

Review

By Prof. Dr. Mariya Zlatkova Stankova, with a scientific specialty "Economics and Management of Tourism", member of the scientific jury for the announced competition for the academic position of "associate professor" at the International Business School, according to the Rector's Order No. 29 /13.02. 2024

Regarding: competition for the academic position "associate professor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.9 Tourism (Sustainable regional development of tourism), published in the State Gazette, no. 103 of 12.12.2023, with a single candidate Dr. Desislava Ivanova Alexova.

Basis for presenting the review: decision of the first meeting of the scientific jury on the procedure, held online on 20.02.2024 at 11:00 a.m.

The review was prepared on the basis of order No. 29 /13.02.2024 of the Rector of the International Business School (IBS). Its content is in accordance with the laws and regulations in force in the Republic of Bulgaria and the internal rules at the IBS. Structurally, it is composed of five parts and a conclusion, in which the candidate's research, teaching and teaching activities and contributions are evaluated, as well as notes and recommendations are given.

1. Applicant Reference

The only candidate in the competition is Chief Assist. Dr. Desislava Ivanova Alexova. The curriculum vitae presented by her within the procedure is sufficiently detailed and allows the conclusion that Dr. Alexova has extensive professional, scientific-applied and pedagogical experience. From the factual data it is clear that she has more than 20 years of experience as a teacher, organizer, expert and researcher in the field of tourism. Over time, she has shown interest in participating in various forums to increase her qualifications in the country and abroad. She supervised graduate students at NBU and IBS in different periods of time. She worked on the implementation of over 30 applied and business projects and has professional experience in educational, scientific and tourist institutions, companies and organizations, for which she presents a set of references as evidence.

Desislava Alexova completed a bachelor's and master's degree in professional field 3.9 Tourism at the New Bulgarian University in the period 1998 - 2003. In the following years, until 2020, she improved her competences in a series of specialized courses on the basics of marketing, digital branding, management of the protected areas, etc. She was awarded the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 3.9 Tourism after successfully defending a dissertation on the topic: "Research of the tourism potential of Botevgrad municipality for sustainable development of the destination". She develops his own business,

as well as being a member of the Bulgarian Tourist Chamber and the Association of Parks in Bulgaria. She speaks English and Spanish.

Currently, Dr. D. Alexova is a lecturer at the International Business School - Botevgrad in the academic position of "chief assistant". She was entrusted with conducting 9 courses, including "Geography for travel agents", "Planning and development of tourism in Bulgaria", "Tourist demand", "Cultural-historical heritage of Bulgaria", "Field research of tourist destinations", " Planning and development of tourist destinations", "Management of a local tourist destination", etc. The assessment of the educational and teaching activity of Ch. Assist. Dr. Alexova demands to take into account her commitment to work on various practical events, as well as her interest in constantly upgrading professional qualities and skills. In this aspect, her research activity is also being followed, in the direction of occupying the academic position of "associate professor". It is definitely related to Dr. Alexova's work as an expert in project teams and working groups of national and international projects and scientific and applied developments for various institutions.

II. General characteristics of the works presented in the competition

Fulfilling the requirements for the academic position

For participation in the competition, Dr. Desislava Alexova has submitted 1 monography - a habilitation work for the competition procedure, 1 published book based on a protected dissertation work for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor", 3 studies, 34 scientific reports and 14 articles. Two of the publications are referenced in Web of Science (NN 4, 52).

Out of a total of 53 publications, 50 are accepted for evaluation. The published book based on a protected dissertation work for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor" is excluded. Also, after a careful study of the thematic focus of publications with N 31 and N 47, they were removed from the scope of the review, as not matching the specifics of the competition theme. In the content of the others, no thematic duplication and connections with the doctoral work of the candidate are established. It should be pointed out that some of the publications date back to the period of 2009 (two in numbers - NN 5, 6). There are some others from 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 that are also presented. By type, number and volume, these publications are as follows:

Table 1. Publications presented by qualitative and quantitative characteristics

№	Publication type	Authorship				Publication numbering (№, №....)	In a foreign language English (№, №..)	Total	
		Independent		Co-authored				Publication number	Pages number
		numbers	pages	numbers	pages				
1.	Monographs	1	418	-	-	Groupe B - N 2	-	1	418
2.	Studios	2	22 38	1	35	Groupe G: NN 52,53,54	-	3	95
3.	Scientific articles	7	79	7	57	Groupe G: NN 5,6,18,21,23,28,29,33,34,41,42,46,50,51	NN 21,34, 41,42,46, 50	14	136

4.	Scientific reports	21	232	11	101	Groupe G: NN 4,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,19,20,22,24,25,26,27,30,32,35,36,37,38,39,40,43,44,45,48,49	NN 4,20,26,36,45	32	333
	Total	31	789	19	193		11	50	982

A total of 31 of the publications presented under the procedure were independently developed by the candidate. The majority of them are in specialized publications in the country, with editorial boards or colleges. It is noteworthy that a large part of them can be used in the educational process, as well as be useful to the tourist business.

Reference to the minimal national requirements

From the submitted documents of the participant in the competition - Ch. Assist. Dr. Desislava Ivanova Alexova, it is evident that the accepted recommended scientific and scientometric formal requirements for the candidates for the academic position "Associate Professor" have been met. The provided evidential material is in accordance with the specifics of the professional direction in which the competition is announced. It is clear from the citation report attached by D. Alexova that her works have been cited by 46 Bulgarian and foreign authors (citation references attached).

A self-assessment for the fulfilment of the minimum national requirements of the candidate, as a participant in the competition for the academic position "docent" in PN 3.9 Tourism, was presented, according to which a total of 859.5 points were calculated with a required minimum of 400. The publications that did not fall within the scope of the review should be deducted from them, whereby the final sum of points amounts to 772.

III. Evaluation of the obtained scientific and scientific-applied results

In the list of the candidate's scientific output, four main categories of publications can be summarized: monographs, studies, scientific articles and scientific reports in the field of tourism, sustainable and regional development. In its structure and volume, this scientific production covers:

1. *Monographs:*

The monograph work with topic and references "Sustainable development of the municipality of Chiprovtsi as a tourist destination. Creating a tourism brand and strategic planning" (2021). Academic publishing house: About the letters - About letters, Sofia (pages: 418) - N 3, developed independently, is mainly considered. It is directly related to the competition theme and affects a key aspect of strategic planning, oriented as an organization and technology at the local level.

In this main work, the author's attention is directed to the study of the tourist environment and the sustainable development of a tourist destination identified on a regional basis. With this in mind, D. Alexova presents the main theoretical interpretations of the tourist destination, its positioning along the life cycle curve and the development of a recognizable brand. Focus is placed on the development of the municipality of Chiprovtsi, as a territorial

system for recreation and tourism, and the chosen approach is interdisciplinary, so as to achieve adaptation and application of a working model and established methodologies for sustainable development at the local level.

The work is developed in four chapters, which present existing practices of zoning and research of tourism resources, as well as different models of tourism zoning. On this basis, a taxonomic scheme for touristic microdistricting and zoning of a destination at the local level is proposed, systematized through the author's observations and expertise. The resource potential in the selected site - Chiprovtsi municipality was studied. In continuation, according to the logical framework of the development, the research is also developed in the direction of studying the manifestations of sustainable development for selected destinations, so as to identify criteria and indicators for sustainable tourism development at the local level. Thus, in order to achieve completeness, the tourist brand Chiprovtsi has been proposed, as part of an overall management concept and strategic priorities for sustainable tourism development of the municipality of Chiprovtsi have been identified.

In general, in this paper the author emphasizes the need for a systematic approach to sustainability issues for tourism destinations formed at the local level. The opportunities it identifies are tied to the use and application of the criteria and indicators for the analysis and evaluation of the tourist potential, with the strategic goals in relation to the sustainable development, identity and reputation of the destination clearly stated. It can be seen that D. Aleksieva is aware of the limitations of an informational nature that narrow the scope of research, among which, in the first place, she places the lack of sufficiently up-to-date and reliable information about tourist resources and objects on the territory of the municipality, service providers and the state of the tourist offer. In order to overcome them, he uses the methods of survey surveys, conducting them among the local community and visitors (2021), and the result draws specific conclusions and recommendations.

