

OPINION

By Prof. Roumen Donchev Daskalov, D.Sc. (New Bulgarian University and Institute of Balkan Studies with Centre of Thracology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; scientific field 3.1: Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural Studies)

regarding participation in the competition for the academic position of Professor in professional field 3.1 (Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural Studies), announced in the “State Gazette” (DV), Issue 51 of June 5, 2026, with candidate Assoc. Prof. Stefan Ivanov Dechev, D.Sc.

The work submitted for the professorship—titled “Between Common Fare and the Dishes of Constantinople: Diet and Cuisine in Ottoman Bulgaria and Surrounding Lands (from the 1830s to 1878)”—is a substantial study spanning 575 pages. It comprises a theoretical and methodological introduction—which outlines the research objectives and tasks and situates the work within the existing scholarship in the field—followed by six substantive chapters and an extensive conclusion that summarizes the study's key findings. The 30-page bibliography (including archival sources) lists titles in Bulgarian, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Romanian, Serbian, Croatian, Greek, Polish, and Hungarian. The scale of the undertaking is also evidenced by the vast number of footnotes—numbering, by my estimate, between two and three thousand. **Citation accuracy** has been strictly observed.

In the introduction, Assoc. Prof. Dechev justifies treating the Tanzimat—the era of reforms in the Ottoman Empire beginning in 1839—and the first decades following Bulgaria's independence as a distinct period regarding food and dietary habits. According to the author, this era saw qualitatively new developments: the introduction of new foods and different, more modern cooking methods linked to the general modernization of the Empire—a process that continued into the era of independent Bulgaria. The study examines not only food products but also cuisine, cooking practices, and specific dishes, as well as utensils, furniture, and dining customs. Although its primary focus is the Bulgarian lands, the study extends to food and cuisine across the vast expanse of the Ottoman Empire and into the neighboring, by then autonomous Balkan states—Greece, Serbia, and Romania—while also incorporating the influences of other “culinary spheres”: Central European, Western European, Mediterranean, and Asian. The result is an “entangled history” and—given the timeframe and the connections to both the preceding and (prospectively) the subsequent eras—a history of the “longue durée”. The study draws upon data from a wide range of sources: information on crop cultivation; commercial registers; kitchen records from the Ottoman court and the Janissary corps; documents from local kadis; data on urban consumption patterns; accounts by travelers and the memoirs or diaries of Bulgarians; cookbooks; advertisements for dishes in the periodical press; and more. Beyond the relatively recently established field of the history of food and dining, the work incorporates ideas and concepts from a number of other disciplines—specifically economic history (including the history of trade), ethnography, the history of everyday life, and cultural history, all within the fields of Ottoman and Balkan studies, which renders the work truly interdisciplinary. Dechev duly acknowledges those who previously worked on similar topics—most notably Maria Todorova, Rayna Gavrilo, and others.

It is neither possible nor necessary to delve into all the diverse issues explored in depth by Assoc. Prof. Dechev—issues concerning the introduction and spread of a given product, its method of preparation, and socially conditioned consumption. I would simply like to note that the exposition is substantiated by numerous examples upon which the conclusions rest. The collection and analysis of the vast body of empirical data naturally constitute a distinct contribution by the author.

I will focus on the study's key findings, as summarized in the conclusion. First, what were the changes in diet during the period under review? Although an increasing segment of

the population was turning to beans, people continued to rely primarily on large quantities of hard bread, cabbage, and—increasingly—peppers, alongside very limited amounts of meat and homemade cheese. Rice, introduced centuries earlier, was consumed mainly on special occasions due to limited purchasing power and the fact that the vast majority of the population had little connection to the market. Consumption of dairy products was low, and eggs were eaten very sparingly. Sugar usage was minimal. However, the consumption of corn and beans—and especially peppers—was on the rise. Overall, the consumption of fruits and vegetables was negligible. Diets were monotonous and lacking in variety, with fresh bread and meat appearing on the table in greater abundance only during holidays. Throughout the period under study, fresh milk remained primarily a food for children, while homemade cheese was of poor quality. Dairy processing was dominated by Yuruks, Vlachs, Karakachans, and Jews, though Bulgarians were increasingly entering the sector; this led to a certain rise in the availability of higher-quality dairy products, particularly *kashkaval* (yellow cheese). By the end of the Ottoman period, the Bulgarian population's adoption of new foods was not yet complete. In the newly established Bulgarian state, peppers were widely consumed, whereas red tomatoes and potatoes—which only became commonplace in Bulgaria after World War I—saw limited use. These patterns mirror the situations in Serbia, Romania, and even Greece, a similarity stemming from the absence of significant social stratification. Culinary limitations were partly offset by more lavish festive spreads, while the tables of wealthy notables and high-ranking clergy followed Ottoman and Phanariot culinary traditions. Dishes that would later become emblematic of "national cuisines" were not yet part of the everyday life of the common people. Nevertheless, during the final two decades of Ottoman rule, key positive changes in food and diet emerged: the consumption of beans and *kachamak* (cornmeal mush) increased, offering alternatives to the previous monotony of a grain-based diet, while—at least in urban centers—the more affluent consumed greater quantities of meat, dairy products, rice, *kashkaval* (yellow cheese), and sweet treats.

