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DIANA MISHKOVA, *Rival Byzantiums. Empire and Identity in Southeastern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2023, pp. X, 357.

The appearance of Diana Mishkova's book *Rival Byzantiums* is a remarkable event in the South-eastern European studies. It is unavoidable to classify it as such, regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with the chosen topic, with the methodology of the research, or with the arguments of the author. It is to say that the latter seem well constructed: in the field that features such a wide range of opinions, often strongly related to the national identity, she successfully managed to keep proper distance and to reliably represent different and sensitive issues. Clearly, Diana Mishkova has experience in this domain of research, as is proven by a number of her previous monographs: *Beyond Balkanism: The Scholarly Politics of Region Making* (2018); *Domestication of Freedom. Modernity and Legitimacy in Serbia and Romania in the Nineteenth Century* (2001) as well as joint publications, e.g.: *European Regions and Boundaries. A Conceptual History* (2017).

In my nearly forty years of work in this field, I have never seen such a topic being taken up. First of all, it is admirable that the author succeeded to assemble such a huge material (four centuries of research on Byzantine history) in a volume. It is yet another question how she was able to approach all these writings, moreover that some of them, I have to say, leave much to be desired. It is important to acknowledge the capabilities of the author: personal, professional and linguistic and to clarify the subject matter of the book, before getting into the research itself. Despite the fact that the monograph is largely based on history and the analysis of historical writings, it cannot be considered a historiographical work. The used

sources are just a basis for an investigation in the field of historical sociology, and the formation and development of the identities of the Balkan peoples. Diana Mishkova stated this in the very beginning of her book and the first authors she cited are Nicolae Iorga and Dimitri Obolensky, who contributed to the creation of the idea of Byzantium as a long lasting and immense phenomenon, exceeding its own spatial and temporal boundaries. What was the impact of this phenomenon on the identity formation and how it was used or abused is the main topic of the monograph.

The volume is divided in two parts and each consists of five chapters respectively. At the end, we have an *Epilogue and Conclusion*. The exposition is logical and follows different eras of development of Byzantine studies, presenting their methodological, cultural and political approaches, as well as the specific tendencies in the different Balkan countries. In my understanding, the main focus of the research is put on the second part of the work that covers the contemporary stages in the Byzantine studies in the Balkan countries after the Second World War.

The first part of the monograph is titled: *On the Road to the Grand Narrative*, and represents the Byzantine studies and their social impact up to the middle of the twentieth century. The first chapter (*Precursors: The Historiography of the Enlightenment*) is dedicated to the birth of the Byzantine studies between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The text is very interesting and enticing but it mainly serves as an introduction to the general topic of the monograph. It describes primarily the Western

studies since the local, Greek and Serbian, were only in their infancy. The most interesting is the introduction of the Romanian 'Transylvanian School' (*Școală ardeleană*) that had a considerable impact on the following development. The next chapters are divided in paragraphs thematically or by countries and I think that it would be useful for such an approach to be applied for this chapter too. Thus, we would have clearly divided texts between the western and the south-eastern ideas about the Byzantine heritage.

The second chapter (*The Century of History: Byzantium in the Budding National-Historical Canons*) presents the historiography of the nineteenth-century Romanticism and its impact in the South-eastern Europe under Ottoman rule. Both of these periods – the Enlightenment and the Romanticism – demonstrate usually negative or suspicious attitude towards the Eastern Roman Empire. Any kind of positive association is due to other, 'collateral' themes like philhellenic feelings and the interest toward the classical antiquity, preserved and transferred thanks to Byzantium. In Russia as well one can discover a dichotomy in the attitude: on one side the secular westerners were suspicious towards the contemplative culture of Constantinople, on the other, it was in Russian political interest to have influence and to control over the Balkan Christians. In Greece this is the time of the uprising and the creation of the modern state, and in that context Byzantium was perceived as an idea of the mediaeval past, however, during that time Greeks looked primarily to their Hellenic roots, not their Byzantine heritage. The political aspects were at the forefront, especially in relation to the *Megalé idea*, which, however, negatively impacted the relations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the archons from Constantinople. The chapter also concerns the perception of Byzantium among the Slavs and Albanians. In Bulgaria, the second part of 19th century and the developments during the time of the 'ecclesiastical struggle' influenced Bulgarian attitude towards Byzantium. The Empire was commonly associated with the Greeks during that period and this negatively impacted how it was perceived among the public, as alien and hostile. In Serbia it was quite the opposite, however, and

the people increasingly identified themselves with the imperial heritage. One of the reasons for such a course was the idea identifying Serbia as Piedmont of the Balkans, and Belgrade developed ambition to revive a unified Orthodox empire. In the young Romanian nation state, however, the eyes were oriented westwards. This is one of the lasting effects of the *Transylvanian School*. It was less so to oppose the Byzantine, and rather of the Ottoman-Phanariot tradition, yet this negative reaction towards the 'East' influenced the general perception of the Greeks and the Empire as well.

