

## OPINION

on the materials submitted for participation in a competition for „Associate Professor“ in the field of Higher Education 4. Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Informatics, Professional field 4.4. Earth Sciences, scientific specialty ‘Ecology and Ecosystem Conservation’ in the discipline Protected Natural Areas

In the competition for Associate Professor, published in the State Gazette 36/29.04.2025 and on the site of the University of Forestry with the code ELA-AsP-0425-165 for the needs of the Department of Ecology, Environmental Protection and Restoration at the Faculty of Ecology and Landscape Architecture, as a candidate participate Hristina Bancheva-Preslavska, Faculty of Ecology and Landscape Architecture, Department of Ecology, Environmental Protection and Restoration.

**Prepared the opinion:** Nina Vankova Nikolova, Ph.D., Professor in a Professional Field 4.4. Earth Sciences, from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

### 1. Brief biographical data for the candidate

The sole candidate in the competition is Hristina Bancheva-Preslavska, Chief Assistant at the Department of Ecology, Environmental Protection and Restoration (EEPR), PhD in Ecology and Ecosystem Conservation.

Hristina Bancheva-Preslavska holds a Bachelor’s degree in Ecology, speciality *Ecology and Ecosystem Conservation* from the University of Forestry, and a Master’s degree in Ecology, speciality *Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development* from the University of Chemical Technology and Metallurgy. She has specialized at Leuphana University, Lüneburg, Germany. She has worked, both as a collaborator and as a project leader, on numerous national and international projects (at *EcoCommunity Foundation*, *Velo evolution Association*, *Ecocentric Foundation*), as an ecologist at Makmetal Holding AD, and as a teacher (at *Meridian 22 Private High School* and *164 Miguel de Cervantes Spanish Language High School*). She has also served as a part-time lecturer at the Faculty of Education of *Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”*. Since January 2017, she has been an Assistant, and since September 2018 – Chief Assistant at the Department of EEPR, University of Forestry. She is proficient in German, Spanish, and English (C1–C2 levels) and has working knowledge of Portuguese (A2–B2 level). She has participated in numerous national and international conferences, seminars, and training programs. She has received numerous awards and distinctions, among them being a Scholarship Holder in the Exchange Program for Central and Eastern Europe of the German Federal Environmental Foundation (DBU) in 2012, and a Scholarship Holder in the program ‘*Civic Education in Action*’ of the Federal Agency for Civic Education and the Robert Bosch Foundation in 2010/2011.

## 2. Correspondence of the submitted documents and materials of the applicant according to the Rules of the Development of academic staff at the University of Forestry.

The documents and materials submitted by the candidate comply with the requirements of the Regulations for Academic Staff Development at the University of Forestry. Hristina Bancheva-Preslavska has met the minimum national scientometric requirements for the academic position of 'Associate Professor' in Professional Field 4.4. Earth Sciences, and in indicators G, D, and E she exceeds the mandatory minimum (Table 1).

Table 1. Minimum requirements for holding the academic position of 'Associate Professor' according to the Regulations for the Application of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (RALDASRB)

Group of Indicators	Description	Mandatory Minimum (Points)	Candidate's Achievement (Points)
A	Doctoral dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "PhD"	50	50
B	Habilitation thesis – monograph	100	100
G	Sum of indicators G6, G7, and G8	200	247
D	Sum of points from indicators D11, D12, and D13	50	126
E	Sum of points from indicators E16, E17, and E18	Not required	160

