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### Centre, Periphery and Back European Historiographical Itineraries



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**Review of Eleonora Naxidou, Η ευρωπαϊκότητα εντός της βουλγαρικής βαλκανικότητας: Ο Λιούμπεν Καραβέλοφ, ο φεντεραλισμός και οι Έλληνες**

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## Centre, Periphery and Back

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Ο Λιούμπεν Καραβέλοφ, ο  
φεντεραλισμός και οι Έλληνες*  
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Eleonora Naxidou

*Η ευρωπαϊκότητα εντός της βουλγαρικής βαλκανικότητας:*

*Ο Λιούμπεν Καραβέλοφ, ο φεντεραλισμός και οι Έλληνες*

[Europeanness in the context of Bulgarian Balkanness: Lyuben Karavelov, federalism and the Greeks]

Athens: Alexandria, 2021. 311 pp.

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In recent decades, studies on the Bulgarian National Awakening have enriched our understanding of Bulgarian nationalism in the nineteenth century, enabling scholars to reassess the various political, social, economic and cultural factors that shaped Bulgarian identity and society.<sup>1</sup> Eleonora Naxidou's recent study on Lyuben Karavelov is an important contribution to this area. It presents to the Greek academic community and educated public this prominent intellectual figure that played a significant role in the formation of Bulgarian national identity, focusing on the ideological movements that shaped his political activities also in relation to the Greeks.

In the introduction (25–27), Naxidou presents the aims of her study. Rather than reproducing or simply presenting in Greek what Bulgarian historians have written about Karavelov, she attempts a re-examination and reassessment of his views and positions in the wider European and Balkan context of his time. Considering him both as an intellectual and a revolutionary, as he himself perceived both these elements necessary for the successful revival of Bulgaria, Naxidou approaches Karavelov as a member of the wider European network of a liberal revolutionary movement. She traces and reconstructs his ideological journey, which combines traditional and modernist attitudes he encountered during his visits to Russia and the Balkans. Looking anew at Karavelov's own texts, she brings to the fore his eclecticism resulting from the ideological fusion of nationalism, liberalism and federalism. Her main thesis is that Karavelov's ideological identity was formed through the synthesis of these three ideologies in combination with traditional Balkan views and Bulgarian characteristics. It was these three dominant European ideological currents, Naxidou stresses, together with the Balkan cultural tradition of religious

solidarity based on the common Orthodox Christian faith, that shaped the revolutionary and political cooperation among the Balkan nations. Thus, Karavelov's ideology combined three distinct elements: "Europeanness", "Balkanness" and "Bulgarianness", which link the European and Balkan experience with the influence from the Bulgarian national movement, an important aspect of which was his views about the Greeks as a national Other. Naxidou touches on the Slavic idea of cultural and political unity, expressed, among others, in panslavism and South Slavic unity, which never held a dominant place in Karavelov's thought and political activity. In this way, Naxidou concludes, Karavelov represents the Balkan intellectual revolutionary rather than a *sui generis* personality.

On this basis, the book is structured in five chapters. Chapter 1, "The European ideological context", discusses the element of the "Europeanness" which influenced Karavelov, namely nationalism, liberal nationalism and federalism, as these were expressed in the nineteenth-century Balkans (29–68). Chapter 2, "The Balkan background", examines the passing of "Balkanness" into modernity, with the division of the united Orthodox community into separate national churches, the common struggle against the Ottoman Empire and the intention towards a joint political synergy for the creation of a federation of the Christian nations (69–108). The third chapter, "The Bulgarian National framework", deals with the characteristics of Karavelov's "Balkanness", the Bulgarian National Awakening, the dominant attitudes of Bulgarian nationalism and the transformation of the Greek from a coreligionist brother to a national enemy and Other (109–61). Chapter 4, "Biographical note on Lyuben Karavelov", gives Karavelov's biographical details, placing emphasis on the elements which formed his ideological identity. The last chapter reassesses Karavelov's ideological profile, looking afresh at his political ideology and views on the Greeks (163–276). This lengthy chapter, which constitutes the core of the study, comprises four sections, which present Karavelov's plan for a Balkan federation, its members, the governing model based on individual freedom and the nation, the attitude towards the European states and Russia, and finally his views on the Greeks, reflecting his personal experiences and the Bulgarian national narrative. The study closes with a conclusion (277–86), full bibliography (287–305) and general index (307–11).

Naxidou defines Karavelov's ideology as "selective", combining various European, Balkan and Bulgarian ideological movements and attitudes centred on nationalism, liberalism and federalism, placed by Karavelov in the service of his own nation's political interests. In his attempt to adapt "Europeanness" in the wider Balkan historical, political and cultural context, Karavelov turned more to the common Christian tradition of unity and solidarity and less to Slavism. For Naxidou, Karavelov's "Balkanness" reflects his "Bulgarianness", mirroring the particular features of the Bulgarian National Awakening.

According to Naxidou, in synthesising his own political vision Karavelov selected elements from various ideological views, demonstrating a cautious approach both towards

panslavism and a Russian dominant role in a future federal Slavic political union as well as towards the Western European federalists' plans, which would serve the interests of the Great Powers and not of the Balkan nations. Nevertheless, Karavelov was willing to accept Cyprien Robert's vision of a Christian federation in the European territories of the Ottoman Empire, without however agreeing with his proposal to be placed under the sultan's authority, which would clearly assist French expansionist interests in the East. Similarly, Karavelov advocated for Giuseppe Mazzini's plans for the dissolution of both the Ottoman and Austrian empires, without accepting either his proposal for their replacement by the Danube and the Slavo-Greek federations, respectively, or his plan for Italy's leading role in the new political order in Eastern Europe.

