

STATEMENT

by Prof. Blagovesta Ivanova, DSc

Regarding the Competition for the Academic Position of "Professor" in "Art Studies and Fine Arts" (Bulgarian National Revival Ecclesiastical Art)

Professional Field 8.1. Theory of Arts

For the purposes of the Fine Arts Department at the Institute of Art Studies, BAS
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I have been appointed as a member of the Scientific Jury for the aforementioned competition by Order No. 352-RD of 8 June 2026.

Associate Professor Alexander Kuyumdzhev, DSc, is the sole candidate in this competition for the position of Professor. He is an established and leading expert in the field of National Revival religious art and culture. He has participated in international projects, as well as those funded by *Nasledstvo BG* (Heritage BG), the National Science Fund (NSF), and the Institute of Art Studies. He was awarded as a young scientist and received the Ministry of Education and Science's "Pythagoras" Award in 2015 for the best scientific book of the year for his monograph *The Murals in the Main Church of the Rila Monastery* (Sofia, Institute of Art Studies, BAS, 2015), which was also declared a publication of national significance by the Publishing Activity Council at the Management Board of BAS.

From the perspective of quantitative scientometric requirements, Assoc. Prof. Al. Kuyumdzhev has an H-index of 8 according to SONIX (the national reporting system of BAS) and an H-index of 2 according to Google Scholar.

The candidate has submitted a colossal volume of materials for this competition, which exceeds the stringent quantitative requirements of BAS multiple times over - totalling 1,485 points. This statement, however, will focus not on quantitative indicators (which are self-evident, given that he has accumulated 140 citations since 2011 alone, the year he was elected Associate Professor), but on the scholarly work accomplished and the significance of Assoc. Prof. Kuyumdzhev's contributions to Bulgarian science.

For his participation in the competition, the candidate has presented a habilitation thesis:

- *The Painters Yoan Popraykov from Elena and Yoan Popnikolov from Gabrovo*. Sofia, Institute of Art Studies, BAS, 2025. ISBN 978-619-7619-52-2. 169 pp., 237 illus.

He has also submitted two monographs:

- *The Murals in the Main Church of the Rila Monastery*. Institute of Art Studies, BAS, 2015, ISBN 978-954-8594-39, 720 pp. (based on a defended Doctor of Philosophy degree).
- *Works of Mount Athos Painters in Bulgaria (1750–1850)*. Sofia, Institute of Art Studies, BAS, 2021, ISBN: 978-619-7619-07-2, 443 pp., 837 illus. (based on a defended doctoral dissertation for the award of the higher degree of Doctor of Sciences).

Eighteen studies and articles have also been presented, published predominantly in Bulgarian outlets. The latter carries significant positive weight given the specific characteristics of the empirical material under investigation, which has proved no barrier to these works already being cited by foreign researchers.

A defining characteristic of Kuyumdzhiyev's scholarship is the sheer scale of his work, a quality evident in all three submitted books. A primary focus of his research lies in performing attributions and determining authorship - tasks that constitute the most refined and complex subject of art history, requiring not only an exhaustive knowledge of specific material but also the deployment of a broad and robust theoretical toolkit. These descriptors apply to his entire body of work, alongside his investigation of previously unknown facts, the discovery of new monuments, and the rectification of erroneous interpretations. This corrective work is undertaken with the benevolent purpose of clearing accumulated past errors that often lead to further flawed conclusions, thus protecting the broader academic community from future missteps.

The re-examination of established errors that have hardened into axioms, the introduction of new interpretations, corrections, novel facts, artworks, and theoretical frameworks are invariably conducted with scrupulous rigour, backed by an abundance of evidence. Without diminishing the prior research of generations of art historians, Assoc. Prof. Alexander Kuyumdzhiyev, DSc, uncovers new facts and establishes new logical connections. Consequently, all materials submitted for this competition can be integrated into a unified conceptual framework that charts a new path forward and advances the field of National Revival ecclesiastical art research. Everything stated thus far points to a well-honed methodology developed over time for handling both familiar and newly discovered artistic material, presenting it through a clear cognitive and analytical structure.

