

REVIEW

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Vladislav Milanov from the Department of Bulgarian Language at
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on the dissertation of Elena Nikolova Runevska titled:

**"Aspects of Teaching Bulgarian as a Foreign Language to Bessarabian Bulgarians from
the Territory of Present-Day Ukraine"**

By **Order No. RD-38-373 dated 09.07.2024** of the Rector of Sofia University, I have been appointed as a member of the academic jury, which is to conduct the evaluation procedure for the dissertation of Elena Nikolova Runevska for the award of the educational and scientific degree 'Doctor'. The preparation format is independent study. At the first meeting of the academic jury, I was appointed by protocol as the reviewer of the academic work. I thoroughly reviewed both the academic work and the accompanying administrative documents and I am certain that they fully comply with the Law on Academic Development, as well as with its Implementing Regulations, prepared for the needs of competitive procedures at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

Brief Biographical Data of Doctoral Candidate Elena Runevska

Doctoral candidate Runevska completed her primary education at 129th School "Antim I" during the period of September 1981 to June 1988. She acquired her secondary education at the then prestigious 22nd School "G. S. Rakovski", where she completed a humanities profile from September 1988 to May 1992. In June 1995, she completed higher vocational education at the Institute of Library Studies, after which she enrolled in Bulgarian Philology at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and graduated with a master's degree in philology and as a teacher of Bulgarian language and literature in July 2000.

She has worked at the Bulgarian National Radio, with particular attention deserving her work with the archives of the radio, as well as the fact that she was the host of the segment "Language Culture for Everyone" on ECET TV. I specifically emphasize this last fact, as it is

inextricably linked to the mission of every Bulgarian linguist; it is also part of the concept of language policy and, not least, in recent years, it is a genre in decline, which undoubtedly is to the detriment of the increasingly less literate Bulgarian society.

She has worked as a teacher in several schools in the capital and has also participated in educational activities of schools preparing young people for successfully passing external assessment exams. Since January 2008, after successfully passing a competition in contemporary Bulgarian language before an academic commission chaired by Prof. Dr. Vasilka Radeva, she has been appointed as an assistant in the Department of Bulgarian Language as a Foreign Language, where she prepares and conducts seminar sessions in contemporary Bulgarian language. She is fluent in English and Russian.

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in the development and defense of doctoral dissertations as the third academic degree. In many cases, there remains a bitter feeling of topics chosen without purpose and of works that analyze insignificant processes, which do not advance science but rather serve as a means for their authors to quickly climb the ladder of academic career development. This ladder increasingly resembles a high-speed elevator, whose goal is to reach the top of science as quickly as possible, though those peaks demand different approaches and much deeper efforts.

However, the dissertation of Elena Runevska is one of those pleasant exceptions, which, on the one hand, demonstrate the solid foundations of academia, and on the other hand, serve as evidence that valuable texts withstand the test of time and are thoroughly tested in practice — both in theory and application. To these introductory words, I would like to add two very important facts regarding the academic presence of doctoral candidate Runevska, without which it would be unthinkable to create a review of her academic text:

1. The highly precise approach in working with foreign students, who need to be introduced to the world of Bulgarian culture through the complex world of the Bulgarian language, and the love for teaching, understood not as a profession but as a vocation, a passion, and a family commitment.
2. The foundation of the dissertation began in the earliest teaching years, progressing through all stages of diligent linguistic work — observing the students' behavior during the learning process, collecting the analyzed material, and applying an appropriate methodology that could scientifically summarize it.

3. The proposed analyses have withstood the rigorous standards of the academic community in various formats: starting from the mandatory participation in academic forums — both national and international — and extending to participation in author teams developing teaching aids to support the teaching of Bulgarian as a foreign language. Here, I refer to the extremely successful team between Elena Runevska and her colleagues Nadezhda Stalyanova, Elena Kreychova, and Mirena Patseva.

It is very difficult, in light of these preliminary remarks, to determine what has been more helpful to Elena Runevska in her academic work. Certainly, her work in secondary school is a wonderful starting point and a good foundation, through which she reached the youth student audience with the right approach and understanding, ensuring that no inaccurate data was collected for the purposes of her academic text. On the other hand, this experience is an excellent example that, in the modern world, teaching in higher education institutions cannot be tied solely to an introduction to theoretical and practical models for mastering and understanding the language, as described in textbooks on Bulgarian as a foreign language. It requires many different approaches, which pass through the trust between the teacher and the student, fostering an attitude toward the language being studied, and introducing the environment in which communication processes unfold.

