

REVIEW

By: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Veneta Krasteva Petrunova, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Regarding: A competition for the academic position “Professor” in scientific specialty „Sociology“ (Public Policies against Poverty and Social Exclusion), higher education area: 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Sciences.

1. Information about the competition

The competition is announced in State Gazette issue 58/9.07.2024 for the needs of the department "Public Policies and Social Changes" at Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (IPS-BAS). I was assigned as a member of the Scientific jury by decision of the Scientific council of IPS-BAS with protocol №16/03.09.2024 and order № ПД 09-253.6/09.09.2024 by the Director of IPS-BAS. At the first meeting of the Scientific jury, which took place on 19.09.2024 (according to the Director's order № ПД 09-267/13.09.2024), I was appointed as a reviewer. Documents in the competition were submitted by only one candidate – Assoc. Prof. Maria Dimitrova Jeliaskova, DSc.

2. General description of the submitted materials

Assoc. Prof. Maria Jeliaskova has submitted a complete set of documents required for participation in a competition for the academic position "Professor" according to Art. 42(1) of the Regulations of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology - BAS on the conditions and procedures for acquiring scientific degrees and holding academic positions. At the first meeting, the scientific jury discussed the quantitative report on the implementation of the minimum national requirements in accordance to art. 2b para. 2 and 3 of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (DASRBA) and of the additional requirements of IPS-BAS. It became clear that the candidate has not only fulfilled the criteria set by DASRBA and IPS-BAS but has also surpassed them, as evidenced by indicators G, D, and E, which represent publications, citations, and involvement in scientific and educational projects, respectively. With a total of 590 points required, Jeliaskova participated in the competition with 1594,2 points. She meets the DASRBA requirements for a PhD in sociology, has been an "associate professor" at IPS-BAN for over two years (since 2012), and has presented a published monograph as well as original research and publications. The condition set by IPS-BAS for acquiring the scientific degree "Doctor of Science" has been fulfilled. The publications submitted by the candidate for the "Professor" competition are distinct and do not repeat those presented for the "Associate professor" competition or for obtaining the "Doctor of Sciences" degree.

In the competition for the academic position "Professor" Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova participated with 21 out of a total of 77 publications in her scientific biography. These are a monograph used as a habilitation thesis and three additional monographs: two independent works in English and one as part of a collective volume published by the BAS academic publishing house (for the contribution of over 100 standard pages of Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova, a protocol is presented and

there is a clear thematic division). In Category G of the scientometric indicators (scientific publications), four publications in English that are indexed in world-famous databases with scientific information are presented; eight papers published in non-refereed peer-reviewed journals or in edited collective volumes (5 in English and 3 in Bulgarian); four chapters published in collective monographs (2 in English and 2 in Bulgarian); one article in an edited collection. In this metric, the candidate has scored more than double the required 220 points, achieving 469,2 points. The citations (indicator D) amount to 830 points, surpassing the necessary 120 points. In category E (scientific and educational projects), the candidate has presented activities worth 145 points, exceeding the minimum of 100 points.

All publications pertain to the theme of the announced competition, covering diverse facets of issues associated with inequalities, poverty, social exclusion, and the public policies connected to these matters.

All this gave grounds to the scientific jury to unanimously decide to admit the works with which Assoc. Prof. Maria Dimitrova Jeliaskova applied to the competition for "Professor" to assessment of the scientific merits.

3. General characteristics of the candidate's scientific and scientific-applied activity

The biography of Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova reveals her active engagement in scientific and applied research, which she has consistently developed since the start of her scientific career. Her numerous publications, both in Bulgarian and English, have a clearly defined scientific theme: social policy and its related facets, including poverty, social exclusion, inequality issues, and the public policies aimed at addressing them. These issues have been extensively examined through involvement in various projects, including roles as a project leader. Funding for some of these projects comes from national entities like the Bulgarian National Science Fund, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Council of Ministers, the Capital Municipality, etc. Additionally, there is an extensive list of research projects supported by international bodies, including the European Commission under the Horizon 2020 program, the Council of Europe, the United Nations, and more.

In addition to publications and projects, Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova's significant scientific dedication is evident in her many presentations at both national and international scientific forums. Frequently, she is invited to deliver a plenary talk as a distinguished researcher.

