

## OPINION

by **Ivanka Daneva Gaydardjieva - professor at New Bulgarian University, PhD**

regarding: the materials submitted for participation in a contest for taking up the academic position **"Professor" at Paisii Hilendarski, University of Plovdiv**  
**by: field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences**  
**professional direction 3.4. Social Activities (Social Protection and Social Work)**

In the announced contest for a "professor" for the needs of the "Social Activities" Department at the Faculty of Pedagogy of the University of Plovdiv "Paisii Hilendarski", announced in the SG, no. 92 of 18.11.2022 and on the university's website, one candidate participated - Assoc. Prof. Ludmila Pavlova Vekova, PhD from the "Social Activities" Department of the University of Plovdiv.

### **1. The procedure and the candidate general presentation**

By Order No. PD-21-67 of 18.01.2023. of the Rector of the the University of Plovdiv, I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury of a contest for the academic position of "professor" at the university in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional direction 3.4. Social Activities (Social Protection and Social Work), announced for the needs of the "Social Activities" Department at the Faculty of Pedagogy. At the first meeting of the jury, held on 24.01.2023, it was decided to prepare an opinion on the contest.

The documentation presented by Assoc. Prof. Ludmila Vekova is precisely prepared and presented, it is in the required volume and fully meets the requirement of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (DASRBA), the Regulations for its implementation and the Regulations for the development of the academic staff of the University of Plovdiv.

The presented list of works, which are outside those specified for participation in the contest for the position of "associate professor", includes a total of 38 publications, of which 33 publications related to the contest for "professor" are proposed and accepted for review, including scientific works - 1 monograph, 30 articles, and also 2 textbooks. 5 publications outside the scope of the contest, including 3 articles and two reports published in proceedings of held scientific conferences, are not reviewed. A list of 9 projects in which Assoc. Prof. Vekova has participated is presented and official notes and other documents certifying her participation are delivered for them. 5 of the publications submitted for review are in English in our and foreign journals, the rest are in Bulgarian. All posts are self-contained. The preoccupation with publications during the habilitation shows that the works submitted for the current contest do not match in terms of content and are a development of ideas.

### **Brief biographical data of the applicant**

Lyudmila Vekova graduated from the "Labor Economics" specialty in 1983 and acquired the Master's degree. After a successfully defended dissertation in 1991, she was awarded the doctoral degree, and since July 2011 she has the academic title "Associate Professor".

Assoc.Prof.Vekova's scientific, scientific-applied and pedagogical activities cover problems of social protection and social work with an emphasis on modern challenges and novelties in scientific and scientific-applied aspects. Vekova's scientific achievements cover issues from education in social activities to practical competences, from theoretical-methodological and regulatory aspects to solving specific practical-applied tasks in the field of social insurance and social assistance, supplementary pension insurance and human resources management. They are related both to the further development of known or newly emerging problems in separate spheres, as well as to the specific methodological and methodical approaches to their solution.

As a general characteristic, it can be noted that Assoc. Prof. Vekova has realized himself as a scientist, scientific supervisor, manager and teacher in the field of social protection and social activities. This is also evident in her publications, in which the scientific-applied problem is precisely defined and practical ways to solve it are offered. This has inevitably been reflected in her research work on six projects as a member of the team.

The period after her habilitation was an active creative period in terms of publications, participation in projects, number of citations, participation in international and national conferences, in the editorial boards, in the Commission on Insurance Relations at the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare. Assoc. Prof. Vekova is also the Chairman of the Board of the Association "Bulgarian Association for Education in Social Work".

### **Personal impressions**

I have known the candidate for a long time, as we were colleagues in practice in the field of pension fund management, I had an idea of her scientific publications and appearances, but I have not become familiar with her research and teaching work in detail until the present opinion. I believe that she is one of the narrow circle of researchers working on the problems of social protection and social activities in our country. I can confidently say that Assoc. Prof. Vekova is a highly respected expert in the social security field and her opinion on a wide range of practical issues is highly valued.

## **2. General characteristics of the applicant's activity**

### *Assessment of educational and pedagogical activity*

Lyudmila Vekova is a teacher with many years of experience - over 30 years. She is the head of the "Social Activities" Department after it was separated from the "Pedagogy, Psychology and Social Activities" Department of the University of Plovdiv until now. In her capacity as head of the department, she has great credit for its creation. She is the author of the curricula for the "Bachelor" and "Master" courses, as well as the documentation for the accreditation of the "Social Policies and Social Work" Doctoral program at the department.


All disciplines taught by Assoc. Prof. Vekova are in the field of social protection, social activities and social policy: Social Protection System; Management of social organizations; Social entrepreneurship; Social policies for disability people; Social management and social marketing; Social competence; Management of human resources in social activities; Management for organizational development, etc. These courses are taught in two departments. In the course of teaching, he applies modern teaching methods based on information and communication technologies.

