



STANDPOINT

By Prof. Dr. Yuliana Ivanova Blagoeva-Yarkova -
member of the scientific jury, appointed by the Rector of the Thracian University,
Order №3253 / 07 December 2020

Subject: Dissertation work to acquire an educational and scientific degree of “**Doctor**” in the professional field 3.8. of Economics, Scientific Specialty “Economics and Management (Agriculture)”

Theme of the dissertation: “Assessment of opportunities for the development of alternative forms of tourism in the Stara Zagora region”

Author of the dissertation: Violetka Lyubenova Jeleva - full-time doctoral student, granted a right of the thesis defense at the Regional Development Department, Faculty of Economics, Thracian University, Stara Zagora

Scientific advisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Blaga Ivanova Stoykova, Regional Development Department, Faculty of Economics, Thracian University and Prof. Dr. Ivan Georgiev Ivanov, Department of Economics, Faculty of Economics, Thracian University

1. Information about the doctoral program and the doctoral candidate

The full-time doctoral program was opened at the Regional Development Department, Faculty of Economics, Thracian University, by Order of the Rector of the Thracian University №371 / 23 February 2017, as of 01 March 2017, with a term of three years. The doctoral studies were extended by one year by Order of the Rector of the Thracian University №3271 / 28 November 2019, from 01 March 2020 to 01 March 2021. The doctoral student Violetka Lyubenova Jeleva was granted a right to defend her thesis, Order of the Rector of Thracian University (№759 / 18 March 2020), as of 25 February 2020.

The dissertation work was discussed and aimed at public defense by an expanded council at the Regional Development Department, Faculty of Economics, Thracian University (Minutes No150/13 November 2020). The procedural requirements of the Law on Development of Academic Staff in Republic of Bulgaria, Regulations for its implementation and Rules of Procedure of the Academic Staff of the Thracian University were complied with. The reviewers were appointed at the first meeting of the Scientific Jury on 18 December 2020.

The doctoral student Violetka Jeleva was born in 1988. She completed her secondary specialized education at the High School of Commerce “Knyaz Simeon Tarnovski” in Stara Zagora. She acquired an educational qualification degree of “Master” in “Economics of Alternative Tourism” at the Faculty of Economics, Thracian University. She is currently an assistant at the Regional Development Department at the Faculty of Economics, Thracian University.

2. General characteristics of the dissertation

In structural terms, the doctoral study is presented in an introduction, three chapters, conclusion, literature, and appendices. The dissertation work has a total volume of 251 pages, the main text is 180 pages. 187 sources were cited, of which 44 studies by Bulgarian authors, and 83 studies by foreign authors. Also cited were reports, normative and strategic documents, programs and projects (19 in total), 40 WEB sites of Bulgarian and world organizations. Reports, normative and strategic documents, programs and projects (19 in total), 40 WEB sites of Bulgarian and world organizations have been cited as well. The dissertation is illustrated with tables (14) and figures (41).

The economic, social, cultural and environmental challenges in terms of high concentration of visitors in mass tourism, as well as extreme pandemic conditions, expand interest in alternative forms of tourism. It is about developing forms of sustainable tourism that integrate the local population, natural environment and human resources of host countries and regions. This is a different, environmentally and socially responsible philosophy for the implementation of tourist activity, which by many authors is defined as the “good” form, protecting the limited resources of the

regions in the long term, while satisfying the interests and claims of both experienced and inexperienced tourists.

The dissertation thus presented for consideration is a comprehensive work with a distinct research approach and a scientifically applied nature precisely for the purposes of promoting alternative tourism in one of the most intensively developing regions in Bulgaria – Stara Zagora region. The Stara Zagora region is becoming more and more popular with its cultural and historical resources for tourism, as well as as part of the national marketing campaign to promote balneo- and SPA tourism, for which there are both scientific studies and a number of strategic documents at the national and regional level. However, this is far from exhausting the resources and capabilities of individual municipalities in the area for developing the alternative forms of tourism. Thus, it is forming the need for a special attention of science, practice and government policy to the opportunities for implementation of the tourist services in a sustainable way, both with established alternative forms and with those that have the prospect of being developed even better in perspective.