The scientific biography of Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova reveals her expertise in studying poverty, social exclusion, and inequalities, which is widely recognized and sought after by state, European, and international institutions. She is a member of the European Anti-Poverty Network in Brussels, the largest network of its kind in Europe, bringing together scientists, non-governmental organization representatives, and experts who are actively engaged in combating poverty and social exclusion. Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova served on the executive committee of the organization and was its vice president from 2016 to 2018. Her expertise was also utilized by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, where she participated in the Working Group on Social Economy from 2003 to 2007.

Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova serves on the National Council on Social Inclusion to the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria (since 2010). She has also been involved in numerous working groups addressing significant issues within Bulgarian society, established by the

Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Commission for Protection Against Discrimination, and others.

Since 2020, Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova has been preparing the European monitoring report on poverty in Bulgaria, known as Poverty Watch Bulgaria. In this report, she outlines the country's overall state regarding poverty and social exclusion, analyzes public policies, and proposes recommendations to enhance their effectiveness.

The consistency and thoroughness of Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova's work on poverty, social exclusion, and inequalities, along with the recognition of her expertise both nationally and internationally, firmly lead me to the conclusion that she has distinguished herself as a leading researcher in the thematic area of the announced competition for the academic position of "Professor" for the needs of "Public Policies and Social Changes" Department at IPS-BAS.

4. Teaching activity of the candidate

The materials presented by Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova demonstrate that her contributions extend beyond scientific research and expert consultancy; she is also actively engaged in student education. Since 2012, she has taught the "Social Policy" course to sociology undergraduates at Sofia University. Additionally, she has been teaching the same subject in English at the University of National and World Economy since 2014. She has delivered lectures on "Economic Sociology," "Social Work," "European Social Policy," and "Reforming Social Policy in Bulgaria" at Sofia University. Moreover, at the Southwest University "Neofit Rilski" and Burgas Free University, she has taught "Sociology of Labor."

Along with this, Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova has one PhD student who has successfully defended his thesis and is presently supervising another with whom they are working on "Access to goods for the marginalized urban poor".

Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova, through her comprehensive teaching efforts, enhances young people's understanding of social policy, while also fostering the development of critical thinking regarding public policies.

5. Assessment of the scientific achievements of the candidate

The long-term systematic work and the principled stance on poverty and inequality issues, as exhibited by Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova in her publications, lay the groundwork for recognizing major scientific and societal problems. They also furnish arguments for a persuasive defense of the proposition in her habilitation thesis, "The Polarized Bulgarian Society: Persistent Poverty and Toxic Inequalities," which will be the focus of this part of the review.

The monograph represents an independent study and serves as a natural extension of the author's previous analysis conducted in her doctoral dissertation, titled "Social Policy: Orientations, Fluctuations, and Deformations," for obtaining the "Doctor of Sciences" degree. The current state of poverty and inequality, both globally and in Bulgaria as discussed in the habilitation work, is largely the result of the deformation of social policy, the neoliberal trend, and market fundamentalism, which emerged as a dominant ideology in public policy formulation post the 1980s. These processes lead to the erosion of community and solidarity, the disruption of social cohesion, and ultimately, the polarization of society. A primary factor in this polarization is what Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova terms "toxic inequalities." The harmful impacts of these inequalities are

often underestimated, partly due to the long-standing avoidance of the topic by economists and social scientists, and partly due to the state authorities' reluctance to regulate them, sometimes even enacting policies that exacerbate these disparities.

Drawing from historical analyses of human societies throughout the centuries, Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova distinguishes between two types of inequalities. She argues that inequalities have always been present and should exist as they serve a functional role within the social structure. Such inequalities are inevitable and can be considered a normal aspect of societal functioning. The second type negatively affects economic and social progress, marked by the concentration of income and wealth among a small segment of the population. Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova's significant finding is that the mechanisms driving this effect extend beyond criminal activities and breaches of the normative framework. Much more dangerous are these tools for drastically increasing the incomes of the rich, creating a "reverse" flow of income (from groups with lower incomes to groups with the highest incomes), which are embedded in the very normative frameworks - called by the author " norms-viruses". They are dangerous because despite the injustice they create and the negative results they lead to, they cannot be prosecuted by justice, i.e. one can speak of a legal system for generating inequalities.

Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova advances the concept that it is essential to establish "an upper threshold of inequality levels, beyond which significant shifts in the functionality of inequalities occur" (Jeliaskova, 2024: 13). This notion is a valuable contribution to the current understanding of inequalities, as it allows for an examination of inequalities not merely in quantitative terms but also in terms of their qualitative aspects and their impact on the overall operation of society. The data and arguments presented by Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova clearly demonstrate that modern inequalities have become highly toxic over the past decades, adversely impacting nearly every aspect of human life and affecting an ever-growing number of individuals. This is particularly true for Bulgaria and the USA. The author highlights that Bulgaria's significant income inequality and poverty rates set it apart from other EU member states.

