

REVIEW

By Prof. DSc Bisser Petrov,

Institute of Balkan Studies with Centre of Thracology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences,
of the doctoral dissertation by

Kiril Georgiev Iliev,

full-time PhD candidate at the “Modern Balkans” Section of the Institute of Balkan Studies with
Centre of Thracology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, entitled

“Bulgaria and the Neo-Slavic Movement in the Balkans, 1908–1913”,

submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor”, Professional Field 2.2
History and Archaeology, Doctoral Programme “Modern and Contemporary General History”.

This review has been prepared pursuant to Order No. 98 ПД-16/08.12.2025 of the Director of the
Institute and Minutes No. 1 of the first meeting of the Scientific Jury held on 13 December 2025.

1. Relevance and Dissertability of the Topic

At the very outset of the present review, it should be emphasized and duly taken into account that the topic chosen by the doctoral candidate has not enjoyed sustained scholarly interest. More precisely, where such interest has existed, it has been extremely limited. This lack of attention may be explained by a variety of reasons, most often of a conjunctural nature; nevertheless, it has resulted in an unusually large historiographical gap, which the work of Kiril Iliev set out to fill. In this respect, both the author, his academic supervisor Prof. DSc Svetlozar Eldarov, and the colleagues from the “Modern Balkans” Section at the Institute of Balkan Studies with Centre of Thracology deserve sincere commendation.

It may aptly be stated that the rationale for addressing the topic of the Neo-Slavic movement in Bulgaria should be sought not so much in its topical relevance as in the oblivion and academic neglect to which it has been relegated over the years. This observation applies more broadly to the Slavic movement in Bulgaria throughout the entire period from the Liberation to the present day. The persistent underestimation of this movement is likely due to the perception that it represents a profound anachronism, grounded in utopian theories of Slavic solidarity which, in most cases, served interests foreign to Bulgaria. On the other hand, the avoidance of such subject matter - often considered exhausted or academically unprestigious - opens wide and fertile scholarly horizons for unbiased researchers willing to direct their

intellectual efforts toward it. Such is precisely the case with Kiril Iliev, who did not hesitate to enter this underexplored field and to present the results of his demanding and labor-intensive research.

The topic is by no means marginal or insignificant. Despite its relatively brief historical existence, Neo-Slavism - whether treated with a positive or negative attitude - attracted the attention of a wide circle of Bulgarian politicians, intellectuals, and public figures of the time. One of the reasons for the tacit omission of this issue from Bulgarian Marxist historiography after 1944 lies in the fact that the most prominent and significant manifestation of the Neo-Slavic movement in Bulgaria - the Second Preparatory All-Slavic Congress held in Sofia in 1910 - was met with sharp criticism by Dimitar Blagoev's Narrow Socialist Party and by leading intellectuals such as Pencho P. Slaveykov, Petko Yu. Todorov, and Peyo K. Yavorov. Their unequivocally negative stance did not stem from Slavophobic or Russophobic views, but rather from their opposition to the reactionary and obscurantist policies of the Russian autocracy. This inconvenient fact entered into irreconcilable conflict with the politically imposed imperative in official historiography concerning the idyllic and unbreakable Bulgarian–Russian/Soviet friendship.

2. General Presentation of the Dissertation

The dissertation consists of a foreword, an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, and a section on sources and literature, with a total length of 310 pages. The text is developed within a coherent and effective structure, which in itself attests to the author's thorough mastery of the material and his ability to select and arrange it in accordance with the standards required for research of this kind. The chronological framework is well substantiated, and the necessary emphases are placed where dictated by the logic of the exposition. The dissertation is written in an academic style and employs a rich and expressive scholarly language.

The Foreword substantiates the choice of topic and provides a general characterization, in broad terms, of Neo-Slavism as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. The Introduction further develops this line of inquiry by examining the concrete manifestations and initiatives of the strengthening tendency toward Slavic unity from the beginning of the twentieth century up to 1908, which constitutes the lower chronological boundary of the study.

The first chapter consists of three sections and traces the development of the Neo-Slavic movement from the Prague Congress of 1908 to the meetings of the All-Slavic Executive Committee held in St. Petersburg in 1909–1910. The second chapter comprises four sections and is devoted entirely to the Slavic Congress in Sofia. This event, which effectively constitutes the core of the dissertation, is examined by the author in meticulous detail. The third chapter, containing two sections, examines the state into which Neo-Slavism fell after the Sofia Congress until its logical conclusion in 1913. Each section is subdivided into thematic units, clearly delineated by appropriate headings.

The Conclusion presents in concise form the general findings concerning the Neo-Slavic movement and offers an explanation for its turbulent and short-lived existence. The final section, Sources and Literature, lists all materials used in the preparation of the dissertation. Primary and unpublished sources were consulted in various Bulgarian archival repositories, including the Central State Archives, the Bulgarian Historical Archive at the National Library “St. Cyril and Methodius,” and the Scientific Archive of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Documentary collections published mainly in the early twentieth century were also used. Particularly impressive is the extensive corpus of periodicals - Bulgarian and foreign - on which the author has relied, totaling twenty-eight titles. Given the underdeveloped state of research on the topic, the bibliography is sufficiently comprehensive and encompasses most of the accessible works directly related to the subject.

