

STATEMENT

from Dr. Milena Hristova Yorgova - Assoc. Prof. at St Cyril and St Methodius University of
Veliko Tarnovo

of a PhD dissertation for awarding the educational and scientific degree "**doctor**"

by: field of higher education **3. Social, economic and legal sciences**

professional field **3.4. Social activities**

doctoral program **Social policies and social work**

Author: *Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova*

Research topic: *Social work with children and families to support early childhood development*

Supervisor: *Ass. Prof. Dr Lyudmila Pavlova Vekova – Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv*

1. General presentation of the procedure and the PhD student

By order No. RD-21-121 dated 20th January 2023 of the Rector of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv (PU), I was elected as a member of the scientific jury to ensure a procedure for the defence of a PhD dissertation on the topic "Social work with children and families in support of early childhood development" for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.4. Social activities, doctoral program Social policies and social work. The author of the dissertation is Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova - a full-time PhD student at the Department of Social Work, with supervisor Prof. Dr Ludmila Pavlova Vekova, from Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

The set of paper materials presented by Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova is in compliance with Article 36 (1) of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of the University of Plovdiv. The PhD student has attached 4 scientific publications on the topic of the dissertation (4 papers).

Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova graduated with a bachelor's degree in Social Work in 2002 from the Technical University of Gabrovo. In 2018, she obtained a master's degree in Management of Social Organizations from Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv. From the attached curriculum vitae, it is evident that her professional path has been permanently connected with social work and social services for children and families. Since 2016, Ekaterina Uzhikanova has been the manager of the Center for Early Childhood Development, Asenovgrad, and since 2022 she has been an assistant professor at the Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Pedagogy of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv. Her research interests are in the field of early childhood development, social services for children and families.

2. Actuality of the research topic

Ekaterina Uzhikanova's PhD dissertation examines a problem that is particularly relevant against the background of the ongoing changes in the system of social services in the Republic of Bulgaria. Building integrated services for children and families in support of early childhood development is a serious challenge, and solving it requires, on the one hand, an understanding of the importance of early support for children and families, and on the other, adequate forms of support for

parenting and child development. Ekaterina Uzhikanova thoroughly analyzes in theoretical and practical aspects the social work with children and families in support of early childhood development, argues the need to create a model of social work for integrated support and presents her own vision for its construction.

3. Knowledge of the problem

The topic chosen by the PhD student corresponds to her long-term professional activity in the field of social work with children and families in support of early childhood development. Ekaterina Uzhikanova's professional commitment is reflected not only in the choice of topic, but also is a prerequisite for an in-depth study of the existing practice.

4. Research methodology

The research methodology chosen by the PhD student has allowed her to solve the tasks set and to prove the hypotheses presented. Established and proven research methods have been used, corresponding to the purpose of the dissertation: study of literary sources, analysis of statistical information, sociological methods - questionnaire and interview.

5. Characterization and evaluation of the dissertation and contributions

Ekaterina Uzhikanova's dissertation consists of 161 pages. They include an introduction, three chapters, a summary, conclusions, recommendations for practice, a conclusion, a self-assessment of scientific contributions and bibliography containing 105 sources.

The main components of the dissertation research are formulated in the **introduction** - objectives; object and subject of research; research tasks; working hypotheses; research methods. In the **first chapter** of the dissertation, Ekaterina Uzhikanova defines early childhood development and clarifies the importance of its support. In the **second chapter**, the PhD student presents the social work with children and families in a theoretical and practical aspect, and at the end of the chapter she focuses on social services in support of early childhood development and argues their importance for developing the potential of the child and the family on the one hand, and on the other – to prevent the risks to the functioning of the family system. In **chapter three** she analyzes the experience gained in providing social services in support of early childhood development under a pilot project - Center for Early Childhood Development - Asenovgrad. The results confirm the need for a complex approach in meeting the social, educational and health needs of children and families at risk of poverty and social isolation. Ekaterina Uzhikanova expands her research by conducting questionnaires and interviews with specialists and managers in the field of social services to outline the scope of practices to support early childhood development in the social services operating in our country. She identifies deficits in the social work supporting early childhood development and develops a social work model for integrated support. In the **conclusion**, a summary of the conducted research is made, as well as main conclusions about the obtained results. It is supplemented with a self-assessment of the contributions of the dissertation.

I believe that the PhD student has achieved the objective set. She has provided sufficient arguments in support of her thesis that the creation of a model of social work for integrated support of early childhood development will lead to an improvement in the quality of care for children and their development in a family environment. In addition - the expansion of the set of activities, methods and approaches in the existing social services aimed at children and families at risk will improve the effectiveness of social work in support of early childhood development.

I accept the mentioned contributions of scientific and scientific-applied nature as the PhD student's personal contribution.

6. Assessment of the PhD student's publications and personal contributions

Ekaterina Uzhikanova has authored 4 publications on the research topic of her dissertation. Classified by type - 4 papers published in edited collective volumes. They meet the scientometric criteria for acquiring the educational and scientific degree "doctor". The publications reflect the main points of the dissertation research. I have no doubts about their authorship.

7. Dissertation abstract

The dissertation abstract contains 32 pages and meets the requirements for this type of abstract development. It adequately reflects the content of the dissertation.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation *contains scientific, scientific-applied and applied results, which represent a contribution to science and meet all the requirements* of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law and the relevant Regulations of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

The dissertation shows that the PhD student Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova *possesses* in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the professional field Social Work and *demonstrates* qualities and skills for independent conduct of scientific research.

Based on the above, I confidently give my *positive assessment* of the conducted research, presented by the above-reviewed dissertation work, dissertation abstract, achieved results and contributions, and I *propose to the honourable scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova* in the scientific field of higher education: 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.4. Social activities, doctoral program "Social policies and social work".

27 February 2023

The statement was prepared by:
Assoc.Prof. Dr Milena Yorgova