

To the Chairman of the Scientific Jury  
in a competition for “professor”  
to the Department of Geography of Tourism  
at Sofia University “St. Kl. Ohridski”

## **OPINION**

By Prof. Galina Krasteva Rashkova, PhD, member of the scientific jury by order of the Rector of Sofia University “St. Kl. Ohridski” № RD 38-197 / 23.04.2021

Subject: competition for a professor in a professional field 3.9. Tourism (Development of tourist destinations), announced in SG issue 22 of 16.03.2021

Dear Madam Chairman,  
Distinguished members of the Scientific Jury,

The prepared opinion is in accordance with the requirements of the Law for the Development of Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria (DASRB), the Regulations for its implementation (RILDASRB), the Regulations for the conditions and procedures for acquiring scientific degrees and holding academic positions at Sofia University “St. Kl. Ohridski” and the recommended criteria of GGF. The procedural requirements for holding the academic position "Professor" at Sofia University “St. Kl. Ohridski” are fulfilled.

### **1. Data for the competition**

In connection with the announced competition for a professor in the professional field 3.9. Tourism (Development of tourist destinations), announced in SG No. 22 of 16.03.2021, documents for participation were submitted by Assoc. Prof. Mariana Atanassova Assenova, PhD, who is the only candidate in the procedure. Assoc. Prof. Mariana Atanassova Assenova, PhD, is a full lecturer in the Department of Geography of Tourism at the Faculty of Geology and Geography of Sofia University “St. Kl. Ohridski”.

### **2. General description of the presented scientific papers for the competition for professor**

I declare that I have no joint publications with the candidate in the competition, which is a guarantee for the objectivity of the presented opinion.

The total number of publications of Assoc. Prof. Mariana Assenova, PhD, with which she participates in the competition for professor, is 46.

In particular, according to the form for minimum requirements of NACID, the publications submitted for the competition can be classified as follows:

Habilitation work - monograph "Between culture and tourism: tourist attractions based on cultural heritage", co-authored with scientific team.

Five articles and reports published in scientific journals, referenced and indexed in world-famous databases of scientific information (6.1; 6.2; 6.3; 6.4; and 6.5 in the presented list).

The total number of articles and reports published in non-peer-reviewed journals with scientific review and published in edited collective volumes is 27 (from 7.1 to 7.27 inclusive in the attached list).

Nine studies published in unreferenced journals with scientific review or published in edited collective volumes (9.1, 9.2, 9.3, 9.4, 9.5, 9.6, 9.7, 9.8 and 9.9 of the attached list).

Published chapters from a collective monograph (10.1, 10.2, 10.3 from the attached list).

Published textbook: "Tourism. Introduction to the profession" in co-authorship.

### **3. General assessment of the teaching work of the candidate**

The disciplines with which Assoc. Prof. M. Assenova, PhD, is engaged in the period 2013 - 2021 include:

*In the bachelor's degree - full-time study:*

-Marketing in tourism - compulsory, 4th semester, with workload 30 hours of lectures and 30 hours of exercises;

-Tour operator and agency activity - compulsory, 5th semester, with workload 45 hours of lectures and 30 hours of exercises;

-Management of tourist destinations - compulsory, 8th semester, with workload 30 hours of lectures and 15 hours of exercises;

-World and regional tourism fairs and exhibitions - elective, 5th semester, with workload 30 hours of lectures and 15 hours of exercises;

-Sustainable development of tourism - standards and certification - elective, 7th semester, with workload 30 hours of lectures and 15 hours of exercises.