Justifying her interest in the issues discussed in the work presented as a habilitation for the competition, D. Alexieva points out that it was provoked by her work on projects and initiatives in the territory she is considering. At the same time, it reflects the contacts she established in the process of working with the local community. She also clarifies that the work presents revised and supplemented by the her as author, part of the results of the project "The Tale of the Carpet: Creation and initial marketing of a new cross-border tourist product connecting the regions of Pirot and Chiprovtsi through their shared carpet weaving traditions"¹. D. Alexieva points out that these results, which she is working on, are in connection with expert work on Activity 1 of the mentioned project and were realized by a wide team of researchers: teachers and experts of the IBS, external experts, representatives of the Historical Museum - Chiprovtsi, the Ponishawieto Museum - Pirot, Municipality of Chiprovtsi, Municipality of Pirot, local associations and representatives of artistic circles from the cross-border region. The same refer to the study of carpet-making traditions and the tourist potential in the cross-border region of Chiprovtsi and Pirot; SWOT analysis and marketing plan; tourism product concepts, concepts for developing marketing tools for the project, as well as materials, part of the medium-term marketing strategy for sustainable development of tourism in the cross-border region of Chiprovtsi and Pirot 2021 - 2025. Their inclusion in the book is with the permission of the leading partner.

2. Studias

D. Alexova is the author of 3 studies (numbered in the bibliographic reference NN 52, 53, 54), one of which was published in a scientific publication, referenced and indexed in world-famous databases with scientific information (N 52).

¹ With number CB007.2.12.121, financed under the Interreg IPA-CBC Bulgaria – Serbia и Lead partner the International Business School

The candidate's research interests, expressed in the mentioned publications, are aimed at exploring the potential for sustainable tourism development, with an orientation to the local/regional profile of the destinations. More specifically, they are dedicated to issues of sustainable development of cultural and eco-tourism in Botevgrad Municipality, as well as implementation of mechanisms for sustainable development in the national resorts of Bulgaria. As a result, recommendations and proposals for developing the parameters of a tourist product have been made.

3. Scientific articles (independent and co-authored):

14 scientific articles published in specialized Bulgarian and foreign publications are submitted for review. Among them, within the framework of the thematic orientation of the competition, the following make an impression:

N 5. Alexova, D., D. Gyurova. 2009. Development of botanical tourism in the area of the villages of Yagodina, Trigrad and Mugla. *Ecological Engineering and Environmental Protection*, 8 (3-4), pp. 112-118. ISSN 1311-8668 (<http://eprints.nbu.bg/id/eprint/1647/>)

N 6. Alexova, D. 2009. Creation of a cross-border park "Rhodope" - protection of natural resources and sustainable development of tourism. *Ecological Engineering and Environmental Protection = Ecological Engineering and Environmentt Protection*. 8. (3-4), pp. 119-127. ISSN 1311-8668 (<https://eprints.nbu.bg/id/eprint/1646/2/9.pdf>)

N 34. Alexova, D. 2019. Sustainable Development of Tourist Destination on Example of Botevgrad Municipality, *Quaestus*, Numerul 14, Anul 8, 2019, pp. 45-61, ISSN 2285-424X

N 41, Alexova, D. 2021. Concept for tourist zoning of Kostinbrod Municipality – a mechanism for sustainable development of tourism. *Socio Brains*, Publisher Smart ideas – wise decisions. Sofia, issue 78, p. 448-459, ISSN 2367-5721 (online)

In the listed, as well as in Dr. Alexova's other scientific articles, her skills to decompose, analyze and summarize, so as to arrive at solutions related to specific problems concerning the management of tourist destinations, with a view to sustainable development and regional characteristics.

4. Scientific reports (independent and co-authored):

Publications from participation in scientific forums – a total of 34 scientific reports, presented and published in collections of national and international scientific forums.

