

## OPINION

by Prof. Dimitar Milchev Vatsov, PhD,  
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on

the scientific works submitted for participation in a competition  
for the academic position of Associate Professor at New Bulgarian University  
in Professional Field 3.4 Social Activities,  
announced in *State Gazette*, no. 97 of 13 November 2020,  
in which the only candidate is

Senior Assistant Rumen Goranov Petrov, MD, PhD

The candidate, Senior Assistant Rumen Petrov, PhD, meets all statutory (legal and in-house) requirements for participation in the competition for the academic position of Associate Professor in Professional Field 3.4 Social Activities. In his self-assessment, the candidate has presented two monographs (his PhD dissertation, defended and published in the UK; and his habilitation work, *Confused in Pain. Social Trauma and Social Responsibility*) as well as 16 articles and studies, a significant part of them published in international publications, including in indexed and refereed journals. His works have received 30 citations, many of them from foreign scholars. Since 1993, he has taught 21 different lecture courses at New Bulgarian University. He also has teaching experience at another four Bulgarian universities. Since 1989, he has participated in 36 research and social projects, and is a member of nine scientific and social organizations.

I know Rumen Petrov as one of the interesting colleagues at New Bulgarian University, who is always attentive to his interlocutors and deeply dedicated to his scientific and social mission.

I am not in conflict of interest with the candidate.

Having concluded that the candidate meets all scientometric and other formal requirements for the academic position of Associate Professor, I proceed to offer a substantive evaluation of his works, with a focus on his habilitation work, *Confused in Pain. Social Trauma and Social Responsibility* (in Bulgarian).

This is not a standard scientific study, at least not in the traditional sense of “scientificity”. Rumen Petrov upholds a comprehensive ethical and methodological approach that is a contribution in its own right at least to the Bulgarian scene of “social activities”. According to this approach, scientific knowledge cannot be – nor should be – entirely objectivistic, neutral and impartial. Epistemologically, this approach is based on interactionist premises: the researcher, even if they want to, cannot remove themselves from the interaction in which they are involved, that is to say, their position is constantly influenced by – and influences – the environment. Ethically, this approach is based on the assumption that *suffering* – the subject proper of social work – cannot nor should be discussed impartially: the denial of empathy, of compassion, even when done on the pretext of scientific “neutrality”, actively causes harm – it inflicts trauma.

Conversely, if one is truly committed to studying suffering, then – according to the above axioms – one cannot but show empathy and assume the role of therapist.

Rumen Petrov studies social traumas. According to him, “[s]ocial trauma is a psychic trauma” (p. 245), but it is a psychic trauma that has been institutionalized – not only have the violence inflicted and the pain caused not received empathy, not only has the victim been denied the right to compassion, but “this denial of the right to compassion is part of the norms of the social system” (p. 238). That is to say, we can speak of social traumas where the social conditions – the formal and informal institutions – are tuned so as to systematically deny empathy, to silence suffering and to exclude and marginalize it (including by instrumentalizing suffering through measures for its “support”). In other words, social traumas are to be found where institutions cause a rupture of the social bond by social exclusion.

Conversely, according to Rumen Petrov social traumas can be healed if institutions are retuned so as to give the victims of violence a voice and to engage the other members of the community (“social responsibility”), including their executioners, in a conversation with them. Following the Scandinavian experience and “the values and practices of restorative (reconciliatory) justice” (p. 344), Rumen Petrov does not merely introduce the latter in Bulgaria; he uses it as a broader critical and therapeutic platform in which he tries to include the broader arsenal of the critically-minded



human and social sciences of the last two centuries. In his view, social work consists in the first place in engaging in conversation – on topics that are usually passed over in silence, with and about the people whom it is most often uncomfortable to talk about; about the *excluded* people and things, as Foucault terms them. This widening of the meaning of “social work” is also a contribution.

It is precisely the wider conception of social work and social therapy which allows us to realize, while reading Rumen Petrov’s book, that too many spheres of our life have become shrouded in silence: we cannot talk with compassion about the multiple persecutions of Muslims, Greeks and Jews conducted by the Bulgarian state after the country’s 1878 Liberation from Ottoman rule, we cannot talk frankly about the time of totalitarianism, we neither can nor want to talk about the present-day poverty and the present-day prisons in Bulgaria. Those are the social traumas which Rumen Petrov reveals and which have been caused and are maintained by various institutions: by the nationalist ideology supported by Bulgarian science (by Bulgarian historiography, but also by Bulgarian social sciences at large), by Bulgarian literature, or by the institutions specialized in social work. It is these traumas – these hidden wounds – that Rumen Petrov lays bare and passionately attempts to conduct a general conversation on them.

And this is another major contribution.

There are quite a few deficiencies as well. Rumen Petrov’s writing is often too journalistic. He often takes exaggerated or not wholly justified positions (for example, on Kant, by placing excessive trust in Elie Kedourie – pp. 138ff). He often uses strong language and goes too far in criticizing fellow scholars (almost to the point of verbal aggression, something which he himself is fighting against).

Methodologically, I would recommend that he clarify his concept of “violence” and, by extent, of “suffering”. He does not offer a definition of the two concepts, but I have the feeling that in his book they function in a rather totalized and, in this sense, indeterminate way, whereby every form of power and coercion can be called “violence” and, apparently, there is no such thing as legitimate violence.

These critical remarks, however, in no way diminish the main merits and contributions of the candidate’s habilitation work. That is why I wholeheartedly **vote FOR** the appointment of Senior Assistant Rumen Goranov Petrov, MD, PhD, to the academic position of Associate Professor at New Bulgarian University in Professional Field 3.4 Social Activities.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Sofia,

14 February 2021

Sincerely,

(Dimitar Vatsov)