

## **Will Bulgaria Become Monarchy Again?**

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### ***ABSTRACT***

This article deals with the much debated question of whether post-Communist Bulgaria should restore the monarchy abolished by the 1946 referendum. The prospects for bringing back the monarchy are believed to be negligible, given the existing constitutional hurdles and the population's pro-republican sentiments. But ex-King Simeon's triumph in the June 2001 parliamentary election has dramatically changed his standing at home. Any restoration of the monarchy will depend on the perceived success of his coalition government, especially in rebuilding the ailing national economy. It is questionable whether Simeon II will be able to live up to the overoptimistic expectations of Bulgarians who believe that like a Messiah he will save their country from the economic, social, political and institutional turmoil into which it has descended. But with a population distrustful of the politically bankrupt old parties and politicians and despondent enough to grasp at straws, a revival of the monarchy cannot be ruled out.

### *Introduction*

Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan consider the issue of constitutions and constitutional formulas to be a significant, if neglected, aspect of democratic transitions (Linz and Stepan 1996: 81-83). They offer a classification of six different possible constitution-making environments, ranging from those that present the most confining conditions for democratization to those that present

the least: (1) the retention of a constitution created by a nondemocratic regime with reserve domains and difficult amendment procedures; (2) the retention of a “paper” constitution which has unexpected destabilizing and paralyzing consequences when used under more electorally competitive conditions; (3) the creation by a provisional government of a constitution with some *de jure* nondemocratic powers; (4) the use of a constitution created under highly constraining circumstances reflecting the *de facto* power of nondemocratic institutions and forces; (5) the restoration of a previous democratic constitution; (6) free and consensual constitution-making. Accordingly, the least constraining or “optimal” constitutional context is the last one, that is, “free and consensual constitution-making”:

This occurs when democratically elected representatives come together to deliberate freely and to forge the new constitutional arrangements they consider most appropriate for the consolidation of democracy in their polity. The constituent assembly ideally should avoid a partisan constitution approved by a “temporary majority” that leads a large minority to put constitutional revisions on the agenda, thereby making consolidation of democratic institutions more difficult. The optimal formula is one in which decisions about issues of potentially great divisiveness and intensity are arrived at in a consensual rather than a majoritarian manner and in which the work of the constituent assembly gains further legitimacy by being approved in a popular referendum that sets the democratic context in which further changes take place (Linz and Stepan 1996: 83).

Despite sharp elite disagreements regarding the timing and nature of the constituent process, Bulgaria was the first country in post-Communist Europe to reach a constitutional settlement, setting this Southeast European nation on a course of political democratization. Under its new Constitution, Bulgaria is a parliamentary republic in which there are no state institutions whose power does not derive from democratic procedures. Legislative power resides with the unicameral National Assembly, consisting of 240 deputies elected for four years by universal adult suffrage. The President of the Republic is a largely ceremonial head of state who is directly elected by the voters for a five-year term and can serve only two consecutive terms in office. The Council of Ministers, the highest organ of the executive branch, is elected by and responsible to the National Assembly. The judiciary is constitutionally independent from the executive and legislative branches of government. Its top bodies are a Supreme Court, the highest court of appeals in the country, and a Constitutional Court with powers of judicial review.

But the adoption of a fully democratic constitution on 12 July 1991 was accompanied by serious political opposition and controversy. There was strong resistance by radical members of the anti-Communist minority in the constituent Grand National Assembly (GNA), who did not want the new fundamental law to be shaped by what they called the “temporary majority” of the ex-Communist

Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The radicals called for early dissolution of the constitution-writing Assembly democratically elected in June 1990 and the holding of new general elections. The monarchists within the oppositional Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) especially rejected the new basic charter, because it retained the republican form of government, while they preferred a return to the Turnovo Constitution of 1879, which had declared Bulgaria a constitutional kingdom. They believed that new parliamentary elections could produce a legislature more favorable to the idea of reinstating the monarchy, which had been abolished in 1946.

However, the two largest UDF members, the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party (BSDP) and the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU)-Nikola Petkov, announced the formation of a splinter faction, the UDF-Center. Demanding that the draft constitution be adopted as soon as possible, the leaders of the newly-founded coalition said that they would oppose the attempts of the “rightist and monarchist forces to divert the UDF from its initial goals” (BTA 17 April 1991). The new group was particularly critical of “the emerging monarchist right wing” in the UDF (BTA 10 April 1991), declaring that “it would be a crime to demand the dissolving of parliament before it has adopted the constitution” (BTA 17 April 1991). The UDF-Center leaders were convinced that the parties that were calling for the dissolution of the GNA before the adoption of the new constitution were directly manipulated by the Madrid-based King Simeon II of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and that their ultimate goal was the restoration of the monarchy and the enthronement of the exiled monarch. Other centrist UDF member parties formed another splinter group, the UDF-Liberals, which declared its support for the pro-republican stand of the UDF-Center. The anti-Communist opposition had in effect become divided between two opposing factions with conflicting views about the nature of the new constitution and whether Bulgaria should have a republican or monarchical form of government (Engelbrekt 1991: 1-8). The republican-versus-monarchist division added another dimension to the country’s ideological cleavages and deep partisan animosities.

