

REVIEW

by Christian Anastasov Tanushev, PhD

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of the materials submitted for participation in the competition
for the academic position of “Associate Professor”
at the Higher School of Insurance and Finance

in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic, and Legal Sciences,
professional field 3.8 Economics

In the competition for “Associate Professor” in professional field 3.8 Economics, announced in the State Gazette, issue 5 of 17 January 2025 and on the website of the Higher School of Insurance and Finance, the applicant is Ivaylo Petrov Iliev from the Higher School of Insurance and Finance.

1. General overview of the submitted materials

By Order No. 152 dated May 13, 2025, of the Rector of the Higher School of Insurance and Finance (VUZF), I was appointed as a member of the academic jury for a competition for the academic position of Associate Professor at VUZF in the field of higher education “Social, Economic, and Legal Sciences”, professional field 3.8. “Economics”, scientific specialty “Marketing (Strategic Marketing and Innovations in Marketing)”.

One candidate has submitted application documents for participation in the announced competition:

Ivaylo Petrov Iliev, Ph.D.

The set of materials submitted by Dr. Ivaylo Iliev in paper/electronic form complies with the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at VUZF and includes the following documents:

- Main habilitation work – a monograph reviewed by two habilitated scholars;
- List of publications;
- Curriculum vitae in the European format;
- Copy of diploma No. 503 / 26.06.2020 awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor", issued by the University of National and World Economy;
- Summaries of the publications in Bulgarian and English;
- Report on compliance with the minimum national requirements for holding the academic position of Associate Professor;
- Report on the original scientific contributions in the submitted works;

- Report on teaching activity over the past three calendar years;
- Other documentation in accordance with the requirements of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at VUZF.

The candidate Dr. Ivaylo Iliev has submitted a total of 16 scientific works: 1 habilitation work (a monographic study), 1 book based on a defended dissertation, 1 scholarly study, 1 chapter from a collective monograph, and 12 articles. Two of the articles are in English, and one is published in a scientific journal indexed and referenced in internationally recognized scientific databases such as Scopus and Web of Science.

Three of the submitted articles are not subject to review and are not included in the final evaluation for meeting the minimum national requirements under the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB) and the Regulations for its implementation. These are:

- “Local Self-Government and Program Budgeting” (2018)
- “Digitalization of Processes in the Public Network” (2019)
- “Main Characteristics of Network Governance in the Public Sector” (2020)

These publications are included in Dr. Iliev’s dissertation abstract as part of the grounds for being awarded the educational and scientific degree “Doctor.”

2. Brief biographical information about the candidate

Dr. Ivaylo Iliev holds a Ph.D. in Public Administration from the University of National and World Economy (UNWE), where he defended a dissertation titled “An Alternative Approach to the Management and Evaluation of Public Programs”. He completed a Master’s degree in Public Finance and a Bachelor’s degree in Finance, also at UNWE. His academic training is further enhanced by studies at the Software University (SoftUni), where he focused on network and web technologies—skills that are increasingly important in the digital economy and business education.

Dr. Iliev has accumulated academic teaching experience in higher education:

- At UNWE, he teaches courses in Welfare Economics and Budgetary Policy;
- At the Higher School of Insurance and Finance (VUZF), he lectures in Strategic Marketing, Digital Marketing, and Principles of Marketing.

Dr. Iliev has held leadership positions in several companies, primarily in the fields of e-commerce, digital branding, and strategic management, including as CEO of several successful Amazon brands. This experience has provided him with:

- In-depth knowledge of digital platforms and marketing tools;
- Experience in strategic decision-making, project management, and brand positioning;
- Familiarity with international markets, online commerce, and business growth strategies;
- Valuable insights to enrich his teaching.

His combined experience in academia and entrepreneurship enables him to:

- Incorporate practical examples into teaching that connect theory with real-world business;
- Prepare students with up-to-date knowledge on digitalization, strategic planning, and innovation;
- Mentor students in areas such as business development, public policy, digital transformation, and marketing.

Dr. Iliev's interdisciplinary expertise in fields such as economics, public administration, digital innovation, and marketing makes him a valuable educator for any university seeking to equip students for the challenges of the modern public and private sectors.

3. General Overview of the Candidate's Work

The dissertation submitted by Dr. Ivaylo Iliev, titled "Strategic Marketing in the Context of Digitalization," consists of 153 pages of main text, a list of figures and tables, and a bibliography. It cites 6 sources in Bulgarian, 113 in English, and 7 websites. Several main topics are addressed in the dissertation.

- Impact of Digitalization on Marketing. The dissertation explores the transformation of traditional marketing strategies, emphasizing the shift from conventional approaches to digital platforms. It highlights the influence of digital technologies on consumer behavior, market analysis, and value creation, underscoring the need for businesses to adapt to these changes to remain competitive.
- Strategic Marketing in the Digital Era. The author examines how the integration of digital tools and platforms changes the processes of market segmentation, target market definition, and positioning, as well as the importance of data analytics and artificial intelligence in strategic decision-making.

– Brand Building and Positioning. A significant portion of the dissertation is devoted to the role of branding in a digital context. It discusses how strong brands are built and maintained online, the importance of brand identity, and the emotional and psychological connections that brands create with consumers through digital channels.

– Consumer Behavior and Value Creation. The study analyzes how digitalization affects consumer expectations and behavior, emphasizing the need for personalized, value-driven marketing. It also explores the creation of functional, psychological, and financial value for both customers and companies.

– Challenges and Opportunities for Companies in the Digital Age. The author identifies key challenges such as increased competition, data privacy concerns, and the rapid pace of technological change. At the same time, the dissertation outlines opportunities such as access to global markets, enhanced customer engagement, and innovative marketing approaches.

