

R E V I E W

on the the dissertation "BULGARIAN-YUGOSLAV RELATIONS (1953 – the end of 1960s)" of Zuo Xiao for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in scientific specialty 2.2. History and Archaeology, Doctoral Programme “History of Bulgaria” – Contemporary Bulgarian History”,

by Prof. Iskra Baeva PhD, Lecturer in Contemporary History at the Faculty of History, Sofia University „Kliment Ohridski”

1. Information about the applicant

Xiao Zuo is a Chinese student who graduated in 2018 with a degree in Bulgarian Philology from the Faculty of European Languages and Cultures at Beijing Foreign Studies University in China. In 2019, she arrived in Bulgaria and, thanks to her good command of the Bulgarian language, was accepted into the master's program in Diplomacy and Intelligence at the Faculty of History of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. Xiao Zuo completed her master's program in 2020, defending her master's thesis "Bulgarian-Chinese Relations 1948-1953" with distinction under the scientific guidance of Prof. Dr. Evgenia Kalinova.

Now a master's degree holder, Xiao Zuo was enrolled in 2020 as a doctoral student in the doctoral program "History of Bulgaria" at the Faculty of History of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski." The topic of her dissertation, approved by the Faculty Council of the Faculty of History, is Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations in the 1950s and 1960s, and her academic supervisor is again Prof. Dr. Evgenia Kalinova. After completing her dissertation, Xiao Zuo submitted it for discussion to the Department of Bulgarian History at the Faculty of History. At its meeting on September 10, 2025, the department discussed the dissertation, gave it a positive assessment, and decided to admit it for defense.

2. A review of the dissertation

I will begin my assessment of Xiao Zuo's dissertation with what distinguishes it from other studies in Bulgarian historiography devoted to relations between Bulgaria and our western

neighbor Yugoslavia. Although she has also examined the Macedonian question, Xiao Zuo's main focus is on other aspects of bilateral relations: their trade and economic characteristics and cultural ties. The doctoral student's non-Bulgarian origin has probably allowed her to look at Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations impartially, with the eye of an outside researcher, which, in my opinion, is the great advantage of her dissertation.

Xiao Zuo's dissertation is presented in English and examines Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations in the 1950s and 1960s, when they thawed and underwent a major, albeit non-linear, evolution. The dissertation comprises 245 pages and is structured into an abstract, introduction, four chapters, conclusion, and bibliography, organized according to the following topics: political relations, developments in the Macedonian question, trade and economic relations, and finally cultural relations. In order to gather material for her dissertation, Xiao Zuo worked in the Central State Archives, where she used the funds of the Ministry of Trade (f. 259 and 473), the Committee for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (f. 363) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (f. 1477). She also used four collections of published documents, as well as the 1978 Declaration. The scientific literature cited by the doctoral student comprises 113 titles in Bulgarian, English, and Serbian, including the most important publications on the subject by Bulgarian, Serbian, and other foreign researchers.

I can accept the objective of the dissertation as stated by the doctoral student in the Introduction: "*The dissertation examines the evolution of Bulgarian foreign policy towards neighboring Yugoslavia from 1953 to the end of the 1960s, focusing on its political, economic, and cultural dimensions, as well as the Macedonian question from the point of view of its publicity*" (p. 10). This formulation is quite modest, so I would add her stated approach to present her thesis on the bilateral relations of two neighboring countries with different historical fates after World War II from the perspective of the dilemma faced by small states during the Cold War: how to reconcile the prevailing internationalism with national interests. Of course, in this case, I must make the reservation that although Bulgaria may seem like a small country from a Chinese perspective, in the European political space it is a country with average territorial and demographic characteristics.

The first chapter (pp. 16–48) of Xiao Zuo's dissertation is devoted to the development of political relations between the two Balkan countries, one of which – Bulgaria, was an ally of the

Third Reich during World War II and became the closest ally of the Soviet Union after the war, while the other – Yugoslavia – was occupied and organized large-scale resistance during the war, and then was initially a preferred Soviet ally before being expelled from the emerging Eastern Bloc in 1948 to become one of the leading countries of the Non-Aligned Movement. These major differences in the positions of the two countries doomed them to complex and difficult relations. They are presented in detail in the first chapter, where the doctoral student argues that Bulgaria's position was entirely dependent on Soviet-Yugoslav relations. In this way, she explains both the distancing after 1948 and the rapprochement between the two countries during the two decades she has chosen to examine. According to political developments, the doctoral student has divided the period into the following stages: frozen relations (1948–1953), unstable normalization (1953–1962), significant improvement (1963–1967), and stability and suspicion (late 1960s). Although they fall outside the chronological scope of the topic, the review of bilateral relations in the 1970s and 1980s provides a good perspective on the presentation.

