**OPINION**

by Prof. Ph.D. Maria Ivanova Ivanova - VTU “St. St. Cyril and Methodius”,

regarding the announced competition for the academic position of “professor” in the Faculty of History of SU “St. Kliment Ohridski”, professional direction 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences (Ethnology - Local traditions and cultures), published in "State Gazette", № 48 of June 28, 2022,

with the only participant in the competition, Assoc. Prof. PhD Mira Nikolaeva Markova

Assoc. Prof. PhD Mira Nikolaeva Markova is a long-time lecturer in Ethnology at the Faculty of History of the University “St. Kliment Ohridski” and an established researcher in the field of Bulgarian and European ethnology. She participated in the competition for “Professor” with 26 publications, which include 1 monograph, 5 studies, 2 articles in scientific publications, referenced and indexed in world-renowned databases, 1 published chapter in a collective monograph and 17 articles in peer-reviewed collections and series. To them should be added her educational and teaching activity, which impresses with its diversity in the individual university fields: preparation and conducting of lecture courses in bachelor's and master's programs; guest lecturer at foreign universities; scientific supervision of graduates and doctoral students; management of a master's program; work (and award) as an “Erasmus+” coordinator; expert activity at the Ministry of Education and Science; participation and management of scientific projects, conferences, etc. Assoc. Prof. PhD Mira Markova also exceeds the minimum national requirements under Art. 2b of ZRASRB for scientific field 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional direction 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences.

I unreservedly accept all contributions to her publications, indicated by Assoc. Prof. PhD Mira Markova. However, they can be supplemented in order to outline in even more detail their research significance for the development of modern Bulgarian ethnology. First of all, the proposed monograph “Local cultures and traditions. Cultural transformation of ritual systems in the 21st century” (S., 2022) deserves attention. Innovative in design, it impresses with its choice of theme, which emphasizes local cultures and traditions in the 21st century. In contrast to most contemporary studies, which discuss globalization and the resulting cultural processes, the mentioned monograph defends the opinion that local ritual systems, supported by historical traditions and adapted to the dynamics of the 21st century, still define both personal identity, as well as that of the community in which they function. Without allowing herself to argue with the supporters of the idea that we are all “citizens of the world”, the author successfully steps on previous local cultures to prove that they make man free, protecting his personal space and that of his community. A peculiar contribution is precisely the traced historical continuity in the development of modern local cultures, which, on the one hand, preserve sustainable and traditional in their essence customary and ritual elements, and, on the other hand, are constantly transformed and developed depending on the conditions of the 21st century.

As specific examples, two relatively independent local cultures have been selected, whose distinctive ritual systems are part of the modern folk culture of the Bulgarians, Greeks and Poles. These are the ritual systems that accompany the custom of Enyova bullia and the nestinarstvo (Anastenaria) in Strandzha and Northern Greece, as well as the pilgrimage in Kalwaria Pacławska (Poland). Their research analysis is built on the basis of personal observations and the direct participation of Mira Markova, with the stipulation made and brilliantly fulfilled that, despite the mediation and mutual dependence between field and researcher, objectivity is preserved, verified through other information sources. In this way, a new theoretical and practically verified model of the functioning of the mentioned ritual systems was developed, their modern transformation and their general specifics as part of local cultures were shown. On the other hand, the complex study of the mentioned custom-ritual systems from Bulgaria, Northern Greece and Poland undoubtedly also represents a contribution to the development of modern European ethnology, taking into account their common similarities and transformations against the background of modern cultural processes in the 21st century.

As a contribution, I would also highlight Mira Markova's attitude towards her informants and their personal stories and struggles, as well as her aspiration to outline those timeless human values ​​that shine through in their many interpretations of the significance and preservation of local identity and culture. Moreover, the informants are the immediate participants and the main actors in the customary-ritual systems, dictating both the knowledge of the past and the transformations in the present. Analyzing the field records, Mira Markova also achieves a magnificent ethnographic description, which is increasingly rare in modern research. Therefore, it can be emphasized that she is a worthy successor of the principles of exemplary field research and especially of her teachers (especially Prof. Dr. Habil Ivanichka Georgieva), whose creative work is indisputable in the development of Bulgarian ethnology.

