

OPINION

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Subject: Dissertation on the topic „**Urbanism in Bulgaria from the Second World War to the End of the 1980s**”

Submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor of Philosophy" in the professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology, Doctoral Program "History of Bulgaria" – Contemporary Bulgarian History

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The presented opinion grounds on:

The opinion was prepared on the basis of the Rector's Order ПД-38-51/29.01.2025 on conducting a public defense and constituting the members of the scientific committee according to Article 4, paragraph 2 of the Act on Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, and a decision of the Faculty Council of the History Faculty dated 21 January 2025.

The distribution of reviews and opinions among the members of the Scientific Jury, as determined by the Decision of the first meeting of the Scientific Jury (Protocol No. 1 dated 20/02/2025).

1. Analysis of the Dissertation

The dissertation “Urbanism in Bulgaria from the second World War to the end of the 1980s ” has a total volume of 245 pages, including text and 11 pages with 19 appendixes.

1.1. Relevance to the topic

The connection between Modernism and the Socialist city in Bulgaria is rooted in a shared pursuit of progress, equitable societal development, and improved living standards. The architectural and urban planning concepts promoted communal living and access to resources for all citizens, emphasizing functionality and social connections. Modernism thus shaped not only the physical appearance of socialist cities but also reflected their ideology by establishing an overall urban organization and improved living conditions in the context of national industrialization. Despite the post-1989 transformations, the Bulgarian urban landscape remains significantly influenced by the period between World War II and the end of the 1980s, with spatial development and national territory organization still following the long-term model constituted by the Unified National Territorial Development Plan.

With the increasing historical distance from this period, there is a growing need to assess and re-evaluate this legacy – a living (inhabited and functioning), large-scale, imposing in its conception, and dissonant in relation to public consciousness. The dissertation topic is highly relevant in the context of modernist heritage and the history of urbanism and architecture in Bulgaria during the second half of the 20th century. This dissertation offers „*a view of Bulgaria's recent history through the lens of urban history, institutional evolution, professional characteristics, ideological influences, and material realizations*”¹. A deeper understanding of every aspect of social life, including urban development, the relationship between ideology and architecture, the scope of the professional expertise, and the large-scale public projects, can form a comprehensive picture of the historical period, the urban planning policies of the time, and their consequences for contemporary societal development.

¹ p.2. Abstract

1.2. Aim and objectives of the dissertation

The dissertation examines the city as „*an object of interdisciplinary historical analysis and as a kind of "litmus test" for larger historical trends*“². The dissertation offers a perspective on modern Bulgarian history through the lens of urban history, examining the intertwined evolution of urban development, institutional change, professional capacity, ideological influences, and material outcomes. The author's primary research question ("focus") is „*How the city emerges, how it evolves, and what characteristics it acquires, particularly in the Bulgarian case, where it has been influenced by European modernism and the socialist ideology of the ruling Bulgarian Communist Party?*“³. The choice of a humanistic rather than a technical approach to studying the phenomenon of "the city" stems from both the candidate's professional field of study and the desire to engage with contemporary European historical scholarship and literature on 20th-century history. Thus „*this task "permeates" the topic and research as the first, though not the primary, one, as the research focus is temporally and spatially narrowed to the socialist period and governance in Bulgaria, described in the title as the period from the end of the Second World War to the late 1980s.*“⁴.

1.3. Structure and contents of the dissertation

The dissertation consists of an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and appendices, totalling 255 pages.

The introduction effectively clarifies the topic's relevance, provides terminological precision, and defines the spatial and temporal scope of the study. A robust methodology is presented, detailing key methods and tools for historical research, and demonstrating their practical application. The diverse information-gathering techniques—interviews, analysis of raw archives, and archival research—are well documented. The study of relevant publications and groups of authors are also noted. The chronological-thematic approach, combined with a case-study methodology, is appropriate. However, the introduction would be strengthened by explicitly defining the dissertation's aim, objectives, subject, and object at the very beginning of the text.

The introduction effectively outlines the topicality, clarifies terminology, and defines the geographical and temporal boundaries of the study. Thorough attention is given to the research methodology, detailing the methods and tools employed and demonstrating their application. The use of diverse data collection methods—interviews, unprocessed archival research, and archival analysis—is impressive. The study of key publications and authors is also addressed. The combination of a chronological-thematic approach with case studies is appropriate. I believe the described and applied methods and tools for the research are appropriate for the dissertation topic and effectively integrated in the presented results. However, the introduction would benefit from clearly articulating the specific research objectives, subject, and object at the outset.

