

# DOCTORAL DISSERTATION REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Nadia Georgieva Boyadjieva, Doctor of Sciences in the scientific field of Law - International Law and International Relations,  
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Member of the Academic Jury in a procedure for awarding the educational and scientific degree of Doctor

Field of Higher Education: 2. Humanities

Professional Field: 2.2. History and Archaeology

Doctoral Programme: “Modern and Contemporary World History”

**Author:** Kaloyan Stoyanov Konstantinov

**Dissertation Title:** “Iran and the Balkans – Political, Economic and Cultural Relations (1990-2021)”

**Academic Supervisor:** Corresponding Member Prof. D.Sc. Alexandre Grigorov Kostov, Institute of Balkan Studies & Centre of Thracology “Prof. Alexander Fol”, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

## 1. Presentation of the Procedure and the Doctoral Candidate

### 1.1. Brief Presentation of the Procedure

By Order No. 10 RD-16/19.01.2026 of the Director of the Institute of Balkan Studies & Centre of Thracology “Prof. Alexander Fol” at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS), I was appointed as a member of the Academic Jury for conducting a procedure for the public defense of a doctoral dissertation entitled: “Iran and the Balkans – Political, Economic and Cultural Relations (1990-2021)” for the award of the educational and scientific degree Doctor in the Field of Higher Education 2. Humanities, Professional Field 2.2. History and Archaeology, Doctoral Programme “Modern and Contemporary World History”.

The candidate is Assist.Prof. Kaloyan Stoyanov Konstantinov, a doctoral student at the Institute of Balkan Studies & Centre of Thracology “Prof. Alexander Fol” at BAS, Department “Contemporary Balkans”, under the academic supervision of Corresponding Member Prof.

D.Sc. Alexander Kostov of the Institute of Balkan Studies & Centre of Thracology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

At the first meeting of the Academic Jury, I was assigned to prepare a review. In compliance with the Order of the Director of the Institute of Balkan Studies and with the decision adopted at the First meeting of the Academic Jury, and in accordance with the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB), its Implementing Regulations, the Rules of Procedure of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Balkan Studies&Centre of Thracology at BAS, as well as the Appendix to the Rules of Procedure concerning the conditions and procedures for acquiring academic degrees and holding academic positions, I hereby submit to the esteemed members of the Academic Jury my reasoned opinion in the present review.

Within the statutory deadline, the following documents were submitted: a Curriculum Vitae (European format), the doctoral dissertation and its abstract, three academic publications related to the dissertation's topic, and an evaluation report covering the doctoral training period.

The documents and materials submitted for review by Kaloyan Konstantinov comply with the minimum national requirements under Art. 2b of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB) for Scientific Field 2. Humanities, Professional Field 2.2. History and Archaeology.

Kaloyan Konstantinov was enrolled as a full-time doctoral student at the Institute of Balkan Studies&Centre of Thracology "Prof. Alexander Fol" at BAS, Section "Contemporary Balkans", with Order No. 107 RD-10 of 06.10.2021 and completed a three-year period of study from October 2021 to September 2024. The doctoral candidate successfully passed the internal evaluation procedure at a meeting of the Department Council of the "Contemporary Balkans" Department and was granted the right to proceed to public defense with Order No. 107 RD-10 of 10.10.2024.

## 1.2. Presentation of the Doctoral Candidate

The doctoral candidate obtained a Bachelor's degree from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in the period 2022–2026, and a Master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies from King's College London in 2018, where he acquired in-depth knowledge of various aspects of

the history and contemporary development of the states and societies of the Middle East and North Africa.

In the following years, Konstantinov participated in conferences, various academic forums, took specialized courses, which enabled him to deepen and further develop his academic preparation, to test and refine his knowledge, and to enhance his professional qualifications in the fields related to his education.

At present, Konstantinov serves as a media expert and specialist on the Middle East and North Africa. He is also a lecturer in the fields of media literacy, journalism, and international relations, and has taken part in numerous conferences in Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, Tunisia, Iran, and other countries.