The controversial attempt by the radical UDF deputies to disrupt the constituent work of the Assembly—first by a parliamentary walkout and then by a last-minute hunger strike—failed, but the constituent process fell short of the “optimal” ideal solution, suggested by Linz and Stepan. The new constitution was adopted in a “majoritarian” rather than “consensual” manner, it was not approved in a popular referendum, and the divisive republic-versus-monarchy issue has remained open-ended ever since. Unlike the Turnovo Constitution of 1879, which had been approved by all representatives in the Constituent Assembly regardless of their ideological differences, 81 of the 400 GNA deputies did not vote in favor of the 1991 basic law. The abstention of the opposing UDF deputies was motivated in part by their fundamental opposition to the constitutional clauses defining Bulgaria as a parliamentary republic. From the standpoint of constitutionalism and institutional design, this was by no means a very promising start for a new democracy, where all important elite players must be part of the consensus on the new democratic constitutional order.

There is a serious danger implicit in such a majoritarian constitution-making process, especially if elite members opposed to the constitutional text subsequently rise to leadership positions in their own parties, as happened in the case of the center-right UDF. This risk emanates from the fact that such elite members would always see the constitutional arrangement as somewhat illegitimate and having been imposed on them by a temporary ruling majority representing an ideologically antagonistic elite. As Linz and Stepan point out, such basic disagreements may create questions about the legitimacy of the new democratic institutions (Linz and Stepan 1996: 4).

With the adoption of the 1991 constitution, whose amendment clauses (Chapter Nine) appear to make it very difficult to revise the republican form of the Bulgarian government, the restoration of the monarchy seemed like an idea consigned to the past. That was until Simeon II, who had never abdicated his throne, became the first exiled monarch to return to his post-Communist homeland as a democratically elected head of government. He may not become a constitutional monarch so easily, given the legislative supermajority that is required to amend the Constitution and the fact that 82% of Bulgarians say that they are in favor of their country remaining a republic. But his chances of returning to the throne are far better than those of other would-be monarchs of Eastern and Southeastern Europe. For instance, King Leka I of Albania (the son of the late ex-king Zog I ousted by Mussolini's invasion in 1939) was rejected by 66% of the participants in a 1997 national referendum on the restoration of the monarchy. Crown Prince Aleksander Karađorđević of Yugoslavia has had his Yugoslav citizenship and all confiscated properties returned to him by the new democratic government in Belgrade, but there is no strong monarchist movement in his country. King Michael I of Romania, who like Simeon had been a crowned head of state before he was forced out by the Communists into a long exile abroad, has accepted the new, republican constitution of his country and even played the role of an ambassador at large. But he appears to have no monarchic ambitions or political base, so there is a very slim chance that Romania may become a constitutional monarchy. And the prospect of ex-King Konstantine of Greece having the constitutional abolition of his monarchy in 1974 reversed is as unlikely as the restoration of the throne in Hungary or of the banished dauphin Nikola Petrović-Njegoš in Montenegro. However, a return of the monarchy in Bulgaria would encourage support at the elite and mass level for similar restorations in other East European countries, especially in the crisis-ridden Balkans.

This article will deal with the still unresolved debate in Bulgaria on restoring a monarchy that in the pre-Communist past was seen as a major obstacle to constitutionalism and true democracy. It will examine the evolution and possible future outcome of one of the more divisive constitutional issues fragmenting Bulgaria's political consensus throughout the transition. A constitutional monarchy has not been contemplated as a serious institutional choice for post-Communist Europe's constitutional design<sup>1</sup> despite the fact that many of these transitional countries were monarchies in their pre-Communist

past and that seven out of the fifteen current members of the European Union (EU)—that the East Europeans so eagerly aspire to join—are stable and democratically-ruled constitutional monarchies: the United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg (in addition to other Northern and Western European countries such as Norway, Monaco, and maverick Liechtenstein).

The article will discuss why the fundamental issue of monarchy versus republic has yet to be definitively resolved, as the post-Communist political elite is still divided about how to settle this critical constitutional question and many politicians insist that it has already been settled once and for all by the adoption of the republican Constitution of 1991. Given the total disillusionment of most Bulgarians with the old parties and politicians, however, Simeon's chances of regaining the throne should not be underestimated, especially since his nascent party, the National Movement for Simeon II (NMSII), now controls both the national legislature and the cabinet government, while Simeon himself has become a prime-minister-king, who—at least initially—elicited very strong popular support. To make matters more complicated, there is no consensus even on how this issue should be resolved—by holding a new popular referendum, convening another Grand National Assembly, or by a vote in the current National Assembly.

