REVIEW

by Prof. Milena Georgieva, PhD,

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on the materials submitted for the competition for the academic position of "Professor", announced by the Institute of Balkan Studies and Center of Thracology – BAS (State Gazette, issue No. 63/01.08.2025) for the needs of the "Cultural History of the Balkans" section in the field of higher education 2. Humanities, professional direction 2.1. Philology (Balkan Literatures and Cultures)

In the competition for the position of "professor" announced for the needs of the "Cultural History of the Balkans" section (State Gazette, issue No. 63/01.08.2025), in the field of higher education 2. Humanities, professional direction 2.1. Philology (Balkan Literatures and Cultures), Assoc. Prof. Antoaneta Borislavova Balcheva is the only candidate. The number and content of the documents and publications she has submitted comply with the requirements of the Academic Staff Development Law in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its implementation at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, and the Appendix to the Regulations of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Balkan Studies and Center of Thracology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences regarding the conditions and procedures for acquiring scientific degrees and occupying academic positions (curriculum vitae, accompanied by the relevant diplomas and documents, a list of publications with which the candidate participates in the competition, an author's report on scientific contributions, summaries in Bulgarian and English, copies of publications, a list of citations, a report on the fulfillment of the minimum requirements according to the Regulations for the application of the Academic Staff Development Law).

Assoc. Prof. Antoaneta Balcheva obtained her doctoral degree in 1997 after successfully defending her dissertation on "The Nature of Romanticism in the Slavic South" in front of the Scientific Council on Literary Studies at the Higher Attestation Commission. From 1999 to 2010, she was a senior assistant at the Institute of Balkan Studies, and in 2011, she was habilitated and elected associate professor in the "Cultural History of the Balkan Peoples" section at the Institute of Balkan Studies and Center of Thracology. I have known Assoc. Prof. Balcheva since her doctoral years as an exceptionally precise scholar and tireless leader of numerous projects between Bulgarians and Croatians, in which she has involved researchers from various institutions. Throughout her academic career, the applicant has demonstrated her scientific activity through her overall scientific output, participation and leadership in national and international projects, organization of scientific conferences, teaching activities, and membership in authoritative scientific organizations.

The total number of publications with which Assoc. Prof. Antoaneta Balcheva participates in the announced competition is 23 scientific works, different from the publications with which she received the academic position of "associate professor" – one monograph and twenty-two studies and articles, of which: nineteen published in peer-reviewed collections, collective works, and scientific periodicals, and three in publications referenced and indexed in world-renowned databases. The presented scientific studies cover several main problem-thematic areas in the field of comparative literature and cultural studies related to the role of elites in the processes of assimilation of traditions and modernization in Southeast Europe; the literary-critical rethinking of national models in the context of South Slavic literary modernism and the aesthetic-philosophical dialogue with European art; main directions and trends in Croatian and Bulgarian literary aesthetics of avant-gardism; cultural memory and identity of the cities – centers of cultural dialogue between Bulgarians and Croats; reception practices and models in Bulgarian, Slovenian, Serbian, and Croatian literatures. The main trend in these studies is a shift away from the usual thematic and typological research and a combination of different methodological approaches focused on cultural and literary anthropology, philosophy, sociology, and psychology.

The main monographic work with which Assoc. Prof. Antoaneta Balcheva participates in the competition is the book "The Culture of Travel. Intertwined Texts and Destinies of Bulgarians and Croats from the Late 19th to the Mid-20th Century. Sofia: Institute of Balkan Studies with Center of Thracology, 2025, ISBN: 978-619-7179-64-4. The monograph consists of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography, including the archival collections, periodicals, reference publications, literary sources, and theoretical works in various languages used by the author.

This original study, which aims to "understand travel as a philosophical idea, artistic image, and social practice with its associated spatial and temporal representations" (Balcheva 2025: 18), introduces the reader to new fields of research in Bulgarian literary studies, devoted to the traditions, mentalities, personal and collective identities of Bulgarians and Croats. Based on a rich conceptual toolkit, a unique structuring and categorization has been carried out of both "the mutual representations constructed in the two nations and the literary parallels and cultural transfer of ideas, values, and aesthetic criteria during the modernist era". The broad research framework has been successfully developed thanks to the interdisciplinary approach and rich methodology used, including comparative, literary-historical, and cultural analysis of texts that are diverse in structure (historical sources, literary works, travelogues, essays, travel notes).