The third chapter (*In Search of the 'Scientific Method'*) presents the developments from the beginning of the Twentieth Century, characterised as a time of re-evaluation of the Byzantine studies and their deliverance from the antagonism between the Eastern and Western Christianity as well as from the Enlightenment's ideological chains. It could be read together with the following chapter four (*Between Byzantine Studies and Metahistory*) that presents the interwar period, strongly marked by the disastrous results of the Great War. This was the time of the institutionalisation of the Byzantine studies in the West as well as in the East due to creation of specialised chairs in the universities, journals, and also by the foundation of the periodically organised Congresses of Byzantine studies. This period is associated with discipline's great fathers and can be characterized by its professionalisation, which however, often suffered as some embraced, while the others rejected the Byzantine heritage, usually motivated by national reasons, less so ideology. Greece accepted Byzantium through the lens of the Hellenic idea and the research was in many aspects affected by the 'Anatolian Catastrophe' and the end of their dreams. Bulgaria and Bulgarian scholars (with one sole exception) further developed the negative judgement of the Eastern Empire, classifying it as 'Hellenic'. Romania and Serbia continued on their already chosen way. In Bucharest the most prominent was great Nicolae Iorga, in whose research we find a fusion of the pure science and open politics in the complex situation during the interwar period. This is also the period when the renowned book *Byzance après*

Byzance appeared, in which some of the questions essential for the discussed topic were for the first time systematically asked.

Turkey was in a different situation after the victorious but disastrous war in Anatolia and a ruinous revolution. The author has chosen, for obvious reasons, to present the developments in Turkey separately in a single chapter of the first part (chapter five: *Byzantium in Ottoman and Early Republican Turkish Historiography*). Because of certain continuity, as well as the fact that Turkish approach to Byzantium is very different to how it was perceived in other Balkan countries, I shall treat the previous chapter and the chapter ten of the second part (*In the Fold of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis*), which concerns the situation after the Second World War, together. We can distinguish at least three separate periods: late Ottoman, early republican, and that after the Second World War (of course it does not mean the latter is uniform). During the end of 19th and beginning of 20th century (and even much earlier) the Ottoman Empire began to integrate itself into Europe and this was reflected, if not in the interest in Byzantium, at least in regard towards the historical monuments and their maintenance and protection. The war and following revolution transformed the society in several ways, one of which was the turn to dismiss, reject, and oppose the *ancien régime*. In Turkish historiography, the attention Byzantium received was mainly in the context of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, the topics such as the question of Turkishness and the interest towards ancient Turks and towards their language, which included the 'Sun Language Theory', dominated the research. All these political concerns left very limited space for Byzantine studies. The Empire was actually considered just a bad antecedent of the damned Ottoman Empire. The period after the Second World War was more complex mostly because of Turkey's growing relationship with the West. Diana Mishkova proposes a very interesting observation on the differences between relatively free-thinking scholars of Byzantine Studies working and publishing in the West and those who remain in Turkey. I believe that in this case the academic research follows the general political

trends and the author rightfully stresses that the context of conducting historical research in a revolutionary republican Turkey was far more oppressive and restrictive, at least in this field.

The Byzantine studies after the Second World War in Greece, presented in the sixth chapter (*From Helleno-Christian Civilisation to Roman Nation*), were strongly influenced by the civil war and the country's political problems, but they still remained connected to the global academia and were influenced by the intellectual currents from Europe and North America. Those developments led to ideas of 'Christian Hellenism' and 'Hellenic-Roman Nation' during the Middle Ages being raised by several scholars. The main issue being discussed was the continuity (or lack thereof) between Byzantium and the ancient Hellenism, but also that between Byzantium and modern Greece. The book presents well and in a critical manner the assortment of national, political, and philosophical ideas, as well as the impact of different academic environments.

The other three historiographies – Bulgarian, Serbian and Romanian – after the Second World War were victims to strong political and ideological oppression. However, in Serbia (chapter eight: *How Byzantine is Serbia?*) more free thought was allowed, primarily because of the relative independence of former Yugoslavia from the soviet control, but also because of the internal developments in Belgrade. The traditions of Byzantine studies were upheld, thanks to the School of Georgi Ostrogorsky and the presence of other White-Russian and 'foreign' scholars, which created a suitable environment to continue a relatively open academic life all things considered.