As a doctoral student, he has actively participated in the academic life of the “Contemporary Balkans” Department and of the Institute of Balkan Studies, contributing to conferences, seminars, and research initiatives. He has also been involved in academic projects, including projects funded by the National Science Fund. During his doctoral studies, he successfully passed all required doctoral exams with distinction and additionally completed two specialized doctoral courses at the BAS Training Centre in the field related to his dissertation topic, conducted fieldwork in Iran in connection with his doctoral studies. He currently holds the academic position of Assistant Professor at the Institute of Balkan Studies&Centre of Thracology, BAS.

He has demonstrated a solid interest in the teaching profession and serves as an adjunct lecturer at the American University in Blagoevgrad, where he teaches a course entitled “International Disinformation and Propaganda.” He has also delivered lectures in the fields of history, international relations, and disinformation in high schools, universities, and organizations such as the Atlantic Club and the United Nations Association, among others. He has made numerous media appearances, including interviews in national and international media related to the topic of his dissertation. (see the attached CV).

Kaloyan Konstantinov has received multiple awards for outstanding achievements as a young scholar and practicing journalist, including prestigious journalism awards (as indicated in the provided Curriculum Vitae).

## **2. General Presentation of the Dissertation**

### **2.1. Current Relevance of the Topic and Research Methodology**

The current relevance of the topic of dissertation is indisputable. Formulated in this manner, it is multi-dimensional: it is significant for the Balkan states, it is essential for clarifying Iran's foreign policy strategy toward the region in the post–Cold War period, and it is a complex one in terms of scholarly analysis and evaluation within the context of contemporary developments in the system of international relations.

The dissertation undoubtedly represents an attempt at a theoretical conceptualization of Iran's geopolitical ambitions — not only in terms of expanding its influence in the Balkans and Europe, but also in its aspiration to position itself “as one of the leaders of the Muslim world and a counterweight to Western hegemony” (p. 5 of the dissertation).

The chosen topic presupposes the examination of important and complex issues in the fields of contemporary international and regional politics, economics, and culture. It may be approached from multiple perspectives: as a necessity for a new and modern understanding of the place of the Balkan states in international politics; as an essential component for a more comprehensive study of the contemporary history of the Balkan countries selected by the author and their foreign policy priorities; from the viewpoint of positioning bilateral relations in their full complexity — diplomatic, economic, trade, cultural, religious, and media dimensions— between the Balkan region and Iran within the intricate architecture of the contemporary international system.

The research methodology employed is interdisciplinary and appropriately selected. Specifically, the author applies the historical method, analysis and synthesis, a systemic approach, comparative analysis, and other relevant research tools. When properly applied, this broad methodological framework enables the doctoral candidate to successfully pursue the principal objective of the dissertation.

### **2.2. Presentation and evaluation of the structure and content of the dissertation.**

The structure of the dissertation demonstrates internal coherence, being guided, on the one hand, by the historical chronology of events and, on the other hand, by the thematic selection of the issues under examination.

The dissertation consists of an introduction, four chapters (each containing thematically related subchapters), a conclusion, a bibliography, and one appendix (4 pages). The total length amounts to 337 standard typewritten pages, including 55 pages of bibliography. The dissertation also includes numerous graphical representations (a total of 45).

The relevance, importance, and motivation for selecting the topic are clearly emphasized by Kaloyan Konstantinov in the Introduction to his dissertation. In addition, the author justifies the exclusion of Iran–Turkey relations from the scope of the research, arguing that they “extend far beyond the Balkans and would be sufficient for an independent study” (p. 11 of the dissertation).

