

Opinion

by

Prof. Dr. Lora Taseva

on the competition for the position of **Associate Professor**

in Professional Field 3.1. **Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies** (promulgated in the *State Gazette* No. 55/19 June 2020)

for the needs of the Culture in the Balkans Section of the IBSCT

Four applicants participate in the competition, but only three of them meet the minimum requirements under the Act for the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ADASRB) and have been admitted for reviewing. The main emphasis in this burden is on the quality of their academic production and on their contribution to acquiring new knowledge, the remaining research activities being of secondary importance. The dissertation works of the applicants and the publications used in the respective procedures have been excluded from the scope of the review.

Goran Blagoev possesses academic qualification in several research fields: BA in theory and history of diplomacy and MA in ethnology, acquired at the St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia, as well as PhD in folklore studies for his dissertation: *The Qurban Tradition in the Culture of Bulgarian Muslims*, which was elaborated as a free PhD dissertation at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The dissertation work was published in a revised form as a separate book as well.

The applicant's academic interests cover various research domains in the sphere of Bulgarian history and the traditional culture of the Balkans. I would group them provisionally in two spheres: (a) ethnology and cultural anthropology; Bulgarian cultural and Church history, including outside the Bulgarian political borders.

In addition to the applicant's PhD dissertation and the publications connected with it, the first sphere comprises also several articles on everyday religiosity, predominantly among Muslims. The author's observations are based on abundant source material, including personally collected field material, and his analyses lead to convincing conclusions, e.g., that religion is the most important structure-forming element for the identity of Bulgarian Muslims, that there exists a generation conflict between everyday and classical Islam, that the agrarian cycle of festivities of the Muslim population from the Golo Brdo village in Albania is based on a pre-Islamic layer of beliefs and rituals that unite them with the western part of the Bulgarian diaspora in the Balkans; that the different types of behavioural reactions during the worshipping of the Miraculous Icon of the Holy Mother of God in Sofia in 2000 reveal a mass manifestation of Christian religiosity, which is unusual among the Bulgarians.

The second, much more voluminous sphere comprises a number of papers in specialised periodical editions and thematic collections of papers, about a dozen texts of the author's collection of materials *Stories for Weeping and for Hope* and his habilitation work *Church and Identity in the Balkans. The Bulgarian Exarchate and Vardar Macedonia until the End of World War II* (382 p.). Although the book lacks the usual

survey of the state of research on the issue, it is a valuable contribution to the examined theme, because on the grounds of the achievements in historiography so far, as well as of the still unpublished archive sources, the author has studied the consolidation and development of the Bulgarian Exarchate in these lands over a millennial time frame and has analysed its role as an element of the national identity, as well as the political and social factors influencing its dynamic fate. Another research aspect in this thematic group can be found in the publications on personalities and events connected with the Church and religious history beyond the Bulgarian territories: the monasteries on Mount Athos and in the Holy Land. They broaden and study in detail the knowledge on the respective historical periods and cultural phenomena. A third subgroup consists of several articles that shed light on circumstantial solutions on issues of the Church rule and policy in the new Bulgarian history.

Iveta Rasheva is the second applicant. Her academic qualification, acquired at the University of Veliko Tarnovo, comprises MA in Bulgarian philology and history, as well as PhD in Bulgarian literature for the dissertation on *The Vita of the Holy King Stefan Dečanski by Gregory Tsamblak in the Russian Manuscript Tradition*.

She participates in the competition with specialised publications shaping three thematic blocks, two of which focus on concrete texts. The first block consists of articles connected with the theme of the dissertation, but published after its defence. They present little known facts and interpret influences of the ideas and texts in Tsamblak's *Vita of Stefan Dečanski* on Russian literatures during subsequent centuries, and on the New Bulgarian literature.

