

REVIEW

REGARDING: The PhD dissertation of Xiao Zuo

a PhD student in the Department of History of Bulgaria

at the Faculty of History of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

on the topic "Bulgarian-Yugoslav Relations (1953-end of the 1960s)" for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the field of higher education "Humanities", professional direction 2.2. "History and Archaeology" /Modern Bulgarian History/

by **Dr. Jordan Angelov Baev** - Professor of Contemporary International History, member of the scientific jury according to the Order of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" No. RD 38-648/09.10.2025.

The presented PhD dissertation contains four main chapters with a total of 19 paragraphs (245 pages). The main goal of the dissertation was formulated within the introduction - a study of the development and evolution of Bulgarian foreign policy towards neighboring Yugoslavia with an emphasis on political, economic and cultural relations, as well as changes in the "publicization" on the so-called "Macedonian question". The relevance of the topic was also determined by the chosen approach to examine bilateral relations from the perspective of the policy of the small state between ideological dependencies and national interests during the Cold War era. The importance of the presented study is increased by the fact that Xiao Zuo is a representative of the youngest generation in the developing Chinese historical Bulgarian studies. Its most prominent representative (and "doyen"), Professor Ma Xipu, has published original monographs on the history of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria in the last two decades, and even nowadays, despite his advanced age, he is completing a fundamental work on general history of the Balkans.

The chronological framework of the dissertation is logically justified and follows the periodization of Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations established in Bulgarian historiography. However, if the beginning of the studied period is clearly outlined with the changes in the Kremlin's policy after the death of Stalin and with the new course of Bulgarian foreign policy in the Balkans, the final period could be justified even more clearly. The decision of the

Bulgarian leadership to transfer political disputes to the sphere of scientific discourses and to activate scientific research on the most controversial bilateral issue - the "Macedonian question" significantly contributes to this. An unambiguous expression of this policy was the publication in November 1968 of a "historical-political reference" on the Macedonian question, and the establishment in the following decade of specialized groups of historians on the "national question", as well as the emerging of new experts on the history and politics of Yugoslavia in a number of research institutes - the two historical institutes at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Military History, the Ivan Bashev Institute of Foreign Policy, the Institute of History of the Bulgarian Communist Party, the Institute for Contemporary Social Theories, etc. In the rich bibliography presented by Xiao Zuo in the introductory part of the dissertation, a number of other publications by specialists in the aforementioned scientific centers could be added - Zhorzheta Grigorova, Anton Parvanov, Valeri Rusanov, Yordan Velichkov, Stoyan Barakov, etc.

The first chapter consistently reveals the various stages of improvement of good-neighborly relations between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, alternating with periods of tension. To a large extent, they were motivated rather by ideological considerations (as in the period 1958-1960), but also by international events (the Six-Day War in the Middle East in June 1967 or the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in Czechoslovakia in August 1968). The PhD student conscientiously and in detail used the achievements of Bulgarian historical science, and in a number of cases also cited alternative data and opinions from publications by Yugoslav/Serbian authors. The applied methodological approach to the study is interpretative with elements of comparative analysis. Although the main documentary collections on the issue have been studied and cited many times in contemporary Bulgarian historiography, it would be more convincing for the PhD student to examine some of them independently in her research. Moreover, the most important decisions and protocols of the top political leadership are fully accessible and available online (CDA, file 1B, notes 5, 6, 35, 36, 64).

The second chapter of the work is perfectly justified and logically dedicated to the key issue of the Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations, the "Macedonian Question". The author focuses her attention on the "internal debates" and the gradual final formulation of the Bulgarian position. The special paragraph on the status of the Bulgarian population in Yugoslavia is also of interest. In future additional research by the author on the topic could be expanded into its three-dimensional state of Bulgarian-Yugoslav-Greek relations. In 2019, for example, a PhD dissertation (by Georgios Mihailydis) was defended in Athens with an interesting parallel

analysis of the positions of the Greek, Yugoslav and Bulgarian communist parties on the “national question” in the postwar era.

As underlined in the introduction, the basic contributions of the study were contained in the third and fourth chapters, dedicated to the economic and cultural aspects of bilateral Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations. These aspects were relatively less studied areas in the otherwise extensive literature in both Bulgarian and Yugoslav/Serbian historiography. The third chapter (pp. 84-160) stands out as the most significant achievement in terms of both size and contents – with numerous unused or little-known so far documentary materials from the archival records of the Ministries of Foreign Trade and of Commerce (CDA, Fonds 259, 473) and with a total of 15 statistical tables attached. The analysis of the differences in structural and functional terms of the economic systems and foreign trade practices of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, which determined the increasing asymmetry in bilateral trade, was of a significant importance. At the same time, Xiao Zuo refuted with specific data the hypothesis for a possible negative impact of the common CMEA policy on Bulgaria's commercial contacts with neighboring Yugoslavia. The comparative analysis of the economic relations with capitalist countries and relations with Yugoslavia, which maintains a relatively liberal and market-oriented economic system, was also useful.

The final fourth chapter on bilateral cultural relations was also based on rich documentary material from the records of the Committee for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Abroad (CDA, Fond 363). The main conclusion of the PhD student is that efforts to expand cultural cooperation were limited due to "ideological constrains and institutional inefficiency". Similar to the previous chapter, a good comparative analysis of cultural relations between Bulgaria and capitalist countries has been made here, although their development had a real expression and results only from the second half of the 1960s. When considering the topic of scientific and academic cooperation with Yugoslavia in future author's works, it is also useful to reveal the archival records of the Ministry of Education, Sofia University and BAS.

A very good impression is made by the extensive but synthesized conclusion of the dissertation (p. 217-234), which contains the main evaluations of the study. The evolution of Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations was considered in the historical context of the constrains within the bipolar confrontation Cold War model, and fluctuations in bilateral relations as result of "Soviet influence" on Bulgarian politics. This thesis had an alternative trend - to what extent the Bulgarian political and state leadership was trying to influence the Kremlin to protect its national interests. On its part, as Xiao Zuo pointed out, the Yugoslav leadership used the

imposed image of Bulgaria as the "most loyal Soviet satellite" to declare Bulgarian policy as "an instrument of Soviet policy in the Balkans".

The dissertation's abstract of 19 pages presents in a synthesized view the structure, contents and main conclusions of the study. There were mentioned two publications of the author on the issues of the dissertation - one in English in the *Bulgarian Historical Review* and the other in Chinese in the edition of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). These publications contributed to the results of the study being more widely popularized among the international historical community, as well as to the development of Bulgarian studies among the one of the leading global powers in the contemporary world. It is necessary to underline as well the role of the scientific supervisor of the dissertation prof. Evgenia Kalinova and the teaching unit - department "History of Bulgaria" at the Faculty of History of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" for the successful completion of the doctoral studies.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the considered dissertation meets the requirements and criteria of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Rules for the Conditions and Procedures for Acquiring Scientific Degrees and Obtaining Academic Positions at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". It is a scientific work with a clearly formulated author's views, which fulfills the set goals and tasks and contains important achievements, still less discussed in the existing historiography so far. I declare that will support and vote for awarding Xiao Zuo the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in history.

Member of scientific jury:

Prof. Jordan Baev, PhD

Sofia, 10 December 2025