OPINION

By: Prof. Dr. Stefan Yordanov Kirilov

College of Tourism – Blagoevgrad,

Included in the Register of Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria at the National Centre for Information and Documentation in professional field 3.9 "Tourism"

and

member of the scientific jury in the competition announced by the College of Tourism – Blagoevgrad for the academic position of "Associate Professor" in higher education area 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.9. Tourism ("Economics and Management of Tourism" (Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence in Tourism)), for the needs of the Department of Tourism

1. **Presentation of the candidate:**

One candidate – Chief Assistant Professor Dr. Ivanka Petrova Vasenska – has submitted documents for the announced competition for the academic position of "Associate Professor" in higher education area 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.9. Tourism ("Economics and Management of Tourism" (Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence in Tourism)), for the needs of the Department of Tourism.

2. **Grounds for writing the opinion:**

Decision of the first meeting of the scientific jury in the announced procedure, held on 28.09.2026 – Minutes No. 1. The competition was promulgated in the State Gazette, issue 64 of 14.07.2026.

This opinion has been prepared on the basis of Order No. 178/08.09.2026 of the Rector of the College of Tourism – Blagoevgrad. Its content complies with the Academic Staff Development in the Republic of Bulgaria Act and the Regulations for its Implementation currently in force, as well as with the internal regulations for the development of academic staff at the College of Tourism – Blagoevgrad, and structurally it comprises seven parts and a conclusion.

3. **Profile of the candidate:**

Ivanka Vasenska is the sole candidate in the competition procedure. From 2012 to 2026 she worked at South-West University "Neofit Rilski" – Blagoevgrad, in the Department of Tourism of the Faculty of Economics, and at the time the competition was announced she held the academic position of "Chief Assistant Professor".

In 2015 she was awarded the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the professional field "Tourism" for a dissertation defended at SWU "Neofit Rilski" – Blagoevgrad on the topic "Management of the Attractiveness of the Tourist Destination".

She obtained master's degrees in "Alternative Management" and "International Economic Relations" (2009 – 2010) and a bachelor's degree in "Tourism" /Tourism Management/ (2005 – 2009) at SWU "Neofit Rilski" – Blagoevgrad.

Chief Assist. Prof. Dr. Vasenska is proficient in several foreign languages – English and Russian – and has a working knowledge of Spanish and German.

For the competition procedure, the candidate has submitted documents that comply with the national requirements and the internal rules of the College of Tourism – Blagoevgrad, namely: a curriculum vitae, a diploma for the educational and scientific degree "Doctor", a list with abstracts of the scientific works submitted for participation in the competition, a standard-form report on the fulfilment of the minimum national requirements by groups of indicators for the academic position of "Associate Professor", an author's statement of the scientific and applied scientific contributions with supporting evidence, a declaration of originality and authenticity, and an application to the Rector of the College for admission to the competition dated 03.09.2026.

4. General (quantitative and qualitative) assessment of the teaching activity (based on the submitted documents).

The submitted documents show that the candidate began her teaching activity at SWU "Neofit Rilski" in 2012. She teaches in bachelor's and master's programmes the courses "Economics of the Hotel Industry", "Digital Tools in Sustainable Tourism", "E-Tourism" and "Business English for Economists". She supervises internships and bachelor's and master's theses and is an academic mentor under the national programme "Student Internships – Phase 2".

She participates in the development of curricula and in accreditation procedures. Over the past 14 years, Ivanka Vasenska has taken part in 13 scientific and educational projects – 7 international and 6 national – funded by the Erasmus+ programme, INTERREG V-A "Greece – Bulgaria", the European Commission and the Scientific Research Fund of SWU. They are in the fields of sustainable tourism, cultural heritage, social entrepreneurship, distance learning and risk management. In them she has held the positions of researcher, lecturer, academic mentor and team member.

It is evident that, as a long-standing lecturer at the Faculty of Economics of SWU "Neofit Rilski" – Blagoevgrad, Chief Assist. Prof. Dr. Vasenska has built a very solid foundation in teaching, with accumulated knowledge and skills. She initially worked as an hourly-paid lecturer, was an Assistant for two years, and for the past seven years has held the academic position of Chief Assistant Professor.

In addition, in the period from 2018 to 2025 she completed 4 teaching mobilities under the Erasmus+ programme, related to English for professionals, economics of the hotel industry, and lectures to second- and third-year tourism students at the universities in Bilbao and San Sebastián (Spain), Pula (Croatia), Maribor (Slovenia) and Kragujevac (Serbia).

5. General (quantitative and qualitative) assessment of the scientific research and research activity (based on the submitted documents).

