

POSITION PAPER

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Subject: competition procedure "Associate Professor" of the Higher School of Insurance and Finance in the field of higher education 3. "Social, Economic and Legal Sciences", professional field 3.8 Economics, promulgated in the State Gazette no. 5 of 17.01.2025

Grounds for submitting the opinion: (1) Participation in the Scientific Jury of the competition in accordance with Order No. 152/13.05.2025 of the Rector of the Higher School of Insurance and Finance and (2) Decision of the Scientific Jury (15.05.2025).

The review has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its implementation and the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of VUZF

In the competition for the academic position of "Associate Professor", announced in the State Gazette, issue 5 of 17.1.2025 and on the website of the Higher School of Insurance and Finance (<https://vuzf.bg/konkursi-za-akademichni-dlazhnosti>), one candidate participated - Dr. IVAYLO PETROV ILIEV, part-time lecturer (<https://vuzf.bg/teachers/hprd-r-ivaylo-iliev>) in the Department of "Business Administration and Marketing" (<https://vuzf.bg/sastav-katedra-biznes-administratsiya-i-marketing>).

1. General presentation of the procedure and the candidate

1.1 Procedure

By order No. 152/13 May 2025 of the Rector of the Higher School of Insurance and Finance, I have been appointed as a member of the Scientific Jury of a competition for the academic position of "Associate Professor of VUZF" in the field of higher education 3. "Social, Economic and Legal Sciences", professional field 3.8 Economics, scientific specialty "Marketing" (Strategic Marketing and Innovations in Marketing), announced in the State Gazette No. 5 of 17.01.2025.

The competition is announced for the needs of the Department of Business Administration and Marketing at the Higher School of Insurance and Finance, Sofia. The only candidate participating in the competition – Dr. Ivaylo Petrov Iliev has submitted all the necessary documents stipulated in the Law on the Promotion of Business Administration and Marketing and the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of VUZF. The set of materials submitted by the candidate are on an electronic medium, which includes a total of 28 files, including:

- 12 of them are documents related to the competition, separated into a separate folder (summaries of publications in Bulgarian and English; reference for contributions, CV of the candidate, card for fulfilled scientometric indicators for associate professor; reference and appendix for citations; note on workload as a part-time lecturer and doctoral degree diploma) and
- 16 files with copies of the candidate's publications in the competition.

The candidate in the competition, Dr. Ivaylo Petrov Iliev, participated in the competition with 16 scientific publications: 1 (one) monograph, presented as the main habilitation work, 1 (one) monograph published on the basis of a defended dissertation work, 1 (one) published chapter in a collective monographic study, 1 (one) study published in a non-refereed journal with scientific review, 11 (eleven) articles and reports in non-refereed journals with scientific review, 1 (one) scientific report published in an edition that is referenced and indexed in global databases with scientific information. After reviewing the publications, 3 (three) of the listed articles and reports in non-refereed journals with scientific review were not accepted for review because they were mentioned in the abstract of the dissertation and participated in the assessment for the acquisition of the ONS "doctor" (defended on June 10, 2020, UNWE). These are the publications: Local self-government and program budgeting (2018), Digitalization of processes in the public network (2019) and Main characteristics of network management in the public sector (2020). The same are listed under numbers 4, 5 and 6 in the reference for publications in the abstract of the dissertation (<https://ras.nacid.bg/dissertation-preview/61978>). There is no document in the documents that would certify the publication of a scientific report "Decentralization of state structures - network management" (which is not indicated as being in print). As the chairman of the program committee of the held (24.10.2024) National Conference, I note that the report presented by my colleague has been approved for publication, has passed scientific review and is included in the conference proceedings (it is currently under printing at the Academic Publishing House of the UNWE). Thus, the total number of publications with which the candidate can participate in the competition and are subject to review is 13 (thirteen). They are within the scope of the competition, outside the dissertation, and are taken into account in the final assessment of the candidate in the competition.