The developments in Bulgarian Byzantine studies, presented in chapter seven (*Toward 'Slavo-Byzantina' and 'Pax Symeonica': Bulgarian Scripts*) and in the Romanian, presented in chapter nine (*Post-Byzantine Empire or Romanian National State?*) share some similarities. Initially they suffered horrible political and ideological oppression, while the scholars who were deemed inconvenient to the regime were persecuted. Another characteristic trend was the continuous pressure on the

academic community to underline a Slavic identity and history of both nations. Because of that Romanian scholars had to abandon a centennial tradition of the *Transylvanian School* from then on. In both countries the pressure from the Stalinist communist regime was relaxed in 1960s, but after short *détente*, nationalist sentiments grew, especially in Bulgaria, which became quite oppressive towards the ethnic minorities. Another similar trend is the suspicion toward Helleno-Byzantine heritage, which was associated with the struggle of the 'national' church in Bulgaria or the condemned 'Phanariot regime' in Wallachia and Moldavia. In Bulgaria there was some continuity in several important topics (e.g. the formation of Bulgarian nationality and considering Bogomil heresy to be a type of mediaeval social movement) as the conclusions of the communist-marxist scholars (e.g. Dimiter Angelov) would align with those of the pre-war researchers, such as V.N. Zlatarski.

After the fall of the communist regimes in 1989, the academic communities in both Romania and Bulgaria looked for new ways to pursue research. The book of Diana Mishkova does not exhaust every single one of these, which is not necessarily a criticism. However, I would like to mention the importance of the French Doctoral School in Bucharest that had a significant impact on the formation of a new generation of historians. Arguably, all leading researchers in mediaeval studies in contemporary Romania and a some of them work in world renowned research centres in Europe and America attended its classes. In addition, one should acknowledge the mission of the *New Europe College*, from which a greater part of the aforementioned group, as well as other young scholars, can trace their origins.

Concerning the treatment of Bulgaria in the book, however, I feel the need to address a certain problem. It is surprising to me to realise the absence of even a mention about Peter Petrov, who was one of the main servants of the Stalinist and communist regime for the long period from 1940s to 1990s. As a mediaevalist, he participated in the formation of the thesis of Bulgarian historical exceptionalism, and also in specific political actions of the regime,

from the persecution of the professors when the communists took power to arguing in favour of discrimination of the Turkish minority in 80s. On the other hand, one of the main critics of Petrov's thesis – Ivan Bozhilov – is presented as the primary nationalist writer in Bulgaria. It neither is necessary to discuss his ideas regarding the nation, nor their impact on his research. I would only like to bring attention to the interpretation of the thesis about 'Preslav civilisation' and '*Pax Symeonica*' and their characterisation as *a prominent, on occasion hypertrophied expression of the distinctiveness and autonomy of Bulgarian medieval political ideology and culture with regard to the Byzantine sphere of influence* (p. 238). Actually, Bozhilov presented the political ideology of Bulgaria after the reign of Symeon as a bad imitation of the Byzantine one. In his terms, the so-called 'Preslav civilization' demonstrates that Symeon could not create a large spiritual basis for his political ambitions. Thus, having realised this, Symeon tried to substitute it by imitating Byzantine culture in the very confined milieu of the Preslav's court; '*Pax Symeonica*' is also an incorrectly, but ambitiously created name of an idea to substitute '*Pax Byzantina*' with something else. The citations are, of course, correct, however, they are taken from a half-fictional book, published in 1983 (*Tsar Symeon the Great (893–927). The Golden Age of Mediaeval Bulgaria*, in Bulgarian), in which Bozhilov expressed his partially interesting and significant thesis in such a pathetic way that even his greatest followers would be challenged to accept and agree with the message of the author.

In the *Epilogue and Conclusion* Diana Mishkova proposes a review on the developments in the domain of Byzantine Studies in the last decade of 20th and beginning of 21st centuries, as well as a generalized synopsis on the ideas and research presented in the book. To sum up, we see a continuing trend for the research of the Eastern Roman Empire's to function as a basis, background, and tool for constructing of a national narrative, but prepared in a more structured way. I can agree, but only partially, since, as the author herself indicates, this approach to the study of Byzantium is neither monolithic,

nor it encompasses the whole corpus of research. The countries of South-eastern Europe, including the ex-socialist ones, are already much more open and free; the younger generation, trained in the great intellectual centres are what gives hope for that academic field.

I began this presentation of Diana Mishkova's book wondering how to classify it. It obviously is not just a historiographical research. If it were, it would be certainly incomplete, as one cannot be expected to cover several centuries of research in Europe, even on a specialised topic, in just one monograph. Furthermore, the author mentioned some detailed studies and publication of sources, for example the collections from 16th–17th centuries, then from 19th, and from contemporary era, but it is disputable whether these admittedly great achievements of Byzantine studies are important to the main point of the book. On the other hand, it cannot be called a historico-sociological research on the identity formation because of the strong presence of the historiography and of Byzantium itself. I would say that this book

is pioneering a new type of research. That being said, it is unfortunate that the author did not include in her research the history of art and of literature. The expressions of culture in the images, would undoubtedly bring very interesting material, which could arguably offer the best examples in support of author's thesis, different in different countries. I believe it would be good to look for the same ideas not only in historiography, but also in the contemporary literary fiction and art, although this would further expand the scope of the research.

Since the book is now available, I strongly hope it will find its way to the countries and academic communities in South-eastern Europe. It certainly deserves attention and may have an impact on how the history is being written there.

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