

STATEMENT

by Prof. Dr. Daniela Lubenova Koleva,
member of the academic jury for the competition for the academic position “Professor”,
professional field 2.1. Philology (Anthropology of Bulgarians. Bulgarian Folklore),
announced by the Sofia University in the State Gazette, No 54/29.06.2021

Regarding: the research outputs, submitted by the candidate Assoc. Professor Dr DSc Nikolai Georgiev Papuchiev

I. General characteristics of the research activities and outputs

Assoc. Professor Dr DSc Nikolai Georgiev Papuchiev has submitted for the competition for the academic position “Professor” in the professional field 2.1. *Philology (Anthropology of Bulgarians. Bulgarian Folklore)* two monographs, one study and two scholarly articles, all of them in Bulgarian, published in the past three years. The works submitted, as well as the candidate’s academic activities, are in full accordance with the thematic field of the competition.

II. Assessment of the scholarly and applied results and contributions of the works submitted for the competition

Assoc. Prof. Papuchiev’s contributions are in the field of the anthropology of contemporary forms of mass culture and popular culture: museums, cinema, tourism, festivals and celebrations. His monograph titled *The Museum – possible and impossible. The challenges of mass culture, the market strategies, and the nostalgia for the past* (2019) delves into the grand narratives and the market strategies of the museums in the current situation of individualised cultural consumption. The author is interested in the transformation of ‘high’ narratives of national history and cultura into constructs for everyday use as a result of their integration into museum narratives of various characters and dispositions. This process is tracked down based on a few typologically different cases explored through comprehensive field work, which lends empirical thickness to the study and originality to its results. Based on the case studies of Grimm brothers’ museum in Kassel, Juliette’s museum in Verona, and Grandma Iliytsa’s museum in Chelopek village in Northwest Bulgaria, Papuchiev captures the

interference of canonical narratives and popular culture. The latter transforms the semiotic code of the originals lending them a different kind of legitimacy. They now generate their own messages by reproducing select fragments of the national narrative and/or the literary canon with the expressive tools of popular culture. The uncovering of the interpretative mechanisms whereby cultural artefacts articulate and naturalise political ideas is beyond doubt one of the most important contributions of the author. In the second part of the book this approach is successfully applied to the analysis of the attempts at muzeumisation of communism in Bulgaria during the past decade or two. This part discusses the symbolic and the interpretative coping with the past in a situation of a lack of consensual ‘grand narrative’ about it – unlike the consolidated national narrative, which is the focus (or the setting) of the Bulgarian cases discussed in the first part of the book. I am particularly pleased to note Papuchiev’s contribution to the understanding of postcommunist nostalgia from the point of view of an ‘anthropologisation of the political’ (p. 211) – a well-argued thesis, supported with substantive empirical material. The innovative character of this position is due to its potential to propose a convincing explanation of the transformation of nostalgia from its status as an existential and life-worldly phenomenon into a powerful element of contemporary popular culture governed by the logic of the market. In this respect, an understudied topic, which singles out Papuchiev’s work against the state of the art is his focus on dissident (‘alternative’) practices during the communist period and their contemporary revitalisation and re-semantisation. The result is a nostalgia not for socialism but for its then-existent utopian alternatives.

The anthropological approach to mass-cultural phenomena is particularly successful in its application to the masquerade games and festivals in the Pernik region, which is the theme of the second monograph submitted by the applicant: *Festivals. Networks. Identities. The masquerade games in Pernik and their regional effects* (2021). Its topic is the construction of cultural heritage and the complex, multilayered social and political relations implicated in this process. The author shows how the so-called amateur art lost its importance during the period of the late socialism, having been replaced by the ‘authentic folklore’, which was conveniently inscribed into the rhetoric of modern nationalism and in particular – in the attempts to construct a ‘national artistic style’. The case study of the Pernik festival reveals the ways in which folklore culture becomes an artistic product and their dependence on ideological and administrative factors. Demonstrating the functioning of “Surva” ritual in two semantic registers – as part of the traditional culture of the region and of the new socialist festive culture – Papuchiev convincingly argues that the instrumentalisation of the local

tradition was part of the policies aimed at the construction of group identities ‘based on the ideology of modern nationalism’ (p. 64). Even more topical and novel is the part of the book dedicated to the postcommunist transformations of the masquerade games, which reveals the complex relations between the local, the regional and the national, between ritual and ideology; the intergenerational links and continuities, but also the conflicts and their mediation through the festivities, as well as the consequences of the awareness of the performative value of the ritual for outside audiences. Papuchiev’s innovative approach guides him to look for the authenticity of the celebration in the actors’ attitudes and activities, as well as ‘at different sites of the social action, and not only and entirely in the tradition’ (p. 129) – a research stance that I highly appreciate and I think that it has proven its potential in the book. No less important a contribution is the juxtaposition of the social ideologies, the market strategies and the symbolic capital related to the celebration and leading to the transformation of its semiotic construction (p. 191).

To sum up, Papuchiev’s work is an important contribution to the study of contemporary mass culture and its social and political implications. More than that: focused on intriguing cases, empirically thick and written in a reader-friendly style, they have the potential to reach out to broader readership outside the research and academic community.

III. Critical comments and recommendations

In the section on “Stoyanovi family” (the so-called ‘found photography’) of the monograph on *The Museum – possible and impossible* the potential of Papuchiev’s anthropological approach seems to be underdeveloped, especially in comparison to his other works, and the other sections of the same monograph. When interpreting such sources, it is important to bear in mind that in the period of their production photography was not a ubiquitous and constant part of the everyday life, as it becomes later. People used to take pictures of themselves primarily on special occasions: festivities and celebrations (including public celebrations), rites of passage of family members and other family occasions, excursions, holidays, etc. This is why the author’s specification that photography reflects ‘significant moments’ (p. 259) of otherwise trivial and standard biographical trajectories is very important and merits a more serious consideration. In this way, his interpretation of the ‘nostalgic turn backwards’ (p. 262) that he has noticed, would have been even more convincing: what is observed in the case of ‘found photography’ and its reception are not only fragmented memories isolated from the grand ideological narrative (p. 265), but sentimentally valued fragments produced with utmost affection and collated into one’s own small narrative.

For possible future edition of the monographs I would recommend to aggregate the references at the end of the books rather than leave them at the end of each chapter as they are at the moment.

IV. Conclusion

Based on the merits and contributions laid out above, I fully support Nikolai Papuchiev's election for Professor in *Anthropology of Bulgarians. Bulgarian Folklore* (professional field 2.1. Philology).

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