The doctoral candidate has also submitted three published studies related to the dissertation topic: *Славянската идея в началото на XX в. От панславизъм към неославизъм*. - В: Юбилеен сборник „История, хора, ценности” по случай 70 годишнината на доц. д-р. Лъчезар Стоянов. София: Нов български университет, 2022, 277-287; *Неославянското движение и Деветият конгрес на славянските журналисти в София*. – В: Сб. Русия - Погледи от Балканите. София: ИБЦТ, 2023, 272-286; *Славянският събор от 1910 г. в София и македонският въпрос*. – В: Дриновски сборник, т. 15. София: Издателство на БАН „Проф. Марин Дринов, 2023, 89-95.

In addition, the materials submitted include an abstract of the dissertation, which accurately reflects its content, outlines the objectives and tasks, and enumerates the scholarly contributions.

3. Knowledge of the Problem and Scholarly Merits

As already emphasized, the topic chosen by the doctoral candidate represents a *tabula rasa* in Bulgarian historiography. This circumstance presupposes that a researcher undertaking such a task would possess considerable academic experience and scholarly accumulation—qualities not easily expected of a doctoral candidate at an early stage of his academic career. Nevertheless, Kiril Iliev demonstrates well-developed analytical abilities, which he applies to an extensive body of empirical material.

This is particularly evident in his treatment of the internal contradictions and conflicts inherent in the movement itself. The underlying political tensions were carefully avoided by its protagonists, while existing disputes - such as Russian - Polish and Bulgarian - Serbian disagreements - were deliberately suppressed and excluded from discussion. Merely three months after the preparatory congress held in mid-July 1908 in Prague, the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary confronted the Neo-Slavic movement with acute and insoluble problems. To the persistent Polish question were added new disagreements in the Balkans. Under these complicated circumstances, the convening of a general Slavic congress proved increasingly problematic. The sessions of the Second Preparatory Congress held in Sofia in July 1910 were solemn and ceremonious in character, yet the reports and speeches delivered there were largely educational and declarative in nature. Behind the lofty rhetoric lay suppressed contradictions that rendered the envisioned initiatives for closer rapprochement inherently utopian. Subsequent developments clearly demonstrated that the political interests of each Slavic nation, however artificially muted or ignored, proved stronger and more resilient than the aspiration for supranational Slavic unity.

It must be noted that a clear elucidation of the obstacles faced by Neo-Slavism—obstacles it sought to minimize or circumvent—required the doctoral candidate to possess comprehensive knowledge of the complex interplay of interstate and domestic political issues in the countries where the movement found resonance. In this regard, Kiril Iliev demonstrates the necessary command of events and processes shaping the diverse political landscape of Central and Eastern Europe at the time.

His objective and critical perspective encompasses these events and processes both comprehensively and in depth, thereby presenting a clearer and more reliable picture of the Neo-Slavic movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. One advantage of the author as a

young scholar is his freedom from the ideological and political constraints that burdened earlier generations of researchers. The tone of his exposition and commentary is devoid of bias - an achievement rarely attained in studies dealing with the elusive concept of Slavic unity.

Ultimately, the dissertation convincingly demonstrates that apolitical Neo-Slavism, with its emphasis on mutual understanding and cooperation and its deliberate neglect of divisions within the Slavic world, proved entirely incapable of preventing the mounting conflicts. As a result, it rapidly declined and lost relevance. The Second Balkan War dealt it an irreparable blow, while the First World War merely sealed its demise.

4. Conclusion

Kiril Iliiev's dissertation represents an original and complete scholarly study of a subject that has remained unexplored and forgotten in Bulgarian historiography. The research process was undoubtedly complicated by the scarcity of secondary literature, which necessitated extensive reliance on primary sources. At the same time, this circumstance lends the dissertation additional substance and strengthens its contributory value. The doctoral candidate has not only identified and utilized a vast body of source material, drawn primarily from contemporary periodicals, but has also interpreted and presented it in a coherent and convincing manner.

The dissertation is not without its shortcomings. In my view, the text would benefit from a more concise overall presentation. In particular, extensive quotations from contemporary press sources could have been summarized and accompanied by authorial commentary rather than reproduced in full detail, which occasionally dilutes the exposition. This may be attributed to doctoral inexperience, which is likely to be overcome in future publications. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the overall empirical and conceptual integrity of the dissertation, as the necessary conclusions and generalizations have been clearly articulated.

The author frequently refers to Pan-Slavism at various points in the text. It would be advisable to provide a concise characterization of this Slavophile current in the introduction, as its ignominious end largely predetermines the very meaning of Neo-Slavism. More generally, a brief overview of earlier attempts at Slavic rapprochement would not be superfluous, given that the movement examined here did not emerge in a historical vacuum. These recommendations in no way diminish the value of the work accomplished by the doctoral candidate nor alter my overall positive assessment.

The materials submitted for the procedure comply fully with the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its implementation at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, and those of the Institute of Balkan Studies with Centre of Thracology. The preliminary review has revealed no evidence of plagiarism.

In view of all the above, I am convinced that the dissertation submitted for public defense, **“Bulgaria and the Neo-Slavic Movement in the Balkans, 1908–1913,”** by Kiril Iliev possesses the necessary scholarly qualities to justify my vote in favor of awarding him the educational and scientific degree “Doctor.” I therefore call upon the other members of the esteemed Scientific Jury to do likewise.

Sofia

30.01.2026

Signature:

Prof. DSc Bisser Petrov