As a result of this methodology, novel conclusions have been reached within the theory of Bulgarian National Revival church art. Among these, I note the more significant contributions:

- The outdated and inaccurate view that certain monuments of Mount Athos art are part of Bulgarian National Revival art has been corrected.
- The assumption that the main church of the Rila Monastery was modeled after the church of the St. Paul Monastery on Mount Athos has been reassessed and corrected.
- The investigation into the graphic models for several images in the main church of the Rila Monastery is deeply impressive. These models stem from diverse origins - ranging from Mount Athos prints to Western European, Ukrainian, and Russian lithographs. The study successfully identifies these as the visual sources for the so-called "didactic" depictions in the church, such as *The Righteous and the Sinful Confession* or *Visiting a Witchdoctor for a Cure*.

The studies and articles submitted for the professorial competition range from the treatment of individual monuments, authors, or documents to broad, overarching survey questions—all intersecting issues within the study and analysis of monuments. Among the former are articles proposing new theses regarding the Kilifarevo Monastery, the murals of the monastery church in Kurilo, the Church of the Holy Archangels in the

Bachkovo Monastery, and various sites within the Rila Monastery. Another portion of the submitted articles consists of studies dedicated to individual artists. These include research on Mount Athos icon painters in Bulgaria, as well as painters who worked in settlements along the southern Black Sea coast and partially within the Strandzha region—an area of inquiry addressed methodologically in the first part of the habilitation thesis. In this connection, Assoc. Prof. Kuyumdhiev also undertakes a revision of the oeuvre of Hristo Dimitrov, a thesis he may well develop fully in the future.

The challenging path of critical evaluation is by no means bypassed in the habilitation thesis itself. Within it, the author re-examines the work of the painters Yoan Popnikolov from Gabrovo and Yoan Popraykov from Elena, whose biographies and outputs had become conflated in scholarship. Through an immense body of evidence and logical threads, the distinct creative outputs of these two icon painters have now been clearly separated.

I will focus more specifically on Chapter One of the habilitation thesis, *The State of Research on National Revival Painters* (pp. 7-50), which in terms of significance corresponds to the introduction of the *Corpus of Murals from the First Half of the 19th Century in Bulgaria*. Unlike the introductory section of the *Corpus* (No. 4), which examines working methodologies and analyses murals, this section of the habilitation thesis functions as a programmatic study regarding the research and investigation of the work of National Revival painters in general.

Correcting the works of seminal scholars—and indeed, foundational studies on Bulgarian National Revival art completed as recently as the 1990s—is a difficult and responsible task, which the candidate delivers with a vast array of arguments. The programmatic nature of this section lies in its review and assessment of numerous propositions hitherto accepted as textbook truths. Its significance extends beyond merely serving as an introduction to the attributional study of the painters Yoan Popnikolov from Gabrovo and Yoan Popraykov from Elena. It outlines directions for future research into the masters of Tryavna, Samokov, Bansko, and Debar, as well as local masters from the Yambol and Adrianople regions, among others.

It is well known in art history that when authorship is absent (and sometimes even when it is documented), analysis relies primarily on stylistic critique, which can often be misleading. In icon painting, where the use of diverse prototypes is standard practice, applying stylistic attribution without supplementary research and archival consultation frequently leads to errors, such as artificially inflating the output of a given artist or school. Kuyumdhiev directs critical attention to the application of this approach, aiming to purge old errors and prevent future ones. This same section summarises themes analysed more extensively through empirical data in the articles appended to the competition. It establishes and prioritises the theoretical framework of issues surrounding the study of National Revival painters.

The remaining sections, from Chapters Two to Four, are dedicated to separating the biographies and artworks of the two painters, where through documents, facts, and stylistic analyses, the oeuvre and identity of the painter from Gabrovo are substantively reconstructed.

For the research of Assoc. Prof. Alexander Kuyumdzhev, DSc, the mandatory requirement to rule out plagiarism is inapplicable and unnecessary to discuss, given the intensely pioneering and exploratory nature of his scholarship. All arguments presented in this statement confirm the absolute originality of the works submitted for the competition.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the qualities of the candidate's works highlighted in this statement, I propose that Associate Professor Alexander Kuyumdzhev, DSc, be elected to the academic position of "Professor" for the purposes of the Fine Arts Department at the Institute of Art Studies, BAS. I am convinced that his future research will contribute significantly to the development not only of the "Medieval and National Revival Art" research group at the Institute but also to the broader field of Bulgarian National Revival art studies.

17 September 2026

Prof. Blagovesta Ivanova, DSc