

## OPINION

by **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zorka Parvanova**

**regarding the doctoral dissertation of Kiril Georgiev Iliev**

entitled “Bulgaria and the Neo-Slavic Movement in the Balkans, 1908–1913”,  
submitted in connection with the procedure for awarding the educational and scientific degree  
“Doctor”  
in the field of higher education 2. Social Sciences,  
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The doctoral dissertation of Kiril Iliev represents a comprehensive, in-depth, and multifaceted study of the Neo-Slavic movement in the Balkans, with a clearly articulated focus on Bulgaria and within the broader context of the development of Neo-Slavism in Austria-Hungary and Russia. The structuring of the text according to the classical chronological-problematic principle consistently highlights the historical events of the studied period that determine the dynamics of the ideological and organizational processes within the movement, the role and influence of Bulgarian Neo-Slavists in common Slavic initiatives on the one hand, and, on the other, their impact on political attitudes in Bulgaria.

The foreword of the dissertation convincingly substantiates the scholarly significance of the topic, which contributes to the understanding of the complex relations among the Slavic peoples as an important fragment of the multilayered geopolitical landscape on the eve of the First World War. The author emphasizes the cultural-economic foundation of Neo-Slavism as a new interpretation of the Slavic idea and rejects its interpretation as a mere “euphemism” for the political Pan-Slavic doctrine of the nineteenth century, thereby directing attention to one of the central conceptual premises of the study. The clearly formulated aims and objectives of the dissertation - to analyze the genesis, motivations and character of the movement, and above all its manifestation in the Balkans, outline another key conceptual line, namely the influence of national ideas on the dimensions, principles, and prospects of the Neo-Slavic project. The foreword delineates the chronological boundaries of the research and the structure of the exposition into two introductory sections, three main chapters, and a conclusion. The author’s critical approach to the sources used is evident in the general historiographical overview, which points out examples of “inaccurate formulations,” “hasty conclusions,” and “underestimated issues” as subjects for reassessment within the dissertation.

The introduction presents the background of the First Slavic Congress in Prague in 1908, regarded as the starting point and lower chronological boundary of the study. The author traces a series of developments in the spheres of culture, the arts, sports, and communications during the early years of the twentieth century, with particular emphasis on South Slavic initiatives that largely brought the idea of a general Slavic forum onto the agenda. The ideological genesis of Neo-Slavism is logically traced primarily to the ideas and proposals of Czech and some Russian (liberal) advocates of Slavic unity, who articulated the cultural and economic objectives and the democratic principles of equality among participants in the new project, linking its realization to the prior resolution of the Russo-Polish conflict. The brief

historical overview of Slavic organizations in Bulgaria and the public figures, cultural activists, and politicians associated with them constitutes an important segment of the introductory section, insofar as the topic places at the center of the study the role of Bulgarian Neo-Slavists within the movement and the influence of Neo-Slavism on the policy of the Bulgarian state

The first chapter of the dissertation, entitled “The Prague Congress, the Bosnian Crisis, and the Meetings in St. Petersburg and Moscow,” is devoted to Slavic forums on the eve of and following the Balkan crisis of 1908, which confronted Neo-Slavism with new challenges arising from its close entanglement with national ideologies and programs within a complex geopolitical context. The meticulously traced preparation of the First Slavic Preparatory Congress in Prague outlines the main lines of conflict, primarily related to the contradictions between the conservative/Pan-Slavic and liberal/Neo-Slavic currents in Russia and their positions on the Russo-Polish question as a major obstacle to unification processes in the Slavic world. Against this background, the role of Czech Slavic activists is highlighted, whose initiatives to seek compromise solutions gradually established the cultural-economic framework of Neo-Slavism as a peaceful and non-confrontational project. The author emphasizes the Bulgarian position, which, in this spirit, advocated the exclusion of “all issues of intra-Slavic discord” and the achievement of Russo-Polish understanding prior to the Prague forum.

