BEYOND THE CANON: ON UNOFFICIAL LITERATURE IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA[1]

Kristiyan Kovachev
Institute of Balkan Studies &
Centre of Thracology "Prof. Alexander Fol"
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Якуб Микулецки. *Между дисидентството, ъндърграунда и сивата зона: Неофициалната българска литература 1944 – 1989*. Превод от чешки: Ж. Чолакова. Пловдив: Пловдивско университетско издателство, 2025, 536 с. ISBN 978-619-7768-38-1.

In recent years, there has been a marked increase in interest in the socialist period. The exploration of various aspects of the era prior to 10 November 1989 has been undertaken by numerous authors – historians (Gruev 2003, Gruev 2008, Gruev 2009, Ivanov 2008, Ivanov 2024, Metodiev 2008, Metodiev 2010, Metodiev 2025), journalists (Lilkov, Hristov 2017; Lilkov, Hristov 2019; Hristov 2012a; Hristov 2012b), literary scholars (Penchev 2023), cultural theorists (Elenkov 2008), ethnologists (Luleva, Troeva, Petrov 2012), among others. Despite the substantial body of research on socialism, there remain areas that have yet to be thoroughly examined.

One such underexplored topic is addressed by Jakub Mikulecký. He graduated in Slavic Studies from the University of Pardubice in the Czech Republic and, in 2016, obtained his PhD from Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv. He is currently affiliated with the Slavic Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences. In 2021, his monograph "Mezi disentem, undergroundem a šedou zónou: Neoficiální bulharská literatura 1944 – 1989" (Mikulecký 2021) was published. In 2025, the book was translated into Bulgarian by Zhorzheta Cholakova and issued by the publishing house of Plovdiv University (Mikulecký 2025).

At the outset, it should be emphasized that this study – now accessible to a Bulgarian readership – is interdisciplinary in nature: it is not solely a work of literary scholarship, but also engages with history and cultural

[1] The review was performed under the Project BG-RRP-2.015-0011 with the financial support of the European Union- NextGenerationEU.

studies. The author employs critical discourse analysis as developed by Norman Fairclough, an approach widely used by sociologists, political scientists, and cultural anthropologists (Mikulecký 2025: 15).

The monograph is structured into thirty-one chapters (excluding the two introductory sections – "Introduction" and "Research Methodology" – as well as the conclusion), each examining different manifestations of unofficial Bulgarian literature prior to 10 November 1989. Particularly crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the work is the methodological section, which establishes the direction of the discourse (Mikulecký 2025: 9 – 20). In the Bulgarian academic context, methodological and theoretical frameworks presented at the beginning are often perceived as tedious and superfluous, frequently treated as a merely obligatory component of dissertations. Recent studies, however, have demonstrated the importance of this section – provided it is written not as a formal requirement, but as a genuine guide without which the monograph would be difficult to comprehend. A recent example is the book by Anna Alexieva (Alexieva 2025). The same applies to Mikulecký, whose work – beyond introducing innovations into Bulgarian historiography, as will be discussed below – may also serve as a compelling model of how scholarly research should be written today.

At the very outset, the author explicitly formulates his objective: "to present a comprehensive overview of Bulgarian unofficial literature and to propose a literary-historical concept that could serve as a basis for further comparative research within a broader European context" (Mikulecký 2025: 7). As a specific research task, he sets out "to select literary texts that are sufficiently representative to function as a worthy counterpoint to official literature, particularly to those published works which, although their poetics may deviate from the socialist literary discourse, are tolerated by the regime and firmly established within the domain of the official canon" (Mikulecký 2025: 9 – 10).

It is explicitly stated that the study does not include texts published in the West by Bulgarian émigrés. Nevertheless, the author rightly notes that "with the exception of individual articles and studies, tamizdat remains an insufficiently explored field, still lacking a comprehensive study". He also introduces several key concepts employed throughout the text, such as the "discursive field of socialism" – a kind of "abstract structure" representing "a set of criteria against which unofficial literature differentiates itself" (Mikulecký 2025: 13).

