

REVIEW

By Professor Dr. Sci Maria Stamatova Vodenska, MVBU – Botevgrad,
with a scientific specialty 4.4. Geography of recreation and tourism

Regarding: Competition announced by the International Business School for the academic position of "Associate professor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional area 3.9 Tourism (Sustainable regional development of tourism), published in SG No. 103 of 12.12.2023.

The review is presented in accordance with Art. 4, paragraph 2 of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and Art. 57, para. 2 of the Regulations for its implementation, art. 5, para. 2 of the Ordinance on the Development of the Academic Staff at IBS, and on the basis of a decision of the Academic Council of IBS (Protocol No. 4 of February 12, 2024).

There is only one applicant for "Associate professor" - Head Assistant Desislava Ivanova Alexova, PhD, lecturer at IBS.

I. Applicant Reference

Head Assistant Dr. Desislava Alexova is a teacher at the International Business School - Botevgrad, the owner and manager of "Kreativo.com" EOOD, an individual member of the Bulgarian Tourist Chamber and the Bulgarian Parks Association. With 20 years of professional experience as a teacher and expert in the field of tourism, education and sustainable development. She has participated in over 30 projects related to the regional development of tourism; research of the tourist potential and preparation of strategic and program documents in various municipalities.

She completed her Bachelor's and Master's degree at NBU, where she became a doctor in 2006, and in 2020 defended her second thesis and became a doctor at IBS. Her work experience is entirely related to tourism, and in 2004 she began her teaching activity as a part-time assistant at the NBU. In addition to being a teacher in various educational structures, Dr. Alexova also has considerable experience in tourism practice, having worked in various positions in a number of tourism enterprises and associations. From 2012 until now, she is Head assistant at IBS and is one of the main teachers in the professional field of Tourism. She has completed a significant number of qualification courses (with relevant certificates) and has very good computer, presentation, communication and organizational skills. She speaks English and Spanish.

II. General characteristics of the candidate's scientific works

For her participation in the competition Head Assistant Dr D. Alexova presented a considerable bibliographic reference with 54 titles published in the period 2009-2023. All of them are available on the Internet. I accept all publications for review. I have only one joint publication with Dr. Alexova in 2021, which will not be reflected in the review.

Of all the publications, less than half (20) are co-authored, and even fewer (12) are in English.

Content-wise, they can be divided into 4 larger groups:

1. Regional tourism development – 30 publications
2. Various tourism types – 22 publications
3. Sustainable tourism development - 15 publications
4. Tourism planning and management – 10 publications

Another smaller group of publications (4) can be singled out, of which 3 are related to tourism education and training, and one addresses the issue of tourism manpower in times of crisis.

The total number of publications is more than 53, because in some of them questions from more than one area are dealt with.

According to the reviewer, the grouping of the publications in this way fully corresponds to the theme of the announced competition - Sustainable regional development of tourism.

In the first area, Head Assistant Dr. Alexova has focused her attention on certain territories of Bulgaria. A part of them are related to the Sofia region or destinations close to it (13) – in the first place is the municipality of Botevgrad (7 publications), followed by Chiprovtsi, G. Malina, Bailovo, Kostinbrod, Dragoman. In them, Dr. Alexova very thoroughly and in depth examines the possibilities for the development of various types of sustainable tourism, making a number of methodological and theoretical generalizations.

Another large group of regional publications is related to national resorts and protected areas, especially natural parks in our country. In total, these are 16 publications, 7 of which are more general, and the rest primarily include territories in the Rhodopes (6 publications), Vitosha (2) and Strandzha (1). In them Head assistant Dr. Alexova examines various problems of protected areas in our country, including legislative, managerial and organizational ones, as well as possibilities for the development of new types of tourism in them, respecting and observing the principles of sustainable development.

There are 4 more publications that treat cross-border areas and territories outside the country, as well as individual aspects of their tourism development (Black Sea, Greece, Romania).

In the publications from the second area, Dr. Alexova pays attention to various sustainable types of tourism, such as alternative, responsible, health, festival, adventure, ornithological, volunteer, botanical, educational, ecotourism. She examines the prerequisites and opportunities for their development in the country as a whole, as well as in smaller destinations and small settlements.