In the introductory part, the author implement the concept of travel culture and analyzes its discussion as a basic cognitive unit in the fields of social and cultural history, geography, psychology, anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, literature, and history. Special attention is paid to the attempts of literary theorists to define the genre specificity of texts

related to the phenomenon of travel, arguing that the dominant synthesis in most works excludes the possibility of a fixed normative classification. Emphasis is placed on the "theoretical flexibility" and pronounced metaliterary nature of travel and writing "as mutually complementary and defining processes" based on the theoretical propositions of Michel Butor, Gaston Bachelard, Roland Barthes, Michel de Certeau, and others. A critical review of the main Bulgarian and Croatian literary-historical studies devoted to travel literature is also provided.

The first chapter of the book "Bulgarian-Croatian Dialogues from the Late 19th to the Early 20th Century" focuses mainly on the works of Bulgarian and Croatian authors, whose texts have been little or fragmentarily analyzed to date and which carry a strong identificational resource regarding the receptive attitudes of the two peoples, appearing as "projections of the grand narrative of the era of Europeanization and modernization". The author has successfully outlined both the socio-historical context of the era and the dynamics of changing stereotypes, as well as trends that were essential to the literary development and influenced travel prose. The paths of departure from tradition and inherited artistic conventions are outlined and analyzed in detail in the second chapter of the book, entitled "The Travel – 'Poetry of Modern Civilization'." In her presentation, she interprets with precision and analytical skill selected works by Antun Matoš and Pencho Slaveykov, creating the idea of the increasingly strong "subjectivization of travel" as an integral part of their literary-aesthetic platforms, aimed at the spiritual elevation of the artist, escaping the disharmony in life. According to A. Balcheva, "the narrative arc of their existential quests" is skillfully traced, "articulating new spaces, utopian or dystopian, bringing together in a single metonymic field the gravities and anxieties of the Bulgarian and Croatian intelligentsia on the cusp between two eras" (Balcheva 2025: 244) .

The themes and ideas explored in the book provoke profound and original observations on the role of travel in the emotional mapping of "one's own" and "foreign" space, achieved in the third chapter of the monograph. Based on works by Antun Nemčić, Ivan Kukulević Sakciński, Silvije Strahimir Kranjčević, Ivan Vazov, Anton Strashimirov, Anna Kamenova, Kiril Hristov, and Dora Gabe, dedicated to the central literary topoi from the Mediterranean and Black Sea cultural areas, the mental maps of travelers are analyzed as a place for "projecting cultural memory and dialogue between different civilizational codes and temporal layers."

Seeking the specificity of travel in the range between so-called "close" and "distant" reading, most of the texts in the monograph are discussed as a "reflective project for constructing identity". The author's arguments in favor of this claim are particularly strong in the fourth chapter of the presented work, "Rhetorics of Travel from the 1930s to the 1960s." Its pages successfully alternate images of emancipated female travelers, diplomats,

politicians, and publicists who shape the ideological profile of travel with the "acceleration" and destabilization of identities characteristic of modernity.

Based on Zygmunt Bauman's typology of the traveler, combining the pilgrim, the wanderer, the vagabond, and the tourist, A. Balcheva outlines a broad palette of socio-historical, cultural-aesthetic models, and social practices of travel during the interwar period.

The issues discussed in the monograph are a valuable contribution to the empirical and theoretical interpretation of the phenomenon of travel and the texts related to the mutual perceptions of Bulgarian and Croatian intellectuals from the late 19th to the mid-20th century. With its comprehensive conceptual approach, it is an important source for the study of new areas in the fields of comparative literature, imagology, thematology, and reception. Another merit of the work is the extensive bibliography researched and compiled on the topic of the monograph.

Conclusion

The documents and materials submitted by Assoc. Prof. Antoaneta Balcheva meet the requirements of the Academic Staff Development Law in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for the Implementation of the Academic Staff Development Law at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, and the Appendix to the Regulations of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Balkan Studies and Center of Thracology – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, regarding the conditions and procedures for acquiring scientific degrees and occupying academic positions. The scientific works submitted by the candidate differ from the materials used in previous competitions and defenses, represent original scientific contributions, evaluated on their merits by the scientific community. I declare that there is no plagiarism or inaccuracy in her works and the documentation submitted by her. The information she has provided on her scientific contributions and citations is reliable. Based on her extensive bibliography of publications, undisputed professional capacity, and active scientific activity, I give my positive assessment and strongly recommend the Scientific Jury to prepare a report-proposal to the Scientific Council at the Institute of Balkan Studies and Center of Thracology for the election of the only applicant Assoc. Prof. Antoaneta Borislavova Balcheva, for the academic position of "professor" in the field of higher education of 2. Humanities, professional direction 2.1. Philology for the needs of the "Cultural History of the Balkans" section ("Balkan Literatures and Cultures").

05.11.2025 Member of the jury:

Sofia Prof. Milena Georgieva, PhD