OPINION

on the dissertation of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Spas Angelov Tashev on the topic "Bulgarian Communities in Albania and Kosovo. Socio-Political Processes and Demographic Consequences (1913-2023)" for awarding the scientific degree "Doctor of Science" in the field of higher education 2. Humanities, Professional field 2.2. History and Archeology

1. **Brief biographical data**

Assoc. Professor Dr. Spas Tashev works at the Institute for Population and Human Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, where he is Head of the Department of Demography. In 2015 he defended his doctoral dissertation on "Immigration Policy and Demographic Prospects of Bulgaria". He also teaches at the South-West University "N. Rilski" at the Department of National Security and Public Administration.

He has held responsible positions as an expert and consultant to the National Assembly, the Council of Ministers, and the European Parliament on policy issues towards the Bulgarian communities in the regions of the Western Balkans and Latin America. He was director of the Cultural and Information Center of the Republic of Bulgaria in Skopje, as well as Deputy Chairman of the State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad and an expert at the National Museum of History.

He is fluent to varying degrees in Spanish, Portuguese, English, Serbian, Russian, Ladino and the official literary norm of the Republic of North Macedonia. He has taken a number of courses for additional qualification in the fields of protection of classified information, information security, refugee law, statistics and demography, and diplomacy. He has over 90 publications in Bulgarian and foreign languages, as well as participation in several projects of national importance.

2. **Scientometric characteristics of the candidate's scientific production in relation to the dissertation for awarding the scientific degree "Doctor of Science"**

On the topic of the dissertation, Assoc. Professor Spas Tashev presents the monograph "Bulgarians in Albania. The Long Path to Recognition" (Tashev, S. Bulgarians in Albania. The Long Path to Recognition. Sofia – Toronto, 2020. p. 256), published in English and Albanian (Tashev, S. Bulgarët në Shqipëri (Rruga e gjatë drejt njohjes). Tiranë, 2023. f. 264), as well as 6 articles in peer-reviewed journals. There are 7 citations of the dissertation, as well as 3 author's participations in scientific forums on the topic of the dissertation. The attached Reference for the fulfillment of the minimum requirements of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences for the acquisition of the scientific degree "Doctor of Science" shows that the author exceeds the required minimum points – for indicator G the author has 340 points (minimum 100 points) and for indicator D – 270 points for a minimum of 100 points.

3. Evaluation of the dissertation and its scientific contributions

The dissertation is 263 pages long and contains an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. The latter contains a wide range of sources: research and sources – 122 titles in Cyrillic and 80 titles in Latin, 49 sources on the Internet, 22 periodicals, unpublished materials from the Central State Archives (CSA), from other archives such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, from the author's personal archive. Also included is a list of the abbreviations used and annexes with 18 facsimiles from the author's archive, documenting important aspects of the topic.

The topic of the dissertation is the state of the Bulgarian communities in Albania and Kosovo with a focus on the demographic development of these communities, especially the number, territorial distribution and the accompanying migration processes. The relevance of the topic is indisputable not only from a research point of view, but also from the perspective of building relevant policies of the Bulgarian state towards Bulgarian communities outside Bulgaria to attract some of them to the gaps in the labor market, to preserve and reproduce their ethno-cultural specificity and identity, and to integrate them into the values of Bulgarian society.

The study is of a historical and demographic nature, as the subject of the study is traced to a period of 110 years – 1913-2023, which presupposes the specifics of historical time, of the complex constellations of political, geopolitical and socio-economic factors.

A significant contribution of the dissertation is in the reviewing and systematization of a wide range of authors on the topic who have worked over the decades. The detailed literature review covers Bulgarian authors /historians, ethnologists, geographers, linguists, etc./, Russian and Soviet authors, Turkish authors, Serbian scholars and scholars from North Macedonia, authors from the former Yugoslavia, Albanian authors, as well as Western authors (British, French, Austro-Hungarian, Italian, etc.), outlining their points of view and the ideological and political standpoints through which the studied processes are presented. A contribution to the literature review is also the fact that, along with the interdisciplinarity of the positions presented, the peaks and lows in interest in the topic are outlined depending on significant social events such as world wars and interstate relations and agreements, as well as the intensification of migration and refugee flows as consequences.

An algorithm (Fig. 1 on page 23) for studying the state of the Bulgarian communities in Albania and Kosovo as demographic structures (birth rate, mortality, marriage rate and migration) and as identity processes as a result of which minority communities are reproduced and the ethnicity of people of Bulgarian origin is preserved or eroded presents another contribution of the dissertation. These processes are examined historically and in the context of multiple socio-economic, geopolitical, political and cultural factors. A special place is given to the influence of the great powers in terms of ethnic diversity and changing geographical boundaries of the countries on the

Balkan Peninsula, the so-called "Macedonian issue", the complicated relations between Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Serbia in the period after 1990, as well as in the transitional periods up to 1925 and during the period 1925-1990. Based on a huge number of sources: archives, some of which were studied and presented for the first time in the scientific literature, statistical data from censuses, military, church, school documents, memories and testimonies of eyewitnesses, media publications, emigrant literature, etc. in Bulgarian, Serbian, Albanian, etc. languages, the author reconstructs a detailed picture of Bulgarian communities whose ethnic identity is accepted or rejected as a result of various factors. The preservation of the Bulgarian language, culture and customs of the local population are presented in admirable detail across individual settlements in the two countries.

Methodologically, the dissertation is based not only on documentary analysis, but also on the method of reconstructing the history of families and narrative and biographical interviews, part of which the author has conducted with representatives of the Bulgarian communities in both countries.

The presentation of the case related to the recognition of the minority status of the Bulgarian community in today's Albania in 2017 is also of a contributing nature. The influence of various agents is analyzed – the petition of people of Bulgarian origin, lobbying in the European Parliament, as well as the role of the Bulgarian government in solving the problem. The opportunities that minority status provides for the preservation of Bulgarian identity, culture and language through educational, economic and cultural initiatives are also considered.

The author’s recommendations for changes in the country's immigration policy with a focus on attracting immigrants of Bulgarian origin from nearby countries considering the deficits in Bulgaria’s labor market, suggestions for changes in the status for obtaining Bulgarian citizenship and for recognition of Bulgarian origin have been innovative and contributing ideas.

The contributions listed in this way are largely covered by the author's self-assessment of the contributions. The abstract reflects the content and the main author's ideas.

Last but not least, I would like to note the author's professional, personal and civic commitment to the topic to which the author has devoted his efforts and purposeful interest over the past 30 years. Thus, the study is not only scientific in nature, but also includes the lived author’s experience.

4. Critical comments

I believe that the topic of ethnicity and identity could receive a wider presentation from the research results in the so-called "migration studies", an interdisciplinary field that has been developing in recent decades in connection with the intensification of migrations on a global scale. Concepts

such as ‘hybrid identity’, ‘mixed identity’, ‘fluid identity’, etc. are used that reflect the complex identification processes at an individual level, related, on the one hand, to the preservation of local attachment and, on the other hand, belonging to the culture of global society (Z. Bauman, M. Castells and others).

CONCLUSION: The dissertation "Bulgarian Communities in Albania and Kosovo. Socio-Political Processes and Demographic Consequences (1913-2023)" is a large-scale, interdisciplinary and original study, with clearly outlined contribution points that fill a gap in the scientific and scientific-applied literature on the issues. I will confidently vote for awarding the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Spas Angelov Tashev in the field of higher education 2. Humanities, Professional field 2.2. History and archeology.

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Member of the Scientific Jury

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