From the beginning, he establishes a distinction between "official" and "unofficial" literature, emphasizing that the former "must in no way challenge the legitimacy of the system" (Mikulecký 2025: 9). Unofficial

literature itself is divided into three types: (1) samizdat – texts reproduced and disseminated without state authorization, with Mikulecký providing a nuanced overview of the debates surrounding the definition of "samizdat" in global humanities scholarship; (2) "drawer literature," i.e., works written without the intention or possibility of publication; and (3) confiscated literature – texts initially published but subsequently banned, with such initiatives potentially originating from the Bulgarian Communist Party, the State Security services, or publishing houses (Mikulecký 2025: 9 – 11).

Particularly noteworthy is the author's effort to contextualize unofficial literature by examining socialist culture, the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the world, and socialist realism (Mikulecký 2025: 14 – 15). He further distinguishes between two principal types of discourse: (1) dissident discourse, manifested in a "politically engaged rejection of the ruling power" (Mikulecký 2025: 19) and characterized by a strong pro-European liberal orientation; and (2) countercultural discourse, representing a more implicit form of opposition, articulated primarily within the domain of aesthetics (Mikulecký 2025: 20).

In addition to demonstrating a thorough engagement with scholarly literature published after 1989 on the subject (Mikulecký 2025: 21 – 27), the author also identifies significant historiographical gaps. Bulgarian literary scholarship, he argues, has shown only sporadic interest in "Bulgarian unofficial literature," which has not resulted in a comprehensive study of the topic (Mikulecký 2025: 21). One might add that this is not solely a shortcoming of literary studies but also of Bulgarian historiography more broadly, which should more fully elucidate the political, economic, social, and cultural context in which unofficial literature emerged. As the author further observes, "there is still no monograph in Bulgaria that presents a more detailed history of samizdat" (Mikulecký 2025: 22). Among the identified gaps, he also notes that "there is still no ambitious theatre studies project in Bulgaria that outlines the development of unofficial, banned, anti-totalitarian drama" (Mikulecký 2025: 25).

In addition to poetry and prose, the author examines "dramatic texts whose theatrical productions during the previous regime were hindered for ideological or political reasons, as well as those that had no aspirations to be staged and were published in samizdat" (Mikulecký 2025: 24 – 25).

The narrative opens with a much-needed contextualization of the events that unfolded in Bulgaria immediately after the coup of 9 September 1944, and in particular the period marked by terror, killings, repression, and arrests (Mikulecký 2025: 28 – 32). This context is developed through a series of concise case studies illustrating how political change affected individual

destinies – presented through carefully selected biographical sketches of figures such as Dimitar Talev, Fani Popova-Mutafova, Chavdar Mutafov, Vladimir Vasilev, Stiliyan Chilingirov, Asen Hristoforov, Konstantin Konstantinov, and Trifon Kunev, among others (Mikulecký 2025: 28 – 43). Particular attention is devoted to cases such as Yana Yazova (Mikulecký 2025: 66 – 73), Ruscho Tihov (Mikulecký 2025: 115 – 124), Veselin Tachev (Mikulecký 2025: 145 – 156), Konstantin Pavlov (Mikulecký 2025: 194 – 210), Georgi Mitskov (Mikulecký 2025: 295 – 303), Boris Hristov (Mikulecký 2025: 304 – 321), Georgi Rupchev (Mikulecký 2025: 380 – 394), Dimitar Voev (Mikulecký 2025: 395 – 404), Blaga Dimitrova (Mikulecký 2025: 414 – 417), and Yordan Radichkov (Mikulecký 2025: 417 – 418), among others.

A particularly significant element of the study is its attempt to reconstruct how this very context was perceived – closely tied to the broader question of the extent to which individuals were aware that they were living through a transitional period. The integration of the figure of Stiliyan Chilingirov and his poem "Emperor and Dictator" into Mikulecký's narrative demonstrates that intellectuals were already reflecting on unfolding events at this early stage: the emperor, portrayed as a celestial spirit and an allusion to Boris III, and the dictator, in whom readers recognize Georgi Dimitrov (Mikulecký 2025: 32 – 33). Such examples are consistently accompanied by concise contextual explanations, making the study accessible not only to specialists in the humanities but also to a broader readership interested in the topic.

It is also important to note that among the many issues addressed in the study is the problem of reader reception. The author argues that the reading and interpretation of such texts "possess a distinctly apocryphal character" (Mikulecký 2025: 16). In this context, one may recall the concept of the "death of the author", according to which a text begins a new life once published, shaped by its readers. Such a process is inherently problematic for a totalitarian system, which seeks to dominate and monopolize not only production but also interpretation and reception.

