

OPINION
by Prof. Dr. Daniela Lyubenova Koleva
Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”
on the materials submitted for participation in a competition for the academic position
of “Associate Professor”
at Plovdiv University “Paisiy Hilendarski”

in: field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences
professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural studies (Culture and communication)

In the competition for “Associate Professor”, announced in the State Gazette, issue 98 of 19.11.2024 and on the website of Plovdiv University “Paisii Hilendarski” for the needs of the Department of Ethnology at the Faculty of Philosophy and History, the only candidate is Senior Assistant Professor Dr. Maria Stoyanova Petrova (Kisikova) from PU “Paisiy Hilendarski”, Department of Ethnology.

1. General presentation of the candidate

Dr. Maria Petrova (Kisikova) has submitted for participation in the competition the monograph *Chitalishte and Time. Institutional Building and Social Transformation. From the Pages of the Chronicle Book* (Plovdiv: UI “Paisiy Hilendarski”, 2024), three studies, one of which in English, and seven articles, one of which also in English. The English-language study is co-authored, and a co-signed protocol is attached. All submitted works are based on original research and correspond to the thematic field of the competition. The certificate of compliance with the minimal national requirements for participation in the competition for “associate professor” in Professional Field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies shows full compliance on all indicators, and on the indicator “Citations” Dr. Petrova’s result significantly exceeds the required minimum – a collegial recognition, which speaks of the significance and contribution of her works.

2. General characteristics of the candidate’s activities

Dr. Petrova received her doctoral degree in 2008 from the “Paisiy Hilendarski” University of Plovdiv and has been working as a senior assistant professor at the same university since 2009. Over the past five years, she has had a significant classroom workload, teaching a total of nine mandatory and elective courses in the degree programmes “Ethnology”, “Cultural and Social Anthropology”, “History and Cultural Heritage”, “English Language and Cultural Heritage”, “Cultural Tourism”. The topics of the courses taught are in line with the topic of the competition and the broader field of ethnology and cultural studies.

Throughout her professional career at Plovdiv University, Dr. Petrova has regularly supervised students’ research practices and internships at partner organizations, students’ participation in projects and scientific forums. She has repeatedly acted as co-editor of collections of reports from student conferences.

Her teaching experience in two important and topical disciplines – “Intercultural Communication” and “Stereotypes and Prejudices” – is reflected in one of the articles submitted for participation in this competition.

Dr. Petrova’s research works are the result of a systematic application of the ethnological approach both to classical terrain (the village of Pchelarovo, the Karakachan community) and to the study of institutions, namely the University of Plovdiv. In my opinion, the greatest contribution is made by the historical-anthropological study of another institution – the *chitalishte* (community centre) in the village of Pchelarovo. This study is the subject of the monograph and of some of the articles submitted for the competition.

The monograph *Chitalishte and Time: Institutional Construction and Social Transformation* is an original contribution to historical anthropology with its micro-historical focus and hermeneutic approach. Starting from the Chronicle of the community centre in the village of Pchelarovo, the author unfolds a rich narrative about the institution that has a central place in the village, about the people who worked in it, and about the broader local and macro-historical context of their activities: political, cultural, social, economic.

Kisikova is clearly aware of the specifics of the Chronicle as a type of ideological communication, affirming the identity of the local group. Therefore, writing in it was a kind of power gesture (pp. 11, 81, etc.), as she repeatedly emphasizes. Hence the interest in the personalities of the two main authors of the chronicle and in the ways in which they adapted the conventions of the genre to their individuality and to their views on the role of the community centre and their own role as its leaders. As the author concludes, “the point of view of the one is inward, towards the documents”, while the other “directs his attention outward and notes events occurring not only in the community centre” (p. 226). Here, the question arises whether and to what extent this is a matter of individual peculiarities of the two personalities or of different socio-cultural contexts, which impose on them (or at least – predispose them) different approaches.

Using the methodology developed within the framework of grounded theory, the researcher deduces from the content of the chronicle main themes and motifs, which she subsequently embeds in broader contexts. Her ability to correlate minute details of the text with data drawn from other archival documents or from anthropological terrain is impressive. By comparing numerous documents of different nature, she manages to build a dense picture of the historical and social context. The oscillation between text and context outlines a classic hermeneutic circle. On this basis, Kisikova builds her interpretations and reaches non-trivial conclusions. For example, a close reading of the chronicle and the minutes of the *chitalishte* board for the first period studied (1926-1946) reveals the changing priorities: at first these are the people, the members of the *chitalishte*, and later – ensuring its stability by acquiring inventory and securing income. On the other hand, specialized periodicals such as the magazine “Chitalishte”, which the author studies, gives her the opportunity to situate her researched case within the broader network of community centres in the region and the country and to gain insight into the nature of the tasks and the problems they faced.

