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REVIEW

by Prof. Yolanda Konstantinova Zografova, PhD

of the scholarly works submitted for participation in the competition for the academic position of "Professor" in Higher education area 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.2. Psychology (Health and Developmental Psychology), announced in State Gazette No. 65 of 17 July 2026 by the Institute for Population and Human Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Only one candidate has submitted documents for the announced competition for Professor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Anna Alexandrova-Karamanova. At the Institute for Population and Human Studies of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, she has held the position of Chief Assistant Professor since 2013 and, since 2020, the academic position of Associate Professor in Health Psychology and Developmental Psychology. Her principal habilitation work submitted for the present competition is the monograph "COVID-19 and adolescents: growing up during a pandemic" (2026).

Evaluation of the monograph and its scientific and applied scientific contributions

The collective monograph "COVID-19 and adolescents: growing up during a pandemic" (2026) presents a comprehensive study of adolescents' health, well-being and social functioning under conditions of a prolonged societal crisis. The allocation agreement specifies an individual contribution by the candidate amounting to 190 standard pages. The work brings together analyses of mental health, health-risk behaviour, social interactions and coping at school, examining these areas in relation to the sociodemographic and personality characteristics of the respondents. Its scientific significance derives both from the scope of the empirical material and from the consistent examination of the interrelationships among the different dimensions of adolescent development.

The conceptual organisation of the monograph is based on the biopsychosocial approach, which enables health circumstances, psychological responses and social conditions to be studied together. The pandemic situation is differentiated into specific dimensions: illness and losses within the family, quarantine and self-isolation, difficulties complying with anti-epidemic measures, the transfer of education and communication online, and economic insecurity. This operationalisation makes it possible to identify different relationships between experienced circumstances and mental health indicators. At the same time, it enables pandemic-specific difficulties to be related to more enduring factors of vulnerability and support, including family relationships, material conditions and individual coping resources.

The empirical basis is a nationally representative school-based survey conducted in 2022-2023, with a sample of 3,326 adolescents aged 11-17. The research design combines standardised quantitative measures with a qualitative module comprising open-ended questions. The broad thematic scope allows different areas of functioning to be examined within a common research procedure, while the inclusion of open-ended questions in the qualitative module supplements the predefined indicators with participants' broader subjective assessments. This provides an empirical basis for analysing both the prevalence of particular difficulties during the pandemic and the

diversity of meanings adolescents attach to the changes they experienced. A methodological contribution lies in the development and psychometric validation of instruments for assessing perceived difficulties in complying with anti-epidemic measures and coping at school. Distinguishing health-related from social measures makes it possible to establish that different restrictions have different associations with mental health and confidence in one's own ability to cope, or self-efficacy. Similarly, measuring academic motivation and self-assessed achievement makes it possible to trace divergent changes that would remain indistinguishable if a single overall indicator were used. A more precise correspondence between research questions and empirical dimensions is thus achieved.

A substantial contribution of the monograph is the establishment of a differentiated picture of vulnerability and adaptation. Psychological difficulties associated with anxiety, loneliness, stress and psychosomatic complaints coexist with social relationships that are maintained or evaluated positively. Differences by gender, age and family circumstances show that the shared crisis situation is experienced differently by different groups of adolescents. The analysis specifies these differences and identifies combinations of circumstances associated with less favourable indicators.

In the study of health-risk behaviour, the importance of family support, communication, conflict and anxiety stands out. Distinguishing material affluence from directly experienced economic hardship contributes to a more accurate understanding of the social determinants of behaviours associated with alcohol and substance use. The findings show that individual behaviours do not follow a single trend and cannot be explained by the same combination of factors. This is relevant both to their scientific interpretation and to the justification of differentiated preventive approaches.

The analyses of social interactions and coping at school broaden the assessment of pandemic experience. Restrictions on face-to-face meetings are not necessarily accompanied by a deterioration in relationships, while digital communication emerges as a possible resource for maintaining them. In education, the relative independence of motivation and self-assessed achievement is established, along with the importance of calm conditions for studying, the perceived difficulty of distance learning and parental support. These findings demonstrate the need to assess social and educational adaptation using more than one measure, through a system of indicators.

