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REVIEW

By **Prof. Dr. Evgenia Kalinova**, Department of History of Bulgaria,
Faculty of History, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

Regarding: the scientific output and submitted materials
by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Habil. **Bisser Petrov Petrov,**
participant in the competition for the academic position of "Professor"
in the field of higher education 2. Humanities, professional field 2. 2. History and Archaeology (International Relations on the Balkans in the 1940s),
announced in *State Gazette*, № 55 of 17.07.2022

Information about the competition:

The competition for the academic position of "Professor" is announced by the Institute of Balkan Studies with Centre of Thracology "Prof. Alexander Fol" – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, for the needs of the department "Modern Balkans". The legal deadlines and procedural requirements have been met. The only participant in the competition is Assoc. Prof. Dr. Habil. Bisser Petrov Petrov. The documents and scientific publications submitted by him comply with the requirements of the Law for the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for the Conditions and Procedure for the Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and for Holding Academic Positions at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

Brief information about the candidate:

Bisser Petrov graduated from the Faculty of History of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in 1987. In the years 1989 – 1992 he was a PhD student at the Institute of Balkan Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. In 1997 he defended his dissertation "Non-Communist Resistance in the Occupied Balkan Countries" and two years later he started working at the Institute of Balkan Studies as a research assistant of II rank. At the same institute in 2010 Bisser Petrov habilitated with the research work "The Occupier's Ally: Collaborationism in Albania, Serbia and Greece during World War II (Social, Political and Military Aspects)". In 2019 he defended his dissertation on the topic "Bulgaria and the New Slavic Movement, 1941-1948" for the award of the degree of "Dr. Habil.". He is fluent in English, Russian, Serbian and Greek.

Fulfilment of the requirements for the academic position:

According to Article 2b and Article 29 of the Law for the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and Article 2 (4.4) of the Regulations on the Conditions and Procedure for the Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and for Holding Academic Positions at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, candidates for the academic position of Professor must meet certain requirements. Assoc. Prof. Bisser Petrov meets these requirements: he has the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the scientific field in which the competition is announced; he has held the academic position of "Associate Professor" since 2010, i.e. more than the required five years. He participates in the competition with a published individual study entitled "Diplomacy and Diversion in the Balkans: British Policy towards Albania during and after the Second World War" (Sofia: Gutenberg Publishing House, 2020), which does not repeat the works submitted for

the degree of "Doctor", the degree of "Dr. Habil." and the academic position of Associate professor and which corresponds to the subject and scope of the announced competition. The candidate also fulfils the minimum national requirements of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences for the academic position of Professor in the field of higher education 2. Humanities, professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology.

Comments on the presented scientific works of the candidate:

Assoc. Prof. Bisser Petrov presents scientific publications that are relevant to the subject of the competition. The most important among them is the main habilitation paper – the published monograph "Diplomacy and Diversion in the Balkans: British Policy towards Albania during and after the Second World War" (Sofia: Gutenberg Publishing House, 2020). It fully meets the requirements for a monograph as set out in section 10 of the Supplementary Provisions of the Law for the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria. The text consists of 306 pp. and presents the political conceptions and actions of Great Britain with regard to Albania over a period of nearly ten years, the starting point logically being the Italian aggression against the small Balkan country that began in the spring of 1939. I do find acceptable the author's approach not to limit the study to the liberation of Albania in late 1944, but to include the post-war years as well, since the focus is not only on the change in Albania's situation, but above all on the reaction it provoked in the circles formulating British policy towards the country and seeking to overthrow the regime of Enver Hoxha – attempts that ended in the early 1950s, which is the upper chronological limit of the study. The in-depth knowledge of the scholarly literature (both English and Albanian) on British policy towards Albania during and immediately after World War II has led B. Petrov to estimate as a "gap" the absence of "a comprehensive summarizing study covering the entire ten-year period" of British policy towards Albania and to set himself the goal of filling it (pp. 17-18). An undoubted advantage of the monograph is the solid source base on which the historical analysis is built. The author has made a serious effort to find and bring into scholarly circulation valuable collections of documents from the British archives. These documents are supplemented by published documents from 15 collections revealing details of British, American, Italian and German foreign policy, as well as documentary internet resources and memoirs and diaries of political and military figures associated with the subject. A large number of scholarly monographs, articles and studies in Bulgarian, Albanian, English and Russian have also been consulted.

