

REVIEW

by **Assoc. Prof. Svetlana Georgieva Dimitrova-Gyuzeleva, PhD**

Area of Higher Education: *1. Education Studies*, Professional Field: *1.3. Pedagogy of Education in ... (Methodology of Foreign Language Teaching /English language/)*

Member of the Academic Jury appointed by Rector's Order № 3-PK-249 / 23.06.2023

with regard to the selection procedure for the academic position of **PROFESSOR** in the Area of Higher Education **1. Education Studies**, Professional Field **1.1. Educational Theory and Management (*Higher Education Management*)** at the Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Master's Faculty, New Bulgarian University, announced in the *State Gazette*, issue 44 / 19.05.2023

Candidate: Assoc. Prof. Elena Atanasova Blagoeva, PhD /uncontested/

The critical analysis of the documents and the supporting evidence, provided by associate professor Elena Blagoeva in her application for the academic position of PROFESSOR in the area of higher education 1. Education Studies, professional field 1.1. Educational Theory and Management (*Higher Education Management*) at the Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures at NBU, clearly demonstrates her achievements on the way of her academic career and professional development. Below I shall elaborate on those of her milestones with which she meets the minimum national requirements for the academic position of PROFESSOR under art. 2b of the *Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act*, as well as the additional requirements of New Bulgarian University as set out in Part 4.2 of the *Regulations* for its implementation at the university.

I. Research activities and results

1. Assessment of the candidate's academic research publications

For the purposes of her application for the academic position of PROFESSOR in the professional field of 1.1. Educational Theory and Management (*Higher Education Management*) at NBU, associate professor Elena Blagoeva has submitted **two published monographs** written in Bulgarian – *Education and the Digital Transformation in Europe – Policies and Attitudes* (Avangard Prima Publishing House, Sofia, 2022, 230 pages, ISBN 978-619-239-807-1, reviewers: Prof. Diana Yankova and Prof. Dinko Gospodinov¹) and *The European Dimension in Education and Culture – Policies and Management* (Avangard Prima Publishing House, Sofia,

¹ This monograph is defined as her primary habilitation work for the purposes of the current procedure (indicator No.3, Group C from the minimum national requirements for the academic position of *Professor*).

2017, 253 pages, ISBN 978-619-160-752-5, reviewers: Prof. Tolya Stoitsova, D.Sc. and Assoc. Prof. Elmira Bancheva, Ph.D.²), as well as **nine articles** and **two longer studies** published in Bulgarian or foreign journals or collective volumes³ after she was appointed associate professor in 2020⁴. Out of the latter publications, nine were written in Bulgarian and two in English. Most of them are individual publications and only 2 were written in collaboration with others, but this fact is duly accounted for in the quantitative indices of her contribution reported in the Self-evaluation report of her fulfilment of the minimum national requirements for the academic position of PROFESSOR under art. 2b, para. 2 and 3 of the *Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act*. The publications submitted by the candidate for the purposes of the current procedure also include **two book chapters** from a collective research study written in English, related to assoc. prof. Elena Blagoeva's participation in the European Erasmus+ project *S2CENE – Strengthening Second Chance Networks in Europe*, in which she was project manager for the Bulgarian partner (NBU) and also editor of the collective volume: Chapter 1. Overview of EU and National Policy Priorities on Second Chance Schools and Chapter 3. Good Practices and Methods in Second Chance Education In: Blagoeva, Elena (ed.) *Strengthening Second Chance Networks in Europe*, New Bulgarian University Press, 2022, ISBN 978-619-233-219-8.

It should be noted here that all of the candidate's publications are directly related to the research area of the present selection procedure (educational theory and management) and that their analysis did not reveal any instances of plagiarism as defined in art. 4, para. 11 of the Regulatory Act for the development of academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria.

