

## **REVIEW**

**by Prof. D.Sc. Martin Ivanov Ivanov, Sofia University *St. Kliment Ohridski*,  
professional field: 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences,**

**on the scientific papers for participation in a competition for the academic position of  
Professor, in the professional field: 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences for the  
needs of the New Bulgarian University, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Anthropology,  
announced in the State Gazette, issue 51 of June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2026, with candidate Associate Professor  
Stefan Ivanov Dechev, D.Sc.**

### **I. Legality of the procedure**

By order of the Rector of the New Bulgarian University No. 3-PK-262/27.07.2026, I have been appointed as an external member of the scientific jury for the academic “position of professor” in the professional field 3.1. „Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences“, 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences. The only participant in the competition is Assoc. Prof. D.Sc. Stefan Ivanov Dechev - lecturer at the New Bulgarian University. By decision of the scientific jury, I have been appointed as its reviewer.

My review of the procedure for admission to participate in the competition and for the formation of the scientific jury did not find any deviation from the provisions of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for its implementation.

According to the documents provided, the candidate meets the minimum national requirements, which is why I believe that the procedure is entirely legal.

To prepare this review, all documents necessary for the defense were received, including: an application for admission to participate in the competition; a creative biography; diplomas; a self-assessment report of the candidate; a list of publications; a report on scientific contributions; a list of publications with which he/she participates in the competition and their digital copies; a table of compliance with the minimum national requirements, as well as an order for the appointment of a jury.

## **II. Assessment of compliance with the minimum national requirements and the requirements of the New Bulgarian University**

The candidate for the academic “position of professor” - Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stefan Dechev, is a graduate of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. From 1991 to 2023 he worked at the South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, where he worked until 2024 as a lecturer in History of Bulgaria (New and Most Recent) at the Faculty of Law and History. Over the past 3 years, Assoc. Prof. Dechev has continued his professional development at the New Bulgarian University.

Over the years, the candidate has been a guest lecturer at the Institute for East European Studies at the University of Amsterdam (1997), the Complutense University of Madrid (2001-2003) and the Center for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz (2017), as well as a visiting researcher at the Center for Advanced Studies in Sofia (2003-2004, 2004-2005) and New Europe College in Bucharest (2007), Collegium Budapest (2008-2009). Until 2018, he was a member of the International Association for Bulgarian Studies, and from 2007 to 2023, he was a member of the Editorial Board of the International Journal for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at Georgia Southern University in the USA. He has received research grants from the Swedish Bank Tercentenary Foundation, Volkswagen Stiftung, Central European University, Harvard University, University of California Berkley’s College, University College London, Center for Development and Reconciliation – Thessaloniki and many others.

His numerous participations in conferences and his media appearances are clear evidence of Assoc. Prof. Dechev's diverse interests and skills in presenting his scientific research not only to an academic, but also to a much wider and mass audience. I must note that even in this respect the candidate's Biography presented to the scientific jury is incomplete, because it does not include a number of his publications in the newspaper "Dnevnik" related to the history of food, nutrition, Bulgarian-Russian relations, Stefan Stambolov, etc. His biographical information also lacks the awarding of St. Dechev with the Polish prize "Wacław Felczak and Henryk Wereszycki" for his book dedicated to the Unification of Bulgaria. The Plovdiv Prize awarded to him this year for his new book on the Unification has not been mentioned either.

From his early research, Assoc. Prof. Stefan Dechev has developed a lasting interest in nationalism, the nation and the nation-state. Over the years, the topic will appear in a variety of its ramifications in his scientific research – the use of nationalism as a mobilization resource, as a basis for propaganda, the connection with philism and phobia, etc. And if during the first two decades of his scientific career Dechev usually projected this major topic onto the condensed historical events surrounding the Unification, the Bulgarian Crisis of 1886-1887 and the rule of Stefan Stambolov, then over time the scene will change. From 2010 onwards, the candidate will increasingly investigate the manifestations of the national and nationalism in the field of food and nutrition. In this sense, his article 'Bulgarian, but not exactly Shopsian. About one of the culinary symbols', printed in the Bulgarian Folklore, No. 1, pp. 125-140 can be perceived as a program for the increasingly lasting interest of St. Dechev in this issue that is so undeservedly overlooked by our historical science. The emphasized academic, but also public interest in the article, its citation even in everyday conversations, probably gave the candidate an additional boost and he deepened his research on the food of the Bulgarians. This was followed by his articles on hot peppers, beans, rice, etc., some of which are included in the scientific production presented in this competition. In all these publications, however, Stefan Dechev does not betray his original interest in the national and nationalism as one of the symbols that food and nutrition resemble.

