

OPINION

by Plamen Vasilev Slavov, PhD – associate professor at the Department of History and Archaeology, faculty of Philosophy and History at “Paisii Hilendarski” Plovdiv University on the dissertation submitted for the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "PhD"

in: field of higher education: 2. Humanities
Professional field: 2.2. History and Archaeology
PhD program: “Historical Studies”

Author: Nikolay Valentinov Karamikhov

Title: “Modernization through Archaization: Political Ideas in Iran during the 20th Century”

Academic supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Valentin Pavlov Petrusenko – Paisii Hilendarski Plovdiv University

By Order № RD-22-1638 dated 14.07.2025 of the Rector of Paisii Hilendarski Plovdiv University (PU), I have been appointed as a member of the academic jury in the procedure for the defence of the dissertation entitled “Modernization through Archaization: Political Ideas in Iran during the 20th Century” for acquiring the educational and scientific degree "PhD" in field of higher education: 2. Humanities
professional field: 2.2. History and Archaeology
PhD program: “Historical Studies.”

The author of the dissertation is Nikolay Valentinov Karamikhov, an independent PhD student at the Department of History and Archaeology, with academic supervisor Assoc. Prof. Dr. Valentin Pavlov Petrusenko – Paisii Hilendarski Plovdiv University.

The printed set of materials submitted by Nikolay Karamikhov complies with Art. 36 (1) of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at PU.

The PhD candidate has submitted three publications.

Nikolay Karamikhov completed his secondary education with a focus on Persian language and higher education at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” with a specialization in Modern History. His academic visit to the USA (in 2001), related to his master's thesis, and two academic trips to Iran (in 2005 and 2011), as well as his participation in UN missions in Iraq, enabled him to access a significant body of academic literature. These experiences enriched his research interests through meetings with leading scholars in the field of modern Iranian history and access to the library of the University of Tehran. His personal observations and encounters with various people during this long period, starting in the early 21st century, also contributed to an objective and targeted understanding of the examined issues, resulting in an interdisciplinary study.

The expansion of Islam's influence and role in socio-political processes over the last decades has led not only to increased interest in the youngest world religion but also to the necessity of a scholarly approach in analysing the dynamic events in Muslim countries – particularly regarding the religious revolution in Iran and its pursuit of a theocratic developmental path.

The topic of cultural and spiritual heritage under the Pahlavi dynasty and after the Islamic Revolution, along with its contemporary political and ideological dimensions, remains insufficiently researched, especially in Bulgarian academic literature.

The dynamics of global geopolitics and the position of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the complex Middle Eastern context call for a timely response to the critical question of the interaction between modernity and archaism within the realms of religion and politics, and among various ideological systems.

The author utilizes existing scholarly contributions by Bulgarian and foreign researchers, having studied and thoroughly interpreted a substantial volume of sources and literature in Bulgarian, Persian (Farsi), Russian, and English. A notable strength—despite limited access to archives in Iran—is the use of diverse documents and original sources housed in various countries and international organizations or in news media.

The empirical data gathered by Nikolay Karamikhov during his two visits to Iran, in the form of interviews, is particularly impressive.

The study employs various methods, well-developed within different academic disciplines: the historical method, analysis and synthesis, the comparative method, classification, and generalization. Special attention is given to political anthropology and the interplay between power relations, historical and cultural processes. The author's personal contacts are presented through observations and interviews with locals in the capital and key historical sites shaping Iranian identity.

The dissertation is 214 pages long and includes 8 figures. It cites 144 sources, including 30 in Cyrillic, as well as primary documents.

The introduction outlines the relevance of the research, the main goal and tasks, methodology, and methods.

Chapter one, “The Complex Path of a New Ancient Nation” establishes the historical framework in which the analysed processes and phenomena are situated, presented chronologically and contextualized within their respective historical periods. The timeframe extends from the major migratory waves at the end of the second millennium BC, through the Achaemenid Empire (6th–4th century BC), the conquests of Alexander the Great, the Sasanid rule (3rd–7th century AD), the Arab conquest, the Safavid dynasty (16th–18th century), the Qajar dynasty (18th–20th century), World War I and the creation of the Pahlavi dynasty, World War II, and the postwar development of Iran until the Islamic Revolution and the end of the monarchy. An autocratic regime reemerges in Iran under the strong influence of religious fundamentalism. This chapter also presents the country's ethnic and religious composition.