The scientific output submitted by the candidate for the competition procedure addresses scientific problems examining artificial intelligence and machine learning in tourism demand forecasting; the digitalization of financial relations in tourism and financial

technologies; the competitiveness, attractiveness and image of the tourist destination; cultural heritage, event tourism and local identity; crises, risk, sustainability and the post-pandemic transformation of tourism; as well as the institutional transformation of the tourism sector and human capital. The research of Chief Assist. Prof. Dr. Vasenska stands out for its very good synergy between theory and practice. It provides concrete answers to current challenges in tourism management and in digitalization and artificial intelligence in tourism.

The submitted works clearly reveal the author's systematic research approach, as well as the contributory nature of her work in the field of digitalization and artificial intelligence in tourism. Undoubtedly, the empirical results have direct practical application in the real sector. The text is presented in coherent, academic and professional language, with correct use of the specialized terminology.

In the competition for the academic position of "Associate Professor", the candidate presents a complete list and abstracts of publications in Bulgarian and English comprising 38 scientific titles, including 3 monographs /2 single-authored and 1 collective/, 5 chapters in collective monographs, 1 study /co-authored/, and 28 articles and conference papers /8 of which are refereed and indexed in Scopus and Web of Science/.

The scientific output meets the national requirements of the Academic Staff Development in the Republic of Bulgaria Act and those of the higher education institution. The publication activity is the candidate's own personal work, part of which has also been published in international outlets. A report on the fulfilment of the minimum national requirements and the additional requirements has been submitted, with a total of 1865.15 declared points across the respective groups of indicators, against the 400 points required for the competition procedure. They are distributed by groups of indicators as follows: Group of indicators A – 50 points, Group of indicators C – 100 points, Group of indicators D – 255.15 points, Group of indicators E – 1230 points. The candidate has also declared 230 points under Group of indicators F, consisting of participation as "researcher/lecturer" or "academic mentor" in six national and seven international scientific and educational projects. A report on 12 cited scientific titles in which the candidate is first, second or third author has also been submitted, with a total of 103 citations.

In view of the above findings, Chief Assist. Prof. Dr. Ivanka Vasenska meets and significantly exceeds the minimum national requirements for the academic position of "Associate Professor".

6. Characterization of the scientific contributions

I accept the scientific contributions presented by the candidate in the competition procedure, systematized into six interrelated research areas. They are summarized in three main groups: theoretical contributions related to enriching existing knowledge, methodological contributions creating new methods, models and research designs, and applied scientific contributions for the application of scientific results in practice.

They are fully relevant to the subject of the announced competition and cover key aspects related to digitalization, artificial intelligence and financial technologies in tourism, destination management (image, cultural heritage, events), as well as sustainability, institutional transformation and risk management in the sector.

No plagiarism established in accordance with the statutory procedure has been found in the candidate's scientific works. In accordance with the regulatory requirements, a Declaration of Originality and Authenticity of the Information has been submitted. It certifies that all

sources used in the research have been cited in good faith and that the provisions of the Copyright and Related Rights Act have been complied with.

7. Weaknesses, critical remarks and recommendations.

I have no significant remarks on the documentation submitted in the competition procedure and find no weaknesses. My only main recommendation concerns the content of some of the summary reports. In the future, it would be useful for the candidate to provide more detailed information on the publications, indicating the number and extent of pages for each of them. I would also like to put the following question to the candidate: *How can digitalization and AI technologies be used to optimize the management of destinations (or the tourism product) and to attract the new generation of digital consumers?*.

Conclusion

Based on the documents submitted by the candidate for participation in the competition procedure, and having examined them in detail, I consider that Chief Assist. Prof. Dr. Ivanka Vasenska fully meets the requirements regarding the necessary number and quality of scientific publications after the defence of her dissertation and in her current academic position. The publications and scientific contributions in the works fully correspond to the subject of the competition in professional field 3.9 Tourism – ("Economics and Management of Tourism" (Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence in Tourism)). Following a detailed analysis, I give my positive assessment in the present procedure and propose that the members of the Scientific Jury and the members of the Academic Council of the College of Tourism – Blagoevgrad vote in favour of awarding the academic position of "Associate Professor" to the candidate Chief Assist. Prof. Dr. Ivanka Petrova Vasenska in higher education area 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.9 Tourism ("Economics and Management of Tourism" (Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence in Tourism)), for the needs of the Department of Tourism at the College of Tourism – Blagoevgrad.

22.10.2026 Opinion prepared by:

Blagoevgrad /Prof. Dr. Stefan Kirilov/