

## REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Nikolina Popova, MBBU-Botevgrad

in a competition for the academic position of "**professor**" with a single candidate Assoc.

Prof. Dr **Mariana Atanasova Assenova** in professional field **3.9 Tourism (Development of tourist destinations)**, announced in SG, issue 22 / 16.03.2021

Based on:

Art. 4, and Art. 29 a of the Academic Staff Development Act (ACRAB) and Art. 60 of the Regulations for application of ZRASRB, the Regulations for the structure and activity of Sofia University and decision of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Geology and Geography, protocol № 5 from 20.04.2021 as well as Order of the Rector of Sofia University "St. K. Ohridski" №RD-38-197 / 23.04.2021 and meeting of the scientific jury from 20.05.2021

This review has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of ZRASRB, the Regulations for its implementation and the Internal Rules for the development of the academic staff at Sofia University "St. K. Ohridski" It consists of four parts and a conclusion and contains information about the candidate for the academic position "professor", quantitative and qualitative assessment of teaching and research products, assessment of the candidate's scientific contributions, as well as notes and recommendations.

### 1. Personal characteristics of the candidate in the announced competition

The only candidate in the announced competition is Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mariana Atanasova Assenova. During the inspection of the submitted materials for the competition no violations in the procedure were found. The requirements of Art. 2b, para. 2 and 3, of Art. 2.b, para. 5, of Art. 29 (1), items 1 to 6, art. 29b (1), (2) and (3) of ZRASRB, as well as art. 60 (1) and (3) and the Annex to Art. 1a (1) of PPZRASRB.

The participant in the competition, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mariana Atanasova Assenova was born on October 18, 1961 in the city of Burgas. She graduated from the English Language High School "Geo Milev" - Burgas (1975-1980). She graduated as a Master of Geography, specialist in territorial organization of tourism and recreation, at Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohrid" (1980 - 1985). He graduated in Marketing, Advertising and Business Communications at the University of National and World Economy (1996-1997).

From 1988 to 1991 the candidate was a full-time doctoral student at Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski" in Geography of Recreation and Tourism (01.08.14) - was expelled with the right to protection. In 2012 she was awarded ONS "Doctor" from Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski"

In 1993 he started working as a full-time assistant at Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski", where he works until now. From 1997 to 2001 he was Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Trade and Tourism, transformed in 2000 into the Ministry of Economy. He has gained experience in tourism practice as an employee of the Travel Agency "International Travel" Ltd. - as Director of Market Bulgaria.

She was Chairman of the Board of Directors of Sunny Beach AD (1999 - 2001), Chairman of the Board of Directors of Orbita Youth Tourism Chain EAD (1998 - 2001) and others. The experience gained in the field of tourism management in Bulgaria at the national level, as well as in tourism practice are a prerequisite for high quality teaching in higher education in tourism.

## **2. Teaching, research and project activities**

Since entering Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski" as a full-time assistant in 1993 to 2013, the candidate passed successively through the academic positions of senior assistant and chief assistant. In 2013, GGF at Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski" awarded her the academic position of "Associate Professor" in the professional field 3.9 Tourism (development of tourist destinations). During all the years as a lecturer at Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski" Assoc. Prof. M. Assenova has a significant contribution to the implementation of the curricula in Tourism in bachelor's and master's degrees.

The reference for teaching and research activity presented by the author shows high values in all indicators: 1. Educational employment - on average over 550 hours for the last 5 years, significantly exceeding the norm of Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski"; 2. Courses taught - 5 in bachelor's degree, 5 in master's degree and 3 in foreign Erasmus students; 3. Trained graduates - a total of 20 (2013 -2021) .; 4. Trained doctoral students - 4 doctoral students (2013 -2020); 5. Scientific mentor under the National Program "Young Scientists and Postdoctoral Students" - 3 people (2020-2021); 6. Participation in conferences and forums held in: Bulgaria - a total of 36 participations (2013 - 2021); abroad - 18 participations for the period 2013 - 2020

Her participation in project-research activity is active according to the reference for realized scientific, educational and scientific-applied projects in the period 2013 - 2021: University / faculty projects - 5; National projects - 10; International projects - 13 pcs. The data testify to active participation and accumulated vast research experience, which has certainly contributed to the high quality of teaching.

