**REVIEW**

of the dissertation by Nadezhda Yanakieva, **"Roads and Buildings in the Balkans According to the Italian Travel Writing Tradition (16th–17th Centuries)**," submitted for the academic and scientific degree of "Doctor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic, and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.1 Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural Studies, doctoral program "Theory and History of Culture"

**by Prof. Dr. Plamen Bochkov, New Bulgarian University**

Nadezhda Yanakieva's dissertation, "Roads and Buildings in the Balkans According to the Italian Travel Writing Tradition (16th–17th Centuries)," was discussed at an internal defense before an expanded panel of the "Culture of the Balkans" Section at the Institute of Balkan Studies with the Center for Thracology "Prof. Al. Fol" (IBCT) at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences on April 15, 2026, and has been approved for a public defense. The candidate is a regular doctoral student in the "Theory and History of Culture" doctoral program. By Order No. 40 RD-16 of the Director of the IBCT dated May 5, 2026, the members of the Academic Jury for the public defense were appointed. The first meeting of the Scientific Jury was held on May 13, 2026, and a decision was made to admit the candidate to the evaluation of the dissertation in accordance with the requirements of Article 26, paragraphs 2 and 3, of the Act on Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgariaл

The dissertation consists of 182 pages, divided into an Introduction and three chapters, two Appendices—an original translation of Tommaso Alberti's travelogue *Journey to Constantinople* and *The Italians and Their Routes Through the Balkans* in the form of brief biographical notes, a third appendix with a tabular presentation of the travelers and their journeys, as well as images of geographical maps and other documents from the period, and a Bibliography including sources and translated texts, studies, electronic resources, and encyclopedic reference works. I am describing the structure of Nadezhda Yanakieva's work in greater detail because I believe that one of the work's foremost strengths is precisely its structure. With an introductory chapter, two substantive and analytical chapters, and several guiding appendices, the author has constructed a text that most effectively achieves the research goal of demonstrating how the authors presented (the Italian travelers) reveal the roads and buildings not only as a physical environment but also as evidence of order and disorder, power

and insecurity, economic and cultural practices, and social diversity in the Balkans within the broader framework of the Ottoman Empire.

In the Introduction, Nadezhda Yanakieva provides a comprehensive overview of Bulgarian scholars who have studied foreign travelogues on the Balkans as a historiographical source, from Konstantin Ireček to the present day. The overview reveals a gap in the research regarding the specific contribution of Italian travelogues focusing on the condition of roads and buildings in the Balkans between the 16th and 17th centuries.

The choice of this period, as well as the thematic focus—roads and buildings—is not accidental. The author justifies this choice in two ways. On the one hand, the rich scholarly historiographical, ethnographic, and cultural literature on foreign travelogues about the Balkans seems to sidestep or often overlook the contribution of the Italian travelogue tradition. On the other hand, it is precisely this focus on roads and buildings that allows these journeys to serve as a record of the characteristics of the places, settlements, and people described during a specific period in the history of the Ottoman Empire. The 16th and 17th centuries were chosen because it was during this time that the empire reached its greatest extent and the intensity of contacts between the capital (Constantinople) and European states was at its peak.

Among the research objectives described in the Introduction, the effort to highlight the evaluative perceptions of Italian travelers regarding the infrastructure sites they observed and to link these perceptions to their personal experiences is particularly noteworthy. To this end, Nadezhda Yanakieva applies an interdisciplinary approach to the selected authors and their texts, utilizing a combination of methods from various disciplines—historiography, literary history, cultural studies, and ethnography. The comparative analysis of travelogues as source material is central, but it is combined—to achieve greater depth of interpretation—with a biographical approach and bibliographic research. The travelogues themselves are classified into three groups—those written by members of official delegations, most often diplomatic missions.

For the purposes of this dissertation, these texts contain the most valuable information, as their authors are generally highly educated individuals with extensive experience, who are observant and well-informed, seeking to understand the structure of power, the administrative system, and the way of life of the local people beyond what is immediately apparent.

