



REVIEW

on a dissertation for obtaining the educational and scientific degree of "**doctor**" in: field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.8 Economics, scientific specialty Economics and Management (Agriculture)

Author of the dissertation: *Ivanka Dimitrova Dimitrova*, full-time doctoral student at the Department of Economics at the Agricultural University, Plovdiv

Topic of the dissertation: "Institutional problems and challenges of tour operator and travel agent activities"

Reviewer: **Assoc. Prof. Boryana Lyubcheva Ivanova, PhD**, Agricultural University - Plovdiv, field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.8 Economics, scientific specialty Economics and Management (Agriculture), appointed as a member of the scientific jury by order No. RD-16-1430 / 20.12.2024 of the Rector of the Agricultural University.

1. Brief presentation of the candidate.

Ivanka Dimitrova holds a Bachelor's degree in Economics and Business Administration, with a specialization in "Tourism Business Management", obtained at the New Bulgarian University in 2001. In 2014, she graduated as a Master in "Tourism Management" at the Agricultural University - Plovdiv, and in 2019 she was enrolled as a full-time doctoral student at the Department of Economics of the Agricultural University with the scientific supervisor Assoc. Prof. Dr. Minko Georgiev. Ivanka Dimitrova's educational profile and many years of experience in the field of tourism logically determine the focus of her work. The accumulated theoretical knowledge and practical experience help her in the development and allow her to present a complete, comprehensive study that has its scientific and practical contributions.

2. Relevance of the problem.

The tourism industry is a sector of significant importance for the Bulgarian economy, but at the same time the sector has been subjected to a number of shocks in recent years. Society witnessed serious liquidity problems in the sector, which led to the exit of some large traders from the market. This was followed by the years of pandemic, which practically stopped tourist flows for a certain period of time. In this sense, focusing research interest on the sector is justified and is a prerequisite for achieving interesting research results.

The relevance of the dissertation work and the originality of the development are

also contributed by the choice of theoretical framework for the study, namely the reference to neo-institutional economic theory.

3. Purpose, tasks, hypotheses and research methods.

The purpose of the study is formulated in accordance with the topic of the work and directs the research interest to identify and assess legal, economic and organizational problems in the tour operator and travel agent industry. A desire is declared to formulate opportunities for improving the adaptability of tour operators and travel agents to the proposed policies for improving the industry.

The study of public relations related to institutions, the structure of organizations, participants in the processes in the tour operator and travel agent industry, as well as the effects related to the costs incurred by them and some forms of free riding are defined as the subject of the study, and tour operators and travel agents are defined as the object of the study.

The definition of the research tasks follows the traditional structure for this type of research – presentation of the research methodology, adaptation of the methodology and determination of the scope of the research, factual research of the institutional environment, coordination structures, transaction costs and non-market effects, with the last task focused on the construction of scenarios and proposals for implementing policies in order to implement the appropriate trends in the tour operator and travel agent activity.

Based on the theoretical analysis, the generated methodological framework and the adapted research methodology, one main and five additional hypotheses have been formulated. The purpose of the main hypothesis is to find the relationship between the various variables. By assessing the level of transaction costs arising from the institutional environment, opportunities for improving the market of the tour operator and travel agent industry are revealed.

Regarding the research approaches and research methods used, the large number of methods can be noted, including those that are specifically related to the neo-institutional economic theory used.

The candidate states that primary data were collected as a result of semi-structured interviews and data collection through personal participation. Secondary sources of information were also used, including statistical reference books, digital platforms, legislative acts, specialized reports, scientific articles, publications, and others.

4. Visualization and presentation of the obtained results.

The presented dissertation work has a total volume of 191 pages, of which 9 pages are with used literature. The development has a classical structure, which includes: an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion. In terms of volume, the significantly larger third chapter, which occupies over 53% of the text part, and the limited fourth chapter, occupying less than 7% of it, are impressive.

The literature used includes 130 literary sources, of which 9 are in Bulgarian, 3 in Russian and 118 in English. It covers both classic works of neo-institutional economic theory and some contemporary developments.

The dissertation also uses 7 sources of a normative-reference nature, of which 6 are in Bulgarian and 1 in English.

The layout of the dissertation corresponds to the accepted standards, and the presented materials, analyses, discussions and results are well illustrated with 15 tables and 24 figures.

The language and style used are appropriate for a dissertation, and the specialized terminology shows that the candidate knows the subject and handles it well.

5. Discussion of the results and used literature.

The presented scientific study analyzes and concludes regarding the activities of tour operator companies, presented through the prism of neo-institutional economic theory with a focus on transaction costs, information asymmetry and rules leading to rent seeking.

