

OPINION

by **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Irina Lyubomirova Ognyanova**

on a dissertation submitted for the award of the
educational and scientific degree of Doctor (PhD)

Field of Study: 2. Humanities

Professional Field: 2.2. History and Archaeology

Doctoral Programme: “Modern and Contemporary General History”

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

Author: **Kaloyan Stoyanov Konstantinov**

No. 1. Information on the doctoral studies, dissertation, abstract, and publications

The candidate, Kaloyan Konstantinov, completed a Bachelor’s programme in Public Relations at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, and a Master’s programme in Middle Eastern Studies (Middle East and North Africa) at King’s College, London. He was enrolled as a full-time doctoral student at the Institute of Balkan Studies & Centre of Thracology (IBCT–BAS), in the “Contemporary Balkans” Department in 2021 under the supervision of Prof. DSc Alexander Kostov. During his doctoral studies (2021–2024), he successfully passed all the examinations and completed his dissertation. He was appointed as an Assistant Professor at IBCT in January 2025. He has received numerous journalism awards and has given more than 30 interviews on the subject of his dissertation in national and international media. He has delivered lectures on history, international relations, and disinformation at universities in Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, Tunisia, Iran, and elsewhere.

No violations were committed in the preparation of the dissertation. It complies with the requirements for the implementation of the Academic Staff Development Act of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for the conditions and procedures for acquiring academic degrees and holding academic positions at IBCT.

The dissertation topic, “Iran and the Balkans – Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations (1990–2021)”, is original within Bulgarian historiography. There is also no extensive scholarly literature on the subject in international historiography. It is precisely this gap that Kaloyan Konstantinov seeks to address with his research. The dissertation comprises 337 pages and includes an introduction, four chapters (each divided into several sections), a conclusion, and a bibliography.

The doctoral candidate had the opportunity to visit Iran briefly in October 2022. Unfortunately, he does not use Persian (Farsi), which prevents him from working with documents in the original language; instead, he relies mainly on English translations.

He also makes critical use of the relevant scholarly literature for the period.

The abstract accurately reflects the structure and content of the dissertation.

Konstantinov has three publications on the topic of the dissertation in IBCT journals such as *Balkani* and *Obscured Balkans*. They address various issues covered in the dissertation: “Relations between Iran and Albania (1992–2022)”, “The Evolution of Iran–Bosnia Relations: From Wartime Alliances to Modern-Day Dynamics”, and “The Media in Bulgaria: A Shield or Conduit for Radicalization Among Muslims During the Rise of ISIS (2014–2019)”.

The doctoral candidate has participated in a number of academic forums related to the topic of the dissertation — conferences, round tables, doctoral forums, and others. He has also taken part in two IBCT research projects: “Cultural Diplomacy in the Balkans in the 20th and 21st Centuries: Achievements, Problems, and Future Challenges” and “The Balkans and Global Challenges after 24 February 2022”.

No. 2. Evaluation of the Ph.D. thesis

The dissertation provides a comprehensive examination of Iran’s efforts, as one of the leaders of the Muslim world, to strengthen its influence among Muslim communities in the Balkans during a period in which the peninsula underwent significant political and economic transformations following the end of the Cold War. During the 1990s, borders in Southeastern Europe were redrawn and new state entities emerged as a result of the disintegration of the federal Yugoslavia. This created new opportunities for the Islamic Republic which, confronted with diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions, sought new arenas for building connections and influence in a peripheral region of Europe such as the Balkan Peninsula.

Through a comprehensive study of the period between 1990 and 2021, its background and prospects, the doctoral candidate aims to assess the political, economic, cultural, religious, and military dimensions of relations between the Balkans and Iran. In fact, Tehran's confrontation with regional actors in the Middle East and with global powers such as the United States and the European Union assigns the Balkans a secondary place in its foreign policy priorities and, to a significant extent — both directly and indirectly — shapes bilateral relations with the states of the region. These relations are examined in the context of global political developments, and above all within the framework of the international sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic.

