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НИКОЛАЙ А. КЪНЕВ, *Византия и България на Балканите. Студии върху политическата история и българо-византийското имперско противоборство на Балканския полуостров през периода VII–X в. (Византинобългарски студии II)* [NIKOLAY A. KÄNEV, *Byzantium and Bulgaria in the Balkans. Studies on the Political History and the Bulgarian-Byzantine Political Conflict on the Balkan Peninsula in the Period 7th–10th c. (Byzantine-Bulgarian Studies II)*], УИ “Св. св. Кирил и Методий”, Велико Търново 2021, pp. 308.

In the last weeks of 2021, the latest book of Assoc. Prof. Nikolay Kănev¹, entitled *Vizantiya i Bălgariya na Balkanite. Studii vărhu politicheskata istoriya i bălgaro-vizantijskoto impersko protivoborstvo na Balkanskiya poluoströv prez perioda VII–X v. (Vizantinobălgarski studii II)*, Veliko Tărnovo: Universitetsko izdatelstvo “Sv. Sv. Kiril I Metodij”, 308 pp., ISBN 978-619-208-281-9 [*Byzantium and Bulgaria in the Balkans. Studies on the Political History and the Bulgarian-Byzantine Political Conflict on the Balkan Peninsula in the Period 7th–10th c. (Byzantine-Bulgarian Studies II)*] was published. The book has a second title *Byzantine-Bulgarian Studies II*, with which, as the author

¹ Associate professor Nikolay A. Kănev is an established scholar and lecturer in medieval history, history of Byzantium, medieval history of the Balkan Peninsula as well as medieval sigillography. Currently, he holds the position of the Dean of the Faculty of History at University of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Veliko Tărnovo (Bulgaria). He has developed a lasting and wide scope interests in the medieval history of Southeastern Europe, especially in the field of political, cultural and socio-economic history of Byzantium and the Balkans, the political history of medieval Europe, Byzantine rank hierarchy, sigillography, prosopography, and ideology of power. His scholarly activity is well attested by numerous publications in Bulgaria and abroad.

notes in the preface (p. 9), the connection with a previous monograph – that itself gained its own place in the studies of medieval Bulgarian history and the history of Byzantium – is sought quite deliberately. As a rule, when writing reviews of newly published books, it is appropriate to say more than just a few words about the author, however, here this seems unnecessary. Nikolay Kănev is undoubtedly well-known and his publications are expected and have visible impact in the scholars’ milieu. It is worth noting that with his new book he clearly demonstrates that he has not abandoned his research after he became the Dean of the Faculty of History at University of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Veliko Tărnovo, despite his administrative commitments and efforts in *force majeure* circumstances on behalf of education in the classical humanities and social sciences.

The book reveals the author’s erudition and skills gained over the years. Nikolay Kănev presents his own ideas and concepts in a study of the political history of Southeastern Europe and especially of political ideology (Roman-Byzantine and Bulgarian), as well as in the field of sphragistics and prosopography, which in turn are key to the author’s unconditionally impressive orientation in the imperial rank hierarchy. The monograph is divided into three

main parts, entitled respectively: I. *Between the Nominal and Symbolic Imperial Supremacy and the Real Fragmentary Territorial Control – Byzantium on the Balkan Peninsula in the 7th century. The Establishment of the Bulgarian Statehood on the Balkans* (p. 11–79); II. *The Dimensions of the Bulgarian-Byzantine Conflict on the Balkans During the Rule of Khan Krum* (p. 81–107); III. *Bulgaria and Byzantium on the Balkans in the Late 9th and the First Three Decades of the 10th Century – Between the Newly Lost Byzantine Hegemony and the Rise of the Bulgarian Empire* (p. 109–269). The chronological order and sequence in arrangement of the mentioned chapters seems to be only for the reader's convenience, because despite corresponding directly to each other, the book's main sections are sufficiently semantically and thematically complete and can be read separately. This seems to be an implementation of the idea to highlight three key periods in the rivalry of Byzantine and Bulgarian political state ideology and concepts followed by the ruling elites in both countries in the struggles for domination over the Balkans (p. 8). From the perspective of political ideology, it is clear why Nikolay Kănev does not write (another) history of the wars between the two countries in the early Middle Ages. Instead, he renders a quite different text in which, for objective reasons, it is not necessary to include even a single page about the other two large-scale and prolonged Bulgarian-Byzantine clashes from the era, such as the conflict in the third quarter of the 8th century and the war of 976–1018.

