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Czech Monograph on Bulgarian Unofficial Literature

Review of the book by Jakub Mikulecký *Между дисидентството, ъндърграунда и сивата зона. Неофициалната българска литература в периода 1944-1989 г (Between dissidence, the underground and the gray zone. Unofficial Bulgarian literature in the period 1944-1989)*. Plovdiv University Publishing House. Plovdiv, 2025 (trans. Georgeta Cholakova). (*Mezi disentem, undergroundem a šedou zónou. Neoficiální bulharská literatura 1944–1989*. Prague: Academia /Slovanský ústav AV ČR, 2021, 511 pp.)

An outsider's view of Bulgarian literature is always not only interesting, but could contribute a lot to literary history. It is even more delightful when it comes to the debut scientific work of a young Bulgarian scholar¹. Having already fulfilled the task of presenting Bulgarian unofficial literature and culture from the period of socialism to Czech researchers and readers, Jakub Mikulecký's book "Between Dissidence, the Underground and the Gray Zone. Unofficial Bulgarian Literature in the Period 1944–1989" has now been translated into Bulgarian² and takes its place among significant studies by Bulgarian scholars on the period, such as Celina Juda's book "Pod Znaka na NRB. Bulgarska literatura i kultura v kapana na ideologiyata" ("Under the Sign of the People's Republic of Bulgaria. Bulgarian Literature and Culture in the Trap of Ideology") (2006).

In a sense, the monograph by Czechia's scholar of Bulgarian and Slavic literature Jakub Mikulecký is a revision of his initial impressions of the Bulgarian countercultural environment. In 2016, during the public defense at Plovdiv University of his doctoral

¹ Jakub Mikulecký is a scholar of Bulgarian and Slavic literature, working at the Slavic Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague. He graduated in Slavic Studies and History from the University of Pardubice. In 2016, he defended his doctorate at the Paisij Hilendarski University of Applied Sciences on the topic "Egon Bondy, or on the Poetics of the Czech Underground". He was awarded the Young Scientist Award of the Czech Academy of Sciences for 2022.

² Mikulecký's Bulgarian monograph was published with the support of the National Scientific Program "Development and Promotion of Bulgarian Studies Abroad". The translator is Zhorzheta Cholakova, and the reviewers are Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ani Burova and Dr. Miroslav Kouba.

dissertation on the Czech underground, he was asked whether a conscious countercultural environment existed within Bulgarian unofficial literature. Mikulecký replied that such a phenomenon did not arise in socialist Bulgaria. Driven by the ambition to refute his hasty conclusion and by his opinion that Bulgarian scholarship shows sporadic interest in unofficial literature, Mikulecký researched the Bulgarian underground for several years, and the result is his monograph, which provides a comprehensive and exhaustive picture of unofficial literature in Bulgaria from 1944 to 1989. Within these broad chronological limits and in the impressive volume of more than 500 pages, Mikulecký collects a large corpus of texts, some of which are poorly represented in Bulgarian literary scholarship, including now. He does not limit himself to genres either – he examines poetry, prose, diaries, memoirs, and dramaturgy.

The study faces the difficult task of selecting literary texts that are sufficiently representative to act as a counterpoint to official literature. But Mikulecký does not attempt to construct a new “anti-communist” literary canon, nor does he claim that the texts he examines in his book are aesthetically “better” than those officially published. The main criterion for their selection is precisely *the unofficial nature* of their literary existence. By “unofficial literature” the author understands work that, for political, ideological, aesthetic or other reasons, is excluded from the field of official literature, which in the period under consideration was subject to the method of socialist realism.

In the Bulgarian context, the author distinguishes three types of unofficial literature: *samizdat*, written “for the drawer,” and *confiscated*. The so-called *tamizdat* and emigrant literature remain outside the scope of the study, although they are also among the author’s scientific interests.

Referring to important studies on the period, Mikulecký builds on them by adding in-depth analysis of already known works. And as a result of his work with unexplored archives, he discovers, presents and analyzes texts that have not been published before. The stories surrounding various self-published books and publications are further specified and supplemented through correspondence with a number of authors (Nikolai Kolev-Bosia, Dimitar Mihaylov, Orlin Dvoryanov, etc.). In addition to this, Mikulecký also provides photographic material, as well as detailed bibliographical data for the publications.