By bringing economic issues to the forefront in the discussion of the Prague Congress, the study reflects the pragmatic perception of the hosts regarding the tasks of Slavic cooperation, while the detailed debates on the agenda underscore the dominant interest in cultural, educational, and scholarly spheres as a broader field for participation by all nationalities. The unification of the South Slavic representatives into a single delegation is assessed as “one of the most emblematic decisions of the congress,” alongside the declaration of the Russian delegation, interpreted as a rejection of Pan-Slavism in the spirit of Neo-Slavic principles. Summarizing the positive outcomes of the forum, the author analyzes the reasons that doomed its decisions to failure—namely, the neglect of inter-Slavic territorial and political disputes and the limited influence of Neo-Slavists on state policies.

These findings are substantiated in the subsequent two paragraphs devoted to the events and processes following the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkan Crisis, which brought South Slavic issues to the fore. The author traces the main lines of the “fractures of Neo-Slavism” as manifestations of interethnic, ideological, and political contradictions among the various segments and currents within the movement. Against the backdrop of sharp polemics in the Bulgarian press, the influence of the idea of Slavic solidarity on the highly nuanced assessments of the effects of Bulgaria’s proclaimed independence is highlighted. The section devoted to the sessions of the All-Slavic Executive Committee in St. Petersburg and Moscow (1909–1910) illustrates the deepening fragmentation resulting from multilayered contradictions and the efforts to preserve unity through compromise resolutions, in the shadow of which cultural-economic projects remained. The idea of a Balkan/Slavic alliance as an important focal point is analyzed both in the context of Bulgarian-Serbian relations within the movement and in the broader framework of political attitudes in Bulgaria.

The emergence of the “Balkan theme” on the geopolitical stage and on the agenda of the Neo-Slavic movement, together with the active role of Bulgarian representatives, explains the shift of the movement’s center toward the Balkans and the selection of Sofia as the host of the Second Slavic Congress, which is the subject of the second chapter of the dissertation. By tracing the preparation of the forum, the author analyzes the divergent challenges associated both with existing contradictions and with the complex geopolitical situation that confronted the organizers with new internal and external opponents. The efforts of Bulgarian Neo-Slavists to refute characterizations of the congress as a political Pan-Slavic forum and to allay fears of anti-Ottoman and anti-Austrian demonstrations underscore the continuity with the objectives and spirit of the Prague Congress. The detailed portrayal of the contradictory reactions within Bulgarian society - both in opposition to and in support of the event - illustrates the inevitable interpretation of Neo-Slavism through the prism of ideological differences and geopolitical attitudes, which in this context manifest themselves in assessments of Russian policy and foreign-policy orientation with regard to the Macedonian question as a priority for Bulgaria.

The second paragraph presents the course of the Sofia Congress, which, despite the accompanying obstructions and organizational difficulties, impresses with its elevated atmosphere and the large number of participants, guests, and observers. By outlining the composition of the delegations and the reasons for the absence of figures emblematic of Neo-Slavism, the author analyzes developments within the movement after the Prague forum, including the dominance of the Russian conservative wing. The work of the economic and cultural-Slavic sections demonstrates a shared understanding of the need for cooperation across various fields, which crystallized only in resolutions of a largely declarative character, primarily in the spiritual sphere. The results and conclusions of the congress are summarized through the positive assessments of the organizers and leading figures: the countering of certain Russian attempts to advance Pan-Slavist ideas, the preservation of the movement’s unity on the democratic principles of Neo-Slavism, and new steps toward the realization of cultural and economic projects. The author defines the forum as a “culmination point” of the Neo-Slavic movement, placing Bulgaria at the center of economic and political dialogue in the region in line with its leadership ambitions.