Secondly, where do these innovations originate? In the Bulgarian case, as well as among other Balkan peoples, they stem from communities in the capital city or in the diaspora that are in close contact with a more developed gastronomic culture—specifically, the merchant class and market gardeners among Bulgarians; Habsburg Serbs in Vojvodina and the Banat among Serbs; and Greek emigrants on the island of Syros among Greeks.

A third conclusion concerns the logic of dissemination. Dechev demonstrates that this process does not always follow a linear path—moving from the palace kitchen down the social ladder via the capital, major cities, and the wealthy class to the middle strata and the vast majority of the population. For instance, while the bean first appeared in urban settings, the peppers that arrived later overtook it in terms of consumption among the common people; meanwhile, Ottoman palace cuisine was in no rush to adopt the bean—just as it was slow to embrace maize, *kachamak* (polenta), and potatoes. The spread of rice, however, originated in the palace, the Ottoman army, the capital, major cities, and Islamic charitable institutions. The trajectory of beef and veal also did not originate in the rural homestead but rather emerged among affluent urbanites under European influence; at the palace, it was initially served to foreigners during banquets, whereas beef was otherwise used to make *pastarma* and *sudzhuk*. And, of course, pork and wine were taboo for Muslims on religious grounds, while pilaf and sherbet were highly characteristic of Ottoman culinary culture.

Another conclusion concerns the two culinary spheres that influenced Bulgarians, following the undoubtedly strongest influence exerted by Constantinople. Shared within the Ottoman culinary realm and neighboring Balkan countries are ingredients such as rice and sugar, as well as dishes like *chorba* (soup), *yakhniya* (stew), *byurek*, *sarmi* (stuffed rolls), *kebab*, *baklava*, *kadaif*, and *halva*—all of which are broadly Oriental-Ottoman products and dishes. The other culinary sphere is the Central European or Habsburg one (centered on Vienna and Budapest), which exerted a particularly strong influence on the Serbs and Romanians, who

were geographically closer to it. From this sphere came the use of hot peppers, black pepper, and other spices, as well as the consumption of pork, pastries, and confectionery. The final major culinary sphere of influence is the European Mediterranean. Despite certain regional peculiarities, Dechev does not believe that one can speak of "national cuisines" during this period—even as a concept—notwithstanding the existence of a few "precocious" cookbooks in Bulgarian. In the realm of culinary history, he thus confirms the view held by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger regarding the "invention of tradition."

Let me systematize the contributions of Assoc. Prof. Dechev's work. I have already mentioned some of these—namely, the collection and presentation of a vast body of empirical data regarding food and nutrition during the period under study, as well as the work's strongly interdisciplinary nature. The subject matter of nutrition is inherently interdisciplinary, encompassing areas of expertise ranging from the food itself and dish preparation to the sociological and anthropological aspects of eating, and extending to issues of social and cultural identity. Dechev deepens the historical perspective, enabling him to critique the vague—and sometimes outright erroneous—temporal contextualization found in certain ethnographic analyses.

Secondly, from a theoretical perspective, the core concepts of the work are "food," "cuisine," and "dishes." However, dishes and food are linked in manifold ways to history, power, ideology, identity, class, ethnicity, nation, gender, and so forth. A particularly interesting issue is the function of food—examined by Dechev—as an expression of social status and as an ethnic and national marker, as well as the—in his view—still-absent modern concept of a "national cuisine." The precursor to this national cuisine was the culinary practice of the refined Bulgarian elite of the past, who adopted dishes and techniques primarily from Ottoman-Turkish and Greek cuisines. One of the study's key findings concerns the dietary differences between the Bulgarian population—characterized by a high degree of social egalitarianism (similar to that of Serbia)—and neighboring regions possessing aristocratic or plutocratic elites, such as Vojvodina, Croatia, Transylvania, Wallachia, and Hungary. In those areas, culinary innovations spread more easily, facilitated by the presence of aristocratic courts with the necessary economic means, as well as by greater geographical proximity to neighboring culinary spheres—particularly that of Central Europe.