1.2. Brief biographical information about the candidate

1.2.1. Education

Ivaylo Iliev (born 26.02.1991) graduated from secondary school 137 "Angel Kanchev" in 2010 with a specialization in marketing and advertising, finance and accounting, entrepreneurship. He completed his studies in the Bachelor's program in "Finance" at the UNWE (Bachelor of Economics/Finance, 07.2014) and the Master's program in "Public Finance" at the UNWE (Master of Economics/Public Finance, 2015). After studying in the doctoral program "Organization and Management Outside the Sphere of Material Production (Public Administration)" in the professional field 3.7. Administration and Management at the UNWE - Sofia (2016-2020) he defended his thesis in 2020. dissertation on the topic "Alternative Approach to Management and Evaluation of Public Programs" and received the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" from the UNWE (diploma No. 503/26.06.2020). In parallel with his education in an academic environment, he also completed a number of courses in digital marketing and e-commerce. He is fluent in English (B2) and Russian (A2).

1.2.2. Professional development

His professional career is diverse and very dynamic. It includes holding various positions - from internships and assistant positions to management positions as a commercial and financial director. In parallel with his studies at the UNWE in the period 2011-2015, he worked in private companies as a credit expert (Profi Credit Bulgaria, 2011), assistant manager and corporate client assistant (Porsche Bulgaria, 2011-2014) and financial director (Gianni Travel, 2013-2015). In 2015, he created and managed an online trading company (2015-2019). In recent years (2019-2024), he has gained significant international experience as CEO and CCO of large companies, specializing in e-commerce and in particular as an Amazon Brand Manager of successful brands, he is a managing partner of Feya Naturals (interior design and furnishings). In his entrepreneurial activity, he has been awarded several prizes, including: "Best E-Business" (BAIT Awards), "Best Bulgarian Company" (First Investment Bank), "Young Inspirer" (Coca-Cola), etc. The

accumulation of professional - expert and managerial business experience is of great importance for the development of a successful academic career.

1.2.3. Academic development

The rich portfolio of activities over the years is complemented by a strong and sustained interest in teaching. Already during his doctoral studies, he participated in a teaching team and taught the subject "Budget Policy" to students from the professional field of "Administration and Management" (2017-2018). In the academic year 2024/2025, he was selected as a part-time lecturer in the Department of "Public Administration" in the subject "Welfare Economics", for which he received positive feedback from the head of the subject, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ralitsa Veleva.

The combination of academic competence, rich entrepreneurial and managerial experience in the field of business process optimization, digital marketing and e-commerce are grounds for him to be attracted to the expanding academic partnership with VUZF. From 2022 Dr. Ivaylo Iliev is a part-time lecturer in disciplines such as "Innovative Business Models", "Fundamentals of Marketing", "Strategic Marketing" and "Digital Marketing", and since 2024 also in "E-commerce Platforms". The report from the "Academic Activities" Directorate of VUZF shows stability in the teaching workload - his annual teaching workload amounts to 240 hours, and in 2024/2025 it is 270 teaching hours. The specified courses also determine the profile of the candidate's current scientific interests - the field of strategic marketing, artificial intelligence in marketing, digital marketing and entrepreneurship. This is also reflected in the change in the publication profile of Dr. Ivaylo Iliev in recent years.

1.3. Personal opinion

I know the candidate from his studies as a student in the Master's program "Public Finance" (where I was his lecturer in the discipline "Public Policy Analysis"), which is when his interest in continuing his studies at the doctoral level dates back to, and then as the head of the department to which the doctoral program, whose studies he completed, is accredited. I was a member of the scientific jury and a reviewer of the doctoral dissertation he defended (<https://ras.nacid.bg/dissertation-preview/61978>). I have direct and personal observations of the doctoral student's work, obtained in the course of a number of discussions and consultations on the topic of the dissertation and his work as a part-time assistant in the Department of Public Administration. I know him as a thorough young author, whose distinctive qualities are precision in scientific pursuits, competence, perseverance and purposefulness in seeking solutions to issues significant for science and practice, and teamwork skills. He has an affinity for teaching, is liked by the students and colleagues he works with. A young, promising and original academic researcher.

Summary of item 1:

The competition documentation meets the requirements of the Law on the State Administration of the Republic of Bulgaria (Art. 2b) and the Regulations for its implementation (Art. 1a, para. 1) and the Regulations on the terms and conditions for occupying academic positions at VUZF (Art. 21).

