

OPINION

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Regarding: Procedure for appointment to the academic position of “Associate Professor” in Higher Education Area 7. “Healthcare and Sports”, Professional Field 7.1. “Medicine”, specialty “Rheumatology”, with candidate Dr. Simona Bogdanova-Petrova, MD, PhD, Chief Assistant Professor at Medical University – Varna.

By Order No. R-109-274/30.07.2026 of the Rector of Medical University – Varna, I was appointed as a member of the Scientific Jury, and pursuant to Protocol No. 1 from the first meeting of the Scientific Jury, I was assigned to prepare an opinion concerning the procedure for appointment to the academic position of “Associate Professor” in the specialty of Rheumatology, with candidate Chief Assistant Professor Dr. Simona Bogdanova-Petrova, MD, PhD.

Having reviewed the documents submitted for the competition, the scientific works, the academic record, the information regarding the candidate’s teaching and clinical activities, and the submitted habilitation work, I present the following opinion.

1. Brief overview of the candidate’s professional and academic development

Dr. Simona Bogdanova-Petrova completed her higher medical education in 2009, obtaining a Master’s degree in Medicine. Between 2010 and 2016, she undertook specialty training in rheumatology and acquired the specialty of Rheumatology. In 2022–2023, she was an independent doctoral candidate at the Department of Propaedeutics of Internal Medicine, specialty “Internal Medicine”, and in 2023 she obtained the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” (PhD) with a dissertation entitled “Pain as Part of the Rheumatological Manifestations of COVID-19 Viral Infection”.

The candidate’s professional career is associated with St. Marina University Hospital – Varna and the Clinic of Rheumatology. Since 2010, she has worked successively as a physician, resident physician, Assistant Professor, and Chief Assistant Professor in Rheumatology. Dr. Bogdanova-Petrova’s professional activity has been consistently linked to the Clinic of Rheumatology at St. Marina University Hospital – Varna. Her extensive clinical experience in the specialty provides the necessary practical expertise in the diagnosis, follow-up, and treatment of patients with inflammatory joint diseases, systemic autoimmune diseases, and other rheumatic conditions. Of particular importance is the fact that the candidate’s scientific activity largely arises from real clinical problems. Topics such as systemic lupus erythematosus, spondyloarthritis, psoriatic arthritis, contemporary targeted therapy, pain, quality of life, and psycho-emotional factors are directly applicable to everyday rheumatology practice. This demonstrates a clear link between her scientific activity and her diagnostic and therapeutic work.

Participation in seven clinical trials further demonstrates experience in applying standardized protocols and working with contemporary therapeutic strategies.

I consider the candidate's clinical qualifications and accumulated professional experience to be consistent with the academic position for which Dr. Simona Bogdanova-Petrova is applying.

Dr. Bogdanova-Petrova's academic development at Medical University – Varna began in 2015 and progressed through the positions of "Assistant Professor" and "Chief Assistant Professor" within the structures responsible for teaching internal medicine and rheumatology. Since 18.05.2026, she has held the position of Chief Assistant Professor in the Department of Cardiology and Rheumatology, Rheumatology Teaching Sector. Her teaching activity includes practical classes in rheumatology for students in the Medicine programme, practical classes in propaedeutics of internal medicine for students in Dental Medicine, participation in semester and state examination committees, as well as postgraduate training of resident physicians. The candidate also conducts a course in capillaroscopy and participates as an instructor in practical workshop formats during scientific forums. Her teaching experience and the nature of the educational activities performed demonstrate accumulated expertise in the practical training of students and residents. I particularly appreciate the combination of basic rheumatology education with postgraduate qualification activities and practical training in specialized methods.

The presented data outline consistent professional development in the field of rheumatology, in which clinical work, teaching activity, and scientific interests develop in parallel and complement one another thematically.

2. Research activity and scientometric indicators

The scientific output demonstrates a clear focus on clinically relevant issues in contemporary rheumatology. Alongside areas traditionally associated with the specialty—namely inflammatory arthropathies and systemic autoimmune diseases—the candidate has directed her interests toward quality of life, pain, psycho-emotional factors, contemporary therapeutic strategies, and the interdisciplinary aspects of rheumatic diseases. This thematic breadth is not an end in itself, but is unified by an effort to achieve a more comprehensive assessment of the patient and of the factors determining clinical outcome.

With regard to the impact of the scientific output in the literature, the academic record reports 8 citations. The presence of citations in the international scientific literature indicates recognition and applicability of part of the candidate's scientific results beyond her immediate research team.

Dr. Simona Bogdanova-Petrova's scientific output includes one monograph comprising 160 pages, 17 scientific articles, and 52 conference presentations. The candidate has participated in more than 40 scientific forums in Bulgaria and abroad, including EULAR and ESCEO forums, national conferences, and rheumatology scientific meetings. Participation in 7 clinical trials is also documented.