#### *The Monarchy-versus-Republic Controversy*

There are significant political forces in Bulgaria, especially the monarchists and some of the conservative parties, which challenge the present republican form of government as illegitimate and imposed illegally by the Communists in 1946. A national referendum held on 8 September 1946 abolished the monarchy in favor of a people's republic, leading to the exile of Queen Joanna of Savoy and her adolescent son, Simeon II, who had been crowned at the age of six in 1943 after the sudden and mysterious death of his father, King Boris III. Discredited by its subversion of parliamentary democracy at home and its wartime alliance with Hitler, the monarchy was genuinely unpopular, but the referendum results were so skewed (85.18% voted for a people's republic and only 3.89% for the monarchy) that fraud was widely suspected (Tzvetkov 1993: 295).

Soon after the fall of Communist leader Todor Zhivkov on November 10, 1989, monarchist groups such as the Christian Republican Party and the Democratic Monarchist Party began to call for the return of Bulgaria's number one political emigre, the exiled former king, and for a plebiscite on whether Bulgaria should be a republic or a monarchy (BTA 17 January 1990). The prevailing opinion among the anti-Communist parties was that the Communist regime had manipulated the 1946 referendum abolishing the monarchy and many of them rejected the legality of its results. The monarchist groups and some conservative parties within the oppositional UDF alliance publicly declared their adherence to the Turnovo Constitution of 1879 and demanded the country's

reversion to monarchism. Written by Imperial Russia and the other Great Powers at the Berlin Congress of 1878 and modeled on the Belgian constitution of 1830, the Turnovo Constitution defined Bulgaria as a constitutional monarchy, in which the crowned head of state had the limited prerogatives assigned to rulers of constitutional monarchies such as the United Kingdom or Belgium. Constitutionally, principal power in the government lay in a unicameral parliament, the National Assembly. But since the prime minister and the cabinet depended on the monarch's will rather than the confidence of parliament, the National Assembly exercised only nominal power over the executive and had relatively minor influence on government decision-making. Royal supremacy was aided by a weak legal framework for legislative control over the throne, allowing the monarch to establish a strong personalistic regime and rule autocratically in spite of the liberal spirit of the Turnovo constitution (Black 1943; Statelova and Markova 1979).

While its historical record is hardly inspiring, the Turnovo constitution still presented the new political elite recruited through the June 1990 founding election with the option of restoring a previous democratic basic law, as outlined by Linz and Stepan. From his involuntary exile in Madrid, ex-king Simeon was openly encouraging the restorationist activities of the royalist groups by advertising the "advantages" of constitutional monarchy over the parliamentary republic declared by the 1991 constitution:

That the new Constitution has been greeted with mixed feelings—to put it mildly—speaks for itself. I have no degree in constitutional law, so I make no pronouncement, but the Turnovo Constitution is more liberal than this first attempt [of Bulgaria] to become a state of law. Constitutions in any democracy may be amended, so this is the line along which our legislators should proceed. As far as political parties are concerned, the King in a constitutional monarchy can be of exceptional assistance to guarantee and foster political life by acting as a moderator.... Particularly in such a transitional period as this, I feel that no other democratic system can replace the advantages of monarchy, its alternatives, and its elasticity. Theory aside, in my own case I have had Western upbringing...I have the advantage of being related to all the European royal families, and with these connections monarchy in Bulgaria stands an even better chance. National unity, reconciliation, and a new sense of dignity are obvious elements in a constitutional kingdom.... I shall not reiterate the advantages of monarchy, which coincide with what I can achieve, provided my people give me a chance.<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning, the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP), later renamed the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), was vehemently opposed to the idea of restoring the abolished monarchy. Not only did the post-Zhivkov BCP cabinet insist on the validity of the 1946 vote, but it also criticized Simeon II for a series of pro-monarchy interviews, which appeared on Bulgarian TV and in the

national press. An official government statement claimed that there was no room for royalist ideas in republican Bulgaria and that the king's ambition for a role in national politics was "unacceptable" (BTA 12 February 1990).

The stage was set for political mobilization and confrontation over this major constitutional issue. Bulgaria is often described as the most favorably inclined to the idea of reinstating the monarchical institution among the countries of Eastern Europe that were formerly monarchies. Several explanations have been offered for the sudden popularity of the former king (Nikolaev 1991: 1-5). First of all, the Communist regime is believed to have failed in erasing the nation's "positive" memory of his father, King Boris III, who died relatively young in August 1943, thus escaping full responsibility for the wartime catastrophe. Simeon II, who lived in exile in Madrid until relatively recently, is well-educated, intelligent, articulate, and fluent in Bulgarian. Since the time of his first appearance on Bulgarian television in early 1990, he has always made a very favorable impression on the Bulgarian public. Until his final return to Bulgaria in April 2001, Simeon was the only exiled king of an ex-Communist nation to carry a regular travel passport and ID card issued by his country's Communist government. His private properties, confiscated in 1947 by the Communist-dominated courts, were returned to him by a unanimous ruling of the Constitutional Court in 1998. The prestige and popularity of the long-exiled monarch were also a function of the public's discontent with the disastrous economic downturn and the chaotic politics of the post-Communist period (Nikolaev 1991: 1-5). Frustrated with the privations and hardships of the transition, many Bulgarians have pinned their hopes on Simeon II as a kind of Messiah to lead their country out of its desperate socioeconomic situation.

