REVIEW

About competition for the academic position of "associate professor" in Higher Education Field 3: Social, Economic, and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.9: Tourism, scientific specialty "Economics and Management of Tourism (Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence in Tourism)"

Reviewer: Prof. Dr. Milena Petrova Stoyanova, Department of Geography, Regional Development and Tourism at Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen, in the field of higher education 4. Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Informatics, Professional field 4.4. Earth Sciences (Geography and Regional Development).

1. Information about the competition

This review is based on order No 178/08.09.2026 г. of the Rector of This review is based on order No. RD-38-444/18.07.2025 of the Rector of the College of Tourism – Blagoevgrad, appointing a Scientific Jury for the competition for the academic position of "Associate Professor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.9. Tourism, and scientific specialty "Economics and Management of Tourism (Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence in Tourism)". The competition was announced by the College of Tourism – Blagoevgrad in the "State Gazette", Issue No. 64/14.07.2026. This review is also based on the Protocol of the Scientific Jury meeting held on 28.09.2026, regarding the election of a chairperson and the designation of reviewers for the competition.

Only one candidate has submitted documents for participation in the competition – Senior Assistant Professor Dr. Ivanka Petrova Vusenska from the Department of Tourism at the Faculty of Economics of South-West University "Neofit Rilski" – Blagoevgrad. The set of materials presented by Dr. Ivanka Vusenska in electronic form complies with the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its

Application, and the Regulations on the Development and Evaluation of the Academic Staff at the College of Tourism—Blagoevgrad.

The analysis of the materials submitted for the competition has been carried out in accordance with the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria. As a member of the scientific jury, I declare that I am not related to the candidate within the meaning of § 1, item 3 of the additional provisions of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, I have no joint publications or private interests that could influence the impartial and objective performance of my work as a reviewer. Therefore, the review meets the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its Application, and the Regulations on the Development and Evaluation of the Academic Staff at the College of Tourism—Blagoevgrad.

2. Biographical data of the candidate

In 2015, Ivanka Vasenska successfully defended her dissertation and obtained a PhD degree in the field of Tourism (Economics and Management of Sectors – Tourism) at the South-West University (SWU). Early in her professional career, Dr. Ivanka Vassenska worked at the Kempinski Grand Arena Hotel in Bansko and the Vail Marriott Mountain Resort & Spa in the United States. Since 2019, she has held the position of "Senior Assistant Professor" in Field 3.9 Tourism (Economics and Management of Tourism [Economics of Hospitality]) in the Department of Geography of Tourism at the Faculty of Economics at South-West University.

Since 2012, Dr. Ivanka Vasenska has participated in a total of *7 international and 6 national scientific and educational projects*. In these, she has served as a researcher, lecturer, academic mentor, and team member.

Dr. Ivanka Vassenska served as an expert on Technical Committee 89 "Tourism Activities" at the Bulgarian Institute for Standardization and as an intern at the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria. She completed a specialization in "Python Programming for Data Science" at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom. At SoftUni, she completed training courses in data science, machine learning, and deep learning. She is a Fulbright

Program alumna and a member of the Union of Economists in Bulgaria and the "Chamber of Higher Education" association. She is the recipient of the Best Paper Award from the international scientific journal *Risks* (MDPI, Switzerland) for 2022.

These indicators meet the criteria set out in the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria for appointment to the academic position of "associate professor", Article 24, Item 1.

3. Assessment of the candidate's teaching and pedagogical activities

Dr. Ivanka Vasenska's teaching and pedagogical activities are centered at the South-West University "Neofit Rilski" in Blagoevgrad. She conducts classes within bachelor's and master's degree programs, covering subjects such as "Economics of the Hotel Industry", "Digital Tools in Sustainable Tourism", "E-Tourism", and "Business English for Economists". She supervises internships as well as bachelor's and master's theses, and serves as an academic mentor under the national program "Student Practices – Phase 2". She also participates in the development of curricula and in accreditation procedures. Furthermore, she has delivered lectures as a visiting lecturer under the Erasmus+ program in Spain, Croatia, Slovenia, and Serbia.

These indicators meet the criteria set out in the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria for appointment to the academic position of "associate professor", Article 24, Item 2, Sub-items a) and b).

4. Assessment of scientific and applied scientific activity

4.1. Compliance with minimum national requirements

The report on the candidate's scientific activity based on scientometric indicators has been prepared accurately, in accordance with the established national requirements under Article 2b, paragraph 2, 3 of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the latest amendments to the Regulations for its Application in State Gazette No.16/10.02.2026. The works of Dr. Ivanka Vasenska significantly exceed the minimum national requirements for the academic position of "associate professor" in Higher

Education Field 3: Social, Economic, and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.9: Tourism.

The points received are:

Group A, Indicator 1 – **50** points (minimum national requirements – 50 points)

Group C, Indicator 3 – **100** points (minimum national requirements – 100 points)

Group D, Indicator 6 – **167,5** points

Indicator 7 – **56,99** points

Indicator 8 – **9** points

Indicator 9 – **15** points

Indicator 10 – **6,66** points

Group E, Indicator 11 – **990** points

Group E, Indicator 12 – **90** points

Group E, Indicator 13 – **150** points

The candidate has also submitted supporting documentation for the criteria in Group F - 230 points.