All necessary documents for participation in the competition are accessible, arranged logically, which allows them to be used as a full-fledged documentary basis for assessing the candidate.

The biographical data and in particular the accumulated professional (entrepreneurial) and academic experience show focused, dynamic and successful development, as well as professional qualifications relevant to the competition position. The candidacy of Dr. Ivaylo Petrov Iliev is suitable for the academic position of "Associate Professor at VUZF".

2. General characteristics of the candidate

2.1. Compliance with national requirements for the position

The provided report on the scientometric indicators shows that the only candidate participating in the competition for the academic position of "associate professor at VUZF" meets the minimum national requirements. The summarized data show that the candidate covers the total minimum point asset of 400 points - in total and by individual groups of indicators.

Based on the adjusted (see above item 1) and accepted for review total number of publications with which the candidate can participate in the competition, the fulfillment of the mandatory/minimum scientometric criteria - in total and by main groups of indicators, under Art. 2b of the Law on the State of the Republic of Bulgaria on the State of the Republic of Bulgaria are shown in the table:

Group. /№	Indicators	Items X points	Total points	Requirement
A	PhD thesis	1 (50)	50	50
B	Habilitation work	1 (100)	100	100
Г	Total by group Г		220	200
Г / 5	Published book (based on a defended dissertation)	1	75	
Г / 6	Articles and reports (refereed)	1 (30)	30	
Г / 7	Articles and reports (unrefereed)	8 (10)	80	
Г / 9	Studies (unrefereed)	1 (15)	15	
Г / 10	Chapter of a collective monograph	1 (20)	20	
Д	Total by group Д		65	50
Д / 11	Citations in refereed scientific publications	1 (15)	15	
Д / 12	Citations in monographs and collective volumes	3 (10)	30	
Д / 13	Cited in non-refereed scientific publications	4 (5)	20	
	Total by group A, B, Г и Д		435	400

With a total mandatory minimum of 400 points, the candidate in the competition scores 435 points. There is no non-fulfillment in any of the individual groups of indicators.

There is a high rate of publication activity in the last two years. All publications are independent and cover the period 2023-2025, with only one out of a total of 13 publications from 2023; 6 (six) publications in 2024 and 2025 (both monographic studies were published in the latter year).

- A:** Dr. Ivaylo Iliev defended his dissertation on the topic "Alternative Approach to Management and Evaluation of Public Programs" and received the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" from the UNWE (10.06.2020; diploma No. 503/26.06.2020);
- B:** Participated in the competition for associate professor with habilitation thesis: Iliev, I. (2025). Strategic marketing in the conditions of digitalization // S., Publishing House of VUZF "St. Grigoriy Bogoslov", ISBN 978-619-7622-70-6, 164 p.;
- Г/5:** The candidate's publication portfolio includes a published book based on a defended dissertation: Iliev, I. (2025). Public networks - an approach to managing public administration // Publishing House of VUZF "St. Grigoriy Bogoslov", ISBN 978-619-7622-71-3, 131 p.;
- Г/6:** The publication is a scientific report. It reflects the candidate's participation in the annual scientific conference (which in 2024 will be in Sofia) of the International Association for Economics and Management in Woodworking and Furniture Manufacturing (WoodEMA - http://www.woodema.org/2024_conference.html). The participation in the conference is in the section "Improving Sustainability Through New Production Perspectives", and the publication is in the collection of scientific reports, which is indexed in both scientometric databases Scopus and Web of Science [Iliev, I. 2024. Scaling furniture manufacturing micro companies into SMES. In D. Georgievaq & A. Barcic (Eds.). WoodEMA 2024 - Green Deal Initiatives, Sustainable Management, Market Demands, and New Production Perspectives in the Forestry-Based Sector - Proceedings of Scientific Papers (pp. 51–56).

