

OPINION
by Prof. Filip Ivanov Uzunov, Ph.D
PAISIY HILENDARSKI UNIVERSITY OF PLOVDIV
of a dissertation
for the award of the educational and scientific degree “*doctor*”
Scientific area 3. *Social, economic and legal sciences*
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Scientific specialty “*Political Sciences*”

Faculty of Economic and Social sciences
Department of Political sciences and National security

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Topic: BULGARIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS NORTH
MACEDONIA, THE AGREEMENT OF 1 AUGUST 2017

Scientific supervisor: *Assoc. Prof. Daniela Pastarmadziewa, PhD*

1. General Overview of the Procedure and the Doctoral Candidate

The dissertation has been reviewed by the Departmental Council (DC) and was approved for defence pursuant to the decision of the Departmental Council of the Department of “Political Science and National Security” at the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv dated 17 October 2025. The present dissertation comprises an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and two appendices. It consists of a total of 277 pages containing 339 footnotes. The bibliography includes 291 sources, of which 155 in Bulgarian, 10 in the Macedonian linguistic norm, and 126 in English.

2. Relevance of the Topic

The dissertation of Vladimir Slavenski is dedicated to a complex, multilayered, and sensitive issue in the domain of international politics and diplomatic engagement, namely the improvement of political and interstate relations

between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia. A broad range of problems is examined, including the negotiation process, the signing of the agreement, and its implementation. The primary objective is to establish the influence of foreign policy strategies and diplomatic approaches on the formation of good-neighbourly relations in the Balkans. The significance of this work is substantial, addressing both current political developments and fundamental theoretical and methodological aspects. The study is distinguished by an original approach and considerable ambition in terms of scope, thematic breadth, and the aspiration to contribute both theoretically and in a practical-applied dimension.

3. Familiarity with the Problem

The dissertation displays all the characteristics of a rigorous academic study, offering in contextual terms a historical and political analysis of the Balkans, with a special emphasis on Bulgarian–Macedonian interstate relations over the past thirty-five years. The author clearly identifies the deficient aspects in the development of the Republic of North Macedonia, including the prevalence of hasty decisions and the influence of external actors on the country’s political processes (including the fact that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church expressed willingness to participate but was not admitted to certain stages of the negotiations).

The negotiation process between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia is analysed in detail and in accordance with the most up-to-date scholarship on the topic. The socio-political context is also examined, in which Macedonian citizens demonstrate enduring pro-Yugoslav attitudes, shaped to a considerable degree by the legacy of the Yugoslav period. These attitudes should not be interpreted as anti-Bulgarian per se but rather as a cultural-historical and emotional attachment to the era of Tito, who perceived his model of governance as combining social benefits with relative international openness. Evidence of this enduring symbolism is the continued existence of schools and public spaces in North Macedonia, as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that still bear his name. The Yugoslav political regime was characterised as a form of “soft authoritarianism,” combining limited modes of political control with a relatively open society. It is precisely this hybrid social and political model that continues to generate certain nostalgic sentiments in the post-Yugoslav space.

4. Research Methodology

The dissertation constitutes an independent and well-structured academic study. It is distinguished by the skilful integration of quantitative and qualitative methods, enabling the simultaneous tracing of long-term structural trends and the in-depth interpretation of political processes, discourses, and actors in bilateral relations. This methodological coherence strengthens the validity of the findings and contributes to a comprehensive elucidation of the research problem.

5. Characteristics and Overall Evaluation of the Dissertation and Its Contributions

My general assessment is that the dissertation represents a study that adequately reflects the political and academic context at the time of its completion. In view of the political changes in North Macedonia and the new priorities of the Mickoski government—characterised by opportunistic approaches and intensified rhetoric often containing elements of anti-Bulgarian discourse—it is evident that the country is pursuing a different political course and identity strategies, including attempts to construct specific, at times contentious, identity narratives. The dissertation demonstrates substantial scholarly contributions through the consistent fulfilment of its core research tasks. The author develops a clearly structured conceptual framework of foreign policy and international relations; summarises the historical dynamics of Bulgarian–Macedonian diplomatic relations; reconstructs in detail the diplomatic approaches and concrete actions undertaken by Bulgaria in connection with the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness; systematises the diplomatic activities carried out, comparing them to internationally recognised standards; develops and applies a reliable toolkit for qualitative research through semi-structured expert interviews; conducts an in-depth analysis of the empirical data; and formulates well-substantiated conclusions regarding Bulgarian foreign policy and diplomacy in the context of the negotiate on process. These results affirm the dissertation as a work of significant contribution in the field of international relations and diplomatic practice.

With regard to Slavenski's study, I have read it several times. Initially, I approached the extensive historical frameworks, analytical instruments, and conceptual apparatus with a degree of scepticism. Subsequently, based on my experience in evaluating dissertations, I reached the conclusion that the study

constitutes a solid and methodologically substantiated scholarly work. I wish the doctoral candidate success in his further academic development.

6. Evaluation of the Publications and the Candidate's Individual Contribution

Vladimir Slavenski has four publications on the topic, all of which I regard as relevant; three of them have been published in peer-reviewed edited volumes.

7. Abstract (Author's Summary)

I consider the abstract to be conscientious and competent, accurately summarising the main emphases of the dissertation research and objectively reflecting its principal results and scholarly contributions.

8. Recommendations

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church could have contributed substantially to resolving the issue, had it been allowed to participate in the negotiation process in 2017. According to Metropolitan Cyprian of Stara Zagora, the Bulgarian government did not provide such an opportunity. I consider it advisable for future research on the topic to incorporate the perspective of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, as well as the role of ecclesiastical diplomacy as a potential factor in the dynamics of Bulgarian–Macedonian relations.

9. Conclusion

In view of all the above, **I confidently give my positive evaluation of the research presented through the reviewed dissertation, abstract, results, and contributions, and I propose to the esteemed academic jury to award the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” to Vladimir Bonov Slavenski in Field of Higher Education 3. Social Sciences, Economics and Law, Professional Field 3.3 Political Sciences, Doctoral Programme in Political Science.**

09 December 2025

Reviewer

Prof. Filip Uzunov, PhD