The first chapter of the book offers a detailed view – as much as possible through the prism of the available primary sources – of the turbulent 7th century. Careful attention is paid to the ethno-demographic changes in the Balkans and towards the efforts of Constantinople's rulers to fight for Byzantine survival, to keep the peninsula under control (at least its strategically important areas), and, in case of a favorable turn of events, to turn their nominal supremacy claims into actual imperial rule. Nikolay Kănev notes that, although we see them as episodic “pushes” – in accordance with the lull or the elimination of threats in other directions, and depending on the specific military,

financial and demographic resources that the emperors were able to harness – as a matter of fact, in ideological and political terms these efforts were (almost) constant. It is not in vain, though, that the author considers it necessary to emphasize that in order for the Byzantine ruling elite to benefit from a full set of integrative mechanisms, first, they had to impose direct power over the “new barbarians” who settled on the Balkans. Undoubtedly, the most significant emphasis in this first part of the book is on the actions of Khan Asparuh (ca. 670s–701), starting from the moments immediately before or soon after the death of his father Khan Kubrat (ca. 630s–660s) and reaching the Bulgarian triumph in the Battle of Onglos (680) and its consequences. With a thorough attention to detail in the sources, a depth of knowledge and use of the abundance of studies on the subject, the author focuses on the westward movement of the groups under Khan Asparuh's supremacy as well as on the time and peculiarity of their settlement and subsequent activity in the region along the Danube Delta. For the obvious reasons in that part of the monograph, either clashes with the Khazars, Avars and the Empire or the contacts of the Khan Asparuh's newcomers with the local population in the area of the former Roman province of Scythia Minor are not omitted. After an in-depth analysis, it is emphasized that all this activity in the late 670s–early 680s bears the sign of continuation of a Khan Kubrat's Old Great Bulgaria state tradition and principles of political organization. Respectively, Khan Asparuh's efforts are seen as a kind of relocation to the west and southwest of the preserved/survived state, however, in greatly changed conditions after the death of his charismatic father and the subordination of the “legitimate” successor Batbayan by the Khazars as well as scatter and migration of other Bulgarian groups in different directions. In connection with the latter, Kănev is reluctant to accept an initial agreement in Khan Asparuh's efforts and the actions of Kubrat in the Avar Khaganate and the migration of his group of Bulgarians and the so-called Sermesianoi to the territories of the present-day Republic of North Macedonia, Northern Greece and Southeastern Albania – discussed in the

second paragraph of this book, *The Emergence of the Second Bulgaria on the Balkans – Kuber's Bulgaria in Macedonia*, p. 57–65. The author explicitly specifies that his viewpoint does not exclude any subsequent agreements (from the 680s onwards) between the two Bulgarian groups in question on a common or coordinated policy both against the Avars and against Byzantium at a later stage. The outlines of such a common policy and its threat to the imperial domination of the peninsula are captured in the records of the military endeavors of Emperor Justinian II (685–695, 705–711) in 687–688 (to which a particular monograph's fragment entitled *Byzantium and Its Experience for the Reconquista on the Balkans at the End of the 7th Century*, p. 67–79 is devoted to). Despite the well-known defeat that the imperial troops suffered from the Bulgarians in the summer of 688, it is in view of the results achieved by Emperor Justinian II that Kănev emphasizes the time from 685 to 695 was the most successful period of the Balkan policies pursued by all Byzantine emperors in the seventh century (p. 78).

The second chapter of the monograph under review is more modest in scope than the more extensive first and third ones. The author pays attention to important features such as the ascension of Khan Krum (ca. 800–814) and the fact that he did not receive the supreme power in the Bulgarian state by inheritance. This, in turn, combined with the presence in Byzantium of a legitimate heir to the Bulgarian throne, had its negative influences both in the internal Bulgarian policies and in interstate relations with partners and opponents in the region. Well-known moments from the Bulgarian-Byzantine clash of 808–815 have not been overlooked. However, they are placed in the context of the changed geopolitical situation in the Balkans. Moreover, it is not so much related to the Bulgarian positions in Northern Thrace restored in the 790s, but to the actual liquidation by the Byzantine side of the existing buffer zones along the entire Bulgarian-Byzantine border. Kănev clearly illustrates the increase of the Byzantine military presence on the peninsula. It became more than tangible through the reform of the existing themes of Thrace and Greece