*In the master's degree - part-time study:*

- Intermediary activity in tourism - master's degree "Tourism" (for non-specialists) (compulsory), master's degree "Tourism" after educational qualification degree "professional bachelor" (elective), master's degree "Cultural Tourism" (elective), master's degree "Ecotourism" (elective), with 30 hours lectures workload;

-Marketing in tourism - Master's degree in Tourism (for non-specialists) (compulsory), Master's degree in Cultural Tourism (compulsory), Master's degree in Ecotourism (compulsory) - 30 hours of lectures workload;

-Tourism policy - master's degree "Management of tourist destinations" (compulsory), master's degree "Management of tourist destinations" after educational qualification degree "professional bachelor" (compulsory), master's degree "Cultural Tourism" (elective), master's degree "Ecotourism" (elective), master's degree "Tourism" (for non-specialists) (elective), with workload 30 hours of lectures;

-Tourism planning - master's degree "Management of tourist destinations" (compulsory), master's degree "Management of tourist destinations" after educational qualification degree "professional bachelor" (compulsory), master's degree "Cultural Tourism" (elective), master's degree "Ecotourism" (elective), master's degree "Tourism" (for non-specialists) (elective), with workload 30 hours of lectures;

-Management of tourist destinations - master's degree "Management of tourist destinations" after educational qualification degree "professional bachelor" (compulsory), master's degree "Management of tourist destinations" (elective), master's degree "Cultural Tourism" (elective), master's degree "Ecotourism" (elective), master's degree "Tourism" (for non-specialists) (elective), with 30 hours of lectures workload.

In the period 2013 - 2021 Assoc. Prof. Mariana Assenova, PhD, proposed and developed two new disciplines in the new curriculum for Bachelors in Tourism, which operates from the academic year 2015/16:

-Management of tourist destinations (8th semester - compulsory);

-Sustainable development of tourism - standards and certification (7th semester - elective).

From the academic year 2018/2019, the following disciplines are offered in English for training of foreign students under the Erasmus program for student exchange, led by Assoc. Prof. Assenova, PhD:

-Marketing in tourism, with workload of 30 hours of lectures and 30 hours of exercises;

-Sustainable tourism development - standards and certification, with workload 30 hours of lectures and 15 hours of exercises;

-Tourism destinations management, with workload 30 hours of lectures and 15 hours of exercises.

The total classroom workload of Assoc. Prof. Mariana Assenova, PhD, is 606 hours, which exceeds many times the mandatory minimum commitment (270 hours) of teachers in the teaching process at Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski".

From the attached reference it becomes clear that in the period 2013 - 2021 Assoc. Prof. Mariana Assenova, PhD, has been the scientific supervisor of 20 graduates who successfully defended their diploma theses on time.

#### **4. Scientific and scientific-applied contributions**

The contributions of Assoc. Prof. Mariana Assenova, PhD, can be summarized in the following thematic areas:

##### *4.1. Analysis of the state and development of tourism.*

Large-scale regional surveys were conducted in three municipalities: Lukovit (D.7.6.), Vidin (D.9.4.) and Strandzha Nature Park (D.9.2.), as well as a survey among the representatives of the accommodation and intermediary sector in Sofia (D.7.9.). With the help of the scientific tools of research Assoc. Prof. M. Assenova, PhD, has assessed the potential for tourism development in these municipalities and in Sofia according to the peculiarities of their tourism development. For example, for the municipality of Lukovit the geographical models were used to assess the competitiveness of the destinations; a model combining quantitative and qualitative techniques for collection and analysis of primary and secondary data was developed and tested, which allowed Assoc. Prof. Assenova to identify both the similarities and specific features of tourism development (the model was tested in the comparative analysis of the villages of Dolen , Leshten and Kovachevitsa (D.9.1.); in the process of her research Assoc. Prof. Mariana Assenova, PhD, applied the model of the local territorial system of tourism (in Strandzha Nature Park), with presented data on the capacity of resources and energy efficiency of the accommodation facilities; with regard to the research in Sofia a comprehensive survey was conducted and the priorities for the development of the destination were highlighted, as well as the priorities in the field of marketing. The results of the research gave grounds to Assoc. Prof. Mariana Assenova, PhD, to make scientific assessments of the potential for the development of tourism and of the tourism supply in the studied municipalities, to emphasize her specific conclusions for certain shortcomings in supply, to define conflicts in spatial planning and management as well.