The candidate has also undergone certified training in various areas of tourism, for which evidence has been presented.- STR USA (2016), TraveLife (2016), Travelport training (2017). They have significantly expanded the practical expertise of the candidate, thus creating a basis for teaching at a high modern level.

Along with the teaching activity, the candidate is also dedicated to active administrative activity. Since 2015 he has been the Head of the Department of Geography of Tourism, and since 2019 he has been the Deputy Dean of GGF with a portfolio of master's and doctoral programs.

## **3. Quantitative characteristics and evaluation of the presented scientific publications**

**To participate in the competition, Assoc. Prof. Dr. M. Assenova presents a total of 46 publications, including 1 Habilitation Paper - monograph, 5 scientific articles and reports in refereed and indexed journals in world-famous databases with scientific information (co-authored), 27 articles and reports in non-peer-reviewed journals with scientific review or published in edited collective volumes (4 independent), 9 studies published in non-refereed journals with scientific review or published in edited collective volumes, 3 individual chapters**

**in collective monographs, 1 textbook used in the school network (co-authored). In their content there is no thematic duplication and connection with the publications on the doctoral thesis and the first habilitation of the candidate. By type and number of publications are presented in Table 1.**

**Table 1.**

C. SCIENTIFIC PAPERS PRESENTED FOR THE COMPETITION FOR PROFESSOR						
	Publications	Num bers	Sole author	First author	Second author	Something else
1	B.3. Habilitation work - monograph	1		1		
2	D.6. Articles and reports published in scientific publications, referenced and indexed in world-famous databases with scientific information	5		3	2	
3	D.7. Articles and reports published in non-peer-reviewed journals with scientific review or published in edited collective volumes	27	4	5	12	6
4	D.9. Studies published in non-peer-reviewed peer-reviewed journals or published in edited collective volumes	9	3	2	4	
5	D.10. Published chapter of a collective monograph	3	1	1		1
6	E.20. Published university textbook or textbook used in the school network	1			1	
	ALL scientific works	46	8	12	19	7

**The presented reference for the citations** (Appendix 13) of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mariana Assenova in the period 2012 - 2021 shows 211 citations, divided into three groups, according to the model for the minimum requirements of NACID:

Indicator E.11. Scientific publications, referenced and indexed in world-famous databases with scientific information - 4 publications cited with a total of 23 citations, a total of 345 points

Indicator E.12. Monographs and collective volumes with scientific review 102 citations of 41 publications were noticed - a total of 1020 points

Indicator E.13. Unreferred journals with scientific review have identified 86 citations from 33 publications. - a total of 430 points.

#### **4. Evaluation of the presented monograph - habilitation thesis**

(Indicator C.3.)

The habilitation thesis is on the topic: "Between culture and tourism: Tourist attractions based on cultural heritage" and can be related to the thematic area: Cultural heritage and cultural and tourist attractions.

The monographic work, presented as a habilitation, is co-authored, with a separation protocol presented. The participation of Assoc. Prof. Dr. M. Assenova is in the volume of 170 pages, clearly recognizable for the reviewer, who knows closely the creative activity of the candidate for many years. The topic is relevant in connection with the need to build a bridge between cultural heritage and tourism, based on cultural attractions.

The monograph is structured in an introduction, seven chapters, a conclusion, a list of sources and appendices with a total volume of 797 pages, the text, without the sources and appendices, contains 735 pages.

The main goal of the research is to develop a theoretically substantiated and practically applicable typology of attractions based on cultural heritage for the purposes of public policy and as a means for their proper and sustainable management.