The theory- and practice-oriented contributions of the candidate's academic publications can be defined in several intertwined scientific research areas within the broader thematic area of the present selection procedure, and briefly, they are as follows:

- **the EU policy and strategy for education** is reviewed with a special emphasis on **higher education and its digitalisation**; the current situation of eLearning as implemented in our higher education institutions is objectively presented (research data being triangulated through the results of a survey conducted with more than 1000 students from different universities around the country studying different degree subjects, incl. the results of a pilot study, which aimed to determine the attitudes of NBU students towards online learning one year after its mass implementation during the COVID crisis); the main problems on the way of digital transformation are outlined and workable solutions, easily adaptable to our academic context, are offered so as to ensure the quality of education that students receive through eLearning, incl. during the COVID pandemic when we had to "navigate the

² This monograph, published as a separate book referenced in COBISS, was written even before the candidate's procedure for the academic position of *Associate Professor*, but was not included in the submitted evidence for that position, which makes it possible to use it here for the purposes of the current procedure (indicator No.4, Group D from the minimum national requirements for the academic position of *Professor*).

³ Five of her nine articles are published in peer-reviewed journals referenced in COBISS, Scopus and/or Web of Science.

⁴ Three of the candidate's publications actually predate the appraisal period under review here (they are from 2017, 2018 and 2019 resp.), but they were not used for the purposes of her procedure for the academic position of *Associate Professor*.

unknown" and quickly come up with effective countermeasures (see publications No. 1, 12 and 13 from the candidate's list with selected publications for the purposes of the present procedure and their abstracts);

- some **other aspects of the Bulgarian strategy for the development of higher education**⁵ have also been studied: e.g. the strategic endeavours of the Bulgarian government to comply with the European directions and to **secure sustainable growth for the HE sector by capitalising on available resources and funds** (see publication No. 8); or the **impact of the COVID crisis** on the processes of **mobility and internationalisation in higher education institutions**, as well as the subsequent reactions to it and possible management approaches to restore the stability of international activities (see publication No. 9);
- the importance of **intercultural competence for successful global citizenship** is emphasised and an assessment model is proposed which can be applied not only in its evaluation but also be used for the development of training modules and university programmes aiming at enhancing the intercultural competence of young people (see publication No. 4);
- the **opportunities that the European Research Council provides to European scientists through project funding** are outlined, and the challenges posed by the clumsy application procedures and by insufficient information and scientists' lack of project management skills are discussed; special attention is paid to the Bulgarian scientific community and some recommendations are made for utilizing the research-supporting affordances offered by the European Research Council (see publication No. 3);
- the role of **education as "a powerful factor for migrant integration in Europe"** is underlined, involving the added value of thus overcoming the negative attitudes of the European citizens (incl. Bulgarians) towards people with migrant background; the obstacles and challenges for successful migrant integration are explored and some EU-funded opportunities for migrants' education and preparation for joining the common labour market are outlined (see publications No. 5);
- **the European dimensions in the development of the cultural and educational sectors** are presented, analysing the EU policies, strategies and tools implemented in these spheres until the year 2020⁶ and foregrounding both the success and weak points in the process of their administration and management, the latter often leading to failure to achieve targeted goals and/or numerous revisions of the strategy (some of which were not documented even in EU official performance reports); Habermas's concept of "communicative action" is also presented as an alternative paradigm for cultural policy-making – not through instrumental action, but through democratic consensus in which the participants themselves define the goals of future development – and the need for maturity, adequacy and motivation of the civil society in the cultural sphere is also substantiated (see publications No. 2 and 11);
- **the current state of Bulgarian education is analysed and compared to objectives as outlined in the Europe 2020 strategy** and its understanding of the important role of

⁵ *Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria 2014-2020*

⁶ *Europe 2020: a strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*

education for the development of society and economy; it is posited that the two-speed Europe model (and its implication for low-rate growth of countries like Bulgaria) is unacceptable for our country because it would institutionalize our periphery position in the EU and that will have a negative impact on the economic and social development of Bulgaria as a whole – the implication of that conclusion in terms of education is that we need to mobilize our resources at all levels and implement the necessary reforms to secure quality education for all (see publication No. 6);