The first chapter analyzes the achievements of neo-institutional economic theory and defines the main concepts of the theory, which are applied in the sector of tour operator and travel agency activities.

It is pointed out that institutions play a key role in social sciences and economics, and their meaning varies in different contexts. The long use of the term in the field of social sciences, dating back to Giambattista Vico (1725), is presented, as well as the fact that even today there is no consensus on the definition of the concept.

Based on an analysis of institutional theory, several components are determined that can be used for a better understanding of the logic of tourism. The author presents the understanding that tourism is an area that can be studied using the theory of the New Institutional Economics, through which the homogenization of practices and structures in this sector is subject to analysis.

The evolution of the concepts of institutional impact, institutional change and coordination-management structure is traced. The importance of property rights and transaction costs is analyzed.

The critical analysis of the concepts concludes with the presentation of a parallel between the basic concepts of the neo-institutional theory and the specifics of the tour operator and travel agent sector.

In the second chapter, the research methodology is presented and the research hypotheses are formulated. The presented analytical framework is based on the concept of coordination-management structure of Williamson (1996) regarding the integration of institutional parameters for studying the impact of the institutional environment through the interaction between institutional factors, the resulting effect and the feedback loop. On its basis, the formal institutions in the presented sector

have been analyzed, the hypotheses of the study have been generated and the analysis tools suitable for the study have been determined.

The third chapter focuses on the analysis of the Tourism sector in the light of the chosen theory. The essence of intermediation in tourism, the features of the regulation and implementation of property rights, the specifics of the coordination and management structure, the institutional and technological adaptation of the sector are clarified. The regulatory framework, the advantages and disadvantages of the Sales Management Software and the risks of different types of intermediation have been examined in particular detail.

The last, fourth chapter draws attention to the formulated recommendations for overcoming the identified problems and improving the functioning of the sector. Opportunities for development have been identified through changes in legislation, the introduction of new technologies and training, improving coordination and data exchange, as well as effective definition of property rights. Although greater specificity in the proposals made would increase the quality of the presented work, the proposal to create a Tourist Guarantee Fund, which will provide an opportunity to stabilize the sector, especially in periods of crisis, makes a positive impression.

The author concludes that the analysis of institutional problems in the tour operator industry, made through the prism of neo-institutional theory, emphasizes the need to implement transparent and ethical business practices. It is indicated that in order to effectively deal with the challenges facing the industry, it is necessary for tour operators to emphasize their adaptability to the dynamically changing environment.

6. Contributions of the dissertation work.

In the materials submitted in connection with the procedure for acquiring the ONS "Doctor" there is no attached reference to the scientific contributions of the dissertation work, although such undoubtedly exist.

Scientific contributions

I believe that an indisputable contribution of a scientific nature of the present work is the application of the concept of neo-institutional economic theory as a basis for analyzing problems in the industry. The theoretical foundations for analysis, assessment and interpretation of the institutional environment of tour operator and tourist agent activities are synthesized. A research methodology is proposed, which in an original way approaches the problems of the sector, providing opportunities for revealing unclear or underestimated factors to date.

Scientific and applied contributions

The scientific and applied contributions arise mainly from the analyses made and the conclusions formulated regarding the deficits of formal institutions,

information asymmetry and proposals for its improvement, and the assessment of transaction costs, which develops into recommendations for their optimization.

7. Critical Notes and Questions.

Some remarks are presented in the individual parts of this review, but they do not change the overall positive impression of the presented material, but rather are aimed at further improving the presented material and further developing the candidate.

8. Published articles and citations.

The attached reference shows that in the period 2019-2024 the candidate has published four articles, one of which is independent and three in co-authorship, fulfilling the requirements of the Law on the State of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its implementation, as well as the regulations of the State Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Bulgaria.

It can be recommended that the list of articles be presented in accordance with the annexes to the Law on the State of the Republic of Bulgaria, which would visualize in an indisputable manner the fulfillment of the requirements of the law and the regulations for its implementation.

The submitted abstract objectively reflects the structure and content of the dissertation work.

CONCLUSION

Based on the various research methods learned and applied by the doctoral student, the studies, analyses, summaries and conclusions made, I believe that the presented dissertation meets the requirements of the Law on the State of Agricultural Research and Development of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations of the Agrarian University for its application, which gives me reason to evaluate it **POSITIVELY**.

I would like to propose that the esteemed Scientific Jury also vote positively and **award Ivanka Dimitrova Dimitrova** the educational and scientific degree "**doctor**" in the scientific specialty Economics and Management (agriculture).

Date: 15/02/2025
Plovdiv

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