Naxidou shows that Karavelov also rejected the Hungarian federalist proposals for a multiethnic monarchy that would exclude the Bulgarians. On the same lines, he agreed with moderate Serbian nationalist federalists, who advocated for the replacement of the Ottoman Empire by a Christian (con)federation of Balkan Christian nations based on the principles of political independence and a constitutional system of government – in the end he preferred a democracy modelled on that of the United States. In contrast to Serbian federalists, however, he was convinced that this plan could only materialise through armed revolution of the subjected Christian nations (mainly Orthodox but including other denominations) against the Muslim Ottoman yoke and not by diplomatic negotiations involving the Western Powers, who would once more serve their own interests at the expense of the Balkan nations. This (con)federation of nations would include Serbians (along with Montenegrins, Bosnians and Herzegovinians), Bulgarians, Romanians and Greeks. Karavelov clearly rejected Serbian plans for a closer union between Serbians and Bulgarians on the grounds of their racial links.

Naxidou closes with a portrait of Karavelov as a revolutionary intellectual, focusing on his primary ideological dimension of "Bulgarianness", assessing his contribution to cultural, ecclesiastical and political aspects of the Bulgarian national movement. It is clear that Karavelov commended his compatriots who promoted Bulgarian culture and education, crucial elements for the awakening of the Bulgarian nation, and was convinced that a proper system of national education would only be possible in a free and politically independent Bulgarian polity. Concerning the church, following the general feeling he was critical of the spiritual and economic oppression the Bulgarian Christian communities experienced under the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople, who aimed at hellenising them. For these reasons, Karavelov fervently supported the Bulgarian claims for ecclesiastical independence through the creation of the national Bulgarian church, which he envisaged as a result, rather than a precursor, of the formation of a national Bulgarian state. In this sense, national education would lead to a national state, which in turn would result to a national church.

Naxidou shows that as member of the Young Bulgarians of the diaspora, Karavelov

embraced the radical views that Bulgarian political independence from Ottoman rule would be secured only through the Bulgarians' own armed revolution, without rejecting Russian help if offered. Any proposals to delay the revolution in view of Ottoman political reforms, or the replacement of the Ottoman Empire by a dual Turco-Bulgarian monarchy as suggested by Bulgarian revolutionary societies, were also rejected by Karavelov. Moving into action, Karavelov contributed to the establishment of the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee, which undertook the organisation of armed revolts against the Ottoman authorities.

Unlike other revolutionaries, Naxidou argues, Karavelov did not embrace socialist demands to overturn the social and political status of the Bulgarian magnates, who served the Turkish rulers against the Bulgarian people. In terms of the territory of a future Bulgarian state, Karavelov adopted the dominant view that it should include Macedonia and Thrace. His attitude towards the Greek nation and people was similar to that of most Bulgarian intellectuals of his time. Together with Rakovski and Botev, Karavelov acknowledged that Bulgarians should cooperate with the Greeks as members of the Christian federation against the Ottomans. Yet, they did not hesitate to criticise Greeks of irredentism and expansionism as well as arrogance and contempt towards the Bulgarians, though Karavelov did recognise the achievements of ancient Greek culture.

Regarding the impact of Karavelov's ideas on the Bulgarian people, Naxidou stresses the lack of supporting evidence, suggesting that this must have been limited for two basic reasons: first, because of the practical difficulty in spreading revolutionary ideas to the wider Bulgarian population; and secondly, because a federal solution appealed to Botev alone, while the ideologues of the Bulgarian awakening were divided into various groups with different views, goals and priorities. Karavelov was not in complete agreement even with the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee, though he did leave his own mark on this important organisation.

Naxidou's study presents this important personality of the Bulgarian revival through a detailed study of his life and activities, while bringing to the fore alternative ideas and views held by Bulgarian intellectuals, who were inspired by European political ideas that pursued liberation from the Ottoman yoke and the independence of Bulgaria. They envisioned their country as member of a federation of free states within the Balkans, linked by common ideological, political, religious and cultural bonds, much like the Greek revolutionary thinker and activist Rigas Feraios. In this respect, Naxidou's book is essential to understanding how the wider ideological circles and movements in Bulgaria were intertwined with those of other Balkan countries under Ottoman rule in this period.

Based on an extensive reading of published primary sources (22, n. 11), primarily Karavelov's own articles in the newspapers *Nezavisimost* and *Znanie* that he issued, as well as in other newspapers, and secondary literature by Bulgarian, Greek and other

historians (21, nn. 9–10), Naxidou's book offers an original, comprehensive and critical study of the protagonist's life, personality, and political and ideological views. The study would benefit from a thorough investigation of Karavelov's personal archive, which would add further insight to Karavelov's life and work.

Naxidou's book is the first full study devoted to this important personality published in Greek and, in this sense, it holds a special place in Greek historiography of the Bulgarian national movement in particular and in Balkan history more generally. The value, however, of this book goes beyond the Greek readership and we very much hope that an enriched edition will be published in English in the future in order to reach a wider international audience.

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<sup>1</sup> See the collection of essays by Maria Todorova, *Το παιχνίδι της κλίμακας: Τα Βαλκάνια από τους εθνικισμούς στη μετασοσιαλιστική νοσταλγία* [The game of climax: The Balkans from nationalisms to postsocialist nostalgia], trans. Takis Geros, ed. Andreas Lymperatos (Iraklio: Crete University Press, 2022), with an extensive bibliography.