Including personality characteristics as moderators supplements the analysis of group differences and draws attention to the conditions under which the relationships between pandemic experiences and individual outcomes change. The qualitative module, covering the responses of 3,001 participants, adds information on personal maturation, reassessment of relationships, physical self-perception and coping strategies used. Its value lies in broadening the thematic scope and incorporating the adolescents' wider perspective.
The applied scientific contribution consists in relating the identified risks and resources to guidelines for psychological, family and educational support. The proposals connect the national findings with internationally developed approaches and outline opportunities for prevention in future crises. Their value lies in substantiating directions for practical work, whose implementation requires subsequent adaptation and evaluation of effectiveness.

In the overall assessment, it should be recognised that the cross-sectional design and retrospective self-assessments allow statistical associations and subjectively experienced changes to be identified but limit causal conclusions, which, indeed, are not claimed. Within these limits, the monograph constitutes a substantively coherent empirical and analytical work. A particularly significant contribution is the comprehensive examination of adolescent development under crisis

conditions and the specification of the interaction between individual characteristics, the social environment and opportunities for adaptation.

Evaluation of the contributions of the remaining publications and the peer-review status of the publication venues

The list submitted for the competition includes a total of 21 publications: one monograph, one chapter in a collective monograph, 12 studies in refereed and indexed publications, five studies and two articles in non-indexed peer-reviewed publications or edited collective volumes. The publications outline several interconnected thematic fields, united by an interest in mental health and well-being as outcomes of the interaction between personality characteristics, interpersonal relationships and social conditions. Taken together, they demonstrate a consistent broadening of the research focus and the use of different analytical approaches to a common set of problems. The publications submitted for the competition reflect a sustained research interest integrating health psychology and developmental psychology. The unifying question is how individual characteristics and resources in the social environment are associated with the health, well-being and behaviour of young people in adolescence. National and international quantitative studies, qualitative analyses and guidelines for preventing problems relating to adolescent mental health and well-being are combined.

Among the thematic fields covered by the publications is positive youth development. Here the research interest focuses on personal and social resources associated with mental health, healthy behaviour and the reduction of certain risk behaviours. Confidence, competence, connectedness, moral orientation and caring for others are examined consistently, as are trust, empathy and experiences of closeness. The contribution of these studies lies in the empirical differentiation of the significance of individual resources.

A group of publications highlights the endeavour to consider well-being in terms of the presence of positive characteristics and relationships, alongside the absence of symptoms and problematic behaviour. Such a perspective broadens the possibilities for analysing adolescent development and points towards prevention based on strengthening existing resources. Research on risk behaviour encompasses substance use, aggressive behaviour, school bullying, cyberbullying and early sexual experience. These behaviours are related to family relationships, the school environment, peer interactions and individual psychological characteristics. Sources of social support and the significance of group norms are consistently distinguished. The family, school and peer group are studied as distinct social contexts whose characteristics may have different associations with particular behaviours. A constructive aspect is the move beyond an overly general treatment of the social environment towards specifying its dimensions. This perspective is extended through the analysis of social inequalities and health literacy. Attention to material resources, access to support and the ability to find and evaluate health information connects individual functioning with the conditions for making informed decisions. International comparisons supplement national studies and make it possible to identify both similar associations and differences across societal contexts. The significance of this research direction lies in considering personal competencies together with the social opportunities for their development and use.

In addition to the monograph, pandemic-related issues are also developed in individual studies. In these publications, familiar risk and protective factors are examined under altered conditions of education, communication and family life. Direct experience of illness, restrictions on everyday life, economic difficulties and subjective assessments of the changes that occurred are

differentiated. The overall tendency is towards analysing differentiated vulnerability and the coexistence of adverse experiences with opportunities for adaptation. Review studies complement the empirical analyses by systematising international knowledge and distinguishing general factors from those specific to the crisis.

A sustained strand of the candidate's scholarly work is the study of subjective attitudes towards one's own body and appearance. This subject is examined in relation to self-esteem, psychological well-being and health behaviour. Both the relatively independent significance of attitudes towards the body and their associations with broader dimensions of mental health are established. Qualitative analyses reveal how similar behaviours may arise from different motives and occupy different places in personal biographies. They also contribute to clarifying culturally conditioned conceptions of the body and physical activity, including discrepancies between participants' self-identification and the practices they describe.