The sense of scale of the Sofia Slavic Congress is further reinforced by the accompanying professional forums, whose work is examined in detail in the third section. A particularly important focus here is the sharp polemic provoked by the congress within Bulgarian society. Starting from the observation that the Russo-Polish conflict and the Bulgarian-Serbian contradictions - key to Slavic cooperation - did not find resolution during the sessions, the author turns attention to the Bulgarian political press. Despite the emphasized efforts of the organizers to exclude national problems from the Slavic agenda, this fundamental dividing line within the movement emerges as a constant context in media coverage of the forum. This brings to the forefront issues related to assessments of Russian policy, projects for a Balkan alliance, and relations with Turkey through the prism of the Macedonian question, interpreted in light of the ideological and political positions of party organs.

The third chapter of the dissertation examines the development of the Neo-Slavic movement on the eve of and during the Balkan Wars. The first paragraph devoted to post-

congress Neo-Slavic initiatives and Bulgaria's participation in them reveals heightened interest in the economic sphere through a series of exploratory visits, forums, structures, and projects, with a pronounced emphasis on Serbian-Bulgarian relations in light of the intensive negotiations for an alliance treaty between the two states. The Tenth Slavic Journalists' Congress in Belgrade in 1911 is examined primarily in the context of its reception in Bulgaria, which clearly highlights party differences on the question of Slavic solidarity through the prism of attitudes toward Serbia and Russia. The final Slavic celebrations in Prague in the spring of 1912 and the intensified debate associated with them on the Polish and Ukrainian questions also shed light on the motives of Bulgarian Neo-Slavists in supporting the positions of the right-wing Russian faction within the movement.

The final subsection examines the manifestations and analyzes the causes of the sharp amplitude in the movement's development - from "Slavic mobilization" to the "collapse of Neo-Slavism" - under the influence of the two wars of 1912-1913. The surge provoked by the First Balkan War is considered, on the one hand, in the Bulgarian context in connection with the participation of prominent Neo-Slavists in the government of Russophile parties, and, on the other, within the broader framework of Slavic organizational activity in Russia and Austria-Hungary and the large-scale campaign in support of the warring Slavic states. The Bulgarian-Serbian clash during the Second Balkan War logically places Bulgaria at the center of the processes that led to the dramatic end of Neo-Slavism. Anti-Bulgarian sentiments and the unsuccessful efforts of Bulgarian organizations to change unfavorable public opinion within and beyond the Slavic community generated profound disillusionment with Neo-Slavism, with lasting consequences not only for Slavophilism but also for Bulgaria's geopolitical orientation. The author's objective approach should be emphasized, as he notes "Bulgarian maximalism and the absence of pragmatic judgment" among the causes of the country's isolation and the collapse of its national ideals.

The conclusion of the dissertation presents a well-structured synthesis of the main problem areas and conceptual lines, substantiating the conclusions regarding the genesis, character, and chronological framework of the Neo-Slavic movement, which emerged in opposition to "retrograde Pan-Slavism" and outside the narrow "ideological base of Austro-Slavism." The thematic emphasis on Bulgaria's place and role in the Balkan context, increasingly dominant in the development of the movement, is convincingly defended in the analysis of the reasons for the short-lived manifestation of Neo-Slavism and its "logical conclusion" under the pressure of national and geopolitical realities.

Despite noting certain shortcomings - such as occasional disruptions in the internal logic of the exposition, unnecessary repetitions, and missed opportunities for clearer structuring of the outlined problem lines as a result of at times mechanical reliance on sources - this observation does not alter my overall unequivocally positive assessment of the dissertation as a comprehensive and in-depth scholarly study of a topic whose significance extends beyond the historical to the contemporary plane.

The original character of the work, its indisputable factual and conceptual contributions, and the scholarly style and language of the dissertation and its accompanying materials meet established academic requirements and standards. This provides sufficient grounds for me to

recommend the awarding of the educational and scientific degree “**Doctor**” in the field of higher education **2. Social Sciences**, professional field **2.2. History and Archaeology**, to **Kiril Georgiev Iliev**.

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