From a theoretical perspective, the author's main contribution lies in the proposed framework that links classical marketing principles with modern digital strategies and provides a structured approach to understanding digital market dynamics.

The detailed analysis of digital branding and consumer experience enriches the academic literature by illustrating how brands can succeed in an online environment. Particularly valuable is the focus on the creation of emotional and psychological value.

From a practical standpoint, the dissertation includes examples and case studies, such as analyses of e-commerce companies, that illustrate the application of strategic marketing in a digital context. These examples are useful to both researchers and practitioners.

Dr. Iliev's work not only reflects current trends but also anticipates future developments in digital marketing, such as the role of artificial intelligence and big data. This forward-looking perspective contributes to the accelerated implementation of such tools in practice.

The book "Public Networks – An Approach to Public Administration Management" is based on Dr. Iliev's doctoral dissertation and reflects his interest in the application of network governance, including practical models for sectors such as education, healthcare, and social services. The conclusions are particularly relevant in the context of decentralization and the modernization of the public sector. The total length of the book is 122 pages. It cites 139 sources, of which 5 are in Bulgarian and the rest in English.

The other submitted works with which the candidate is participating in the competition reflect his scientific interests in recent years and cover topics concerning the interconnection between public administration issues, digital transformation, strategic marketing, and the development of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs).

His work provides an in-depth study of the evolution of public administration through network governance, the significance of program budgeting for local self-government, and the necessity of goal-oriented financial planning that links public expenditures with measurable outcomes. The author substantiates strategic guidelines for coordination among government bodies, the civil sector, and businesses.

In addressing the topic of digital transformation in public administration, Dr. Iliev argues that the introduction of digital tools significantly improves efficiency and citizen engagement. His publications emphasize the need for new management models and technical competencies to support the transformation of administrative functions. Special focus is given to the structural and behavioral changes that accompany digitalization.

Another essential focus in the candidate's work relates to the development and digital adaptation of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in Bulgaria. In a series of applied studies, he analyzes the challenges and opportunities facing MSMEs, exploring aspects such as access to finance, digital marketing, and internationalization. Special attention is paid to the furniture manufacturing and wood-processing industries, where Iliev evaluates growth opportunities through the implementation of Industry 4.0 technologies. His work outlines both the potential of digitalization and the barriers to its implementation, including lack of digital skills, high costs, and resistance to change.

His publications also address topics such as artificial intelligence and machine learning in marketing, where he proposes a strategic approach for their ethical and effective application. His contributions in this area are aimed at both the academic community and business practice.

Dr. Iliev's scholarly contributions are characterized by:

- Integrative frameworks that combine theory and practice in the fields of management and marketing;
- A clear focus on digital transformation as a strategic and organizational process;
- Analysis of the Bulgarian public and business sectors with proposals applicable on a broader scale;
- Empirical grounding through surveys, case studies, and comparative analyses.

4. Assessment of the Candidate's Personal Contribution

Dr. Iliev's monograph is a timely study of strategic marketing in the digital age. It successfully combines theoretical propositions with practical applicability and contains innovative ideas for reflection by both researchers and practitioners. The author's focus on

digital transformation, branding, and consumer behavior is integrated into a holistic view of the challenges and opportunities of contemporary marketing. His other publications offer actionable strategies and tools for navigating deep technological and managerial transformations in both the public and private sectors. I consider that the works submitted for review are the result of the author's own efforts and are directly relevant to the subject matter of the announced competition. Dr. Iliev's interdisciplinary approach demonstrates his research skills in the modernization of public administration and in strategic marketing in the digital era.

5. Critical Remarks and Recommendations

There is some thematic overlap among his articles—particularly on network governance and digital marketing—which risks fragmenting the novelty of individual works. It is recommended that his future research be more sharply delineated, focusing on deepening specific aspects rather than reiterating previously examined concepts in different contexts.

Going forward, Dr. Iliev might direct his efforts toward truly interdisciplinary studies that link public administration, marketing, and digital transformation within global challenges, such as sustainability, artificial intelligence, and social entrepreneurship. These topics would not only broaden his scholarly profile but also enhance the international impact of his research. Participation in international collaborative projects and consortia would further raise his visibility and foster exchange of expertise.

Additionally, Dr. Iliev is encouraged to strengthen the empirical foundation of his work by conducting larger-scale quantitative and qualitative studies. Engaging in long-term panel research or building proprietary data sets on specific topics (for example, digital consumer behavior in Southeast Europe) would enable more robust and enduring conclusions, thereby adding greater analytical depth and practical relevance to his scholarship.

6. Personal Impressions

I do not know the candidate personally and therefore have no observations regarding his work style or collegial relationships.

Conclusion:

The documents and materials submitted by Dr. Ivaylo Iliev comply with 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 LDASRB, and the Regulations on the Conditions and Procedures for Holding Academic Positions at the Higher School of Insurance and Finance (VUZF).

The candidate has presented a sufficient number of scholarly works published after those used in earning the educational and scientific degree of “Doctor.” His works contain original scientific and applied contributions. His theoretical developments have practical applicability, some being directly oriented toward educational activities.

The achievements of Dr. Ivaylo Iliev in teaching and research fully meet the Regulations on the Conditions and Procedures for Holding Academic Positions at VUZF.

Having reviewed the submitted materials and scholarly works, and analyzed their significance along with their scientific, scientific-applied, and applied contributions, I consider it justified to give a positive evaluation and recommend to the Academic Jury that they prepare a report-proposal to the Academic Council to appoint Dr. Ivaylo Petrov Iliev to the academic position of Associate Professor at VUZF in professional field 3.8 “Economics”, scientific specialty “Marketing (Strategic Marketing and Innovations in Marketing)”.

June 5, 2025

Reviewer:



Prof. Christian Tanushev, Ph.D.