Monarchical parties and movements, which have been skillfully campaigning for the king's return, gained some popularity in the early transition period (Devlin 1990: 39-44). But republicanism has continued to enjoy broad support, not only among the Socialists (ex-Communists), but also among the Social Democrats and the Agrarians, two traditionally anti-monarchist parties, which together constituted a 52% majority of the UDF card-carrying membership in 1990-1991. Public opinion polls have repeatedly indicated that, while the king himself is widely respected, a clear majority of the population is not prepared to welcome back the monarchy as a national institution, even though pro-monarchist sentiments seem to be stronger in Bulgaria than anywhere else in post-Communist Europe, according to the reputable *New Democracies Barometer* surveys (Rose and Haerper 1998; 1994). Nor have the monarchist parties fared particularly well in electoral politics. For example, the largest monarchist group, the Kingdom of Bulgaria Federation, has never won more than 1.8% of the popular vote in any general election.

However, at the start of the transition restoring the monarchy seemed to enjoy strong support among some of the conservative parties, in addition to the more outspokenly monarchist groups (Dobrev 1998: 182-183). Within the anti-Communist UDF especially, opinions on the matter were clearly divided. Supporters of Simeon II pointed to the very constructive role which King Juan

Carlos I had played in Spain's democratization as well as to Simeon's own highly commendable personal qualities as a very successful businessman. Anti-royalist opponents, however, were not swayed by such arguments. One of the reasons for the Social Democrats' split from the UDF was precisely because of what they complained was the alliance's "flirtation with monarchism."

President Zheliu Zhelev, the first post-Communist head of state, also supported the republican form of government, insisting that historically the monarchy had been "imposed from abroad" (Duma 3 May 1991). In contrast to the conservative parties, he and other centrist UDF leaders recognized the validity of the 1946 decision in favor of the republic and opposed the resurrection of the abolished monarchy, given its discredited historical record:

Some people maintain that the 1946 referendum was illegal because it was held under undemocratic conditions. Therefore, it must be repealed now and the Turnovo Constitution should be restored, together with the monarchy.... But I am absolutely sure that, despite all manipulations and falsifications, which, no doubt, accompanied it, the 1946 referendum reflected the will of the vast majority of the Bulgarian people. And this is easily understandable... since the Coburg-Gotha dynasty was responsible for the two national catastrophes of 1913 and 1918, then it plunged Bulgaria in a third national catastrophe by siding with the Axis Powers during the last world war. It was also involved in coups d'etat, autocratic government, political assassinations, violations of the Turnovo Constitution, and so on. I am not surprised that immediately after the war Bulgarians—like the Italians, the Romanians and the Hungarians—placed their hopes for a better and more democratic future on the republican form of government (Zhelev 1996: 201-203).

During the 1990-1991 republic-versus-monarchy debate, Zhelev even warned that a return of the monarchy might lead to another national catastrophe (Zhelev 1995: 170), while conceding that it was entirely up to the elected constituent assembly to decide what form of government Bulgaria would have (BTA 16 January 1991). He suggested that the question of the monarchy should be decided by a new referendum, a proposal that was eagerly embraced by the monarchists.

The first article of the draft constitution, which was approved by the GNA on 29 May 1991, states that "Bulgaria shall be a republic with a parliamentary form of government," but pro-monarchist deputies strongly objected to the adoption of this formulation. That is why the Assembly decided to settle the monarchy-versus-republic debate once and for all by means of a national referendum scheduled for 6 July 1991. The referendum date had been proposed by Dr. Petar Dertliev, the staunchly anti-monarchist leader of the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party and architect of the new Constitution, and was backed by BANU-Nikola Petkov and the BSP, which believed that a new referendum would not reverse the 1946 vote. The idea of resolving the issue of the monarchy by means of a plebiscite also corresponded to the wishes of



Simeon II himself, who had previously declared that he was willing to return to Bulgaria only if the nation wanted him back (Nikolaev 1991: 1-5).

But in the weeks following this decision, public opinion, as reflected in mass polls and in numerous news media interviews, appeared mostly opposed to a return of the monarchy. Sample surveys showed that republicanism was much more deeply rooted in Bulgaria's political culture than pro-monarchist sentiments, since many Bulgarians stated that having an unelected and dynastic monarch as head of state would be undemocratic. According to an opinion poll taken in late May 1991, 78% of the respondents favored a republican form of government, while only 8% supported the monarchy (BTA 25 May 1991).

Sensing inevitable defeat given the prevailing public mood, even the monarchist parties rejected the idea of having a referendum at this time, complaining that it had been scheduled too soon, which prevented the exiled king from organizing a nationwide campaign in his own favor. But the main argument of the referendum's opponents against bringing the republic-versus-monarchy debate to a popular vote was that it risked further dividing a nation already polarized by numerous other problems (Nikolaev 1991: 1-5). Before it could take place, the referendum was put to a new parliamentary vote and rescinded by the GNA, putting this controversial issue to rest, at least for the time being.

