

# REVIEW

from

Prof. PhD Alexandar Nikolov Nikolov

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", PF 2.2 History and Archeology (Medieval History) on the scientific works for participation in a competition for the academic position of "Associate Professor" in PF 2.2 History and Archeology, (Medieval Balkan History - Economic History of the Balkans 10<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> c.) announced in State Gazette No. 55/28.06.2024 from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", for the needs of the Department of History of Byzantium and the Balkan Peoples, Faculty of History, with a single candidate Chief Asst. Prof. Yoanna Ilieva Bencheva, PhD

## **Assessment of compliance with the minimal national requirements of the LDASRB and the requirements of the ROOSU:**

The verification of the data submitted by the applicant shows that the minimum national requirements of the LDASRB and the requirements of the ROOSU have been met and the procedure is completely legitimate. The candidate meets the conditions for participation in the procedure for filling the academic position "ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR", as the achieved indicators and according to the five groups of criteria fully cover the necessary conditions.

## **Research activity and results:**

The only candidate Chief Assistant Dr. Yoanna Ilieva Bencheva completed her secondary education in 1989 at NHALC "St. Constantine-Cyril the Philosopher". She graduated with a degree in "History" in 1995 at the "St. Kliment Ohridski" with a master's degree. She specialized at the Department of History of Byzantium and the Balkan Peoples. She also received a teaching qualification as a "History teacher", as well as a second specialty "Cultural Studies".

In 1999, she also successfully graduated from the "Law" specialty at the Faculty of Law of the SU, with a master's degree and a specialization in "Jurisprudence". In 1996, she won a competition for an assistantship at the Department of History of Byzantium and the Balkan Peoples at the HF of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski", Since 2019 she is Chief Asst.

Professor. She defended her doctoral dissertation on the topic "Food and dietetics in the Byzantine-Balkan world 10<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> centuries" in 2018 at the HF of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski", Department of History of Byzantium and the Balkan Peoples. Dr. Bencheva received a classical secondary education, i.e. she is fluent in the three classical languages, and also fluent in English and Russian.

She specialized at the University of Cologne in 2001 with a scholarship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation under the guidance of Prof. Peter Schreiner and Prof. Hristo Matanov. She is a member of the Association of Byzantinists and Medievalists in Bulgaria and part of the board of the IF 94 Cooperation. She participated in seventeen scientific projects, including the position as an academic mentor.

Dr. Bencheva teaches general and specialized courses in the specialties "History", "Hebrew Studies", "History and geopolitics of the Balkans", "History and geography", "Archaeology", "Archival studies and documentary studies", "History and foreign language". She was also supervisor of a number of graduates.

### **Description of scientific works:**

The candidate, Yoanna Bencheva, has submitted an impressive total list of publications, which includes two monographs, 38 studies and articles (including one in English and one essay in Greek on Critoboulos of Imbros). She is also a co-author in the writing of three teaching readers. One more popular science publication is also presented.

For the competition, the candidate has submitted a separate list of 18 publications, which includes her two monographs, from 2019 and 2024, and 16 studies and articles, one of which is written in English.

The main work presented here is the monograph "*Food Trade in Dalmatia and Istria (13<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> century)*". Sofia: University Press "St. Kliment Ohridski", 2024 224 p., ISBN 978-954-07-5986-9 (print); ISBN 978-954-07-5987-6 (e-book, pdf);,. Here, Dr. Bencheva dwells on a topic that has been studied in historiography, but perhaps not so extensively and completely, especially in Bulgarian medieval studies.

The subject of the research is a region in the Northwest Balkans, closely linked to the Adriatic and Mediterranean seas, to maritime trade, but also to the Balkan region, namely Dalmatia and Istria - areas in which in the Late Middle Ages (13<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> centuries) Venice and

the Kingdom of Hungary fought for supremacy, but the Serbian Tsardom of Dušan and later the Ottoman Empire also had their influence.

The local cities, which were closely related to the Italian communes and especially to Venice, and among which the Republic of Dubrovnik stood out, of course, differed in size, influence, degree of independence, population and many other indicators. Dr. Bencheva pays special attention also to the numerous island communities that formed separate administrative and political units. Her competence also in the field of law allows to focus at a really high level of the city statutes as a source for the principles, rules and mechanisms by which the trade in food products was carried out in the period under consideration. The whole range of food products in which there is a lively trade, both retail and wholesale, in the region and in much wider frameworks which also affected the Apennine Peninsula and Central Europe, is examined in detail. Fortunately, Dalmatia and Istria have preserved in their archives a rich material that allows to build a full-blooded picture of the economic life in the region during the considered period.

The monograph consists of three chapters, each of which explores in detail different issues. Thus, the first chapter, "Cities - natural environment, development and statutes" presents us with the general framework in which economic life developed, and especially the trade in food products. It is here that Dr. Bencheva also introduces us to the diversity of urban life in Dalmatia and Istria, to the natural environment, which is a particularly important factor for food production and trade, to the complex relationships of local communities, both among themselves and with large players in the region - Venice and Hungary and last but not least with the main source material, namely the city statutes and regulations, which allow the construction of a complete and reliable picture of the trade in question.

The second chapter, "Food Trade in Urban Statutes", is central to the monograph. Dr. Bencheva's language and source studies skills, her knowledge in the field of law, as well as the experience of long-term studies of similar issues in the Balkan and Mediterranean context, have allowed her to scrutinize all provisions that relate to both the general principles of trade, as well as to the specific requirements for trade with individual items: wheat, meat, fish and seafood, salt, olive oil, spices, milk and milk products, and in general the whole range of an amazingly diverse array of foodstuffs that were available and widely distributed and traded in the period under review.

