



REVIEW



on

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

Author of the dissertation: ELKA VASILEVA GENOVA, full-time doctoral student at the Department of Economics at the Agricultural University, Plovdiv

Topic of the dissertation: "CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN MOUNTAIN AND SEMI-MOUNTAIN AREAS"

Reviewer: PROF. DR. VALENTINA LYUBENOVA NIKOLOVA-ALEXIEVA, University of Food Technology - Plovdiv, field of higher education: **3. Social, economic and legal sciences**, professional field: **3.8 Economy**, scientific specialty: "**Economics and Management**", appointed as a member of the scientific jury by order RD 16-738/ 08.06.2026 of the Rector of the Agricultural University, Plovdiv

1. Brief presentation of the candidate.

Elka Vasileva Genova is a specialist with established professional and research experience in the fields of microbiology, biotechnology, agrarian economics and tourism. Her professional career began in 1998 at the Institute of Microbiology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, where for more than two decades she performed a wide range of administrative, laboratory and project activities. In this role, she participated in the administration of scientific projects, the preparation of publications and reports, the maintenance of laboratory documentation, as well as in the organization of national and international scientific forums.

Her professional experience also includes work as a specialist in "Tourism Activities" in the Municipality of Brezovo, where she works on promoting tourist resources, preparing talks, digital advertising and organizing cultural and tourist events. Since 2023, she has held the position of teacher in "Technology and Entrepreneurship" at the Primary School „Dusho Hadzhidekov” – Plovdiv, by implementing the learning process, applying interactive teaching methods and participating in school initiatives and projects.

In parallel with her work at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Elka Genova developed academic competencies in the field of **agrarian tourism, tourism management and agrarian economics**, by successively completing a bachelor's and two master's programs at the Agricultural University - Plovdiv.



Elka Genova is enrolled as a full-time doctoral student at the Department of Economics with scientific supervisor **Prof. Dr. Ivan Penov**. Her scientific interests are related to the development of rural tourism, sustainable agrarian systems, regional planning and European rural development programs. She has published scientific articles, participated in conferences and contributed to research projects under national scientific programs.

Elka Genova has been honored with a number of awards, including "Top of the Class" (2018, 2020), a scholarship from the St. St. Constantine and Helena Foundation, and prizes in academic competitions. She is the author of a solo art exhibition. She possesses a wide range of competencies - **scientific, organizational, communication and creative, which characterize her as a professional with high commitment and proven contribution in various fields.**

2. Relevance of the problem.

The relevance of the problem under study is determined by the increasing processes of socio-economic transformation in rural areas, as well as the need for sustainable models for the development of local communities. In the context of European regional development policies and the implementation of measures under the Rural Development Program, rural tourism is being established as a key tool for stimulating the local economy, preserving natural and cultural heritage and creating new forms of employment.

The last decade has seen a significant increase in interest in **alternative forms of tourism, including agrarian, ecotourism and wine tourism**, which places new demands on the planning, management and evaluation of tourism resources in rural areas. This requires in-depth scientific research focused on the profile of users, the effectiveness of investment projects, the possibilities for integrating local resources and the development of sustainable development models.

The urgency of the problem is also enhanced by the need to adapt rural communities to demographic challenges, economic imbalances and changing consumer attitudes. In **this context, scientific research acquires particular importance**, as it provides **analytical tools and empirical data** that support the formulation of effective policies, strategies and practices for the development of rural tourism.

The topic of the dissertation is well chosen, the research is extremely relevant and due to its practical focus - the results can be used by local administrations, tourism organizations, entrepreneurs and academic institutions in the development of projects, tourism products and regional strategies. **It contributes to expanding scientific knowledge** in the field of sustainable development, regional planning and management of tourism activities, while offering applicable solutions to real problems in rural areas.

3. Purpose, tasks, hypotheses and research methods.

The introduction to the dissertation formulates **the main goal** and **seven logically related tasks** for its achievement. **The aim** of the dissertation is "to analyze the conditions and factors that influence the development of rural tourism in the mountainous and semi-mountainous regions of Bulgaria, by examining the interrelationships between the resource potential, the local community, the tourism business, visitors and the institutional



environment .”

Tasks are appropriately set, including: analyzing the natural, cultural and anthropogenic resources of the studied territory, studying the profile of users of rural tourism services, assessing the economic efficiency of tourism initiatives and investment projects in rural areas, and proposing strategic solutions.

The object of research is the processes of development of rural tourism in the mountainous and semi-mountainous regions of Bulgaria, considered in the context of the interaction between natural and cultural-historical resources, socio-economic conditions and the institutional environment. Both *the object and the subject of research are correctly formulated*.

The main **thesis** is « *that in small settlements with available natural and cultural-historical potential, the development of rural tourism remains limited, due to the complex interaction of various factors, as well as the ineffective interaction between the main participants in the tourism process* ». The thesis is divided into **six research sub-theses** , which constitute the basis of the empirical research conducted.

