"College of Tourism," Blagoevgrad

REVIEW

of the submitted work for the participation in a competition for the academic position of ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, announced by the Private Higher Education Institution "College of Tourism," Blagoevgrad, in the State Gazette, Issue 64 of July 14, 2026, in Professional Field 3.9 Tourism – "Economics and Management of Tourism"

Reviewer: Prof. Stoyan Ognyanov Kirov, PhD

Candidate: Chief Assistant Professor Ivanka Petrova Vasenska, PhD

This review has been prepared based on a decision made during the meeting of the Scientific Jury held on September 28, 2026—a jury constituted by Order No. 178 dated September 8, 2026, issued by the Rector of the College of Tourism, Blagoevgrad.

The submitted documentation complies, in terms of both type and content, with the regulatory requirements set forth in the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB) and the Regulations for its implementation at the College of Tourism, Blagoevgrad.

I. Brief biographical details about the candidate

Chief Assistant Dr. Ivanka Vasenska successively graduated a Bachelor's degree in Tourism, as well as Master's degrees in International Economic Relations and Management of Alternative Forms of Tourism, at the South-West University "Neofit Rilski" in Blagoevgrad. In 2015, she obtained a PhD in the professional field of Tourism (3.9), specializing in the Economics and Management of Economic Sectors (Tourism).

She has expanded her professional experience by completing additional training in the field of teaching mobility under the Erasmus+ programme, as well as through the International Summer Institute organized by the Fulbright Foundation and the Alma Mater Centre for Humanities in Pravets. She possesses foreign language skills: English – C2 level; Russian – B2; Spanish and German – A2. Chief Assistant Dr. Ivanka Vasenska possesses extensive professional experience. Her professional background indicates that her career began in the tourism sector at the Kempinski Grand Arena Hotel in Bansko. She also gained international experience serving as a Front Office Supervisor and "At-Your-Service" Supervisor at the Vail Marriott Mountain Resort & Spa (Marriott International) in Vail, Colorado, USA. Furthermore, she has worked as an expert for the Bulgarian Institute for Standardization (BDS) – Technical Committee 89 ("Tourism Activities") – and as an intern at the National Assembly of the

Republic of Bulgaria My assessment of the educational and professional status of Chief Assistant Dr. Vasenska is that she fully meets the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASRB), as well as the required alignment between the thematic focus of the submitted scientific output and the professional field and specialty of the announced competition. To participate in the competition, the candidate for the academic position of "Associate Professor" must submit publications that are distinct from those associated with their doctoral dissertation. These scholarly works must be published by legitimate publishing houses, with their quality ensured by reviewers and editorial boards. They must not contain any confidential information.

In summary, the candidate meets the requirements for participation in the competition for the academic position of "Associate Professor," as she has a PhD degree, she has 8 years of teaching experience as an Assistant and Chief Assistant at the South-West University "Neofit Rilski," have presented a monographic habilitation thesis along with 40 publications relevant to the subject of the competition, and have been engaged in professional activities within the scientific community both in Bulgaria and abroad.

II. Characteristics of the candidate's scientific and applied-scientific output and teaching activities

2.1. Assessment of the implementation with qualitative requirements

The professional profile of chief assistant Ivanka Vasenska indicates that she possesses skills and competencies acquired during her professional experience as a specialist and lecturer.

Her core knowledge and expertise are related to the execution of academic and research activities, the development of educational documentation, and the implementation of scientific projects.

The candidate for the academic position of "Associate Professor" is actively involved as a member of the editorial boards of several scientific publications, both in Bulgaria and abroad, specifically: Member of an editorial board/scientific council: Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the journal „Economics and Law“ (South-West University "Neofit Rilski"); Editor of the journal „Entrepreneurship“ (South-West University "Neofit Rilski"); and Reviewer for the journal „Tourism Management“ (Elsevier, ScienceDirect) – https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/tourism-management/

She is a reviewer for the journals “Risks” and “Journal of Risk and Financial Management” (published by MDPI). She received the Best Paper Award from the journal “Risks” (MDPI) in 2022 for the following article: Vasenska, I., Dimitrov, P., Koyundzhiyska-Davidkova, B., Krastev, V., Durana, P., & Poulaki, I. (2021). Financial transactions using fintech during the COVID-19 crisis in Bulgaria. “Risks”, 9(3), 48. Chief Assistant Professor Dr. Ivanka Vasenska is a member of the Union of Economists in Bulgaria and a member of the NGO "Chamber of Higher Education."