The candidate has submitted two textbooks concerning the pension insurance system /part one/ and supplementary pension insurance /part two/. Acquaintance with them convinces that they fully ensure the preparation of undergraduate and graduate students in several courses, and can also be extremely useful for doctoral students and practitioners, as they present a wide range of issues - from theoretical positions and philosophy, constitution and the development of the pension insurance model in our country to the regulatory and methodical aspects of this activity.

Over the past 10 years, she has supervised 40 graduate students. She is the supervisor of three PhD students, two of whom are awaiting public defense.

### *Evaluation of the candidate's scientific and scientific-applied activity*

The scientometric characteristics of the publications for the "Professor" contest include the following groups:

-  habilitation monographic work;

- ✚ 5 publications in scientific publications, referenced and indexed in world databases with scientific information (Scopus and/or Web of Science), incl. 3 publications in English in collections of participation in scientific forums and 2 articles in Bulgarian;
- ✚ 3 peer-reviewed articles in indexed national journals;
- ✚ 5 peer-reviewed articles in scientific works of universities;
- ✚ 17 scientifically reviewed and published reports from scientific forums (national, with international participation and international scientific forums);
- ✚ 2 peer-reviewed textbooks.

From the attached table for the minimum national requirements /in terms of indicators/, resulting from the DASRBA and the Rules for the Development of the Academic Staff of the University of Plovdiv, it is clear that the candidate significantly exceeds them.

### ***Contributions (scientific, scientific-applied, applied) and citations***

The candidate's scientific interests cover a wide range of topics, mainly, but not exclusively, in the field of social protection and social activities. More specifically, her research focuses on: education in social activities and the necessary practical competencies for them; the regulatory aspects and the solution of specific practical-applied tasks in the field of social insurance and social assistance; supplementary pension insurance and human resources management; social entrepreneurship and social innovation. They are related both to the further development of known or newly emerging problems in individual spheres, as well as to the specific methodological and methodical approaches to their solution, applied in the research projects in which Assoc. Prof. Vekova was involved.

#### *1. Evaluation of the monographic work, including evaluation of the scientific and scientific-applied contributions*

The candidate's Habilitation thesis "Social Protection in Unemployment (Social Work with the Unemployed) (2022) is a systematic and multifaceted study of social protection in unemployment, containing the subsystems of social security against the risk "Unemployment", social assistance to unemployed persons and labor policies employment market. The monographic work of Assoc. Prof. Lyudmila Vekova is distinguished by its exceptional topicality, meeting the needs of modern times, as it combines high theoretical knowledge with in-depth methodological and practical knowledge, which results in its wide practical usefulness. It should be emphasized that previous monographic studies have focused on some of the subsystems of social protection in case of unemployment, and this habilitation thesis covers all its subsystems, which are considered in development and in the context of contemporary challenges to social security.

The main theoretical-methodological directions of the research include logically interconnected and therefore predetermined thematic areas: the concept of the social protection system and main factors determining the contemporary challenges before it and the leading problematic aspects; the socio-economic aspects of unemployment and trends in its change for the period 2004-2021. in Bulgaria; unemployment insurance risk-theoretical, regulatory aspects and trends for 2004-2021 in our country; opportunities for voluntary insurance; substantive characteristics of social assistance-benefits and services; problematic aspects of labor market policies in the context of support for the unemployed in Bulgaria; research of alternative forms of providing employment-conceptual basis, regulation, problematic aspects; characteristic of the functioning of the unemployment protection system through the implementation of social work with unemployed persons.

The monographic study of Assoc. Prof. Lyudmila Vekova contains contributions of a theoretical-methodological nature and contributions of a practical-applied nature, which can be summarized in the following directions:

1.1. By referring to the complementation and enrichment of the theoretical-conceptual frameworks in the study of social protection are the analysis and systematization of the theoretical foundations of the concept of "social protection" of the population, as well as its applied definitions, on the basis of which the essential characteristics and goals are pointed out. The author's conceptual position regarding the definition of essence, constituents and orientation is expressed.

1.2. In connection with the extensive consideration of unemployment as a process, the concept of the need to consider unemployment social protection as a system of elements (including social spheres-insurance and support, labor market policy), forms and methods of impact, regulatory basis and organizational structure, and the achievement of its goals implies compliance with certain principles is argued.

1.3. The scope of social protection is justified from the standpoint of the systemic approach as including social security, social assistance and labor market interventions, representing interconnected subsystems with a view to achieving a certain level of social security. The opinions of researchers have been analyzed from scientific-theoretical and methodological-methodical aspects, as well as the definitions applied by institutions and in practice for the active policy of the labor market, for the essential characteristics and specifics of social work with unemployed persons. Reasoned own views on definitions, aspects and orientation are proposed.

1.4. An extensive and in-depth review of the unemployment insurance legislation since 2001 has been carried out so far, including and the provision and payment of benefits upon the occurrence of this insurance case, the active unemployment protection policy and its main directions. The analysis of the legal and by-law regulations and statistical data for the specified period are the basis for outlining the author's own position, arguing for trends of change and highlighting problematic aspects.

