Chapter 4

Title

**The King and Us –
The Role of Socio-political Myths
in Post-socialist Bulgaria**

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Abstract The paper discusses the dynamic constitution of political myths within the context of post-socialist Bulgaria of the early 2000s. In 2001 the party of the former Bulgarian Tsar Simeon II won the national elections and formed a majority government. Paradoxically, unparalleled by another former member of the Eastern Bloc, the democratic vote had brought to power an ex-king. The analysis focuses on the socio-political salvific myth of the good 'Saviour-King', which underpinned the rise to power of the ex-monarch. Thereby the analysis explores the role of the social imaginary in crafting a coherent social vision of a country's future.

Introduction and analytical objective In the twenty years since the collapse of communism, Bulgarian democracy has seemingly achieved its objective goals – the democratic institutions have been established and there is a functioning multi-party system (Peeva, 2001). Bulgaria is considered a consolidated democracy, with a stable parliament, sound government structures, an active civil society and free media (EBRD, 2007). The country is defined as 'a democratic, law-governed and social state,' and the Bulgarian constitution includes a wide range of social rights. However, Bulgaria has been characterized as 'chronically incapable of coping with its social problems or improving its level of economic prosperity' (Gati, 1996; Ganev, 2001: 186; Clark, 2002; Vassilev, 2010).

In Bulgaria the transition towards democracy and market economy has been a modernising project, aimed at creating an 'open society,' wherein certain necessary trade-offs between 'social security'-stability versus social opportunities have been resolutely shifted toward the latter. The modernity aspect of this project has also been aimed at dismantling some of the obviously traditional socio-economic aspects that the communist regime has preserved and even reinforced. However, the feasibility of the transition was also predicated upon a spontaneously emerging vision of the society, yet it is this vision that remains underexplored and obscured (Lechner, 2004).

Consequently, the analysis aims to explore new parameters for reflecting on democracy that go beyond the limits of the prevailing theoretical frameworks of 'formal democracy'. Whereas 'revolution from above' and 'elite-led, top-down transition' have been the guiding paradigms of the theory and praxis of the post-communist period (Wydra 2000; Woell and Wydra, 2008), the discussion argues about the importance of recognizing the socio-political dimension of the democratization process, as emerging from the bottom-up. Thus, the analysis argues that understanding democracy within Bulgarian context should take into account the issues beyond the formal creation of liberal rights, and consider the myths and narratives of the social imaginary as essential in the process of identity formation, and therefore, for the process of democratization. In particular, the essay will focus on a transient, yet powerful socio-political myth – the myth of the saviour-king.

Identity and political myth

Collective identity is defined as a 'group self-understanding,' 'group consciousness,' collective 'we' feeling (Delanty and Rumford, 2005: 51). As Eder argues, constructions of identity are formed within social relations of the present and are created in a way which allows permanent change of social relations

to be written into identity so that society could see itself and be seen from the outside as having a constant (Eder, 2009: 428). Societal identities also refer to self-understanding of a society (Anderson, 2006). Identities are articulated as the reason for particular political praxis, yet they are also (re)produced through these very policy discourses: they are simultaneously (discursive) foundation and product (Butler, 1990: 25).

However, it is only a common narrative that can make 'a single set' out of a multiplicity of principles, values, memories, symbols that constitute identities. Myth, as a particular kind of narrative, can fundamentally contribute to this end. Myth implies the possibility of encompassing different stories, stemming from different narrative voices, which can be re-comprised in a common mythologem (Levi-Strauss, 1978: 25-27). Thus, myth can contribute to a delineation of the always problematic idem of any form of group identity.

A simple narrative becomes a political myth when it creates significance of political conditions and actions shared by a group (Botticci, 2007: 178). A political myth 'tells the story of a political society' (Tudor 1972: 138). Political myths reduce the complexity of social life to the relative simplicity of its narrative plot, thereby providing fundamental cognitive schemata for mapping the social world (Flood, 1996; Shcherbinina, 2011; Sakwa, 2004). It is in this way that myth can be considered poetic - a poetry not written for aesthetic reasons, but which imagines forth, shaping the several features of the external world into a concrete image (Munz, 1973: 197). The poetic aspect of political myths enables them to act as 'motivating social myths' in being the direct means for questioning what is given (Sorel, 1950). Indeed, as narratives that provide significance, political myths not only make sense of experience, but they also provide orientation and stimulation for action: they are an invitation to act 'here and now.'

Myths are essential for the political imaginary, and they are also indispensible for the constitution of legitimacy and

civic identity in post-communist democracies (Woell and Wydra, 2008). Myths cannot just be invented; they need to resonate with the society. They do not represent false information, rather they contain beliefs of the community about itself. An essential component of identities, myths are powerful in shaping the definition of public interest (Goldstein and Keohane, 1996: 85).

