

REVIEW

АГРИКАРЕН УНИВЕРСИТЕТ гр. ПЛОВДИВ	
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Получено на 21.07.2026	

on a dissertation for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher education: 3.0 "Social, economic and legal sciences", professional field: 3.8 "Economics", scientific specialty "Economics and Management (Agriculture)",

Author of the PhD thesis: Elka Vasileva Genova, PhD Student, Department of Economics, Agricultural University – Plovdiv

Topic of the PhD thesis: Challenges and Prospects for the Development of Rural Tourism in Mountainous and Semi-Mountainous Areas

Reviewer: Assoc. Professor Dr. Krum Hristov Hristov, Agricultural University-Plovdiv, Department of Economics, 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, 3.8. Economics, scientific specialty "Economics and management (Agriculture)", appointed by Order No. 16-738/08.06.2026 of the Rector of the Agricultural University – Plovdiv as a member of the scientific jury.

1. Brief Introduction of the PhD student

Elka Vasileva Genova is a full-time PhD student at the Department of Economics, Agricultural University – Plovdiv, enrolled in the doctoral programme Economics and Management (Agriculture). She holds a higher education degree in the fields of economics and tourism, and her academic and professional background has consistently focused on tourism development, management and the development of rural areas.

Her professional experience is closely related to the tourism sector, where she has held both expert and managerial positions, as well as teaching expertise. This practical experience provides a solid foundation for the present research by enabling the integration of theoretical concepts with the real challenges faced by the tourism industry.

The candidate's scientific interests are focused on rural tourism development, tourism destination management and the sustainable development of rural areas. These research interests are reflected both in the submitted dissertation and in the accompanying scientific publications, which are directly related to the dissertation topic. The consistency of her scientific interests and the practical orientation of her research have contributed to the successful achievement of the objectives of the dissertation.

2. Relevance of the Research Topic

The topic of the dissertation is undoubtedly relevant from both scientific and practical aspects. In the context of growing demographic challenges, depopulation of

rural areas and the need for the sustainable use of local resources, rural tourism has become an increasingly important instrument for regional development and the revitalisation of local communities.

The research is particularly relevant in the context of the European Union's policies on sustainable development, smart growth and territorial cohesion. Contemporary strategic documents emphasise the promotion of sustainable tourism practices, the development of local economies, entrepreneurship and the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. Within this framework, rural tourism is regarded not merely as a tourism activity but also as an important driver of socio-economic development and an instrument for enhancing the competitiveness of rural areas.

A major strength of the dissertation lies in its interdisciplinary approach, which integrates economic, managerial, social and territorial aspects of rural tourism development. The author goes beyond a purely theoretical analysis by seeking practical solutions through an empirical study conducted in the Municipality of Brezovo. The selection of this specific tourism destination enables the identification of the actual challenges, constraints and opportunities for rural tourism development, thereby enhancing the practical relevance and applicability of the research.

3. Aim, tasks, hypotheses and research methods

The dissertation is characterised by a clearly formulated research concept, a logically structured framework and consistency throughout the implementation of the research process.

The main objective of the dissertation is clearly defined and focuses on analysing the challenges and opportunities for the development of rural tourism in mountainous and semi-mountainous areas by examining the interaction between resource potential, stakeholders and the institutional environment, as well as by developing a conceptual model for the sustainable development of tourism destinations. The objective is specific and fully consistent with the subject and scope of the research.

To achieve this objective, the PhD student formulates a set of research objectives that encompass both the theoretical aspects of rural tourism and the empirical investigation of the selected tourism destination. The systematic implementation of these objectives ensures a logical progression from the theoretical analysis to the practical validation of the conclusions and recommendations.

The dissertation formulates six research hypotheses, which constitute the foundation of the empirical investigation.

The methodological framework has been appropriately designed and is fully consistent with the research objective and tasks. The author applies a comprehensive research approach based on the combination of theoretical, empirical and comparative methods. The study employs analysis and synthesis, inductive and deductive reasoning, comparative analysis, questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, the case study approach, as well as graphical methods for processing and presenting the research findings. The selection of the applied research methods is appropriate to the nature and objectives of the study.

In my opinion, the chosen methodology has been applied correctly and consistently throughout the research. It provides an appropriate basis for achieving the research objective, fulfilling the research tasks and validating the proposed hypotheses. The findings are well substantiated and constitute a reliable foundation for identifying the scientific and applied contributions of the dissertation.

4. Visualization and presentation of the results

The dissertation comprises 263 pages and is organised in a logical and coherent manner. It consists of an introduction, four chapters, conclusions, scientific and applied contributions, a list of references and appendices. The presentation is clear, well-structured and fully consistent with the research objectives and tasks.

The dissertation is well illustrated and includes 51 figures, 15 tables, 18 photographs and 9 appendices, all of which are directly related to the subject matter and facilitate the understanding and interpretation of the research findings. The graphical and visual materials have been carefully selected, are informative and contribute significantly to the clear presentation of the analyses and conclusions.

5. Discussion of the Research Results and References

From a content perspective, the dissertation demonstrates a coherent logical structure and a well-balanced organisation. The study ensures a progression from the theoretical foundations through the research methodology and empirical analysis to the formulation of practically applicable conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter One provides the theoretical foundation of the dissertation. The author systematically reviews and critically analyses the existing scientific literature on rural tourism, sustainable development, tourism destinations, social capital and stakeholder collaboration. The literature review goes beyond a descriptive presentation of previous research by demonstrating a critical approach and establishing the author's own conceptual framework, which serves as the basis for the subsequent empirical investigation.