The author introduces the concept of the “gray zone”, used in the Czech context, to denote the semi-official cultural space, the zone in

which the official and unofficial fields intertwine. Since in the 1970s and 1980s the communist regime in Bulgaria gradually lost its power and determination to suppress alternative discourses and their literary manifestations, choosing in certain cases to tolerate them, the concept of the “gray zone” is applicable and adequate to the Bulgarian context.

Drawing parallels with the cultural and political characteristics of other countries of the former Eastern Bloc, Mikulecký distinguishes two main Bulgarian alternative worldviews, opposing the dominant socialist discourse: *dissident discourse*, which from the late 1960s began to acquire a strongly pronounced pro-European (liberal) orientation, and *countercultural discourse*, opposing dissidence, which he perceives as another form of authoritarian discourse. As a manifestation of a dissident position, Mikulecký also distinguishes *the anti-assimilation discourse*, historically determined by the assimilation campaign called the “Revival Process”, noticeable mainly in the work of Bulgarian Turks. He specifies that these alternative discourses are not hermetically closed and inaccessible subsystems – on the contrary, they intertwine and complement each other.

Mikulecký’s book is a revised and adapted version, tailored to the local audience. The first parts of the monograph provide the historical context, are more overview, and the necessary reservations and clarifications are made in them, which, combined with the accessible language and the comprehensive chronological scope of the study, provides the publication with a wider readership. On the other hand, even in these more overview parts of the study, Mikulecký also makes his great contributions to Bulgarian literary scholarship.

In order to trace the development of unofficial literature, the author begins with an extensive overview of the rejected writers who worked before September 9 1944 (the time of the Red Army invasion of Bulgaria that resulted in communist rule), systematizes camp and prison literature, outlining its general trends, motifs, and thematic cores.

After providing a comprehensive overview of diary and memoir literature, the researcher traces and dwells in detail on the second generation of authors who, in the 1980s, took up the topic of the repressions of the 1940s and 1950s, developing them in the field of fiction (for example, the novel *Seeds of Fear* by Vanzetti Vassilev). At the end of the book, the author also dwells on prison poetry from the 1980s, with the detailed analysis of the poems of Nikolay Kolev-Bosia, written in prison in the 1980s, as well as the presentation of his two

samizdat poetry collections – “The White Nights of Diyarbakir” and “Nocturne”.

The chapter “The Curbs of the Political Thaw under Khrushchev and the Controlled De-Stalinization of Bulgarian Culture in the 1960s” is also reviewed. Although he admits some inaccuracies³, Mikulecký provides a comprehensive picture of Bulgarian official prose during this decade.

The author also pays special attention to the topic of the collectivization of agricultural land. Unlike official and émigré literature, this traumatic topic is less present in unofficial literature, mainly in the so-called literature from the drawer. Despite the small number of works, these are valuable literary texts by Filip Dahilov, Iliya Nikolchin, Todor Riznikov, Svilen Kapsazov, Zlatka Cholakova, some of which have not been the subject of special interest in Bulgarian literary history.

Mikulecký devotes a separate chapter to the works created by representatives of religious and ethnic minorities (Bulgarian Turks, Pomaks, Roma), which also fall into the category of unofficial literature. After presenting the main periodicals and authors from the 1950s to the 1980s, Mikulecký focuses on the texts that react to the assimilation campaign of the mid-1980s, and an analysis is made of the work of Svilen Kapsazov (Keshif Akhmedov Kapsazov).

In “The Czech Trace: The Bulgarian Literary Echo of August 1968 and the Death of Jan Palach”, Mikulecký traces the reaction of Bulgarian intellectuals supporting the construction of “socialism with a human face” and the consequences for them, and provides a list of works that can be read in the context of the Prague Spring: Stefan Tsanev’s play “The Trial Of the Bogomils”, Hristo Fotev’s poem “From the Summer of ‘68”, Lyuben Dilov’s science fiction novel *The Weight of the Spacesuit*, Rangel Valchanov’s film “Aesop”, Zlatka Cholakova’s short story “Whatever you make your bed on, you will lie down on”. It analyzes in detail and points out the common moments in the three poems written “for the drawer” and dedicated to the tragic fate of the Czech student Jan Palach – “Self-Immolation” by Valeri Petrov, “Jan Palach” by Blaga Dimitrova and “Ballad of Gasoline” by Binyo Ivanov.