In the fluid socio-economic and socio-political space of post-socialist Bulgaria, myths have given order and meaning. In the radical uncertainty of the wide-encompassing Bulgarian transformation, the major myths of the period have also been motivating social myths, inviting a set of policies and action.

The post-socialist 'transition' and salvific myths Twenty years after the fall of the Eastern European bloc, Bulgaria is amongst the most disappointed EU nations, when it comes to assessing the transition from totalitarianism to democracy (Dnevnik, 2009). The transition in Bulgaria has been called the 'cold war of the civil society,' and it has been marked by its confrontational character. Although the confrontation contributed to and in greater degree imposed a confrontational and irresponsible model for public behaviour and communication, the very model of the transition generated socio-political contestation. Bulgarian people expected that the transition would be something organized, planned and constructive. Although politically segmented, the society trusted political elites to realize controlled, and at least partly safe transition, and the vast majority of the people expected fast changes for the better. These expectations turned out to be misleading, as the uncontrolled character of the transition was initiated from the very beginning. While in the early nineties, the transition was considered as an instrument for a one-way public benefit; ten years later the view of the transition was dominated by the perception of chaos, lack of perspective, illogicalness, catastrophe – these

perceptions were seemingly aptly captured by the Russian description of the Nineties as 'the Wild Nineties' (Ledeneva, 2006; Ryabchuk, 2007).

The expectation that the transition will be a quick process leading to greater socio-economic prosperity, modernization and increased socio-economic opportunities, was transient and quickly faded away. However, emergent socio-political myths continued promising salvation and quick resolution of Bulgaria's socio-economic and socio-political problems, thereby foresting for brief periods social unity and consensus. One of the most powerful salvific myths was the one of the good (ex-)King, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. The former monarch triumphantly won the elections in 2001 (Barany, 2001; Peeva, 2001). Simeon's electoral success marked a shift from traditional political parties to personalistic parties – a trend which has continued being a defining characteristic of Bulgaria's political landscape (Gurov and Zankina, 2013; Levitt and Kostadinova, 2014).

The myth of the good (ex-) king– Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha

A bipolar model of confrontational politics, pitting 'left' versus 'right' was a characteristic of the Bulgarian post-socialist transition of the 1990s (Todorov, 2007). This model mired Bulgarian politics in social and political instability and mistrust. Amidst a 'chaotic transition' and political hostility, the public perceived the traditional parties as having failed their public mandate. Disillusioned and tired by the party politics dividing the nation, the Bulgarian public sought a unifying figure, a source of authority and national identity that would stand apart from political squabbles. Paradoxically, the Bulgarian ex-monarch became this impartial and uniting symbol. The prestige and popularity of the long-exiled tsar 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). Unhappy 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 (Vassilev, 2003: 2).

Simeon II, former king (or tsar) of Bulgaria was born in 1937 and formally reigned in Bulgaria in the period of 1943-46. Since he ascended the throne at 6 years of age, the royal authority was exercised over the kingdom on his behalf by a regency council. A referendum held in 1946, just as Bulgaria became a member of the Eastern Bloc, resulted in the abolishment of the monarchy. Simeon was forced into an exile abroad, eventually permanently settling in Spain. He returned to Bulgaria only in 1996. At that time the former monarch formed the political party National Movement for Stability and Progress (abbreviated in Bulgarian as NDSV), initially established as the National Movement Simeon II. After the party won the elections, Simeon became prime minister of the Republic of Bulgaria from July 2001 until August 2005. In the elections that followed, NDSV lost its parliamentary majority and participated in a coalition government with the Bulgarian Socialist Party. In 2008 after the electoral defeat of NDSV in the national parliamentary elections, the former tsar left politics. At that time the ex-monarch became the subject of numerous property-related scandals and accusations of corruption and greed. As a result, in the public's eyes he was no longer a hero but a greedy old man.

However, in the mid-nineties the myth of the good saviour-monarch was in its ascendancy. Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha was perceived as the unifying figure in the Bulgarian political landscape, an appeal further aided by nostalgic monarchism. Thus, well before the electoral victory of the ex-monarch's party and his appointment as a prime minister on the 17th of June 2001, a new political myth has already appeared - the myth of the saviour-king (Petkov, 2005: 209). Reflecting on this period, which marked the height of his popularity, Simeon shares: 'For the Bulgarians I was the king and this

was a connection with the past, and also an opportunity for a more promising future' (Saxe Coburg Gotha, 2014: 232). Indeed, when Simeon returned to Bulgaria in 1996, he was given a welcome fit for a king. Enthusiastic crowds cheered: 'Simeon!' and 'We want our king!' Reportedly, half a million people gave a warm welcome to the ex-king on his arrival in Sofia on 26 May 1996. 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 the national affairs, especially at a time when Bulgaria was on the verge of its worst post-1989 economic debacle (Vassilev, 2003).