I must specifically highlight the consistent distinctions Dechev draws regarding dietary habits across different settings—the capital Istanbul, versus the empire's major cities, small towns, the rural periphery, and mountain populations—as well as the consistent social differentiation between elite consumption (the palace, high-ranking officials, Janissaries, and the navy), the affluent urban strata, and the common people (rural populations and the urban poor). At the same time, as previously noted, Dechev refutes the universality of a "linear" model regarding the spread of foods—tracing a path from the Sultan's palace and the Istanbul upper class, through the army, to the empire's major cities and the affluent strata of smaller towns, eventually reaching the rural population. While this sequence holds true for certain foods, others did not originate in the royal court but rather among the wealthy urban classes, only to be adopted by the court at a later stage. Attention is also paid to the "hidden" (in the sense of marginalized) culinary traditions of transhumant groups—such as the Vlachs, Karakachans, and Yuruks—as well as those of settled communities like the Jews.

Dechev employs several innovative methodological approaches: the *longue durée* (long-term) chronology of the French Annales school; tracing the trajectory of the transmission of foods and dishes alongside their local adaptations (i.e., transfer mechanisms); comparisons between Balkan countries to delineate variations within the Ottoman culinary sphere; and, finally, tracing the influences of the Central European and Mediterranean culinary spheres on the Ottoman one (the so-called "entangled history"). These are all modern methods, employed with understanding and skill. Moreover, the theoretical and methodological premises do not

remain confined to the introduction but are elaborated upon within the study itself, thereby gaining persuasive force.

All of the above also addresses the question of the **significance** of the research topic and the overall ambition of this truly fundamental work. It is an independent study; not only does it avoid repeating the subject matter and content of the author's doctoral dissertation (or the work submitted for the position of Associate Professor), but it does not overlap with them in any way.

The **novelty** of the work presented here within the Bulgarian academic community hardly requires justification. This is particularly true for the field of history, where studies on diet—and on everyday life in general—still tend to elicit a smile, often being dismissed as all but "frivolous." However, the work's novelty for Bulgarian humanities and social sciences lies not merely in its subject matter, but in the extensive exploration of its various aspects and specific details, as well as its historical depth. Last but not least, despite its considerable scope and specialized nature, the book is written in elegant, rich language and will appeal to a broad audience, not just to specialists. It contains vivid descriptions of foods and culinary customs by contemporaries and foreign travelers alike—details that enliven the narrative, a touch the author himself adds "for dessert," so to speak. Everyone will find something of interest in the work. Personally, for instance, I was fascinated to learn about the preparation of *sherbet*; I knew the name and that it was a sweet drink, but I had no idea what it was made of or how it was prepared and consumed. I also did not know that for a long time, tomatoes were eaten green—primarily as pickles—rather than red. Others will find different details to appreciate; there is something here for everyone.

The abstract aligns with the core tenets of the submitted work and provides a clear overview of its contributions. The author has included a list of 34 publications produced subsequent to the dissertation; 12 of these are closely related to the dissertation's subject—food and nutrition—with half (6) published in English. These works have appeared in prestigious outlets, including De Gruyter, Brill, and journals such as the "European Journal of Nutrition", a seminal publication in the field. Dechev's work has garnered significant international recognition, evidenced by numerous citations from both Bulgarian and foreign authors—including in authoritative publications like the "European Journal of Nutrition" and the "South-East European Journal". Given the volume of citations, I will simply confirm that they are well-documented.

I have known my younger colleague Stefan Dechev personally for many years. Alongside his exceptional capacity for work—manifested in enviable productivity—I would like to highlight his active participation in various historical debates, as well as his public engagement across different media platforms, including Radio Free Europe, Bulgarian television channels, and social media. In this context, I must also note his critical mindset and the civic courage he demonstrates in upholding unpopular views.

Having perhaps digressed a little, let me conclude decisively. The work possesses all the qualities required for the conferral of the rank of Professor; with full confidence in the merits of both the work and the candidate, I recommend that the esteemed committee award Stefan Dechev the rank of Professor in the specified field.

Sincerely,

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