The second and central theme is the so-called “anachronic story” about the conversion of the Bulgarians to Christianity by Cyril and Methodius. However, before highlighting the achievements in this field, I need to point out that the definition of “anachronic” for a text that does not correspond chronologically and above all in content to the historical truth is inappropriate. The use of the short form of the pronoun “our” (*ни*) in the title of her habilitation work *Our Renaissance Anachronic “Story” about the Christianisation Mission of St. Cyril and St. Methodius in Bulgaria* (182 p.) is likewise inappropriate from the perspective of the academic style, because science is addressed to an international public. It is also strange that there is no reference anywhere in the book to the source used for Paissiy's *History* and that the list of research references lacks its contemporary critical edition (2013) by D. Peev, M. Dimitrova, P. Petkov and A. Nikolov. The detailed investigation of the historical theme in question – from its emergence, through its incarnations in the Bulgarian literature from the National Revival Period until its contemporary artistic treatments by Bulgarian and foreign authors with its reflections in the visual arts – reveals both the evolution of the mythologem and its role as element of the Bulgarian national identity, and its echo in the culture of Eastern and Western Slavs.

The third thematic group is formed by articles on the cult for the work of the first teachers of the Slavs as an essential part of the cultural awareness of the Bulgarians from the National Revival Period to this day. These articles present some poorly known facts about the celebration of the Day of St. Cyril and St. Methodius, and about the evaluation of the contribution of Clement of Ochrid, given by outstanding Bulgarian public and academic figures.

Julia Zlatkova's academic qualification includes MA in History from the University of Sofia and PhD in medieval general history, obtained at the IBSCT – BAS for the dissertation work *Female Monasticism in Early Byzantium (4th–7th Century)*. The publications with which she participates in the competition are focused in two thematic circles. The first one develops further issues connected with her dissertation work, revealing new perspectives to the Early Christian female monasticism, examining it as a historical, social, cultural and literary phenomenon. Additional information is given to the knowledge on the role of the Roman female aristocrats for the building of the monastic institution, on women's charity work during the Late Antiquity, on the extreme ascetic practices of the Syrian hermits, on some rare types of female sanctity in the hagiographic literature.

The second thematic circle focuses on the ideology of Konstantin Leontiev and his reflection on the Balkans in the 19th century. It unifies a cycle of studies and articles, as well as the habilitation work *Konstantin Leontiev and the Balkans* (297 p.), developed further on the basis of them. The value of these studies stems from the fact that the rich literary heritage of the Russian diplomat, devoted to Bulgarian and Balkan history, has not been subjected yet to systematic academic discourse. Julia Zlatkova indeed succeeds in attracting attention with her works to the personality and to Leontiev's untraditional – and sometimes debatable – views, linking them with his personal destiny, and in a number of cases also with their historical context, seeking their place in the evolution of European philosophical thought. I would indicate as a debatable moment in her approach the undifferentiated use of sources that are of a different nature: documentary texts and fiction. It would also be advisable to differentiate more clearly in the analysis of facts between Leontiev's opinions and their evaluation by the author.

In summary: **Goran Blagoev**'s publications enrich academic knowledge in the sphere of the history, culture and ethnology of Bulgaria and the Balkans with new sources and interpretations, and his teaching experience in the universities of Sofia and Plovdiv is an additional asset in his biography of a scholar. **Iveta Rasheva**'s studies contribute to the elucidation of certain issues in Bulgarian literary and cultural history, but they are with a relatively limited thematic and source scope, being focused primarily on particular themes and demonstrating some deficiencies with respect to the academic standards in some cases. **Julia Zlatkova** researches poorly studied cultural phenomena from two different chronological periods, shedding light on some of their unfamiliar aspects and not infrequently deriving important conclusions of a cultural-historical nature, but a bigger distance and emancipation from the object of her studies would highlight better her research inferences.

In my opinion, of the three applicants Goran Blagoev, whose scientometric parameters are also the highest, possesses the most serious academic assets, hence I recommend him for the academic position of Associate Professor *in* Professional Field 3.1. ***Theory and History of Culture***.

Sofia, 8 October 2020