The subject of in-depth analysis for the purpose of definition are the terms "tourist attractions based on cultural heritage", respectively "cultural-tourist attractions" by searching for an answer to a wide range of precisely defined research questions, allowing a broad definition. Based on an analysis of many definitions of "cultural tourism" in the scientific literature, in strategic planning documents related to its development in Bulgaria, in the Bulgarian legislation on cultural heritage and on the basis of legal definitions (Law on Tourism, 2020) a working definition is proposed.

The reviewer accepts the author's declared contribution in theoretical terms - further development of existing definitions. "Landmark" is not appropriate because it does not reveal the main function of the attraction, namely its power to attract. We believe that some inaccuracy has been admitted in the direction of the distinction between natural and cultural site as it is generally accepted that cultural heritage includes both natural and cultural-historical sites and phenomena. an object of tourist interest, most often related to natural, tangible or intangible cultural heritage and / or historical event... "- we find this to be a terminological disharmony,

The typology of the tourist attractions presented by the author has been tested within the framework of empirical field research, the methodological tools of which have been selected in accordance with the research goal and tasks. It includes a semi-structured interview with "operators" of tourist attractions - 46 sites, 26 of which have the status of immovable cultural property. The aim is to obtain primary information as a basis for supply analysis and covers The study also covers visitors to cultural and tourist attractions (668 respondents in 30 sites). It was carried out according to a specially prepared standardized questionnaire for the purpose of analysis of the tourist demand. The volume of facts obtained is a significant contribution to the theory of tourism based on cultural heritage in Bulgaria. One of the strengths of the analysis is the broad aspect systematization of

theoretical formulations - ideas and definitions on the issue of tourist attractions. We find some inaccuracy in the direction of distinguishing between natural and cultural object, as it is generally accepted that cultural heritage includes both natural and cultural-historical objects and phenomena. We believe that there is a lack of critical attitude regarding some of the considered criteria, for example: origin / genesis, degree of assimilation, etc. This could be avoided by using primary sources that laid the foundation of the theory of recreation and answered a number of questions addressed in the monograph, for example, the difference between a tourist resource, a potential and a real tourist attraction, which Kusen (2010) discusses, p. 127 The answers to these questions can be found in the scientific literature of the 70s and 80s of the 20th century, they have entered into generally accepted theoretical notions.

The reviewer accepts the proposed classification / typology with a strong practical focus on public policies, respectively the distribution of public funds for the transformation of cultural heritage into tourist attractions.

#### **Indicator D.6. Articles and reports published in scientific journals, referenced and indexed in world-famous databases of scientific information**

In this group are presented 5 materials, of which 1 report and 4 articles. The treated problems fall into three thematic areas:

##### **1. Environmental protection policy in tourism**

The research focus is on clean production (D.6.1, report and D.6.4, article). The contributing nature in both works is emphasized methodically. D.6.1 proposes and substantiates a set of key performance indicators related to social responsibility in accommodation, type of hotels, in Bulgaria. Article D.6.4 applies a set of absolute and relative indicators (KPIs) for resource use (energy and water consumption) and generated pollution (air and waste water emissions).

Based on them, the expected change due to the implementation of the accepted options is calculated. The applied nature of the research is mostly related to the outlined focal points for intervention.

##### **2. Sustainable tourism development at the local level**

The main aspects of the study are: models of tourism development at the local level in mountainous and rural areas (D.6.2. And D.6.3). The focus of the research is on identifying models for local tourism development in mountain areas and related support policies. The works have a theoretical-analytical and applied character.

##### **3. Cultural heritage and cultural and tourist attractions**

Article (D.6.5) presents a systematic analysis of the utilized financial resources for socialization of cultural heritage, including 120 sites, within the Operational Program "Regional Development" 2007-2013. The work is characterized by analytical nature and identification of problem areas that reduce the effectiveness of the funds used.

All five publications address current issues of modern tourism development in Bulgaria. They are all co-authored.

**Indicator D.7. Articles and reports published in non-peer-reviewed journals with scientific review or published in edited collective volumes**

There are 27 publications in this group. Of all the publications, 3 are independent, and in four of them the candidate is in first place.

