

Saxcoburggotsky and His Catch-All Attitude: Cooperation or Cooptation?

MARIA KOINOVA
Harvard University, Cambridge

In a precedent in Eastern Europe's post-communist history, on 24 July 2001 Bulgaria's exiled monarch Simeon II of Sax-Coburg-Ghota took an oath as Prime Minister in front of the republican Bulgarian Constitution. According to his own words, a sense of duty to his motherland stood behind his will to enter politics at the age of 63. Silencing the doubtful, he chose to announce his decision to become Prime Minister on 11 July, the day of the 10th anniversary of the promulgation of the 1991 Constitution. This was a message of commitment to observe the rules of the parliamentary republic.

During the 1990s Simeon Saxcoburggotsky - which is his civilian name - played his game slowly, but steady. First, in 1993 his late mother Giovanna and sister Maria-Luisa returned to Bulgaria after 47 years of exile. The tumultuous welcome with which they were received, was the first test of the Bulgarian public opinion about the royal family and the country's royal past. Encouraged, in May 1996 Simeon returned for the first time himself. Pictures of crowds welcoming him like no other public figure after 1989, entered the world news of what were otherwise boring news from Bulgaria. The impact was both domestic and international. To remind the public of the royal family's existence, irregular visits followed by him and his sister over the next years. Then, almost invisibly, he entered the political party world. In 1997 he supported the small liberal-centrist coalition dominated by the ethnic Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), which incorporated also some royalists. This coalition was represented in the previous Parliament, but was rather marginal due to the absolute majority enjoyed by the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF). Close to the end of the UDF mandate, Saxcoburggotsky came out of the shadow. Hampered by a decision of the Constitutional Court to run for President, he formed a political movement on his name and ran for the June 2001 general elections.

The decisive victory of his political formation, the National Movement for Simeon II (NMSV), occurred due to several factors. First, the previously ruling liberal UDF – although having had many macro-economic and foreign policy achievements – such as low inflation, support for the NATO-forces in

Kosovo and taking-out of Bulgaria from a negative visa-regime within the European Union (EU) - had largely failed on other policies. Corruption and lack of social policies were the buzz-words for UDF's electoral opponents. The brand new expensive cars bought for the parliamentary deputies, largely contrasted with the 60-80 DEM monthly pension for the elderly. Second, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the influential left-wing political formation, did not manage to restructure internally after the big blow it received in the winter of 1997. By that time, the BSP-dominated parliament and the BSP-government were ousted from power through UDF-led street demonstrations. Thus, in the spring of 2001, the BSP was not a real power to alternate the outgoing government. Third, due to the lack of alternatives, there was a space for the negative vote. Saxcoburggotsky came up with no concrete political agenda, but with general promises to combat corruption and increase the welfare of the poor. He also promised foreign investment and – implicitly because of his royal connections in Europe – stronger recognition of Bulgaria internationally.

The Premier's catch-all style became a new political phenomenon. He started by incorporating the Bulgarian Orthodox Church when he gave his oath in the parliament flanked by Patriarch Maxim and the Bible. Then, he did not want to rule alone and officially invited as a coalition partner an ethnic Turkish minority party, the MRF, which has its main constituency among the Muslims of Bulgaria. For the first time the MRF rules by having two ethnic Turkish ministers – the agricultural minister Mehmed Dikme, and the minister without portfolio, Nezhdet Mollov. Then, Saxcoburggotsky took in cabinet two former mayors elected previously on the BSP ticket. Kostadin Paskalev, the former mayor of the south-western town of Blagoevgrad became a Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Regional Development and Public Works. Dimitar Kalchev, mayor of the northern town of Rousse on the Danube river, became Minister of State Administration. Then, the Prime Minister took also a considerable number of women on board, by contrast to previous governments. Although there are only two female ministers, there are several female deputy ministers and around 40% of NDSV's parliamentary deputies are women too.

The 'experts' became an important part of Saxcoburggotsky's team. Two key positions – of the Vice Premier and Minister of Economy, and the Minister of Finances - were taken by Bulgarians who had become successful abroad. The first, Nikolay Vassilev, has an impressive CV with education in four universities and a career in London, while the latter has two M.A. degrees with American universities and experience with the leading financial investment corporation Merrill Lynch. The foreign minister Solomon Passy comes from within the country, but hardly anyone doubts his expertise, especially with respect to the NATO enlargement. He had advocated Bulgaria's entering into NATO as of the early 1990s, at a time when nobody believed that Bulgaria and NATO could match at any point.