WoodEMA, i.a. **Scopus:** <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85196721909&partnerID=40&md5=f9d6936adcf6046143b66647308163ce>; **Web of Science:** <https://www.webofscience.com/wos/woscc/full-record/WOS:0013004000000006>

- Г/7:** A total of 8 publications are listed in this group, of which 7 articles in non-refereed journals with scientific review (2 of them in English) and 1 scientific report, in a collection of reports from a national scientific conference. Three of the publications in this group are visible in the CEEOL database, and the remaining (5) are visible on the electronic pages of the university publications of VUZF "Money and Culture" and "Management in Business and the Public Sector".
- Г/9:** A studio work in Bulgarian, published in the VUZF Yearbook (a non-refereed journal with scientific review);
- Г/10:** Participation of the candidate with a chapter from a published collective monograph: Iliev, I. (2023). Social Networks and Network Management // Trajectories of Social Development, UNWE Publishing House, Sofia, ISBN: 978-619-232-778-1, pp. 41-52. As part of a collective scientific study of a new and significant research perspective - social development, the publication emphasizes the opportunities for modernizing public management through proactive policies with added value, based on a networked social and management architecture. The monograph is visible in the CEEOL database (<https://www.ceeol.com/search/book-detail?id=1225113>).
- Д:** The citation report shows a total of 8 (eight) citations (made in the period 2019-2024) of 4 publications of the candidate. Of these, 3 (three) are publications mentioned in the abstract of the dissertation, and they are cited a total of 5 (five) times. One publication with which the candidate participates in the competition is cited. Given that the publications with which the candidate applies to the competition are in the period 2023-2025 (only one is from 2023), I accept the total point asset for group D reported in the scientometric indicators report (where all citations of the candidate to date are reported). It is a good sign that the cited publication from the list has one citation in a monograph, one citation in a scientific report from a collection indexed in Scopus and one citation in an article published abroad. The structure of the total number of citations is: 1 citation in a scientific report referenced in Scopus, 3 citations in a scientific monograph and 4 citations in scientific articles in non-refereed scientific publications with scientific review.

My acquaintance with the publications participating in the competition, in addition to the specified characteristics of the publication profile, gives me reason to also point out:

- All publications with which the candidate participates are relevant to the subject area of the applied competition and the defining topic in the scientific specialty of marketing – “strategic marketing and innovations in marketing”. In terms of their focus, the publications can be grouped into three main fields (this is also evident from their name), which in the short time horizon outline a distinguishable trajectory of development in the direction of the applied specific topic of the competition. (a) Publications on “social networks and network management” theorize (using examples from the public sector) the paradigms, structure, resources and mechanisms of modern (both public and corporate) management. (b) Social networks are the conceptual basis on which different actors seek competitive solutions in a specific business environment, which outlines a transition to the second thematic focus of the publications, which we can define as “sectoral business analyses”. (c) Without understanding the nature of networks and the behavior of actors in them, successful management is impossible. The complex networked social and market architecture and behavior of participants in them through new technologies increase the connectivity between people, change the structure and social dynamics, which is the great contemporary (business) challenge. This also outlines the third conditional circle of publications, to which those on innovations related to digital marketing and communications and strategic

marketing management belong. The outlined transition in the topic is clearly visible in the structure of the publications and it is in sync with the academic/teaching work of the candidate.

- All publications submitted to the competition are entirely original. It can be said that this is a characteristic "mark" of the candidate - there is a lack of co-authored research and publications, which - understandably at this stage of his development - outlines a serious opportunity for development in the future.
- The diversity of publications is also an important sign of scientific quality. Participation in the competition with two monographic studies, a chapter in a collective monograph and studies indicate that the author is looking for original solutions to topics significant for science and practice. Articles and participation in scientific forums expand the field of scientific debate on the selected topics. Every fourth publication is in English, which helps their scientific visibility. Expanding the palette of publications and the portfolio of scientific publications (beyond those of VUZF and UNWE) will stimulate the popularity of the results and will establish the author in a wider academic environment.

Summary of item 2.1:

There is sufficient scientific production in terms of volume, structure and genre diversity. The attached documents characterize the candidate as an established academic lecturer and researcher. The candidate meets the required national thresholds for holding the position of associate professor.

The teaching activity is in disciplines within the subject area of the interests stated in the publications and research. Synchronization between teaching, scientific activities and practical experience has been achieved, which has a positive impact on the quality of training and scientific work. The rich managerial and entrepreneurial experience will help to accumulate such in lecture teaching. Fluency in English allows to conduct teaching in foreign language programs, which shows the academic competence of the candidate for the academic position of "associate professor".