**Thematic directions:**

**1. Cultural heritage and cultural and tourist attractions**

The largest number of publications - 8, are in the thematic area related to cultural heritage and cultural and tourist attractions (D.7.5, D.7.8, D.7.20, D.7.21, D.7.22 D.7.23, D.7.24, D.7.25 D). A number of aspects related to the assessment and classification of the studied cultural sites are treated, a profile of the visitors of attractions based on the cultural heritage and typologies of the attractions based on the cultural heritage in Bulgaria have been developed.

**2. Sustainable tourism development**

Various aspects of sustainable tourism development and analysis of territorial tourism systems at the local level are studied in 8 papers. They treat such problems as: tourism development monitoring system (D.7.12, D.7.14, D.7.15, D.7.16.); potential for development of a local tourist system (D.7.3, D.7.4); integrated approach to the management of tourist destinations in Bulgaria (D.7.11); corporate - social responsibility (D7.4); economic aspects of territorial tourism системи на местно ниво ( D7.7); Посочените разработки се отличават с теоретичен, методичен и приложен характер.

**3. Marketing in tourism**

On the issues of marketing in tourism 5 works are presented (D.7.2, D.7.9, D.7.18, D.7.26 and D.7.27); They have respectively theoretical-analytical and methodological character. They address the following main issues: efficiency and effectiveness of Bulgaria's participation in selected tourism exhibitions in 2010 and 2011 (D.7.2); development of the tourist product and marketing of the metropolitan area of Sofia through research of business perceptions and priorities. (D.7.9). It has a emphasized methodical character (D.7.18) presenting a methodology for marketing research of museums and galleries. The issues of using new tools for popularizing Sofia as a tourist destination - gamification, are considered in papers (D.7.26 and D.7.27)

**4. Higher education in tourism**

3 works are dedicated to the indicated thematic area (D7.1, D7.13 and D.7.17) The issues addressed are related to the adaptation of the curricula in tourism in higher education in connection with the new business models in tourism - D.7.17; comparative analysis of the teaching materials of the

universities in the field of CSR within 7 European countries - G7.1; justified need for participation of students in real research projects for acquisition of research skills - D7.13,

## **5. Tourist regionalization**

Theoretical issues of tourist zoning are analyzed in 2 works (D.7.10 and D.7.19). They deal mainly with theoretical issues of zoning - evolution, goals, approaches, results. They are characterized by theoretical and analytical nature.

### **Indicator D.9. Studies published in non-peer-reviewed peer-reviewed journals or published in edited collective volumes**

According to indicator G9, 9 publications are presented. Of all the publications, 3 are independent, and in two of them the candidate is in the first place. The reviewer stops at each of these works, due to the nature of studies, representing an in-depth study of a specific problem, as well as due to the fact that they contain the largest number of independent studies of Assoc. Prof. M. Assenova. The issues addressed relate to 3 thematic areas as follows:

#### **Thematic directions:**

##### **1. Tourism development and tourism management at local level:**

5 works are presented (D 9.1, D 9.2, D.9.4, D.9.7, D.9.8.). Study D 9.1 „Model for research of the tourist development and management of tourism at local level: comparative analysis of the villages of Dolen, Leshten and Kovachevitsa ”substantiates a model for studying the tourist development and management of tourism at the local level through a comparative analysis of the villages of Dolen, Leshten and Kovachevitsa. The work is of theoretical and analytical nature. Studio D 9.2. "Problems of sustainable development of tourism in Strandzha Nature Park". The authors identify problems related to territorial development and conflicts in the territorial planning and management of the protected area. The work is of theoretical and analytical nature. Studio D.9.4. "Peculiarities and problems in the tourist demand and supply of Vidin municipality" is a comprehensive situational analysis based on secondary information and recommendations for the development of the local tourist product. This study is an independent study of Assoc. Prof. M. Assenova. Study D.9.7 "Destination Management Systems in Bulgaria: Current Situation and Challenges" presents the process of transformation of destination management (DMS) under the influence of new information and communication technologies and their application in tourism. The study has a strong theoretical and applied nature, indicating the challenges to the future development of DMS in Bulgaria. In the studio D.9.8. "Review of studies on the development and management of tourism in the mountainous areas of Bulgaria", based on chronological approach and systematization of information on a spatial and thematic principle, the author develops a classification scheme of territorial studies of mountain settlements, resorts, municipalities and regions on two criteria: scientific approach and applied research methods. The contribution is theoretical. This study is an independent study of Assoc. Prof. M. Assenova.