- special attention is given to some **innovations in inclusive education**: the novel **robot-enhanced learning architecture** (RELA) intended to help the learning process of children with various learning needs (see publication No. 7) and the so-called **STEAM education model**, based on the synergy of science and art (in this case integrating game, puppet theatre and social robotics), for maximising the learning outcomes and pedagogical rehabilitation in inclusive education (see publication No. 10);
- in the two book chapters from the collective research study under the European Erasmus+ project *S2CENE – Strengthening Second Chance Networks in Europe*, an overview is offered of **EU and national policy priorities on second chance education** for adults who lack the education and/or professional skills to function adequately in our society; some good practices are also presented, e.g. Second Chance Schools, which help young people gain the necessary skills and knowledge for successful personal, social and vocational integration (see publications No. 14 and 15).

2. Assessment of the candidate's citations by other scholars

In her Self-evaluation report on the fulfilment of the minimum national requirements for the academic position of PROFESSOR, assoc. prof. Elena Blagoeva describes in full detail a total of **26 individual references** by other Bulgarian and foreign scholars to her academic publications, out of which **15**⁷ (referring to 6 of her publications) are made by authors who published their work in journals or collective research volumes which are both peer-reviewed and referenced in renowned academic research databases, another **10** citations (of 9 of her publications) are in peer-reviewed monographs or collective volumes and there is **one** in an unreferenced academic series of the Institute of Mathematics and Informatics at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. This statistics on its own is indicative of the significance and scientific resonance of the candidate's research publications.

3. Assessment of the candidate's participation in research projects

Over the 5 years of the appraisal period, assoc. prof. Elena Blagoeva has participated in a number of national and international educational and/or research projects, e.g. she was an academic supervisor in the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science project *Student*

⁷ One of these is actually a review of Elena Blagoeva's 2013 monograph entitled „Интернационализация на висшето образование в Европа. Формиране и управление на процесите на интернационализация в Европа като елемент от управлението на висшето образование“ (see Naimushin, B. 2019. Internationalisation of Higher Education in Europe – Book review. *English Studies at NBU*, 5(1), pp. 7-8).

Internships - Phases 1 & 2; she took part as an expert in the *Prevent* Erasmus+ project, financed by EC Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA); she also acted as a project manager in two Ministry of Education and Science projects under the National Programme for the Implementation of Youth Activities („Младежи против насилието: Подай ръка – бъди приятел“ / 2019 and „Уважение вместо насилие – от нас зависи!“ / 2020); as well as managed the Bulgarian partner activities in four international projects (*S2CENE – Strengthening Second Chance Networks in Europe* [2020-2023]; *Practice your Rights with Knowledge and Creativity*, financed by the Active Citizens Fund under the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area [2019 – 2021]; „Подкрепа за пълно включване“ [2019 – 2022] and *Cyber-Physical Systems for Pedagogical Rehabilitation in Special Education* [2018 – 2021], both financed by the European Research Executive Agency). Along with these, assoc. prof. Elena Blagoeva is actively involved in the internal (NBU) project for enhancing the impact of the scientific periodicals published by NBU, financed by the NBU Central Strategic Development Fund.

As part of her responsibilities for dissemination of project results and ideas, assoc. prof. Elena Blagoeva has delivered a wide range of talks/presentations and organised some public forums, e.g. in 2021 she organised at the New Bulgarian Studies Department a round table on Second Chance education opportunities, and in 2022 moderated a similar international round table on the topic of strengthening Second Chance networks in Europe with participants from Portugal, France, Croatia and Bulgaria; in the same year (2022) she made a presentation on the topic of "Education in Bulgaria – prevention of dropout and aggression" at an international public forum (attended by various stakeholders from Portugal, Greece, Italy and Bulgaria) organised under the EU project *School centres for public support (SOS centres)*.