Due to the length limitations of this review, I will briefly discuss the content of the individual chapters of the dissertation:

The first chapter is introductory in nature and serves as the historical and theoretical basis for the study. In it, the author examines the specifics of the Iranian political regime, its institutional architecture, and ideological framework. The historical evolution from the Pahlavi dynasty to the establishment and consolidation of the Islamic Republic is traced. The emphasis is on the peculiarities of the theocratic model, the role of the supreme leader, the significance of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the concept of "exporting the revolution." The chapter is mainly descriptive and contextual in nature, providing the necessary historical and ideological framework for understanding Tehran's foreign policy actions in the later period.

In the second chapter, entitled "Politics and Diplomacy between Iran and the Balkans," the author moves from a general description of the regime to a specific study of the political and diplomatic relations between the Islamic Republic and 11 countries from the Balkan Peninsula selected by the author. Emphasis is placed on the impact of international sanctions against the Islamic Republic in the context of their impact on bilateral relations with the Balkan states. The author draws on important documents of the World Organization – resolutions of the UN General Assembly, resolutions of the UN Security Council, official documents of the European Union and the United States. Key cases are analyzed here – the Yugoslav Wars, relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, and Albania. This chapter is based on a solid documentary foundation and a clearly expressed analytical approach.

The economic dimensions of relations between Iran and the Balkan states are the subject of the third chapter. In it, the author examines the dynamics of bilateral trade, the structure of exports and imports, and the impact of international sanctions on economic cooperation with 10 Balkan states. This part of the dissertation is distinctly empirical in nature and is based on a significant amount of statistical data, which is systematized and presented in tables and graphs. The analysis shows that economic relations often follow a pragmatic logic that does not always coincide with the official political positions of the countries concerned.

The fourth chapter examines Iran's cultural and religious influence on the Balkan countries, and particularly the role of the media in Iranian foreign policy. The activities of cultural centers, foundations, and religious structures in various Balkan countries are traced, as well as the way in which Iran builds its public presence in the region. Attention is paid to media analysis – both of Iranian state media and Balkan official publications – to examine the mutual construction of images and narratives. The chapter is both analytical and empirical in nature and complements the political and economic analysis with the important dimension of cultural influence.

As a whole, the structure of the dissertation, with the four chapters briefly described here, is logically constructed – from the historical aspects of Iran's development, it moves on to a political and diplomatic analysis of Iran's bilateral political and diplomatic relations with the Balkan states, to the economic dimensions, and concludes with an in-depth analysis of Iran's cultural, religious, and media instruments of influence in the Balkan states and societies. This structure allows for a gradual building up of the research—from the general to the specific and from the institutional to the societal level. Thus, the dissertation achieves internal thematic coherence and offers a multi-layered reading of Iran's place and role on the Balkan Peninsula during the period under review.

Conclusions and summaries are presented in the individual chapters. The conclusion presents the author's main conclusions to a sufficient extent.

The sources and literature used are appropriate and diverse, encompassing published scholarly works in Bulgarian and several foreign languages, official documents of international organizations, archival collections, materials from periodical press, and other resources available in electronic format in the online space.

### **3. Assessment of the Contributions of the Dissertation.**

The strengths and contributions of the dissertation have multiple dimensions. I will highlight some of them below:

1. I generally accept the main contributions outlined by the doctoral candidate in the abstract (pp. 26–27), considering them to be accurate and correctly formulated.
2. The selection of such a complex and multi-faceted topic, covering a three-decade period of contemporary international politics, is a challenge and presupposes broad awareness and well-developed knowledge in the fields of contemporary history, international politics, political science, diplomacy, and international relations. In this dissertation, the author demonstrates a high level of expertise, theoretical understanding, and analytical capacity in addressing complex issues of international interaction. This merits positive evaluation and encouragement of his ambitious scholarly efforts.
3. The dissertation may be characterized as a multi-layered, conceptually original, and interdisciplinary scholarly study of the political, economic, and cultural-religious aspects of relations between Iran and the selected states of the Balkan Peninsula. It undoubtedly enriches the specialized literature in Bulgaria and has a clear theoretical contribution.
4. An important contribution lies in the comprehensive systematization and analysis of bilateral relations between Iran and the Balkan states within the broader geopolitical context of the post–Cold War international order.
5. High appreciation is due to the author’s examination of the issue of Iran’s instruments of influence—both traditional diplomatic mechanisms and elements of soft power—within the Balkan region.
6. The research and analysis of the cultural-religious and media instruments of Iranian foreign policy in the Balkans is an undeniable contribution.
7. The author correctly notes that, in the context of sanctions and diplomatic isolation, propaganda plays an important role in promoting Iran's political goals and strategic interests in the Balkans and beyond. The study of this powerful factor in contemporary world affairs and in the specific example of Iran deserves recognition.
8. The author's periodization of Iran's foreign policy toward the Balkan region, which is distinct from other periodizations found in related literature, also deserves a positive assessment.