An example in this regard is the ethnographic description of the nestinarstvo as a local custom-ritual system. The introduced new ethnological information, combined with the achieved research results, convincingly shows that the folk culture can also have a new reading, which will expand and somewhat correct the established scientific ideas about its contemporary state. I welcome Mira Markova's critical, but also successfully chosen scientific approach to the study of the nestinarstvo as a local cultural phenomenon, whose centuries-old functioning proves precisely the dynamics in the functioning of folk culture, which, regardless of transformations, preserves its original structure in separate customary and ritual elements. Moreover, this feature of the folk culture shines through even in the migratory cultural processes, considering the contemporary identical organization and purpose of carrying out the nestinarstvo in Strandzha and in Northern Greece, where it was transferred. The analyzes of the historical migration of nestinarstvo from Strandzha to Northern Greece, made on the basis of the personal self-assessment of the bearers of the local culture, as well as the attitude of the Orthodox Church towards its implementation, are useful.

The modern idea of ​​the functioning of the folk culture and its local manifestations is complemented by the author's thesis about the preserved syncretism of the nestinarstvo. It includes the indisputable truth about the rite, which is not subject to doubt, and this guarantees its stability, structure and system in its conduct. The interdependence of the listed indicators also determines the perception of the nestinarstvo ritual complex not only by the main ritual persons, but also by the other participants, i.e. from the whole local community.

The third chapter in the monograph “Local cultures and traditions. Cultural transformation of ritual systems in the 21st century” is dedicated to the modern pilgrimage in Kalwaria Pacławska (Poland), with the emphasis placed on religious symbols, whose local manifestation binds even people who declare non-pilgrimage, but cultural interests. In Bulgarian ethnology, there have always been few studies that examine foreign cultures outside the Balkans, even less local cultures, so the contribution of the presentation of this chapter is indisputable. It is subordinated to the general methodology of the monograph, including the relationship between the field and the researcher, thereby enforcing the established Bulgarian ethnological tradition in the study of not only native but also foreign cultures. The scientific value of the Third Chapter is also contained in the objective tracking of the local cult of the Calvary Mother of God, which is celebrated on the Assumption of the Virgin. The ethnographic description is also accompanied by numerous illustrations that trace the entire course of the pilgrimage. And the historical parallels drawn between the Roman Catholic cult of the Virgin in Calvaria Patslavska and the Orthodox cult of the Holy Virgin reveal their common features in the so-called folk and local religiosity.

I consider the presentation of modern hermitage, which is part of the religious practices in Calvaria Patslavska, as innovative and contributing. As Mira Markova claims, in the 21st century it is characteristic of postmodern people who, for one reason or another, continue to seek not only forgiveness or healing, but also a rethinking of their life path.

An argued contribution is the concluding author's thesis in the monograph that in our time the importance of local cultures is growing, as they are the stable foundation that supports human self-knowledge and gives meaning to the life path within the boundaries of the local community.

Another area of ​​the scientific research activity of Assoc. Prof. PhD Mira Markova are her other publications on the relatively closed custom-ritual complexes in the process of transformation and development. In practice, they continue the theme of the state of local cultures in the 21st century, by condensing the ethnological picture of the connections of the examined customary-ritual complexes of the chimney-making and the Enyova bulya custom in Strandzha with the tourist industry and the local government. The custom of Enyova bulya is particularly indicative, which in some respects has acquired the parameters of a tourist attraction. This thesis is proven with the new field information introduced, focusing on the contemporary social and economic framework of the local community and the search for motivation in the tradition to declare the local identity.

The publications of Assoc. Prof. PhD Mira Markova on the local urban culture in Bulgaria constitute a significant contribution. First, one of her studies about the modern culture of the small Bulgarian town is important. As an example, the city of Strelcha is mentioned, and the analysis of its local culture is done from an ethnological point of view, and the consequences of the demographic and economic crisis, which also affect the transformations of culture, are followed. Innovative is the author's attitude to the complex unity between traditional (rural) cultural elements and typical urban culture, which outline the theoretical model for the current cultural development of small towns in Bulgaria.