The first two chapters effectively contextualize urban development and planning as a modernization- a meeting point of modernism (in the theoretical sense) and the socialism (as and ideological doctrine). In the first chapter the author identifies factors, themes, and trends in European modernist development that influenced the development of the Bulgarian cities. The term "modernism" is examined within the context of urban history and architectural design, specifically through the lens of urban projects and plans—individual, collaborative, and state-sponsored.

Here, the author hypothesizes an identity between the mediators of ideas (ideology) and their materialization (in the built environments) – the prominent urban planners and architects of the period. He convincingly concludes that these individuals were trained within the traditions of 1920s and Western modernism, but for ideological or political reasons, implemented these approaches in pursuit of shaping the form of socialist society in the People's Republic of Bulgaria.

² p. 2. Abstract

³ p. 3. Abstract

⁴ p. 2. abstract

Chapter two explores the connection between social utopia and the material manifestations of the ideal socialist city in the USSR. It examines the ideas of the urbanists, de-urbanists, Soviet constructivism, and the transition from modernist Soviet constructivism to imperial Stalinism, and the "Sotsgorod" as a counterpoint to Le Corbusier's leading modernist ideology and the growing community of architects and urban planners starting from the developed Western countries, and subsequently spreading globally, via the International Congress of Architecture (CIAM) and its fundamental "Athens Charter". Logically, Section 8 of Chapter Two, *"The External Perspective on the 'City and Socialist Revolution': A Historiographical Look within the Modernist Current in the Second Half of the 20th Century,"* questions when and how, outside the "socialist East," specifically in Western Europe, the recognition and study of the organic relationship between the modern city and the socialist ideology began.

Chapter Three traces the urbanization process in Bulgaria across six historical periods: pre-World War II (with sub-periods 1878-1885, 1885-1919, and 1919-1944); post-war recovery (1944-1947); Stalinist period (1948-1956/58); the 1960s; the 1970s-1980s synthesis of modern (internationally-influenced) and mature Bulgarian urban planning. The conclusion of the chapter reflects on the institutionalization, capacity-building (in Sofroekt, Glavroekt, and KNIPITUGA), the role of architects and urban planners, and the development of expert capacity and strategic vision for national territorial planning, as exemplified by the Unified National Territorial Development Plan.

Chapters Four and Five analyze symbolic territorial and urban planning structures, and model case studies illustrating the synthesis of urban planning, architecture, and landscape architecture. Chapter Four reviews key theoretical debates and identifies three symbols of the connection between urban planning solutions and social identity: large scale housing complexes, settlement systems, and the functional and ideological interplay of work, leisure, and aesthetics.

Chapter Five examines three interaction groups through seven case studies, symbolic for each historical period, and illustrating different approaches to the interplay between work-leisure-synthesis and the socialist-modern-developed city. The case studies are: Dimitrovgrad and Pernik (work-socialist city); Rusalka, Albena, and Smolyan (leisure/nature-modern city); and the National Palace of Culture, and the monument erected by the Bulgarian Communist party on Mount Buzludzha (aesthetic spirit-developed city). For each example, the author uses a typology combining historical and established concepts with locally adapted Bulgarian phenomena. Further clarification of the criteria justifying these specific examples, and highlighting their enduring qualities in changing contexts, would strengthen the analysis.

In the conclusion, a synthesis of the content of the dissertation work is presented with an emphasis on the methodological framework of the research (without pointing out the limitations of the research and the possibilities for future upgrading or expansion of its scope), the typological urban interventions and the selected case studies, and the subsequent changes in them after 1989 are succinctly presented. It would be appropriate here, similarly to what was done in the Abstract, to integrate the contributions claimed by the PhD student.

1.4 General impressions

The textual part of the dissertation, as well as the practical work on it, show a very good knowledge of the specifics of the theoretical and political framework of the issue under consideration. The doctoral candidate is fluent in the terminology. The bibliography, as well as the relevant and correct citation, are also evidence of a good knowledge of the general and specific trends, theories and expert positions on the topic. The bibliography contains a total of 227 sources, including archival sources (32), publications in periodicals (12), scientific literature in Bulgarian (90 titles) and foreign-language literature (60 titles in English, French, Italian and Russian), published documents (3), reference books and brochures (5), electronic publications (15), memoirs and 8 interviews. All are referenced in the text. The citation of sources in the text is correct.

