

REVIEW

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of the materials submitted for the competition for the academic position of 'Professor' in the Area of professional qualification 3.1.Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural studies, announced in *State Gazette* No. 51 (5.06.2026)

I. Assessment of compliance with the minimum national requirements

In the competition for professor, announced in *State Gazette* No. 51 (5.06.2026) for the needs of the Department of Anthropology, New Bulgarian University, the only candidate is Assoc. Prof. Dr. Habil. Stefan Ivanov Dechev. The set of materials submitted by him includes most of the necessary documents in accordance with the Academic Staff Development Law in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASB), the Regulations for the Implementation of this law and the Regulation for the Development of Academic Staff of the NBU on the Conditions and Procedure for the Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and for Holding Academic Positions. Missing: abstracts of the publications presented in the competition (in Bulgarian and in English) and author's record of his own scientific contributions.

The presented table showing compliance with the minimum requirements under the Regulations for the Implementation of the ZRASB – although not particularly precise – indicates that the candidate meets the requirements. Group G includes publications whose total score significantly exceeds the required 200 points. I have the following comments regarding the table: it includes some of the publications with which Assoc. Prof. Dechev obtained his 'Doctor of Science' degree in the Area of professional qualification 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural Studies, which contradicts the provisions of Art. 29 (1_3) of the ZRASRB and Article 60 (3) of the Regulations for the Implementation of the ZRASRB. However, according to Art. 7 of the Supplementary Provisions of the same Regulations, the system allows for the aggregation of coefficients within a single group of indicators (in this case, Group G), so that 'internal compensation may be applied and points lacking in one indicator may be supplemented by points from another'. It is precisely this that allows me to conclude that the candidate meets the minimum national requirements, since, although several of the publications cannot be taken into account, he has sufficient others (the monograph, which is not a habilitation thesis, and the published book based on a defended doctoral thesis alone amount to 175 points) to compensate for the necessary reduction in the number of articles and

studies. As a coefficient, the sum of the remaining, previously unused articles and studies amounts to 102.5 p.; in other words, the total in Group G continues to exceed the required minimum of 200 p. despite the reduction. I also have a comment regarding Group D, concerning the citations in the report: their coefficient has been calculated incorrectly: the number of citations for co-authored articles is counted in full for each individual author – there is no division, as is the case with publications. I regard this as an error in data entry rather than a substantive shortcoming, as it results in a reduction in the value rather than an increase. Let me repeat: despite the lack of precision in the presentation of the data, there is no doubt that the candidate meets the minimum national requirements.

II. Research Activities and Results

Having taught for many years at the Neofit Rilski South-West University (1991–2023), Assoc. Prof. Stefan Dechev has been working in the Department of Anthropology at New Bulgarian University since 2023. In 2024, he defended his doctoral thesis entitled *From the rice of Asia to the peppers of America: An entangled history of food and cuisine in the Ottoman Bulgaria and surrounding lands (late 14th to early 19th century)* to be awarded the academic degree of ‘Doctor of Science’ (Dr. Habil.) in the Area of professional qualification 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural Studies, and in 2025 – another thesis entitled *The memory of Stambolov. Politics, contexts and uses (1895–2020)* for the award of the academic degree ‘Doctor of Science’ in the Area of professional qualification 3.3. Political Sciences. These two dissertations, although not required, certainly confirm his expertise in the field of social sciences.

In this competition, Dechev is presenting a habilitation monograph entitled *Between the common people’s dishes and the delicacies of Constantinople: Food and cuisine in Ottoman Bulgaria and the surrounding lands (from the 1830s to 1878)*, which I shall discuss briefly. The monograph, comprising 575 pages, 35 of which are devoted to the bibliography, peer-reviewed by Prof. Dr. Habil. Rumen Daskalov and Prof. Dr. Habil. Martin Ivanov, is published by RIVA Publishing House. The content is organised into a preface (pp. 9–16), six chapters and a conclusion (pp. 523–539).

