

STATEMENT

by Prof. Dr. Miglena Nikolchina, Sofia University "St. Kl.Ohridski"

on the materials submitted for participation in the competition announced in State Gazette No. 50/09.06.2023.

for the academic position of associate professor in professional field 2.1. Philology (Classical Languages), Faculty of BF, Department of Mediterranean and Eastern Studies, NBU.

One candidate, Dr. Georgi Gochev, submitted documents for participation in the competition after the expiry of the statutory deadline, which met the requirements of the RAADB Act.

Having read the materials submitted by the candidate and on the basis of my long-standing observations on the scientific and teaching development of Dr. Georgi Gochev, I express the following considerations in support of his candidature.

I have been following Gochev's academic development for more than two decades, ever since his student years. This development involves both his solid scientific erudition and his ability to create intersections of discussion in academic and non-academic environments. His work as a translator from Ancient Greek, which is impressive in both volume and quality, is an integral part of his work as a scholar, teacher and promoter of the classical heritage. Gochev has also written works of fiction and actively collaborates with the theatre scene.

Gochev's application for this competition includes his habilitation thesis *Freedom from the Shadows. Justice and Education in Plato's Dialogues*, published as a book by the New Bulgarian University Press (2023), as well as other publications - books of essays and commentaries, as well as studies and articles published in periodicals. In this statement, I will focus on Gochev's habilitation work. I will point out its merits as well as some of its unique and, to a certain extent, peculiar features.

Freedom from the Shadows. Justice and Education in Plato's Dialogues offers an insightful reading of Plato's dialogues from an ethical and political perspective. Gochev spells out his approach as resulting from, on the one hand, his participation in a 2013 seminar with Bogdan Bogdanov, and, on the other hand, from the political developments in Bulgaria at the time of that seminar, as well as certain subsequent political developments worldwide. This legitimation, in which the seminar undoubtedly carries the greater weight is not without its hidden sides, its shadows, so to say with reference to the book's title, as I will try to show later on.

While I emphasize the ethical and political perspective as distinctive to Gochev's reading of Plato, this does not imply a neglect of the ontological and epistemological problematics. On the contrary, Gochev introduces them, but as inseparable from, and in fact subordinate to, an agonal anthropology in which education is conceived as 'man's contest with human nature... He who educates himself, Plato holds, enters into a contest with his very existence as a human being.' (p. 12) This orientation of the book, which is at once at odds with and in harmony with dominant contemporary trends in problematizing the human - insofar as it incorporates its own questioning and self-criticism - is a tremendous quality of the book, and one that is particularly close to my heart. I also find interesting Gochev's claim that, with Plato, one cannot speak of a philosophical system, but rather of "rules of the philosophical game", where

points are scored by the true views reached by the participants. I will not comment here on what is gained and what lost by such an approach; rather, I will point out that it is related to certain choices that Gochev makes in his reading of Plato, and to which I will return in a moment.

Gochev's book does not explore Plato's entire legacy, but only the dialogues relevant to his chosen focus on justice and education, and, again, not all of them. This choice is expounded by him without ignoring his personal biases and his work as a translator. Most importantly, this choice has to do with some of the main features of the book and some of its great qualities.

One of these qualities is the freedom with which Gochev finds his way in Plato's problematic. It is a question of intimate inhabiting, not just knowing. It is something more than erudition, it is living through and in conversation with Plato's texts. This freedom is subtended by the topics that inspire Gochev, who is unafraid to focus on some of the most popular, most often discussed, and even worn out moments, such as the myth of the cave. Gochev has a fresh take on such topics, but also the ability to weave them into a coherently unfolding larger web of his own - along with justice and paideia, these are the questions of soul, time, love, knowledge... Most of these accents are brought out in the chapter headings. This weaving is accompanied by a style at once precise, flexible, accessible, and beautiful. This, in turn, is related to another feature that I find to be a quality - the meeting of philosophical reflection and literature, which Isaac Passy in his book defines as philosophical literary *études*. Passy's studies are on literary works, whereas the Platonic dialogues that Gochev discusses are, of course, philosophy, but a philosophy whose ambivalent nature has been discussed many times and which Gochev also thematizes. So, of course, does the late Bogdanov, whose presence in Gochev's book I will return to in a moment.

This makes the genre of Gochev's work itself consciously and deliberately ambivalent: it is analytical and incorporates the various commentatorial traditions in the interpretation of Plato, but does so in an essayistic and ultimately pedagogical way. This book would undoubtedly fit beautifully into the teaching of Plato - into seducing to Plato. It deserves to reach a wide audience, but even if it does not, it would certainly do an excellent job in university classrooms.

These qualities, however, come at a price, which I will outline here not so much - or rather not only - as a critique, but as an attempt to understand its deeper layers. Above all, Gochev, even when referring to fundamental divisions and debates in Platonic studies, chooses sides by largely sweeping the opposing viewpoint under the rug. An example of this is the debate over Plato's unwritten doctrine, which is at least indicated as existing - and delivers the only mention, and that in a footnote, of Tsocho Boyadzhiev, and almost the only mention of Nevena Panova. This paucity is strange insofar as not just the dilemma of the unwritten doctrine, but also the subject of Plato's dialogism per se with the manifold questions it raises, has been carefully and repeatedly explored by Boyadjiev, Panova and other Bulgarian authors. The problem of game, playing, and playthings in Plato, for example, is addressed by Panova in several places: in offering his own framework of philosophical game Gochev finds it unnecessary to mention both this, and Panova's work on the political in Plato. The same applies to the topic of myth in Plato's philosophizing - Kamelia Spassova, who has devoted a comprehensive study to the role of example in Plato and Aristotle, is not mentioned at all.

These are just examples of the many absences - of Boyan Manchev, Nikolay Gochev, Dimka Gocheva, Ognyan Kasabov and others - which enter into a somewhat ironic contradiction with the view of Platonic dialogue as a collective search for truth, held by Gochev and repeatedly thematized in Bulgarian Platonic studies and generally in the humanities. To quote,

"Truth, according to Plato, cannot be individual; it is collective, and its search must be answered by collective, not individual, cognitive efforts. Its discovery, therefore, cannot be a mere communication by one who knows to one who does not; it is an experience of change on the part of all participants in the search" (p. 20).

Common as these points might be, they should undoubtedly at least be referred to as such. The above quote sounds like it comes straight from Bogdanov's mouth, and here comes the second peculiar point of this book.

Bogdan Bogdanov's name appears in the second sentence of the Introduction, after which it will appear 54 more times. This is a modest number, however, in view of the enormous role Bogdanov plays in the book, which has set itself from the beginning as an extension of a task set out by the Master. The hidden dramaturgy of this string of concrete analyses, called *Freedom from the Shadows*, is at once mourning, "Apology," and "Phaedo," that Socratic John with whom the first chapter begins. The collective, as in "Phaedo," is jealously removed. Even the crossing-out of the theme of the unwritten doctrine might have received in this perspective an illumination which I will omit here.

To put it another way, in a striking way Georgi Gochev, with this book, is not just talking to us about Plato, but acting out, staging Plato as voicing Socrates. As I said, this is not a criticism, I find it remarkable.

Emphasizing again the qualities of the habilitation thesis and Gochev's many other qualities as a researcher, teacher and translator, I strongly support Georgi Gochev's election to the academic position of Associate Professor in professional field 2.1. Philology (Classical Languages), Faculty of BF, Department of Mediterranean and Eastern Studies at the NBU.

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