In the first chapter of the book, "Albania as an Italian Rear", the author outlines the channels through which a strong Italian influence was established in Albania in the 1920s and 1930s, but could have more fully clarified Italy's motives for its interest and activity in that country. The factors that contributed to Albanian society's positive attitude towards Britain are briefly discussed, highlighting the role of British officers who arrived in the country as early as 1923 to train Albanian security forces. The evolution of Italian attitude towards Albania on the eve of the Second World War is briefly but accurately presented, concluding finally that "Albania was the only road to Italian expansion in the Balkans and must inevitably be annexed", and taking concrete action in this direction. Against this background, B. Petrov reveals the slow reaction of British diplomacy, relying on the policy of "appeasement" and aimed only at verbally deterring the imminent annexation. His assessment is that the Italian occupation of Albania in April 1939 "caught the British government unprepared and confused, without a clear strategy for an adequate response". Б. Petrov provides evidence for this assessment, based on published and unpublished British documents, but no sufficiently thorough explanation is given for the reasons

for London's conciliatory attitude towards the occupation of Albania. However, one can hardly dispute the author's conclusion that "the conquest of the small and defenseless Balkan state... proved to be an event of insufficient magnitude to bring about an adjustment in British policy towards Mussolini's Italy" and that Albania was "the victim of both Italian aggressiveness and British tolerance towards it" (p. 53). It seems to me that a wider audience would have benefited if B. Petrov had presented in more detail the links that London made between Hitler's and Mussolini's actions in the spring of 1939, which is part of the explanation for British indifference to the fate of Albania, which had lost its independence. Similarly, a more comprehensive analysis of the policy of "appeasement" pursued by Britain and France would help the reader to better understand the logic of British actions, which relied on "gestures of goodwill" (p. 68) towards Italy in return for its eventual distancing from Hitler.

The author's approach of weaving into the narrative of the diplomatic steps of Rome and London information about the course of events in Albania itself and the organization of political life there, dictated by the Italian side, deserves positive assessment. This approach requires finding a balance in the presentation of the different research fields and B. Petrov has managed to achieve it. The pages devoted to the reorganization of Britain's intelligence services and their involvement in subversive activities in Albania from the summer to the winter of 1940, as well as the attitude of Greece and Yugoslavia towards them and towards Albania itself, I would describe as valuable, representing the current state of English-language historiography on these issues, supplemented by some published and unpublished archival documents. In this context, the author's emphasis on the determined reluctance of the Foreign Office to commit itself to promises of restoring Albanian independence, and thus giving impetus to eventual Albanian resistance, seems to me to be insufficiently analyzed and explained. A more extensive analysis is made of the change in the British position at the end of 1942, when London formally declared that it was in favor of restoring Albanian independence, and the reasons for and implications of this step are commented in connection with the interests of both the Allies in the Anti-Hitler coalition and the Yugoslav and Greek leaders. Among the contributions of B. Petrov is the tracing of British activities from 1943 onwards aimed at sending military missions to Albania and the challenges they faced, including those related to the resistance movement of the Albanian Communist Party and the Bali Kombetar organization.

