



REVIEW

Regarding PhD thesis for awarding a PhD academic degree in scientific specialty "Economics and management (Agriculture)", professional field 3.8 Economics, higher education field 3. Social, economic and law sciences

Reviewer: prof. Darina Ruscheva Todorova, PhD, Economic Research Institute at Bulgarian Academy of Science. The review is prepared in accordance with Ordinance № 3253/07.12.2020 of the Rector of Trakia University – Stara Zagora, and art. 5 (3) and art (4) of the Regulation for development of the academic staff at Trakia University.

Author of the PhD thesis: *Violetka Lyubenova Zheleva*, a full-time PhD student in higher education field 3. Social, economic and law sciences, professional field 3.8. Economics, in PhD studying programme "Economics and management (agriculture)" at department "Regional development" of the Faculty in Economics at Trakia University – Stara Zagora.

Title of the PhD thesis: *"Assessments of the possibilities for development of alternative tourism at the region of Stara Zagora"*

1. Information about the PhD student

Violetka Lyubenova Zheleva, PhD was born on 10.11.1988. She completed her secondary education in 2007 at Commercial High School "Knyaz Simeon Tarnovski" in Stara Zagora, specialty "Intermediary in the custom and tax administration". She has a bachelor's degree in Economics, specialty "Regional Economy" at the Faculty of Economics of Trakia University – Stara Zagora and she has a master's degree in "Economics of alternative tourism" again at the Faculty of Economics at Trakia University – Stara Zagora. She has defended her master thesis on topic "Development of the extreme tourism in Bulgaria (on the example of the off-road competitions "Bulgaria Trophy Challenge 2014")" with an excellent mark.

Professional experience. Violetka Zheleva has worked as a waitress and a sales-consultant in various companies. Since February 2010, she has been working

as a manager of "VIKA 2010" Ltd, and since June 2018 –she is an assistant supervisor at Forever Living Company. She speaks English and Russian and she has good computer experience. She possesses skills to work in a team.

As a PhD student, Violetka Zheleva has participated in four scientific projects, implemented by department of "Regional development". She has participated also in various scientific conferences and seminars.

Violetka Zheleva is a full-time PhD student at department of "Regional development" at the Faculty of Economics of Trakia University – Stara Zagora. Her PhD thesis is on topic "Assessments of the possibilities for development of alternative tourism in the region of Stara Zagora", which was discussed at a meeting of the Extended Department Council of department of "Regional development" at the Faculty of Economics, held on 13.11.2020 (Protocol № 150), with a decision the PhD thesis to be admitted to a public defense.

2. General characteristics of the PhD thesis

The PhD thesis of Violetka Zheleva has been written on a total of 251 pages, of which 180 pages main body text and 71 pages - appendixes (list of figures - 41 and list of tables - 14). The appendixes consist of: Appendix III – primary data, collected during the survey through questionnaires; Appendix IV – Age and gender structure of the respondents, represented by cross tables and Appendix V - Questionnaires. The PhD thesis is structured as follows: introduction, three chapters, conclusions, and list of references. The list of references consists of 187 sources of which 101 in Bulgarian and the rest are in foreign languages. The list of references is exhausted and rich of content. The author has listed as references basic scientific research, important legal acts etc. The literature review allows to be noted that the PhD student is very well acquainted with the various sources in the field of the topic of the PhD thesis.

The topic of the PhD thesis is of indisputable relevance. The approach, chosen by the PhD student to comprehensively substantiate the relevance of the topic of the thesis is a positive moment as she has discussed the problem in a worldwide scope (the observed upward tendency in the development of the tourist sector), on national level (changes in the Bulgarian tourism and the necessity new forms of alternative tourism to be developed and identified) and on regional level (studying the relationships between tourism and regional economy). In the introduction section and based on publications of Bulgarian and foreign authors it is summarized that from the viewpoint of the theory and practice, the problem needs to be discussed in depth.

The object of research is "settlements, events, tourist attractions, together with the tourists as end consumers of tourist goods and services, people, providing

tourist services, experts, representatives of the local authorities, who are directly responsible for the development of the tourist sector in the region, organizers of popular and attractive local events, that attract tourist interest". In short – all stakeholders are covered.

The subject of research is: "status and tendencies for development of the various forms of alternative tourism; rural tourism; tourism related to traditional for the region productions; cultural tourism; festival tourism, ethnographic tourism; wine tourism, sport tourism and hobby tourism. Here again, the PhD student has tried to completely embrace the various forms of alternative tourism. This fact also deserves to be highly assessed.

The formulated *purpose* of the PhD thesis (p. 6) shows the algorithm for assessing the possibilities for development of alternative tourism in the region of Stara Zagora: analyzing and assessing the tourist resource potential in some of the municipalities in the region, development of specific forms of alternative tourism and summarization of the results. To achieve the beforementioned purpose of the thesis, the PhD student has solved the following tasks: a) studying the theoretical formulations, clarifying the terms, concepts and classifications of the alternative tourism; b) assessing the status and possibilities for development of alternative tourism in the region; c) developing a methodological framework of the research; d) based on a field study and the results obtained, there are identified problems, the impact of the various forms of alternative tourism over local economy are assessed and solutions for solving the identified problems are proposed.

The research thesis is that "In the region of Stara Zagora there have existed unused potential for alternative forms of tourism " (p.7). Having in mind the comprehensive character of the research, four compound hypotheses with eight sub-hypotheses are formulated.

In the study, there are used various methods, each of which has its own significance and allows to be made in-depth analysis and the results obtained enrich the "entire picture" (observation method; method of field study; method of survey and other quantitative methods).

