# Opinion

BY

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RE: THE CANDIDACY OF

**ASSOC. PROF. DR. RUMYANA DIMITROVA MARINOVA-CHRISTIDI**

For appointment to the academic position of Professor in Professional Field 2.2. History and Archaeology (Contemporary Bulgarian History – Bulgaria and the Middle East after World War II), announced by the Faculty of History at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski in State Gazette, No. 5, dated 17 January 2025

*The opinion has been prepared pursuant to Order No. RD-38-48, dated 27 January 2025, issued by the Rector of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski Prof. Dr. Georgi Valchev, concerning the appointment of the Academic Evaluation Committee for the current competition for the academic position of Professor, as well on the basis of Protocol No. 1 / 20.03.2025 from a meeting of the Academic Evaluation Committee.*

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rumyana Marinova-Christidi is the sole candidate in the competition initiated by the Department of Bulgarian History at the Faculty of History of Sofia University. The documents and publications she has submitted, as well as the compliance report under Article 26 of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ADASRB), demonstrate that she meets the minimum scientometric requirements for appointment to the academic position announced in the competition, in accordance with the ADASRB, its Implementing Rules, and the Internal Rules of Sofia University for the Development of the Academic Staff. Assoc. Prof. Marinova-Christidi is participating in the competition with 23 authored publications—one book, submitted as a monographic study, and 22 articles and studies. Two of these ("Bulgarian Antisemitism in the 21st Century," *Israel Affairs*, 29/1, 2023, pp. 185–200; and "From Salvation to Alya: The Bulgarian Jews and Bulgarian-Israeli Relations (1948–1990)," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 17/2, 2017, pp. 223–244) are indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. The remaining publications submitted by Assoc. Prof. Marinova-Christidi cover a wide range of topics—from Stara Zagora during the socialist period and the development of education in Bulgaria and North Macedonia, to the Holocaust and the rescue of Bulgarian Jews, as well as the relations between the People's Republic of Bulgaria (PRB) and the State of Israel established in 1948.

The breadth of research interests and the diverse activities of the candidate, who is recognized as an established expert in contemporary history of Bulgaria during the socialist period, who also addresses Bulgaria's relations with other states, are reflected also in her work as a supervisor of PhD students. Among them, for example, is Stoyan Stoyanov, who researches Bulgarian-Polish relations during the socialist era. The dissertation topic of her recently graduated (30 April 2025) PhD student Petar Stoilov (*The Relations between Bulgaria and*

*Israel, 1948–1990*) almost completely overlaps with the theme of the principal book (*Bulgaria and Israel, 1948–1990*, Sofia: Sofia University Press St. Kliment Ohridski, 2025) with which Assoc. Prof. Marinova-Christidi is participating in the current competition. This clearly reflects a specific approach to the joint work between supervisor and doctoral student, suggesting a particular type of synergy, in which both rely on a similar — often identical — body of source material from Bulgarian and Israeli archives, including the Central State Archives (CSA), the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Archives of the Commission for Disclosing the Documents and Announcing the Affiliation of Bulgarian Citizens to State Security and the Intelligence Services of the Bulgarian People's Army (ACRDDABCSSISBPA), and the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem (cf. pp. 6–7 in the Summary of Petar Stoilov's PhD dissertation and, respectively, pp. 253–254 of Assoc. Prof. Marinova-Christidi's book submitted for the current procedure).

In terms of genre, the book submitted by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rumyana Marinova-Christidi as a monograph, *Bulgaria and Israel, 1948–1990* (303 pages), can be characterized as a hybrid work. It consists of several markedly diverse but nonetheless logically interconnected sections: an Introduction, a predominantly reference-oriented descriptive Chapter One (pp. 17–115), a primarily analytical Chapter Two (pp. 117–246), a Conclusion (pp. 247–252), and a Bibliography (pp. 253–268). In addition to these, the book includes a Chronology (pp. 281–293), an English-language Summary (pp. 301–303), as well as a section titled "General Information about Israel Today" (pp. 269–280) followed by "And Something More about Contemporary Israel" (pp. 295–299). These latter sections present a variety of interesting facts about Israel's climate, demographics, languages, religion, anthem, flag, coat of arms, political and judicial systems, military, and defense forces, based on the *Facts about Israel* series published by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and provided to the author by the Embassy of the State of Israel in Sofia.