The second group stems from commercial contacts, and, as might be expected, the authors here are more pragmatic and more sparing in their descriptions. Their scope of interest includes markets, goods, prices, road safety, and caravanserais; less frequently, hygiene and other cultural customs. Finally, there were the missionary journeys undertaken by both Catholics and Protestants, and their observations focused on literacy, the religious affiliation of the population, and spiritual spaces and practices. This typology is valuable because it extracts the specific characteristics from the concrete texts without pitting them against one another or underestimating them.

Nadezhda Yanakieva's dissertation traces in detail two overland routes—the Middle Route (from the Adriatic coast through Belgrade and Sofia to Constantinople) and the Right Route (from Constantinople through Aytos, Provadia, and Dobrich to the Danube River). Without getting into any potential controversy regarding the choice of their names, I will say that the author's arguments are strong enough, and what matters more is not how she names the routes, but how she analyzes the information about them extracted from the Italian travelogues.

Chapter One, **"The Ottoman Empire and the Old Italian States in the 16th–17th Centuries,"** serves to provide a broad historical and political context for the journeys of Italians from the West to the East through the Balkans. It traces in detail the rise of the Ottoman Empire under the rule of Suleiman the Magnificent, the military campaigns into the heart of Europe periodically undertaken by various sultans, and the complex economic and diplomatic relations between the empire and the Italian republics—Venice, Genoa, the Vatican, Tuscany, and Naples. The 16th century, known in Ottoman history as the "Golden Age," marked by military victories and the charisma of Sultan Suleiman, saw the greatest expansion of the Ottoman Empire to the west and east, its most significant influence on the political life of European states, and the peak of its economic power. During this century, the Italian city-states tended to accommodate the empire rather than oppose it. Venice lost its position as the leading naval power in the Mediterranean; gradually, along with Genoa, it also lost the territories it had previously conquered in the eastern part of the Mediterranean. In the 17th century, however, the empire's power gradually waned. Western powers intensified their pressure, which, combined with the rule of incompetent sultans mired in corruption and court intrigues, led to stagnation in domestic affairs, as well as to rebellions and economic crises. It was not until the "Era of Mehmed Köprülü"—as the last few decades of the 17th century are known—that the empire stabilized once again. These difficulties faced by the authorities in Istanbul, on the other

hand, strengthened the empire's diplomatic ties and trade relations specifically with Italian cities, and especially with Venice. The Porte waged war primarily against Venice on land and at sea, but it also traded primarily with Venice, due to the latter's influence in the Mediterranean region. This section of the work may seem overly verbose, but, in my opinion, it successfully fulfills its role of providing a rich and vivid picture of the military, political, and economic (commercial) relations between the Italian city-states and the Ottoman Empire during some of the most turbulent centuries.

Chapter Two, **"The Diagonal Road (The Middle Road),"** occupies a central place in Nadezhda Yanakieva's dissertation. For centuries, this route was used by subjects of the Roman Empire to transport people, troops, and goods between Belgrade and Constantinople. During the Ottoman period, this route—approximately 900 kilometers long—was essential for the transport of grain, textiles, hides, salt, and metal goods.

The main points along the route are identified in sequence—**Belgrade**, where travelers typically arrived by boat on the Danube and which, for most of them, was their first point of contact with the Empire. From this point onward, for each city or stop along the route, the accounts of each of the eleven travel writers who visited the city are used in sequence. Thus, the section on Belgrade includes the impressions of four of them, and I would like to take this opportunity to highlight a specific feature of Nadezhda Yanakieva's dissertation —where the existing translation from Italian into Bulgarian is unclear or inaccurate, the translation has been corrected, and in effect, these are new, more precise translations of portions of the Italian travelogues.

The next cities on the route are **Yagodina** and **Skopje**. This represents a different approach to the Diagonal Route, starting from the Adriatic coast and passing through the territories of present-day Albania and North Macedonia. In Skopje, the travelers encounter a multi-confessional population, remnants of the ancient heritage, and a well-developed market infrastructure. Further on, the book includes the travelers' relatively brief notes on the cities of **Novi Pazar, Niš, and Pirot**.