In her research (D.10.2.) Assoc. Prof. Assenova has analyzed the process of transformation of tourism in Bulgaria and the reforms in tourism policy in the period after the changes in the political and economic system. Based on the presentation on the Internet of tourist destinations in Bulgaria at different territorial levels, Assoc. Prof. M. Assenova has analyzed the state of destination management systems (DMS) (D.9.7.). In this regard, she reviewed the concepts of DMS, their evolution and functionality, outlined the regulatory and strategic framework for the development of DMS in Bulgaria.

Other contributions of Assoc. Prof. M. Assenova are related to her research on different types of tourism.

For example, with regard to the state and development of cultural and cultural heritage tourism, the contributions are in the following specific aspects: clarification and definition of a number of concepts; a typology of attractions has been proposed and tested, developed by Assoc. Prof. Assenova (B.3.), (D.7.25.); a study has been made through a developed methodology of the tourist demand for the attractions (B.3.), (D.7.21.), (D.7.23.), and of their supply (B.3.); the national experience and the international management practice are analyzed and summarized (B.3.); an analysis of the spending of European funds for the implementation of projects has been made (D.7.8.) and the main problems that are the reason for the unsatisfactory final results have been defined (D.6.5.)

Standing out with its topicality is the study, with the help of a survey, on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on culture and tourism based on cultural heritage (D.10.3.), which sets out the scenarios for recovering from the crisis and overcoming its consequences.

Another contribution is the review carried out by Assoc. Prof. M. Assenova of the studies on the development and management of tourism in the mountainous territories of Bulgaria (D.9.8.), Systematized on a spatial and thematic principle; the existing models (determined on the basis of a number of criteria) of development of the mountain tourist centers in Bulgaria are analyzed (D.6.2.); the positive and negative characteristics of the identified models are indicated, incl. models of tourism development in small destinations, and the challenges to the sustainable development of tourism in mountainous areas (D.6.3), (D.7.3.), (D.7.7.), (D.7.16.) are commented.

#### *4.2.Sustainable development of tourism*

The main theoretical contribution in this thematic area is that on the basis of the European system of indicators for sustainable development of tourism at destination level (D.7.14.) and the recommendations for elimination of identified weaknesses in relation to certain indicators and providing them with the necessary information, Assoc. Prof. Mariana Assenova has adapted its application (D.7.12.), (D.7.11.), (D.7.15) to the Bulgarian conditions. In this regard, the contribution of Assoc. Prof. Assenova is also significant for establishing the basic values of the indicators that are important for the subsequent monitoring of the development of tourism in Bulgaria in the context of its sustainability. Based on her research, Assoc. Prof. Assenova also emphasized the practical importance of using the system of evaluation indicators.

Another significant contribution of Assoc. Prof. Assenova are the summarized results of the practical experience in the assessment of corporate social responsibility. 25 hotels in Bulgaria have been analyzed (D.6.1.) and a set of basic performance indicators has been proposed. The most frequently applied measures related to social responsibility at the corporate level in the accommodation sector are systematized and presented. Assoc. Prof. M. Assenova, after conducting an independent survey, highlighted the challenges of planning and implementing measures for social responsibility in small and medium enterprises in selected European countries and in Bulgaria (D.7.1.).

Emphasized contribution from the point of view of environmental friendliness of sustainable tourism development is the methodology used by Assoc. Prof. Assen for resource efficiency and clean production, approved by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). Based on the information from the research conducted in 20 hotels (in Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia), Assoc. Prof. M. Assenova summarized and analyzed the practices in the Balkan region, synthesized the proposed and used measures for efficient use of resources (G. 6.4.). Absolute and relative indicators (KPIs) for resources' use and generated

pollution are indicated and the projected economic efficiency when using the undertaken measures is assessed; a comparative analysis of resources' costs and established international averages is made. In addition to the contributions of Assoc. Prof. Assenova in this thematic area, we can add the assessment and mapping of recreational, scientific and educational ecosystem services, as well as ecosystem services of cultural heritage in the urban areas of Bulgaria (D.10.1.), classified in 10 urban subtypes.

