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ASSESSMENT REPORT

Assessor: Professor Katya Georgieva Stoycheva, PhD
Department of Psychology
Institute for Population and Human Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences
Professional area: 3.2. Psychology

Evaluation of the scientific production submitted for consideration in the competition for promotion to the level of Full Professor in the professional area: 3.2. Psychology (Psychology of the Early Childhood) announced in the State' s Journal, Issue 58 from 9 July 2024

Candidate: Associate Professor Maria Petrova Trifonova, PhD

Only one candidate has applied for promotion to the level of Full Professor under the abovementioned competition. This is Dr. Maria Petrova Trifonova, Associate Professor at the Institute for Population and Human Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Department of Psychology, Unit of Developmental and Health Psychology.

The **professional background** of Maria Petrova Trifonova is adequate to the scope of the announced competition. She completed her higher education in psychology at Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski" (1981) and successfully defended her doctorate in psychology at the Institute of General and Educational Psychology in Moscow, USSR (1989). Her professional career at the Institute of Population and Human Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences began in 2003, where her academic career has been developing ever since. In 2014 she acquired the academic position of Associate Professor, which she still holds today. Associate Professor Dr. Maria Trifonova has assumed and successfully fulfilled responsible positions at the Institute of Human and Social Sciences: Head of the Unit on Developmental and Health Psychology (since 2015), and Head of the Psychology Department (since 2022). Her extensive professional experience also includes positions as an adjunct faculty (SWU, 1991-1993; NBU, 2004 - 2019); Program Director at the Open Education Centre (1997-1998, evaluation of educational programs); and researcher at the Institute for General Education of the Ministry of Education (1981-1984). She also did a post-

doctoral specialization at the Central and Eastern European Center for Cognitive Science at NBU (2004-2005).

For consideration in the current competition, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Trifonova has submitted:

- 1 scientific monograph;

- 4 scientific articles, refereed in world databases (WoS, Scopus), two in English and two co-authored;

- 14 scientific articles and reports in Bulgarian language in non-refereed journals and thematic collections with scientific peer review, of which 5 are single authored;

- 5 chapters of a collective monograph in Bulgarian language with scientific peer review, two of them co-authored.

All these **scientific works** are within the thematic scope of the competition and are accepted for peer review.

In total, 28 **citations** of the applicant's published works are also reported, including 6 citations in scientific journals, refereed and indexed in world-renowned databases; 15 citations in monographs and collective volumes with scientific peer review; 7 citations in non-refereed journals with scientific peer review.

After her habilitation in 2014, Associate Professor Dr. Maria Trifonova continues to expand her research work, covering new areas of child development and addressing the challenges of inclusive education, up to become ***an established expert in the field of early childhood development.*** Over the past 10 years, she was the principal investigator in five projects under contracts with UNICEF and the Ministry of Education to establish and investigate standards for early childhood development, develop and validate a screening test to assess risks of developmental and learning problems, and assess conditions for inclusive education. The creation of the short form of the screening test in 2018 and the verification of its psychometric characteristics - construct and external validity, reliability, sensitivity and specificity - are in line with current trends in the field of psychometrics. This new instrument covers the main areas of children's development and their expected achievements, and its evaluation is based not only on the child's performance in test situations, but also on information from parents and kindergarten teachers. This allows to achieve a more complete and comprehensive picture of the child's development at an early stage of their development. A collective monograph (*Early Screening Assessment and Guidelines for Stimulating the Development of Three-Year-Old Children*, 2023, Ministry of Education and Science and RCSPO, ISBN: 978-619-7743-02-9) was published on the results of the research work. Evidence of the significant scientific and applied value of the work carried out are also the

trainings assigned by the Ministry of Education to pedagogical specialists in kindergartens for the application of the methodology.