Examining all Balkan countries (with the sole exception of Turkey as an independent regional actor) constitutes an overly ambitious task even for well-established specialists in the field. This lends the dissertation an original character.

The study is also interdisciplinary in nature, employing the scholarly methods of history, political science, and international relations.

In the **introduction**, the aims and objectives of the dissertation, as well as the methodology employed and the theoretical framework, are clearly explained. The chronological framework of the study is also successfully delineated — from the end of the Cold War in the Balkans and the profound changes that began in 1989/90, alongside the accession of Ali Khamenei to power in Iran, to 2021, when Ebrahim Raisi assumed office as President of Iran. Indeed, the period under study represents a time of deep transformation both for the Balkans and for the Islamic Republic.

Unfortunately, the introduction does not specify the sources used by the doctoral candidate in writing the dissertation. They are only briefly listed in the conclusion (p. 270). The dissertation relies predominantly on sources available in English translation. The majority consist of various websites, primarily in English, while archival materials from different Balkan capitals — especially from the 1990s, for which the thirty-year declassification period has already elapsed — are absent. The U.S. intelligence and diplomatic services, on which the candidate largely relied, tend to focus more on Iran's internal issues and general foreign policy orientations, paying comparatively limited attention to the Balkan region. Periodical press from the Balkan states has likewise not been used, although many newspapers, particularly in countries with Muslim populations, contain material related to Iranian foreign policy.

The historiographical review is structured thematically, yet this approach does not provide a clear picture of the extent to which the problem has been studied separately within Iranian, Bulgarian, Balkan, and Western European or American historiography.

The proposed periodization of Iranian foreign policy toward the Balkans as a region (rather than toward individual states) is a valuable contribution: *the period of the Bosnian war and other conflicts up to the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement (1992–1995); the post-war phase until the introduction of the first international sanctions (1996–2006); the sanctions period until the conclusion of the Iranian nuclear agreement (2007–2015); the interim period between sanctions (2016–2018); and their reimposition beginning with the first term of Donald Trump (after 2018)*. However, this periodization should have been stated already in the introduction rather than at the end of the dissertation (pp. 266 and 278), and it would have been beneficial to weave it into the very fabric of the exposition.

The **first chapter** presents an overview of Iran's foreign policy from the 1920s to the present day; however, it does not address the Balkans and serves only as an introductory section.

The **second chapter** constitutes a substantive contribution of the dissertation, as it focuses on Iran's relations with the Balkan states, with particular emphasis on those in the Western Balkans that have large Muslim populations, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The bilateral relations between Iran and Balkan countries that are already members of the European Union are also examined, and which therefore follow the EU policy regarding sanctions imposed on Iran. A similar approach is pursued by governments of states that, even when not members of the EU, seek future accession and aim to maintain favorable trade and diplomatic relations with the Union. As a result, over time they align their policies with the positions of Brussels and Washington.

Within this chapter, Iran's rivalry with Turkey and Saudi Arabia for influence over Muslim communities in the region is clearly outlined.

The fourth section, dealing with espionage, organized crime, and terrorism in the Balkans — particularly the role of Hezbollah — is also of considerable value.

The fifth section represents the most significant contribution, analyzing Iran's political relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina (including the Iranian support for Muslims during the wars in the 1990s), with Albania (the granting of asylum to thousands of members of the opposition organization PMOI hostile to the ayatollah regime), and with Kosovo, and consequently with Serbia.

The **third chapter** of the dissertation addresses the highly important issue of bilateral economic relations between Tehran and the Balkan capitals. The thesis that these relations are most significant with Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria is supported by specific data. The graphs and tables presented, illustrating trade exchange between Iran and the states of the region, are also valuable. The data indicate that while Iran primarily exports raw materials, it imports mainly machinery and equipment, metal, as well as chemical and pharmaceutical products from the Balkan states.

The **fourth chapter** is devoted to the use of religion, culture, and media as instruments for projecting the influence of the Islamic Republic in Southeastern Europe — that is, the application of “soft power.” These issues have been extensively examined in the scholarly literature; therefore, the dissertation attempts here only to fill certain gaps within it.