Everything described in the previous paragraph is, in fact, the creative prehistory of the dissertation. To further enrich this story, I will add the common saying that the author has long been ready for this step, as well as the next one. However, this is neither the time nor the place to search for the reasons behind the late emergence of the text, as the work is so serious and presents both the doctoral candidate and the Faculty of Slavic Philology in a light worthy of academia.

Elena Runevska's dissertation has a classic structure, within which the author's creative potential unfolds, observing and analyzing the complex phenomena in the acquisition of Bulgarian among Bessarabian Bulgarian students studying at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". The war in Ukraine certainly marks the path and thinking of the young people who continue their education in the homeland of their ancestors, but whose fate intricately intertwines their love for their roots with the aggression they have been forced to endure at various levels over the years — from everyday life to the suppression of their native language by the imposition of Russian. These non-linguistic facts, which have long been recognized in linguistics as part of

a person's linguistic world, place a heavy burden on the thinking of Bessarabian students and their speech behavior when learning Bulgarian as the language through which they connect with their roots, but also as a language for living and communicating in Bulgaria. Beyond these difficulties on a global scale, it is important to note the complex task Runevska faces in describing such a vast amount of material, with its inherent heterogeneity and difficult-to-typologize generalizations.

The author has successfully handled all of this. As evident from the work and the materials attached to it, she has approached the task with academic professionalism, patience, a rich theoretical background, and, not least, her own decisions regarding the prepared materials. The strength of this dissertation lies in the fact that two layers are distinctly observed: the well-organized and accumulated examples over the years, and Elena Runevska's ability to explain them clearly and comprehensively, referencing in-depth theoretical knowledge of contemporary Bulgarian language while also offering her own solutions in the selection of texts, the creation of tasks, and the development of exam materials for the students.

The work is structured with an introductory section (from page 6 to page 12), where the motivation for choosing the topic is very clearly presented, along with the mandatory elements such as the object, subject, goals, tasks, and research methods. The introduction, as a strong opening, grabs the reader's attention with a thoroughly objective argumentation for the appearance and defense of this text. Runevska, as an experienced teacher, knows very well that without a strong introduction, the text risks becoming mere statistics and analyses filling theoretical models. Her aim to create a classic dissertation is evident as she continues into the first chapter of the study (from page 12 to page 40), where the terminology used is systematically clarified, and general theoretical principles related to second language acquisition are introduced. Concepts such as bilingualism and multilingualism are explored, and the value of this first chapter is reinforced by the accompanying historical context, without which no contemporary research would be complete. Particularly with this topic, the historical perspective cannot be overlooked, as it encodes some of the characteristics of the generalizations.

I can confidently highlight two important aspects regarding this chapter: the theoretical overview is done with depth and understanding, making it the most precise framework for applying the research; secondly, the author does not give the impression of offering an arbitrary review but rather transitions from concept to concept through skillful dialogue and the

professionalism of an experienced linguist. Only one contributing text has escaped Runevska's research attention, which I highly recommend she reads as it is relevant to the topic: the doctoral dissertation of Tsvetelina Tsvetanova, defended in 2022 at the Faculty of Slavic Philology. The summary at the end of the chapter is a good approach and will especially aid readers of the text if it is published as a standalone book, which I strongly recommend at this point.