In chapter two, “Persian Nationalism (A Case Study – Iran in the 20th Century)” based on archival documents, academic works, media publications, and the author's two visits to Persepolis (2005 and 2011), the working hypothesis is developed: modernization through archaization and a unified concept of national identity formed through Persian language and culture, as well as Persian Shiism. The conclusion is drawn that Islam has encompassed all spheres of Muslim life for centuries and that Islamic law and concepts of governance directly influence the attitudes of the clergy and ordinary Muslims toward power.

The chapter also focuses on Iran's complex contemporary national identity and its consolidation after the Islamic Revolution.

Chapter Three, titled “**The Islamic Revolution in Iran – A Future in the Past**” presents various theories attempting to explain the processes and phenomena leading to the events of 1979, which drastically transformed Iran for decades to come. The roles of the ulema and Ayatollah Khomeini in channelling public dissatisfaction against the Shah’s policies are analysed. Different theories on the causes and essence of the Islamic Revolution as inherently religious are reviewed. The dominant and most widely accepted theory in contemporary Iran is highlighted: that the revolution was driven by a de-Islamization policy that offended Muslim sentiments and provoked resistance against the Shah's regime. Khomeini’s role is presented in the context of Iranian-American relations.

This chapter also follows the formation of a new political culture in Iranian society, opposing despotism and dictatorship, and the absolutist monarchy embodied by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. New ideals of social justice inspired and motivated Iranian women to participate in the revolution, which triggered a reaction from the clergy.

In **Chapter Four**, “**A Comparison of (Seemingly) Incomparable Entities**” the author explores three ideological systems – Zoroastrianism, the Bahá’í Faith, and the Tudeh Party. These operate within small communities in the country and the diaspora and face intolerance from the state after the Islamic Revolution.

The comparison of the three systems is presented through four findings: their values and goals; the influence of Shiite Islam; the identification of various elements from the tangible and intangible cultural heritage; and the resources that sustain their existence while preserving their Iranian identity.

The conclusion outlines the achievement of the main goal and fulfilment of the tasks. It states that the entire 20th century is marked by the complex interplay between archaism and modernity. This model, with necessary precision and adaptation to specific historical processes and phenomena, can be applied in analysing other countries in the region.

The broad-themed dissertation is prepared deliberately, conscientiously, and thoroughly. It presents a balanced analysis of various spheres of Iranian social, political, and religious life, summarizes extensive information (including empirical), and interprets many diverse sources, some of which are used for the first time in academic research. The author applies an interdisciplinary approach, reflecting the complex interaction within a Shiite environment between history and contemporaneity, tradition and culture, religion and politics. The ambition to explain modernization through archaization is successfully realized in a study that deserves high praise.

Its relevance and usefulness are also connected to the challenges of studying and engaging with the contemporary Islamic world in all its dimensions.

The submitted publications by the PhD candidate are related to the dissertation topic and reflect his work on the text, as well as the results achieved in preparation for the defence.

Nikolay Karamikhov's original contribution lies in presenting new knowledge about processes and phenomena related to Iran's recent history in the context of modernization through archaization as part of broader socio-political, religious, and ideological developments.

The analysis of the phenomenon "Islamic Revolution in Iran" addresses the key question of the extent to which the rise of an ancient religious system (archaization) can fit into the dynamic process of declared modernization of the country and the region.

The proposed model for understanding the complex dynamics of the relationship between modernization and archaization, adapted to the present, can also be applied to the study of other countries.

In this regard, a recommendation can be made that in the author's future efforts to publish the study, he might attempt to forecast, as far as possible, Iran's future development within the complex geopolitical processes of the modern world, in which Iran plays a significant role.

The abstract meets the formal requirements and reflects the main results achieved in the dissertation.

Undoubtedly, the timely publication of the dissertation as an independent monograph would be beneficial not only to academic and scholarly circles but also to all those professionally engaged in diplomacy and international relations, as well as in the study of the current state of Muslim countries and peoples.

The submitted dissertation and accompanying materials meet the requirements of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at Plovdiv University. After reviewing them, I find it well-founded to conclude that all necessary conditions are in place for the academic jury to award Nikolay Karamikhov the educational and scientific degree of "PhD" in Field of Higher Education: 2. Humanities, Professional Field: 2.2. History and Archaeology, PhD Program: "Historical Studies", for which I give my positive evaluation and vote IN FAVOR.

29.08.2025

Issuer of the opinion:
/signature/

Plamen Slavov, PhD