Reactions to the cancellation of the referendum confirmed that the idea of resurrecting the monarchy lacked national consensus. President Zhelev praised the Assembly for reversing a decision, which, he complained, "put in question legitimately elected institutions so lightheartedly." Dr. Petar Dertliev, the widely respected "father" of the new Constitution, declared triumphantly that there could be no doubt about the legitimacy of the republic since "all those who wanted a referendum have now recanted" (BTA 5 June 1991). Even Simeon announced from Madrid that he was glad that "the untimely and unnecessary referendum" had been revoked (BTA 6 June 1991). A new poll conducted on 15 June 1991 confirmed that a strong majority of Bulgarians (76%) favored keeping the republic, while only 15% of the respondents said that they would have voted for the return of the king (BTA 21 June 1991). Having realized that their cause lacked mass appeal, the monarchists temporarily suspended their efforts to bring back the monarchy through a referendum.

But the controversy over the monarchy was far from over. Nearly sixty parties and organizations with monarchist platforms were still seeking to repeal the 1946 referendum, restore the 1879 Turnovo constitution and bring back the exiled king to the throne. The most significant among them were the Kingdom of Bulgaria Federation and the Movement of United Monarchists. Many prominent UDF politicians also extended overt or covert support for the monarchy (Andreev 1996: 39). For example, the UDF-led cabinet of Prime Minister Ivan Kostov officially asked the Constitutional Court to repeal the 1946 referendum, claiming that its results were rigged by the Communist regime. Had it been successful, such a step could have paved the way for the restoration of the monarchy. President Petar Stoyanov of the UDF declared that as head of state he favored a popular vote on reintroducing the monarchy, because the Turnovo Constitution

was abolished when Bulgaria was “under the occupation of a foreign military power,” even though he was rather ambivalent on this issue, insisting that Bulgarians had far more urgent problems to resolve than reinstating the monarchy.

In spite of the 1991 referendum setback, Simeon did not give up his ambition to return to Bulgaria as king. He continued to insist that a constitutional monarchy was the best form of government for a country in transition like Bulgaria. That the ex-king was one of the most popular political figures among Bulgarians was confirmed by his unofficial trip to Bulgaria in May-June 1996 at the invitation of 101 leading Bulgarian intellectuals. His triumphant private visit demonstrated that the ex-monarch enjoyed widespread popularity not only among the mass public, but also among top politicians, many of whom (including then-President Zhelev) sought to meet privately with him. As many as half a million people turned out to welcome the king on his arrival in Sofia on May 26. Opinion polls suggested that, while less than 20% of Bulgarians wanted the monarchy restored, some 40% wished the ex-monarch to play an important political role in national affairs, especially at a time when Bulgaria was on the verge of its worst post-Communist economic debacle brought on by the discredited policies of Socialist Prime Minister Jan Videnov’s government.

During his 1996 visit to Bulgaria, Simeon II boldly declared that he did not recognize the results of the 1946 referendum and that he was still officially the king of all Bulgarians. He again spoke strongly in favor of a constitutional monarchy, which he recommended as a “flexible and pragmatic form of government” (BTA 16 June 1996). Such statements were the main reason why the royal visit proved to be so controversial among anti-monarchist parties like the BSP, the BSDP, and the Agrarians, whose leaders avoided all contact with the visiting king, insisting that his presence deflected attention from the country’s many problems.

Opinions on the future role of the exiled king were more evenly divided within the political elite than at the mass level. On the one hand, many leftist and centrist politicians reaffirmed their support for the so-called “Dertliev Constitution” of 1991 and remained opposed to enthroning a dynasty that, in the words of former President Zhelev, “brought upon Bulgarians three national catastrophes and two of the most horrible political assassinations in our modern history—the murders of (prime ministers) Stambolov and Stamboliisky” (Zhelev 1996: 131). On the other hand, the monarchists continued to insist that “Bulgaria is more likely to return to normality with Tsar Simeon as constitutional monarch, than by prolonging what has proved to be a disastrous experiment with republicanism” (Monarchy 1996). For their part, many UDF leaders declared that the 1946 referendum results were “illegal,” thus giving a boost to Simeon’s hopes of being one day enthroned in Bulgaria:

We have always declared that the 1946 referendum was illegal. We believe that the Bulgarian nation was given no free choice in 1946.

That is why the question about Bulgaria's future form of government and the validity of the Turnovo Constitution remains an open one.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, there was no elite consensus on the status of the exiled king or what to do with the abolished monarchy. Since Simeon II insisted that he was seeking an important role in Bulgarian politics in order "to create a climate of consensus that would allow everyone to work together,"<sup>4</sup> it was unclear how his political ambitions and the persistent cleavage between monarchists and republicans on this issue would affect the future of the democratization process in Bulgaria. By far the least expected scenario was that the king would return to Bulgaria and run for election.