In connection with the resolving of these issues, the topic of the dissertation, the object, the subject, the purpose and the tasks of the research have an exceptional relevance and significance. The dissertation is comprised of an interconnected circle of theoretical and practical issues of alternative tourism with a focus on its forms precisely in Stara Zagora region. The limited number of scientific developments and publications related to the alternative tourism in the selected region makes the dissertation work original and timely.

In working out the dissertation, the doctoral student has relied on the accumulated knowledge of the problem and has creatively applied it. The literary sources have been analysed in good faith. This dissertation is a very extensive study, extremely labor-intensive work has been done and a significant amount of information has been processed.

Thus, the presented dissertation is a response to the need of researching with the help of scientific tools the problems and opportunities for the development of alternative forms of tourism in the Stara Zagora region.

3. Research and results

In its logical sequence, the dissertation starts with an introduction that purposefully defines the relevance of the problem in the context of both global and national trends, as well as considers the problems with a view to the challenges of the modern way of life and culture. The purpose and logical tasks derived from it, the subject matter, the object, and the thesis are correctly structured. All of the four composite hypotheses are distinguished, with eight subhypotheses aimed at the alternative forms of tourism studied. In chapter one, a definitive review of alternative tourism by foreign and Bulgarian authors has been very well presented. The essence and content of the individual forms has been examined, moving from the general understanding of the alternative tourism to the specific private forms of its manifestation. Special attention has been paid to classification systems and criteria, a separate section has been differentiated for the selected forms of alternative tourism for the purpose of the study. In Chapter two the scientific research methodology has been worked out and the applied research methods have been described in detail. Here is also a socio-economic analysis of the studied five municipalities and the respective settlements of the Stara Zagora region, with an emphasis on tourist resources. The third chapter is the constructive section of the dissertation, in which based on the results of the conducted surveys, strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the development of alternative tourism are presented. The thesis that there is an untapped potential for the development of alternative forms of tourism has been confirmed. Moreover, there is also a specific strategic approach (“aggressive”) to be applied in the development of strategic and programming documents for the development of alternative tourism in the Stara Zagora region. The dissertation ends with a Conclusion summarising, on the one hand, inferences reflecting the overall results of the key sections and, on the other hand, proposals for specific measures and activities aimed at exploiting the potential for the future development of the relevant forms of alternative tourism.

As for the main results and contributions of the study carried out in the dissertation work can be indicated:

First: Definitive highlights of the alternative forms of tourism, studied in the dissertation, have been clarified and enriched conceptually.

Second: A comprehensive methodological scheme for analysis and evaluation of the possibilities for the development of alternative forms of tourism has been developed, including an author's survey, with the application of included author's observation.

Third: A comprehensive analysis of the level of development of alternative forms of tourism in a particular area, the Stara Zagora region has been made, which allows the derivation of both estimates and expected development prospects.

Fourth: Specific strategic and operational measures for the development of alternative forms of tourism have been proposed, which can be applied both at the level of Stara Zagora region and for a nationwide package of measures.

The specified theoretical and research and applied contributions can be summarized as a program of strategic steps by national and state authorized bodies, in partnership with concerned countries, to transform alternative tourism, including in the Stara Zagora region into a competitive sector based on sustainable practices, as well as conceptual designs for alternative forms of tourism.

The abstract developed by the doctoral student generally meets the requirements. The content of the dissertation work, the methods and techniques of research and its contributions is presented precisely and clearly. A list of publications for the dissertation has been submitted - 4 publications, with 3 of which the doctoral student is the sole author. The bibliographic registration of one of the publications is incorrectly indicated in the author's abstract as a citation of the author.

In future studies of the factors for the development of alternative tourism, I can recommend taking into account the role of the pandemic environment, which is understandably not addressed in the dissertation, as well as the role of financial support to increase economic and socio-environmental sustainability.

4. Conclusion

Given the well-founded theoretical and methodological approaches, in-depth analysis, clearly formulated results and conclusions and recommendations, I believe that the presented dissertation meets the requirements of the Law on Academic Staff Development of Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for Academic Staff Development of Thracian University gives me reason to rate it as **POSITIVE**.

All this gives me reason to propose to the honorable Scientific Jury to vote positively and to award Violetka Lyubenova Jeleva the educational and scientific degree of "**Doctor**" in the scientific specialty "Economics and Management (Agriculture)", professional field 3.8. Economics.

January 13, 2021

Scientific Jury Member:.....
(Prof. Yuliana Yarkova)