The second chapter, "From Civil to Cold War", traces the specifics of the German occupation of Albania after the Italian capitulation in the fall of 1943 and the collaborationism of Bali Kombetar. Against this background, B. Petrov reveals the disagreements within British political and military circles over the support Britain had so far given to both wings of the resistance. With the growing confrontation between these two wings threatening to escalate into civil war, some in the British military were calling for an end to the "equal treatment" of the Communist wing and Bali Kombetar and for British aid to be concentrated on the former, who were actually fighting the Germans. The author rightly places these calls in the context of the changes in British attitude towards the different wings of the Balkan resistance movements that commenced after the meeting of the "Three Big Ones" in Tehran. He also explains why in Albania (unlike in the case of the Yugoslav resistance) London decided "to support all rebel units, regardless of their political orientation, if they resisted the Germans" in the hope that there would be a "general uprising" at the end of the war.

Б. Petrov presents in detail, on the basis of archival documents, the formation of the British attitude towards the various political forces in Albania in 1944, refracted through London's desire to reconcile the contradictions between them and to push them towards active action

against the Germans. The author's conclusion that by the spring of 1944 Britain "had not yet openly taken sides in the internal Albanian conflict" and that "its conduct was not based on firm principles and convictions but on momentary improvisations suggested by officers to some extent acquainted with the situation in the country" (p. 169), and in the summer of 1944 the main aim of British policy, to prevent civil war in Albania, seemed increasingly unachievable. British efforts to intensify non-Communist resistance and thus balance the growing power of Enver Hoxha's partisans are described in detail, and a narrative of the complicating situation in Albania, culminating in late 1944 with the liberation of the country and the triumph of Enver Hoxha's full grip on power, is incorporated into the analysis.

In the final part of the monograph B. Petrov focuses on London's hesitant policy towards the new government in Tirana, which aroused growing suspicion in Enver Hoxha, reinforced by the direct British military intervention in favor of the right wing in the confrontation between political forces in neighboring Greece. The analysis convincingly elucidates the reasons for Churchill's final decision - refusing to support any possible opposition to overthrow Enver Hoxha, but also refusing to recognize his government, at least until November 1945, when this would be done jointly with the USSR and the USA. Of particular interest are the paragraphs dealing with the deterioration of British-Albanian relations in the following years, the incidents that accompanied them, and the enduring negativity of the two countries towards each other over a long period. The author provides the necessary explanations for this state of affairs, taking into account the changes in the international climate and the influence of third countries, and in the last paragraph extends the scope of the study by tracing the relations between Albania and the United States after the war and by presenting London's attempt in 1949, in coordination with the Americans, to carry out a subversive operation in Albania with the aim of igniting a civil war, overthrowing the regime of Enver Hoxha and removing it from the Soviet orbit. It seems to me that B. Petrov would have compared this operation with a similar one in Bulgaria, analyzed in J. Baev's publications.

The book ends with a Conclusion, which I consider worthy of high evaluation because of its synthesized, but very clear and convincing, judgement on the main aims of British policy towards Albania during and after the war, the methods of action and their disappointing results for London. It is unlikely that the reader who has carefully followed the vicissitudes outlined in the two chapters would dispute B. Petrov that Albania "occupied a rather low place in Britain's hierarchy of military priorities. Policy objectives towards it are therefore of a secondary importance and are most often considered in the broader context of relations with its neighbors... In this situation, policy towards it appears to be mainly the product of various momentary improvisations. It is compensatory and impermanent rather than preventive and constant." (p. 284). The overall impression of the monograph is of a well-chosen historical case study, traced in detail from carefully researched and professionally analyzed documentary sources, with knowledge of the English-language historiography on the subject, and presented to the Bulgarian audience in a clear and comprehensible scholarly style. Of course, as a historian, dealing with Bulgarian history, I would prefer to find in the book comparisons with relevant commentaries on British policy in Bulgaria (and such can certainly be made), and it seems to me that the monograph would thus further intrigue Bulgarian readers. One more critical note - B. Petrov could have more clearly highlighted his contribution to the Bulgarian historiography if he had also reviewed the publications of Bulgarian authors who have dealt to one degree or another with the Albanian theme or with British policy in the Balkans in the period under consideration.

