OPINION

by Prof. DSc Orlin Stamenov Sabev

on the dissertation of Nadezhda Zaharieva Yanakieva
"Roads and Buildings in the Balkans According to the Italian Travelogue Tradition (16th-17th Century)" and the accompanying materials to it
(author's abstract and publications)
for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "doctor"

Nadezhda Zaharieva Yanakieva has been enrolled as a full-time doctoral student in the Department "Culture of the Balkans" at the Institute of Balkan Studies with the Center for Thracology (IBCT) at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences under the doctoral program "Theory and History of Culture" in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences, as of 01.10.2016 and with a supervisor Prof. Dr. Penka Stilyanova Danova. After a one-year extension of her doctoral studies, she was discharged with the right to defend her thesis, effective from 01.10.2020. By decision of the Scientific Council of IBCT-BAS dated 28.04.2026, a procedure for the defense of her dissertation with the selection of a Scientific Jury was opened.

In addition to the dissertation, consisting of 239 pages, Nadezhda Yanakieva presented four articles (three published and one in print) on the topic of the work. With this, she covered the minimum scientometric requirements – 50 points for a dissertation (group A) and 30 points for publications (group D).

The dissertation comprises an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, three appendices and a bibliography.

The introduction justifies the choice of topic and its research significance. The topic was chosen due to the lack of a targeted study that would systematically trace the development of roads and buildings in the Balkans through the prism of the 16th-17th century Italian travelogue tradition (p. 4). Nadezhda Yanakieva traces the complete or partial publication of Bulgarian translations of Italian travelogues by K. Jireček, I. Shishmanov, H. Kesyakov, L. Miletich, A. Ishirkov, N. Mihov, P. Danova, S. Rakova, etc.), as well as scientific research related to

travelogues by foreign travelers during this period (I. Popova, P. Danova and S. Rakova). She explains that the 16th-17th century period was chosen because the Ottoman Empire reached its widest territorial boundaries then, and diplomatic, commercial, and cultural ties between the old Italian states — mainly Venice, Genoa, Tuscany, Naples, and the Papal State — and the Ottoman Empire were at their most intense.

Yanakieva presents information extracted from previously published and unpublished Bulgarian translations of Italian travelogues. She follows the two most popular land routes in the Balkans, which were of strategic, economic, commercial and military importance: the Diagonal (Middle) Road (*Via Militaris*) and the Right Road, which follows the Black Sea coast. A notable aspect of the dissertation is the inclusion of extensive quotations from unpublished travelogues, translated by Yanakieva herself. In doing so, she introduces new sources that are little known in Bulgarian academia, such as the travelogues of Jacopo Soranzo (1575), Tommaso Alberti (1612) and Giovanni Benaglia (1685), into scientific circulation. This enables readers to experience their authentic expression, which undoubtedly enhances the value of the dissertation.

In the first chapter, Nadezhda Yanakieva provides a detailed overview of the historical context, examining diplomatic, commercial and cultural relations, as well as military conflicts, between the old Italian states and the Ottoman Empire.

The second chapter is dedicated to Italian travelogues reflecting the impressions of travelers whose route from the Western Balkans to Istanbul, the Ottoman capital, passed along the Diagonal Road. This road is the most important and frequently used in the Balkans, with significant transport, communication, trade and military value. This explains the presence of large, important settlements such as Belgrade, Sofia, Plovdiv and Edirne along its length, as well as numerous smaller settlements and road infrastructure sites such as bridges, inns and caravanserais. Consequently, this chapter is also the longest at around 100 pages (pp. 59–159).

The third chapter focuses on the few Italian travelers who travelled along the Wright Road and is therefore significantly shorter (pp. 160–178). It mainly presents information from Tommaso Alberti.

In these two chapters, Nadezhda Yanakieva focuses on the parallels and comparisons between the cultural knowledge of Italian travel writers, which was based on their understanding of the region's geography and history, mainly drawn from ancient texts, and their first-hand observations. In this way, these travelogues reflect not only the personal experiences

and observations of the writers, but also provide new, up-to-date knowledge that corrects indirect, theoretical and anachronistic knowledge with roots reaching far back into antiquity. In this sense, the travelogues of this period have a dual function: on the one hand, they reflect the clash between Western European and Ottoman/Oriental cultural consciousness; on the other, they reflect the clash between different chronological-cognitive layers in the cultural consciousness of Western Europeans themselves. In this case, they reflect the clash between the Italian travelers of the 16th-17th centuries and their own cultural consciousness. Furthermore, Nadezhda Yanakieva's analysis reveals the potential of travel literature to shed light on significant aspects of Ottoman infrastructural development. Based on the buildings and infrastructure sites described in the travelogues, she emphasizes "the deeper imbalances in the regional development of the Ottoman Balkans" (p. 78). According to Yanakieva, the information in the travelogues clearly shows how the Ottoman state concentrated administrative and economic functions in regional cores while leaving peripheral zones semi-autonomous or weakly controlled (p. 77). Yanakieva also draws attention to the aesthetic assessment given to buildings with religious and other purposes.

The three appendices to the dissertation are also particularly valuable. The first is a translation by Nadezhda Yanakieva of part of Tommaso Alberti's travelogue reflecting his journey from Istanbul to Machin in 1612. The second contains biographical references to the Italian authors discussed in the dissertation, as well as information about their travels through the Balkans. The third appendix presents the chronology of these journeys and the settlements visited by the travelers in tabular form. The dissertation is also accompanied by fifteen illustrations visualizing the aforementioned Balkan routes and the settlements along them. These illustrations are engravings that were originally published alongside the travelogues and their title pages.

The dissertation is presented in an academic style that is also accessible, clear and concise. The work is original and does not contain any signs of plagiarism or copying. However, some quoted passages differ from the cited original (see note 40 on p. 22). The citation system is inconsistent. In addition to correcting these shortcomings in a future publication, some expressions could be refined. For example, "traveling experience" (p. 14) could be replaced with "traveler's experience", some settlements could be identified: Alehinats as Aleksinats. Similarly, the terms *nazil* could identified as *nazır*, while Mehmed Pasha's caravanserai in Sofia could be identified as Sofu Mehmed Pasha's caravanserai.

The abstract adequately presents the structure and content of the dissertation.

In conclusion, I am convinced that this dissertation meets high academic standards and its author, Nadezhda Zaharieva Yanakieva, deserves to be awarded the degree of “doctor”.

June 11, 2026

City of Sofia

Prof. Dr. Orlin Sabev, IBCT-BAS