

OPINION

by Professor Ivan Alexandrov Biliarsky, Dr. Hab.

Institute for Historical Studies, BAS

for the competition for associate professor in the Faculty of History

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

announced in the State Gazette no. 55 of 28 June 2024, p. 23

with a single candidate ch. assistant Dr. Joanna Ilieva Bencheva

I have known Joanna Bencheva and her research for nearly a quarter of a century, and I think I can speak for their qualities. The candidate graduated in history at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in 1995, and in 1999 in law at the Faculty of Law of the same university. In 2018, she successfully defended her dissertation on "Food and dietetics in the Byzantine-Balkan world in the X-XV centuries" and obtained the educational and scientific degree "Doctor". In 2019, she was appointed chief assistant at the Faculty of History of Sofia University, having previously held other teaching positions.

I would like to point out that among Dr. Bencheva's scientific interests, the topics related to the cultural history of the Balkans during the Middle Ages predominate. In this regard, the combination of historical and legal education undoubtedly has its importance and contribution. Food, as a part of people's daily life, is an essential element of the culture of any society and its production, distribution, delivery and method of use represent an interesting and rich field of research that presents the efforts of Dr. Bencheva in a positive light.

Dr. Joanna Bencheva has a remarkable list of scientific publications in Bulgarian and international collections. It presents the author's research in the above-mentioned field of scientific knowledge and presents a remarkable concentration on the subject, which is also a necessary condition for the depth of the research. Among these publications, of course, the two monographic studies stand out, which I will dwell on separately. However, I would also like to make two minor criticisms of the compilation of the publication list. It is about the book "Veselin Beshevliev.

Biobibliography' (2020) which is classified under 'Study Aids'. Undoubtedly, it can serve to support students' studies, but - as the title suggests - this is an interesting biobibliographic study of one of the most notable Bulgarian medievalists, which is not only a teaching aid. In that sense, it seems to me that putting it in this context somewhat detracts from the book's importance. The same can be said about the collection "Russia, Mount Athos and the Rila Monastery (XI-XX centuries)", of which Dr. Bencheva is a co-editor, together with A. Nikolov and T. Georgieva. This is a remarkable documentary collection that is not just a teaching aid, although it can serve as one. As I have already noted, I do not consider these remarks to be substantial.

The first of Dr. Bencheva's two monographic works - "The Table in the Byzantine-Balkan World" - is a further development of the ideas presented in her doctoral dissertation. On another occasion I have already had the opportunity to state that this work is of interest, both for the remarkable material collected for the first time in our historiography, and for the selection of the scope (geographical and ethnic) and the topics. Balkan cuisine cannot be "nationally" divided, both in the Middle Ages and today, and this is wonderfully presented in the book.

I will pay a little more attention to the candidate's other monograph - "Food Trade in Dalmatia and Istria (13th-15th centuries)", Sofia, 2024 - as this is her habilitation thesis. The topic, as we can see, is related to the main scientific interest of Dr. Bencheva, although this is obviously a different work, both in terms of specific directions and in terms of its geographical and civilizational scope. The book, published by the University Publishing House "St. Kliment Ohridski", covers more than 220 pages and a variety of topics. It is divided into three main parts (chapters), which correspond to three separate topics related to the food trade along the Dalmatian coast. The introduction presents the context of the work's creation, sources and historiography. We must note that the author has followed the modern trend and has not overdone this preparatory part, the knowledge of which is mandatory for every author, but not its extensive advocacy in every book. **The first chapter** is devoted to the natural-geographical and historical environment of the study. It presents the studied cities in a region where urbanization and urban life are incredibly developed in the context of the Balkans. Each individual city, its statutes, its history and the geographical environment in which it developed are presented. Undoubtedly, the chapter is very informative and interesting. **The second chapter** is dedicated to the regulation of food trade in the individual statutes. This is where the legal education of the author is evident. The chapter is not

subdivided according to the statutes of the individual cities, but according to the object of normative regulation: the various goods. Thus, we have research on the regulation of trade in cereals, meat, milk and dairy products, fish and seafood, honey, fruits and vegetables, olives and olive oil, salt, spices, wine. In each separate section are presented the conditions for carrying out trade, which are different for each group of products, its regulation, place of sale, taxation, etc. **The third chapter** deals with the persons who may carry on such trade, and with the places where it is carried on. The market, shops, pub, home and all possible options are tracked. The human element is represented in two directions: the traders who can carry out such an occupation in each separate sphere, as well as the employees who control their activity. Interesting side questions are those about measures and weights and especially about the packaging of the various products. All this creates an interesting panorama of urban life on the Dalmatian coast, seen through the lens of the food trade. I want to explicitly note that the book is not only rich in information that will enrich our knowledge of that era, but also interestingly written. It is addressed to specialists on the subject, but also to a very wide range of readers who are interested in the Middle Ages and in Dalmatia - a region that undoubtedly represents a contact zone between East and West. The book is accompanied by a rich illustrative and scientific apparatus, explanations and a rich bibliography.

I have reason to believe that Dr. Joanna Bencheva's habilitation work represents a good continuation of her previous research and that it deserves a high rating.

Thus, as a result of this review of Dr. Joanna Bencheva's scientific achievements, I can only give a positive assessment of her work. The attached documentation related to the conduct of the competition meets the requirements of the Law and gives a good and adequate idea of the candidate's case.

Based on all this, I give my positive vote for the awarding of Dr. Joanna Ilieva Bencheva to the scientific position "Docent" and allow myself to call on the other members of the Scientific Jury to do the same.

Sofia, 27. 09. 2024 г.

Signature:

(Prof. Ivan Biliarsky, Dr. Hab.)