The Introduction is aligned with the established academic tradition of works titled "*Bulgaria and...*", defining the purpose of the study not as an attempt to "close," but rather to "open" the debate on the relations between the People's Republic of Bulgaria (PRB) and the State of Israel (p. 13). While the methodological framework is not articulated explicitly enough, it logically follows from the literature overview and the state-of-the-art presented in the opening pages (pp. 8–14). Here, Assoc. Prof. Marinova-Christidi outlines her ambition to build upon earlier scholarship by exploring, to a large extent, a new dimension of the subject—the fate of Bulgarian Jews after 1944—through the prism of the relations between socialist Bulgaria and the newly founded State of Israel after 1948. A few clarifications are warranted here. Although the Introduction briefly summarizes and refers to earlier research, the historiographical review does not always identify the specific theses or contributions of earlier scholars that Marinova-Christidi seeks to build upon. As a result, some assertions appear insufficiently substantiated.

For example, it is insufficiently unclear exactly how the presented monograph complements the work of Boyka Vassileva (*The Jews in Bulgaria, 1944–1952*, Sofia: Sofia University Press St. Kliment Ohridski, 1992), which soundly and thoroughly addresses the relevant period. Assoc. Prof. Marinova-Christidi asserts: "For this reason, since the 1960s, the school of Arab Studies has developed, focusing on the Arab states and their role in the Middle East conflict, with Israel not being the focus of these studies. Among historians working on the history of international relations, the Middle East conflict has been addressed by Hristina Mircheva and Dora Kalcheva" (p. 10). In reality, at the Department of Arabic and Semitic

Studies—which has been the center of Middle Eastern studies in Bulgaria for more than fifty years—the emphasis on the Arab world is logically justified, given that Arab countries constitute most of the region's history and culture. However, Israel has never been excluded from the scope of scholarly and educational interests. The different perspectives on the Arab-Israeli conflict have always been taught and researched. Every graduate from the Arabic Studies Program at Sofia University knows well that questions on the Arab-Israeli conflict have always had a high probability of appearing even on the major written state examination—a fact demonstrating that the issue has never been treated as marginal or one-sided.

It is surprising that the historiographical review neither mentions nor includes in the bibliography the works of Prof. DSc Yordan Peev—all the more so because an analysis of his publications on the Arab-Israeli conflict and the contemporary Arab world could have strengthened some of the author's own assumptions and argument. Further, works such as those by Prof. DSc Hristina Mircheva, who for many years also taught in the programs of the Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies, or by Dora Kalcheva, are mentioned only in passing, without any substantive or detailed analysis of their contributions. The same applies to the research of another historian, long associated with our school of Arab Studies—Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nadya Filipova whose monographs are referred to only briefly in some footnotes (pp. 189–190). The significant contribution of Prof. Dr. Yordan Baev, particularly his extensive collection of primary sources in the *Documentary Collection* on Bulgaria and the Middle Eastern conflict, also seems to be insufficiently highlighted. There are also other historians and researchers—regardless of which scholarly school in Bulgaria or abroad they may be affiliated with—who are neglected in the presented historiographical overview. Such omissions would have been difficult to overlook if Assoc. Prof. Marinova-Christidi's work had aspired to engage comprehensively with the history *of* the Middle East. Since, however, her goal is rather to shed new light on certain aspects of Bulgaria *and* the Middle East from the perspective of Bulgaria's relations with the State of Israel, the mention of these omissions serves more as a collegial recommendation. This mention therefore does not undermine the candidate's competence as an expert in modern Bulgarian history, particularly in the study of the Holocaust, Bulgarian Jews, and their intertwined fate with Bulgaria during and after the Second World War.

Chapter One, titled "Modern Israel: From the Founding of the State to the End of the Cold War," according to the author, "aims to provide a historical overview of the history of the State of Israel." Assoc. Prof. Marinova-Christidi rightly emphasizes the existence of a vast corpus of literature on the history of modern Israel and notes that since "there are numerous authors who have written on the topic which, however, is not the central focus of this study, it has been addressed through the prism of a few of the best among them only" (p. 14). Despite this caveat, it would have been helpful for the reader to understand why, in the author's view, these particular researchers were selected as the most distinguished. The historical overview, comprising approximately one hundred pages, conventionally presents ("following the wars" preceded by some prehistory) the various periods—from the rise of Zionism, the Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine, the proclamation of the State of Israel in 1948, the subsequent armed conflicts with the Arab states up to the Palestinian Intifada of 1987 and the Peace Process in the 1990s. This material, based on similar factual outlines, is more or less taught in the Arabic Studies program as well. Thus, thanks to the demonstrated skills of Assoc. Prof. Marinova-Christidi to deliver a synthesized account of historical events, this chapter could also serve as a useful supplementary educational resource for our students, alongside the

lectures and teaching materials inherited from Prof. DSc Yordan Peev and subsequently developed by the next generations of Arabists and historians of the Middle East.