The topic and content of the dissertation suggest an interdisciplinary approach and teamwork. Radoslav Iliev demonstrates an attitude of comprehensive thinking regarding information and tools from different professional fields and at the same time demonstrates an ability to highlight

the specific characteristics of the period by analysing it in a broader time frame (with a predominant emphasis on the pre-history of the studied period).

1.5. Evaluation of the significance of the results obtained and scientific contributions

The doctoral student has stated a total of four contributions to the dissertation work, which I accept and consider to have been achieved.

2. Evaluation of the abstract

The abstract consists of 22 pages and objectively reflects the structure and content of the dissertation. It presents all chapters of the dissertation, presents the stated contributions, and lists the reports and publications of the author.

3. Evaluation of the dissertation publications

Five independent publications on the topic of the dissertation in Bulgarian language have been declared. They sufficiently reflect the issues and problems addressed in the dissertation.

4. Critical comments and recommendations

I recommend that the dissertation be published as a monograph after linguistic editing (for example - synchronization of full and incomplete articles) and cleaning up the terminology (for example - in different places in the text different terms are used for the same thing - case study, example, field example, case). One factual error should be corrected in the text - among the interviewees, Senior Assistant Professor Dr. urbanist Angel Burov, and not as currently recorded - Senior Assistant Professor Dr. urbanist Angel Bondov.

Despite the undeniable merits of the dissertation, I would also like to make a few critical remarks. There is a discrepancy between the content of the abstract and the main document (the dissertation) - the dissertation ends with a synthesis and summary of the models. There are no references to declared contributions and publications related to the topic of the dissertation. They are reflected in the Abstract. In both documents, I do not find clearly and categorically defined goals and objectives of the dissertation (why not hypotheses), which should be bound to the content by chapters and correspond to the declared contributions.

The author demonstrates a high level of awareness and is fluent in the terminology used in presenting the context – pan-European, Soviet, Balkan, national. Regarding the national context, it would be useful to include opinions (even if contradictory) of more contemporary authors, especially those with prominent interests and proven professionalism in the field of preserving cultural heritage after 1944. In further developments on the topic and revisions for publication of the presented dissertation, I recommend entering into a dialogue with the developments of contemporary researchers who have focused and declared their scientific interests on the temporal and spatial scope of the present dissertation - the period after the Second World War until the end of the 1980s. It is also a good idea to comment on dissertations for the award of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" on a similar topic that have been defended at UACEG by: arch Jasen Kyosev (2004). "Construction of the centers of medium-sized cities in the second half of the twentieth century and prospects for their development at the beginning of the XXI century"; arch. Aneta Vasileva (2017). "The architecture of Bulgaria in the second half of the 20th century. External influences and the development of identity; arch. Emilia Kaleva (2017) Preservation of Bulgarian architectural heritage from the second half of the 20th century. A series of publications by A. Vasileva and E. Kaleva, focused on some of the case studies) are accessible via their Academia profiles (<https://uacg.academia.edu/AnetaVasileva>; <https://independent.academia.edu/EmiliaKaleva>)

These comments and recommendations do not underestimate the already highlighted merits of the thesis but aim to support its author in the dialogue with urban and territorial planning theory and practice. I wish Radoslav Iliev successful professional development and future fruitful research in the field as well as to integrate and share his research findings in his educational practice among students from different universities, who are directly or indirectly involved in

studying and reflecting on the history of Bulgarian urbanism from the Second World War to the end of the 1980s.

I would pose two questions to the doctoral student: 1). What were the limitations and difficulties in conducting the research for the purposes of the dissertation? 2). How would the author define the potential and the necessity for future research on the topic or related topics?

5. Conclusion

The results and contributions presented in the dissertation demonstrate that Radoslav Iliev is capable of conducting independent scientific research and presenting original findings. Furthermore, his dissertation confirms his ability to combine his knowledge and research capacity with a sustained professional interest and practical engagement with the issues addressed in the work.

In conclusion of the above, and:

- Considering that the presented doctoral thesis meets the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and its regulations
- Taking into account the relevance of the presented work the scientific achievements of the Candidate;
- Regarding the fact that a significant number of publications related to the content of the dissertation have been made;
- Assessing the Candidate's broad and specialized knowledge on the topic of the dissertation;

I propose to the esteemed members of the Scientific Jury to award Radoslav Iliev the educational and scientific degree "Doctor of Philosophy" in the Professional Field: 2.2. History and Archaeology, Doctoral Program "History of Bulgaria" – Contemporary Bulgarian History.

16.04.2025 г.

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