##### **2. Tourist regionalization**

Theoretical issues of tourist regionalization are analyzed in 2 works (D 9.3 and D.9.6). Study D 9.3 "Potential marketing tourist regions of Bulgaria" presents a scheme of marketing tourist regions with certain boundaries and specialization. The authors draw conclusions about the scientific justification of the scheme and its expediency for defining the boundaries of tourist areas in country, the study has an outlined theoretical and discussion character. Studies D.9.6 "The new tourist zoning of Bulgaria: approaches and results" is a meaningful supplement to the work D 9.3. The research focus is on the adopted requirements and criteria for the delineation of tourist areas, as well as on the consultation process, as a tool for "smoothing" the contradictions in order to achieve politically acceptable and practically applicable solutions. The work is of a theoretical nature.

### **3. Higher education in tourism and qualification of those employed in tourism**

There are 2 works (D.9.5 and D.9.9) with applied-analytical character

Study D.9.5 „The internship in the education in tourism at the Sofia University“ St. Kliment Ohridski ”. Based on a significant amount of primary information and its processing with the statistical package SPSS and Excel, an in-depth analysis was conducted, as well as an assessment of the organization and conduct of internships and performance by students. Study D.9.9. “Qualification of the employees in the tourist attractions, based on the cultural-historical heritage - condition and problems” presents a significant amount of primary information obtained through surveys among key stakeholders: operators of tourist attractions based on cultural heritage; visitors; certified guides ., The survey was conducted in 2019 and 2020. The level of staff training was established, and a number of weaknesses were also identified. The work has a theoretical and applied character.

### **Indicator D.10. Published chapter of a collective monograph**

In the group of indicator G 10 are presented three monographic works in co-authorship.

The participation of the author is proved by the presented separation protocols.

The three chapters of the monographs fall into two main thematic areas, characteristic of most of the works of Assoc. Prof. Mariana Assenova, namely:

#### **1. Cultural heritage and cultural and tourist attractions**

Chapter D.10.1 "Cultural ecosystem services of the urban environment in Bulgaria" is with

lead author Assoc. Prof. M. Assenova and is distinguished by her pioneering character, treating the physical and intellectual interactions with biota, ecosystems and urban landscapes in Bulgaria. The contributing nature of the work is related to the assessment and mapping of recreational, scientific and educational ecosystem services, as well as ecosystem services of cultural heritage in the urban landscapes of Bulgaria The contributions include a developed classification scheme, including 10 urban subtypes of landscapes.



The monograph "The challenges of the crisis in the field of tourism, policies and measures to overcome them" (D.10.3). is one of the first studies of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the reactive action taken. The participation of Assoc. Prof. M. Assenova is related to: systematization and analysis of the undertaken measures and initiatives in the field of tourism; study of the prerequisites for a sound policy in the field of culture and cultural tourism. They address both the direct consequences of the crisis, as well as the process of recovery and development of the tourism sector in the medium term. Based on this, the author justifies the relevant measures, incl. models, which expresses the scientific and applied nature of labor.

## **2. Tourism development and tourism management in Bulgaria**

Chapter D.10.2. Bulgaria. In: Hospitality and Tourism in Transition in Central and Eastern Europe: A Comparative Analysis. (Ed. M. Vodenska). Cambridge Scholars Publishing,

The research participation of Assoc. Prof. M. Assenova is mainly related to the analysis of the process of transformation in the tourism sector and the corresponding changes in the country's tourism policy in the years of transition to a market economy. The author also explores the management and marketing aspects of tourism. The contributing element can be defined as theoretical - analytical with applied orientation.