Chapter Two presents the methodological framework of the research. It clearly defines the research object and subject, the research aim, objectives, theses and the applied research methods. The choice of a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches, deserves particular recognition, as it enables a comprehensive examination of the research problem. The use of questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and multi-stakeholder analysis provides a solid empirical basis for testing the proposed theses and formulating well-founded scientific conclusions.

Chapter Three constitutes the core analytical part of the dissertation and presents the principal findings of the empirical research. The author provides a systematic analysis of the tourism potential of the Municipality of Brezovo, the existing tourism infrastructure, resource availability, marketing activities and the interactions among the main stakeholder groups. The research findings are logically organised, convincingly interpreted and effectively supported by appropriate tables, figures and photographs, which enhance the clarity and comprehensibility of the analysis.

Chapter Four has a strong applied research orientation. Based on the empirical findings, the author formulates practical recommendations aimed at improving the management of rural tourism destinations and develops an original conceptual model for their sustainable development. The proposed model represents a logical continuation of the theoretical and empirical analyses, successfully integrating scientific concepts with practical evidence. This significantly enhances both the scientific value and the practical relevance of the dissertation and provides a useful basis for future policy-making and strategic planning in the field of rural tourism development.

The bibliography is comprehensive and appropriate to the scope of the research. It comprises 91 bibliographic sources, including publications by Bulgarian and international authors, strategic and legislative documents, reports issued by international organisations, statistical publications, institutional sources and relevant online resources. The literature review covers the principal scientific contributions in the field and provides a sound theoretical and methodological foundation for the empirical investigation conducted in the dissertation.

6. Contributions of the Dissertation

The scientific contributions identified by the PhD student are well justified and derive directly from the conducted theoretical and empirical research. They contribute both to the advancement of scientific knowledge in the field of rural tourism and to the practical application of the research findings in the management and development of rural tourism destinations.

Theoretical Contributions

1. An original conceptual framework for the development of rural tourism destinations has been developed, integrating resource potential, stakeholders, destination management, marketing activities and social capital into a unified analytical system.
2. The research demonstrates that, despite the constraints imposed by the broader public policy framework, there are manageable local factors—such as partnerships, social capital, community involvement and stakeholder coordination—that can be effectively utilised to stimulate the development of rural tourism.
3. The principal factors influencing the development of rural tourism in small rural settlements have been systematically identified and analysed, highlighting the role of the institutional environment, social capital and stakeholder interaction in the effective utilisation of tourism potential.
4. A comprehensive methodological framework for analysing rural tourism development at the local level has been developed, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Scientific - Applied Contributions

1. Through a comprehensive empirical investigation, the dissertation identifies the key factors, relationships and constraints affecting rural tourism development in the Municipality of Brezovo, including resource potential, infrastructure, marketing activities, demographic processes and stakeholder interaction.
2. Practical recommendations have been formulated to improve the management, coordination and marketing of rural tourism destinations. These recommendations are applicable not only to the Municipality of Brezovo but also to other rural municipalities with similar characteristics.
3. The practical applicability of the proposed conceptual framework has been demonstrated through initiatives aimed at promoting local cultural heritage, supporting event tourism, strengthening community engagement and increasing the visibility and attractiveness of the tourism potential of the Municipality of Brezovo.

I accept the scientific and applied contributions as presented by the PhD candidate. They are logically substantiated, fully supported by the content of the dissertation and make a valuable contribution to both the scientific understanding of rural tourism and the practical management and sustainable development of rural tourism destinations.

7. Critical remarks and questions

The dissertation is a developed research and does not contain any substantial weaknesses that would diminish its scientific value. Nevertheless, several recommendations may be considered with a view to the further development of the research.

First, greater attention could be devoted to assessing the impact of digitalisation and marketing tools on the development of rural tourism. Given the increasing importance of online platforms, social media and digital marketing in promoting tourism destinations, a more in-depth analysis of these aspects would further strengthen the practical relevance and applicability of the research.

Second, it would be valuable to monitor the development of the tourism destination over time through follow-up studies. Such approach would make it possible to assess the extent to which the proposed recommendations lead to improvements in tourism performance and contribute to the socio-economic development of the study area.

These recommendations do not diminish the overall quality of the dissertation but rather indicate potential directions for its further development and future research.

I would like to address the following question to the PhD candidate:

In the dissertation, social capital is identified as one of the key factors influencing the development of rural tourism. In your opinion, which component of social capital has the greatest impact on the development of a rural tourism destination, and why?

8. Publications and citations

The PhD student has submitted two scientific publications directly related to the topic of the dissertation, presenting part of the principal findings of the conducted research. Both publications have been published in the peer-reviewed journal Scientific Works of the Agricultural University – Plovdiv and address topical issues concerning the development of rural tourism. In my opinion, the submitted publications meet both the quantitative and qualitative requirements for the award of the PhD degree.

The abstract has been prepared in accordance with the applicable academic regulations and provides an accurate and comprehensive presentation of the dissertation's structure, content, principal research findings, as well as its scientific and applied contributions.

CONCLUSION:

Based on the different research methods applied by the PhD student, the correctly performed analysis, the formulated recommendations and conclusions, I

consider that the presented dissertation meets the requirements of the Law for Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, The Regulation for the Application of the Law for Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations of the Agricultural University - Plovdiv for its application, which gives me reason to assess it **POSITIVE**.

I would like to propose to the Scientific Jury to vote **POSITIVELY** and award Elka Vasileva Genova the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the scientific speciality "Economics and Management (Agriculture)"

Date: 10.07.2026
Plovdiv

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