³ For example, when he writes that Vasil Popov was attracted to magical realism, the author probably had in mind the collection “The Roots”, and not the novel *The Time of the Hero* (see Mikulecký, *Jakub. Between dissidence, the underground and the gray zone...*, p. 105). The absence of Georgi Markov’s name in the list of the main representatives of prose from the 60s (*ibid.*, pp. 103-106) is also striking, although later in the study Mikulecký focuses on some of his works.

Examining Filip Dakhilov's "Chronicle of Cruel Days" and Georgi Markov's "The Roof" as literary antitheses of the production novel, the author makes important comparisons of Dakhilov's poetics with the Soviet and especially Czech underground (Egon Bondy, Petar Placák, Jan Pelc). In fact, this is one of the greatest contributions of the study – placing Bulgarian unofficial literature in a comparative perspective. The author also outlines similar connections with the Czech underground when analyzing Boris Hristov's prose from the 1980s ("The Blind Dog" and "Death Spots") or the poetry of Georgi Rupchev.

In the two chapters dedicated to dramaturgy – "Theater without an Audience I" and "Theater without an Audience II", Mikulecký provides a rich chronological overview of plays from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s, withdrawn from the repertoires of theaters, but also those that remained only "in the drawer" or published in samizdat. He dwells in more detail on analytical observations on the historical drama "The Virgin Mary" (1974) by Blaga Dimitrova, as well as on one of the most radical dramatic texts created in the spirit of the avant-garde – the drama "The Slaughtered Inhabitants" (1985) by Ivan Stanev.

The author also separates chapters dedicated entirely to individual authors or works – "The Phenomenon Yana Yazova", which focuses in detail on the novel from the drawer "The Salty Bay"; "Rectilinear Inertia by Ruscho Tihov", in which he examines the author's experimental prose, written in 1967-1968, as a radical text, standing outside the aesthetic framework of not only official but also unofficial literature. There are also parts, again mostly overviews, that present key cases from Bulgarian literature ("The Case of the Novel "Litse"), but also those in which the author's contributions are clearly evident, such as the detailed analysis of Georgi Mitskov's poetic work from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

In the chapter "Georgi Rupchev and the Chthonic Spaces of Bulgarian Poetry", Mikulecký first examines the poet's published works, and then those poems that either remained in manuscript or were published in samizdat in the late 1980s, thus outlining Rupchev's important presence not only in the official field of Bulgarian literature, but also in the semi-official gray area and nonconformist circles of the Sofia underground.

The chapter "Dimitar Voev and the Rock Poetry of the Underground" is undoubtedly also of great value, in which Mikulecký goes beyond the field of literature and examines the unofficial music scene, describing

the peculiar development of Bulgaria in terms of subculture. Here he traces the phenomenon of the so-called “closed music”, starting from the duo “Wocek” (later – the trio “Wocek and Chugra”) and their medium – magnetizdat⁴, and reaching the “New Generation”, finding traces of Soviet socialist art, the Lianozov School and Czech “total realism” in Voev’s poetics.

Mikulecký also worked with the rich archive of Orlin Dvoryanov, which contains many of the texts of the authors of the Sofia movement “Ku-ku” from the early 1970s, which grew in 1974 into the informal literary circle – the group *Kukuv Den*. In addition to tracing the development, transformations of the group and the aesthetic quests of its members, Mikulecký deeply analyzes their poetry and prose, and given the group’s search for continuity with the traditions of surrealism and dadaism, compares their works with those of the authors of the first wave of the Czech underground from the late 1940s and 1950s (Karel Hynek, Zbyněk Havlíček, Egon Bondy, Jana Krejcarová). In this chapter, the researcher also focuses in detail on one of the emblematic texts created in this circle – Emilia Dvoryanova’s novel “The House”, the manuscript of which dates back to 1984-1986.