Sustainable tourism development is a main topic in the scientific output of Head Assistant Dr. Alexova. She examines the theoretical, methodological and practical aspects of sustainable tourism at different spatial levels and in different territories. It is particularly important that she pays attention to these issues in territories still under-exploited by tourism, thus giving suggestions for laying the foundations of sustainable development at the very beginning of tourism adoption.

I can't help but pay attention also to the ethical issues raised by the Associate professor candidate in her publications.

II. General characteristics of the habilitation thesis "Sustainable development of the municipality of Chiprovtsi as a destination. Creation of a tourism brand and strategic planning"

The monograph presented for review has a total volume of 397 pages. It is structured in a Preface, Introduction, four chapters and a Conclusion. It is illustrated by five appendices, 39 figures and 14 tables. The list of used sources includes 138 publications in Bulgarian, 5 publications in Russian, 46 publications in English, 28 electronic sources and 18 normative, program and strategic documents.

In the **Introduction**, the author emphasizes the importance of the topic, connecting it to the huge undeveloped tourist potential of her chosen destination - the municipality of Chiprovtsi. The object and subject of the research, as well as its purpose, are indicated. 7 research tasks are formulated, for the solution of which a corresponding methodological toolkit is presented. A research thesis is formulated, the limitations in the implementation of the set tasks are indicated. In general, the Introduction outlines the framework of the overall scientific research undertaken by Head assistant Dr. Desislava Alexova.

Chapter one presents the theoretical and methodological framework of the study. The author bases her research on two fundamental concepts in the field of tourism. These are the Territorial System for Recreation and Tourism and the Tourist Destination. Keeping in mind the ultimate goal of her research study, Head assistant Dr. Alexova examines also some concepts from the area of tourism marketing - the product and the product, marketing and communication policy of the tourist destination.

The presentation of the conceptual framework of sustainable development of a tourist destination follows quite logically. A number of models are considered, and

tourist destination sustainable development is presented from different points of view - economic, social, ecological, cultural, etc.

Theoretical positions concerning the essence, the creation and the peculiarities of the brand of a tourist destination are examined here. An innovative approach to creating and managing a brand and brand personality of a tourist destination is also analyzed.

The author also examines the theory and features of tourism zoning and micro-zoning, analyzing in detail the schemes of tourism zoning in Bulgaria known in the scientific literature.

In the second part of the first chapter, Dessislava Alexova presents already known studies of sustainable tourism development in various tourist destinations in Bulgaria - Botevgrad, Kostinbrod, Gorna Malina. It should be emphasized that all of them were conducted by the author, or at the very least, she was seriously involved in their research.

In the first chapter, the main methodological aspects of the study of sustainable development of Chiprovtsi tourist destination are also discussed. The approaches used and the quantitative and qualitative techniques for carrying out the study are listed correctly and in detail. A special point is dedicated to the methodology for researching tourist resources in the municipality of Chiprovtsi.

It can be concluded that the voluminous first chapter comprehensively and argumentatively sets the theoretical and methodological foundations for conducting the specific study of sustainable development in the selected municipality of Chiprovtsi. The author shows enviable knowledge of the presented theoretical and methodological aspects of her research.

The **second chapter** is dedicated to the study and analysis of possibilities for sustainable development of the municipality of Chiprovtsi as a tourist destination. The author has chosen the SWOT analysis as the most suitable form for their presentation, and the table attached at the end of the chapter is extremely detailed, comprehensive and informative. The external and internal factors affecting sustainable tourism development of the municipality have been consistently examined and analyzed. Also worth noting is the use of PEST analysis in this study.

The in-depth and detailed analysis of the tourism potential of the municipality deserves special attention. Head assistant Dr. Alexova shows an extremely good knowledge of all types of tourism resources and the tourist offer in the municipality of Chiprovtsi. The role of local government in the sustainable development of tourism is also discussed.

The conclusions drawn after the study of the municipality of Chiprovtsi follow from the analysis and are extremely well argued.