1.5. Of a practical-applied nature are the characteristics of alternative forms of providing employment for risk groups with a view to limiting unemployment, such as social entrepreneurship, social enterprises, centers for protected employment and social assistance, as well as the evaluation of the proposed measures to limit the impact of the health crisis on the labor market. As a logical continuation of the research, the delineation of the primarily regulatory aspects of the existing, but so far unused, legal opportunity for unemployment insurance in additional voluntary funds for unemployment and/or professional qualification.

*2. Assessment of the contributions in the other attached publications made after the appointment of the academic position "associate professor".*

The scientific contributions in the articles and scientific reports of Assoc. Prof. Vekova can be summarized as follows:

2.1. Theoretical-methodological contributions:

First, social activities within each subsystem of social protection against unemployment are systematized and their functions are examined in details (20 and 30).

Secondly, given the importance of pension insurance in the system of social protection of the population in our country, the Bulgarian pension model has been characterized with an emphasis on its fully funded part. Based on an analysis of the regulatory regime and the development of funded pension insurance in Bulgaria, problems of the pension model in the country have been highlighted. (8, 23, 32 and 33).

2.2. Scientific-methodological and applied contributions:

First, a reasoned opinion is expressed regarding provision in universal pension funds. The specifics and practical aspects of public insurance for pregnancy and childbirth, as well as those employed in the "Security" and "Defense" sectors and those employed in school education, have been analyzed. (6,10 and 25).

Secondly, the main factors and processes underlying the management of social work in our country and, together with that, representing the contemporary challenges to practical activities in the social protection system, were investigated. Legal changes in the field of social assistance are characterized, and mainly those related to a relatively more limited researched subject - social services. (20,30,26 and 27).

Third, the emphasis is placed on the characteristics of social enterprises, revealing their potential for improving employment and social inclusion of risk groups. The study of problem areas leads to substantiated specific recommendations for the development of entrepreneurship in the social sphere, given the existing principal possibilities of social innovations (3, 7 and 19).

Fourthly, the actual problem of the impact of factors and processes of a demographic, economic and social nature on the specifics of competences in the social sphere has been fully developed. The effects of these factors and processes on the necessary changes in the professional competencies of social workers have been analyzed and those that are a mandatory prerequisite for successful professional realization in the social sphere have been highlighted. (3, 14,26).

Fifth, based on an analysis of the training process in the "Social Activities" professional field, unresolved issues are systematized and specific proposals for its improvement are indicated. The overall nature of the research in this field also covers the professional realization of the graduates of this professional direction. (9, 13, 15, 29).

The problems investigated by the candidate are distinguished by a clearly formulated thesis, in-depth studies and concrete results achieved with generalizations, conclusions and recommendations useful for science and practice.

Publications containing citations are presented in hard copy and as an electronic scanned copy. After checking the sources, 34 references to the publications of Assoc. Prof. Vekova were found, including 5 citations in scientific publications, refereed and indexed in global scientific information databases, 4 citations in peer-reviewed monographs and collective volumes, and the remaining 26 are in peer-reviewed publications or reviews in non-refereed peer-reviewed journals. This serious response means that the candidate is recognized as a scholar.

#### *Evaluation of the candidate's personal contribution*

I consider all publications submitted for the competition to be the candidate's personal work. During their review, no evidence and/or established signals of copyright violations of other researchers were found at the time of preparation of this opinion.

### **3. Critical remarks and recommendations**

The publications presented for review are developed on a fundamental theoretical and empirical basis, the theses and practical recommendations contained in them are reasoned. I have no specific critical remarks on the content of the candidate's scientific works. The following recommendations can be made for the future research and teaching activities of Assoc. Prof. Vekova: to continue to successfully combine his research and teaching work with his activity as an expert; to expand his research in directions related to the strategic management of the economy; to increase his international appearances.

## CONCLUSION

The results achieved by Assoc. Prof. Lyudmila Pavlova Vekova, PhD, in the educational and research activities, fully meet the requirements of the Development of the Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria Act (DASRBA), the rules for its implementation and the additional requirements of the Faculty of Pedagogy, adopted in connection with the regulations of the University of Plovdiv for the application of the DASRBA.

The scientific publications of the candidate under the announced contest contain original theoretical, methodological and practical-applied contributions, some of which are directly oriented to the academic work.

**Getting to know the materials and scientific works presented in the contest, the analysis of their significance and the scientific, scientific-applied and applied contributions contained in them are the arguments and the grounds for giving my positive assessment and to recommend the Scientific Jury to prepare a report-proposal to the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Pedagogy for the election of Associate Professor Lyudmila Pavlova Vekova to the academic position of "Professor" at the University of Plovdiv "Paisii Hilendarski" in field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional direction 3.4. Social activities (Social protection and social work).**

March 10, 2023

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**Prof. Ivanka Daneva, PhD**