From the procedurally presented publications in this category, I would like to single out the following:

N 4. Alexova, D., E. Alexandrova, M. Vodenska and N. Popova. 2021. Contemporary Challenges to the Sustainable Development of Tourism in the National Resorts of Bulgaria. Sixth International Scientific Conference "BUSINESS AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT", Business Development, Innovation and Circular Economy, ISSN: 2261-2424 - published in a collection indexed in Web of Science (https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/pdf/2021/31/shsconf_brd2021_02011.pdf)

N 27. Alexova, D. 2019. Competitiveness of destinations by creating creative tourist initiatives and attractions following the example of Botevgrad municipality. In: Proceedings XV International Scientific Conference on Innovation and Entrepreneurship. Sofia, MVBU, pp. 58-71., ISBN 978-954-9432-83-1 (CD)

N 36. Alexova, D. 2019. Studies and problems in the ecotourist supply in the Western Rhodopes region. *Emerging Markets Economics and Business*. Contributions of young researchers. Proceedings of the 9th International Conference of Doctoral students and Young

Researchers. No.7, December, 2019, Oradea University Press, pp. 174-177, ISBN 978-606-10-2076-8, ISSN 2344-6617 (print), ISSN 2601-1840 (online), ISSN-L 2344-6617N 15.

N 37. Aleksova, D. 2020. Methodology for sustainable development of a tourist destination, In: collection of reports from the International Student-Doctoral Conference "Sustainable Tourism - Perspectives and Challenges", ed. "Avangard Prima", Sofia, pp. 263-277, ISBN 978-619-239-423-3

N 43. Alexova, D. 2022. Implementation of a regional brand for quality in tourism "Gorna Malina - green municipality". In: Education in a global world and new technologies. The universities of Southeast Europe and Asia – a smart destination for culture, tourism, youth, artificial intelligence and blockchain technologies. Sofia: "About letters - About letters", pp. 50 - 62. ISBN 978-619-185-550-6

After reading carefully the presented scientific reports, I can note that the candidate's professional interest in the competition topic is obvious, as well as her willingness to analyse important problems, theoretical and practical positions related to the theory of tourism, sustainable development, alternative and specialized types of tourism studied at the regional level. Although there are some publications (NN 45, 46 and 47) that can be described as marginally relevant to the problems of sustainable regional tourism development.

Summarizing the facts presented above, I accept that a significant volume of scientific production has been presented for review, which in its main part corresponds to the subject of the announced competition. The submitted evaluation and review materials, independently developed by the applicant and in which he participated as a co-author, amount to 1018 pages. The publications are dedicated to issues relevant to the theory and practice of tourism in Bulgaria. The monographs, studies and scientific articles examine various aspects of the researched issues. I also accept that they, together with the scientific reports, are relevant to the subject of the competition, although some of the latter date back to the period 2009-2015. However, I evaluate this fact positively, as I believe that it is a confirmation of the candidate's long-term efforts to improve himself as a researcher and teacher.

IV. Assessment of received scientific and scientific-applied contributions

After I got acquainted with the research work and publications of Ch. Assist. Dr. Desislava Alexova, I come to the conclusion that she has a good literary awareness and skills to systematize and make sense of what has been achieved in the field of her research interests.

In my opinion, in the publications submitted for the competition, there are a total of 4 directions related to scientific and scientific-applied issues:

- The sustainable development of regional tourist destinations;
- The organization and management of the tourist offer for specialized types of tourism;
- Tourist branding and gamification;
- Conservation of tourist resources, planning and management of tourism in protected areas.

I believe that the following can be mentioned as the main contributions in the overall work of the candidate:

1. The factors influencing the strategic framework for the sustainable development of regional tourist destinations in Bulgaria were analysed, and a model for the sustainable development of an emerging tourist destination was proposed based on the example of a specifically studied one - Botevgrad (N 2, 34, 37).

2. A tourist brand and visual identity of the municipality of Chiprovtsi was proposed, taking into account the local characteristics, in cooperation with professionals from the field of design (N 2, 15, 32).

3. An author's taxonomic scheme for tourist microdistricting and destination zoning is presented and good practices for tourist zoning in Bulgaria are studied (NN 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 14, 19, 41).