#### *The 17 June 2001 Electoral Surprise*

Simeon II wanted to run in the presidential elections of January 12-19, 1992 and October 27-November 3, 1996, but in each case was prevented from doing so by the 1991 Constitution, which required that he should have been a Bulgarian resident for at least five years prior to the election. Nor was the former monarch, who had finally moved his official residence from Madrid to Sofia in October 2000, permitted legally to register his newly-founded National Movement as a political party in April 2001. But a month later his Movement was allowed to form an alliance with two smaller registered parties, the Party of Bulgarian Women and the Oborishte Party for National Revival, as the National Movement for Simeon II (NMSII) under the nominal leadership of Vessela Draganova in order to participate in the upcoming legislative election of June 17. For the first time, the ex-monarch publicly declared that he had no immediate plans to restore the monarchy in Bulgaria and pledged instead to combat official corruption and revive the moribund economy (which was already showing signs of anemic recovery) in order to meet the criteria for the coveted EU membership.

Underscoring the volatile and fluid politics of the country, the 17 June 2001 parliamentary election abruptly did away with the previously bipolar configuration of the political party system, based on the decade-old supremacy of the UDF and the BSP. In a stunning blow to the two formerly dominant political parties, the barely two-month-old NMSII won a resounding electoral victory (Koinova 2001: 135-140). At 64, Simeon became the first ex-royal to return triumphantly to power in post-Communist Europe. His electoral success, achieved practically *ex nihilo* (to comprehend its pivotal significance, just imagine Ross Perot winning the U.S. presidential election in 1992), illustrates the unstable and unsettled nature of party politics in Bulgaria due to the catastrophic economic situation and the glaring inability of the existing political parties to offer a credible solution to it. Fed up with pervasive government corruption, street crime, economic collapse and poverty, many ordinary Bulgarians greeted Simeon as a savior who had come to rescue their long-suffering country from what they saw as the stranglehold on power of incompetent, corrupt and self-serving coterie of party politicians. Simeon's comeback via the ballot box was

clearly a result of Bulgaria's economic and social woes, which have produced mass discontent and disenchantment with the performance of the new, democratic authorities. In the *New Europe Barometer 2001* poll, for example, only 2% of the Bulgarian respondents said they were "very satisfied" with the way democracy works in their country, 25% were "fairly satisfied," 42% were "not very satisfied," and 30% "not at all satisfied" (Rose 2001). Only Slovaks, at 79%, showed a higher level of dissatisfaction than Bulgarians, 72%. Bulgarians are also very unhappy with the level of official corruption in their country, as 74% of the Bulgarian respondents in the same poll said that most or nearly all public officials are corrupt and take bribes.

The NMSII won a landslide electoral victory with 42.74% of the ballots, receiving 120 seats in the 240-member parliament (see Table 1). By mobilizing the protest vote of the tired, disappointed and impoverished sectors of the Bulgarian population, Simeon became only the second monarch to return to power (if not to the throne itself) in postwar Europe after Spanish king Juan Carlos I was crowned in 1975 following the death of Caudillo Francisco Franco. According to some media reports, his Movement would have won an absolute majority of parliamentary seats if it was not for the surprisingly good showing by a shadowy group calling itself Coalition for Simeon II, which garnered 3.4% of the popular vote. Many Bulgarians, particularly among those voting abroad, mistakenly cast their ballots in favor of the Coalition for Simeon II, believing they were voting for the former king's Movement. The ex-monarch, who did not himself run in the election, complained during the electoral campaign that the group had been deliberately established by the ruling UDF in an effort to sow confusion among his supporters (RFE/RL Balkan Report 19 June 2001). The United Democratic Forces, a coalition led by the UDF, garnered 51 seats, having been backed by 18.18% of the electorate. The vote was a clear rejection of UDF Prime Minister Ivan Kostov's policies of economic austerity, which included balanced budgets, deep cuts in social programs and shutting down entire state-run industries, as well as perceived ties to official corruption. The Coalition for Bulgaria, with the BSP as its main component, was supported by 17.15% of voters and obtained 48 seats. The ethnic Turkish-dominated Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) won 21 seats, having received 7.45% of the vote.

Since the NMSII was one seat short of the 121 required for an absolute majority in the National Assembly, it secured the participation of the MRF and the BSP as unofficial coalition partners. Simeon II was sworn in as Prime Minister on 24 July 2001. The new cabinet, in which both the MRF and the BSP were allocated ministerial portfolios, was approved by parliament on the same day. But this electoral victory may have cost the ex-monarch the support of the UDF, which as the "official" opposition has initiated several unsuccessful parliamentary votes of no confidence in Simeon's rule.

