

## REVIEW

REGARDING: The PhD dissertation of Kaloyan Stoyanov Konstantinov

A full-time doctoral student in the "Contemporary Balkans" section  
of the Institute of Balkan Studies with a Center for Thracology at the Bulgarian Academy of  
Sciences

on the topic "Iran and the Balkans - Political, Economic and Cultural Relations (1990-2021)"  
for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher  
education "Humanities", professional direction 2.2. "History and Archaeology" (New and  
Recent General History)

by Dr. Jordan Angelov Baev - Professor of New and Recent General History, member of the  
scientific jury according to Order No. 10RD-16/19.01.2026 of the Director of the IBCT-BAS

Kaloyan Konstantinov holds a bachelor's degree from the Faculty of Journalism at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and a master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies from King's College, London. In the period 2021-2024 he was a full-time doctoral student at IBCT, and after successfully completing the three-year doctoral course, he was discharged with the right to defend his thesis. In November 2024 he was appointed as an assistant professor in the "Contemporary Balkans" section of IBCT. The biographical note shows that during the period of study in the three levels of higher education the doctoral student had the opportunity to build on his knowledge in various areas in the field of Humanities, and his participation in a number of international conferences, seminars and courses (including a "field trip" in 2022 in Iran) gave him the opportunity to consolidate this versatile knowledge.

The presented dissertation with a size of 337 pages is structured in four main chapters with a total of 21 paragraphs, which are divided into sub-paragraphs on a thematic or geographical principle. The individual chapters are built in a sequential problem-chronological form, with each of them examining a separate topic (Iranian foreign policy, political, economic

and cultural relations with the Balkan countries). In addition to a detailed bibliography, the dissertation includes a useful appendix (annex) with a list of the studied 71 bilateral agreements and protocols ("memorandums of understanding") between Iran and ten Balkan countries for the period 1995 - 2021. The PhD dissertation represents a comprehensive scientific study, which is the first of its kind in Bulgarian historiography with a contribution in the field of contemporary regional and international history.

The introduction of the dissertation argues the relevance of such a scientific study and formulates the subject, goal and tasks of the work. Right from the beginning, the doctoral student substantiated the hypothesis that "smaller states and regional powers play an increasingly important role in terms of global stability" (p. 4). The study uses various interdisciplinary approaches, among which comparative historical and political analysis, statistical economic methods, cultural-religious review and media monitoring are of primary importance. The analysis is illustrated with a total of 45 graphs based on data from the "Observatory of Economic Complexity" (2023). I would suggest that the data on Iranian-Bulgarian economic relations be compared also with the official annual reports of the National Statistical Institute, since sometimes there are discrepancies in the figures from different national sources. The chronological framework and internal periodization are well-founded, but the doctoral student has correctly realized the need to present also the previous historical stage (1925-1979) during the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty and Ayatollah Khomeini in the first decade after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The exceptional relevance of the issue requires Kaloyan Konstantinov to continue his analysis to the present day in his next study in order to fully cover the period of the "Khamenei era".

The first question that arises in a historical study about contemporary events with a minimum time distance is the reveal and analysis of authentic and reliable documentary sources. The PhD dissertation is based on a respectably large number of scientific and expert publications and a decent amount of documentary materials. Kaloyan Konstantinov has conscientiously studied numerous available online foreign policy materials and information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Sofia and the embassies of a number of Balkan countries, as well as the official documentation on Iran of the Security Council and the UN General Assembly (over 30 resolutions of the world organization). Given that the policy of the United States is a key factor in understanding and explaining many aspects of the topic under consideration, the doctoral student has fully justified introducing into scientific use key analytical materials of the CIA, the State Department and the US Congress. My

recommendation is that the reports and estimates of US intelligence, which after their declassification are stored in the US National Archives (NARA), be cited in accordance with the established practice for using the CIA's digital collections – CIA-FOIA-CREST (CIA Records Search Tool). Although there is a serious delay in the publication of documents on Iran from the Reagan, Bush and Clinton administrations in the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series, it is useful to use the National Security Archive's digital collection "Documenting Iran-US Relations 1978-2015" (2019), prepared by one of the prominent researchers of US-Iranian relations, Malcolm Byrne.

The brief bibliographic overview clearly shows two things – the undeniable contribution of the dissertation to Bulgarian historiography (there are only a few specific publications on the research topic by Ambassador Angel Orbetsov, Assoc. Prof. Plamen Teodosiev and Dr. Dimitar Bechev), as well as the attraction of a significant number of publications by Balkan, Western and Iranian authors. As the PhD student himself underlined, it is still a "literary review", but the usual historiographic analysis is missing. In order to see the different assessments in Russian historiography of the role of Russia as a regional power, it is good to use the historiographic review in Gulnara Murtazaeva's study of Soviet/Russian-Iranian relations in the period 1978-2008 (2014).

The introduction discussed the development of the theory of international relations (TIR) as a theoretical framework of the dissertation. Some more general concepts about the different IR schools could be shortened (pp. 11-16), while at the same time adding definitions and theoretical trends in security policy as an important IR component. Also, in historical science there are similar theoretical narratives, but also more specific schools such as revisionism, post-revisionism and postmodernism.