No. 3. Comments and recommendations to the author of the dissertation with a view to further work on the research problem and future publications:

1. The source base of the dissertation should be expanded — particularly through the inclusion of diplomatic correspondence, notes, reports, bulletins, and similar materials produced by the foreign ministries of the Balkan states. I would also recommend consulting the Diplomatic Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria, as well as making use of materials available on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran — including translations of speeches by foreign ministers, official documents, press releases, reports, statements, and official positions concerning the various Balkan countries. Research in the archive of CEU, which preserves recordings of Radio Free Europe and many other valuable documents related to the Balkans, especially during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, would also be beneficial. When dealing with Bulgaria, sources in Bulgarian should be cited primarily (rather than foreign ones); the same applies to the other Balkan states.

A comprehensive review of the full runs of English-language state media— such as *Tehran Times*, *Mehr News*, *Press TV*, *Pars Today*, and others — is required. As the author states, they contain more than 20,000 articles concerning the Balkans. All of these should be utilized throughout the dissertation, rather than subjected merely to quantitative analysis through software. The categorization of information as “negative,” “neutral,” and “positive” is unsatisfactory (pp. 238–262). The same applies to Balkan media, which should be examined in detail as sources of information on Iran–Balkan relations.

Nor have the complete runs of English-language open-access journals dealing with the region been reviewed, such as the *Journal of Balkan and Near East Studies*, *South Eastern Europe and Black Sea Studies*, and others.

There exists an enormous body of sources and literature on the Yugoslav wars, which should be used and analyzed; writing about this period on the basis of internet websites is insufficient.

2. A large portion of the empirical material requires more thorough processing and analysis, rather than merely listing the collected data — often in alphabetical order (for example, the state visits of Balkan leaders to Iran and Iranian leaders to the Balkans, pp. 97–101).

A more in-depth analysis of economic relations between Iran and the Balkan states is also necessary; quantitative data on trade exchange alone are insufficient.

The introduction of international relations theory only at the end of the dissertation (pp. 263–267) and in the conclusion (p. 278) is likewise not particularly appropriate — it should either be incorporated in the first chapter or applied throughout the discussion of the individual issues. Moreover, when dealing with a theocratic state such as Iran, the application of theories of liberalism, Marxism, or feminism is hardly suitable.

3. Particular emphasis in the exposition should be placed on Iran's relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, which ought to become the central focus of the study; accordingly, the body of sources, information, and its analysis and synthesis in this section should be substantially enriched.

4. The term “Western Balkans” should be defined more precisely, and Slovenia and Croatia should be excluded from it from the moment they became members of the EU (respectively 2004 and 2013) (p. 4). I would also recommend distinguishing between and clarifying the terms “Bosnians” and “Bosniaks” (p. 80).

5. The conclusion should not merely recount the individual chapters, but rather present the main generalizations and findings resulting from the in-depth analysis and synthesis carried out in the body of the work.

6. The bibliography should be shortened (53 pages); it would be advisable to list only those titles that are cited in the footnotes of the dissertation text.

Sources in Greek should not appear in the bibliography, given that the doctoral candidate does not use this language.

Likewise, listing sources in Cyrillic — most of which are websites (8.1.1) — and separating those retrieved from websites under “Online Sources” in Cyrillic (8.3.1) is entirely unnecessary. All sources obtained from websites in Cyrillic should be consolidated in a single section, as should those in Latin script.

No. 4. Conclusion

The study of political, economic, and cultural-religious relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the eleven countries of the Balkan Peninsula over a thirty-year period (1990–2021) is an exceptionally ambitious and challenging task. I believe that the author of the dissertation “*Iran and the Balkans: Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations (1990–2021)*” has successfully addressed this challenge, which gives me grounds to give a positive recommendation for the awarding of the academic degree of Doctor (Ph.D.) to Kaloyan Stoyanov Konstantinov.

Sofia

16 February 2026

Member of the Academic Committee:

(Assoc. Prof. Dr. Irina Ognyanova)