Regarding the second period (the 1980s), the meticulous analysis of the records in the chronicle forms a rich picture of the main roles of the *chitalishte* for the local community: as a cultural centre, as a youth centre, and as a public centre in a broader sense, including other local organizations that used to hold their events in the *chitalishte*. The fact that the *chitalishte*

acts as an intermediary between the local community and ethnologists, archaeologists, etc. also contributes to its authority. The role of a cultural, public, and youth centre is affirmed not only for Pchelarovo, but also for the surrounding villages: only this *chitalishte* “has the necessary “inventory” to commemorate significant individuals and events” from the national commemorative calendar (p. 142). Here, the author offers concise but convincing reflections on the role of the community centre in Pchelarovo in the context of the state policy towards the Turkish ethnic group.

Opening her lens wider, Kisikova describes the legal norms that regulated the activities of community centres during the two periods studied and the institutional infrastructure in which they operated. An important finding in this regard is the process of centralization that began as early as the 1930s, leading to a complete institutional and ideological control of community centres by the state in the following decade. From “civilizing” (p. 173), i.e. primarily educational, their mission was transformed into propaganda (p. 229). I would like to note with particular satisfaction the precise and in-depth analyses of the changes after 1944. Kisikova convincingly substantiates her thesis that “the mechanisms of penetration of the new power at the local level are more difficult to see” (p. 230). A detailed comparison of the laws on community centres from 1941 and 1945 does not yield any significant differences; the real differences are in the agents that are expected to implement the legal regulations: the party committees, the committees of the Fatherland Front and the Komsomol as local “political centres”. These changes lead to the situation in which the *chitalishte* turns out to be “like a totalitarian state dismantled on a local scale” (p. 235). The different position and character of the *chitalishte* institution during the two periods under study is convincingly illustrated by their actions in moments of financial uncertainty: while in the 1930s it provoked various activities, in the 1980s, when the source of “all rules, policies and resources, as well as of every initiative” was the state (p. 273), the *chitalishte* leadership was waiting for subsidies. While in the 1930s the community centre had an active role, in the 1980s its leadership was deprived of initiative, and therefore of responsibility; it turned from an institution of civil society into yet another state institution that followed the party directives (p. 283).

Last but not least, I would like to note the impressive reflexivity and prudence of the author. She explicitly considers the challenges in her study. And this is not just a rhetorical tool. As far as I could notice, Kisikova nowhere allows herself over-interpretations. On the contrary, her imperative is “not to bring meanings and explanations from the contemporary situation to the past” and “to contextualize the data so that they are understandable and explainable in relation to their internal measure” (p. 151). I am pleased to note that these “scientific claims”, as the author states them, are fully satisfied in her work. The book is noteworthy not only by its original approach, which was mentioned above, but also by the consistent and precise application of the chosen methodology. The critical attitude towards the sources that Kisikova demonstrates is of crucial importance for the success of her research (e.g. the difference between the minutes from a meeting and a report for the public and the resulting limitations for the interpretation of these documents, p. 234). Therefore, without any hesitation, I assess her claim for methodological innovation as very successfully defended.

As an important thematic contribution, I would highlight the theme of festivity, taken up in the monograph and further developed in the studies based on current field material. On

the one hand, the organization of holidays in the village is one of the main activities of the *chitalishte*, through which it gains visibility, gains supporters and establishes itself as a centre of the local cultural life. On the other hand, a specific “political economy” of holidays reveals their importance as a source of income, but also as a mediator of ideological narratives at the end of the first and mainly during the second period. The new developments of recent years, which are the subject of two of the studies, reveal the challenges that the construction of local memory has been facing, its changing topoi and its divergent articulations “from above” and “from below”.

3. Critical remarks and recommendations

I have no critical remarks on the presented works. The question to the monograph, posed above, does not constitute an objection, but rather invites further reflection.

I would like to recommend that Dr. Petrova use widely – as far as possible – the results of her research work in her teaching. I am convinced that this is the best way to improve the quality of education and motivate students to actively participate in class.

CONCLUSION

The documents and publications submitted by Senior Assistant Professor Dr. Maria Petrova for participation in the current competition for Associate Professor in Professional Field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies are in full compliance with the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of ZRASRB and the relevant Regulations of Plovdiv University “Paisiy Hilendarski”.

The candidate's publications testify to active and in-depth research and contain significant methodological and thematic contributions. Dr. Petrova's teaching activity is noteworthy for the relevance of the content and innovation in terms of teaching methods.

I confidently give a positive assessment of the candidate and categorical support for the proposal of the Scientific Jury to the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the Plovdiv University “Paisiy Hilendarski” for the election of Dr. Maria Stoyanova Petrova for Associate Professor in Professional Field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies (Culture and Communication). Her habilitation will be a well-deserved recognition of her work to date and an undoubted asset for the students and the faculty of the Faculty of Philosophy and History.

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Prof. Dr. Daniela Koleva