Methodologically, the publications combine analyses of nationally representative and international data, multivariate statistical procedures, qualitative research and literature reviews. Some studies use extensive international empirical datasets but examine them through different new problem-oriented and analytical perspectives. Their specific overall contribution should therefore be assessed in terms of the additional knowledge they provide about particular relationships and processes. Their common characteristic is the consistent specification of established theoretical approaches and the linking of findings to possible directions for prevention, education and psychological support.

Overall, the publications delineate several clearly connected areas of inquiry: adolescent mental health and well-being; the impact of COVID-19 and health crises; health-risk behaviour and substance use; positive youth development and protective factors; family and school environments; bullying, violence and cyberbullying; body image and related health behaviours; health literacy and social inequalities. Particularly evident is the common approach of viewing adolescent health and behaviour through a biopsychosocial perspective in which individual characteristics interact with the family, school, social environment and wider societal context. This is also one of the central conceptual strands of the submitted publications.

The publications appear in peer-reviewed scholarly journals or edited collective volumes, a substantial proportion of them in venues indexed in Scopus and/or Web of Science. The authorship profile demonstrates participation in both national and international scholarly exchange. Peer review and indexing complement the substantive evaluation of the submitted works and attest to their inclusion in established forms of academic communication. Overall, the publications represent thematically consistent scholarly activity with empirical, analytical, methodological and applied contributions in health and developmental psychology.

Citations by other authors

A total of 52 citations have been submitted for the competition: 28 in refereed and indexed scholarly publications, 12 in peer-reviewed monographs and collective volumes, and 12 in non-indexed peer-reviewed journals. The list demonstrates the reception of several research areas - school environment and risk behaviour, positive development, consequences of the pandemic and body image. The international and thematic diversity of the citing publications attests to scholarly recognition.

Participation in research projects and application of results

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Anna Alexandrova-Karamanova leads the project on adolescent health and well-being under COVID-19 conditions, funded by the National Science Fund for 2021-2025. The monograph and related publications constitute significant scientific results of this project. This demonstrates a capacity to organise research and consistently develop, present and publish findings. Also significant are her co-leadership of HBSC in Bulgaria since 2020, leadership of the project analysing trends in HBSC in 2019-2022, and leadership of the international qualitative project on the long-term consequences of severe COVID-19, funded by ANSO for 2022-2025.

The applied value of the works examined lies in providing empirical grounds for prevention, family and school support, health education and different types of public measures more directly targeted at specific groups.

Overall assessment of scientific contribution, originality and reliability of data

The main contributions can be characterised as empirical-analytical, methodological and applied scientific. In my opinion, originality is manifested in the specification of established theoretical approaches through bulgarian and international data, in distinguishing the non-uniform functions of social and personal resources, and in combining quantitative modelling with the analysis of subjective meanings. Some publications use shared empirical datasets, and a number of findings are also included in the monograph. The additional analytical knowledge substantiated by large datasets and clear statistical procedures also deserves a highly positive assessment. Furthermore, the use of established instruments, internal consistency checks, ethical procedures and discussion of limitations provide grounds for confidence in the methodological organisation of the studies.

Educational and teaching activities

The teaching and educational activities of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Anna Alexandrova-Karamanova are presented in her curriculum vitae primarily through her role, since 2020, as head of the doctoral programme “Developmental and Educational Psychology”. In 2025, together with Chief Assist. Prof. Velina Hristova, she also developed a new doctoral programme, “Health Psychology”, which is undergoing accreditation. Since 2021, Assoc. Prof. Karamanova has been Director of the National school for doctoral students and young researchers in the social sciences, and since 2022 she has also served on the editorial board of its conference proceedings. In this capacity she demonstrates a high level of organisation and sound selection of participants, thereby contributing to the positive profile of the Institute for Population and Human Studies.