The second chapter (pp. 49–83) is devoted to the role of the Macedonian question in Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations. Since this topic has been studied in greatest detail by Bulgarian historians, Xiao Zuo's task was to trace their theses, but also to compare them with those of Serbian historiography. She did so very conscientiously, and her account provides a good opportunity to follow the different points of view in parallel, some of which do not agree with the Bulgarian position. Xiao Zuo critically raised the question of Bulgarian policy towards Bulgarians in the Western Outlands, who are clearly neglected.

The third chapter (pp. 84–160) is, in my opinion, the core of the dissertation. It traces the problems, successes, and limitations in the trade and economic relations between the two countries, which are overshadowed by political and ideological disputes. This part of the dissertation is the most valuable, as the economic side of bilateral relations has traditionally been underestimated by Bulgarian historiography, and because Xiao Zuo has successfully used both archival documents and the official publication *Foreign Trade*. In this chapter of her dissertation, Xiao Zuo has also successfully applied her broad knowledge of the development of other countries and global economic trends: of socialist countries with centrally planned economies, but also of those with market economies, among which she includes Yugoslavia. This has helped her to assess bilateral Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations in the context of both the processes in the

Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, where Yugoslavia became an observer in the 1960s, and developments in Western European countries.

Xiao Zuo devoted the fourth chapter (pp. 161–216) to cultural relations. It is no coincidence that she placed them last in her dissertation. In this way, she assessed their place and role in the bilateral relations between the two neighboring Slavic countries. The doctoral student rightly emphasises how difficult their development has been in the field of literature and the written word, pointing out the main reason: ideological differences. At the same time, relations in the field of music have developed most smoothly. I also agree with her general conclusion about the lack of balance in cultural relations, as Yugoslavia dominates in virtually all areas. Interest in Yugoslav culture is much greater in Bulgaria than interest in Bulgarian culture in Yugoslavia. She again attributes the reasons for this to the different ideological characteristics of the two countries, Bulgaria's greater isolation within the Eastern Bloc, and Yugoslavia's greater openness to Europe and the world.

The conclusion of the dissertation makes an excellent impression, in which Xiao Zuo not only repeats the conclusions made in the individual chapters, but also offers new justifications for them and deepens the main theses of his dissertation.

3. Evaluation of the scientific results obtained

Xiao Zuo's dissertation presents an in-depth analysis, based on important primary documentary material and serious historical research, of the relations between the Yugoslav Federation and Bulgaria in the period when, after their almost complete cessation after 1948, they began to be restored. The contribution of the dissertation is primarily in the third and fourth chapters, where Xiao Zuo examines trade, economic, and cultural relations. Particularly impressive is her ability to examine these relations not only through the prism of one country or the other, but in the broader historical context of the Eastern Bloc, as well as in view of the division of the world during the Cold War, which created a favorable opportunity for Yugoslavia to take an intermediate position with all the advantages that this entailed.

I fully support the scientific results formulated by Xiao Zuo in her work. As evidence of the high quality of Xiao Zuo's dissertation, I will quote a long but important text from the conclusion: "*During the Cold War, national development was often a process of balancing*

ideology, national interests, and pragmatism. Although 'political priority' and 'ideological superiority' dominate official discourse, pressure from the real world, especially in the economic sphere, leaves room for the application of pragmatic principles. Pragmatism does not mean abandoning ideology or national interests; rather, it emphasizes the practical pursuit of development outcomes and national interests within a complex international environment. It focuses on developing trade, technological exchange, and improving living standards without directly challenging the political status quo. The difference between these three approaches lies mainly in their priorities: nationalism emphasizes cultural identity and territorial integrity; alignment with great powers aims to secure external support and security guarantees; while pragmatism seeks to achieve maximum economic benefit and international cooperation at the lowest political cost. In the context of the highly confrontational Cold War, pragmatism offers a flexible and realistic path to development, even under strict ideological constraints." (p. 230).

4. Evaluation of the dissertation publications

Xiao Zuo's main publication on the topic of her dissertation is her study "Bulgaria's Economic Relations with Yugoslavia during the 1950s: Limited Trade under the Shadow of the Cold War" in the renowned journal *Bulgarian Historical Review* (No. 1 (53), 2025, p. 92-115). She has published the article "Yugoslavia in Bulgaria's Cultural Policy in the 1960s: Prelude to the Golden Age of Cultural Diplomacy" in the electronic journal *Dzyalo*.