The first chapter of the dissertation examined the general foreign policy of the Iranian state in different historical eras of a century (1925-2021). The culmination and catalyst in Iran's rapid reorientation towards the United States and Great Britain in the post-war period was the coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in August 1953. The dissertation could have more clearly indicated that the coup was the result of coordinated actions by the British (Operation "Boot") and American (Operation "Ajax") intelligence services. It was also omitted that in the period 1955-1979 Iran was a member of the regional military-political bloc CENTO (originally the "Baghdad Pact"), and in 1958 it even signed a secret "peripheral pact" for intelligence cooperation with Israel. The domestic policy of Shahin Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was rightly defined by Kaloyan Konstantinov as "autocratic rule", but a paragraph

could also be added about the sinister repressive role of the secret police SAVAK. In two separate paragraphs of the first chapter, the foreign policy principles and priorities of the rule of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei were consistently and systematically analyzed. Special attention was paid to the concept of "exporting the Islamic revolution" by creating proxy armed groups in neighboring Islamic countries. It could be mentioned in brief the complex system of governance with internal rivalry and confrontation between theocracy and political clans, a community diversity composed of five or six major ethnic groups, as well as the radical-adventurous foreign policy line that for years doomed the country and the regime to a "crash out country" of political survival.

The second chapter examined a key problematic topic for the establishment and development of diplomatic and political relations between Iran and the individual Balkan states. Due to the fact that the dissertation is the first such study in Bulgarian historical science, it would be good to correct some inaccuracies and supplement the introductory paragraph, in particular, with data on the development of relations between Iran and Bulgaria (pp. 59-60). For example, the Shahin Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, officially visited Bulgaria not once, but three times - in September 1966, June 1973 and May 1978, when he was declared an "honorary citizen of Sofia". As a result of the bilateral agreements signed during the exchanged visits of the prime ministers of the two countries (1971 Amir Abbas Hoveyda in Sofia and 1972 Stanko Todorov in Tehran), the bilateral trade turnover increased many times.

Separate paragraphs traced the resolutions of the world organization and the sanctions imposed on Tehran on the issue of the development of the Iranian nuclear program and in connection with the violation of human rights. A separate place was occupied by Iran's rival relations with two other influential Islamic countries in the region - Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Kaloyan Konstantinov did not fail to examine in a synthesized manner the complex problem of Iranian support for extremist groups in accordance with the strategy of the head of the elite Quds Brigade of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Gen. Soleimani, for "forward defense". The attempts to influence the Hezbollah group in the Balkans were noted, but at the same time the Iranian government was actively fighting to neutralize the Islamic State and other radical Islamist groups in the Middle East. The main focus of the content of the second chapter was directed at revealing bilateral relations with 11 Balkan countries, ten of which have experienced a complete domestic and foreign policy transformation since 1989, and seven of which have newly established state legal status. As the doctoral student himself noted, there is

very fragmentary and incomplete data for some of the Balkan countries, which results in a disproportionate presentation – for example, for Romania with one short paragraph.

The third chapter of the work is dedicated to the economic relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the ten Balkan countries (excluding Kosovo), and a summarized comparative analysis of Iranian exports and imports with the respective countries is made. The doctoral candidate makes a well-founded conclusion about the pragmatic approach of the authorities in Tehran, who view their economic relations with the Balkans as an opportunity to expand their influence in adjacent regions beyond the Middle East.

The fourth chapter of the dissertation examines the cultural and religious activities and influence of the IRI in the Balkans, including through the use of strategic initiatives and Islamic cultural and religious foundations. In a separate paragraph, an original monitoring of the media impact as the main ideological instrument of state policy is presented. Kaloyan Konstantinov, in particular, offers a content analysis of the content of the leading Iranian media outlet Tehran Times, which for the period under study included nearly 20,000 materials about the Balkans. The author's general conclusion is that "against the backdrop of severe economic and political isolation... the Islamic Republic is actively developing its soft power through cultural, religious and media activities."

The conclusion of the dissertation contains a synthesized summary of the conclusions and assessments formulated in the course of the presentation. The 28-page abstract reflects the content and conclusions of the study. Of the six contribution elements indicated, I fully support contributions 1, 2, 3 and 5 and partially 4 and 6. Three publications on the topic of the dissertation were released in 2024-2025, two of which are in English. Kaloyan Konstantinov has also published some expert media articles, including on the current situation in Iran after the assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (*News.bg* from March 2, 2026). In conclusion, I would like to express my positive assessment of the presented doctoral dissertation, which represents an original author's study and has indisputable scientific contributions. The individual recommendations made in the review are intended primarily to support the PhD student in his future work on the researched topic. This gives me reason to draw the well-founded conclusion that the dissertation in question meets to a very large extent the necessary requirements and criteria for acquiring the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in accordance with the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its implementation and the Regulations of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Balkan Studies with a Center for Thracology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

on the conditions and procedure for acquiring scientific degrees and occupying academic positions. In view of the above, I will vote "yes" and I call on the esteemed members of the scientific jury to also cast their vote for awarding Kaloyan Stoyanov Konstantinov the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the field of higher education "Humanities", professional direction 2.2. "History and Archaeology" (New and most recent general history).

Member of the scientific jury:

(Prof. Dr. Jordan Baev)

2 March 2026