Administrative and public activities

The information presented demonstrates the candidate’s substantial involvement in research organisation, expert work and professional public activities. Since March 2023 she has been a member of the Scientific Council of the Institute for Population and Human Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The candidate also undertakes expert activities outside her own institution. In 2022 she participated in expert groups of the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency for the accreditation of psychology programmes at various universities in Bulgaria. Following nomination by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, she also participated on the committee of

internal reviewers for the International Science Council project Mental Wellbeing in Young People. Since 2007 she has been Bulgaria's national delegate to the European Health Psychology Society and, since 2020, Scientific Secretary of the Health and Counselling Psychology Section of the Society of Psychologists in Bulgaria.

Her editorial activities include membership of the editorial boards of the international and national journals Central European Journal of Paediatrics, Psychological Research (in the Balkans), Practical Health Psychology, and Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine, as well as serving as guest editor for Societies.

Fulfilment of the requirements for appointment to the academic position

Anna Alexandrova-Karamanova holds the educational and scientific degree of Doctor in Psychology, obtained in 2013, and has occupied the academic position of Associate Professor at the Institute for Population and Human Studies of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences since 2020. The submitted publications are thematically relevant to the announced competition in professional field 3.2. Psychology, specialisation "Health and Developmental Psychology". The scholarly output, citations, project leadership and expert activities outline a developed academic profile and provide grounds for a positive substantive assessment of the candidacy. The minimum national requirements and the applicable additional institutional requirements have been fulfilled well above the required levels.

Personal impressions of the candidate

My impression of Assoc. Prof. Karamanova is that she is a deeply committed person engaged in high-quality research activities, with independent thinking and openness to international scholarly experience. Particularly striking is her professional care for and assistance to younger colleagues, supporting their development from their very first steps in research. She also performs excellently in her role as director of the doctoral school, and I am pleased that she accepted the proposal to lead it several years ago.

Scientific and applied scientific contributions

The original scientific contributions formulated in the submitted works and studies fall into five areas. Their systematisation reflects the actual research trajectory of Anna Alexandrova-Karamanova. The areas are interconnected and partially overlap, and may therefore be regarded as a thematic grouping of contributions rather than independent lines of achievement. Naturally, the comprehensive study of pandemic experience across several domains of adolescent functioning stands out particularly for its significance and topical relevance, combining quantitative and qualitative data and identifying differences according to individual and social characteristics.

The stated applied scientific contributions are formulated as guidelines for prevention and intervention that could be useful to professionals, parents and adolescents. The diversity of behaviours studied and their differentiated relationships with the family and school environments and the characteristics of positive development also constitute a scientific contribution, enriching the field under discussion precisely through the multilayered nature of the data and conclusions obtained. The contributions are empirical-analytical, methodological, review-synthetic and applied-conceptual. There is consistent development and specification of established approaches, while some studies also propose a new integration of factors and research procedures.

My recommendations concern future work and are aimed at building on what has been achieved. First, I would recommend longitudinal studies, especially when dealing with adolescence. Second, self-assessments should be deliberately combined with independent indicators, which would allow changes to be tracked more convincingly and presumed mechanisms to be tested. In the studies presented, the principal sources are nevertheless self-reports, which offer limited scope for establishing causal relationships. Third, qualitative analyses could be deepened through more extensive interviews and fuller presentation of the relationship between empirical findings and interpretations. Fourth, the applied guidelines merit development into specific programmes with clearly defined target groups, institutional partners and a system of indicators for evaluating effectiveness. Combining this work with an analysis of social inequalities and access to support would be particularly promising.

Conclusion

The submitted scholarly works and information on the overall academic activities of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Anna Alexandrova-Karamanova provide grounds for a positive assessment of her research achievements, research-organisational activities and contribution to the development of health psychology and developmental psychology. Her scholarly work is distinguished by thematic consistency, diversity of methods employed, international cooperation and an endeavour to ensure the applied value of the findings. Her involvement in doctoral training, professional organisations and expert evaluations complements her profile as an established researcher with institutional and public engagement.

On the basis of the substantive assessment of the submitted research activities, I firmly support the candidacy of Assoc. Prof. Anna Alexandrova-Karamanova for the academic position of “Professor” in professional field 3.2. Psychology, specialisation “Health and Developmental Psychology”.

Date

29.10. 2026 Prof. Yolanda Zografova PhD