9. The author's findings and conclusions have practical applicability, as they can serve as a useful analytical basis for future research, as well as for experts and policymakers dealing with Balkan and Middle Eastern issues.
10. The dissertation also has a practical and applied character. It can be used by a wide circle of people interested in the topic and for the purpose of the educational process (university students and doctoral students).
11. A strength of the work is the presence of the author's personal opinion and assessment, which is evident throughout the text of the dissertation. The author correctly refers to the opinions of other authors, which is a testament to academic ethics.

#### **4. Remarks and Recommendations.**

##### 4.1. Comments and remarks

Due to the limited length of this review, I will focus here on several significant omissions and specific statements that I consider to be inaccurate or incorrect, namely:

1. Although in the introduction the doctoral candidate has stated that the dissertation will not examine relations between Iran and Turkey and has provided arguments in support of this decision, I believe that such an important regional actor should not be overlooked. The history of the Balkan states has been inseparably linked to the Ottoman Empire and, in contemporary times, to Turkey, and this fact cannot be underestimated. Indeed, Turkey is present in the exposition; however, the approach of isolating Turkey from Iran's overall policy toward the Balkans constitutes, in my view, a significant omission in both the structure and the substance of the dissertation. Of course, this shortcoming may be addressed by the author in his future research and publications.
2. The author writes: " This allowed him to support the radical Sunni Taliban in Afghanistan against the Soviets over the years..." (p. 264). This is a wrong statement. The Taliban did not even exist until 1994, five years after Soviet troops completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan (and three years after the Soviet Union itself had disintegrated). Iran supported Shiite guerrillas who fought against Soviet forces in the 1980s, but it never supported Sunni guerrillas.  
The Soviet Union completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989. The pro-Soviet Khalq government under Najibullah remained in power over the next three years. But after the newly independent Russian government cut all aid to the Afghan government in the spring of 1992, the country descended into civil war. In that context,

the Taliban were formed in 1994. Some of those who joined it had fought against Soviet forces in the 1980s, but they did not do so as part of the Taliban (which did not yet exist). Throughout the Soviet war in Afghanistan, Pakistan played a far more important role than Iran in supporting the anti-Soviet guerrillas. The United States, China, and Saudi Arabia also played key roles in backing the guerrillas, but Pakistan played the lead role both before and after the Soviet withdrawal.

3. The doctoral student has some wrong comments about the UN, such as this: " "The United Nations General Assembly, and especially the UN Security Council, are dominated by Washington and its allies ..." (p. 265). The five permanent members of the UN Security Council include Russia and China, both of which have almost always vetoed meaningful sanctions against Iran. As for the UN General Assembly, it is dominated not by the United States but by Third World dictatorships, many of which avidly share the anti-Western ethos promoted by the Iranian Islamic regime.
4. The brief section on International Relations (IR) theory and Iranian foreign policy (pp.263 - 267) suggests that the student believes IR theories serve as guideposts for government officials. Actually, IR theories are intended solely to explain the way international politics works, regardless of whether any political leaders have ever heard of them. That said, the student is generally on the mark in suggesting that constructivism (with its emphasis on identities and cultures) provides the best framework for understanding Iranian policy in the Balkans. I would re-characterize it as religious constructivism, with certain elements of realism mixed in.
5. In certain places, the author uses expressions that are not entirely appropriate (for example, in footnote 47 on p. 25, the author uses the term "savetite" [councils], when he most likely refers to the USSR). Such imprecise formulations should be corrected in a future revision.