### **Indicator E- 20. Published university textbook or textbook used in the school network**

In this group is presented 1 pc. (E.20.1) Tourism. Introduction to the profession. MATCOM

Sofia, 160 pp., (2012) in co-authorship with M. Vodenska. The textbook is written according to requirements of the Ministry of Education and is used in specialized secondary schools in nutrition, hospitality and tourism, as well as in universities where education is conducted in Tourism. Mariana Assenova is the author of the third section, presenting the practical work in the travel agency - the cycle of creating a travel product, the organizational structure of the travel agency, the classification of positions and personnel management. The textbook is written at a high professional level, practically oriented thanks to the real practical experience of the author in a travel agency in Bulgaria.

## **4. Critical remarks**

The reviewer has no critical remarks on the merits. The notes made in item 3.

Quantitative characteristics and evaluation of the presented scientific publications are of a constructive nature. We would recommend the candidate, in his future work, to focus on independent research, for which there is significant potential.

## **Conclusion**

No violations of the procedure have been established since the inspection of the submitted materials for the competition. The requirements of Art. 29 (1), items 1 to 6, art. 29b (1), (2) and (3) of ZRASRB, art. 60 (1) and (3), as well as Annex Art. 1a (1) of PPZRASRB for the Minimum national

to the scientific, teaching and / or the artistic or sports activity of the candidates for the academic position "Professor" in the professional field 3.9 "Tourism".

Based on the acquaintance with the documents of the candidate in the competition and evaluation of the publications and documentary evidence submitted by him, the following conclusions can be made:

The candidate:

1. Holds an educational and scientific degree "Doctor".
2. He held the academic position of "Associate Professor" at Sofia University "St. K. Ohridski" over 4 years.
3. He has published original monographs, original articles and reports in specialized scientific publications in the field of tourism, which do not repeat the ones presented for acquiring the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" and holding the academic position "Associate Professor".
4. Meets the minimum national requirements (Art. 60 item 5 of the Regulations for application of the law for development of the academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria) on the basis of the reference submitted by the applicant and the additional requirements of Sofia University "St. K. Ohridski" (art. 115, para. 1 and 2 of PUDSU). The candidate significantly exceeds the required minimum in indicators D and E.
5. There is no proven by the statutory order plagiarism in the scientific works - art. 6, para. 1 under PUDSU and art. 4 (11) ZRASRB.
6. Presented and accepted for evaluation is sufficient in volume, not related to the first habilitation scientific production, including 46 works.
7. He has published 5 articles in English in peer-reviewed and indexed journals and reflected in world databases.
8. In the Web of Science database, the applicant was cited 23 times. The citations of the candidate's publications in monographs and collective volumes with scientific review are 102. The citations in non-refereed journals with scientific review are 86.
9. He was the scientific supervisor of four doctoral students who successfully defended their dissertation and were awarded the educational and scientific degree of Doctor in PN 3.9 "Tourism".
10. In their entirety, the peer-reviewed publications contain theoretical, significant methodological contributions and scientific and applied results in the field of sustainable development and management of tourist destinations.

My overall assessment of the criteria and indicators for teaching and research shows that Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mariana Atanasova Assenova fully meets the requirements of Art. 2b, para. 2 and 3, Art.

2.b, para. 5, Art. 29 (1), items 1 to 6, art. 29b (1), (2) and (3) of ZRASRB, as well as art. 60 (1) and (3) respectively the Annex to Art. 1a (1) of PPZRASRB for holding the academic position "professor" in professional direction 3.9 Tourism (Management of tourist destinations)). I fully support her candidacy for the above academic position.

**Sofia, July 28, 2021.**

**Reviewer:**

**(Prof. Dr. Nikolina Popova)**