A significant contribution to the work is the disclosure of the indirect consequences of the lack of control over inequalities and the change of their role in the social structure - through extensive data, Assoc. Ph.D. Jeliaskova demonstrates that such disparities cause substantial harm to individuals' lives, health (both physical and mental), education, and also impede the progress of democracy in societies plagued by these inequalities.

Another contribution of Jeliaskova's work is the connection, which the author makes, between the growth of inequalities, the changes in the dynamics of poverty and the multitude of problems in Bulgaria that are not only unresolved but also intensifying. Examples include the declining working-age population, the depopulation of certain areas, marked regional disparities, and the deteriorating access to quality healthcare and education. Indeed, this method of analyzing social issues by examining the interconnections between various social phenomena is also evident in other publications of the candidate, which I consider to be of particular value.

The scientific and applied significance of Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova's monograph lies in its identification of the factors contributing to Bulgaria's persistently unfavorable social environment, particularly in comparison with other EU member states. It outlines the genesis of these issues and delineates what distinguishes Bulgaria as a unique case regarding inequality levels. Furthermore, it exposes the consequences of these persistent problems.

While the monograph does not contain a distinct section discussing possible ways to improve this situation, it is interwoven with the author's advice to those who develop the normative framework throughout its entirety. To set forth on a path toward restoring social and distributive justice in Bulgarian society, it is necessary to shift away from the current neoliberal paradigmatic framework. This framework has resulted in the distortion and dilution of tools that previously curbed the sharp rise in inequalities (such as the social policy), and has advanced mechanisms that legally exacerbate divisions among people, for instance, by endorsing individualization over universality or by altering the tax system to benefit higher-income groups. Assoc. Prof. Jeliazkova contends that dismantling the mechanisms that foster toxic inequalities is essential. She advocates for the establishment of new instruments that enable the state to mitigate these disparities, ensuring they do not exacerbate social exclusion or extreme poverty among large population groups, nor impede social and economic advancement. I wholeheartedly concur with the assertion that a conceptual shift is necessary for this transformation. This shift should lead to a change in the imposition of market principle and neoliberal values in policy-making, and replacing them with principles that emphasize "human dignity, social cohesion, solidarity, social inclusion, social justice, and social empowerment." (Jeliazkova, 2024, p. 116).

In addition to her habilitation thesis, Assoc. Prof. Jeliazkova identifies specific tools to combat poverty and social exclusion in other publications. According to her monograph, "Social Enterprises and their Ecosystems in Europe: Country Report Bulgaria" (Jeliazkova, M., 2019), published by the European Commission, the development of the social economy and social enterprises is particularly effective in including marginalized groups. In the monograph "Demographic Development, Workforce and Labor Resources in Bulgaria" by Borisova-Marinova, K., Atanasova, M., Beleva, I., Jeliazkova, M., Tair, E., Tsekov, N., Hristova, A., Nikolova, S., Banov, H. (2018), published by BAS Publishing House "Prof. M. Drinov", Assoc. Prof. Jeliazkova argues that poverty's causes are less about individual shortcomings and more about the public policies and regulatory frameworks established in Bulgaria. Assoc. Prof. Jeliazkova's statement, which is supported by her analysis of the workforce quality and job quality in Bulgaria, indicates that there is a disparity not favoring job quality. This concept was also utilized in her research on the effectiveness of youth employment policies, reflected in six publications submitted for the competition.

Assoc. Prof. Jeliazkova's efforts in her publications merit high assessment for substantiating and empirically verifying a broader approach to studying various forms of poverty, as well as identifying under-researched social problems. An example is energy poverty and the issue of energy efficiency, areas where the social sciences, especially sociology, should broaden their interest and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the problem through the lens of its various aspects.

6. The candidate's contribution in collective publications

Of the total 21 publications submitted for the competition by Assoc. Prof. Jeliazkova, 11 are collaborative works. The points for these publications have been appropriately allocated among the co-authors. The distribution protocols indicate that all authors contributed equally, with Assoc. Prof. Jeliazkova serving as the lead author on four of these works. The subject matter of

the collaborative publications aligns with Assoc. Prof. Jeliazkova's scientific interests, implying her substantial input in their elaboration.