The overview of completed research and applied projects includes a list of 13 projects, 6 of which are national scientific and educational projects, as follows: Project BG05SFPR001-3.002-0001 “From Higher Education to Employment,” under the “Education 2021–2027” Programme, co-financed by the European Union; RP-C1/25 International Scientific Conference “Cooperatives and Sustainable Development: Economic, Social, and Environmental Dimensions”; and RP-B1/25 Research on the Career Prospects of Students Graduating from the Faculty of Economics at the South-West University “Neofit Rilski.” RP-B4/20 Research on Risk Management in a Digital and Globalized Economy; RP-A1/24 Upgrading the Capacity of the "Economy Observatory" Research Center for the Training of Students and Doctoral Candidates and Their Participation in Scientific Research – Phase 2. Implementation period: March–November 2020. 2. Project BG05M2OP001-2.013-0001 of the Ministry of Education and Science: "Student Practices – Phase 2." Implementation period: January 13, 2020 – May 12, 2023. Funded by the Operational Programme "Science and Education for Smart Growth" (OP SESG). Budget: 46,000,000 BGN.

Participation in 7 international scientific and educational projects: "Financial Skills for Business Startups and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises" – "Financial Skills foR busiNEss Startups SMES (FAIRNESS)," under Key Action 2 (KA2) of the EU's Erasmus+ Programme, Grant Agreement No. (Project No.): 2022-1-MT01-KA220-ADU-000086969; and "Towards the Autonomy of UFM (Unaccompanied Foreign Minors)," Grant Agreement No. 2021-1-IT01-KA210-VET-0000328, "Sustainability as a Recovery Tool for Small Tourism Businesses: Environmental & Social Responsibility in Tourism (Sure.To Tourism)", Contract No. 2021-1-BG-01-KA220-VET-000029619; "Social and Sustainable Skills for Young NEET Population (SOSUSK)", Project No. 2021-1-EL02-KA220-YOU-000029015; "Innovative Instruments for the Preservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage in the Cross-Border Area", with the acronym "TOURISM-e", Project No. MIS 5049389; "Social Agri-entrepreneurship for People with Disabilities in the Cross-Border Area" (AGRI-ABILITY). Duration: 12 February 2018 – 5 July 2021. Funded by the European Territorial Cooperation Programme Greece–Bulgaria; "Licence, Master professionnels en formation ouverte et à distance pour le développement du tourisme durable en Chine, au Vietnam et au Kirghizstan / LMPT" ("Professional Bachelor’s and Master’s Degrees via Open and Distance Learning for the Development of Sustainable Tourism in China, Vietnam, and Kyrgyzstan" – LMPT). Project number: 573897-EPP-1-2016-BG-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP.

2.2. Fulfillment of Quantitative Requirements

The quantitative requirements stem from the mandatory conditions, indicators, and criteria set forth in the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB) and its Implementing Regulations, as well as from the requirements of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at the College of Tourism Blagoevgrad. To participate in the competition, the candidate has submitted 40 publications, as follows:

The scholarly production submitted for the competition comprises research conducted after the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" (PhD) and is categorized as follows: monographs; chapters in multi-authored monographs and encyclopedic

publications; studies; articles and papers in publications refereed and indexed in Scopus and Web of Science; and articles and papers in non-refereed, peer-reviewed journals and edited collective volumes.

The monograph “Digital Applications of Artificial Intelligence in the Tourism Sector” (Neofit Rilski Publishing House, Blagoevgrad, 2022, ISBN 978-954-00-0328-3)—authored solely by the candidate—is submitted as the habilitation thesis; its subject matter aligns directly with the announced scientific specialty.

The publications are grouped into six interrelated research areas. The contributions are categorized as theoretical (T), methodological (M), and applied-scientific (P).

A total of 204 citations of the candidate’s works have been identified, comprising 90 in publications indexed and abstracted in Scopus and Web of Science, 8 articles and papers published in Scopus and Web of Science, 12 in peer-reviewed monographs and edited volumes, and 102 in peer-reviewed, non-indexed journals. The candidate has also served as a reviewer for international scientific journals (Risks, JRFM). The citations come from authors based in Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, and South America, which attests to the international recognition of the research results.

The publications with the highest response are: Stankova, M., & Vasenska, I. (2015). Raising cultural awareness of local traditions through festival tourism. Tourism & Management Studies, 11(1) - 68 citations; Vasenska, I., Dimitrov, P., Koyundzhiyska-Davidkova, B., Krastev, V., Durana, P., & Poulaki, I. (2021). Financial transactions using fintech during the COVID-19 crisis in Bulgaria. Risks, 9(3) – 74 citations; Dimitrov, P. M., Stankova, M. Z., Vasenska, I., & Uzunova, D. (2017). Increasing attractiveness and image recognition of Bulgaria as a tourism destination. Tourism & Management Studies, 13(3) – 14 citations.