Chapter three, "Environment and People", focuses on the physical environment in which trade takes place and also on the people who carry it out. This reconstruction is based

again mainly on the provisions in the statutes, but other sources have been drawn on, which confirm to a large extent the data from the legal documents.

In general, the presented monograph is a full-scale study of the problem, which is pioneering in nature and fully meets the criteria for a habilitation thesis. On the one hand, it builds on the previous studies of Dr. Bencheva in similar issues, but on the other hand, it examines a completely new region and new aspects, closely related to the history of the city and city law, refracted through this specific topic. The presented text shows Dr. Bencheva as a well-established and well-trained scientist who manages to analyze and present in an accessible and comprehensible way topics from economic history, successfully overcoming the usual difficulties in presenting similar topics in medieval studies.

The second presented monograph *The Meal in the Byzantine-Balkan World 10th – 15th century*. Sofia: IK "Gutenberg", 2019, 316 p., ISBN 978-619-176-157-9 is Dr. Bencheva's published doctoral dissertation, of course, with certain additions and corrections.

This is a work that is dedicated to the food products that are present on the table of the Balkan population in the considered period, the dietetics and nutrition of this population, which is distinguished by various signs: social status, age, ethnicity, and other criteria.

Dr. Bencheva also dwells here on topics related to the wholesale and retail trade of these products, which are comprehensively described based on a wide range of sources - written, visual, archaeological and linguistic. Her ability to work with original sources allows her to develop her research according to the highest standards of medieval studies already in her doctoral dissertation. This is also reflected in the publication under consideration. It also consists of three chapters, the first of which is dedicated to Byzantine dietetics: way of eating, diet, behavior during meals and, of course, the changes that occurred with the end of Antiquity, the spread of Christianity and contact with neighboring peoples: Slavs , Persians, etc.

The second chapter dwells on the food products themselves in all their variety, method of preparation, storage, recipes and consumption, not only in Byzantium, but also in the neighboring Balkan countries, as far as the source data allow. The variety of products available to the Balkan population is impressive, distinguishing the region from other parts of medieval Europe, where the uniformity of food and scarce resources caused frequent famines and epidemics. Dr. Bencheva's research shows and confirms the opinion that the Balkan Peninsula, due to its geographical features, climate and combination of different cultural influences, is an area where nutrition is usually not a general problem since the medieval era.

The third chapter dwells on the differences in nutrition between individual social, religious and ethnic groups in the Balkans. The overall conclusion is that, despite these differences, there are common principles and norms that are close to the territory of the considered region and even in that period show the significant proximity between the Balkan population and by this indicator.

The remaining 16 publications of Dr. Bencheva, submitted for participation in the competition, can be distinguished in the following groups. The first and largest, spanning 11 publications, includes articles on nutrition, food use, nutrition etiquette, commerce, and other topics related to Dr. Bencheva's core body of research. Of special note is the publication in English related to the maritime trade of Mount Athos, as well as the publications devoted to the ruler's table, the use of water in the Balkans, the production and trade of cheese, eating in Constantinople, eating during pilgrimages to the Holy Land and others. This type of research fits perfectly into Dr. Bencheva's main line of research, which is emerging as a researcher of economic history and especially the history of nutrition, food trade, food etiquette and various aspects of this basic human activity.

In addition to this main topic, Dr. Bencheva also has separate publications on other issues, which are partially related to her basic research. Among them, the theme of the donations to the Mount Athos monasteries, the theme of predicting the climatic conditions, the journeys in the Middle Ages stand out. Among the studies, the article devoted to the *Pacta conventa*, a document which, at least according to tradition, laid the foundations of the union between the Croatian and Hungarian crowns and preserved a certain autonomy of the Croatian lands for many centuries to come, albeit under the scepter of the Hungarian kings and the Austrian emperors afterwards. An interesting aspect of Dr. Bencheva's research is presented by her article on old age in the Balkan-Byzantine world, so how were the elderly treated, what was their diet, medical care and society's attitude towards this not so numerous group in the Middle Ages .

In general, Yoanna Bencheva reveals herself as a fully formed and precise researcher of questions from the history of the Balkan-Byzantine area, which lead us to the social history, the history of nutrition, of everyday life and other topics that are not so popular in our historiography. With this, she fills a niche that is expanding more and more, as it is evident that new fields of research arise from the main topic of food, nutrition and trade in food products, which Dr. Bencheva enters with her inherent expertise. The level of citation of her research and the indisputable contributions, faithfully reflected in the documents attached to the competition,

testify to an exceptional focus and purposefulness of her scientific research in topics that were also touched upon by other authors, but often times in the context of other, larger topics or in insufficient depth.

**Conclusion:**

From everything stated so far, we can summarize that Ch. Assistant Professor, PhD Yoanna Ilieva Bencheva, the only candidate, fully meets the criteria and requirements for occupying the academic position of "Associate Professor", in accordance with the minimal national requirements and the requirements of the Regulations of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski". Her scientific output, teaching and project activities testify to high professionalism and significant scientific achievements in the field of medieval Balkan history. Therefore, I strongly support and vote positively with "Yes" for the candidacy of Ch. Asst. Prof. PhD Yoanna Ilieva Bencheva, for the academic position of "Associate Professor".

26<sup>th</sup> of September 2024

Signature:

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Александър Николов