bulgarian people are capable of marvels...”—such comments were typical of his campaign speeches.

Simeon Borisov Saksoburgotski, or “Tsar Simeon II”, was appointed king of Bulgaria in 1943, when he was just six years old, following the mysterious death of his father. He is a descendent of the Hungarian branch of the House of Saxony-Coburg-Gotha, and therefore related to Prince Albert, the husband of the nineteenth century British monarch, Queen Victoria. Simeon’s wife Margarita also has royal blood and is a scion of the House of Savoy.

Following a popular referendum in 1946, the Bulgarian monarchy—thoroughly discredited by its collaboration with the Nazis—was abolished and Simeon was expelled from the country. He first went to Egypt and then Spain, at that time ruled by the fascist dictator Franco. He never relinquished his claim to the throne. On reaching adulthood in 1955 he drew up a manifesto addressed to his “dear people”, describing the referendum of 1946 as illegal.

After his education at a French school in Madrid and a military academy in the US, he went into business, although it is still not clear exactly in what sort of business he was engaged. He is said to have been active as a business consultant and property dealer. The many gaps in his biography, however, have led to speculation and rumours—for example, that he was involved in weapons deals between Russia and the Middle East. His political opponents accuse him of pursuing a secret mission from Russia to destabilise Bulgaria.

In his election campaign Simeon drew on his past as king of Bulgaria. He posed as the saviour and conciliator of his people and

allowed his supporters to address him as “Your Majesty”. Regarding his political aims, he had little to say apart from a few vague utterances. “Believe me!” was the phrase he employed most frequently in his election campaign.

It would be a mistake to regard the unexpectedly rapid rise to political prominence of a one-time monarch as merely the result of a mood of mass hysteria. In fact, Borisov Saksoburgotski incorporates a number of modern characteristics, and in many respects has more in common with the Italian media mogul Silvio Berlusconi than a nineteenth century Balkan potentate.

Like Berlusconi, Saksoburgotski is one of the richest men in his country—something he owes to the conservative UDF, which enabled the former monarch to reclaim his confiscated property. And like Berlusconi, beneath the populist slogans about uprooting corruption, crime and poverty, Simeon is intent on pursuing an ultra-right-wing economic programme. The promised recovery is to be accomplished through radical tax cuts and the deregulation of the entire economy, even though similar policies in Bulgaria and other countries of Eastern Europe have achieved the exact opposite of what was promised.

In addition, the new head of government—here again there is a parallel to Berlusconi—is surrounded by some of the most dubious characters from former governments, including those who ruled Bulgaria both before and after the collapse of Stalinism. Typical in this respect is the former Foreign Minister Stojan Ganev, who now functions as a sort of *eminentia grisea* in the Simeon entourage.

Ganev’s career initially received a boost from his role as an official in the Stalinist secret police. He is the son-in-law of a KGB general, and was educated at the State Security College for Public Law. He joined the conservatives after 1989 and then, in his post as foreign minister, for a period of time led the UN General Assembly, before being unceremoniously expelled from his party. Thereafter he joined the religious Mun sect and taught at its college in New York.

The figure of Vessela Draganova also casts a revealing light on the former monarch. She heads the Bulgarian Women’s Party, which put itself at the disposal of Simeon’s NDS after the latter was legally prevented from founding a new party because of the short notice of application. Draganova is a member of the hard-line Stalinist Bulgarian Communist Party.

That such a dubious combination of forces could emerge as the governing party within the space of two months can be explained only on the basis of two interconnected factors:

First is the disastrous legacy of the domination of the workers movement by the Stalinist dictatorship. The decades-long suppression of any independent political movement, in the name of a regime purporting to be socialist, has left a trail of disorientation and confusion leading to the paralysis of the working class as an independent political factor. In addition, the BSP—the successor party to the Stalinists—implemented disastrous policies between 1994 and 1997 which prepared the way for the return of Simeon, whose re-emergence the BSP has greeted with tacit approval.

Secondly, the continuing decline in living standards has led to a level of desperation and social degradation that provides a fruitful basis for the emergence of right-wing demagogues. This fact has even come to the attention of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which has close links to the German conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

In a study published in May the foundation commented: “Simeon’s political appeal is evidently based not so much on an authentic monarchist electorate, but rather is more directed to the widespread

protest potential arising from the rigours of reform in East Europe.... In the eyes of many discontented voters, Simeon appears to be the ‘strong man’ who will do away with corruption and nepotism and make life more bearable for the ordinary man, the ‘humiliated and abused’.”

Another factor contributed to Simeon’s rise to prominence. The two daily newspapers with the largest circulations in Bulgaria, *Trud* (Work) and *24 Tschasa* (24 Hours), did everything they could to suppress any discussion of the lessons of the past. Both papers, with a combined readership of over 1 million, belong to the German WAZ concern, which has close links to the German Social Democratic Party (SPD).

In an article for the *Süddeutschen Zeitung* (June 16, 2001), the Bulgarian writer Ilya Trojanov described the role of the newspapers as follows: “In comparison to these papers, even the German *Bild* appears serious. Written in a vulgar and primitive style, they engage in intellectual pornography on a daily basis. This serves not only to boost the sale of newspapers, but also to promote the interests of the former nomenclature, which has transformed itself into the much decried Red Mafia and has plundered the country for the past 12 years.... It is not surprising that the question continually comes up in Bulgaria: why does a German publishing house allow such a policy on the part of the editorial board? This is a question that one must forward to those responsible.”

When one considers the character and the contradictions of the new government, headed by the former monarch, there can be no doubt that the regime will prove to be both unstable and short-lived. The promise of a rapid improvement in living standards for the masses within 800 days is illusionary, and the reactionary nature of the proposed measures of implementation will soon make themselves felt. The question is, what comes next? A further catastrophe? This depends on the ability of the working class to develop a new orientation.



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