Stefan Dechev participated in the competition with two monographs, six studies, one teaching aid and an impressive number of 13 articles. All of them with undisputed authorship and without

proven plagiarism or unreliability in the scientific data presented in the scientific works. The presented scientific production not only meets, but significantly exceeds the minimum requirements for scientific and teaching activities for the field of higher education social sciences, professional field: 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences from the ZRASRB and from the Regulation on the development of the academic staff of NBU and Appendix 2. Minimum national requirements and requirements of NBU, which candidates must meet to acquire a scientific degree and to occupy the academic positions of “Senior Assistant Professor”, “Associate Professor” and “Professor”. With a required minimum number of 550 points, the candidate has collected and presented 1,648.51 points - more than three times more than necessary for the successful conduct of the procedure.

For example, under the group of indicators D (published monograph that is not presented as a main habilitation work; articles, studies and reports published in scientific publications, referenced and indexed in world-renowned databases with scientific information and in non-refereed journals with scientific review or published in edited collective volumes), Assoc. Prof. Stefan Dechev has 278.1 points out of the required 200 points. Under the group of indicators E (citations), the points are 544.8 out of the required 100 – five times more, and under indicator E (leadership or participation in national and international scientific or educational projects) – 475 out of the required 100 points. Although it is not included in the list of mandatory minimum requirements, the candidate also submits a dissertation for the award of the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences”, which brings him an additional 200 points. It should also be noted that a large part of Assoc. Prof. Dechev's publications are in foreign languages, which makes him recognizable, read and cited not only in Bulgaria.

### **III. Research (creative) activity and results**

As his main habilitation work, Assoc. Prof. Stefan Dechev presents the recently published monograph: *Among the Common Dishes and the Feasts of Constantinople. Nutrition and Cuisine in the Ottoman Empire and the Surrounding Lands (from the 1830s to 1878)*. Sofia: Riva, 2025. 575 p. ISBN 978-954-320-992-7, of which, together with my colleague Prof. Dr. Rumen Daskalov,

I had the honor of being a scientific reviewer. In practice, the book can be considered as the second part of the monograph *From the Rice of Asia to the Peppers of America. An Intertwined History of Food and Cuisine in Ottoman Bulgaria and the Neighboring Lands (from the End of the 14th to the Beginning of the 19th Century)*. Sofia: Riva, 2025. 546 p. ISBN 978-954-320-992-7. It was the author's main habilitation work for the acquisition of the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences”, in which I participated as a member of the scientific jury.

The book *Among the Common Dishes and Feasts of Constantinople* is innovative in many ways. It directs its research not only to a topic, but also to an entire scientific direction almost completely neglected by Bulgarian historiography until now. At first glance, such a statement may sound provocative, especially against the background of the rich ethnographic, agronomic, culinary and generally historical scientific research on food and nutrition. And yet, as the author shows us in impressive detail, the rational grain that can be sifted from this otherwise very voluminous literature to date is insufficient to construct even a superficial answer to the question: What are the historical roots of what we are used to calling “Bulgarian national cuisine” today? and the related sub-questions: What did the Bulgarian eat during the last few Ottoman decades?; Does the diet of the “ancestors of modern Bulgarians” change over time and how?

Secondly, Assoc. Prof. Stefan Dechev fills the gaping historiographic gap extremely skillfully, following the already established tracks in foreign literature. The entry of new, overseas foods, the appearance of cookbooks, mutual nutritional influences, utensils, “habits” when eating – these and many other subtopics are successfully woven into large and smaller debates in foreign historiography.

And thirdly, the “supranational” approach chosen by Dechev, in which, along with what is happening on the “food front” of the Bulgarian lands, developments in the near and more distant parts of the Balkans, the Orient and Central Europe are also kept in focus, allows the author to paint a multi-layered picture, far exceeding the traditional factual framework.

Structurally, the book consists of six interconnected parts. In the first and second chapters, the reader’s attention is drawn to focused on individual foods – old and gradually new ones such as bread, beans, peppers, potatoes, fruits, meat, dairy products, sweets, etc. The third chapter

examines the different levels in the culture of eating – from the high strata of the palace kitchen, through the inns, student dining rooms and the army, to the lowest common people’s rural tables. I should especially note the fourth chapter, which focuses on cookbooks as an important building block of the emerging “national cuisine”. The already mentioned regional development of the topic is the subject of the next, fifth chapter. On the terrain of the wide “cultural basin”, stretching between Transylvania, Banat, Bosnia, Dalmatia and the Aegean islands, Ottoman culinary traditions and “*alafranga*” cooking meet and interact. While in Thrace and Eastern Bulgaria the influences come largely from Istanbul, Edirne and Plovdiv, in Danube Bulgaria “the gastronomic models of Bucharest completely dominate” (p. 533). Despite the regional peculiarities, the broad cultural area of the Balkans and the Middle East share “a common gastronomic culture” (p. 388), albeit with different ratios between “Western” and “Eastern” influence. Dechev even speaks of an “Ottoman cultural pool” and “shared *sarmi, kebab, baklava, halva*, etc.” (p. 531). The final sixth chapter returns the narrative to the author’s initial interest in the field of the national and nationalism. Can we talk about a “Bulgarian national cuisine” and what are its original sources in the last three and a half – four decades before the Liberation? St. Dechev’s answer is negative. With the exception of G. S. Rakovski, contemporary Bulgarian authors “do not set themselves the goal of building any national cuisine at all. They realize and recognize the culinary superiority of Istanbul and consider all these dishes, as already said, as common and characteristic of “our countries” and “our places”. (pp. 534-535).