Particularly useful here are the foregrounded currents within Zionism and the nuances in the views of the various groups comprising it, as well as the succinct presentation of the different waves of Aliyah (the "return" of diaspora Jews to Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel) and the expansion of the Yishuv. Some of the specialized concepts and terms in Middle Eastern history are not conveyed with complete precision which is not surprising given the linguistic and specialized expertise required for such a task—an expertise the author herself does not claim to possess. For instance, the somewhat schematic presentation of the emerging Palestinian identity and resistance movement includes the assertion that Fatah—sometimes spelled FATAH, precisely because it is a reversed acronym —means "Victory" (p. 66). In fact, the term Fatah (from Arabic *fatḥ*) carries much deeper historical, cultural, and religious connotations, meaning "opening" or "conquest," and is associated with the great Arab/Muslim conquests (*futūḥāt*) of the 7th and 8th centuries.

I also find it interesting why Assoc. Prof. Marinova-Christidi chooses to refer to the October War of 1973 as the War *of* Yom Kippur instead of simply Yom Kippur War. The movement of Hamas (again an acronym, and therefore sometimes also spelled HAMAS) is somewhat inaccurately described as a "fundamentalist militant group." The genesis of Hamas is directly linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, a transnational Islamist movement, whose affiliates do not necessarily adhere to a fundamentalist doctrine, but are rather associated with a broader phenomenon usually described by scholars as Islamism or political Islam.

Had this chapter not been so heavily dominated by a descriptive narrative over analysis, it would have been extremely interesting to explore the intertwined histories of Arab/Islamic and Jewish religious-nationalist and fundamentalist currents. Unfortunately, however, the Gush Emunim ("Bloc of the Faithful") movement, which is crucial for understanding many processes within Israel—and which assigns vital symbolic importance to Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) for Jewish identity—is mentioned only in passing (p. 77). Yet, through its theological arguments and biblical idioms, an analysis of Gush Emunim could significantly contribute to a deeper understanding of important aspects of contemporary Israeli politics.

In this chapter, I also noticed certain textual overlaps (and apparent overreliance, without proper referencing) with Wikipedia. For example, in the definitions of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews (p. 99), the text from the Bulgarian version of Wikipedia is used almost verbatim without acknowledgment, and despite some omissions, entire passages are incorporated into the monograph, including phrases such as the explanation that the Sephardim "found themselves in a world largely dominated by Islam, and the isolation of this world from Europe also affected the development of Sephardic communities."

Overall, the historical overview in Chapter One, although presented from the perspective of the Jews and Israel, offers a balanced description of key historical events and processes. Thus, although I personally would have preferred an approach based on the entangled histories, and although this overview feels somewhat "attached" to the "core" study presented in the Chapter Two, I still find it useful as a factual description, some aspects of which may be unfamiliar to readers primarily interested in the main product of the research that follows.

Chapter Two (Bulgarian-Israeli Relations in the Turbulence of the Bloc Confrontation, 1948–1990) is undoubtedly the monographic focus of the book, and as such, it offers several—in my view, indisputable—contributions to the history of the People's Republic of Bulgaria (PRB) and its complex relations with the State of Israel, particularly through the role of Bulgarian Jews. These contributions are concentrated in the following sections:

- §3. Bulgarian Jews and the World Jewish Congress (1944–1948), pp. 151–159.

Here, Assoc. Prof. Marinova-Christidi convincingly demonstrates the role of the Bulgarian Jews' contacts with international Jewish organizations, particularly the World Jewish Congress. She highlights, for example, the importance of the Bulgarian Zionist Organization within the Congress of the World Zionist Organization, skillfully connecting these processes with the encouraging role of the communist leadership, and personally that of Georgi Dimitrov (p. 154). Of particular interest is the focus on the role of the Consistory of Bulgarian Jews. Ultimately, the chapter outlines the steps leading to the severance of relations between Bulgaria and the World Jewish Congress, thereby closing yet another door to the country and contributing to its increasing international isolation (p. 159).

- §4. Ties between the People's Republic of Bulgaria and Israel from the Establishment of the Diplomatic Relations to their Severance (1948–1967), pp. 159–199.