The book also sheds light on the mechanisms through which the State Security apparatus, the Bulgarian Communist Party, and the nomenklatura constructed the image of the intellectual as an enemy. Particularly illustrative is the cited excerpt from a 1966 review by Maksim Naimovich, published in the newspaper "Literaturen front": "I close Konstantin Pavlov's book with the lingering residue of some sticky filth. I have constantly encountered an unpleasant aestheticization of the dirty, the vile, the repulsive" (Mikulecký 2025: 200). Reviews of this kind, appearing in

official outlets such as "Rabotnichesko Delo" and "Istoricheski Pregled", aimed to precondition readers' attitudes toward texts they had not yet read.

The study also reveals a significant issue within Bulgarian society, albeit without exploring it in full depth. A considerable number of the writers discussed not only faced persistent obstacles in publishing their works but were also subjected to continuous surveillance by the State Security services – as in the case of Konstantin Pavlov (Mikulecký 2025: 198). For some of them, further information would likely emerge from the work of the Commission for the Disclosure of the Documents and for Announcing Affiliation of Bulgarian Citizens to the State Security and Intelligence Services of the Bulgarian People's Army. It is to be hoped that, in the near future, the archives of State Security will be fully integrated into the national archival system, or at the very least systematically catalogued and made publicly accessible, so that the full extent of the materials collected on the country's intellectual elite can be revealed.

Life under socialism unfolded in the shadow of State Security. For this reason, this repressive apparatus frequently accompanies Mikulecký's narrative which, through individual cases, also evokes "the hundreds of thousands of citizens of the People's Republic of Bulgaria" whose lives bear the trauma of surveillance and the fear of impending repression (Mikulecký 2025: 206). The book thus also functions as a reflection on the extent to which contemporary society has changed, and to what degree it continues to carry the legacy of socialism.

Mikulecký's work is not merely an exploration of the past but also a mirror held up to the present. It raises questions that extend beyond the socialist period, addressing mechanisms of cultural control that remain relevant today. In this sense, an open question persists: to what extent have these patterns been overcome, and to what extent do they continue to be reproduced in new forms? This concern is encapsulated in the author's concluding observation: "Any hint of criticality and relative creative freedom is often purchased at the cost of public declarations of loyalty to the Communist Party and its policies" (Mikulecký 2025: 487).

REFERENCES

Alexieva 2025: Алексиева, А. *Христо Ботев: Идеологическо моделиране на героичния образ*. [Alexieva, A. *Hristo Botev: Ideologichesko modelirane na geroichniya obraz*.] София: Кралица Маб, 2025.

Elenkov 2008: Еленков, И. *Културният фронт: Българската култура през епохата на комунизма – политическо управление, идеологически основания, институционални режими*. [Elenkov, I. *Kulturniyat front: Balgarskata kultura prez epohata na komunizma – politichesko upravlenie, ideologicheski osnovaniya, institutsionalni rezhimi*.] София: Институт за изследване на близкото минало, 2008.

Gruev 2003: Груев, М. *Между петолъчката и полумесеца: Българските мюсюлмани и политическият режим (1944 – 1959)*. [Gruev, M. *Mezhdu petolachkata i polumesetsa: Balgarskite myusyulmani i politicheskiyat rezhim (1944 – 1959)*.] Стара Загора: Кота, 2003.

Gruev 2008: Груев, М. *Възродителният процес: Мюсюлманските общности и комунистическият режим: Политики, реакции и последици*. [Gruev, M. *Vazroditelniyat protses: Myusyulmanskite obshtnosti i komunisticheskiyat rezhim: Politiki, reaktsii i posleditsi*.] София: Институт за изследване на близкото минало, 2008.

Gruev 2009: Груев, М. *Преорани слогове: Колективизация и социална промяна в Българския северозапад 40-те – 50-те години на XX век*. [Gruev, M. *Preorani slogove: Kolektivizatsiyata i sotsialna promyana v Balgarskiya severozapad 40-te – 50-te godini na XX vek*.] София: Ciela, 2009.

Hristov 2012a: Христов, Хр. *Операция „Маратон“: Истината за кражбата на Паисиевата история от Държавна сигурност в „Зограф“*.[Hristov, Hr. *Operatsiya “Maraton”: Istinata za krazhbata na Paisievata istoriya ot Darzhavna sigurnost v “Zograf”*.] София: Ciela, 2012.

