R E V I E W

by Assoc. Prof. Ventsislav Muchinov, DSc

for the dissertation of *Assoc. Prof. Spas Tashev, PhD*

THE BULGARIAN COMMUNITIES IN ALBANIA AND KOSOVO. SOCIO-POLITICAL PROCESSES AND DEMOGRAPHIC CONSEQUENCES (1913-2023). DISSERTATION FOR OBTAINING THE SCIENTIFIC DEGREE "DOCTOR OF SCIENCES". SOFIA, 2024, 265 p.

The case of the Bulgarian diaspora beyond the political boundaries of Bulgaria has continued to stir the attention of the Bulgarian community for almost a century and a half – starting from the first couple of decades after the liberation of Bulgaria up to the present day. This topic became pressing after the wars between 1912 and 1918 and the following national catastrophes that left a numerous population of Bulgarian descent beyond the border of the Bulgarian state. After an extended break during the communist era, interest towards this topic was revived fully during the last decade of the 20th century, as well as the first two decades of the 21st. As a result of this interest, a series of studies and documentary publications have been issued concerning the Bulgarian communities in the neighbouring Balkan countries, within the borders of the former Russian Empire, in the countries of Central and Western Europe, the Americas and others. Understandably, the interest of Bulgarian researchers is focused on the tragic fate of Macedonian and Thracian Bulgarians, while interest in other smaller Bulgarian communities remains of secondary importance. This is the case of the Bulgarians who found themselves within the borders of the modern states of Albania and Kosovo, representing the westernmost historical Bulgarian communities in the Balkans. Inspite of that, during the two latest decades, the topic has been a subject of study by Bulgarian historians and ethnographers such as Svetlozar Eldarov, Veselka Toncheva and others. However, thorough historical demographic research, that would trace the dynamics in the number and territorial distribution of the Bulgarian population in Albania and Kosovo during the period from the official recognition of Albanian independence in 1913 to the present day, was still missing.

An indisputable contribution to the study of this topic is the dissertation of Assoc Prof. Spas Tashev, dedicated to the Bulgarian communities in Albania and Kosovo. The author has a long-standing research interest in the Bulgarian communities in these countries that dates back to the beginning of the democratic changes in Albania in the 1990s. His research on the subject has been completed in the present dissertation,, the goal of which is not only to trace and analyse the demographic processes that have taken place among the Bulgarian ethnic communities in Albania and Kosovo in the course of more than a century, but also to lay down tangible proposals for adequate policies for the Bulgarian state towards this communities.

For the purposes of the study, various documents of Bulgarian, Albanian, Ottoman-Turkish, Serbian, French, Austro-Hungarian, Italian, etc. origin containing information about the changes in the number of Bulgarians and the settlements inhabited by them in Albania and Kosovo, were searched, systematized, processed and analyzed. A significant moment is the introduction into scientific circulation of little-known or unknown to Bulgarian science statistical data on the Bulgarians in Albania and Kosovo, such as data from the Ottoman vilayet yearbooks (*salnames*) from the period before 1912; from the population censuses conducted by the French and Austro-Hungarian occupation authorities in the parts of Albania controlled by them in 1918; from the population census conducted by Italy in Albania, Kosovo and Western Macedonia in 1942; etc.

For the needs of the study, S. Tashev developed a specific methodology for studying demographic processes among the Bulgarian communities in Albania and Kosovo. This was necessary due to the fact that during most of the research period, the Bulgarian identity of these communities was partially or completely denied by the authorities in the countries in which they were included as a result of the major territorial changes in the Balkans in 1913. The research has an undeniable interdisciplinary character and uses principles and methods typical of historical demography, modern demographic statistics, ethnology, geography, linguistics and other sciences relevant to the researched issue. Through them, the historical and modern statistics and documents on the Bulgarian communities in Albania and Kosovo are analyzed in order to clarify the specifics of their reproduction and the dynamics in their numbers and territorial distribution.

Structurally, the dissertation consists of an introduction, three main chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography of the sources and literature used, a list of abbreviations and appendices with a total volume of 265 pages.

The introduction presents the sources and historiographical basis of the study, the goals and objectives of the present dissertation work, as well as the research methods used. The three chapters chronologically trace and analyze the changes in the number of Bulgarian populations in Albania and Kosovo (total for both countries and by individual settlements and regions) over a long period of over a century. The First chapter of the dissertation examines the formation and development of the Bulgarian communities in Albania and Kosovo from the Middle Ages to 1925, when the borders of the Albanian state and the Kosovo region within Serbia/Yugoslavia were finally formed. The main areas and settlements in Albania and Kosovo, inhabited compactly by Bulgarian communities in the second half of the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th century, are outlined. Chapter Two examines the period from 1925 to 1990 – a period in which the Bulgarian community in Albania was initially partially recognized, and after 1944 its identity was not only completely denied, but also came under the blows of Macedonism. Chapter Three examines the state of the Bulgarian communities in Albania and Kosovo from the beginning of the democratic changes in 1990 to the present day, analyzing the events that led to the official recognition of Bulgarians in Albania as a national minority in 2017 and the actions for recognition of the Bulgarian community in Kosovo.