Apart from the main habilitation work discussed so far, B. Petrov also submitted several articles and studies, which deal with similar themes, referring to the period of the Second World War. They trace the author's path to the comprehensive monograph on British policy towards Albania (which, however, is "upgraded" with the period after 1944 to the early 1950s). Since the main aspects and the author's evaluations of these publications are present to one degree or another in the above-mentioned book, I will refrain from a detailed analysis. However, I would like to emphasize that the two articles "British Policy towards Albania: April 1939 - April 1941" and "The Monarchy in Albania during World War II", as well as the study "Great Britain and Resistance in Albania, 1943-1944" are based on extensive material from the British archives; they deal with facts essential for understanding the historical logic of the events, most of which have not been the subject of a thorough and comprehensive analysis not only in Bulgarian historiography and they contribute to the understanding of British policy towards Albania in particular, but also towards the Balkan region in general during the years of the Second World War. In all three studies, the author keeps true to his clear and precise scholarly style of writing and of drawing well argued, critical and accurate conclusions and assessments.

B. Petrov's research interests are not limited to Albania and British foreign policy. Remaining within the chronological framework of the Second World War, he analyses important but overlooked aspects of the war in Greece, Serbia and the Balkans as a whole. In a lengthy study devoted to Gen. Georgios Tsolakoglou ("The Activities of General Georgios Tsolakoglou to Retain the Territorial Integrity of Occupied Greece"), the author analyzes the complex topic of collaborationism in Greece and the motives determining the choice to place oneself at the service of the occupier in the role of prime minister of one's occupied homeland. In the first part of the study B. Petrov traces in detail the military actions on Greek territory that led to the country's surrender and the general's place in it. In the second part, based on published documents, memoirs and diaries, including those of Tsolakoglu himself, his hopes to preserve the territorial integrity of the country, to prevent its remaining under Italian occupation and to prevent the surrender of Belomorje region to Bulgaria are reconstructed. An explanation for the collapse of these hopes B. Petrov presents through the prism of German interests and plans for this part of the Balkans.

In an article ("The Collaborationist Idea of Serbia's Transformation into a Peasant State in World War II") and a study ("The Anti-Urbanism of Serbian Collaborationists during World War II") B. Petrov raises again the question of collaborationism, as reflected in the intention of the Serbian collaborationists to build their future state on the basis of the traditional Serbian zadruga and incorporate it into the Nazi "New Europe". The article presents the views of the extreme Serbian right as they developed from the 1930s to the time of the Second World War, in which the idea of a return to the zadruga is present. In parallel, it traces the rise of Gen. Nedic at the head of the collaborationist Serbian government, who shared this idea and tried to implement it. The second study examines the topic in the broader context of anti-Urbanism as a philosophical and political trend born out of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, and presents Serbian views more thoroughly on the basis of numerous studies in Serbian and English.

I would especially like to mention the article with the provocative title-question "Was the Partisan War Legitimate in the Balkans during World War II?" It examines for the first time the guerrilla resistance in occupied Albania, Yugoslavia and Greece from the perspective of the international law in force at the time, and more specifically the 1907 Annex to the Fourth Hague Convention "On the Laws and Customs of War on Land". The excellent knowledge of the facts about the resistance movement in the three countries allows B. Petrov to draw conclusions as to

the extent to which the requirements of the said document have been complied with, but also to give his assessment that it is too outdated and inapplicable and its requirements have been exceeded by the comprehensive and violent nature of the war. However, the author points out the debatable nature of the legitimacy issue that leaves room for future research and analysis.

With the articles and studies mentioned so far B. Petrov has consolidated his position as a specialist in the issues of Balkan history during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath, outlined new research problems, introduced foreign archival documents into scientific circulation and made his own scientific contributions in this field.