The candidate has participated in 6 national and 7 international research and educational projects and is a reviewer for the international scientific journals “Risks” and “Journal of Risk and Financial Management” (MDPI).

In summary, an analysis of the scientometric report and other documents related to the competition demonstrates that the candidate for the academic position of "Associate Professor" at the College of Tourism – Blagoevgrad meets and exceeds the quantitative and qualitative requirements established by the “Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria” (ADASRB) and the criteria adopted by the College’s Academic Council. This is an evident from both the overall performance and the results across individual indicators, with a total achievement of 1,865.15 points according to the required quantitative standards and qualitative indicators, which far exceeds the required 400 points.

2.3. Assessment of Teaching Activities

Chief Assistant Dr. Ivanka Vasenska served as a full-time faculty member in the Department of Tourism at the South-West University "Neofit Rilski" until September 2026. Data regarding her teaching activities indicate that the candidate has developed 10 independent

lecture courses in the field of tourism—some of which are directly related to the subject of this competition (e.g., Software Applications in Tourism, Digital Tools in Sustainable Tourism, Digitalization in Tourism, Startups in Tourism, and E-Tourism)—as well as 5 courses taught in English, covering Business English and English-language communication.

The candidate for the academic position of "Associate Professor" has actively participated in the development of curricula and new study plans, as well as in the updating of existing ones for specialism within the professional field of Tourism. This work has been aligned with emerging research areas and the needs of managerial practice in the tourism sector. Furthermore, the candidate has contributed to the preparation of documentation related to accreditation. Working with students also constitutes a significant part of the teaching activities of Chief Assistant Ivanka Vasenska. In the educational process, in addition to standard lectures, she conducts sessions in practical settings, delivers training, and implements innovations in teaching methods and tools—such as interactive methods, presentations, case study analysis, organization and preparation for the state exam, etc.

Regarding the criterion of teaching and educational activity, it can be summarized that Chief Assistant Dr. Ivanka Vasenska is an established lecturer in the field of tourism who use active teaching methods.

Based on the scientometric map, it can be concluded that the submitted scholarly works meet both quantitative and qualitative requirements. Their author is an established researcher and lecturer who has contributed to the development of tourism and the integration of new technologies into the educational process. She is well-known within the scientific community, both domestically and internationally—a fact evidenced by the citations of his scholarly works by authors from Bulgaria and abroad (204 citations).

There is a compliance between the requirements of the competition and the candidate’s academic and teaching competence.

In summary, I would like to state that the candidate is a highly qualified lecturer, possessing the necessary professional experience and competence to meet the requirements of the announced competition for the College, and is qualified to get the academic position of "Associate Professor."

III. Key contributions to scientific, applied-scientific, and teaching activities.

3.1. Thematic content of the submitted scientific output

Chief Assistant Dr. Vasenska has provided a structured thematic systematization; the content of the candidate’s publications can be categorized into the following areas:

Research Area 1: Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in Tourism Demand Forecasting. Key publications: a monograph (2022); a chapter in the “Encyclopedia of Tourism Management and Marketing”, Edward Elgar (2022); “FinTech”, 4(3) (2025); “Ekonomicko-manazerske spektrum”, 18(1) (2024); “ITEMA Conference Proceedings” (2024); “Smart Analysis of Tourism Policy Efficiency in Bulgaria for the Period 1980–2017”, Sciendo (2020).

The monograph by Chief Assistant Dr. Ivanka Vasenska explores the potential applications of artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies within the tourism sector. The conceptual framework of the field is systematized, and key classes of algorithms are distinguished based on the nature of the tasks they address—namely, forecasting, classification, segmentation, and natural language processing. The study examines specific areas of implementation within tourism practice, including forecast of the demand, revenue management, service personalization, automated customer service, and the analysis of consumer reviews. A special place is dedicated on the forecasting of the incoming tourist flows through models of deep self learning applied to time series; this includes defining data requirements, the architecture of the models, and the criteria for evaluating forecast accuracy. The economic impacts of implementation are analyzed, alongside limitations and risks related to data quality and organizational readiness. Recommendations are formulated for the tourism industry and for the institutions responsible for tourism policy.

Research Area 2. Digitalization of financial relations in tourism and financial technologies. Key publications: Risks, 9(3) (2021); Risks, 13(10) (2025); SHS Web of Conferences, 129 (2021).