**Sofia** is featured in Italian travelogues along this route by no fewer than six authors: Benedetto Ramberti, Caterina Zen, Marcantonio Pigafetta, Giovanni Chiaromani, Giovanni Benalla, and Giovanni Battista de Borgo. All of them view the city as a major market hub, situated on a plain, surrounded by mountains, with numerous springs, and filled with a variety

of buildings—baths, inns, mosques, and churches, marketplaces, and commercial structures. An analysis of these diverse yet consistent descriptions allows Nadezhda Yanakieva to draw strong and precise conclusions, such as that the travelers' presence and experiences in Sofia reveal a dual religious landscape of the city —one in which the sacred is present both as an active practice and as a memory of the past (p. 107).

I will cite one more passage from this section of the work. "When we read stories told by travel writers," writes Nadezhda Yanakieva, "we always wonder whether the authors are eyewitnesses or whether these stories were heard from local people" (p. 103). This remark has important methodological significance, insofar as it raises and examines the question of the narrative as a form of interpretation. First, the travel writer interprets his or her own observations through a narrative or story; and second, they interpret another narrative through their own narrative, resulting in a cumulative reflection of different perspectives on the same object (in this case, the condition of the Church of Saint Sophia, which, according to the travel writers, gave the city its name).

Naturally, the journey from Belgrade to Constantinople also takes us to **Plovdiv**. The Italians are impressed by the ancient charm and vibrant energy of the city beneath the hills. Nadezhda Yanakieva examines in greater detail Katarin Dzen's description of Plovdiv, which contains valuable information about the city's ethnic composition, housing, markets, and other public buildings and places. Another important author is Marcantonio Pigafetta, who drew up a fairly accurate "map" of Plovdiv's population. "This observation," writes Yanakieva, "is indicative of the ethnic stratification in the urban environment: the Christian population inhabited the older, fortified, and higher-elevation parts of the city, while the Ottoman population occupied the flat area, which was the site of later development. Thus, a spatial and social distinction emerges between the different communities" (p.113). In these descriptions, the contrast noted by most authors between the city's favorable geographical location and its ancient glory on the one hand, and its apparent neglect on the other, is striking. A state they describe as "lost grandeur."

If Chapter Two of the dissertation is central, then the description and analysis of Mustafa Pasha's bridge near Svilengrad occupy a central place within it. Not because it differs from other descriptions and analyses, but because it is precisely in this section that we see the overall concept of the work synthesized: an architectural structure (the bridge over the Maritsa River), linked both to specific historical figures and events and to local legends and folklore; the

infrastructure surrounding the structure (caravanserais, inns, imarets); the sociopolitical context of its construction; and its place on the cultural map of the Balkans during that period (16th–17th centuries). This concept, defined by the research objective and the chosen methodology, fully corresponds to the call for an interdisciplinary study situated at the intersection of historiography, cultural anthropology, and etnography.

The chapter concludes with a description of **Edirne**—the former Ottoman capital. As expected, the travel writers devote more pages and more observations to this ancient transportation, political, military, and cultural center. To make sense of the wealth of observations, Nadezhda Yanakieva divides this section into several smaller parts—the khans and markets, the bridges, the mosques and churches, the sarays and Janissaries, and the caravanserais. The city of the three rivers has captivated its visitors with its architectural grandeur (baths, caravanserais, mosques, churches, madrasas, imarets, markets, bridges), its rich history (Emperor Hadrian as its mythical founder), and its diverse population—Turks, Greeks, Jews, Armenians, and Catholics (?). And now, in the chapter's conclusion, we find the crux of the research hypothesis—though objective and unbiased, the Italian travelers' observations of the cities along the Diagonal Route differ diametrically in their assessments. While for Benedetto Ramberti, "the entire country" (meaning all the sites, towns, and villages along this route) is underdeveloped, miserable, and dreadful due to "the indolence of its inhabitants" (p. 158), for Catherine Zen, the people are so "reverent, caring, and patient" that it is impossible to describe "just how good servants these people are" (p. 158).