Mira Markova's research interest in urban culture is also prominent in her publications dedicated to the modernization and urbanization of the city of Sofia from the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 21st century. From an ethnological point of view, the focus on the modernization of the city from the Liberation to the 1940s, which, albeit slowly, began to change the everyday life and mentality of Sofia residents. On the other hand, as the capital city, Sofia also became an attraction center for many settlers, mainly from the surrounding villages, who further shaped the urban periphery as a specific local culture with its inherent markers - market, school, community center, etc. The changes that have taken place in Sofia are gradually building the Bulgarian model for imitation, characteristic of the trends in the development of other larger cities.

The topic of Sofia's urban environment in modern times is represented in a publication analyzing topical stereotypes related to the influence of public opinion and prejudice in neighborhood local communities (“Reduta” and “Krasna Polyana”). The publication is also relevant to the educational process, as it raises the question of new directions in the study of social communication and the fight against dangerous stereotypes. Another publication on public opinion, on the study of its ethnological specifics and characteristics, has a similar character. The analysis shows that there are significant differences in the formation of public opinion in traditional and modern society.

The local urban community is also at the center of the analysis of its folk religiosity from the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. The cult of St. Mina is traced both from a traditional point of view and from the side of its modern veneration. As a contribution, I accept the author's statement that myth, faith and reality continue to intertwine in the life of modern man, and the veneration of saints and holy places, despite being a universal cultural phenomenon, is primarily characteristic of the development of the local community.

Mira Markova's research on the cult of St. Anna in Central Western Bulgaria, St. Modest in Strandzha also relates to popular religiosity, which also prove the role of religiosity in local cultures. The fact that the mentioned saints are not often studied in Bulgarian ethnology is a contributing factor, as they are distinguished precisely by their local veneration.

Assoc. Prof. PhD Mira Markova's research on teaching aids, ethnographic exhibitions, museum activities, which are directly related to her teaching activity, represent a certain contribution. The study guide of the Croatian geographer Ivan Hoič “Pictures from the general geography”, published at the beginning of the 20th century, was selected for the study because of the mandatory objectivity that was imposed in the presentation of foreign culture in the educational process. According to the author, the Bulgarian culture presented by Ivan Hoich is so objective that it encourages reflection on our self-knowledge even in the spirit of reality in the 21st century.

Mira Markova's publications on the organization of the First Russian Ethnographic Exhibition in St. Petersburg in 1867, at which all Slavic peoples were represented, are also related to the mandatory objectivity in the study of foreign cultures. Although the exhibition has a marked political significance, by participating in it the Bulgarians get the first opportunity to make an independent appearance before the European public. The Bulgarian exhibition includes traditional folk clothing, which at the time was a visible sign of ethnic identity. Personally familiar with the exhibits from this exhibition, the author assumes that they faithfully reflect the Bulgarian folk culture in the context of the all-Slavic ethnographic wealth. It also offers a new view of the importance of ethnographic knowledge in state relations.

Museum activity and its impact on the educational process is presented in two publications, where problems related to the introduction of new intercultural educational programs in ethnographic and historical museums are discussed. According to the author, whose opinion as a university teacher I fully support, more effective cooperation between the museum and the school will lead to the faster formation (especially for future ethnologists) of conditions for a positive impact against attempts at intolerance in the study of native and foreign cultures.

In conclusion, I emphasize once again that the presented research and teaching output of Assoc. Prof. PhD Mira Nikolaeva Markova fully corresponds to the content of the announced competition for a professor in professional direction 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences (Ethnology - Local traditions and cultures). As it was traced, local traditions and cultures are the subject of research in almost all of Mira Markova's publications, which are distinguished by a variety of topics and a significant contribution to the development of modern Bulgarian and European ethnology. As a member of the established scientific jury, I will vote with conviction for awarding the academic position of “professor” to Assoc. Prof. PhD Mira Nikolaeva Markova in professional direction 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences (Ethnology - Local traditions and cultures).

Prof. PhD Maria Ivanova