2.2. Evaluation of scientific and applied scientific activities

As I indicated above (section 2.1), the candidate's publication profile outlines three closely related research perspectives that define the research interest of Dr. Ivaylo Iliev: (a) networks and network management, (b) sectoral business analyses and (c) strategic marketing management in a digital environment. In this "coordinate system", the two monographic studies that stand out, not only in their volume, but also, above all, in the richness and significance of the ideas developed in them, are the main object of a synthesized presentation and evaluation below. It can be said that they form two gravitational centers that are the basis and emphasize the leading scientific and applied scientific contributions of the candidate.

2.2.1. I first note the monograph "Public Networks - An Approach to Public Administration Management" (a book based on the dissertation for the acquisition of a doctoral degree), since it forms an intellectual foundation that is reflected in subsequent author's research and, in particular, the habilitation work. The second important reason is that the topic of public networks is still a "white spot" in the field of modern public management sciences and its in-depth and large-scale study is in itself a contribution to the emerging scientific conversation on this topic. It should be noted that the book is not simply a re-publication of an already finished text from the dissertation research or a compilation of its texts, but a new author's reading and attempt to theoretically understand the topic of the architecture, mechanisms and management of social networks, which are the basis of modern societies and business. Compared to the dissertation, the book has dropped the questions about the model for management and evaluation of public programs inherent in public networks, but has strengthened those about the position of actors in the network exchange of (capital) resources, coordination strategies, etc. From this point of view, I find the

choice of a title with an emphasis on public administration and a meaning that reduces network management and public networks to an instrumental "approach" inherent in public administration to be not particularly successful and narrow.

Why is the study of networks in the context of public governance a scientific task of fundamental importance? The short version of an obviously incomplete answer is related to the network nature of modern public architecture, which requires a new, corresponding to it, network approach to public governance. Behind the deep theoretical layer of the analysis of networks (social, public, resource, managerial, professional, etc.) peeks the specific way of coordinating their management – public policies. In the most general terms (in the indicated “three-dimensional version” of this understanding) policies are considered as the central field of the interests of the state, business and civil society, and in their interaction through policies a balance is sought between systems that embody the main structural dependencies of social life (economic, political and social). The recipes, from and to each of them, obtained in the “laboratory environment - other things being equal” are not sufficient and do not take into account: (a) that the three systems of social life function together and (b) the network(s) and its participants - complexly structured, intertwined, embedded, overflowing, etc., are subjects of policies. The thesis of this book is that this interaction is not strictly “technical”, socially and politically “neutral”, and the formation and implementation of policies is no longer a technological “routine management process”. Public policies (programs/projects) are a complex and multi-component creative process of management of/through public networks and vice versa, the latter are a condition (basis) of public policies. The introduction of a model of management through policies aimed at achieving the public interest on the basis of balancing the individual preferences of multiple participants in public networks means redefining the role of the state in public governance.

The theoretical argumentation of this view comes as a logical result of the process of “network convergence” of public governance models outlined in the book. This transformation process is conceived as a building block (not rejecting) change in the basic governance functions, roles, tools and objectives characteristic of each model, which have a common focal point: network governance, in which the network administration implements coordinating strategies/activities aimed at developing trust, reciprocity and sustainability between network participants. This is a radical change in the way public governance functions, with an emphasis on the network-specific focus on the “whole” and its aspects - structures, results and consent. Public policies are seen as dynamic, flexible, autonomous structures in which different actors (institutional, groups, individuals) participate, with different “scales”, resources and influence, which, along with their own interests, are also carriers of systemic/sectoral and spatial characteristics. This changes the network analysis. Particularly valuable for him is the identification of the flows of network exchanges, which shows "networks in action" and which allows to assess their inherent ability to be an adaptation mechanism to the external environment. The latter - networks as complex adaptive systems, represents a long-term learning process, a key methodological marker for understanding strategic (business/marketing) management in a digital environment.

Among the ideas presented in this work are the publications: Social Networks and Network Governance (2023; chapter of a collective monograph) and Decentralization of State Structures – Network Governance (2025; scientific conference report).

