

OPINION

by Associate Professor **Ivka Tsakova Nekova**, Doctor in Political Science,
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Concerning: The research work of Assist. Prof. **Blagovesta Ilieva Nikolova**, PhD – a participant in the competition for obtaining the academic position of “Associate Professor” in the scientific area of “Philosophy”, professional field 2.3 Philosophy (Political philosophy) for the needs of department “Social Theories, Strategies and Prognoses” at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology – BAS. The competition was officially announced and published in the State Gazette on 15.12.2020.

The legal basis for preparing the current opinion is my being included as a member of the Scientific Jury with Order № ПД 09-109/17.02.2021, issued by the Director of IPS-BAS, and a protocol from a meeting of the Scientific Jury that took place on March 2, 2021.

General description of the submitted materials by the applicant:

Assist. Prof. Blagovesta Nikolova is the only candidate in the announced competition for “Associate Professor” in the scientific and professional field 2.3. Philosophy. She has submitted an impressive set of documents and materials for participating in the competition. The most significant among them are the academic publications – a monograph (in English), 7 papers in English and 8 articles in Bulgarian. The participation of Dr. Nikolova with presentations in international fora in Germany, Luxembourg, Spain, Austria and Great Britain is admirable. Five academic articles are with ISI impact factor and/or SJRank; four publications are in other referenced and indexed editions, while the remaining six articles and papers are published in non-referenced journals with scientific peer-review or in edited compilations. In the submitted evidentiary materials it can be noticed that all 25 citations of Dr. Nikolova are in English-language editions. This has to do with the participation of Blagovesta Nikolova as an expert in international projects. A marker of her accomplishments is the “Pythagoras” prize for young researchers in the field of humanities and social sciences – an award she received from the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science in 2017.

Scientific, applied and pedagogical activities of the candidate:

The research interests of the applicant, who has obtained her PhD in Philosophy with a dissertation entitled “The transformation of foresight in contemporary knowledge societies” (2013), are generally in the realm of political philosophy, and in futures studies in particular. The specific area of research interest to which Dr. Nikolova has devoted her attention in the last few years is the so-called Responsible Research and Innovation. The latter concept is the focus of her monograph (Nikolova, B. 2019. *The RRI Challenge: Responsibilization in a State of Tension with Market Regulation*). The orientation of the author towards this novel research field is a result of her postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Namur, Belgium in the period 2015-2017.

The academic publications of Blagovesta Nikolova in international journals with Impact Factor reveal her achievements in the framework of evolving discussions and heated debates on particularly “burning” issues such as: a) the relations between science fiction and futures studies (*The Science Fiction - Futures Studies Dialogue ... 2021*); b) the “ethical coverage” of EU security studies (*Putting critique to work: Ethics in EU security research ... 2019*); c) the functionality of the prognostic figure of the wildcard event and its discursive, epistemological and practical aspects (*The Wildcard Event ... 2015*); d) ways in which young people can be included in the process of decision-making thus engaging them with the future of representative democracies shaken by crisis (*Youth And The Future ... 2015*); e) for the increasing role of inclusive (participatory) forms and techniques in the realm of contemporary foresight (*The Rise and Promise of Participatory Foresight, 2014*).

The publications of Blagovesta Nikolova in other referenced and indexed editions concern topical problems with regard to: a) economic forecasting in turbulent environment where lawful and illicit activities are entangled; b) the marketization of contemporary forecasting and resulting questionable practices of value-creation by selling images of the future; conjoining prognosis and market failure with the aim of generating profit, etc.; c) critical examination of the concept of knowledge-based societies by exposing mechanisms and structures that distort the process of conceiving images of the future; d) difficulties for the social sciences in performing their prognostic function in comparison to natural sciences, in a situation of “staggering acceleration of social change in contemporary societies”.

The outlined aspects of the work of Dr. Blagovesta Nikolova on particularly important and pressing topics in the realm of political philosophy, futures research and responsible research and innovation precondition the quality of her applied and consultancy activities as an expert for the European Research Executive Agency. She has performed ethics reviews of EU projects within the following programs: H2020-MSCA-IF-2016, H2020-MSCA-IF-2017, H2020-MSCA-IF-2018, H2020-MSCA-IF-2019, H2020-SPACE-202-LEIT, H2020-MSCA-IF-2020.