PhD student Xiao Zuo has participated in two Chinese projects: the first is run by the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese and is led by the Institute of Russian, Eastern European, and Central Asian Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; and the second was at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and focused on researching the culture of Central and Eastern European countries. This project culminated in the publication of the *Blue Book of Central and Eastern European Culture. Reports on the Cultural Development of Central and Eastern European Countries* (2022), Social Sciences Academic Press (China), with the theme of this publication being "Report on Bulgarian Cultural Development."

5. Evaluation of the abstract

The abstract of Xiao Zuo's dissertation "Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations (1953 – the end of the 1960s)" is 17 pages long and outlines the main parameters of the dissertation. The abstract formulates the subject of the research and the documentary and historiographical basis of the dissertation. The doctoral student has made an effort to formulate the contributions of her work and has cited her publications on the subject.

The content and layout of the abstract meet the academic requirements.

6. Evaluation of the scientific indicators

The overall assessment of Xiao Zuo's dissertation and her published study "Bulgaria's Economic Relations with Yugoslavia during the 1950s: Limited Trade under the Shadow of the Cold War" in the renowned scientific journal *Bulgarian Historical Review* (No. 1 (53), 2025, p. 92-115), part of Web of Science and Scopus, meet the requirements for scientometric indicators. Her publication in China should also be added:

„2021 年保加利亚文化发展报告》·载《中东欧文化蓝皮书：中东欧国家文化发展报告（2022年）》，北京：社会科学文献出版社，2023年，第58-77页

Report on Bulgarian Cultural Development 2021. In: *Bule Book of Central and Eastern European culture, Reports on the Cultural development of Central and Eastern European Countries*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (China), 2023, p. 58-77.

7. Critical comments

My high assessment of Xiao Zuo's dissertation "Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations (1953 – the end of the 1960s)" does not mean that there are no minor inaccuracies in the work or that I disagree with some of the theses. I mean the following: I would not say that after 1948 Yugoslavia rejected the Soviet model (p. 16); rather, it was forced to modify it because of its compulsory ties with the US and the UK, but at its core, the Yugoslav model continued to follow the Soviet model of state socialism. I also disagree with the thesis that the conflict between Stalin and Tito was due to Tito's attempt to seek an independent model (p. 17) – I think it was not about a different model, but about Tito's desire to pursue an independent policy towards other countries in the Soviet "sphere of influence"; The triumvirate of Malenkov, Beria, and Khrushchev did not

include Molotov, which is why he was not among the main participants in the power struggle in Moscow in the period 1953–1955 (p. 21); Yugoslavia did not oppose the Soviet intervention in Hungary on November 4, 1956; moreover, Tito agreed to the intervention during his meeting with Khrushchev (pp. 25–26). The problem arose after Imre Nagy and ministers from his government sought protection at the Yugoslav embassy in Budapest following the intervention; it also seems to me that Bulgaria's refusal to liberalize (p. 97) should be placed in the context of modernization; among the main objectives of the Comecon (p. 132), I miss the idea of mutual assistance, which not only appears in the title but was also implemented both in the form of free technical documentation and in the construction of major infrastructure projects such as the Danube Bridge from 1952 to 1954; I doubt that Bulgaria wanted to receive raw materials from the West (p. 148), because that was the role of the Soviet Union; Yugoslavia did not leave the socialist camp in 1948 (p. 156), but was expelled from it; I could not understand what Xiao Zuo meant when he wrote that Balkan chauvinism appeared after 1912 (p. 202).

Once again, I would like to emphasize that these minor comments do not alter my high opinion of the dissertation.

7. Conclusion

Xiao Zuo's dissertation "Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations (1953 – the end of the 1960s)" demonstrates the doctoral student's ability to research primary and secondary documentary material on two different countries, to effectively use historiography on the subject, to independently develop important issues from the historical development of relations with Yugoslavia in the 1950s and 1960s, which are important for Bulgarian history, and to draw historical conclusions. In this way, she contributes to the development of Bulgarian historiography and at the same time establishes herself as one of the few Bulgarian historians in the People's Republic of China.

All of this gives me reason to state my conviction that Xiao Zuo has fulfilled all academic requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree of "doctor", for which I will vote.

December 16, 2025 г.

Reviewer: prof. Iskra Baeva PhD