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Editorial Note: Balkan Mountains – a symbol of liberty – Part III (Western Balkan)

Dimcho Zahariev

*Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen, Faculty of Natural Sciences,
115 Universitetska Str., 9700 Shumen, Bulgaria*

Now falls the twilight and the moon clambers
Into that arch where the happy stars dance,
Now the wood rustles, now the wind hisses,
Now chants the Balkan a robber's romance.

A translation of the ballad "Hadzhi Dimitar" written by
the Bulgarian poet and revolutionary Hristo Botev in
1873

It is no coincidence that the Balkan Mountains were chosen as a symbol of freedom: the proudly raised mountain ridges, the peaks reaching for the sky, have inspired poets and writers for centuries. The text of the ballad, mentioned above, continues with a description of how the mountain called "Balkan" sheltered the freedom fighter Hadzhi Dimitar, who died there during a battle. The poet could hardly have expected that this text would become a living and true prophecy about his life. In the spring of 1976, together with about 200 people, Hristo Botev undertook the mission of inciting the northwestern parts of Bulgaria to a rebellion for liberation. At that time, Bulgaria was part of the Ottoman Empire. The rebellion failed, and Hristo Botev died in the western parts of the Balkan Mountains near the present-day town of Vratsa, where he sought protection from enemies who were superior in numbers and weapons.

Today, a monument has been erected at this place to remind us of the people who gave their lives for a noble goal – to be free. And every year, hundreds of people follow in Botev's footsteps to share in and be grateful for his work.

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The western part of the Balkan Mountains is indeed different from the middle and eastern parts of the mountain. Part of the relief in the Western Balkan Mountains is typically alpine. Typical rocky peaks, rock crowns and rock ridges can be seen here. Some of the most impressive rock formations are called ritli (Fig. 1): after the name of the side boards of the carts, to which they have a certain resemblance. Their thickness varies from 3 to 7 meters, and their length - between 200 and 400 meters.



Figure 1. The rock riffles near the village of Lyutibrod (Photo by Dimcho Zahariev, 2020)

The various surface and underground karst forms are widespread: sinkholes, hollows, whirlpools, karst fields, caves, etc. Karst processes are developed in different parts of the Balkan Mountains, but the forms in some of the parts of the Western Balkan Mountains are particularly expressive: Vračanska Mountain, Chepan Mountain, Ponor Mountain, etc.

The most famous caves visited by tourists in this part of the mountain are the Ledenika Cave and the Temnata Dupka Cave. The Ledenika Cave gets its name because of the formation of large transparent or milky-white masses of ice in its initial parts (Fig. 2), as the temperature in them drops below 0°C. The ice remains for about half a year (from December to May). During this time, the cave is most beautiful and suitable for exploring. Due to the excellent acoustics, concerts are held in it every year.

The deepest cave in Bulgaria is also located in the Western Stara Planina Mountains - Kolkina Dupka Cave with a depth of 561 m. The last mapping in 2024 found that it is the longest cave in Bulgaria with a total length of underground galleries of 23,297 m.

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Figure 2. Ice waterfalls in Ledenika Cave (Photo: Website of the Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park)

The Vrachanska Skaklya waterfall (141 m) near the town of Vratsa is the largest non-permanent waterfall on the Balkan Peninsula (Fig. 3). Other high waterfalls in this part of the mountain are Bovska Skaklya (85 m) and Borov Kamak (63 m).

On August 27, 1885, the first organized tourist event in Bulgaria was held: a climb to Cherni Vrah in the Vitosha Mountain, which is located adjacent to the Western part of the Stara Planina Mountains near the city of Sofia - the capital of Bulgaria. The organizer was one of the masters of the word in Bulgaria - the writer, public figure and lawyer by education Aleko Konstantinov. Like Hristo Botev, he also had versatile abilities and actively used them to change the environment around him. Aleko Konstantinov often shared with his friends that if he could not fulfill his great dream of a trip around the world, he would be happy to cross the "majestic Balkan" (Stara Planina) from the border with Serbia to the Black Sea. The idea of crossing the Stara Planina Mountains on foot is today popular as the Kom-Emine trek. The trek starts from the westernmost peak located on the territory of Bulgaria (Golyam Kom), which is allowed to be climbed for tourist purposes due to its proximity to the border between Bulgaria and Serbia; continues along the main ridge of the mountain and reaches its easternmost part – Cape Emine on the shores of the Black Sea. Its total

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length is controversial – from 560 to 700 km depending on the chosen route. The distance can be covered on foot in 18-25 days in summer and in 28 days in winter. The record for the fastest crossing of the route has been set and improved several times. The best achievement so far is set by Bozhidar Antonov, who in 2018 covered the distance in 4 days, 8 hours and 27 minutes.

In addition to walking, the "Kom - Emine" route can be covered by bicycle or off-road vehicles. The route presents the opportunity to climb 100 mountain peaks, to cover 20,500 m of positive and 21,500 m of negative elevation. It is accompanied by magnificent views, endurance of the body and spirit. And most importantly - it gives the opportunity to discover not only the mountain, but also yourself while passing through it.



Figure 3. Vrachanska Skaklya Waterfall (Photo by Alex Markov, 2022)

Front Cover

A view of the eastern part of DzhenDEM reserve, Central part of the Balkan Mountains

Photo by Prof. Dimcho Zahariev

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Corresponding author: d.zahariev@shu.bg

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Editorial Note

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