

STATEMENT

From Associate Professor Dr. Maria Georgieva Baramova, Department of “History of Byzantium and the Balkans,” Faculty of History, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

Member of the Academic Jury, appointed by the Rector’s order of Sofia University (No. RD 38-406/12.07.2024), for the competition for the academic position of “Associate Professor” in the professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology (Medieval Balkan History – Economic History of the Balkans, 10th-15th Century), as announced in the State Gazette, issue 55/28.06.2024.

1. The competition for the position of Associate Professor has been announced to meet the needs of the Faculty of History at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski,” specifically for the Department of “History of Byzantium and the Balkans”. The sole candidate for this position is Assistant Professor Dr. Joanna Ilieva Bencheva.

The documents submitted by Dr. Joanna Bencheva comply with the requirements of Article 2b of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, enabling an objective evaluation of her research and teaching activities. The scientometrics presented by the candidate fully meets the minimum national requirements across all four indicators stipulated by the law. Her scholarly works show no traces of plagiarism and are the result of diligent academic research. Dr. Bencheva’s research interests lie in the medieval history of Southeastern Europe, specifically within the social and economic history domain, as evidenced by the attached publications. This aligns perfectly with the profile of the announced competition. Dr. Bencheva’s specific interests and scholarly contributions in the area of the social history of everyday life are of significant importance and will significantly enhance the development of medieval history within the Faculty of History.

The candidate earned her degree in “History” from the Faculty of History at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” in 1995 and subsequently obtained a degree in “Law” from the Faculty of Law at the same institution in 1999. In 2018, she defended her dissertation titled “Nutrition and Dietetics in the Byzantine-Balkan World, 10th-15th Century.” Dr. Bencheva has extensive teaching experience, initially as a regular assistant (since 1995), and subsequently as a senior and chief assistant in medieval Balkan history at the Department of “History of Byzantium and the Balkans.” She is a specialist in the history of Southeastern Europe, including Byzantine history.

The provided academic portfolio, including her curriculum vitae, publications, research projects, and teaching activities, not only meets the scientometric indicators required by the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria for the position of “Associate Professor,” but also serves as undeniable evidence of her substantial professional experience as a university lecturer. Joanna Bencheva delivers mandatory lecture courses for undergraduate students across various specializations within the Faculty of History, including Medieval Balkan History, History of Byzantium and the Medieval Balkans, Introduction to Academic Writing in Balkan Studies; specialized courses such as Everyday Life in the Balkans during the Middle Ages; Social Aspects of Everyday Life in the Balkans during the Middle Ages;

Jews in the Medieval Balkans; and a master's course: Food and Entertainment in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean (10th-15th Century) as part of the joint master's program between Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and Veliko Tarnovo University "Sts. Cyril and Methodius" titled "History and Culture of the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages."

2. Dr. Joanna Bencheva is the author of two monographs and over 40 studies, articles, textbooks, and teaching aids, all dedicated to various aspects of the medieval history of the Balkans. In the competition, she participated in a habilitation thesis, published and submitted for discussion titled "The Trade of Food Products in Dalmatia and Istria (13th–15th Century)." Sofia, University Press "St. Kliment Ohridski," 2024. Additionally, her participation in the competition includes her second monograph (resulting from her successfully defended doctoral dissertation in 2018) and 15 selected publications comprising studies and articles.

The monograph "The Trade of Food Products in Dalmatia and Istria (13th–15th Century)." is the culmination of Dr. Bencheva's extensive research over many years and is essentially a study that seeks to contextualize the legislative aspects of food trade during the Late Middle Ages in Southeastern Europe, utilizing the preserved urban statutes from Dalmatia and Istria. The book examines the legal regulation of trade in various types of goods, the rights and/or prohibitions on the import and export of certain foods, the locations and times when such trade was permitted, as well as the measures and weights, taxes, duties, and fees involved. It also addresses punitive measures against violators and hygiene requirements, among other aspects. Depending on their location and other factors, these issues are explored across different types and statuses of urban settlements, including large and small production centers, continental settlements, and islands. Particularly valuable is the integration of the historical narrative within the context of the influence of natural features and the environment on the trade of food products.

In the first chapter, titled "Cities – Natural Environment, Development, and Statutes" (pp. 13–72), the urban statutes of individual city settlements in Dalmatia and Istria are systematically examined, as these are the primary sources for the study. The chapter highlights the influence of political and natural factors on the development of each city. Crucial to analyzing and understanding the mechanisms regulating food trade in these regions is the political environment shaped by the rivalry between Venice and Hungary during this period. Here, I would like to interject an opinion regarding using the term "great powers of the era," even when placed in quotation marks (pp. 8, 17, 24, 31, etc.). This is not only due to the traditionally accepted different meaning of the term but also because the author herself seems to contradict this by later referring to Hungary and Venice as "regional powers" (p. 13). This designation, I believe, is far more appropriate.

The hypotheses presented at the end of the first chapter are notably successful from both an analytical and interpretative standpoint. These hypotheses directly observe Venice's legislative intervention concerning the trade of food products as documented in the statutes (pp. 68-72).

The primary contribution of the monograph is found in the second chapter: "The Trade of Food Products in Urban Statutes" (pp. 73-163). Various food products, along with their production and trade (import and export), are thematically grouped and systematized—covering categories such as bread and cereals, meat, milk, fruits and vegetables, fish, wine, olives, salt, honey, and more. Through an engaging narrative, the reader is immersed in the history of the medieval "consumer basket." Regarding the import and export of grain and

cereals, for instance, the author provides a detailed examination of the prohibitions and/or regulatory regimes governing the export of wheat and other grains.

The third chapter, “The Environment and the People” (pp. 163-188), is dedicated to the socio-economic aspects of food trade during the Middle Ages. It examines, in several sections, the venues for trade (such as the marketplace, tavern, shop, and port); the profiles of the traders themselves, as well as the officials involved in regulating the exchange of goods; the significance of packaging in the sale of specific products; and the control of measures and weights. It might be beneficial to explore in greater detail the impact of quarantine—not only as a hygiene measure but also as a political mechanism of control characteristic of pre-industrial societies.

The additional publications with which Dr. Bencheva is participating in the competition for the academic position of “Associate Professor” align with her aforementioned research interests. The record of cited references complies with the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and demonstrates a high level of recognition of the candidate within academic circles.

Without a doubt, the academic output presented by Dr. Joanna Bencheva for the competition not only meets the legal requirements but, in certain respects, clearly exceeds them.

3. Based on my thorough and careful examination of the documents submitted for the competition, I unreservedly recommend to the esteemed academic jury the academic position of “Associate Professor” in the professional field of 2.2. History and Archaeology (Medieval Balkan History – Economic History of the Balkans, 10th-15th Century), be awarded to Assistant Professor Dr. Joanna Ilieva Bencheva. In all mandatory aspects—research and teaching activities—the candidate fully meets the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for its implementation at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski,” which are necessary for holding the academic position of Associate Professor.



Sofia 4.10.2024

Assoc. Prof. Maria Barramova