

## REVIEW

of the dissertation thesis by Xiao Zuo

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on the topic "Bulgarian-Yugoslav Relations (1953 - the 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" (Contemporary Bulgarian History)

by Prof. Dr. Romyana Marinova-Christidi, Chair of the Scientific Jury, pursuant to Order No. RD 38-648/09.10.2025 of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski."

Xiao Zuo's dissertation is devoted to Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations from 1953 to the end of the 1960s. I am deeply impressed that a foreign colleague, and one from a distant country like China, has chosen to write her dissertation on a very specific Balkan topic. The choice of topic, her command of the Bulgarian language, and the fine style, structure, and density of the work deserve admiration. Despite the fact that political relations between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia have been well developed in historiography, little attention has been paid to the economic and cultural aspects of the period in question. In this sense, the dissertation makes a contribution and fills certain gaps. The doctoral student has boldly covered the political, economic, and cultural interactions between the two countries, as well as the many contradictions and sometimes difficult-to-understand Macedonian issues for foreign observers and researchers. It is remarkable that Xiao has an excellent knowledge of the historiography on the subject and uses literature in Bulgarian, Serbian, and English. The use of archival materials from several

Bulgarian archives is also an indisputable contribution of the dissertation. The text and the scientific apparatus are formatted according to the standards of the Faculty of History, and the citations and notes are correct. In addition to the well-structured and enjoyable text of the dissertation, we can also mention that the doctoral student already has publications in English and Chinese related to Bulgarian history during the socialist period.

The text of the dissertation consists of four chapters with 19 paragraphs (including subparagraphs), a conclusion, a bibliography, and appendices, and has a total length of 245 pages.

The introduction justifies the significance of the topic, the chronological boundaries of the study, and the emphasis placed on the political, economic, and cultural contacts between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia during the period under review. The goals and objectives of the study are set out, namely "to rethink the dominant narrative focus on political and ideological tensions" by broadening the view to include the economic and cultural aspects of bilateral relations. However, the doctoral student is not tempted to exclude the complex Macedonian question from her research; on the contrary, she gives it the necessary attention, which is a serious challenge for a researcher who comes from a country that is in a completely different historical, geographical, and geopolitical context. Xiao Zuo's courage deserves admiration, especially since she has approached the topic in a correct and professional manner.

The doctoral student's historiographical review is remarkable. She demonstrates excellent knowledge of the authors who have researched this topic, as well as the published documentary collections, conference proceedings, and economic studies on the state of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia during this period. The conscientious and accurate citation of these authors also contributes to the professional appearance of the dissertation.

The first chapter traces the dynamics of relations between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, the various stages they went through, placing this in the context of ideological frameworks and international events. The approach is chronological and distinguishes several periods: the rupture of 1948-1953 and the attempts to normalize relations thereafter; the escalation after the events in Hungary in 1956 and the deepening of ideological opposition; the improvement in relations in the period 1962-1967; their renewed tension in the late 1960s, as well as the stagnation and mistrust in bilateral relations in the 1970s and 1980s. The text is logical and well-reasoned. In her narrative, the doctoral student demonstrates an excellent knowledge of Bulgarian historiography on the subject, but also uses Serbian sources, which not only adds depth to the study, but also introduces a different perspective.

The second chapter of the dissertation is devoted to the central issue in Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations, namely the "Macedonian question." The individual paragraphs trace the genesis of the Bulgarian position, the different views and internal debates, the review of policy in 1963, mutual distrust, propaganda, and limited progress in bilateral contacts. The author argues that 1967 was particularly important because it was then that the mistakes and revised positions acknowledged at the March 1963 plenum were made public. In 1967, the thesis formulated at that time that there was no Macedonian minority in Pirin Macedonia was already openly articulated. An important part of this chapter is the section on the status of the Bulgarian population in Yugoslavia.

The third chapter is the most extensive, devoted to the economic ties between the two countries, and is a valuable contribution, as trade relations have not been examined in detail in the historiography. The large volume of archival documents from the fonds of the Ministries of Foreign Trade (CSA, f. 259) and the Ministry of Trade (CSA, F. 473), as well as the 15 statistical tables attached, make an excellent impression. The doctoral student provides an in-

depth analysis of the differences between the economic systems of Bulgaria (centralized planned economy) and Yugoslavia (liberal, market-oriented) and the asymmetry to which they lead. The analysis of the foreign trade practices of the two countries, the influence of the COMECON, and trade with capitalist countries is particularly valuable. Another plus of this chapter is that economic relations are placed in the context of political parameters, with Xiao Zuo making apt parallels, comparisons, and analyses in this regard. The numerous statistical data provided by the doctoral student are very useful, illustrating the conclusions and enriching the picture on the topic.

The fourth chapter focuses on the cultural ties between the two countries. Although culture is usually considered a secondary issue in bilateral relations, it is in fact very illustrative of political relations and also very interesting, as its specific nature allows for some freer interpretations and observations outside the strictly political context. An indisputable contribution to this chapter are the numerous documents used from the archives of the Committee for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (CSA, F. 363), supported by documents from the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The text again follows a chronological order by period, but it would benefit from the addition of documents from the Ministry of Education (CSA, F.142), as important processes can be traced in the field of education. This chapter focuses on Yugoslavia's place in Bulgarian cultural policy, and the main conclusions again point to political mistrust and differences in the positioning of the two countries during the Cold War as the reasons for the lack of success in cultural diplomacy.

In her comprehensive conclusion, the doctoral student draws well-argued conclusions and analyses, some of which are original, such as the assertion that Bulgaria, as a small country in the Soviet bloc, sought to strike a balance between ideological subordination, geopolitical reality and national interests. Xiao Zuo illustrates these conclusions precisely through

Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations and especially through the politics and diplomacy surrounding the "Macedonian question." The author also proposes an analytical model for interpreting foreign policy behavior within the socialist camp, based on three foundations: ideology, pragmatism, and national interest. She demonstrates her ability to work with a large body of archival documents, to synthesise and structure historical information, and to produce an analytical and well-organised historical text that constitutes an independent scientific study. The rich archival material she has used deserves special attention – documents from the Ministry of Foreign Trade, the Ministry of Trade, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Committee for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (stored in the Central State Archives), which contributes to the high value of the work. Its main contribution is that it goes beyond ideological and political parameters and enriches them with the economic and cultural aspects of Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations. At the same time, they are placed in the necessary historical context of the Cold War and the positioning of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia in it.

The abstract presented by doctoral student Xiao Zuo is 19 pages long and objectively presents the content, structure, and conclusions of the dissertation.

In conclusion, I would like to congratulate Xiao Zuo for her bold approach, hard work, serious efforts, and excellent results. Her research fully meets the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations on the Conditions and Procedures for Acquiring Academic Degrees and Holding Academic Positions at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski." It is an independent dissertation of a contributory nature, which gives me reason to strongly support her being awarded the academic and educational degree of "Doctor."

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