The **third chapter** presents the results of thenqualitative research conducted in the municipality - interviews, focus groups and surveys. They are analyzed in

detail and illustrated by appropriate tables and graphs. Conclusions about the tourist product and the tourist demand in the municipality of Chiprovtsi have been formulated. Proposals have been made for the sustainable development of various types of tourism on the territory of the municipality - rural, agrarian, mountain, ecotourism, adventure, extreme, sports, business, pilgrimage, religious, festival, educational, volunteer, cultural and creative tourism.

The author pays particular attention to the characteristics of tourist demand and the possibilities for a diverse offer of tourist products and recreational activities in the municipality, as this is a basic prerequisite for the sustainable development of tourism in it. A number of international and Bulgarian good practices are presented, which can be applied locally.

In the third part of this chapter, the author makes a successful attempt to present tourism micro-zoning of the municipality of Chiprovtsi, which was carried out on the basis of principles used by her in the development of other micro-zoning in the country. The need for tourism zoning at local level is motivated by the need to develop sustainable and competitive tourism, implement a local tourism policy that is consistent with the territorial features and the specifics of different parts of the municipality and implement effective marketing to make the tourism areas of the territory recognizable for potential tourists and successfully promote them at the domestic and international market.

The need for control and monitoring of sustainable tourism development in the municipality is indicated, and the main mechanisms and tools for this are presented.

On the basis of earlier studies by Head assistant Dr. Alexova, indicators for sustainable tourism development on the territory of Chiprovtsi municipality have been identified.

Following the logic of allg stated above, the author ends this chapter with the creation, offer and management of a tourism brand of the municipality of Chiprovtsi. It is based on the specific tourism characteristics of the municipality and its possibilities for developing sustainable tourism. The graphic proposals for branding are extremely interesting and appropriate. Marketing and communication guidelines (including the creation of a specialized portal) to promote the newly created tourist brand are formulated.

Chapter four examines the strategic planning and implementation of the policy for sustainable tourism development in Chiprovtsi municipality. The main principles of sustainability are outlined, the strategic goals and priorities for sustainable development of the destination are formulated. Detailed priorities are divided in separate measures that should be implemented in various tourism areas of the municipality. Finally, a detailed ten-year action plan (2021-2031) is presented,

including the various types of activities, the sources of funding, the persons responsible and the period of implementation.

The Conclusion is concise, synthesized and summarized and derives from the overall text of the monograph. The directions for action of Chiprovtsi municipality are outlined. It is stated that the main objective of the study has been achieved and the formulated research thesis has been proven.

In conclusion, it can be summarized that presented is an extremely thorough, comprehensive, very well structured, logical and complete scientific research work with undeniable theoretical, methodological and applied contributions. We can only hope that the management of Chiprovtsi municipality follows the guidelines formulated therein and will achieve significant results in the development of sustainable tourism on its territory.

III. Evaluation of the obtained scientific and scientific-applied results (evaluation of scientometric indicators)

Dr. Alexova's scientific interests and research activities are concentrated in several areas. First of all, they are focused on sustainable tourism development, development of specialized types of tourism, planning and management of tourism in protected areas, destination management and more specifically on creating and testing a model for local tourism development of emerging destinations, research of concepts and good practices for responsible, solidarity and volunteer tourism. Secondly, the research is focused on alternative tourism offers and the product policy of the destinations, which contribute to sustainable local tourism development and the improvement of their tourism product quality. Thirdly, the publications cover various aspects and problems of strategic planning of destinations and the creation of brand identity, including tourism marketing, unique positioning, accompanied by a regional trademark as a voluntary certification for tourism quality.

The problems investigated by the candidate are particularly topical and are distinguished by a clearly formulated goal, thorough research and conclusions and recommendations useful for science and practice. The contributions to the enrichment of scientific knowledge about sustainable tourism, and more specifically in the field of regional tourism development, are indisputable.

Thematically, the production with which the candidate participates in the competition gives reason to group them into thematic areas that give a real idea of the development of scientific knowledge in the field. The bibliographic apparatus is used correctly. No inadmissible borrowings from other authors were found.