The author emphasises that this study is a continuation of the doctoral thesis *From the rice of Asia to the peppers of America*. The chronological scope of the present study hardly needs justification: it is a part that follows the previous one and precedes two further ones, with the period covered here being the very era of reforms of various kinds in the Ottoman Empire

(with the exception of the strictly fixed end date, which is open to debate). The narrative is set against the backdrop of general historical developments and modernisation processes, with particular emphasis on changes in trade, agriculture and the culture of everyday life. The author draws on a vast amount of historical data, sourced from a variety of materials such as archival records, published documents and travelogues, memoirs and diaries, cookery books, periodicals and works of fiction. Furthermore, the narrative is underpinned by commentaries and references to a wide range of academic research in the fields of history, ethnography, anthropology, the natural sciences and so on. As regards geographical scope, as the author himself points out, the narrative – whilst focusing on the Bulgarian lands – covers territories “from the capital Constantinople to Bosnia, Wallachia and Moldavia, Serbia and Greece, as well as a number of other neighbouring lands” (p. 16).

Stefan Dechev provides us with a thick description of the introduction and development in the region of a range of foods, as well as of dietary habits and cuisine, not only in relation to economic development and trade. What we read is, at the same time, an entangled history of borrowings and cultural transfers with neighbouring culinary traditions. The author pays particular attention to the social and cultural context and the hierarchies that are important for the realisation of cultural transfers. In his view, during the decades under consideration, the region’s cuisine remained exceptionally simple and monotonous (p. 89), with limited consumption of meat and animal products, as well as vegetables, whilst food production techniques (for example, in the case of dairy products) were far from modern. Although consumer culture was characterised primarily by the existence of self-sufficient villages (p. 243), the role of the market as a catalyst for the exchange of goods, as well as ideas, cannot be disputed.

Dechev notes the existence of “two main culinary spheres – Ottoman and Muslim, on the one hand, and Serbian-Wallachian-Hungarian (including Vojvodina and Transylvania), on the other” and considers that the sources point to a distinctly ‘multicultural’ picture (p. 244; cf. p. 529). Observing the culinary literature produced in the 1860s and 1870s, the author concludes that in the Serbian, Greek, and Romanian cases it was more open to the cuisines of Central Europe, France, and Italy, whilst the Bulgarian remained firmly within the Ottoman and Balkan culinary sphere (p. 353). Apart from the drive to integrate European standards, he also notes the desire of the Bulgarian elite to continue incorporating into their cuisine the refined urban gastronomic culture of the Ottoman Empire: “In this case, truly original and refined cuisine proved to be stronger than both anti-Turkish nationalism and the drive towards modernisation

and Europeanisation” (p. 521). Ultimately, however, the development of cuisine in the Balkans shows no significant differences during the period under consideration, and the entire discussion enables Stefan Dechev to conclude that in none of the Balkan cases did a national cuisine emerge before the emergence of the nation state (p. 521; pp. 534–535). In this regard, he emphasises the influence of what he calls the phenomenon of the emerging cookery books in the Balkans, which are driving modernising trends in culinary and gastronomic culture. It is precisely this phenomenon that contributes immensely to the creation of a modern housewife modelled on the European ideal within a local context (p. 352), and without this modern housewife, the author argues, “the future ‘national cuisine’ is impossible – both as an ideology and in practice” (p. 535).

The study by Assoc. Prof. Stefan Dechev, summarised here, is original and wide-ranging; it is based on an exceptionally rich array of sources and engages with the achievements of cultural history, ethnography, and anthropology alike. I expect that the further investigation and analysis of the emergence and development of national cuisine (specifically Bulgarian cuisine), as outlined by the author, will enhance the significance of the work carried out to date in the humanities and social sciences in Bulgaria.

I shall comment only briefly on the candidate’s other publications. Among them is the monograph *Unification vs. backroom dealings: Politics and memory (1885–1998)* (Zhanet-45, 2025), reviewed by Assoc. Prof. Nikolay Vukov, PhD and Assoc. Prof. Stoyan Antonov, PhD, which offers us an alternative history of the events surrounding 1885, but above all of the ways in which these events were subsequently utilised – from the end of the 19th century right through to the end of the 20th century. The clash between history and collective memory, which refracts it in different ways across various historical eras, provides fertile ground for analysis precisely within the field of cultural studies, and the author demonstrates a sound command of the tools required to analyse the processes and changes observed. I would also place the other monograph, *Stambolov after Stambolov. History, politics and memory (1895–2020)* (Prosveta, 2022) in the same field, despite the fact that it was submitted as a doctoral thesis for the award of the academic degree of ‘Doctor of Sciences’ in the Area of professional qualification 3.3. Political Sciences. The issues of collective memory and the uses of historical events (and figures), as well as the manipulations associated with them, are among the most extensively explored thematic areas in cultural studies.