Political Party	Votes	% votes	Seats
National Movement for Simeon II (NMSII)	1,951,859	43.73	120
United Democratic Forces (UDF-led)	830,059	18.17	51
Coalition for Bulgaria (BSP-led)	783,107	17.14	48
Movement for Right and Freedoms (MRF)	340,510	7.45	21
Others	603,010	13.51	0
Total	4,463,432	100.00	240

Table: Results of the June 19, 2001 parliamentary elections  
*Source:* Official results released by Bulgaria’s Central Electoral Commission

Even before his electoral triumph in the parliamentary contest, Simeon had tried to register to compete in the presidential race of November 11-18, 2001, but the Constitutional Court ruled that he could not run, because of the five-year-residence constitutional requirement. In spite of his open support for sitting President Petar Stoyanov, Bulgarian voters vented their frustrations over mass poverty and accusations of graft and corruption by ousting the UDF-backed incumbent and electing Socialist leader Georgi Parvanov in his place. Had Simeon been allowed to run, it is most likely that he would have been elected president instead of Parvanov, who campaigned with populist promises to relieve the daily suffering of common people.

*Can Simeon II Restore the Monarchy?*

Simeon II no longer rejects the 1946 referendum or the republican Constitution of 1991, to which he swore allegiance as prime minister, in spite of his past declarations that he wants to rule Bulgaria as king. While not ruling out a revival of the monarchy in the long term, he insists that this matter is not on the agenda today and that Bulgarians must now concentrate all their energies on tackling the dire economic and social ills of their homeland. Nevertheless, Simeon continues to regard a constitutional monarchy as a desirable and achievable form of government for a transitional country like Bulgaria.

When he assumed the premiership in 2001, his restorationist dreams appeared closer than ever to becoming reality. Simeon, who has always considered himself King of the Bulgarians, can obviously count on monarchist sentiments that survived under the Communist regime and may have become even stronger due to the trials and tribulations of the transition. Having established the NMSII, which officially transformed itself into a formal political party in April 2002, the ex-king has a power base—at least for now—that he can rely on in the future.

Simeon's biggest problem is that the public’s deep disappointment with his ability to govern and with painful economic reforms has brought down sharply his popularity at home. In spite of the overoptimistic expectations of the population, heightened by Simeon’s demagogic promise to rebuild the economy

and improve the abysmal living standards of Bulgarians in 800 days (his famous “800-day plan” announced during the electoral campaign), his government has failed to ease the deep economic and social crisis gripping the country. The unemployment rate is about 22%, the annual per capita GDP is less than \$1,500, and the external debt is still over \$10 billion. A recent government-sponsored conference on social policy reported that more than 40% of all Bulgarians are malnourished (Khristov 2003). Widespread public discontent has eroded Simeon's mass appeal, confirming that personal charisma is a tenuous and fleeting source of power, as the famous German sociologist Max Weber argued a century ago. According to some recently published public ratings, Simeon, at 28%, is trailing behind not only the current head of state, President Parvanov, but even the former one, President Stoyanov.

Following about a dozen defections from its parliamentary ranks which reduced the NMSII's near majority to a plurality, the cabinet of Prime Minister Simeon has been able to stay in power only with the tacit support of the MRF, which retains its cabinet posts at the ministerial and deputy ministerial level. After it became clear that even a charismatic former royal like Simeon II cannot provide a quick fix for Bulgaria's daunting problems, public approval of his party plunged from a high of 65% in July 2001 to a historic low of 9% in March 2003, forcing the NMSII to consider fielding no candidates of its own in the approaching local elections. Contributing to declining public confidence in his rule were several cases of gross official corruption revealed in 2002, as well as recent legislative missteps such as the controversial new media law and the even more controversial amendments to the law on privatization. Simeon's cabinet, especially some of the previously unknown emigres who were appointed heads of critically important government ministries, has been buffeted by charges of corruption, mediocrity, incompetence and professional ignorance. The Bulgarian news media have also accused Simeon of employing a confrontational style of lobbyist-like “arm twisting” of opponents to enforce his favored policies rather than ruling by consent as he promised during the election campaign (Yanovska 2002). Following the introduction of a list of constitutional amendments, which the cabinet claims are essential for Bulgaria's eventual membership in the EU, critics have even charged him with secretly planning to provoke a future debate on changing the republican form of government.

At this point, restoring the monarchy remains an unresolved and contentious issue. There is a rather remote possibility for holding a new referendum, which the monarchist groups and the UDF have openly supported in the past—but which seems unlikely to be called, given public opposition to bringing back the monarchy and the lack of constitutional basis for such a referendum. The question of how the monarchy can be legally restored without a national referendum is no less murky and controversial. For example, constitutional article 158 (3) stipulates that a specially elected Grand National Assembly (GNA) of 400 members is required to decide “on any changes in the form of state structure or form of government.” However, there have been some sharp debates both within and outside of parliament on whether there is indeed a

legal requirement to convene a GNA in order to change the republican nature of the 1991 Constitution. For constitutional article 153 allows a regular National Assembly to “amend all provisions of the Constitution except those within the prerogatives of the Grand National Assembly.” Such a constitutional change would require, under article 155 (1), “a majority of three-fourths of the votes of all Members of the National Assembly.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, “a bill which has received less than three-fourths but more than two-thirds of the votes of all Members” may be reintroduced in two to five months and then passed by “a majority of two-thirds of the votes of all Members,” according to article 155 (2). And, under article 159 (1), only a third of all Assembly members or the President may introduce such a constitutional amendment. Given these amendment provisions, it is not difficult to imagine a scenario under which a two-thirds majority or more of the deputies in the current National Assembly might vote in favor of resurrecting the monarchy in Bulgaria.