Research Area 3. Competitiveness, Attractiveness, and Image of the Tourist Destination. Key publications: monograph (2018); chapter in “Tourist Destination Management”, Springer (2019); study “Improving Destination Management Effectiveness” (2017); “Ekonomika”, 61(3) (2015); “Tourism & Management Studies”, 13(3) (2017); “Marketing and Branding Research”, 4(3) (2017); “Entrepreneurship”, 2(1&2) (2014).

Research Area 4. Cultural Heritage, Event Tourism, and Local Identity. Key publications: a collective monograph (2015); a chapter in “Fulbright International Summer Institute: Interdisciplinary Doctoral Papers” (2017); “Tourism & Management Studies”, 11(1) (2015); “Globalization and Its Socio-Economic Consequences” (2018); “The Cultural Corridors of South-Eastern Europe” (2018); and publications from the "Cultural Corridors" series (2012–2017)

Research Area 5. Crises, Risk, Resilience, and Post-Pandemic Transformation of Tourism

Key publications: Springer Proceedings in Business and Economics (2021); Ekonomicko-manazerske spektrum, 14(2) (2020); Tourism and Connectivity (2020); ICTR Conference Proceedings (2021, 2022); "Cultural Routes in the Balkans" (2021); 10th World Conference for Graduate Research in Tourism (2018).

Research Area 6. Institutional Transformation of the Tourism Sector and Human Capital. Key publications: a chapter in “Tourism Development in Post-Soviet Nations”, Palgrave Macmillan (2020); Management, Knowledge and Learning International Conference (2013); Regional Studies Program (2015)

3.2. Assessment of Scientific and Applied-Scientific Contributions

The contributions in the presented scientific output can be summarized into three groups:

A. Theoretical contributions – enrichment of existing knowledge. The methodological framework of deep machine learning has been adapted to the specificities of tourism time series (1.1); the influence of economic determinants on forecasting accuracy has been proved (1.3); the determinants of the adoption of digital payments have been identified (2.2); a model of the relationship between culture, competitiveness, and image has been developed (3.1); the role of festival tourism in preserving local traditions has been demonstrated (4.1); a typology of consumer reactions during a crisis has been derived (5.2); a conceptual distinction has been introduced between new forms of tourism and newly term formations (5.4); the institutional transformation of the Bulgarian tourism sector has been analyzed (6.1).

B. Methodological contributions – the creation of new methods, models, and research designs. A comparative design for evaluating forecasting models (1.2); a concept of methodological pluralism for volatile time series (1.4); a bibliometric approach for mapping a research field (2.3); a methodology for the factor analysis of destination competitiveness (3.2); the application of game theory in destination analysis (3.4); interpretive approaches to intangible heritage (4.2); a measurement toolkit for attitudes toward travel under risky conditions (5.1); and adaptive “security–sustainability” frameworks (5.6).

C. Scientific-applied contributions – application of scientific results in practice. A toolkit for evaluating tourism policy (1.5); systematization of the economic effects of artificial intelligence in tourism practice (1.6); empirical assessment of fintech behavior in Bulgaria (2.1); a system of indicators for the attractiveness of Bulgaria as a destination, along with guidelines for destination management (3.3, 3.5); product models based on cultural heritage (4.3, 4.4, 4.5); empirical results regarding the sharing economy (5.3); application of "Tourism 4.0" in a post-pandemic context (5.5); and findings concerning human capital and innovation (6.2, 6.3).

IV. Critical Remarks and Recommendations

The scholarly work of Chief Assistant Dr. Ivanka Vasenska is of interest to a wide range of specialists, researchers, and university lecturers. In this regard, I recommend that the candidate focus her future efforts on further leveraging and disseminating her significant scientific and applied results, as well as her teaching experience, through the publication of the monograph, textbooks, and teaching tools for the educational process. This would also facilitate the additional promotion of the candidate’s publications to a wider audience. I have no critical remarks. I do have a question: How can AI be used to improve the quality of the tourism product and the service provided to tourists?

Conclusion

The presented assessments regarding the candidate's scholarly, teaching, and research activities demonstrate that she fully meets the requirements set forth in the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB), the Regulations for the Application of the LDASRB, and the Regulations on the Development of the Academic Staff at the Private Higher Education Institution "College of Tourism – Blagoevgrad" for the academic position of "Associate Professor." Consequently, I firmly recommend that the esteemed members of the Scientific Jury vote in favour of appointing Chief Assistant Dr. Ivanka Vasenska to the position of "Associate Professor" in Professional Field 3.9 Tourism, specializing in "Economics and Management of Tourism."

20.10.2026 г. Reviewer: ……

Blagoevgrad /Prof. Stoyan Kirov/