II. Teaching activities

Assoc. prof. Elena Blagoeva has developed and taught about 15 theory- and practice-oriented courses and 10 extramural courses in various Bachelor and Master degree programmes at NBU (for both full-time and part-time students), closely related to the thematic area of the present selection procedure (educational theory and management), e.g. *EU educational policies and programmes*; *Culture and intercultural competences* for the "Primary school pedagogy and foreign language" BA programme; *EU educational policies – Comparative analysis*; *Software of the mind – intercultural aspects of education*; *Project thinking and educational project management* for the "Leadership and management in education" MA programme; *Intercultural skills and working in international teams*; *EU educational and cultural policies*; *Project Management*⁸) for the "Art management" and "Leadership and public management" MA programmes, etc. She constantly updates and improves the content of the courses that she leads and all of them are provided with ample study materials on the NBU Moodle e-platform (PowerPoint presentations on her lecture topics, additional reading materials, incl. links to

⁸ She has been delivering this course in English as well for some years.

external learning resources, interactive forums, test modules and assignments). She tries to involve her students in the project events in which she participates (e.g. in October 2022 some students from the "Primary school pedagogy and foreign language" BA programme took active part in the international e-meeting under the *S2CENE* project related to the Erasmus Days in Europe). Students' satisfaction with her teaching is permanently above the average – according to the survey done by the NBU Center for Quality and Evaluation the average grade of students' satisfaction with her courses over the 5-year appraisal period is excellent 4.65 (out of 5).

It should also be noted that assoc. prof. Elena Blagoeva is a key figure in the team who developed the NBU programmes in the area of education studies, namely the "Primary school pedagogy and foreign language" BA programme and the "Leadership and management in education" MA programme, as well as contributed a lot to building their teaching teams and getting the university accredited in the professional fields of 1.1. Educational Theory and Management and 1.2. Pedagogy. She has also designed a sample teacher qualification module which could be implemented in other degree programmes at NBU aiming to train teachers in their own professional fields.

Up to this moment assoc. prof. Elena Blagoeva has not supervised the work of any PhD students, but she has consulted a number of BA and MA students on their theses and participated in many state exams (the information is derived from the NBU Intranet System).

III. Administrative and public activity

At present assoc. prof. Elena Blagoeva is a member of several national and international organizations: e.g. the Bulgarian Association for European Integration and the European Association for International Education. She was also a member of the management board of the Local Administrators' Continuing Training in European Affairs (LACTEA), as well as a managing director of the "Concepts-Bulgaria" Foundation (an NGO in the sphere of culture and education).

During the academic 2020/21 and 2021/22 assoc. prof. Elena Blagoeva served as programme director of the new pedagogical degree programmes, and since 2022/23 she has been chair of the Pedagogical section at the Department of foreign languages and cultures.

These facts are also indicative of her commitment to the professional and academic community in Bulgaria and abroad.

IV. Personal Impressions of the candidate

My personal impressions of assoc. prof. Elena Blagoeva are related to our team work on the development of the NBU programmes in the area of education studies, namely the "Primary school pedagogy and foreign language" BA programme and the "Leadership and management in education" MA programme, as well as our cooperation with regard to preparing all the necessary documentation for getting the university accredited in the professional fields of 1.1. Educational Theory and Management and 1.2. Pedagogy. In this way I could directly appreciate her

management and interpersonal skills, as well as her academic knowledge, the precision of her work and her resourcefulness. In our team work, she often took the initiative and was highly responsible, guided by the principles of collaboration and collegueship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I can say with conviction that the academic publications, documents and supporting evidence submitted by associate professor Elena Atanasova Blagoeva for the purposes of the current selection procedure for the academic position of PROFESSOR at NBU testify to her research qualities and her original academic contributions to the field of Pedagogy (and in particular educational theory and management), as well as to her skills and experience of transferring the theoretical concepts into educational practice.

Considering all of the above, I am convinced that associate professor Elena Blagoeva's application for the academic rank of PROFESSOR meets the minimum national requirements under art. 2b, para. 2 and 3 of the *Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act*, as well as the additional requirements of New Bulgarian University as set out in Part 4.2 of the *Regulations* for its implementation at the university, so I fully support her election for the academic position of PROFESSOR in the area of higher education 1. Education Studies, professional field 1.1. Educational Theory and Management (*Higher Education Management*) at New Bulgarian University.

1 September 2023

Signature:



/Assoc. Prof. Svetlana Dimitrova-Gyuzeleva, PhD/