The comments and recommendations made are intended to provide a more accurate assessment of certain facts and events and do not detract from the author's achievements.

#### 4.2. Recommendations

I recommend that Kaloyan Konstantinov continue his scholarly research on the selected topic and, following the necessary revisions, publish the dissertation in book form. Such a publication would contribute to a better understanding of the complex relations between Iran and the individual Balkan states within the contemporary international environment. This study

would also have practical applicability and could be used by a broad audience interested in the subject, including students and doctoral candidates, historians, scholars of international relations, political scientists, economists, representatives of diplomatic circles, and others.

## **5. Assessment of the Abstract and the Scientific Publications**

### **5.1. Assessment of the Abstract**

The abstract consists of 28 standard typewritten pages, including, as appendices, a list of the scientific contributions of the dissertation (2 pages) and a list of publications related to the dissertation topic (1 page). Its length, structure, and content accurately reflect the objectives, scope, research methods and methodology, structure, and principal conclusions of the dissertation, including its contributions. These characteristics allow the conclusion that the abstract complies with the established requirements.

### **5.2. Assessment of the Scientific Publications**

Three scientific publications — the three articles related to the topic of the dissertation — have been submitted for evaluation. They are provided for review in electronic form as well as in print out version. One publication is in Bulgarian, and two are in English. All publications have been published in specialized peer-reviewed academic journals. All three are directly related to the subject of the dissertation and are accepted for evaluation. They demonstrate the doctoral candidate's sustained interest in the issues examined in the dissertation concerning relations between Iran and individual Balkan states. Specifically, they discuss different aspects of Iran's relations respectively with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Bulgaria.

### **5.3. Assessment of the Doctoral Candidate's Personal Presence**

The dissertation, the abstract, and the submitted publications clearly indicate the personal and substantive contribution of Kaloyan Konstantinov. The author's presence is evident in his individual assessments, in the selection of sources, in the original graphs prepared by him, as well as in those drawn from reliable sources. His views are clearly discernible in both the exposition and the conclusions reached.

In summary, I consider that the submitted dissertation, abstract, and publications demonstrate a sustained scholarly interest in the selected topic and provide an original interpretation of the issues under examination.

## **6. Personal impressions of the candidate.**

I know Kaloyan Konstantinov as a full-time doctoral student in the Section. My impressions of his work as a doctoral student and as an assistant are excellent. He is actively involved in the academic life of the Contemporary Balkans Section, participates in scientific projects, shows diligence in the tasks assigned to him, works in a team and is respected at the Institute of Balkan Studies.

## **7. Conclusion.**

The merits of the reviewed dissertation outlined above provide sufficient grounds for me to conclude that the dissertation contains scientific, scientifically applied, and practically applicable results that represent an original contribution to scholarship. These results comply with the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB), the Implementing Regulations of the LDASRB, the Rules of Procedure of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Balkan Studies & Centre of Thracology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, as well as the Appendix to the Rules of Procedure of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Balkan Studies & Centre of Thracology “Prof. Alexander Fol” at BAS concerning the conditions and procedures for acquiring academic degrees and holding academic positions.

Based on the above, I **confidently cast a positive vote** and propose to the esteemed members of the Academic Jury that **the educational and scientific degree Doctor be awarded to Kaloyan Stoyanov Konstantinov in the Field of Higher Education 2. Humanities, Professional Field 2.2. History and Archaeology, Doctoral Programme “Modern and Contemporary World History.”**

Sofia

4th February 2026

REVIEWER: \_\_\_\_\_

/Prof. Dr. Nadia Georgieva Boyadjieva, D.Sc./