

## Review

By Assoc. Prof. Ilia Iliev, PhD on the dissertation work of Dimitar Ivanov Vassilev for the award of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the scientific field 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional subfield 3.1. Sociology, anthropology, cultural sciences, with scientific supervisor Assoc. Prof. Violeta Kotseva-Popova, PhD.

Topic: "Institutional development and musealization of folk culture in contemporary times. (On the example of crafts and organized craftsmanship in Bulgaria)"

### 1. General data about the doctoral student and the documents submitted

By order RD 38-50 from 02.02. 2026 of the Rector of Sofia University, I am appointed as a member of the academic jury, which at its first meeting elected me as a reviewer. The doctoral student has attached the necessary package of documents and materials for participation in the defense procedure. They meet the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations of Sofia University.

Mr. Vassilev received a bachelor's degree in Ethnology from the Faculty of History of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in 2007, and a master's degree in 2012 in the program "Management and Socialization of Cultural Heritage" from the Faculty of Philosophy of the same university. In 2023, he became a doctoral student at the Department of Ethnology at Sofia University.

Meanwhile, he consistently developed as a specialist in the field of museum theory and practice. In 2008-2017, he worked as a curator at the Ethnographic Museum at the EIM (later IEFEM). In 2017, he moved to the National Museum of History, where he rose to the position of head of the department "History of Bulgaria during the Revival 18th - 19th centuries". According to the NIM classification, this section also includes exhibitions

related to traditional folk culture and crafts, and more specifically the collections "Rural Life", "Tools of Labor" and "Furniture", for which Mr. Vassilev is directly responsible. During this period, he also led courses as a part-time lecturer at the National Academy of Arts, including "Theory of Museum Exhibition", "Heritology" and "History of Artistic Metal". In parallel, he participated in and/or led projects related to the collection of field data and artifacts related to traditional culture, as well as organizing numerous exhibitions.

Mr. Vassilev's theoretical and practical activities in the field of traditional folk culture logically lead to numerous publications. A list of 34 articles and studies is attached, of which 16 are directly related to the topic of the dissertations, as well as the editing (in co-authorship) of four collective volumes.

This is an established specialist in the middle of his career, who has consistently worked in various positions in museums, from curator to head of department, has an eye for collection, preservation and classification of museum artifacts, as well as their presentation in exhibitions, and last but not least, has demonstrated his ability to analyze accumulated facts and present them in academic publications and university courses.

## 2. Dissertation

Mr. Vassilev's work is on a topic that is scantily researched in the Bulgarian scientific literature. The text consists of an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion with a total volume of 289 pages, a list of cited literature, used archival and online sources and supplements. The overall goal of the doctoral student is to trace the transformation of crafts and craftsmen production during the dramatic social changes that occurred in the middle and second half of the twentieth century, as well as their state today. At the same time, crafts as an economic activity and the products produced by them are an opportunity to analyze major trends in Bulgarian society, combining various modernization ideological projects and more down-to-earth realities. Last but not least, the survival of certain livelihoods and related practices, as well as aesthetic and consumer

choices, allows Mr. Vassilev to offer important conclusions about the sustainability of traditional Bulgarian culture.

The introduction presents the author's main goals, objectives, sources and methodological solutions. There is no systematic review of the available literature and theoretical approaches, which is compensated by the presence of a separate introduction and conclusion to each of the three chapters. It is worth paying attention to the reflective position of Mr. Vassilev, who notes the advantages and limitations of his fieldwork, namely the reasonable assumption among the interviewed craftsmen that, as a long-time museum worker, he is already familiar with the specifics of their profession. This, as he correctly points out, largely determines the behavior of the interlocutors.

The first chapter examines the history of craft cooperatives in Bulgaria, mainly in view of their interaction with the BRSDPL, the BRP, and the Bulgarian Communist Party. The period before 1947 serves more as a prelude to the main part of the chapter, dedicated to the transformation of cooperatives under state socialism, which also explains the emphasis on this party. With laws adopted in 1948 and 1949, the property of artisan cooperatives was nationalized and they were forced to adopt uniform statutes, which practically changed all the principles on which their pre-war evolution was based. The new structure retains merely formal similarities with the previous craft cooperatives. The changes are illustrated by the example of the cooperatives in Pavlikeni and TPK “Solidarity” in Ruse.

Here is the moment to note a stylistic feature of the dissertation. In this, as in the following chapters, the main contributions are inserted in the course of presenting and analyzing specific examples, be they cooperatives, individual master artisans, museums or institutions. These specific examples also make up the main part of the text. One may argue that this is due to Mr. Vassilev's long career in the field of museum work. Each individual case can be compared to a part of an exhibition, where the artifacts deserve

independent attention, are presented in a way that allows them to be examined from different angles and assessed on their own merits, before merging into the general thread of the exhibition. His approach to shaping the text is similar to that of creating an exhibition.

The second part of the chapter is devoted to the creation of the Association of Masters of Traditional Crafts. The processes and ideological stakes there are different in comparison with the examples from Ruse and Pavlikeni discussed above. In the first post-war decade, labor-production cooperatives became an appendage to the planned economy, whose task was to temporarily fill the gaps in the centralized state economy. These gaps were never filled, which allowed the cooperatives to survive, but in a purely ideological sense they were seen as a temporary solution. In contrast, the Craftsmen's Association is part of a process of imposing cultural nationalism (as formulated by Maria Todorova), which includes celebrations of Bulgarian history culminating in 1981, folk art festivals, specialized schools for folk singers and craftsmen, networks of regional and national museums, etc. The production of the craftsmen is not intended to fill gaps in the centralized planned economy, but to guide consumer choices and combat harmful external and internal aesthetic influences. In this sense, the Association is close to artists unions such as those of Bulgarian writers, translators or painters.