Total number of points for all groups and indicators – **1635,15 points** (with minimum national requirements for an associate professor professor of 400 points).

4.2. Quantitative characteristics of the candidate's scientific output

In the table of indicators, Dr. Ivanka Vasenska has included a list of 22 publications in total, comprising 19 articles in scientific journals and conference proceedings (including 7 stand-alone works and 10 articles refereed and indexed in Scopus and WoS), 2 studies (1 of which is refereed and indexed in internationally recognized databases), and 1 chapter in a collective monograph. The total number of publications submitted for the competition that are refereed and indexed in internationally recognized databases is 11; of these, 3 are stand-alone, 2 list her as the lead author, and 6 are co-authored.

Type and number of reviewed publications

№	Type of publications	Number	stand-alone	First co-author	Second and etc. co-author	Number of pages	Relative share (%)
1	Indicator B-3. Habilitation work – monograph	**1**	1			212	100 %
2	Indicator D-6. Articles and reports published in scientific journals that are cited and indexed in world-renowned scientific databases	**10**	3	2	5	88 (of 170)	51.8 %
3	Indicator D-7. Articles and reports published in non-indexed, peer-reviewed journals or in edited collective volumes	**9**	4	2	3	58 (of 94)	61.7 %
4	Indicator D-8. Studies published in scientific journals that are refereed and indexed in internationally renowned scientific databases (excluding those included under indicators C-3 and D-6)	**1**		1		4 (of 19)	21 %
5	Indicator D-9. Studies published in non-indexed, peer-reviewed scientific journals or in edited collective volumes	**1**	1			25	100 %
6	Indicator D-10. Published chapter in a collective monograph	**1**		1		27 (of 82)	32.9 %
	Total	**23**	**9**	**6**	**8**	**414 (of 602)**	**68.8 %**

Of the 23 peer-reviewed publications, 9 are single-authored. Of the 14 co-authored publications, Dr. Ivanka Vassenska is the first author in 6 of them (42.9%), and in the remaining 8 (57.1%), she is either the second author or a subsequent author. Almost all—

21 of the works—were published in English. The total volume of the publications under review amounts to 6.2 pages, of which 414 pages (68.8%) represent the author's contribution. Of these, those cited and indexed in world-renowned scientific databases total 189 pages, of which 92 pages (48.7%) represent the author's contribution.

The candidate's Hirsch index, according to Scopus (based on 9 publications with a total of 60 citations, excluding self-citations), is 2; and according to WoS as of January 28, 2026, it is 2 (51 citations in 10 publications, 6 of which are in the WoS Core Collection). This figure is impressive for a researcher in the field of tourism.

According to the table of indicators, Dr. Ivanka Vassenska has a total of 66 citations.

These indicators meet the criteria set out in the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for its Application for appointment to the academic position of "associate professor".

5. Quality characteristics of the candidate's scientific output and scientific contributions

All works submitted for review address current scientific and applied scientific issues related to digitalization in tourism, the competitiveness and image of tourist destinations, as well as global challenges and the sustainable development of tourist destinations — topics that, in effect, fully align with the scope of the announced competition.

The peer-reviewed publications are the result of in-depth research conducted using general and discipline-specific, quantitative and qualitative methods, including: review of the literature, observation, comparison, analysis, synthesis, systematization, classification, and evaluation. In her research, Dr. Ivanka Vassenska skillfully applies statistical and sociological methods, spatial analysis, and the methods of functional typology and categorization. The majority of the publications are based on the results of her own empirical fieldwork and survey studies. The results of these studies have been presented and disseminated at scientific and applied forums (both national and international).

According to the information provided by Dr. Ivanka Vassenska, her scientific publications fall within the following subject areas: 1. Artificial intelligence and machine learning in

forecasting tourism demand (C-3; D-6.1; D-6.4; D-7.1; D-7.2; D-10.1); 2. Digitalization of financial relationships in tourism and financial technologies (D-6.2; D-6.6; D-7.4); 3. Competitiveness, attractiveness, and image of tourism destinations (C-3; D-6.5; D-6.9); 4. Cultural heritage, event tourism, and local identity (D-6.10; D-7.9; D-9.1); 5. Crises, risk, resilience, and the post-pandemic transformation of tourism (D-6.3; D-6.6; D-6.7; D-6.8; D-7.3; D-7.8); 6. Institutional transformation of the tourism sector and human capital (D-8.1).

The creative profile of Dr. Ivanka Vassenska is distinguished by a pronounced thematic focus in her research activities. The candidate lists six areas in the Reference for the contribution of her works, but as a reviewer, I believe that these could be grouped into broader areas, which would make it easier to clarify the contributory aspects. Therefore, as, according to the reviewer, the contributions of Dr. Ivanka Vassenska's scientific research are in three main areas: methodological, empirical-diagnostic, and scientific-applied.

