

OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Hristo Berov, PhD, member of the scientific jury in accordance with the Order of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" - No. RD 38-648/09.10.2025

of a dissertation on the topic:

"BULGARIAN-YUGOSLAV RELATIONS (1953 - the end " (1960s)"

for awarding the ONS "Doctor" in professional field 2.2. History and archaeology (doctoral program "History of Bulgaria" - Contemporary Bulgarian History)

of Zuo Xiao

The dissertation work of Ms. Zuo, presented to the attention of the scientific jury and the general public Xiao is a commendable attempt to study specifically Balkan or more precisely Bulgarian problems in a Balkan context. In this case, the interest of a researcher from the other side of the world in such a type of issue undoubtedly deserves support and serious attention. The text presented to the esteemed jury aims to analyze the evolution of Bulgarian foreign policy towards Yugoslavia from 1953 to the end of the 1960s with an emphasis on the interaction between the political, economic and cultural dimensions and special attention to the Macedonian question. The author examines the topic in the context of the Cold War in the Balkans, in which Bulgaria was the faithful ally of the USSR, and Yugoslavia - the state with a unique position between the two blocs and a leader in the Non-Aligned Movement. This specificity predetermines an "unstable normalization" and periodic crises in bilateral relations.

The text is organized thematically and problematically into 4 chapters, Introduction and Conclusion and a list of sources used called " Documents " and " Bibliography " with a total volume of 245 pages. The study definitely has its relevance, focusing on one of the special periods in the relations between the two Balkan states, reflecting both an attempt to restore acceptable interstate relations, but also bearing the burden of unresolved issues from the first half of the century and the specifics of the Cold War in the Balkans.

The first chapter (Bulgarian-Yugoslav Politics Relations) traces the development of interstate relations – from the restoration of contacts in the mid-1950s to the new escalation of tensions in the late 1960s. The study presents a historical overview of the immediate post-war rupture and the initial efforts to normalize relations until 1953, then traces the period of cautious thaw in the mid-1950s, followed by the new exacerbation of tensions after the Hungarian Crisis of 1956 and the deepening of ideological opposition until the early 1960s of the twentieth

century. Focusing on the improvement of bilateral relations in the period 1963-1967, the author highlights the key political meetings before moving on to the new tensions caused by the divergence of positions on the Macedonian question and the Prague Spring in the late 1960s. The concluding lines examine the limited progress and enduring mistrust that characterized Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations in the 1970s and 1980s.

Chapter Two (The Macedonian Question in Bulgarian – Yugoslav Relationships : Path of Rethinking and Publicization) examines the Macedonian question in Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations, defining it as central. Defining the period of the 1950s as a time of rethinking, the author outlines the internal debates in Bulgaria and emphasizes the challenges for reformulating the policy pursued. The following pages gradually trace the formation of the new Bulgarian position, starting from the March Plenum in 1963 and its implementation at the state level. The intensification of propaganda with the subsequent increase in diplomatic tension and efforts for rapprochement in the 1970s and early 1980s is also analyzed. Special attention is also paid to the status of the Bulgarian population in Yugoslavia and how this issue fits into the broader national narratives and bilateral disputes. In these pages, Ms. Zuo Xiao analyzes the Macedonian question not only as an “eternal dispute” but also as a policy that is undergoing an internal evolution – from avoiding open conflict to gradual rethinking, institutionalizing a new position, and moving towards active publicity and propaganda articulation after 1967–1968.

The third chapter (Bulgarian-Yugoslav Economic Relations) traces the restoration and expansion of economic relations from the mid-1950s onwards, with a particular focus on institutional frameworks, trade patterns and key economic indicators. The central theme here is the asymmetry in relations, including the challenges faced by Bulgaria due to its centralized economic system, in contrast to the liberalized approach in the Yugoslav economy. The analysis takes into account the influence of the CMEA and also reflects the economic relations between Bulgaria and capitalist countries. The author emphasizes that in the 1960s there were more opportunities for cooperation between the two countries (including through long-term contracts and protocols), but the real importance of Bulgaria in Yugoslav trade remained limited, while for Bulgaria the main partners remained the USSR, the GDR, Czechoslovakia, etc., which absorbed the main shares of foreign trade. This leads to a relatively weaker incentive for Bulgarian trade authorities to strengthen relations with Yugoslavia, which remained outside the institutional structure of the bloc. The conclusion is that economic cooperation often functions as a pragmatic space for dialogue, but rarely is it a "motor" capable of neutralizing political conflicts.

The Fourth Chapter (Bulgarian-Yugoslav Cultural Relations) draws attention to relations in the field of cultural contacts and the place of Yugoslavia in Bulgarian cultural policy. The early stage of cultural cooperation within the framework of the plan for a South Slavic Federation is examined, followed by a period of interruption. After that, the restoration of cultural ties during the thaw in the 1950s and early 1960s is described, including the implementation of various forms of exchange (artistic, academic and educational). In the 1960s, cultural cooperation expanded, but limitations remained as a result of ideological pressure or institutional inefficiency. Overall, a balanced comparative analysis of cultural relations with some capitalist countries is presented, and the chapter concludes with assessments of the structural limitations, mutual distrust and the broader context of the Cold War that shaped cultural diplomacy.

The conclusion summarizes the observations and conclusions from the previous chapters. The fluctuations in Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations under Soviet influence are assessed and the complex interactions between ideology and national interest in the Bulgarian position on the Macedonian question are noted. Last but not least, the political, economic and cultural dimensions of the bilateral relations are highlighted in a comparative perspective, with particular emphasis on the asymmetry, limitations and ideological barriers that characterized Bulgarian-Yugoslav interaction throughout the Cold War.

Miss Zuo 's dissertation Xiao leaves as a whole a positive impression on the reader with the clearly formulated goal and a balanced approach in presenting the problems. Such an approach is greatly facilitated by the good knowledge of the specifics of the Cold War in the Balkan context. The serious attention paid to economic issues in bilateral relations is particularly pleasing. This is a definite contribution of the dissertation work, which fills a certain historiographical void with a systematic and documentary-based analysis. Good work with the sources - primary and secondary - also leaves the reader with the feeling of serious and thorough work.

Of course, some remarks can be made, such as advice to use a wider range of publications and, if possible, documents of Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav origin. In the economic analysis, which is solid in documents and structure, it would be useful to distinguish more clearly "short-term" fluctuations from "long-term" structural dependencies (CIV/EEC, clearings, payment mechanisms) - although these dependencies have been taken into account and argued. It would also be good to approach more critically the comments on the Bulgarian minority within Yugoslavia and especially within the SSR (in the West outskirts) and not to take so much credence in assessments of systematic repression by the republican authorities.

Despite these brief remarks, the one presented by colleague Zuo Xiao's dissertation covers all the requirements for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the professional field of "History and Archaeology". As a result of this impression of mine, I confidently vote **in favor** of awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Ms. Zuo. Xiao .

21.12.2025
Berov

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hristo