The second chapter essentially introduces the core of the doctoral candidate's work. First and foremost, the language difficulties in the learning process are highlighted, and I want to emphasize that, based on Elena Runevska's analyses, these difficulties show their specificity in this particular group of foreign students, and they are not the same as the language challenges faced by learners of Bulgarian as a foreign language from other nationalities. The material led the author in defining the groups, but this should not surprise us: nouns, pronouns, verbs, lexical collocations, and syntax are among the traditionally expected language domains where we find these difficulties. I commend the author's decision to use this appropriate term rather than being tempted by older practices that label such difficulties as 'errors' or 'mistakes,' often referred to as sins. It is perfectly logical for young people, disconnected from the Bulgarian language in various ways, to struggle with the grammatical category of definiteness (and I would add indefiniteness), as well as the grammatical category of tense, because even native speakers of Bulgarian find these categories problematic. The difference with Bessarabian Bulgarians is the presence of complex factors such as tradition, dialect, and the dominance of a language imposed upon them, whereas in Bulgaria, these issues arise from developmental processes that may eventually lead to some changes in the structure of grammatically organized categories over time. The comments on the examples are well-balanced with theoretical concepts, and the influence of the native language on the inaccuracies is also well-placed. This makes the conclusions in the summary well-grounded and opens the door to new research generalizations. I will highlight just a few of them: Bessarabian Bulgarian students have no difficulty with receptive acquisition of information from texts in Bulgarian, regardless of the style or genre (listening and reading). However, they struggle with production (speaking and writing) in Bulgarian and systematically deviate in the following areas:

- **Noun system:** gender agreement, numeral form, article usage (both in determination and lack of determination of nouns), including hyper-correctness in article use.
- **Pronoun system:** continuous use of the first-person singular pronoun in the nominative case, transposition of the first-person singular pronoun in the nominative case instead of the full accusative or dative form in duplicate object constructions, use of full rather than short forms of personal pronouns in the accusative and dative cases, use of the personal pronoun in the dative case instead of possessive pronouns, substitution of full forms of relative pronouns and relative adverbs with interrogative forms.
- **Verb system:** use of the third-person verb form instead of the first-person form, hyper-correctness – combining the auxiliary verb "to be" with a full verb or omitting the auxiliary verb, especially in nominal predicates, incorrect tense usage – employing aorist/present tense in every position within complex sentences instead of the perfect, pluperfect, or imperfect; consistent use of evidential verb forms in contexts requiring non-evidential forms.
- **Syntax:** errors in word order concerning the auxiliary verb and short pronoun forms within the sentence, punctuation.
- Lexical collocation, including the appropriate use of prepositions.

I accept Elena Runevska's conclusion that the primary difficulties are driven by negative transfer from Russian – both in the noun system and in the verb system.

The third chapter of the dissertation exceeds the initially set idea of developing a model for working in Bulgarian language classes, offering conceptually advanced ideas with theoretical model claims. This chapter synthesizes the author's high teaching skills and the proposed methods for working with students during these exercises. The richness of the text lies both in the author's creative solutions and in the successful application of these in practice. A sample working model has been developed, which could, in itself, serve as a separate subject for a dissertation study. If we assume that the second chapter identified the deviations and provided a precise and thorough diagnosis, the third chapter presents the ways to overcome the identified difficulties. The thematic organization and selection of materials demonstrate a deep

commitment to the subject matter and high professionalism. The applied guidelines, frameworks, syllabi, and assessment forms further enhance the value of the conducted experiment.

The bibliography includes the essential sources required for creating a well-argued and in-depth academic text. The appendices show not only the reliability but also the precision with which Runevska processed the preliminary material to summarize it in her analytical observations. Even at first glance, the texts bear witness to the strong influence of the Russian script system through the handwriting.

There are parts of the text where it is evident that the work was done in a more fragmented manner, and others where more attention was paid to the analyzed linguistic phenomena. The style is engaging, balancing between the strictly academic perspective of a researcher and the temptation to vividly and illustratively present the speech of her students, as a teacher who aims to educate them even through this text.

The abstract meets the requirements of the genre and accurately reflects the content of the original text in a proportional and credible manner. The publication activity on the dissertation topic also meets the requirements for the public defense of the text.

I have two main recommendations for Elena Runevska:

1. To participate even more confidently in national and international conferences.
2. To prepare the text for publication as a standalone book, to be included in the 2025 publishing plan of the Faculty of Slavic Philology.

I also have personal impressions of the doctoral candidate. I know her as an exceptionally dedicated and responsive colleague, a conscientious scholar whose analyses can be trusted by students, Bulgarian studies colleagues, and specialists from various fields of applied linguistic disciplines.

In conclusion, I will absolutely vote in favor of awarding the scientific and educational degree "Doctor" to Elena Nikolova Runevska and encourage my colleagues on the academic jury to support her as well.