

Report
On the application of associate professor Daniela Liubenova Koleva
for the competition for the position “professor”
in the professional field Sociology, anthropology, cultural studies. (History and theory of
culture. Oral history, culturological research on memory)
Announced in State gazette #21 from 13.03.2020

Reviewer: prof d-r of social sciences Ivaylo Dichev

Only one candidate has applied for the competition – ass. Prof. Daniela Koleva. The documents are meticulously prepared and correspond to all requirements of Sofia University.

I have been working with Koleva for 22 years in the department History and theory of culture, Faculty of philosophy. We have participated together in numerous research projects and publications in the field of cultural anthropology. Koleva has been a hard worker with original ideas and sense of responsibility. These qualities of hers have motivated numerous international research teams to have her as a member.

After her habilitation as associate professor in 2002, Koleva specialized in the field of memory studies and more particularly the memory of the communist period in Bulgaria. The works, presented for this competition, are from this period of her activity.

Let me also say that Koleva's courses on the theory of culture, oral history and identity studies are highly appreciated by our students. She has had been-vice dean of our faculty and at present is chair of our department.

As I said, the main theme of the presented works is the memory of the communist regime. The latter is analyzed in all its complexity through the different research paradigms that the author critically considers. Koleva constantly compares the Bulgarian case to Eastern Europe; besides the sociological and the historical approach, a central place in her analysis occupies anthropology, i.e. biographical interviews. The goal is to understand how people try to adapt their life-stories to the new political situation, the strategies of giving sense to their experience after the collapse of the socialist experiment.

An original aspect of Koleva's work is the investigation of various existential aspects of communism – memories of being young and attending brigades; gender identities, constructed by the ideology; the way old people, having been socialized during the atheist regime, cope with the approaching death, etc. Several articles are a precious methodological reflection on the biographical method as tool in cultural anthropology.

The main work, presented to the competition, is the monograph “Memory and justice. Personal recollections and public discourses on communism”, 2020. It resumes decades of research on the subject. Its main theme are the memory wars – between the grand narratives of ideologies, but also between the small narratives of individuals and groups.

The author reviews the most important works on collective memory, preparing the concepts she will use in her further analysis: social frameworks, places, cultures, policies of memory. A chapter of the work is dedicated to a precedent of remembering a totalitarian regime – the Holocaust with all its controversies and debates. The case of communism will prove to be even more complicated, as unlike nazism, it did not end at once in a military defeat. As to Bulgaria, things are even more ambiguous because the former communists kept their place on the political scene and the hardships of transition during the 90s makes a large portion of the population idealize dictatorship.

This ambivalence is the reason for the incapacity of Bulgaria to elaborate a common public (grand) narrative about the near past. The author argues that the attempted policies of memory do not affect the cultures of memory. According to her memory is not only referential, but also communicative: telling each other stories about the past serves to create group identities. And the

latter tend to clash, to compete with each other.

The second part of the monograph passes to the level of the anthropological interview. The collected life-stories of people, having been socialized during communism, are systematized in two types: traumatic (mainly collected in relation to the former camp of Belene) and nostalgic. The author opposes them conscientiously in order to pursue her main theme: memories are only partially true or false, their main goal is to give shape to present identities, feelings, belongings.

The “optimistic” vision of Koleva about memory is unexpected and original. We should not try to unify our vision about the past, as it is done by historians, she argues. Memories will be alive until they are contesting, challenging, fighting each other.

Conclusion. The candidate is a well established scholar with an undisputed place in the field of cultural anthropology and memory studies. The numerous publications in Bulgaria and in prestigious international journals are a serious contribution to the field. The academic career of Koleva and her teaching experience are enviable. All this makes me recommend her for being conferred the academic title of “professor” in the professional field Sociology, anthropology, cultural studies. (History and theory of culture. Oral history, culturological research on memory).

Sofia, 25.08,2020

Prof d-r
Ivaylo Dichev