The ex-king states: 'My compatriots came to me to make confessions to me. They saw the person, who would listen to their complaints... I exemplified a certain novelty, a certain exoticism, after the years of communism and timelessness. I became the darling of the media. I remember that during my first visits I had more than 100 meetings in only 10 days' (Saxe Coburg Gotha, 2014: 232). The strong and positive reaction, which the former tsar elicited in the public, could in part be related to his status of being 'outside' the events, 'untainted' by the painful experiences of the transition. The old-fashioned Bulgarian language of the ex-tsar, who had spent many years of forced exile abroad, only added to his appeal. This 'external' viewpoint also bestowed upon the mythical persona of the former king elements of a Bakhtinian trickster – a character, who comes from the outside and disrupts the flow of events (Szakolczai, 2009: 141). The public longed for a disruption of the lawlessness, corruption and impoverishment brought about by the Bulgarian post-socialist transition trajectory. NDSV, the amorphous personalistic movement that brought the former tsar to power quickly gained a wide-ranging popularity.

Nostalgic monarchism was a key component of the ex-king's appeal. This nostalgia was widely shared across the

different parts of the political and socio-economic spectrum – for example, both the Bulgarian president and the leader of the Bulgarian Labour Unions alike addressed the former monarch and now candidate prime minister with 'Your Majesty.' In the eyes of the Bulgarian public the former tsar was not just another politician – Simeon's royal origin was the defining element of his allure. The 'royal welcome', which the Bulgarian public gave to the former king, increased the confidence of the ex-tsar in his pursuit of political leadership: 'I was surprised. That means that the political layers are not as impenetrable, as I had previously imagined them' (Saxe Coburg Gotha, 2014: 233).

The close personal connections between Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and the Spanish king Juan Carlos, who has been called 'the midwife of the Spanish democracy,' gave the former monarch an additional public appeal. In what was characterized as a 'parliamentary revolution,' during the 2001 parliamentary elections the Bulgarian voters withdrew support for the highly-praised center-right government with premier Ivan Kostov. The king's movement - which did not even exist until just 90 days before the elections - took half of the 240 seats in the unicameral National Assembly. The wide-ranging public appeal of the NDSV ensured its dominance in 28 of the 31 regions of the country.

Clearly, the former tsar represented a Weberian charismatic authority figure, 'resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him' (Weber, 2015). But Simeon also actively participated in creating his own myth. 'Morality' was given the key role amongst the qualities of the 'saviour-king's' mythological figure. Simeon explicitly promised 'higher morality in national politics' in his numerous electoral political speeches and public announcements. Yet, at the same time, the speeches of the ex-monarch did not outline any practical

judicial and political reforms needed to ensure this 'higher morality'. Instead, the invocation of 'morality in politics' in the public rhetoric of the former monarch resembled 'magical incantations.' Simeon claimed to be the moral arbiter in this new kind of politics and the saviour-king's mythology invited blind faith in the actions of the former tsar. 'Trust me!,' asked the ex-king of his compatriots, 'when the time comes I will tell you (what to do).' In this request for blind, unquestioning trust, Simeon was no longer the politician, who serves the public and is accountable to it, but the tsar, in possession of royal authority.

Another important component of the saviour-king's myth was the mythological chronotope of '800 days,' in which the country will be 'turned around'. The chronotope had a particularly strong messianic appeal, as it promised an improvement of the country's economy and the standard of living of the ordinary Bulgarians in a relatively short period. In order to achieve this ambitious goal Simeon envisioned a 'special time' of 800 days; a time outside the ordinary and formerly existing time-flow, in which a disruption of the existing development trajectory would be possible. The utopian goals of socio-economic advancement would be achieved by the magical transformation of the existing reality, via the application of the 'renowned Bulgarian industriousness and entrepreneurship'. Like a messiah, Simeon positioned himself as a keeper and interpreter of this new world. No opposition or negotiation of the interpretive perspective of the saviour-king was anticipated: 'I rely on the unquestioning support of everyone, who has believed in me so far,' stated Simeon (Saxe Coburg Gotha, 2001).