Then Saxcoburggotsky took people known for achievements and merit, not for politicking. Nikolay Svinarov became a Minister of Defense. He was a lawyer and former secretary general of the High Lawyer's Council. Georgi

Petkanov, a professor of tax and administrative law and an active member of the arbitration court, took over the internal ministry. Justice minister became Anton Stankov, former head of the Penal Consortium affiliated with the Sofia City Court. The Vice Prime-Minister and Minister of Social Affairs, Lidija Shouleva, came directly from the business world. Previously, she was a director of the Albena Invest Holding privatization fund. The educational minister Vladimir Atanassov was known mostly among Sofia University circles, but those who know him, acknowledge that he is a man who knows his job.

Saxcoburggotsky created a team of many people with either positive or no particular public images. However, he did not stop there. He took in also some people of doubtful reputation, coming from both outside and inside the country. The most disputed figure was Stoyan Ganev, who became Chief of the Cabinet. Ganev was a former foreign minister in the first UDF government (1991-1992). After taking a position at the UN, he decided to stay in the United States, where he spent almost a decade. This step – among others during his time in office – made Bulgarians believe that he is not a statesman, but a political adventurer. Ganev's new post, however, gives him an enormous power within the state – he can read confidential information that may reach only the Prime Minister, he can control the access to him and advise him on issues of state importance among other privileges.

The public opinion asks also why Saxcoburggotsky took on board figures connected – directly or indirectly – with interest groups of doubtful reputation within the country. It is publicly known that the Minister of State Administration Dimitar Kalchev has been a respected mayor of the town of Rousse, but also a board member of two firms related to the 'Multigroup' holding. The latter emerged in the early 1990s as a monopolist conglomerate of enterprises dealing with natural goods in the energy sector. Part of its wealth was supposedly acquired through networks of the former secret services. In 1997 the UDF government broke their monopoly, so they transformed, shrank and kept a relatively low profile over the past four years. Although recently the leader of the transformed group Ilija Pavlov publicly advocated tolerance in the business and apologized for his own aggressive behaviour before, it still remains to be seen whether this is just a rhetoric against the backdrop of a new political scene or a commitment to a new business ethic.

The appointment of the interior ministry's general secretary Bojko Borisov became also a hot topic. His firm was responsible for the personal security of Simeon over the past five years, alongside that of other important public figures from Bulgaria and abroad. However, Borisov and his firm had close connections to a leader of one of the 'wrestlers groups', which in the mid-1990s became powerful by extorting money through offering of 'insurance and protection'. Those groups were also pressed to keep a low profile over the past four years, but they still remained structures not to be overlooked. Thus, at present a lot depends on Borisov's own behaviour. If he shows no tolerance to these groups, then one can believe that Saxcoburggotsky gave his personal

bodyguard a chance for development rather than that he made a gesture to mafia-styled organizations.

A culmination of the Premier's catch-all attitude so far was his decision to back the incumbent President Petar Stoyanov for the upcoming presidential elections on 11 November. Unusually for a pre-elections campaign, until early October the most powerful movement in Bulgaria, Saxcoburggotsky's NDSV, did not have a candidate. Waiting and waiting, at the last moment Simeon announced his decision in favour of Stoyanov. The latter is running as an independent candidate, although he was backed by the UDF long time ago and was elected on the UDF ticket for his first term in office.

While it is clear that the catch-all attitude is indeed a form of overcoming divisive politics - the main argument of the Prime Minister - some observers have other opinions. It is often alleged that Simeon took many lobbies on board, because he simply does not know well the Bulgarian reality, and needs diverse elements to rely on. Also, opinions exist that different lobbies decide for the Prime Minister and not he, himself. Many interpreted also his last catch-all move - to back Stoyanov - as a new demonstration of weakness. The claim went that his movement had no public figure able to win the presidential race and that is why Simeon had no other winning choice.

Let us now look from another angle. Is Saxcoburggotsky indeed weak, or is he playing the rules of another game that is not well understood domestically? First, he moves slowly, but decisively, and makes decisions 'when the right time comes'. Indeed, he does not know well the Bulgarian political life, so he needs time to learn about the players before he really starts. On 9 July *Troud* suggested that 380 applications for ministers were submitted for consideration on Simeon's desk, something that did not happen to any post-communist Prime Minister before. Then, he takes almost everybody on board, but creates a healthy distance. So far, he did not develop clientelist networks of persons or groups, which was very often the case in Bulgaria's politics before. Then, he does not overexpose either his thoughts or the direction of his looming decisions, but asks the lobbies to go first. Then he ultimately decides.