Chapter Three, **"The Right Path,"** supplements the information on Italian journeys through the Balkans by focusing on a route that was less frequently used but important for trade contacts among the Balkan states (or, rather, the empire's territories). Unfortunately, this chapter tends to focus more on description than on analysis. This is likely due in part to the fact that the travelers' own accounts of the towns along this route are quite sparse. A typical example is Dobrich; nothing is said about the town except that it has no fortress walls and is surrounded by forests. In fact, the information about this route is drawn primarily from Tommaso Alberti's travelogue. And since this is the case, Nadezhda Yanakieva draws a comparison with Martin Gruneweg's travelogue from 1582. This allows her to highlight the differences between the types of travelers and their observations—while Gruneweg is fascinated by ethnographic characteristics and cultural differences such as food, clothing, customs, language, religion, and

so on, the merchant Alberti focuses on safety on the road, the comfort of accommodations, and prices.

The conclusion of the dissertation systematizes the findings derived from the travelers' accounts, placing them within the broader context of the social structure and economic function of key Ottoman complexes. Nadezhda Yanakieva quite rightly asserts that "the study contributes to overcoming stereotypes and prejudices in the interpretation of travelogues, which are often perceived as not particularly reliable sources" (p. 181).

The main contributions of this dissertation concern the place of Italian travelogues in the Bulgarian historiographical and cultural-historical tradition. In particular, I will highlight four of them.

**First** is the attempt to systematize a wealth of source material reflecting Italian travelogues on the Balkans from the 16th–17th centuries and the information on roads and buildings in the region contained therein. Texts by eleven Italians who traveled through the Balkans—with diverse backgrounds (diplomats, merchants, missionaries)—have been selected, each offering different perspectives on the same sites along the route.

**Second**, the study combines various research methods to provide a comprehensive description of the two routes (the Diagonal and the Right Roads), adding a political, social, and cultural context to the specific features of the infrastructure adds a political, social, and cultural context.

**Third,** a comparative analysis of travelogue texts allows Nadezhda Yanakieva to reveal the period's characteristic complexity and contradictions in the "image" of the Balkans—for some, a safe, refined, well-developed, and spiritual place, for others—a dangerous, uncivilized, disorderly, and neglected place. This duality is partly objective, insofar as the Ottoman Empire itself maintained both administrative order and social disorder, but it is also subjective, depending on the travelers' attitudes, prior experiences, and powers of observation.

**Finally**, the work features a simple and clearly focused structure in light of the research objectives, as well as remarkably polished language and elegance of expression.

In addition to the research contributions of the thesis, Nadezhda Yanakieva's contribution as a translator should also be highlighted. Tommaso Alberti's travelogue, "Journey

to Constantinople," is presented to the academic community in Bulgarian translation for the first time.

Ph.D. candidate Nadezhda Yanakieva earned her bachelor's degree in the "Art History" program with a thesis titled "Ottoman Monuments in the Travelogues of Evliya Çelebi." She earned her master's degree in "Comparative Art Studies" with a thesis titled "Ottoman Monuments in 19th-Century Travelogues." Both degrees were awarded by New Bulgarian University. Nadezhda Yanakieva currently works as an administrative manager and curator at NBU, where she has organized several significant exhibitions and events. I have no firsthand personal experience with her, but my colleagues at the university say that Nadezhda Yanakieva is exceptionally well-prepared, professional, and possesses a strong sense of responsibility and work ethic—she is someone you can count on.

Four publications are attached to the defense documentation—three published and one in press. The publications appear in academic journals (two from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and one from New Bulgarian University), are not co-authored, and are entirely on the topic of the dissertation.

The abstract comprehensively and objectively conveys the content and original contributions of the dissertation.

In conclusion, and in light of everything stated thus far, I strongly recommend that the esteemed members of the Academic Jury award Nadezhda Yanakieva the academic and scientific degree of "Doctor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic, and Legal Sciences, professional area 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural Studies for the dissertation titled "Roads and Buildings in the Balkans According to the Italian Travel Writing Tradition of the 16th–17th Centuries."