

OPINION



on a dissertation submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree of **Doctor (PhD)** in: Professional Field 3.8 Economics, Higher Education Area 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, Scientific Specialisation Economics and Management (Agriculture)

Author of the dissertation: *Elka Vasileva Genova*, full-time PhD student, Department of Economics, Agricultural University – Plovdiv

Title of the dissertation: *Challenges and Prospects for the Development of Rural Tourism in Mountainous and Semi-Mountainous Areas*

Reviewer: *Assoc. Prof. Mariya Marinova Peneva, PhD*, Department of Economics of Natural Resources, UNWE, Sofia, Higher Education Area 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, Professional Field 3.8 Economics, Scientific Specialisation Economics and Management (Agrarian Economics and Policy), appointed as a member of the Scientific Jury by Order No. RD-16-738/08.06.2026 of the Rector of the Agricultural University.

1. Relevance of the Research Problem.

The dissertation addresses a significant scientific and practical issue: the development of rural tourism in mountainous and semi-mountainous areas. Given increasing demographic imbalances, limited employment opportunities, and underutilised local resources, rural tourism serves as a key instrument for diversifying economic activities and promoting the sustainable development of small rural settlements. The research is particularly relevant given the identified gap between the region's natural and cultural-historical potential and the current level of tourism development. The PhD candidate shifts the analytical focus from resource endowments to the influence of the institutional environment, social capital, governance, and stakeholder interaction. Accordingly, the dissertation is both timely and consistent with current priorities for rural development in Bulgaria and internationally.

2. Research Aim, Objectives, Hypotheses and Methods.

The aim of the dissertation is clearly formulated and logically justified. It focuses on analysing the conditions and factors affecting the development of rural tourism in mountainous and semi-mountainous areas by examining the interrelationships among resource potential, the local community, tourism businesses, visitors, and the institutional environment.

The research thesis is clearly defined and emphasises the role of social capital, the institutional environment and stakeholder interaction as prerequisites for a more effective utilisation of tourism potential. The research objectives are logically structured and consistently lead towards the achievement of the stated aim, covering the theoretical, empirical and practical dimensions of the research problem.

The methodological framework employs established scientific approaches tailored to the specific characteristics of the research object. The chosen research methods align with the stated aim and objectives. Notably, the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, along with the inclusion of diverse stakeholder groups, namely local authorities, tourism businesses, the local

community, cultural institutions, non-governmental organisations and visitors. This approach enables the comparison of multiple perspectives and supports a comprehensive interpretation of the research findings.

3. Presentation and Visualisation of the Research Results.

The research findings are presented in a clear and systematic manner, with extensive visualisation. The inclusion of 15 tables, 51 figures, and 18 photographs facilitates data interpretation and supports the analysis. The visual presentation of results related to local community attitudes, the status of tourism businesses, the role of community cultural centres (chitalishta), and visitor behaviour and preferences is particularly effective. The development of a visitor profile and typology, identification of tourism demand segments, and comparison between tourism demand and existing supply offer substantial analytical value. The stakeholder interaction model and the proposed concept for rural tourism destination development effectively synthesise the main research findings.

In certain sections, the extensive use of graphical presentation results in some fragmentation. Nevertheless, the overall visualisation remains convincing and functional.

4. Discussion of the Results and Literature Review.

The literature review demonstrates a good understanding of the theoretical and methodological foundations of rural tourism, tourism destination management, social capital and stakeholder theory. The sources consulted are diverse, including both Bulgarian and international publications, and are fully relevant to the research problem. Referencing is accurate and reflects good academic practice.

The discussion of the results demonstrates the author's capacity to critically interpret empirical evidence and connect it to relevant theoretical concepts. The PhD candidate extends beyond presenting findings by offering explanations for identified constraints and differences in stakeholder perceptions.

A notable strength of the dissertation is its movement beyond a predominantly resource-based approach by incorporating the institutional environment, social capital, and stakeholder interaction mechanisms. In certain sections, a more systematic comparison of the findings with previous empirical studies could further enhance the discussion.

5. Contributions of the Dissertation.

The scientific and practical contributions made by the author adequately reflect the main outcomes of the research and align with the stated research aim and objectives.

Among the identified contributions, the developed concept for rural tourism destination development and the practical recommendations for local authorities, tourism businesses, community cultural centres, and the local community are particularly significant. Their value lies in their direct applicability to planning and managing tourism development at the local level.

6. Critical Remarks and Questions.

The critical remarks provided are primarily constructive and indicate possible directions for further research.

Some research propositions are formulated using terms such as "significant impact" and

"substantial contribution". While the methodological approach enables identification of key factors and interrelationships, a more precise assessment of the magnitude and significance of these effects would require additional statistical methods.

Furthermore, the empirical research is based on an in-depth case study of the Municipality of Brezovo, while the dissertation addresses mountainous and semi-mountainous areas more broadly. Although the findings are analytically relevant for territories with similar characteristics, comparative research involving additional municipalities would provide a more robust assessment of the applicability of the proposed conceptual framework.

In this context, the following discussion question is raised:

Which elements of the proposed concept for the development of a rural tourism destination do you consider generally applicable to small mountainous and semi-mountainous municipalities, and which are specific to the Municipality of Brezovo? What additional research would be necessary to assess the applicability of the proposed concept in other territories?

7. Published Papers and Citations.

The PhD candidate has presented two publications on the dissertation topic, reflecting its main research results. Both publications meet the quantitative and qualitative requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

The submitted dissertation abstract accurately reflects the dissertation's structure and content.

CONCLUSION:

Based on the research conducted by the PhD candidate, the applied research methods, the correctly designed empirical study, and the conclusions and generalisations drawn, I consider that the submitted dissertation meets the requirements of the Academic Staff Development in the Republic of Bulgaria Act and the Regulations for its implementation at the Agricultural University. Therefore, I give my **POSITIVE ASSESSMENT** of the dissertation..

It is respectfully recommended that the Honourable Scientific Jury vote in favour of awarding **Elka Vasileva Genova** the educational and scientific degree of **Doctor (PhD)** in Economics and Management (Agriculture).

Date: 15 July 2026
Sofia

Подписите в този документ са заличени
във връзка с чл.4, т.1 от Регламент (ЕС)
2016/679
(Общ Регламент относно защитата на
данни).