Many would claim that this is exactly a western style of ruling not by 'patronage', but by 'policy', and that such style arrives for the first time on Bulgarian soil after 1989. However, the healthy question is whether this is really so? Are all concerned societal elements debating the substance of policies to be taken on a consensual basis, or are they just the décor for a one-man's show? Is what we see in Bulgaria a sign of a genuine cooperation between people, the widely acclaimed building of bridges and crossing of divides, or is it a simple cooptation of elites? The answer so far is not clear, since signs lead to both directions. Some policies, like the combat of corruption, with which the government has started decisively, are obviously subject of consensus by many parts of the ruling elite and the coalition partners. Similar consensus exists on the policies for EU and NATO integration, which the new government inherited and continued with a new vigour.

However, there are other signs. Although people within the NDSV constantly warned Saxcoburggotsky about Ganev and some other figures, their words were overheard. Tensions also arose between the NDSV and the coalition partner MRF. Initially some of them concerned the choice for regional governors in which the MRF has shown a strong interest. Moreover, while the MRF has been a coalition partner, in fact it has less powerful ministers than NDSV's non-coalition partner, the BSP. The biggest clash, however, emerged out of the almost personal decision of Saxcoburggotsky to back President Stoyanov. This brought the MRF to the brink of backing the BSP presidential candidate. The decision for this support for the first time also embarrassed many of the NDSV members, since it made clear to them who takes the decisions after all. They felt small because they understood that there is no other person within the movement to whom the Prime Minister can trust a victory, except to himself. Some even interpreted it as his lack of desire to help other personalities emerge around him. In this vein, one can also ask the question whether the new strongman does not attempt to make the small even smaller and – on a larger scale - make all groups squabble among each other, so that he can emerge as the only person to make a mature authoritative decision. Such an attitude would remind of a forgotten royal style of rule, and of the age-old principle 'divide and rule'.

Despite those tensions, Saxcoburggotsky managed so far to create a positive political environment and has good chances to introduce the promised changes. Everybody except the UDF is on board, including the President, who is most likely to win. Now, when both the NDSV and the UDF back the President, the gap between the Prime Minister and his only real opposition gets narrower. On the long run, the President may decide to veto legislation, but he will be aware that he owes his victory not only to himself, and will be careful, if he wants to put a stick in the wheels of Simeon's carriage.

However, it is possible that the new government stumbles over its own design. As a catch-all movement with a populist appeal, the NDSV does not have an ideological doctrine binding its members. Thus, the power concentration is not so much around anything else but the figure of Saxcoburggotsky. If he is not successful in uniting all those interests, one cannot rule out the development of 'power fiefdoms' of some stronger personalities, which is a phenomenon typical for the Bulgarian political reality. The Prime Minister should be aware that the political culture does not change overnight.

Also, there is too much expectation and hope vested in Saxcoburggotsky. According to a *Mediana Agency* opinion poll of 29-30 July, 65% of the respondents believed that the new government is able to take out the country from the difficult economic situation. In May 1997, the former Prime Minister Ivan Kostov received only 54% of the public's trust. Thus, if Simeon's promise to introduce significant change within 800 days does not materialize, he may face a serious downfall. However, if he is successful, he may attempt to change the rules from within the system - ask for constitutional changes and for the introduction of monarchy. While at present the majority of the Bulgarians would not opt for 'monarchy' even if he takes the country out of the economic and

social limbo, as polls indicate, this may not be the case in the future. The former exiled monarch never says 'never' when asked about his intentions to turn Bulgaria into a monarchy. On their part, ordinary Bulgarians have shown with their vote in the last elections that they need a father-figure to solve their problems. They view this figure beyond the president, designed in modern constitutions to perform the function of the 'father of the nation'. And most of them seem to be not fully aware of the fact that the power concentration in the personality of the Prime Minister makes them vulnerable on the good or bad decisions of one single person. Hopefully, during the next four years Bulgarians will take seriously Saxcoburggotsky's appeal not to believe him, but believe their own selves, and in that way help the nation mature politically.