The most important mythological 'bundle of relations' (Levi-Strauss, 1955: 431), which the ex-king referred to in his speeches, was the one between him and his 'compatriots' (Saxe Coburg Gotha, 2001). The former monarch stated that he saw this relationship as a service to his compatriots,

which he felt it was his duty to offer – 'for decades I have lived with my duty to serve you.' The former king emphasized, 'I am firmly convinced that I ought to fulfil my historic duty to serve you.' At the same time the Bulgarian people, whom Simeon wanted to serve, were portrayed as a poor, unhappy, and desperate 'flock,' apparently in need of a competent and benevolent shepherd. For the ex-king these 'royal subjects' were clearly in need of leadership and moral guidance – 'for me there has been nothing more painful than the desperate cries of hundreds of my compatriots'. Thus, while talking about service, Simeon did not imply the service that a 'mere' politicians offers to his electorate. Rather, the former monarch's entry into the Bulgarian politics was 'the return of the king', loosely covered by the politician's garb.

Yet the quick rise of the myth of the 'saviour-king' was followed by an equally quick fall. Only a year after the sweeping electoral victory, the public trust in the NDSV government had dramatically fallen. The country's economy and the standard of living had not markedly improved. The public judged harshly the former royal: 'He is a king-liar'. The press concluded that: 'in 12 months the Bulgarians were transformed from optimists to pessimists.' The 'cult phrase of the former king, "Trust me!" actually should mean: "Trust in yourselves!"' was the public verdict. 'The myth of the good king imploded like a soap bubble,' concluded the social media.

The Bulgarians wanted a hero saviour-king. However, they received a politician. The attempts of the Bulgarian public to transcend the divisions between left and right by resorting to the pre-modern authority of divine rule by a king did not live up to the expectations. 'If I would have been satisfied by just playing the role of a 'tsar', without any power, role in which the people wanted to see me, I am sure that my popularity today would have been as high as before,' admitted Simeon (Saxe Coburg Gotha, 2014: 232). A 'roi ex

machina' could not provide quick solutions to the social, political and economic problems of capitalist Bulgaria of the early 2000s. In spite of the over-optimistic expectations of the Bulgarian people, expectations heightened by Simeon's demagogic promise to rebuild the economy and improve the abysmal living standards of Bulgarians in 800 days, his government failed to ease the deep economic and social crisis gripping the country (Vassilev, 2003: 170). Widespread public discontent eroded Simeon's mass appeal, confirming the Weberian conclusion that personal charisma is a tenuous and fleeting source of power. The Bulgarian ex-king was not naked. Rather, the richness of his clothing contrasted too sharply with the poverty of his subjects.

Conclusion Democracy in Bulgaria is predominantly conceived in its 'formal' dimensions – the existing democratization studies have mainly focused on certain aspects of the formal institutionalization of political authority via the top-down setting of institutions, rules and procedures. Little attention has been given to the models, rationalities and representations that provide the intellectual and emotional sources on which the social realities are built up as well as to the need to explain democratization holistically. At the normative level, the link between institutions and democracy has been perceived as an unquestionable ethical imaginary, in a way that has reified both categories and has silenced their alternative conceptions.

The discussion aimed to aid in establishing new parameters for reflecting on democracy that go beyond the limits of the prevailing institutionally-centered theoretical frameworks, especially within Eastern European context. Thereby the analysis introduced aspects and nuances that have been neglected and marginalized in the current research of the post-socialist Eastern European democracies. The essay sought to move beyond the most frequently accessed episte-

mological paradigms by exploring an overlooked analytic dimension, which emphasises the importance of social myths and their power to mobilize the public imagination and lead to socio-political action.

The study focused on one major Bulgarian salvific myth – the one of the good (ex-)king. Rising quickly to prominence, the myth just as quickly lost its utopian appeal. The public persona of the former royal underwent a complex process of mythologization, followed by an even quicker de-mythologization. The ex-tsar actively participated in the creation of his own myth, portraying himself as bearer of superior morality and trustworthiness. Acting as a Bakhtinian trickster he sought to disrupt the flow of time by introducing a special chronotope ('800 days') that would allow the achievement of his ambitious development goal. Yet, Simeon, the politician, could not fulfil the promises of Simeon, the former king. At the twilight of his governing mandate, the social imaginary was no longer associating his image with that of a heroic king-saviour, but with the one of a 'sly fox'.

The exploration of the Bulgarian political myth of the good 'saviour-king' suggests two major conclusions. First, re-conceptualizing the socio-political imaginaries of democracy within a wider framework of social relations requires taking into consideration the strong moral judgement that society bestows upon the symbolic figures, central to the constitution of the political myths. Second, the dynamic development of the symbolic figure of the former tsar and the attendant political myth point at the continued presence of an active and responsive 'civic imaginary,' which is frequently passing an ethical judgement and acting as a social critique. Thus, the discussion presents an argument for the recognition of the saliency of an active model of citizenship in Bulgaria, rather than the passive 'Orientalized' one, which currently still prevails in much of the analytic discourse.

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