Various methods were used: analysis and synthesis, inductive and deductive approach, comparative analysis, questionnaire survey, semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, multi-stakeholder analysis, case study approach, as well as graphical methods for processing and presenting the results. A complex approach was chosen, based on the combination of theoretical, empirical and comparative methods of scientific knowledge.

The methodological tools are appropriately selected, in accordance with the set goals and objectives.

Both the goal and the tasks are correctly formulated, providing sufficient opportunities for conclusions and recommendations in the research and conclusion. I give a very high assessment of the methodology used, as well as in terms of the raised theses and the implementation of the tasks set to achieve the goal of the dissertation .

4. Visualization and presentation of the results obtained.

The scientific work is 263 pages long and consists of **an introduction**, an exposition in **four chapters, a conclusion, references** and **eight appendices**.

The literature used is sufficiently representative and corresponds to the nature of the study. It includes **91 bibliographical sources**, including publications by Bulgarian and foreign authors, strategic and regulatory documents, reports by international organizations, statistical, institutional and internet sources.

The scientific work is **excellently illustrated** and contains **51 figures, 15 tables** and **18 photographs**, which are directly related to the presentation and assist in the perception and interpretation of the presented results. The graphic material is well selected, informative and contributes to a clearer presentation of the analyses performed and the conclusions drawn.

The first chapter of the dissertation represents the theoretical basis of the study and performs a key function in building the conceptual framework on which the overall scientific argumentation is developed. In it, the author carries out a systematized, in-depth and critical review of leading international and national scientific studies devoted to the essence, characteristics and development of rural tourism, as well as the factors that determine its dynamics in mountainous and semi-mountainous regions. The structure of the chapter is **clearly defined and logically consistent**. The author presents the main



theoretical propositions regarding the essence of rural tourism, defines key characteristics of rural tourism, its role in socio-economic development and the specific features of tourist activities in rural areas. A precise classification of the forms and varieties of rural tourism is made. The author examines the factors influencing the development of rural tourism, emphasizing their interrelation and complex impact on tourist activity. The chapter creates the necessary analytical basis for the subsequent regional analysis. The author argues for the importance of an integrated management approach for the sustainable development of tourist areas. The emphasis is placed on stakeholder cooperation, trust, local initiatives and community networks, which are essential for the viability of tourist destinations. Theoretical models for the development of tourist destinations are analyzed, including stage models, concepts of the life cycle of tourist areas and integrated approaches to management. The presentation of these models **enriches the theoretical framework and provides a methodological basis for the empirical analysis.**

The chapter ends with **summary conclusions** that synthesize the main theoretical propositions and clearly outline the relationship between the theoretical basis and the subsequent methodological and empirical parts of the dissertation.

Chapter two of the dissertation is structured in three main sections: *methodological framework, research design and organization of the empirical study*. In the first section, the author correctly defines the theoretical foundations of the study and outlines the conceptual approaches that guide it. The integration of contemporary scientific statements related to rural tourism, social capital and the management of tourist destinations makes an excellent impression.

The second section presents the research design and formulates the research theses. Here, a good logical connection between the theoretical framework and the empirical objectives is observed. The six working theses are clearly formulated and cover key aspects of tourism development – social capital, marketing, institutional coordination, infrastructure and demography. The third section presents the methods and organization of the empirical research. The author uses a combined methodological approach, including quantitative and qualitative methods – questionnaire survey, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, multi-stakeholder analysis and case study approach. This choice is adequate for studying complex socio-economic processes in small settlements. A particular strength is the inclusion of multi-stakeholder analysis, which allows for the study of interactions between the main participants in the tourist destination. The information base is diverse and includes scientific publications, strategic documents, statistical data and field observations. This is a strength of the chapter, but some of the sources could be updated with more recent empirical research in the field of rural tourism and regional development. Chapter Two is well structured and methodologically sound. It serves as a stable **methodological basis for the subsequent empirical analysis.**

The third chapter represents the empirical and applied part of the study, in which the author conducts an in-depth analysis of the studied region and presents the results of the field study. The chapter is *structured consistently and logically, combining* regional analysis, assessment of tourism potential, study of tourism activity and analysis of interactions between the main participants in the tourist destination. The author presents a characteristic of the studied region, emphasizing the natural, cultural-historical, demographic and socio-economic features of the municipality of Brezovo. Natural and anthropogenic resources are identified, classified by type and importance. The systematic approach to resource analysis makes a positive impression, but a more detailed assessment of the degree of their tourist attractiveness and their real readiness for inclusion in tourist products is missing. The author presents an objective picture of the



current development, highlighting the limited tourist activity, the low level of use of available resources and the lack of sustainable tourism products. The main actors in the tourist destination and the interactions between them are examined. The author uses a multi-stakeholder approach, through which he identifies the roles, interests and degree of influence of the local government, the tourist business, cultural institutions, the local community and visitors. The analysis is well structured and shows clearly expressed problems in the coordination and communication between the actors. The main weaknesses in the marketing activity are presented, including insufficient digital advertising, lack of branding and limited participation in tourist networks. The author objectively takes into account the role of the municipality of Brezovo in the development of the tourist destination and the initiatives undertaken, but also emphasizes the lack of strategic vision, limited resources and insufficient institutional support. This section is important, as it clearly shows the relationship between the institutional environment and the actual development of tourism. Chapter three concludes with conclusions and summaries that synthesize the results of the empirical research and ***prepare the basis for the formulation of recommendations*** in the final part of the dissertation.