From this section onwards, Assoc. Prof. Marinova-Christidi embarks boldly into the heart of her monographic research, presenting an original, extensive study, preceded by a historical overview and an introduction to the fate of the Jews in Bulgaria up to 1948. She depicts the actions undertaken to recognize the State of Israel in line with the Soviet Union, as well as the initial activities of Bulgarian intelligence services, spurred by Israel's significance not only in the Middle East but also for countries in Western and Central Europe. The deterioration of Soviet-Israeli relations—and consequently Bulgarian-Israeli relations—is described in detail. The documentary material gathered is effectively mobilized to reveal the central role of Bulgarian Jews, whether in political and economic relations, cultural ties, or even, as it turns out, as agents of both Bulgarian and Israeli intelligence services. The first Bulgarian perceptions and analyses of Israel—its political system, judicial structure, and economic life—are also of considerable interest.

- §5. The Image of the Enemy—Israel through the Eyes of State Security and the Informal Contacts between the Two Countries after 1967, pp. 199–213.

This part of the monograph meticulously describes the processes following the severance of diplomatic relations between the PRB and Israel, a consequence of the Soviet reaction to the June War of 1967, where intelligence gathering and informal contacts between the two countries became paramount. Assoc. Prof. Marinova-Christidi's investigations into agent operations are among her most significant contributions in this section. Also noteworthy are the uncovered documents from the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. The role of agitation efforts and propaganda campaigns is highlighted within the broader struggle against Zionism, stemming from Bulgaria's alignment with the Socialist Bloc. It is appropriately emphasized that Bulgarian-Israeli relations during the 1970s were almost entirely dominated by the broader context of the Cold War and the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The introductory historical background to the second chapter, however, is somewhat one-sided. On the one hand, Bulgarian Jews indeed enjoyed rights regarding their participation in political, administrative, cultural, and other activities of the Bulgarian state, as well as the preservation of their cultural identity. On the other hand, manifestations of antisemitism did occur, leading, form example, to the necessity, at the beginning of the 20th century, for the

Chief Rabbi to publish a brochure defending Jews by highlighting their engagement in agricultural activities.

Some assertions are slightly exaggerated. For instance, the claim that "the Soviet Union actively supported the idea, considering that the new Jewish state would become a bastion of socialism in the Middle East" (p. 146). It is highly unlikely that Stalin harbored such illusions. Rather, this direction seemed to be the only viable option at the time, as Moscow saw few prospects in the Arab world and sought to undermine British and French influence in the Middle East. There are numerous studies on these issues that the author could consult further. Later, referring to Robert O. Freedman (p. 199) regarding the Soviet strategy of building an "anti-imperialist bloc" in the Arab world, the narrative continues by stating that priority was given to cooperation with Arab communist parties and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). In reality, communist parties wielded almost no real influence in the Arab states, and their marginality was well known both to Moscow and its satellites.

As a whole, Chapter Two is also predominantly event-oriented, with the descriptive narrative often outweighing the analysis. A case in point are such mentions as the one related to the fate of figures like Nikola Petkov (p. 157), where the impression is created that the responsibility of the Bulgarian authorities for the isolation of Bulgarian Jews from international Jewish organizations is somewhat diluted. The inclusion of information from intelligence archival documents, in many cases, settles for presenting what was stated in them. The author thus criticizes Bulgarian agents as unsuccessful, highlighting, for instance, that according to one Bulgarian agent, "a significant percentage of the population is unable to maintain medical insurance and, when ill, is left to the whims of fate" (p. 177). However, how does the contemporary historian interpret the information provided by these agents? According to Assoc. Prof. Marinova-Christidi (pp. 212–213), in 1975, Todor Zhivkov allowed for some deviation of Bulgarian policy from Soviet policy regarding the Jews, issuing instructions not to follow the Soviet path of "sharp anti-Semitism". However, it is not sufficiently clear why she asserts that Soviet policy should specifically be characterized as sharp anti-Semitism, or what the nuances of such a claim are. The Conclusion as a whole offers an appropriate summary, emphasizing the role of Bulgarian Jews and the significance of the intelligence networks in the context of the severed diplomatic relations between the two countries from 1967 to 1990.

IN CONCLUSION, while the critical remarks above primarily concern aspects that do not affect the candidate's core expertise in contemporary Bulgarian history during the socialist era, they do not diminish the overall quality and scholarly value of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rumyana Dimitrova Marinova-Christidi's work. Therefore, my overall assessment is positive. The breadth of her research, including in areas such as the history of Bulgarian Jews and Bulgarian-Israeli relations, demonstrate her significant contributions to the field. Given her expertise and the impact of her scholarship, I offer my support for her candidacy. I recommend that the esteemed Academic Evaluation Committee approve the appointment of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rumyana Dimitrova Marinova-Christidi to the academic position of Professor in Professional Field 2.2. History and Archaeology (Modern Bulgarian History – Bulgaria and the Middle East after World War II) at the Faculty of History, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski.

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