Particularly interesting are the relations between the Association of Masters and the Union of Bulgarian Artists, discussed in detail in the chapter. Initially, they were hierarchical, reflecting the inequality between the prestigious individual authorial work and the supposedly anonymous folk art. The Association made efforts to emancipate itself, but the institutional battles continued until the end of the socialist period. The contributions in this part are particularly valuable, as they allow us to see the concrete consequences of the concepts of traditional folk art (treated as anonymous and collective) that dominated in this period. These concepts collide with realities, namely far from anonymous and very talented individual (instead of collective), artists – masters of traditional crafts, discussed by Mr. Vassilev. The example of Petar Gigov, a master of Busin ceramics, stands out.

The second chapter is dedicated to the museification of folk crafts, with the emphasis on the open-air museum in Etara. Unlike the other chapters, a broad comparative perspective is given here, examining the first open-air museums associated with the world exhibitions of the 19th century, the first open-air museum “Skansen”, the National Museum of the Romanian Village in Bucharest and Glentleiten in Bavaria. Mr. Vassilev analyzes the different approaches to creating open-air museums, the advantages and disadvantages of the different solutions, to bring us to the central part of the chapter, namely the creation of “Etara”.

Three methods were used in Etara – restoration of already existing objects, relocation and reassembly of objects from other settlements, as well as creation of copies. All three approaches have their correspondences in the world practice examined in the dissertation. The specific example, a kind of key exhibit in this chapter, is the Gabrovo pottery. Talented master ceramists such as Violeta Keremedchieva and Veselin Damyanov, as well as the mutafchiya Hristo Marinov are presented. Once again, we see a clash between the theoretical concept of folk art as anonymous and collective and the reality in the face of master creators, each of whom has their own strong individuality and talent.

The chapter examines the processes of including Etara and its masters in international networks through the organization of events and exhibitions, as well as its influence as an example and methodological assistance in the construction of smaller museum complexes such as Old Dobrich, Genger in the Slaveeva Reka city park in the town of Aytos and the Samovod Bazaar in Tarnovo.

The third chapter answers the question: “how does one become a master of a traditional craft?” based on examples from the town of Troyan and the village of Oreshak. The centers related to the training of craftsmen are examined, such as a school and a gymnasium for applied arts, the transmission of a craft between a master and an apprentice, as well as the emergence of conditionally self-taught, i.e. masters often

trained in a family environment. Special attention is paid to the role of museums and festivals as institutions that set certain frameworks for the development of crafts through expertise, guarantees of authenticity and the opportunity to sell the production. The main trends outlined in the previous chapters are deepened here based on specific examples from the Troyan region. The part dedicated to four generations of potters from the Yovkov family is of great contribution. Over the course of a century, different representatives of the family have fit into various institutional, economic and political frameworks, continuing and improving the family craft. They are connected to cooperatives, museums, specialized schools, exhibitions and festivals, interacting in one way or another with all these institutions designed to shape and guide traditional crafts, but ultimately remaining faithful mostly to the family tradition. They use or adapt to the diverse institutions, but remain first and foremost craftsmen and individual artists. This is a valuable opportunity to rethink the definitions of traditional or folk art, as well as the opposition or hierarchical arrangement between traditional and contemporary art.

### 3. Contributions of the dissertation

The dissertation, as well as the abstract, does not indicate the points of contribution. I will allow myself to do so. Based on rich empirical material, archival sources, observations and interviews, the transformation of traditional crafts in different political and economic systems over the last century is shown. The influence of various institutions such as cooperatives, the Craftsmen's Association, museums, exhibitions, festivals and vocational schools on crafts is analyzed. The history, structure and interactions between these institutions are examined. Perhaps most valuable, the role of the individual craftsman is demonstrated as a creator with their own talent and dignity, which problematizes the definitions of traditional folk art, as well as the hierarchies between folk crafts on the one hand and contemporary artists on the other. The contributions are undeniable and go beyond the requirements for a dissertation.

#### 4. Others

I have known Mr. Vassilev since the years when he was a student in the bachelor's program in Ethnology at Sofia University. We have participated in several joint field research studies, during which I was impressed by his professional integrity and ability to quickly find a common language with interlocutors of diverse social profiles and personalities. I have no conflict of interest. The dissertation has successfully passed an institutional check at Sofia University for the absence of plagiarism, and I myself did not notice any.

#### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to note that the dissertation contains scientific results that represent an original contribution and meet the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations of Sofia University. The dissertation demonstrates that Mr. Dimitar Vassilev is able to collect valuable empirical material, to notice and analyze the key trends in it and to formulate the results in clear academic language. This is a well-established professional in the middle of his career. Therefore, without hesitation, I give a positive assessment of the research and propose to the esteemed jury to award the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Mr. Vassilev in the field of higher education 3. Economic, social and legal sciences, professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences.

Sofia, March 17, 2026

Ilia Iliev