In his dissertation, S. Tashev studies and analyzes in detail the political and socio-economic factors influencing the dynamics in the number and territorial distribution of the Bulgarian communities in Albania and Kosovo during the research period – the attitude of the Albanian and Serbian/Yugoslavian authorities regarding Bulgarians in Albania and Kosovo; the influence exerted by the neighbouring Balkan states, primarily by Yugoslavia with propaganda of Macedonism after 1944; the lack until 1990 of a consistent policy by the Bulgarian state for recognition of the cultural and educational rights of Albanian and Kosovo Bulgarians, etc.

Special attention was paid to the problems of the Bulgarian communities in Albania and Kosovo at the present day, the most important of which is the loss of the native language among people who have migrated to the cities in the interior of both countries. S. Tashev makes specific recommendations for improving the work of the Bulgarian state administration in proving the Bulgarian origin of Bulgarians from Albania and Kosovo. According to the author, Bulgaria should support the intensification of cultural and educational contacts of the Bulgarians there with the Bulgarian state, as well as encourage seasonal and other types of labor migration of Albanian and Kosovo Bulgarians, which will not only contribute to the

Bulgarian economy, but will also allow them to find professional realization without having to leave the historical areas inhabited by them.

The review of the dissertation of Assoc. Prof. Spas Tashev allows the conclusion that the study contains a number of contributions and has important significance for science, society, and Bulgarian state institutions.

Scientific contributions:

- For the first time in Bulgarian science, a comprehensive interdisciplinary study is being carried out, which examines and analyzes the changes in the number and territorial distribution of the population of Bulgarian origin in Albania and Kosovo over an extended period of more than a century.
- Archive documents and materials of Bulgarian, Albanian, Ottoman-Turkish, Serbian, French, Austro-Hungarian, etc. origin, unknown or little known to local researchers, containing data on the historical and demographic development of the Bulgarian communities in Albania and Kosovo, have been found and introduced into scientific circulation.
- The various political and socio-economic factors influencing the development of Bulgarian communities in the mentioned Western Balkan countries are studied in detail. Based on this, the main problems faced by Bulgarian communities in Albania and Kosovo in modern times are outlined.

Importance to society:

- The dissertation, published in the future as a monograph, would introduce both the scientific community and the wider Bulgarian public with the historical and demographic development of the westernmost historical Bulgarian communities in the Balkans – those in Albania and Kosovo.
- The study has the potential to support the efforts of Bulgarian state institutions to develop adequate policies to support and preserve Bulgarian communities in the Western Balkan countries. It would also become a valuable tool for Bulgarian diplomacy in upholding Bulgarian positions at the European level in the complex relations with the Republic of North Macedonia. This also determines its relevance in the context of the contemporary geopolitical situation in the Balkans and the world.

At the same time, the following recommendations can be made to the dissertation, considering its future publication as a monograph:

- The historiographical overview in the introduction (pp. 6–17) can be presented more concisely, without a detailed description of each publication on the topic, since the theses advocated by their authors are presented in the further text of the dissertation. At the same time, it is necessary to expand the presentation of the archival documents and materials used in the study (pp. 18–20). These documents contain little-known or hitherto unknown statistical and demographic data on the Bulgarian communities in Albania and Kosovo. Therefore, their search and introduction into scientific circulation should be highlighted as a contribution and presented in more detail.
- The text of the dissertation should place greater emphasis on the author's contributions, which should be systematized and summarized in the final part of the study.
- In the future publication of the dissertation as a monograph, a geographical index and a list of the changes in the names of the examined settlements in Albania and Kosovo that occurred during the research period, should be prepared. Detailed maps of the regions in both countries densely inhabited by Bulgarian communities in the past and present, could also be prepared. This would contribute to the popularization of the study not only among representatives of the scientific community, but also among a wider circle of readers interested in the fate of Bulgarian communities outside the country.

The abstract of the dissertation for the degree of "Doctor of Science" by Assoc. Prof. Spas Tashev presents the main components of the research and highlights the most significant contributions of the work. On the subject of the dissertation, Assoc. Prof. S. Tashev has participated with reports in three scientific forums, has prepared 8 publications in Bulgarian, English and Albanian, and has provided a list of 7 citations of his works. The information presented by Assoc. Prof. Tashev on fulfilling the minimum requirements of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences for acquiring the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" shows that he has not only fulfilled, but also significantly exceeded the requirements.

In conclusion, I would like to state my conviction that the dissertation of Assoc. Prof. Spas Tashev "The Bulgarian Communities in Albania and Kosovo. Socio-Political Processes and Demographic Consequences (1913–2023)" is a current and detailed interdisciplinary study, based on a significant source and historiographical base. The research has a number of

contributions and has important significance for science and for society, as well as for Bulgarian state institutions. Therefore, as a member of the Scientific Jury, I will vote “YES” for the acquiring the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences” in the field of higher education 2. Humanities, professional direction 2.2. History and Archeology by Assoc. prof. Dr. Spas Tashev, PhD.

Sofia,

10.12.2024 /Assoc. Prof. Ventsislav Muchinov, DSc/