Б. Petrov is submitting another book for the "Professor" competition – "Bulgaria and the New Slavic Movement (1941-1948)" (Sofia: Gutenberg Publishers, 2019). It is based on the candidate's dissertation for the degree "Dr. Habil." (in the candidate's attached reference on the author's contributions it is noted that "in essence, the monograph is basically the text of the dissertation submitted to the competition for the degree of Dr. Habil."). The minimum national requirements for the academic position of "Professor" provide 75 points for it. As the merits of the dissertation have been assessed by the scientific jury in the procedure for the award of the degree "Dr. Habil.", I will not discuss this book in my review. To the same thematic range - about the Slavic idea and its political use after the Second World War - belong another two articles: "The Unfortunate End of the New Slavic Movement, 1947-1948" and "The Slavic Factor in the Foreign Policy of Fatherland-Front Bulgaria", as well as the study "The Personality of Exarch Stephen of Bulgaria through the Eyes of Soviet Generals". The articles largely reflect issues already discussed in the above-mentioned dissertation (in paragraph 4 of Chapter Three and in Chapter Two, respectively). The first presents the activities of the Pan-Slavic Committee, established in Belgrade at the end of 1946 with the task of acting as the leading centre of the Slavic movement, used by Stalin for his own political purposes, but which lasted only until mid-1948, when the Tito-Stalin conflict cancelled the use of the Slavic idea. The second article brings the pursuit of this idea to Bulgarian "soil" in the immediate post-World War II period and shows through documents from the Central State Archives and the press of the period its place in Bulgarian foreign policy, which relied on Slavic "brotherhood" with the USSR and Yugoslavia to solve important Bulgarian problems. The study on Exarch Stefan examines his activities from 9 September 1944 to the summer of 1946 through published documents and memoirs, revealing the attitude of four Soviet military officers towards his personality, while also presenting the links between the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church, which Stalin used in that period to achieve his foreign policy goals. With these studies B. Petrov brings new insights to the otherwise well-studied period of "people's democracy".

Б. Petrov submits also other publications, with which he has already participated in the competition for the academic position of "Associate Professor" (noted in NACID-https://ras.nacid.bg/dissertation-preview/16001): "The Neglected Ally: Zog of Albania in British Military Plans"; "The Occupation of Albania of 1939 in the Light of Anglo-Italian Relations"; "The Soviet Military Mission in Greece and the British-Soviet Division of the Balkans into Spheres of Influence". According to Art. 29-1-3 of the Law for the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and par. 8c of the Regulations on the Conditions and Procedure for the Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and for Holding Academic Positions, evidence (publications, etc.) submitted for the degree of "Doctor"; for the degree of "Dr. Habil." and for the academic position of "Associate Professor" may not be repeated. Therefore, I have no reason to review the three publications.

My overall impression of the scientific papers of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Habil. Bisser Petrov submitted for the competition is that they are professional, objective and cover a significant range of scientific problems. I do not find plagiarism in them and consider them as independent and contributory works of the candidate.

Significance of the candidate's contributions to science and practice:

A solid testimonial for the scientific recognition of Assoc. Prof. Bisser Petrov is the large number of citations of his scientific works in the country and abroad (see Annex 2 to the candidate's documents - a list of all citations). He also has a sufficiently active presence in scientific events – in the period after his habilitation in 2010 to 2021 B. Petrov presented his scientific papers at 15 scientific conferences (eight of them with international participation - see Appendix № 3), and most of these papers were subsequently published as scientific articles and studies.

An important criterion in evaluating candidates for academic positions is their activity in scientific life, including their involvement in scientific projects. In the period from 2017 to 2022, Assoc. Prof. Bisser Petrov participated in five national projects implemented by the Institute of Balkan Studies and Centre of Thracology "Prof. Aleksandar Fol" - BAS, one of which ("Society, Leadership and Politics in the Balkans in the Modern Era") he is the scientific supervisor (NACID and Annex No. 3).

Conclusion:

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the publications of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bisser Petrov in terms of quantity and quality give me grounds to recommend that he be awarded the academic position of "Professor" in scientific field 2. Humanities, professional field 2.2 History and Archaeology (International Relations in the Balkans in the 1940s).

27 November 2022

(Prof. Dr. Evgenia Kalinova)