The academic record demonstrates that Dr. Bogdanova-Petrova's research activity has the necessary volume, thematic consistency, and publication profile, and meets the requirements under the relevant indicator groups for appointment to the academic position of "Associate Professor".

3. Evaluation of the habilitation work

The principal habilitation work submitted is the monograph “Pain, Mood and the Relationship Between Them”, published in 2025 by Steno Publishing House – Varna, ISBN 978-619-241-401-6, with a total length of 160 pages.

The topic of the monograph is relevant from both fundamental and clinical perspectives. Chronic pain is a leading component of the clinical presentation of many rheumatic diseases, yet its intensity and persistence cannot always be explained solely by the activity of the underlying inflammatory or structural disease. In this context, consideration of the relationship between pain, affective disorders, and the individual perception of symptoms is particularly important for contemporary rheumatology practice.

The monograph is structured into five main thematic areas. The author systematically addresses the definition, classification, and mechanisms of pain perception; factors that modify the pain experience; emotions and mood disorders; contemporary neuroimaging and functional methods; genetic and epigenetic factors; as well as the possibilities for pharmacological and non-pharmacological management of coexisting pain and affective disorders.

Of particular relevance to the specialty of Rheumatology is the discussion of psycho-emotional disorders in patients with inflammatory joint diseases. A separate section analyses rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, and psoriatic arthritis in the context of systemic inflammation and its relationship with mood disorders. This presents pain not merely as a symptom of peripheral inflammation, but as a complex biopsychosocial phenomenon whose development and chronification are determined by interactions between peripheral and central mechanisms.

A major strength of the work is its analysis of the mechanisms that may explain the parallel occurrence of chronic pain and mood disorders. The roles of pro-inflammatory cytokines, disturbances in neurotransmitter systems, central sensitization, brain structures, and neural networks involved in the processing of painful and emotional stimuli are discussed. The monograph also includes contemporary evidence from functional and neuroimaging studies supporting the presence of overlapping central mechanisms in pain and affective disorders.

An important contribution of the monograph is its emphasis on dual-targeted treatment. The author considers pain and mood disorders as mutually reinforcing conditions in which isolated treatment of only one component may be insufficient. The work analyses pharmacological and non-pharmacological approaches and highlights the importance of a comprehensive strategy that takes into account both the physical and emotional suffering of the patient.

From a scientific and applied perspective, I consider it particularly important that the monograph emphasizes the need to integrate rheumatological assessment with evaluation of factors such as depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, obesity, stress, and other modifiers of chronic pain. This has direct relevance to clinical practice because it enables more accurate

differentiation between activity of the underlying disease and other mechanisms that may sustain pain symptoms and impair quality of life.

The work is distinguished by its interdisciplinary nature, bringing together advances from rheumatology, neuroscience, psychiatry, molecular biology, and pharmacology. Its value lies not so much in presenting individual mechanisms in isolation, but in integrating them into a comprehensive concept of the patient with chronic pain.

I consider the monograph to have scientific, educational, and practical value. It is directly related to the candidate's professional and scientific field and logically continues her research interests in pain, which began with her doctoral dissertation.

6. Critical remarks

I do not identify any substantial shortcomings in the presented scientific, teaching, and professional activities that would call into question the candidate's suitability for appointment to the academic position of "Associate Professor".

7. Conclusion

Following a comprehensive assessment of the materials submitted for the competition, I consider Dr. Simona Bogdanova-Petrova, MD, PhD, to be an established clinician and educator with consistent academic development and scientific output focused on current issues in contemporary rheumatology.

The candidate's scientific works demonstrate sufficient volume and quality, while publications in peer-reviewed and indexed scientific journals, together with the documented citations, attest to the recognition of her scientific activity. The habilitation work "Pain, Mood and the Relationship Between Them" represents a relevant and interdisciplinary analysis of the complex relationship between chronic pain and affective disorders and has direct scientific and practical significance for rheumatology.

Her extensive clinical experience in the specialty, more than ten years of teaching experience, participation in the training of students and residents, and active involvement in national and international scientific forums further support my positive assessment of the candidate's professional and academic development.

On the basis of the materials presented, I consider that Dr. Simona Bogdanova-Petrova, MD, PhD, meets the requirements for appointment to the academic position of "Associate Professor" in the specialty of "Rheumatology".

I give a positive assessment of the candidacy of Dr. Simona Bogdanova-Petrova, MD, PhD, and confidently recommend that the esteemed Scientific Jury propose her appointment to the academic position of "Associate Professor" in the specialty of "Rheumatology".

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Varna

Assoc. Prof. Svetlana Hristova, MD, PhD
Signature

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