

OPINION

АГРИКЛУРЕН УНИВЕРСИТЕТ гр. ПЛОВДИВ	
Вх. № 4006	Дело № 105
Получено на 21.04.2026	

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. Rositsa Petrova Beluhova, 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. Relevance of the topic

The topic of the dissertation is highly relevant from both scientific and practical perspectives. The development of rural tourism has become an important instrument for the economic revitalisation of rural areas, the diversification of local economies, the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, and the improvement of the quality of life of local communities. In the context of increasing competition among tourist destinations and the need for the sustainable use of local resources, research aimed at identifying the factors determining the development of rural tourism is of growing scientific and societal importance.

The research problem is particularly relevant in the context of the European Union's policies on sustainable development, the green transition and rural development, which emphasise the integrated utilisation of local potential, entrepreneurship and the development of alternative employment opportunities. In this respect, the dissertation addresses an issue of considerable practical significance by providing an analysis of the factors influencing the development of rural tourism and by proposing recommendations that could support strategic planning and destination management processes.

2. Aim, tasks, hypotheses and research methods

The main objective of the dissertation is to analyse the factors influencing the development of rural tourism in the mountainous and semi-mountainous regions of Bulgaria by examining the relationships among resource potential, the local community, tourism businesses and the institutional environment. To achieve this objective, the author formulates a set of specific research objectives and six interrelated research hypotheses, which provide a logical framework for the study.

The methodological approach is appropriate to the research objectives. The dissertation successfully combines quantitative and qualitative research methods, including analysis and synthesis, comparative analysis, questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and the case study approach. Particularly valuable is the inclusion of different stakeholder groups (local authorities, tourism businesses, the local community, community cultural centres and visitors), which provides a comprehensive understanding of the research problem and enhances the reliability of the findings.

3. Visualization and presentation of the results.

The dissertation is logically and consistently structured and consists of an introduction, four chapters, conclusions, scientific and applied contributions, references and appendices. The PhD thesis comprises 263 pages, which is appropriate for the nature of the research. It includes 51 figures, 15 tables, 18 photographs and 9 appendices.

4. Discussion of the results and theoretical background

The dissertation is well organised, and the research results are presented and discussed consistently with the objective, research tasks and hypotheses.

The **first chapter** examines the theoretical foundations of rural tourism. The author analyses the nature, forms and development factors of rural tourism, as well as issues related to destination management, social capital, stakeholder cooperation and sustainable development. This chapter provides a solid theoretical foundation for the empirical analysis.

The **second chapter** presents the research methodology. The methodological and theoretical framework, the research object and subject, the research hypotheses and the system of indicators are clearly justified. The application of a combined research approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the research problem and provides a reliable basis for testing the proposed hypotheses.

The **third chapter** presents the main findings of the empirical research conducted in the Municipality of Brezovo. The tourism potential of the municipality, the current state of tourism activities and the role of the main stakeholder groups are analysed in detail. The application of the multi-stakeholder approach deserves particular recognition, as it allows the perspectives of local authorities, tourism businesses, the local community, cultural institutions and visitors to be examined simultaneously. This provides a comprehensive interpretation of the research findings and identifies the principal constraints and opportunities for rural tourism development.

The **fourth chapter** summarises the research findings and formulates conclusions and recommendations. The proposed concept for the development of a rural tourism destination has both scientific and practical value.

The bibliography includes 91 references, 45 publications by international authors, 25 publications by Bulgarian authors, 11 reports, strategic and regulatory documents, and 10 Internet sources. The literature used is diverse and relevant to the research topic, providing a solid theoretical and methodological foundation for the dissertation.

5. Contributions of the PhD thesis

The scientific and applied contributions are correctly formulated and accurately reflect the research conducted in the dissertation. I fully accept them and assess them positively. Among the most significant contributions can be highlighted:

- Development of a conceptual framework for analysing the factors influencing rural tourism development in mountainous and semi-mountainous regions.
- Proposal of an integrated model based on the multi-stakeholder approach for assessing the interactions among the principal actors within a tourism destination.
- Identification of the key factors constraining the development of rural tourism in the Municipality of Brezovo through comprehensive empirical research.
- Formulation of practical recommendations for improving the management and sustainable development of rural tourism destinations.

6. Critical remarks and questions

The dissertation represents a comprehensive and well-developed scientific study. The following recommendations may be considered in future research:

- Extending the analysis through the application of additional quantitative methods that would allow a more precise assessment of the influence of individual factors on rural tourism development.
- Testing the proposed conceptual model in other rural tourism destinations in order to further verify its practical applicability.

I have the following question to the PhD candidate:

To what extent could the proposed integrated model for the sustainable development of rural tourism destinations be adapted and applied to other rural areas in Bulgaria that differ in terms of resource potential, demographic characteristics and the level of tourism development?

7. Publications, citations and abstract

The PhD candidate has submitted two scientific publications directly related to the topic of the dissertation, reflecting part of the theoretical and empirical research presented in the thesis. The publications have been published in the peer-reviewed journal Scientific Works of the Agricultural University – Plovdiv and address current issues related to rural tourism development. The submitted publications meet both the qualitative and quantitative requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree Doctor.

The submitted abstract accurately reflects the structure and content of the dissertation.

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: 06.07.2026
Plovdiv

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