The scientific contribution of the monograph by Dr. Trifonova "*Movement and the Child's Exploration of the World*" (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences Publishing House "Prof. Marin Drinov", 2024, ISBN: 978-619-245-450-0) is in outlining heuristic trans-disciplinary connections in studying the role of movement in the child's mental development and demonstrating the research possibilities of the process approach revealing the dynamics of development. The work brings forth "evidence of the changes occurring in the child's mental life through which mastered movements influence the conditions for the realization of the child's curiosity-induced exploration of the world" (p. 11). The relationships revealed are also indicative of markers of atypical development (pp. 152-159). The scientific and applied contributions of the monograph are related to the development of a rich toolkit for assessing the child's behavior and interaction with the mother and with objects. This monographic work also deserves high praise for its skillfully presented synthesis of the theoretical propositions of the developmental cascades model with empirical data on children's motor development, exploratory activity, and social connectivity during the first year of life.

I fully accept the author's statement of Dr. Maria Trifonova's **scientific contributions** which is organised around two thematic areas: Motor development and child exploratory activity; Child development and quality of the educational environment.

The contributions in the first thematic area are related to: a) the approbation of new theoretical approaches in child development and their operationalisation in a methodological framework of empirical research; b) the generation of new, original scientific data on the relationship of children's motor performance, exploratory activity and emerging attachment with the parent; c) the enrichment and development of familiar theoretical models (e.g. Bowlby's attachment theory) with up-to-date empirical data.

The contributions in the second thematic area are related to: a) the theoretical argumentation, supported by empirical data, on the conditions and environment stimulating the development and ensuring the mental well-being of all children, but especially those at risk of developmental problems; b) the possibility and importance of validating the pre-school education standards against the age indicators of child development and the empirical data on their achievement in Bulgarian children from 3 to 6 years are demonstrated; c) up-to-date empirical data on good practices and accompanying difficulties in the implementation of inclusive education in kindergartens; d) validation of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - ECERS-3 (Harms, Clifford, Cryer, 2014, Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, 3rd edition); e) Bulgarian

adaptation of the parent form of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997, The Strengths and Diffi¬culties Questionnaire) for students aged 4 to 16 years; f) construction and validation of the Emotional Stroop Test with faces of primary school-aged children.

The **citations** of her publications over the last 6 years are a testimony of the current importance of the works of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Trifonova and of the high evaluation of the results she obtained. The greatest attention (and therefore recognition) to the work of Assoc. Prof. Trifonova come from national and foreign specialists who work on the problems of language development and diagnosis and prevention of disorders in child development (a total of 13 citations since 2019), as well as on inclusive education and support for children with special educational needs (a total of 9 citations since 2019). Her work on the construction of number in Jean Piaget's conception in the context of contemporary cognitive psychological models continues to attract interest (total of 4 citations since 2018).

In the light of the attained high achievements, it is interesting to ask how Assoc. Prof. Trifonova sees her future research work on child development (which are the promising directions?) and the application of the new psychological knowledge in educational practice (which are the most important avenues?).

Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova also has **extensive teaching experience**. For more than 15 years she has taught courses in cognitive psychology and developmental psychology in Bulgarian and English for undergraduate and graduate students. She is currently **supervising two doctoral students**: Radostina Stoyanova-Shiryaev (together with Assoc. Prof. Georgi Petkov), who studies the processes of categorization in the development of biological cognition in children, and Anna Petrova, who studies parental influences on child development.

The undeniable **personal qualities** of Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova also contribute to her successful work in a team and on her own: strong motivation, persistence in achieving the set goals, dedication to scientific research, efficiency and leadership. She is doing an excellent job with her administrative responsibilities and her promotion would undoubtedly benefit the advancement of the institution.

I accept the statement submitted by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Trifonova about **the compliance with the requirements for being promoted to the academic position of Full Professor.** It testifies that the candidate's scientific activity (scientific monograph, publications, citations, national and international projects) fully meets the minimum national requirements for the academic position "Professor" in Area 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences in Professional Field 3.2. Psychology according to Art. 2b, para. 2 and 3 of ADASRB.

CONCLUSION

Associate Professor Dr. Maria Trifonova is an established scientist with a clearly outlined field of research interests and expertise, and with an impressive scientific output enjoying sustained international presence and recognition. Her publications feature in-depth studies, contributing important scientific and applied results with notable implications and impact.

Based on my high appreciation of the academic performance of Associate Professor Maria Petrova Trifonova, PhD, I propose that she be elected to the academic position of Full Professor by the Scientific Council of the Institute for Population and Human Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

Sofia, 21 October 2024 Signature: *Professor Katya Stoycheva, PhD*