4. Generalizations have been made, having theoretical and methodological importance for improving the organization of various specialized types of tourism and alternative tourist offer of the destinations (Publications NN 5, 8, 18, 19, 21, 23, 25, 26, 29, 33, 35, 36, 39, 42, 47, 50, 51, 52, 53).

In general, scientific contributions are found in the candidate's developments related to the theoretical aspects of tourism micro-zoning, refracted through the prism of sustainable development. The practical-applied contributions are noticeable in the scientific reports and articles presented by him, offering an applicable mechanism for the organization and management of tourism, in a sustainable and adapted to the specifics of a tourist destination at the local level, including for underdeveloped and depopulated areas that are still are not established as tourist destinations.

Thus presented, the contributions of Ch. Assist. Dr. Alexova reflect the focus of her research on the study of specific models for identifying and dealing with the problems of the tourist destination in a regional aspect, following good practices in the field of sustainable tourism development and the promotion and integration of established criteria and indicators in this connection, for destination Bulgaria.

V. Critical Notes, Recommendations and Questions

In the peer-reviewed and analysed scientific papers and materials of the candidate, the focus of her research interests is well outlined. Her attitude towards clarifying the specifics of the problems and at the same time, her attempts to overcome the faced difficulties in her quest to be punctual, is visible. In general, no serious weaknesses which would reduce their positive qualities, can be found in the works of Dr. Alexova. However, I allow myself to make some recommendations. I believe that despite the large number of publications of the candidate, they are not sufficiently publicized and have not gained popularity among external audiences. It would be good if Dr. Alexova expanded her appearances more representatively, not only in the country, but also abroad. In this way, her work will contribute to the confirmation of some of the conclusions, which can actually have a wider practical impact on the tourism industry. I would also add the recommendation to Dr. Alexova to widen the regional profile of her researches to other scales.

The comments made in no way detract from the candidate's scientific and applied contributions and have the character, above all, of suggestions for his further development as a researcher.

Conclusion

Summarizing my position regarding the materials and documents under the current procedure for the academic position of an associate professor, I believe that the national legal requirements were followed as well as those of the university that announced the competition.

Acquaintance with the competition documents and evaluation of the candidate's publications give me reason to draw the following conclusions:

1. D. Alexova is the only candidate in the procedure for selection of an associate professor;
2. The candidate possesses the educational and scientific degree "doctor";
3. D. Alexova holds the academic position of "chief assistant" in the university that announced the procedure;
4. The candidate is provided with the necessary classroom and non-auditory employment;
5. D. Alexova was assigned a total of 9 lecture courses;
6. The candidate has published his own works related to the disciplines taught by him, directly related to the theme of the competition - such as, for example, on "Planning and development of tourism in Bulgaria" and "Management of a local tourist destination";
7. D. Alexova is participation in the procedure for the academic position for "associate professor" with a sufficient quantity of scientific production unrelated to the doctoral dissertation, including 1 monograph - habilitation work related to the procedure topic, 3 studies, 32 scientific reports and 14 articles with a total volume of 982 pages;
8. A total of 46 citations of the candidate by other authors were documented, according to a reference submitted by the National Centre for Information and Documentation (NACID);
9. In their totality, the evaluated publications contain a set of scientific and scientific-applied contributions that complement and further develop scientific knowledge in the field of sustainable tourism management in the context of the regional characteristics of tourist destinations.

My summary assessment of the criteria and indicators for the educational and scientific research activity related to the competition, shows that Dr. Desislava Ivanova Alexova meets the requirements of the Law for the development of academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the regulations for its application, as well as the internal regulations of the IBS for holding the academic position "associate professor"

After reviewing the materials and scientific works presented in the competition and the conducted analysis, I can give a positive assessment for the awarding of the academic position of ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR to the candidate Ch. Assist. Dr. Desislava Ivanova Alexova in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.9 Tourism with scientific speciality "Economics and Management (Sustainable Regional Development of Tourism)".

Blagoevgrad,
03.04.2024 г.

Reviewer:
(Prof. M. Stankeva, PhD)