## 3. Assessment of the candidate's educational and pedagogical activities (work with students and PhD students)

As a faculty member at the University of Forestry, Hristina Bancheva-Preslavska is responsible for six courses—offered in the bachelor's programs in *Ecology and Environmental Protection* and *Alternative Tourism*, and in the master's programs in *Landscape Architecture* and *Ecology and Environmental Protection*. Over the past five years, her average total teaching workload has been 384.4 hours, of which 358.6 hours were classroom-based instruction. Chief Assistant Hristina Bancheva-Preslavska has supervised four graduate students who successfully defended their theses and has served as a reviewer for six theses. She has also participated as a member of examination committees for the state exams of bachelor's students in the *Ecology and Environmental Protection* program. Her teaching activities also include work with postgraduate students, serving as a thesis reviewer, participating in examination committees, and supervising pedagogical practice at the Centre for Continuing Education of the University of Forestry. She is the author or co-author of four curricula within the study programs of *Ecology and Environmental Protection*, *Landscape Architecture*, and *Alternative Tourism*. Evidence of her strong organizational and administrative skills includes participation in various committees (for accreditation and SANCS documentation, admissions campaigns, and scientific activities), serving as academic advisor and mentor for students, and contributing to the organization and execution of numerous scientific forums, events, and initiatives involving both students and school pupils.

**Conclusion** – Chief Assistant Dr. Hristina Bancheva-Preslavska possesses the necessary education and professional experience for appointment to the academic position of ‘Associate Professor’ in Professional Field 4.4. Earth Sciences – *Ecology and Ecosystem Conservation*.

#### **4. Assessment of candidate’s scientific, scientific-applied and publishing activities**

General description of the presented materials

Candidate Chief Assistant Dr. Hristina Bancheva-Preslavska participated in the competition with:

- Monographs - 1 number (s);
- Textbooks - ... number (s);
- Learning materials - ... number (s);
- Books - 1 number (s);
- Publications - 27 number (s).
- Projects - 11 numbers (s). (She has participated in 3 national and 3 international research projects, as well as 5 educational projects, serving as project leader for two of them)

##### **4.1 Participation in scientific, scientific-applied and educational projects**

The documents submitted for the competition indicate that Chief Assistant Dr. Hristina Bancheva-Preslavska has participated in teams for six national and three international research or educational projects. The research conducted within these projects has focused on forest community monitoring, the study of invasive alien species in Bulgaria, soil erosion, wetland ecosystems, and the practical significance of non-formal education and training in eco-schools. Dr. Bancheva-Preslavska has served as project leader for two projects—one under the National Youth Program (2016–2020) of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and one funded by the German Federal Environmental Foundation (DBU).

##### **4.2 Characterization of published scientific results**

The results of the research conducted by Chief Assistant Dr. Hristina Bancheva-Preslavska have been published in one monograph, one book based on her doctoral dissertation, 12 articles in journals indexed in Scopus and/or Web of Science, and 13 publications in Bulgarian peer-reviewed or editorially reviewed journals.

The main thematic areas of Dr. Bancheva-Preslavska’s research include: Protected areas and natural heritage (publications G7-1, G7-5, G7-6); Management of ecological systems and natural resources (G7-9, G7-10, G7-2); Environmental education and communication for sustainable development (G7-13, G7-8, G7-23, G7-24); Soil erosion and forest amelioration (G7-15, G7-20); Ecotourism (G7-4, G7-11). The research of Chief Assistant Dr. Hristina Bancheva-Preslavska has a regional focus but is multidisciplinary in nature, encompassing ecology, geography, tourism, education, and the social sciences.

##### **4.3 Reflection of Candidate’s Scientific Publications in Literature (known citations)**

- Total - 33 citations.
- By type of citations:**
- In reference journals and proceedings of scientific forums - 31 citations;

- In teaching aids, monographs, dissertations, etc. - 2 citations.

Citations of the publications in reputable journals (Scopus, Web of Science) highlight the international visibility of her research.