#### *4.3. Tourist regionalization.*

A significant share of the publications is related to the topic of tourist regionalization. In 2013, a reasoned scheme with potential marketing tourist regions was proposed (D.9.3.), mainly outlined on the basis of the concluded agreements between the municipalities in connection with the implementation of projects related to regional development of the tourist product and marketing of destinations, financed by Regional Development Operational Program (2007-2013). In addition to the analysis of the territorial scope of the project proposals, the territorial scope of the existing regional tourist associations was also taken into account. The evolution of the tourist regionalization of Bulgaria is traced in a comparative order (according to the goals, the approaches used and the achieved results) (D.7.19.). Subsequently, the proposed scheme is the basis of a comprehensive Concept for tourist regionalization of Bulgaria (D.7.10.) with clear theoretical statements and in accordance with legal requirements. The applied scientific principles, requirements and criteria for delineating the tourist regions, the process of consulting with the stakeholders and the achievement of generally acceptable boundaries, scope, specialization and centers of the 9 tourist regions proposed according to the developed scheme (D.9.6.) are clarified in detail. The scientific and applied nature of the research is proved by the fact that the developed concept and the proposed regional scheme are officially accepted and approved by an order of the Minister of Tourism.

#### *4.4. Training in the field of tourism.*

In an applied aspect, from the point of view of tourism education, the contribution of Assoc. Prof. Assenova is in the presenting and the potential use of the business models, developed on the basis of sustainability and the principles of the circular economy, the shared economy, shared consumption models, the creation and the so-called dematerialization of the product. Thus, Assoc. Prof. Assenova, arguing the need to adapt learning objectives to new knowledge, skills and competencies of students, justifies the need for changes in curricula and practical training of students in tourism (D.7.17.).

In this thematic area worth emphasizing is the contribution to the summary and analysis of the experience of the Geography of Tourism Department at Sofia University in the organization and conduct of internships of students in Tourism at Sofia University (D.9.5.). Both the approach and the results of the joint participation of teams of lecturers and students from the department in research projects are also presented, and based on the evaluation by the students (survey) the benefits for the different stakeholder groups are derived, in particular for the scientific growth and the practical training of the students (D.7.13.).

In confirmation of the significant contributions of Assoc. Prof. M. Assenova is the fact that her scientific works have over 200 citations in scientific journals, referenced and indexed in world-famous databases with scientific information, in monographs and collective volumes with scientific review, as well as in non-refereed journals with scientific review.

## **5. Critical remarks and recommendations**

The teaching experience and research competence of Assoc. Prof. Mariana Assenova, PhD, do not give grounds for critical remarks. I would recommend in her future research to further develop the topic of marketing of tourist destinations in Bulgaria in the context of contemporary challenges.

## **6. Personal impressions**

Assoc. Prof. Mariana Assenova, PhD, is distinguished by workaholicism and correctness in her relationships. She is extremely organized and responsible for her duties, both as head of the Geography of Tourism Department and as Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Geology and Geography at Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski". She is attentive, tolerant and ethical in her relations with her colleagues, she enjoys authority among students with her teaching and pedagogical qualities.

## **7. Conclusion**

I confirm that the candidate in the competition - Assoc. Prof. Mariana Atanassova Assenova, PhD, fully meets the mandatory requirements of Law for the Development of Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations on the terms and conditions for holding the academic position "professor" at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". She has fulfilled the additional requirements for holding the academic position "professor" at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" according to the Law for the Development of Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for its implementation, and the recommended criteria of the Faculty of Geology and Geography for the academic position "professor". He has indisputable merits as a teacher and researcher, with proven contributions to the scientific specialty of the competition.

I clearly and unequivocally declare my positive assessment "FOR" the only participant in the competition for professor. I am fully convinced that Assoc. Prof. Mariana Atanassova Assenova, PhD, should be elected and take the academic position "professor" in the professional field 3.9. Tourism (Development of tourist destinations), in the Geography of Tourism Department at the Faculty of Geology and Geography of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

Sofia, July 18, 2021

Author of the opinion:  
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