Somewhat surprisingly, one of the central themes in the book – along with the national and specific manifestations of food and nutrition – the combination of “new” and “old”, “traditional” and “modern”, “Western” and “Eastern” is not honored with a separate chapter. Valuable observations on it are scattered throughout the text (the paragraphs on rice, potatoes, beef, pastries, etc. in the first and second chapters, the entire fourth and fifth chapters, and a number of paragraphs in the sixth chapter). We find summaries on the topic only in the conclusion. According to the author, “although close to Istanbul and the Mediterranean, today’s Bulgarian lands remain relatively far from the core and are definitely the periphery” (p. 537). Although new crops (beans, peppers, corn) gradually entered the diet of our ancestors, it remained extremely “frugal” in terms of nutrition. For example, regarding sweets: “Despite living in or near two

empires that are world-famous for their confectionery (Ottoman and Habsburg), the use of sugar among the mass of the population continues to be more than modest” (p. 523). Assoc. Prof. St. Dechev remains unexplained by this conservatism of the Bulgarians, their slowness in accepting the new (food), their extreme frugality, the glaring nutritional (and to some extent cultural) peripherality given their geographical proximity to the center.

A series of studies and articles can also be attributed to the thematic circle of the monograph, through which the chronological scope of the topic has been expanded (up to the 1980s), and its individual aspects (for example: the perception of beans, chili peppers, Shopska salad, traditional diet, cookbooks) have been significantly condensed.

Enriching the thematic arsenal of Assoc. Prof. Dechev does not mean that he loses sight of other scientific fields in which he has made a significant academic contribution for decades. I will recall his overview and in many respects pioneering articles and studies on the current state of Bulgarian historiography, the understanding of military monuments “as peculiar instruments for political interactions”, Bulgarian-Macedonian cultural conflicts and historical narratives.

Along with these two parallel and largely interconnected scientific streams, Assoc. Prof. Stefan Dechev also keeps in focus a number of other interests related to what he calls “hidden history”. In the textbook of the same name, the author subjects the established Bulgarian historical paradigm and nationalist status quo to a “critical reassessment”. According to the apt definition of the *Marginalia* journal, the textbook collects “provocative texts dedicated to little-known and unknown hidden and silenced pages of our past”.

#### **IV. Educational and teaching activities**

Assoc. Prof. D.Sc. Stefan Dechev has a rich teaching career behind him, which began in 1991 at the Southwestern University “Neofit Rilski”, and since 2023 - at the New Bulgarian University. Over the years, he has developed and taught numerous courses in the field of history, anthropology and archival studies with a wide thematic and temporal scope – “Nations and Nationalism”, “The Balkans in Transition to Democracy”, “Masculinity in Bulgarian Politics”,

"History of Food and Nutrition" and many others. He has participated in four scientific juries and has been the scientific supervisor of five doctoral students.

## **V. Personal impressions of the candidate**

I know Assoc. Ph.D. Stefan Dechev and I have been following his scientific work for over two decades, I was his reviewer in the procedure for his acquisition of the scientific degree of "Doctor of Sciences", as well as a scientific reviewer of his latest book: *Among the common dishes and feasts of Constantinople. Food and cuisine in the Ottoman Empire and surrounding lands (from the 30s of the 19th century to 1878*. Sofia: Riva, 2025. 575 p. ISBN 978-954-320-992-7.

I have always respected the innovation and depth of his research, his clear civic position on a number of not only historical topics and his impressive academic courage. All his texts, along with his public appearances and social activity, paint St. Dechev as an unconventional, modern historian, far beyond the narrow boundaries of the national (nationalist) paradigm. His analytical abilities, broad knowledge of the international context and literature, his language skills and academic fearlessness undoubtedly turn the candidate into a "white crow" in our graying historical community.

In my research, exercises and lecture courses, I have used his publications as important for describing and understanding various aspects of Bulgaria's recent past. Both in terms of quantity and quality, the candidate's scientific output has long exceeded the minimum requirements for holding the academic position of "professor" and it is a pity that this competition is only now being held. Of course, neither the candidate St. Dechev nor the New Bulgarian University is to blame for this, but it is a bad example of (in)academic intolerance in some Bulgarian universities.

## **V. Conclusion**

Taking into account all of the above, I will confidently vote for Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stefan Ivanov Dechev to be elected to the academic position of "professor" in professional field 3.1. Sociology,

Anthropology and Cultural Sciences for the needs of the New Bulgarian University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Anthropology, and I recommend that he be admitted to election and approved by the Academic Council of NBU.

**Sofia, September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2026**

**Prof. D.Sc. Martin Ivanov**