

Reference

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for the competition for the academic position of "Professor" of New Bulgarian University, Sofia, in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences. Assoc. Prof. Stefan Ivanov Dechev, D.Sc., from New Bulgarian University, is participating as a candidate in the competition for the academic position of "Professor" — announced in the "State Gazette" (Issue 51 of June 5, 2026) — for the Department of Anthropology at New Bulgarian University.

I. Assessment of compliance with minimum national requirements and the requirements of New Bulgarian University

Stefan Dechev graduated from the Faculty of History at Sofia University in 1988. In 2004, he obtained his PhD with a dissertation titled "Russophile and Russophobe Ideology in the Bulgarian Press (1886–1894)." Between 1991 and 2023, he taught at the South-West University, as well as at various other universities and within academic circles. He has held the position of Associate Professor at the South-West University since 2012. He has acquired skills and experience through Bulgarian and international training courses, programs, and collaborations, establishing himself as one of the country's leading historians, with a profile and research interests that integrate his work into the fields of social and cultural anthropology. He holds the degree of "Doctor of Sciences" in the professional field of Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural Studies (3.1) as of 2024, as well as a "Doctor of Sciences" degree in professional field 3.3. "Political Science," effective 2025. For the current procedure, the minimum national requirements and those of New Bulgarian University have been met with a score exceeding the required threshold.

II. Research (creative) activity and results

For the current competition, Assoc. Prof. Stefan Dechev has submitted academic works for review that have not been presented in previous procedures. They are categorized as follows: 2 monographs (authored individually), 6 studies, 13 articles, and one teaching aid. The

description of the competition materials indicates that the candidate has presented original research works and publications. The scope and structure of the submitted academic output provide an excellent opportunity to evaluate the candidate's qualities as a researcher. Overall, the submitted works meet the minimum requirements set out in the Regulations for the Application of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria at New Bulgarian University, and no evidence of plagiarism or the use of artificial intelligence has been found in them.

The monograph titled “Between Common Folk Dishes and the Cuisine of Constantinople: Food and Cooking in Ottoman Bulgaria and Neighboring Lands (from the 1830s to 1878)” offers a systematic research perspective on food and dietary habits in the region during a period coinciding with societal modernization—driven by the industrial era—and the processes of nation-building. Precisely for this reason, tracing the pathways through which new foods were introduced, culinary skills were established, and various behavioral patterns and lifestyles were adopted proves crucial to understanding the processes of societal modernization in the country, which unfolded from major urban centers toward the periphery. To arrive at this insight, the researcher meticulously examines a wealth of evidence regarding the foods and culinary preferences of Bulgarians at the time, as well as the environment in which they lived. Against this backdrop, innovations stand out, allowing for an outline of the gradual changes—and even the delays—in the adoption and use of many food products that are today considered "natural" staples of our cuisine. The monograph falls within the fields of the history of everyday life and cultural anthropology; while it seeks to explore the subject of food and nutrition in the past from multiple perspectives, it simultaneously addresses contemporary issues, thereby making an undeniable contribution to this area of research.

In his scholarly work, Assoc. Prof. Stefan Dechev focuses on topics that engage his research sensibilities, leading him to work in several other specialized fields as well. The second monograph, “The Unification versus the "Behind-the-Scenes": Politics and Memory (1885–1998)”, focuses not only on the hard-won union between the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia but also recalls largely forgotten facts regarding the deep political rift that emerged among Bulgarians after 1885. The coup and counter-coup of 1886—centered on the abdication and return of Prince Alexander — and the Russophile revolt of 1887 were all shaped by the Unification; despite the victory in the Serbo-Bulgarian War, these events led to a foreign policy that divided the young nation into opposing factions. The author draws upon

contemporary accounts and opinions that did not support the act of Unification — views that appear surprising today. Understanding the political reality of that era reveals the divisions within the political elite—those who favored the Unification and those who did not—while the described situation transcends the notion of history as a series of predetermined events viewed solely from our modern perspective. The study also traces how the narrative surrounding the Unification and its attendant conflicts evolved and was reinterpreted over the decades leading up to the close of the 20th century. In this book, the author once again raises ethical questions regarding the modern historian's service to society, exploring the interplay between the historian, the media, and historical myths. Thus, the responsibility of the professional historian comes into focus; they remain in debt to the present if they merely reiterate the established paradigms of the national narrative.

Topics related to food and cuisine, as well as historical and cultural myths, frequently engage Assoc. Prof. Dechev's attention; consequently, the six studies presented here explore — without merely repeating — various facets of these issues. Four of the studies focus on food, portraying national cuisine both as a historical reality and as an element of the social imagination. All of them have appeared in prestigious Bulgarian and international collections, a fact that further underscores their significance as publications. Two other studies address historiographical challenges within Bulgarian historical scholarship — specifically regarding the so-called "Revival Process" — and the processes involved in "inventing" the Middle Ages.

Assoc. Prof. Dechev's articles further develop these themes, addressing the need to rethink the national narrative and drawing upon contemporary fieldwork and research into cultural heritage. This research spans a wide geographical area—covering both Bulgaria and Bulgarian communities abroad — and traces the processes by which this cultural heritage is constructed. The studies and articles by Assoc. Prof. Stefan Dechev represent research distinct from his monographs. As an experienced university lecturer, he is also deeply interested in the methodology underpinning various types of observation and research; he therefore produces scholarly texts designed to assist students while serving as a corrective to traditional historiography. In this way, he demonstrates knowledge and skills that reinforce and link his scholarly inquiries with his teaching activities. The book "The Hidden History: Polemics" — cited here as a teaching resource — is a collection of articles that effectively opens up the

prevailing model of teaching and training historians in Bulgaria, while also clarifying the author's civic stance.

III. Citations by Other Authors

Assoc. Prof. Stefan Dechev has documented at least 90 citations by other researchers—predominantly in foreign publications—demonstrating an excellent grasp of his work, as well as the relevance and utility of the theses he has developed, which align with the broader context of international scholarly inquiry.

IV. Remarks on the candidate's activities and achievements

Assoc. Prof. Dechev has supervised three doctoral students who successfully defended their theses, thereby demonstrating his teaching and mentoring capabilities. He has participated in one national and ten international research projects, underscoring his status as a prominent and recognized researcher whose work aligns with numerous contemporary scholarly paradigms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the scientific works submitted by the candidate for the competition are sufficient in volume and fall within the thematic scope of the relevant academic field. Overall, the candidate meets the competition requirements—surpassing the necessary benchmarks for research output—and demonstrates impressive activity in the fields of science and education.

Assoc. Prof. Stefan Dechev is an established specialist in history and cultural anthropology whose research meets the requirements of current regulations for appointment to the academic position of "Professor." His scholarly contributions—characterized by an anthropological interpretation of the phenomena, processes, objects, and figures under study, all situated within a broad sociocultural context—define his body of work. This provides the basis for me to recommend to the esteemed members of the Scientific Jury for this competition that they support the appointment of Assoc. Prof. Stefan Dechev to the academic position of "Professor" in Higher Education Area 3 (Social, Economic, and Legal Sciences), Professional Field 3.1 (Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural Studies), at the Department of Anthropology of New Bulgarian University, in accordance with the *Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria* and the *Regulations for its Application*.

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Opinion prepared by:

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