The candidate for Associate professor meets the minimum requirements for the scientific, teaching and/or artistic-creative activity of the candidates for the academic position "Associate professor" in professional fields, in accordance with PPZRASRB (groups of indicators A-D) and a corresponding number of points: A

50/50 , B 100/100, D 444.5/200, D 265/50, or a total of 859.5 points whereas the required number is 400 points.

III. Assessment of received scientific and scientific-applied contributions

I generally agree with the theoretical and scientific-applied contributions presented by the candidate for Associate professor, and I have taken the liberty of summarizing and reducing them.

1. Theoretical and scientific-practical contributions in the monograph

- An interdisciplinary approach is applied to the study of an undeveloped tourism destination. For this purpose, a model developed and approved by Dr. Alexova was used for the sustainable development of an emerging tourism destination, following the example of Botevgrad.
- Main theoretical propositions related to planning, development and branding of a tourism destination are presented. Based on an innovative research approach, a tourism brand and visual identity of Chiprovtsi municipality is developed.
- An author's taxonomic scheme for tourism microregionalization and destination zoning is created.
- Empirical quantitative and qualitative information on the current state of the main subsystems of the tourism system in Chiprovtsi municipality is collected, the tourist resources were analyzed and evaluated, based on a methodology approved and adapted for the purposes of the research.
- The strategic goals and priorities for sustainable tourism development of Chiprovtsi municipality as a tourism destination are outlined, tied to specific measures for their implementation and a practically targeted action plan
- The development as a whole finds application in the adopted and implemented Tourism Development Program of Chiprovtsi municipality, which is also the work of the Associate professor candidate.

2. Theoretical and scientific-practical contributions in the publications

- Good practices for planning and developing sustainable tourism in a tourist destination at the local level are presented, including underdeveloped and depopulated areas that have not yet been established as tourist destinations;
- Various specialized types of tourism and alternative tourist offers of the destinations are presented in a theoretical and practical-applied aspect;
- Theoretical statements are presented and discussed and good practices in Bulgaria and abroad for alternative, solidarity, voluntary, educational and responsible tourism are presented.
- Problems related to the protection of tourism resources, the planning and management of tourism in protected areas, as well as the sustainable development of tourism in the national resorts in Bulgaria are presented and discussed.

- Theoretical statements and good practices from Bulgaria in the field of tourism branding are presented and discussed

V. Evaluation of citations

According to the Reference attached, by NACID on the citations of the works of Dr. D. Alexova in the period 2005-2023, 46 citations are established. The reference is drawn from the databases of Web of Science, SCOPUS and others. Most citations are by Bulgarian authors.

VI. Critical notes, recommendations and questions

I have no critical comments or questions for the candidate for Associate professor. I have some recommendations for her future development as a scientist. She has accumulated enough material in the form of practical-applied studies. Let her deepen her research in the theoretical and methodological aspects, make summaries and present them as monographic publications. She should also write more in foreign languages and publish her works abroad.

VII. Summary conclusion

From the inspection of the submitted materials for the competition, no violations in the procedure are found. All requirements regulated by Art. 24 (1), 27(4) item 1 and item 2 of the ZRASRB and of Art. 53 (1) (2) and Art. 57 (2) item 1 and item 2 of PPZRASRB are met.

As a whole, the peer-reviewed publications of Head Assistant Dr. Desislava Ivanova Alexova contain indisputable scientific and practical-applied contributions that further develop theoretical knowledge and improve the methodological toolkit for solving significant problems of tourism. My overall assessment of the criteria and the indicators of her research activity show that Head Assistant Dr. Desislava Ivanova Alexova, PhD, meets the requirements of Art. 24 and Art. 27 of the ZRASRB and art. 53 and art. 57 of the PPZRASRB for occupying the academic position of "Associate professor" in professional field 3.9 "Tourism" (Sustainable regional development of tourism) and gives me the reason to express a completely **positive** attitude and to propose to the respected members of the scientific jury to also vote positively on her candidacy.

Date

Signature:

(Prof. Dr. Sci. Maria Vodenska)