and the newly organized Macedonia, (Western) Mesopotamia, Thessaloniki, Kefalonia, Peloponnese, Dyrrachion and lastly Strymon and the dispatching of the impressive 6000 army unit in Serdica (which the author also considers through the prism of the formation of the new, much larger and branched structure of the Byzantine military districts on the Balkans). In this regard, Kănev draws attention to the fact that despite the success of Khan Krum in the northwest and the territorial expansion in the Carpathian Mountains and the Middle Danube area, at the moment when Emperor Nikephoros I (802–811) managed to concentrate his forces in the Balkans, he could advance in two directions against Bulgaria and threaten its very existence. The author stresses that the first step in the implementation of the outlined scenario came in 807 (with the failed Byzantine campaign against Bulgaria) and since then *Krum's actions [...] were not due to his initial aggression against the Roman Empire, but were entirely caused by the need to seek counteraction against the strengthening of the positions of Constantinople in the Balkans to the detriment of Bulgaria and against [...] the increasingly threatening and openly anti-Bulgarian policy of Emperor Nikephoros I* (p. 89). What is useful to the reader is the outlines of the development of hostilities and the focus on the skillful use of the resources of the Byzantine themes of Mesopotamia, Thrace and Macedonia in the Bulgarian counter-offensive, which began in the spring of 812, and especially the periodization of Khan Krum's rule in three stages, emphasizing their inherent specifics. The proposed view of the time of one of the greatest Bulgarian rulers in the Middle Ages ends with the reasonable concluding words that *it was Khan Krum who built the indisputable factual position of the Bulgarian medieval state as an empire in the sense of a great, vast, powerful, and sovereign state whose rule encompassed many groups of different ethnic backgrounds* (p. 107).


The third and most voluminous chapter is the part of the monograph in which the author seems to consistently strive to abandon easy solutions, entering into a multitude

of controversial issues, often with a critical analysis of a number of recent or long-established views in historiography, arguing their position or adding additional aspects to any of those already suggested by other scholars. It is not easy to create a text in a new, unique and distinctive way when it comes to personalities, events and processes to which hundreds of pages have already been written by some of the world's most prominent scholars in Byzantine and medieval studies. Nikolay Kănev not only copes with this challenge, but also manages to write in a pleasant and readable style, suitable not only for scholars, but also for a larger audience unfamiliar with the Byzantine political concepts, the imperial rank hierarchy or the specifics of the sigillography. Each of the four sections in the third chapter deserves a separate review, which is far beyond the narrow limits of the present lines. Among the most interesting in this part of the monograph are the pages that highlight a "corruption network" that secured positions in the palace itself and was able to impose decisions that were not only contrary to the financial interests of Byzantium, damaging the treasury revenues, but also to undermine long-lasting peaceful relations with a sufficiently powerful neighbor, making its military response inevitable. With the same insightful approach are passages dealing with the Bulgarian-Byzantine relations in the decade after the war of 894–896, the claims of Tsar Symeon (893–927) in the summer of 913, as well as the reasons for the large-scale and bloody clash of 913–927. What is of interest to the reader is Nikolay Kănev's suggestion concerning the efforts of Tsar Symeon

to establish – or to be more precise, to complete its establishment, in view of the Bulgarian policy towards Serbs and Croats from the second half of the 9th century – a specific Bulgarian community of tribes and states in the Western Balkans, with the corresponding Bulgarian supremacy in ideological, political and cultural-religious terms.

Certainly, at least some of the proposed solutions and ideas in the Nikolay Kănev's new monograph will arouse the curiosity of scholars interested in the early medieval history of Southeastern Europe. In fact, for the author of the present lines, one of the book's main advantages is not its supposed "invulnerability" against counter-arguments and future well-grounded criticism. Much more impressive is the fact that instead of looking for direct and easily achievable personal benefits by publishing in English, the author prefers to offer his latest work first to the Bulgarian reader and to enrich the knowledge of the Bulgarian audience. This is Kănev's unconditional answer to the long-standing dilemma for scholars from Eastern Europe whether to publish their most significant research in their native languages or to choose an option in the English (German and French) language.

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