Dr. Nikolova has participated in training sessions for employees of the European Commission in Brussels (with lectures on the problems of responsible innovation governance) as well as for students in the framework of Erasmus+ program at universities in Malaysia (with lectures devoted to ethics reflexivity in research projects). In view of that, my recommendation to the applicant would be to expand the range of her pedagogical activity, and of her audience respectively, with civil servants and students so she can transfer knowledge and share her European experience as to the intriguing issue of the practical implementation of research and innovation governance.

Analysis of the scientific contributions of the applicant:

The scientific contributions in the publications of Blagovesta Nikolova are plenty; however, due to limitations imposed by the genre of the opinion, I will mention the most important, which in my judgement are concentrated mainly in the monographic study. The monograph, for the first time in Bulgaria, *traces the emergence of the concept of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) and its integration in the European institutional context*. The purpose of the RRI concept is to offer solutions to existing problems concerning the trust gap between science and society (different communities – national states, the European community) in seeking “acceptable” forms of market realization of research results. The responsabilization of the research and innovation realm (as to society, communities) can be advanced through social critique and ethical reflection.

Another fundamental scientific contribution in the monograph of Dr. Nikolova, in my opinion, can be found in the ethical critical reflection on the notion of “market societies”, which advances the tendency to project the principle of market regulation onto spheres that are usually driven by non-market considerations. The offered argumentation about the dangerous “instrumentalization of the idea” of RRI and its co-optation by the market mechanism as a

technique for “ethical stamping” of products and services, I reckon to be particularly creative for explaining the current crisis processes in EU and its member states. *The market mechanism cannot /should not be conceived as the “ultimate social regulator” indifferent to any social teleology.* In this context the author positions her contemplations about the “effects of the produced knowledge”, about the need to consider “positive responsibility”, “social acceptability” and “social desirability” of the products of the research and innovation process.

Another important contribution of the monograph, in my judgement, lies in the exposed *conflict between different strategic priorities of the European Union*, interpreted through the prism of the RRI concept: between the ambition for accelerated economic development relying on innovations on the one hand, and the aspiration of the European Union to set an example as an entity promoting values by the means of protecting fundamental rights, on the other. Managing this conflict entails *“ethical scrutiny” as to EU-funded research activities (projects)*. It is in this connection that the assumed overlap between democratization and taking responsibility as to the research and innovation process is criticized – “problematic innovations” are being legitimized in the context of obscured political responsibility with the aim of profit-making by exploiting free input of ideas that generate value.

Personal impressions and a question for the applicant:

While getting familiar with the research work of Dr. Blagovesta Nikolova, which is voluminous, of good quality, and within the broad and interdisciplinary research field of political philosophy, futures studies and responsible research and innovation, I am left with the general impression for a deficit in the availability of this kind of studies in the research and public sphere in Bulgaria. I believe that her future scientific and applied activity will boost the authority of the “Social Theories, Strategies and Prognoses” department at IPS-BAS within the wider community of social scientists in EU and in Bulgaria.

I have no critical remarks to the candidate. I am impressed with the solid scientific contributions that have received national and international recognition. As a political scientist I am particularly impressed with the critical potential of the RRI concept for rethinking (redefining) the current politico-economic system. Pertaining to that, I would *ask Dr. Nikolova what she thinks are the prospects of “overcoming the economic imprint on the notion of governance” in the context of future responsible (to the community – national or European)*

research and innovations, and the governance of these innovations by the means of European policies for financing scientific research?

On the basis of the performed review of the submitted materials and documents for the competition, I can make the conclusion that the candidature of Assist. Prof. Blagovesta Nikolova complies with the minimal requirements for obtaining the academic position of “Associate Professor” as stipulated by the Law for the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB), the Rules and Regulations for its application, and by the Rules and Regulations on the Conditions and Procedures for Obtaining Scientific Degrees and Occupying Academic Positions at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. In addition, there is no evidence of plagiarism in her publications. I hereby declare that I am not affiliated with the candidate within the meaning of paragraph 1, item 5 of the additional provisions of the LDASRB. As regards the competition procedure or the candidate, I declare that I have no private interest that could impact my objectivity as a member of the Scientific Jury.

Conclusion:

I am fully convinced in the merits of the scientific publications of Dr. Blagovesta Nikolova and I think that she fulfils the criteria for obtaining the academic position of “Associate Professor”. I recommend to the members of the Scientific Jury to vote for assigning Assist. Prof. Dr. Blagovesta Nikolova the academic position of “Associate Professor” in the scientific area of “Philosophy”, professional field 2.3.

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Prepared by:

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