2.2.2. The habilitation thesis – Strategic Marketing in the Conditions of Digitalization (2025) – together with publications No. 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14 (see Summaries of Publications) outline the other leading line of research of the candidate. They outline searches for two key challenges. The first is in theoretical terms and it brings out new marketing trends in response to dynamic technological, market and social changes. According to the candidate, the source of innovations and changes in traditional marketing practice are digital technologies –

such as: intelligent production, which allows mass personalization and marketing; artificial intelligence, which allows optimization of business processes and resources; augmented and virtual reality and blockchain, which change the way companies communicate with their consumers, etc. Important from a theoretical and methodological perspective. is the insight that found the most distinct representation of the habilitation work, about the integrity of the digital environment, i.e. the integration of artificial intelligence, automated solutions and personalized digital communications, etc., which requires a specific strategic response from the management of (business) organizations.

The second group of challenges in the presented research are solutions in a scientific-applied plan, as an answer to practical questions and a result, as a rule, of empirical studies (see publications No. 7, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13). In these publications, the candidate focuses his research on specific “micro, small and medium-sized enterprises” or a separate industry, striving to derive applicable solutions such as competitive growth strategies (6, 12), digital tools for business development (7, 9, 10, 11), digital channel management (7, 12), brand communication guidelines (9, 13, 14), sustainable and responsible use of digital technologies (13, 14), etc.

The habilitation thesis explores the modernizing (cultural and business) influence of digital technologies (considered as a whole – as the integrated digital environment) on marketing strategies and business models. The source of this influence is not digital technologies themselves – digitalization unfolds profound changes in consumer behavior, today much more empowered, more heterogeneous, more dynamic, which requires a strategic response in the process of co-creation of value. The modern marketing tactics for branding in a digital environment, social media management, marketing automation, personalization of digital communications, the role of influencers, etc. discussed in the book as a response to these changes are key elements in creating value for business and customers within the framework of a strategic (marketing) planning process adapted to them. This is how the idea of the monographic study can be briefly described, on the pages of which two lines of research are intertwined. The first outlines the technological/digital challenges in an attempt to examine the impact of digitalization on marketing processes and tools. The second summarizes a specific instrumental management response, as well as the corresponding technical capabilities, which finds expression in a model for strategic digital marketing planning. The latter emphasizes the original moment that this study currently brings to the scientific literature (in our country) on this topic. In the large cohort of studies on the topic of digitalization, the present study offers a special perspective: to study the impact of digital technologies as a whole (what I defined above as an integrated digital environment) on strategic marketing management and to derive its model solution as an answer. I find this task (along with the design and logic of the study) significant in theoretical and scientifically applied terms. My familiarization with the text of the monograph gives me reason to confirm that this task has been accomplished, with the author's inherent precision, thoroughness, observation, consistency and erudition, which presents him as a serious researcher in the field of marketing management.

Structurally, the monograph has a complete form, balanced and logically arranges the answers to questions that are relevant according to the author in three directions (the questions correspond to the individual parts of the text): (a) how does the digital environment change (the process and tools of) strategic marketing? (b) how does the modern digital environment help build and communicate a strong brand and competitive brand positioning? (c) how to develop a marketing strategy for a company/brand with an online presence? Consistently and in their entirety, the answers outline the steps along the way along which the main thesis of the study is built and proven, namely: in the conditions of digitalization, as a dominant modern social, technological and business reality, strategic marketing planning requires a "special approach". The characteristics of this approach according to the author are: integration of traditional marketing tools and strategies with digital solutions such as personalized marketing, automation,

big data analysis, virtual and augmented reality, e-commerce, etc.; application of a digital marketing planning model (as the main one for companies with an internet presence); emphasis on digital communications, channels and platforms when making key decisions that bring value to customers and the business (brand, brand identity and brand positioning; building customer communities; etc.). The understanding of these ideas leads to the development and test (step-by-step) application of a model for strategic analysis and assessment of the environment for the purposes of marketing planning of a company/brand with an internet presence.

The text is readable, the ideas are presented clearly and concisely (in places, in a summary-synthesized manner), which, on the one hand, allows the use of the monograph for educational purposes, but on the other hand, reflects on the critical and polemical style inherent in this genre. The repetition of the title as the name of a separate chapter in the text is a mistake.