A separate chapter examines science fiction literature that stands outside the central official field, moving more in the gray area. In addition to analytical observations on confiscated or stored works (“Seagulls Far from the Shore” by Evgeni Kuzmanov, “The Growth Accelerator” by Rumen Shomov, “The Plateau” by Vladimir Svintila), Mikulecký also systematizes the science fiction clubs that appeared in Bulgaria in the 1970s and 1980s. It was during these decades that various other clubs, seminars, salons and circles emerged – all of them are gray areas that to a greater or lesser extent managed to avoid the control of centralized political structures. The author describes in detail the publications associated with these clubs and groups – self-published books, fanzines and brochures, and also includes illustrations of the covers and a description of their contents. An analysis is also made of the poetry of the so-called “a forgotten generation” of the 1980s (Vladimir Levchev, Rumen Leonidov, Boris Rokanov, Danila Stoyanova, Edvin Sugarev, Ani Ilkov, Miglena

⁴ By *magnitizdat*, the author understands independent (amateur) production and limited distribution of sound recordings with diverse content: recordings by Western groups, by underground musical formations that do not have access to a wider audience, as well as audio versions of literary texts or recordings of author readings.

Nikolchina), which with its poetics remains outside the mainstream of official literature. In these parts of his study, the Czech Bulgarian scholar draws the connection between academic circles, seminars, circles, dissidence, eco-thematics, which becomes a political platform, as well as the transition to postmodernism.

Undoubtedly, the core of the study are the chapters dedicated to Bulgarian samizdat, which in terms of genre does not differ from the samizdat activity of other Eastern Bloc countries, but due to the socio-political specifics in Bulgaria is less developed. The author adheres to the definition of samizdat given by Michal Pršiban, but according to the specifics of the Bulgarian context, he ignores the requirement for a minimum circulation (which in Czech scientific circles is from six to 12 copies), since compliance with this criterion in a Bulgarian context would exclude some of the emblematic samizdat of the period. He also explicitly specifies the limits within which Bulgarian samizdat has its place, taking into account the changes in the political life of the country – it is appropriate to speak of Bulgarian samizdat or proto-samizdat only after 1949, when publishing activity in the country was already entirely under the absolute monopoly of state institutions. It highlights the specifics of Bulgarian samizdat, namely: it is spontaneous and elemental in nature; associated with individual individuals and hermetic small communities; often apolitical – it only acquired a political character in the late 1980s; and it first appeared in smaller towns as a reaction against central literary institutions.

Mikulecký chronologically traces the history and development of Bulgarian samizdat – from the first attempts by prisoners in the Belene camp to publish independent periodicals in the early 1950s, through the almanacs and publications of the 1970s and 1980s, to the late samizdats at the very end of the regime. Dozens of poets published separate collections of poetry in samizdat, and Mikulecký offers a list arranged chronologically according to the date of their samizdat book. Incidentally, the index at the end of the monograph also makes it easier for the reader.

With his in-depth analytical observations on the poetry of Veselin Tachev, Ivan Tsanev, Yordan Trendafilov and Zdravko Kisyov, Mikulecký builds on the research accumulated so far on the so-called Ruse samizdat. He finds in their poetics intersections with the lyrics of the Moscow Lianozov school, Czech total realism and the so-called “confused” poetry, as well as with the grotesque imagery

of the Russian socialist artist of the 1970s and 1980s. The analyses and detailed descriptions of the almanac “UFO” from the end of the 1970s, as well as the author’s samizdat books from the 1980s by Vasil Urumov, Ivan Borislavov, Hristo “Richkata” Nikolov, Sevdalin Genov, Bozhidar Slavov, Rumen Shomov, Krasimira Aleksieva, and Sabakhatin Bayramov.

Ultimately, the goal that Mikuletsky set for himself was fulfilled – the book presents a comprehensive and systematized view of Bulgarian unofficial literature, the main alternatives are considered, contextualized according to the situation in other countries of the former Eastern Bloc, important contributions are made to the history of Bulgarian samizdat, and literary-historical concepts are proposed that could serve for further comparative research in a broader European context.