Chapter Four, presented in the form of "Conclusions and Recommendations", serves as a final analytical section, in which the author synthesizes the results of the theoretical and empirical analysis and formulates practical guidelines for the development of rural tourism in mountainous and semi-mountainous regions. The fourth chapter demonstrates *the author's ability to summarize a complex information, derive patterns and propose applicable solutions based on scientific evidence*.

The four chapters are evenly balanced and logically linked. The conclusion of the dissertation paper summarizes the conclusions and findings of the results of the research conducted. They provide grounds to establish that the main goal and objectives have been achieved, the subtheses have been confirmed, and the thesis has been proven.

The structure of the dissertation *research is adequately constructed and corresponds to the set goal and tasks*. The work contains specific results and empirical evidence that objectively reflect the real achievements of the conducted scientific research.

I believe that the results of the dissertation research have a high degree of practical applicability, therefore I recommend the project-oriented approach for continued development of the topic.

5. Contributions of the dissertation work.

Contributions can be divided into scientific and applied. *I accept the contributions as real, credible and proven in the course of the dissertation research.*

Scientific contributions

- Author's work is presented concept for development on tourist rural destination area, which integrates resource potential, interested parties countries, governance on the destination, the marketing activity and social capital in a single analytical system
- Identified are manageable local-level factors – partnerships, social capital, local community and coordination between stakeholders – that can be used as a tool to activate the development of rural tourism.



- Systematized are the main factors influencing the development of rural tourism in small settlements, highlighting the role of the institutional environment, social capital and the interaction between stakeholders for the effective use of tourism potential.
- The development has been analyzed on the village tourism on local level, by applying the comprehensive approach.

Scientific and applied contributions

- The main factors, dependencies and limitations determining the development of rural tourism in the municipality of Brezovo have been synthesized, based on a comprehensive empirical study.
- Practical guidelines have been formulated for improving the management, coordination and marketing activities of tourist destinations in rural areas, applicable to other municipalities with similar characteristics.
- The practical applicability of the developed concept has been confirmed through implemented initiatives to promote the local cultural heritage, develop event tourism, activate the local community and increase the recognition of the tourism potential of the Brezovo municipality.

I consider the contributions to be the personal work of the doctoral student.

*The conclusions and proposals in the dissertation present Elka Genova **as an erudite researcher with excellent theoretical training, with the ability to make creative generalizations and formulate solutions for practice.***

6. Critical notes and questions.

- **Main opinion:** quality dissertation, excellently illustrated, clearly outlined contributions with potential for development.
- **Critical notes :** I don't have essential critical notes to the dissertation research .
- **Recommendations:**
 - Given the relevance and significance of the scientific research, I recommend that the doctoral student further develop it into a monographic work in the future and publish the results in the global databases Scopus and WoS.
 - I recommend in future publishing activities:
 - since some of the recommendations in the dissertation are formulated at a strategic level, they can be supplemented with more specific operational mechanisms for implementation, including monitoring indicators, time frames and an assessment of the necessary resources.
 - to include comparative examples from other successfully developing tourist destinations, which would strengthen the argumentation and applicability of the proposed measures.
 - based on the dissertation, the following be developed: a model for assessing tourism potential; a methodology for analyzing social capital and a toolkit for assessing the interaction between stakeholders. The publication of such models increases scientific contribution and citation.
- **Question 1:** Which natural and cultural resources on municipality Birch have highest potential for development on tourist products?
- **Question 2:** What are the main barriers to institutional coordination in the study region?



7. Published articles and citations.

A total of **2 publications** in Bulgarian, co-authored, dedicated to the dissertation work are presented. They are printed in the peer-reviewed publication "Scientific Papers" of the Agricultural University - Plovdiv and have become available to the scientific community on an international scale.

I accept the publications as directly related to the dissertation research. They summarize and publish significant problems and results of research related to the development of rural tourism.

The presented abstract is 45 pages long and objectively reflects the structure and content of the dissertation.

CONCLUSION:

Based on the various research methods learned and applied by the doctoral student, the correctly conducted experiments, the generalizations and conclusions made, I believe that the presented dissertation meets the National Requirements and the Regulations of the Agricultural University for its application, which gives me reason to evaluate it **POSITIVELY**.

I would like to suggest to the esteemed Scientific Jury to also vote positively and award **ELKA VASILEVA GENOVA** the educational and scientific degree "**doctor**" in scientific specialty: "Economics and Management (Agriculture)" in professional field 3.8. Economics.

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