In the *first chapter* "Theoretical aspects of alternative tourism" there are studied some groups of issues, related to: summary of the basic definitions of alternative forms of tourism; studying the approaches of various researchers and organizations in relation to the concept for alternative tourism and the classification of its components; the specifics, role and significance of alternative tourism for overcoming the negative effect over destinations, suitable for mass tourism; disagreements both amongst researchers in the academic society and those in the region concerning the definition of alternative tourism and etc.

The *second chapter* "Methodology of the research. Social-economic characteristics of the region of Stara Zagora" is divided in three sections. In the first

section, it is presented the methodology framework of the PhD thesis, together with the methods for statistical data proceedings. In the second section, it is presented the necessary geographical and economic data for the region of Stara Zagora (administrative and territory structure, natural resources, economic development, transport access, anthropogenic tourist resources and potential) and in the third section, there are presented the characteristics of the municipalities, where the field study is conducted.

In the third chapter "Analysis and assessment of the status and possibilities for development of alternative tourism on the territory of region of Stara Zagora" there are presented the main parameters of the research and it is made a SWOT analysis of the results obtained by the survey.

3. Main results of the PhD thesis

The results of the research are obtained through rich literature review, factual and empirical material. By their nature, these results enrich and expand the knowledge in the field of alternative tourism and its forms.

Based on the study and the developed SWOT analysis, the PhD student has proposed some measures, related to update of the existing management processes, legal acts, and administrative regulations in relation to the development of alternative tourism in the region of Stara Zagora for the period 2014-2020. For this purpose, she proposes a system of measures in the following directions: development of the tourist culture of tourists through providing reliable and on-time information for the tourist potential of the region; developing an appropriate and working marketing strategy; diversification of the provided forms of alternative tourism; developing steps for decreasing the seasonality in some types of alternative tourism; measures, aimed to prevent ecology consequences; developing the transport access to destinations that provide alternative tourism outside the municipality cities; opportunities for cooperation among secondary schools, higher schools and business in order appropriate specialties for training of employees to be established; cooperation with other municipalities and regions for preparing joint tourist packages; participation in various European projects and better application of the project funding to receive financial resources for development of various forms of alternative tourism (cultural, wine, rural, sport and hobby tourism in the region) and etc.

4. Scientific and scientific-applied contributions

The main scientific and scientific-applied contributions of the PhD thesis could be summarized as follows:

a) contributions with theoretical orientation—summary of the literature for alternative tourism, considering the nature and specifics of the various forms of alternative tourism;

b) it is developed and approbated methodology for assessment of the opportunities for development of alternative tourism in the region of Stara Zagora;

c) rich empirical material is gathered and summarized through the complex approach;

d) a questionnaire for the needs of the research has been compiled and applied in order to be assessed the possibilities for development of alternative tourism in the region of Stara Zagora;

e) concrete measures for goalsetting of the aggressive approach for development of regional tourism are proposed and substantiated.

As an important contribution with scientific-applied character should be highlighted the fact that this multi-aspect and complex research is the first of its kind because it presents comprehensive assessment of the possibilities for development of alternative forms of tourism in the region of Stara Zagora.

5. Publications on the topic of the PhD thesis

The author has listed 4 publications, of which: 3 independent and one co-authored. Three of the publications are published and one of them is in print. Three of the publications are in English and one of them is in Bulgarian, as follows:

1. Zeleva V., State, trends and perspectives for the development of extreme tourism in Bulgaria (presenting the case of the off-road Trophy Challenge 2017"), *Trakia Journal of Science*. Vol.15, 2017, pp. 446-451.

2. Zeleva V., A study on the development of festival tourism in Kazanlak Municipality: the case of the Rose festival 2019, *Trakia Journal of Science*. Vol.17, 2019, pp.86-93.

3. Zheleva, V., Razvitie na festivalniya turizamv Starozagorsko /na primer ana natsionalenfolkloren sabor "Bogorodichna stapka"/, *Monografiyanaproekt "Identifitsirane na vzaimovrazki i protsesizarazrobotvanena modelza ustoichiv regionalen turizam "*, 2019, p. 119-139 (in Bulgarian).

4. Zeleva V., Stoykova , B., Condition and development trends of wine tourism in Bulgaria (the example of festival of folklore heritage), *Trakia Journal of Science*. In print.

The listed publications are in a monograph study and they are published in the prestigious scientific journal *Trakia Journal of Science* of Trakia University—Stara Zagora and the results of the current PhD thesis are published there.

6. Assessment of the synopsis

The synopsis covers a total of 37 pages and strictly reflects the content, results, and contributions of the PhD student, as well as the list of publications, related to the PhD thesis.

7. Recommendations

I give positive assessment to the implementation of the research of the PhD thesis, to the precise layout of the study, to the presentation of the figures and tables, as well as to the reference list. I would recommend the PhD student, if she has the will, to continue its future research in this field in order to enrich and expand the economic science in the field of tourism.

8. General assessment of the PhD thesis and conclusion

As a conclusion, my general assessment of the presented PhD thesis is that the research is developed at high professional level and it is in accordance with both the requirements of the Act on development of the academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria for awarding scientific degrees and with the regulations for awarding scientific degree PhD at Trakia University –Stara Zagora. The thesis consists of original scientific and scientific-applied contributions and that is why I propose with full conviction to the esteemed members of the Scientific Jury to vote positively for awarding scientific degree PhD in scientific specialty “Economics and management (agriculture)”, professional field 3.8 Economics, higher education field 3. Social, economic and law science to VIOLETKALYUBENOV AZHELEVA.

Sofia, 15.01.2021

/prof. Darina Ruscheva, PhD/