As regards the studies and articles presented in the competition, I have already mentioned that some of them should be disregarded, at least in my view, as they were used in

the defence of a doctoral thesis (for the degree of ‘Doctor of Science’) in the Area of professional qualification 3.1, as is evident from the Autoreferat accompanying this thesis and available on NACID platform. These are the publications numbered 1, 3, 4, 6, 14, 15, 16 and 17 in the list presented as *Document_4a_Publikacii_NBU2*. However, I would like to emphasise that these publications undoubtedly belong to the field of social sciences. The remaining articles are more historical and historiographical in focus, but they too offer the author’s views on the balance between cultural conflict and historical narrative, or on the relationship between military-historical heritage and commemorative practices, and so on. Or, in other words, they once again address issues such as memory and heritage, borders and identities – central themes of research in the fields of anthropology and cultural studies. In all his publications, Stefan Dechev sets out a clear position and defends it convincingly. In this vein, I would not fail to mention the anthology *The hidden history. Polemics* (Paradox, 2019). Although described in the bibliography as a university textbook, this collection actually illustrates precisely the author’s distinctive views, which often diverge from the mainstream, particularly in the field of public history.

It is unlikely that this difference alone accounts for the numerous citations of Assoc. Prof. Dechev’s publications, most of which appear in journals, thematic volumes and monographs published by respected academic publishers in Bulgaria and abroad (covering a very wide geographical scope). These citations confirm the significance of the candidate’s achievements in the field of humanities and social sciences. His participation as a speaker at national and international conferences also bears witness to this.

It is well known that when assessing a candidate’s achievements for professorial position, it is not only publications and citations that matter. The listed participations in national and international projects once again confirm the broad spectrum of Stefan Dechev’s academic interests. I would like to highlight just two of them: the national project, based at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (IEFEM-BAS), on the construction of national cultural heritage abroad; and the international project, led by UCL London, dedicated to cuisine through the prism of culture and health.

III. Teaching academic activities

The candidate’s teaching activities deserve special attention. The number of lecture courses taught by Assoc. Prof. Dechev at NBU is impressive. This amounts to more than ten courses over the last three academic years, covering vast fields of knowledge: from working

with archives and presenting Europe as an anthropological field, through issues such as power and domination, ethnic and religious communities, nations and nationalism, to courses which explore the relationship between politics and historical memory and between history and anthropology, not to mention core courses for the Department of Anthropology such as Anthropology of Bulgaria and Anthropology of Europe. With the possible exception of the latter, all the others seem to me to be directly related to the candidate's research activities. Furthermore, Stefan Dechev has supervised three doctoral students who have successfully defended their theses, which is yet another positive indicator in his portfolio as a candidate for the academic post of 'professor'.

IV. Administrative and public activities

It is difficult to gain an insight into Assoc. Prof. Dechev's administrative work from the materials presented. However, we have sufficient information regarding his public activities – both from the national media and from social networks. He has appeared on various television and radio programmes on numerous occasions. His presence in the press is also evident; amongst his many popular publications, I would highlight the series “The Hidden History” in *Маргиналия*.

V. Personal impressions of the candidate

I have known Stefan Dechev as a colleague for many years through his publications, but also through his participation in various seminars and conferences both in Bulgaria and abroad.

I have no conflict of interest.

To sum up, the documents and materials submitted by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Habil. Stefan Dechev for participation in the announced competition meet the requirements of the Academic Staff Development Law in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its Implementation and the Regulation for the Development of Academic Staff of the NBU on the Conditions and Procedure for the Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and for Holding Academic Positions. The candidate has submitted a sufficient number of academic works, distinct from the materials used in previous competitions and defences. His work contain original scientific contributions, a significant proportion of which have been published in journals and scientific collections issued by academic publishers of recognised standing in Bulgaria and abroad. I have no doubts regarding possible instances of plagiarism in the publications submitted for review.

On the basis of the presented opinion, I give my positive assessment and recommend that the Scientific Jury prepare a report- proposal to the Academic Council of the New Bulgarian University for the appointment of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Habil. Stefan Ivanov Dechev to the academic position of ‘Professor’ in the Department of Anthropology within the Area of professional qualification 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural Studies.

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Signature

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