The methodological contributions include the following:

- A comparative research design has been proposed and tested, comparing classical econometric models, machine learning models, and deep learning models for forecasting tourism demand, taking macroeconomic determinants into account;
- The concept of methodological pluralism in forecasting highly volatile time series has been formulated and applied;
- A methodology for factor analysis of the competitiveness of an existing tourism destination, applicable for periodic measurement and comparative analysis, has been proposed and tested;
- Interpretive approaches to intangible cultural heritage in the development of tourism products have been developed;
- A theoretical model of the interrelationships between culture, tourism, competitiveness, attractiveness, and destination image has been developed, which explains the mechanism by which cultural resources are transformed into a competitive advantage;

- A measurement toolkit has been developed to assess travel attitudes under conditions of heightened risk, applicable for monitoring consumer behavior during crises;
- Adaptive frameworks have been proposed for reconciling security and sustainability requirements in the management of tourist destinations.

Empirical and diagnostic contributions are contained in works that include:

- The methodological framework for deep machine learning in time series analysis has been systematized and adapted to the specific characteristics of the tourism sector;
- It has been empirically demonstrated that the inclusion of economic indicators as exogenous variables improves the predictive accuracy of tourism demand models, and the relative significance of individual indicators has been established;
- The determinants of the adoption of cashless and digital payments have been identified and classified, taking into account the factors of trust, perceived risk, and technological readiness;
- Consumer behavior regarding the use of fintech solutions during the COVID-19 crisis has been empirically studied and measured, and the resulting structural changes in payment habits have been identified;
- The role of festival tourism as a tool for raising awareness and sustaining local traditions has been demonstrated, and the mechanism through which it impacts the host community has been identified;
- Changes in the attitudes and behavior of tourism consumers during the COVID-19 crisis have been systematized, and a typology of reactions has been developed;
- The impact of the crisis on the sharing economy in tourism has been empirically established using the example of Airbnb in the Czech Republic, with conclusions applicable to other markets in Central and Eastern Europe as well
- A distinction has been made, in terms of both terminology and content, between new forms of tourism as actual market phenomena and as linguistic neologisms, which brings conceptual clarity to the field of research (using glamping as an example);

- A periodization and analysis of the Bulgarian tourism sector's transition from a planned to a market economy has been conducted, identifying the institutional factors that shaped its development trajectory and the contemporary discourses surrounding it.

Scientific and applied contributions include:

- An analytical framework has been applied to assess the effectiveness of Bulgaria's tourism policy for the period 1980–2017, with the aim of informing management decisions at the national level;
- The economic implications of implementing artificial intelligence technologies in tourism practice have been systematized—with regard to revenue management, capacity planning, and marketing decisions;
- An assessment of Bulgaria's attractiveness as a destination has been conducted, and a system of indicators for monitoring it has been developed, including with regard to the recognition of its image in foreign markets;
- Guidelines for improving the effectiveness of destination management have been formulated, addressed to destination management organizations;
- A creative-economic interpretation of the archaeological heritage of the Valley of the Thracian Kings (Starosel) has been proposed as a basis for developing a specialized tourism product;
- The model of a comprehensive tourism product, built on shared cultural heritage on a cross-border basis, has been substantiated (using the Via Pontica and Via Diagonali cultural corridors as examples);
- The opportunities and challenges posed by the "European Capital of Culture" initiative for Bulgaria as a destination have been analyzed;
- The potential of the "Tourism 4.0" concept and of open-air museums for organizing safe tourism experiences in a post-pandemic environment has been substantiated;
- Best practices for achieving sustainability through innovation in tourism, applicable at the regional level, have been systematized.

The content of Dr. Ivanka Vassenska's publications demonstrates that her theoretical and applied research is closely aligned with current issues in tourism, with an emphasis on its digital development and the application of AI.

6. Critical comments and recommendations to the candidate

The information provided by the candidate regarding his scientific contributions accurately reflects his scientific achievements, but could be more concise. The classification of publications is rather fragmented, which makes it difficult to identify and summarize the scientific contributions. The critical comments are of a recommendatory nature. They do not diminish or cast doubt on the results achieved and the contributions highlighted.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of the candidate's scientific and teaching activities reveals very good theoretical and methodological preparation in the indicated thematic area, mastery of the main methods and approaches of research and significant participation in international, national and university scientific projects. Therefore, Dr. Ivanka Vassenska is a well-established scientist and teacher with undeniable contributions in the field of tourism.

There is no evidence of plagiarism in the scientific works submitted by Dr. Ivanka Vassenska for participation in the competition for associate professor.

The achievements of Dr. Ivanka Vassenska in scientific-applied and educational-pedagogical activities are grounds for me to give her a **positive assessment** and to **propose her for election to the academic position of "associate professor"** at the College of Tourism – Blagoevgrad in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.9. Tourism, and scientific specialty "Economics and Management of Tourism (Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence in Tourism)".

25.10.2026 **Reviewer: .....**

(Prof. Dr. Milena Stoyanova)