Hristov 2012b: Христов, Хр. *Секретното дело за лагерите*. [Hristov, Hr. *Sekretnoto delo za lagerite*.] София: Ciela, 2012.

Ivanov 2008: Иванов, М. *Реформаторство без реформи: Политическата икономия на българския комунизъм 1963 – 1989*. [Ivanov, M. *Reformatorstvo bez reformi: Politicheskata ikonomiya na balgarskiya komunizam 1963 – 1989*.] София: Ciela, 2008.

Ivanov 2024: Иванов, Ст. *От кражби до убийства. Криминалните престъпления в България (1944 – 1989)*. [Ivanov, St. *Ot krazhba do ubiystva. Kriminalnite prestapleniya v Balgariya (1944 – 1989)*.] София: Ciela, 2024.

Lilkov, Hristov 2017: Лилков, В., Хр. Христов. *Бивши хора по класификацията на Държавна сигурност: Как БКП ликвидира елита на България*. [Lilkov, V., Hr. Hristov. *Bivshi hora po klasifikatsiyata na Darzhavna sigurnost: Kak BKP likvidira elita na Balgariya*.] София: Ciela, 2017.

Lilkov, Hristov 2019: Лилков, В., Хр. Христов. *Погубената България: За съдбата на българския елит след 9 септември 1944 г*. [Lilkov, V., Hr. Hristov. *Pogubenata Balgariya: Za sadbata na balgarskiya elit sled 9 septemvri 1944 g*.] София: Ciela. 2019.

Luleva, Troeva, Petrov 2012: Лулева, А., Е. Троева, П. Петров. *Принудителният труд в България 1941 – 1962: Спомени на свидетели*. [Luleva, A., E. Troeva, P. Petrov. *Prinuditelniyat trud v Balgariya 1941 – 1962: Spomeni na svideteli*.] София: АИ „Проф. Марин Дринов“, 2012.

Metodiev 2008: Методиев, М. *Машина за легитимност: Ролята на Държавна сигурност в комунистическата държава*. [Metodiev, M. *Mashina za legitimnost: Rolyata na Darzhavna sigurnost v komunisticheskata darzhava*.] София: Институт за изследване на близкото минало, 2008.

Metodiev 2010: Методиев, М. *Между вярата и компромиса: Българската православна църква и комунистическата държава (1944 – 1989 г.)*. [Metodiev, M. *Mezhdu vyarata i kompromisa: Balgarskata pravoslavna tsarkva i komunisticheskata darzhava (1944 – 1989 г.)*.] София: Ciela, 2010.

Metodiev 2025: Методиев, М. *Разрушаване на общността: Държавна сигурност срещу Българската православна църква*. [Metodiev, M. *Razrushavane na obsthnostta: Darzhavna sigurnost sreshtu Balgarskata pravoslavna tsarkva*.] София: Ciela, 2025.

Mikulecký 2021: Mikulecký, J. *Mezi disentem, undergroundem a šedou zónou: Neoficiální bulharská literatura 1944 – 1989*. Praha: Academia: Slovan. úst. AV ČR. 2021.

Mikulecký 2025: Микулецки, Я. *Между дисидентството, ъндърграунда и сивата зона: Неофициалната българска литература 1944 – 1989*. [Mikulecký, Ya. *Mezhdu disidentstvoto, andargraunda i sivata zona: Neofitsialnata balgarska literatura 1944 – 1989*.] Превод от чешки: Ж. Чолакова. Пловдив: Пловдивско университетско издателство, 2025.

Penchev 2023: Пенчев, Б. *Прогресисти и консерватори: Темпорални модели в българската литература от края на 40-те до 70-те години на XX в.* [Penchev, B. *Progresisti i konservatori: Temporalni modeli v balgarskata literature ot kraya na 40-te do 70-te godini na XX v.*] София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2023.

Пловдивски университет
„Паисий Хилендарски“

НАУЧНИ ТРУДОВЕ
том 63, кн. 1, сб. В, 2025

Филология

Коректор: Гергана Иванова

Предпечатна подготовка: Гергана Георгиева

Печат и подвързия: Пловдивско университетско издателство

Пловдив, 2026

ISSN 0861-0029