

OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Nadya Filipova, PhD, Institute for Historical Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

regarding the dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree PhD in the field of higher education 2. Humanities, Professional field 2.2. History and Archeology, Doctoral Programme “Modern and Contemporary History”

Topic of the dissertation: “**Iran and the Balkans – Political, Economic and Cultural Relations (1990-2021)**”

Author of the dissertation: Kaloyan Konstantinov

This Opinion has been prepared in accordance with:

1. Order No. 10 ПД-16/19.01.2026 of the Director of the Institute of Balkan Studies and Centre of Thracology – BAS for the appointment of the Scientific Jury for the defense of the dissertation of Kaloyan Konstantinov.

2. Minutes No. 1 of the meeting of the Scientific Jury for the defence of the dissertation prepared by Kaloyan Stoyanov Konstantinov – PhD student at the Department "Contemporary Balkans".

The dissertation presented by the PhD student Kaloyan Konstantinov is in a volume of 377 non-standard pages including the Bibliography section. The study makes an important contribution to the broader research on the issues of interactions between the politically, ethnically, and regarding confession heterogeneous Balkan states, on the one hand, and leading powers in contemporary international relations, on the other. Focusing on Iran as a partner for the Balkan states is particularly valuable as a concept, given the expanding global influence of this Middle Eastern country in the rapidly globalizing world after World War II. Structurally, the study complies with the standards required for a PhD thesis: it consists of Introduction, four Chapters, a Conclusion and a Bibliographic section. The double numbering of the separate parts of the dissertation is unacceptable.

In the Introduction, the importance of the topic is underlined, the methodology is defended, the chronological and geographical scope chosen for the study is justified, as well as specific aims are formulated. The points facilitating the achievement of agreements of mutual interest are defined conceptually, in addition to clarifying the basic logic of contradictions. The approach of “examining cases in order to focus (the dissertation – my note, Nadya Filipova) on examples of bilateral relations within the broader dynamics of relations between Iran and the Balkan states” (p.10) is entirely relevant. The approach of comparative analysis of Iran’s

relations with all Balkan states (except Turkey) on several key topics is methodologically valuable. It is unclear why the content refers to “aim” instead of “aims” of the study.

In the four chapters of the dissertation Kaloyan Konstantinov makes an analysis of Iran’s bilateral relations with the different Balkan countries regarding the principal aspects of politics, economic relations and cultural ties, making it possible similarities and contrasts to be highlighted. Aiming to create the basis for the development of the main part of the study, the leading characteristics of Iran’s foreign policy in the 20th century are revealed in the First chapter.

In Chapter Two the presentation of Iran’s historical connections with the Balkan communities and states is in irrelevant volume. In contrast, the focus on international sanctions against Iran is of paramount importance because it provides the basis for unbiased conclusions in the analysis of Iran’s bilateral relations in the Balkans. In this context, Iran’s specific approach, based on assessments of the positive prospects of exerting pressure or refraining from such actions, is also brought to the fore. Despite the exclusion of Turkey as a subject of study, the main points of rivalry between Tehran and Ankara are outlined, in addition to drawing special attention to contests between Tehran and Riyadh for influence in the Balkans. Such an analysis is particularly valuable for the drawing general conclusions as regards Iran’s bilateral relations with the Balkan countries. Equally important is the study of “Iran’s illegal activities in the Balkans”, which activities, according to the author, contribute to guaranteeing the stability of the regime in Tehran, including thanks to attracting “additional economic revenues” (p. 87). It is emphasized that the internal political weakness of the Balkan states in the 1990s created fertile ground for Iran’s illegal activities and for the implementation of Iran’s long-term global strategy.

Iran’s bilateral economic relations with the Balkan countries are in the focus of the study in Chapter Three in search of the intersection between international sanctions, on the one hand, and the “oil weapon”, on the other. The thesis that “for the Islamic Republic, the main motivation behind its activities in the Balkans is to mitigate the effects of international isolation” (p. 147) is developed. Successful results, as well challenges facing the achievement of Iran’s goals are clarified, and important circumstances such as foreign policy commitments of the different Balkan states and the dynamics of international environment are brought to the fore. Special attention is paid to the economic needs of separate Balkan countries, within the framework of which Iran’s successes in diversifying its foreign trade list are outlined.

Kaloyan Konstantinov's ambition to comprehensively examine both Iran's global policy in the Balkans and the specifics of country's bilateral relations is demonstrated by his analysis

of Tehran's "soft power" policy in Chapter Four. The conceptual Iranian strategy to promote Iranian cultural and historical heritage as the main method for implementing this policy is highlighted, given the common and opposing perceptions of the past and the religious diversity of the Balkans. The systematic nature of Iranian cultural policy is demonstrated by drawing attention to methods that are similar in concept and form, such as the arrangement of literary and other cultural forums, as well as the promotion of Iranian cinema. The nuances in the receptivity of different Balkan states' scientific and cultural institutions are also revealed. The conclusion that there is mutual interest in maintaining and expanding bilateral cultural ties is defended, in addition to highlighting the fundamental complications created by the Tehran's policy of persecuting regime's opponents. However, phrases such as "polishing the image" in this and previous chapters of the dissertation are academically unacceptable.

The general conclusion accurately reflects the issues analyzed in the main text and the conclusions drawn. The bibliography is compiled in accordance with the requirements for academic writing.

Kaloyan Konstantinov has provided three publications, thus covering the other requirements for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "doctor". The Abstract presents accurately the contributions of the dissertation.

Conclusion

Kaloyan Konstantinov's dissertation meets all requirements for academic writing. Taking into account dissertation's contributions, as well as the successful completion of the educational process, I believe that Kaloyan Konstantinov can be awarded the educational and scientific degree "doctor".

March 5, 2026

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nadya Filipova