#### **4.4 Contributions to the candidate's work (scientific, scientific-applied, applied)**

According to the attached Summary of Contributions submitted for the competition, the research of Chief Assistant Dr. Hristina Bancheva-Preslavska demonstrates both scientific and applied scientific contributions in the following areas:

- I. Current status and management of protected areas of national and international significance
- II. Opportunities for the development of ecotourism in protected areas, including the development of implementation approaches
- III. Approaches in the teaching of ecology and environmental protection

The first research area includes the monograph and related scientific publications. The monograph, *"Management of National Parks: Approaches and Evaluation Criteria,"* contributes to the development of a methodological approach for assessing and enhancing the effectiveness of national park management in Bulgaria through a system of criteria, indicators, standards, and a self-assessment questionnaire. The study proposes legislative changes, increased state funding, and standardized working methodologies. It confirms that the current management of national parks in Bulgaria is of moderate effectiveness and poses risks to biodiversity conservation. The monograph further recommends the engagement of partners and volunteers and the enhancement of staff qualifications to achieve more sustainable management.

The research reflected in the scientific publications analyzes the IUCN Green List Standard and the potential inclusion of Bulgarian protected areas, identifying Central Balkan National Park and several nature parks as the most suitable candidates. The management of national parks in Bulgaria and other European countries has been compared against IUCN criteria, and a holistic approach has been proposed for the sustainable conservation of wetlands and communication of their significance. Assessments have been conducted on the network of protected areas in Northwest Bulgaria and the Northern Black Sea region, with a recommendation to designate a new nature park to improve ecological connectivity. Special attention has been given to Ramsar sites, including Shablensko and Durankulashko Lakes, with proposals for integrated management through environmental education. Additionally, approaches to combat erosion and methodologies for informational and educational activities in protected areas have been developed.

The contributions of the scientific publications in the second research area relate to the following. Methodologies have been developed for organizing ecotourism and eco-trails in protected areas, including Northwest Bulgaria, Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park, and the Northern Black Sea region, where specialized floristic, faunistic, and combined routes have been proposed. The potential of Ramsar sites has been analyzed, highlighting the need to expand visitor infrastructure and enhance educational activities. The significance of natural landmarks included in the *"100 National Tourist Sites"* initiative has been emphasized, as they attract growing tourist interest. Communication criteria for visitor centers and approaches for



educational ecotourism—including green schools and support for local communities—have been developed. Additionally, an innovative model for urban eco-tours, inspired by German examples, has been proposed as a complement to ecotourism in protected areas.

The publications in the third research area analyze the development of environmental education toward education for sustainable development, including experiential learning in protected areas and the role of non-formal education in developing key competencies among youth. An integration of the pedagogical perspective into the natural sciences has been proposed based on an evaluation of higher education in Bulgaria. As a primary contribution, four handbooks on environmental education have been developed and published for different target groups.

#### **5. Assessment of the applicant's personal candidate**

Chief Assistant Dr. Hristina Bancheva-Preslavska is the sole author of 13 of the publications submitted for the competition, and for 11 co-authored publications, she is listed as the first author. This demonstrates her ability to lead scientific research, develop publications, and collaborate effectively in a team. A review of the publications and documents submitted for the competition provides a solid basis for concluding that the candidate has made an undeniable personal contribution to the research conducted, the analyses performed, and the preparation of the scientific publications.

#### **6. Critical remarks**

The documents submitted for the competition have been prepared with great detail and precision, and the thematic focus of the scientific publications corresponds well to the competition topic. However, it should be noted that the presentation of the candidate's contributions is overly extensive, which complicates the identification of the most significant achievements. It is not always clear which publications represent original, innovative contributions and which serve to confirm or extend findings from previous work.

#### **7. Personal impressions**

I do not personally know Chief Assistant Dr. Hristina Bancheva-Preslavska.

#### **8. Conclusion**

**In connection with the above, I propose that Chief Assistant Dr. Hristina Bancheva-Preslavska be elected as a „Associate Professor“ in the discipline Protected Natural Area in the Professional field 4.4. Earth Sciences, scientific specialty Ecology and Ecosystem Conservation.**

Prepared the opinion:  
Prof. Nina Nikolova, PhD

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