2.3. Main scientific and applied scientific contributions

The analysis of the scientific production of the candidate in the competition for an academic position, with an emphasis on the two monographic studies, where the main creative ideas and solutions are synthesized, presents Dr. Ivaylo Petrov Iliev as a thorough and erudite researcher in the indicated fields.

The materials from the competition include a Reference in which the candidate for the academic position of "associate professor" has made a self-assessment with a detailed description of the contributions for each publication. An objective source of the presented self-assessment is the content of the publications. The method of self-assessment does not lead to the extraction of a structured summary of scientific achievements and innovations on the main topics of work and especially on the topic of the competition (e.g. theoretical, methodological and applied) is risky. Thus, the following are allowed: (a) repetitions, which is understandable due to the common theme developed in a number of publications, e.g. the contributions 4.1 and 4.2 indicated in the reference with 15.1 and 15.4 respectively or 8.5 and 15.9, etc. and (b) some of the indicated ones do not have the nature of results, e.g. "empirical research conducted", "analysis performed", "efficiency examined", etc. (see 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.5, 9.3, 10.4, etc.). Based on the Candidate's Contributions Report, the following more important contributions can be summarized:

- *Of theoretical significance*: theoretical generalizations about the "network convergence" of public management models, on the basis of which functions of network public administration are derived; systematized components, main processes and characteristics of network management; changes in consumer behavior in the conditions of digitalization are identified; integration of traditional marketing tools and strategies with digital innovations such as personalized marketing, automation, big data analysis, virtual and augmented reality in the process of strategic marketing management.
- *Of methodological significance*: selected management functions (strategic planning, facilitation of cooperation, regulation of resource exchange) of public networks; derived exchange channels and coordination strategies in public networks; classification of networks in the public sector with leading criteria: structure, purpose, management mechanisms, degree of institutionalization; formulated model for management of public networks; systematized capital resources in public networks; developed criteria for assessing network performance; developed methodology for strategic marketing planning in the conditions of digitalization; summarized factors for building a strong brand in a digital environment.
- *Of applied significance*: examples of successful applications of network management in various areas of the public sector have been identified; a model for strategic marketing planning of a company/brand with an online presence has been successfully tested; key trends in the development of digital marketing have been outlined; recommendations for optimizing online sales and building a sustainable digital strategy; empirical assessments

of: the competitive advantages of small and medium-sized enterprises (including in the sector of micro-enterprises in the furniture industry), the effective use of digital channels and online presence, the effectiveness of influencer partnerships.

All results mentioned are the work of the author. I have no doubt about the correct use of other sources and ideas, and compliance with the standards of scientific ethics.

3. Critical notes and recommendations

Earlier in the text, I made remarks regarding the accuracy of some of the data provided in the documents submitted for the competition procedure, the correctness of the formulations from the Reference for Contributions, titles of publications and separate parts of them. This does not diminish my impression of the candidate's qualities and does not impair his qualities as a researcher of new and significant topics and as an academic lecturer. The role of research in the above-mentioned areas of declared scientific interest will increase and I am convinced that Dr. Ivaylo Iliev will find a place in the scientific debate on them. I recommend that the candidate continue his scientific research in these areas, focusing his attention on: (a) publishing in refereed publications and indexed in world-renowned databases; (b) working on scientific (scientific-applied) projects; (c) participating in research and publication teams. The development of teaching literature is a natural step in the path of a habilitated lecturer - the commitment to ensuring the teaching of the courses he teaches is hopefully a task that the candidate will take to heart. More active participation in discussions and presentation of ideas and results in scientific and practical forums is another direction of future development, which will present and establish the candidate for the academic position of "associate professor" in the academic environment.

4. Conclusion

My acquaintance with the materials of the competition and based on the presented scientific production after acquiring the ONS "Doctor", the scientific and applied results and contributions of the work of **Dr. Ivaylo Petrov Iliev, I give a "POSITIVE EVALUATION"** and recommend to the scientific jury of this competition **to award the candidate the academic position of "ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR"** in the scientific field 3 "Social, Economic and Legal Sciences", professional direction 3.8 "Economics", scientific specialty "Marketing" (Strategic Marketing and Innovations in Marketing).

June 15, 2025.
Sofia

Sign.:
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Alexander Valkov