

## **Simeon Comes Up Short**

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The new Bulgarian premier does not appear to be fulfilling his pre-election pledges.

Barely months after he first declared his intention to 'get involved'

in politics, former Bulgarian king Simeon II has become the first deposed monarch ever to be elected prime minister in his former kingdom.

Domestic and international observers who had openly wondered how the

64-year-old businessman, who speaks an accurate but quaint form of

Bulgarian, could achieve his aim of 'bringing Bulgaria into the 21st

Century' got their comeuppance in June when voters awarded his national

movement a landslide victory.

At a stroke Simeon, who has spent over 50 years abroad and was billed by one foreign observer as an 'historical anachronism', was propelled to political stardom. His star continues to rise: by the time his government was sworn in on July 24, some pollsters put his popularity rating 77 per cent ahead of anyone else in Bulgarian politics.

However, even some of Simeon's staunchest supporters have noticed that the former king's deeds have been at sharp variance with his words.

Having advocated a 'new morality' in politics, his government includes some shady figures connected to what is popularly dubbed the 'domestic Mafia'. Having vowed to promote democracy, the statutes of his national movement - which has not yet become a political party - allow Simeon to hire and fire deputies at will.

Having pledged to significantly improve the lot of ordinary Bulgarians "within 800 days", he has given little indication of how he intends to implement the economic reforms prescribed by his economic advisers.

The list goes on: having pledged to draw on professional and expert

know-how, Simeon has surrounded himself with complete unknowns, ranging from actors to provincial lawyers, school teachers and even a circus

magician. Few have any experience of politics.

The former king had said he would draw on his connections in the Arab world to attract investment from Saudi Arabia, among others. Once prime minister, however, he appointed Solomon Pasi as foreign minister, who, as a Jew, is unlikely to receive a warm reception from the Saudi government.

Simeon's deputy is a member of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, BSP, the heir to the communists, who rigged the 1947 referendum abolishing the monarchy in Bulgaria. A strange choice for a former monarch allegedly committed to a liberal, right of centre government - but then by appointing two BSP members to his government, Simeon has driven a wedge through the party itself.

Simeon's victory and the manoeuvres which accompanied the formation of his government have caused something of a political earthquake in Bulgaria. The former ruling United Forces are now in tatters, split between those who want to ally with Simeon and those led

by ex-premier Ivan Kostov, who prefer to stay in opposition.

Even the new government's junior coalition party, the Turkish Movement

For Rights and Freedom, is disgruntled, because party leader Ahmed Dogan was denied a senior position in the administration.

Analysts in Sofia have been quick to point out the similarities between

Simeon's behaviour and that of his father King Boris III, who during the 1930s sidelined long-standing political parties and established his own authoritarian rule.

While it seems unlikely that Simeon will resort to such methods, the difference between the words of the former king and the deeds of the incumbent premier make predictions difficult. Above all, Simeon is equivocal on the question of whether he will seek to restore the monarchy. Throughout his years in exile, he always referred to himself as King of the Bulgarians.

During the general election campaign, he insisted restoration was not a priority, without ever denying that it might be a long-term aim. On July 24, he swore allegiance to the Bulgarian republican constitution, but did not say whether this spelt the end of any monarchist ambitions he might have. This prompted observers both at home and abroad to surmise that restoration in Bulgaria is only a matter of time.

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