7. Impact of the candidate's scientific publications on Bulgarian and foreign literature

In the competition for the academic title of "professor," the candidate presents 75 out of a total of 152 citations accrued after taking the academic position "associate professor" in 2012. Among these, 28 citations appeared in works referenced and indexed in Scopus and/or the Web of Science; 35 in peer-reviewed monographs and collective volumes; and 12 in non-refereed peer-reviewed journals. As mentioned at the outset of the review, this is one of the indicators according to which Assoc. Prof. Jeliazkova repeatedly exceeds the required points as per DASRBA and the supplementary criteria of IPS-BAS. This serves as a testament to the broad scientific recognition and significance of the candidate's contributions.

8. Critical remarks on the submitted works, including on the candidate's knowledge of the literature

One of the objectives of scientific research is to address questions of social significance. Assoc. Prof. Jeliazkova adeptly achieves this, presenting her findings in an erudite and convincing manner. This naturally leads to the rise of further questions, that could become the cause of new research and the continuation of the study of the problems of inequalities, poverty and social exclusion. Consequently, my inquiries should be viewed not as shortcoming of Assoc. Prof. Jeliazkova's work, but rather as suggestions for subsequent studies.

The first question arises from the thesis defended in the habilitation book regarding the necessity of an upper limit on inequalities, a notion I wholeheartedly endorse. Nonetheless, this gives rise to at least two queries: What ought to be the threshold for this limit, and by what means can it be established? I recognize that these questions are beyond the scope of the current study, as the author has explicitly outlined at the start of the book. Therefore, I am persuaded that in her future research, Assoc. Prof. Jeliazkova might explore and propose a potential model for conceptualizing such an idea within Bulgarian society.

The question largely pertains to the factors influencing this process. Following Assoc. Prof. Jeliazkova's analysis of the causes behind the rise in inequalities and the legal mechanisms allowing wealth—and consequently power—to be amassed by a select few, is there any basis to assert that the elites are disinterested in altering this system?

Why, despite warnings from scientists, researchers, and experts from international financial institutions, Bulgarian leaders show no readiness for change? Assoc. Prof. Jeliazkova concludes that the rulers lack the capacity to implement necessary changes. However, is capacity the sole explanation? Does this imply that the country's improvement can only occur through external means, such as "importing" politicians?

The candidate demonstrates a high level of literary awareness, evidenced by the extensive range of sources utilized in her publications.

9. The reviewer's personal impressions of the candidate and other information not presented in the points above

I have known Assoc. Prof. Maria Jeliaskova since my years as a PhD student. My direct impressions of her work intensified after 2010 when, amidst the transformation of the Institute of Sociology, I joined the "Public Policies and Social Changes" Department. From the early years, it became apparent to me that she was deeply involved in extensive scientific research within the realm of social policy and strategies to combat poverty and inequality. Her dedication to her work, carried out with outstanding professionalism and responsibility, along with her principled stance and ability to advocate for the scientific community's key positions, are the reasons Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova to be unanimously chosen for a head of the "Public Policies and Social Changes" Department. Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova is a colleague who can be relied upon, always ready to discuss conceptual issues within the work of scientists from the department, advance their research, and collaborate on joint projects.

Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova's analytical approach to significant social issues, her critical thinking, scientific accomplishments, and adherence to academic ethics and principles epitomize my understanding of a professor. I am certain that a scientist with such qualities enhance the image of both the IPS-BAS and Bulgarian sociology as a whole.

10. Conclusion

The review of Assoc. Prof. Maria Jeliaskova's publications and activities demonstrates unequivocally that she has distinguished herself as a leading scientist in the field of this competition. Her analyses and research are of an exceptionally high level, addressing issues of importance not just to Bulgarian society but to the global community as well. This contributes to its international authority. Quantitatively, Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova presents threefold the points necessary as per the DASRBA and the additional criteria of the IPS-BAS.

This leads me to the definitive conclusion that Assoc. Prof. Jeliaskova has the requisite qualities and scientific contributions to occupy the academic position of "Professor" in professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Sciences, specialty 05.11.01. „Sociology“ (Public Policies against Poverty and Social Exclusion).

I will confidently vote in favor of awarding Assoc. Prof. Maria Dimitrova Jeliaskova, DSc., the academic position of "Professor." I urge the other members of the Scientific Jury, as well the Scientific Council of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences to support this decision.

Sofia
18.10.2024

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Veneta Krasteva