As the British historian Richard Crampton has argued, the republic-versus-monarchy debate in Bulgaria remains open-ended mainly because of the disastrous failure of the post-Communist reforms and the anarchic domestic situation (Crampton 1996: 23). If the national economy improves under his rule, Simeon’s stock might rise again. But if the economy continues to stagnate or becomes even worse, his own political future, as well as that of the monarchy he would like to restore, will be placed in peril.

For now Simeon II seems to be a man in no hurry, even though his many detractors warn that his time may be running out. Obviously he does not want to end up like King Leka I of Albania, whose chances of returning to the Albanian throne were dashed by a premature popular referendum that clearly rejected his restoration. The world’s only king, past or present, to have been democratically elected to high political office believes that time is on his side, insisting publicly that “Unfortunately, people were expecting miracles from my entry into politics. These expectations were unrealistic.... It is too early to make judgments. The results will speak for themselves” (AFP 31 October 2002).

But even if Simeon’s government fails, a return to constitutional monarchy in Bulgaria cannot be ruled out, especially at a time when absolutely any kind of change may appeal to ordinary Bulgarians as preferable to the rocky and disappointing status quo. After all, according to the *New Europe Barometer 2001*, 27% of them want a return to Communism, 13% prefer military rule, and 28% would welcome a strong-arm dictatorship (in the same poll, Bulgarians are surpassed only by the Russian respondents in their expressed preference for non-democratic alternatives).

### *Conclusion*

The adoption of a new constitution in 1991 made Bulgaria the first post-Communist nation with a constitutional basis for the transition to democracy. Because of the opposition of a monarchist minority in the GNA that preferred a return to the Turnovo Constitution of 1879 and many other partisan quarrels,

Bulgaria's new basic charter was adopted by a "majoritarian," rather than "consensual" approach to constitution-making. While not a single party represented in the constituent Assembly openly rejected the basic principles and institutions set forth in the new Constitution, this lack of unanimity was a sign of deep disagreements within the political elite over a number of critical constitutional issues, including the republican form of government.

The controversy over the monarchy has revealed the significant scope of political divisions over this fundamental constitutional issue. Recurrent attempts to bring back the monarchy have failed because of its low historical legitimacy and strong resistance by influential anti-monarchist members of the political class. The strongest attempt so far, the pro-monarchy campaign of 1990-1991, foundered because the former king lacked a strong base of public support in the country that he could have used to pressure politicians opposed to his restoration. Attitudinal evidence indicates that in spite of the intense pro-monarchist propaganda, restoring Simeon II on the throne is rejected by a majority of ordinary Bulgarians who see the monarchy as a vestige of the past and an anachronism incompatible with the workings of a modern parliamentary democracy. It is on this mass-level basis that the enthronement of the king has been successfully contested by the anti-monarchist parties and politicians.

But Simeon's triumph in the June 2001 parliamentary election has dramatically changed his political standing at home. He continues to believe in the advantages of constitutional monarchy as the most suitable institution for the needs of Bulgaria's transition, even though he now pays homage to the republican constitution and present political institutions. Any restoration of the monarchy will depend on the perceived success of Simeon's prime-ministerial regnum, especially in living up to the overoptimistic expectations of the population which believes that like a Messiah he will save Bulgaria from the economic, social, political and institutional turmoil into which it has descended.

On the surface at least, the prospects for restoring the monarchy in Bulgaria appear to be negligible, given the existing constitutional hurdles and the population's pro-republican sentiments. But just five years ago who could have predicted that the former king would be elected a prime minister whose newly-founded political party would control both the legislative and executive branches of the Bulgarian government? In a country capable of new and perhaps even bigger surprises, the resurrection of the monarchy would be both a result and a symbol of the failure of post-Communist reforms. With a population distrustful of the politically bankrupt old parties and politicians and despondent enough to grasp at straws, no one could rule out a monarchical future for a parliamentary republic governed by a once and perhaps future king.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Elster 1998; Lijphart and Waisman 1996; Zielonka 1994: 87-104; Lijphart 1992: 207-223; Lijphart 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Simeon II in Ward 1992: 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Assen Agov in Duma 9 February 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Simeon II in Trud 14 August 1996.

<sup>5</sup> One legal expert, Constitutional Court justice Georgi Markov, believes that a three-fourths supermajority may be next to impossible to achieve because "It is difficult to have three-fourths of all deputies present in parliament at the same time, let alone have them vote unanimously." See *Standart* 2003.

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