



South-West University „Neofit Rilski”

## ACADEMIC STATEMENT

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Teodora Kiryakova – Dineva,

Professional Field 3.9, SWU “Neofit Rilski”, Blageovgrad

**on:** Dissertation for obtaining the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in the scientific specialty “Economics and Management (Agriculture)”, Professional field 3.8 Economics, Field of Higher Education 3. Social sciences, economic sciences and law

**On the topic** „Assessments of the development opportunities of alternative forms of tourism”

**author:** Violetka Lyubenova Zheleva, PhD student in full-time education in the department „Regional development” at the Faculty of Economics, Thracia University

**Grounds for providing the academic opinion:** participation in the scientific jury for the defense of the dissertation, according to the Decision of the Faculty of Economics at Thracia University from 20.11.2020 and the Order of the Rector of TrU № 3253 from 07.12.2020

### I. Short biography of the PhD student and data on the procedure

Violetka Jeleva has been trained in the doctoral program at the Department of Regional Development, Faculty of Economics, Thracia University, in the scientific specialty ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT (Agriculture), professional field 3.8. Economics, field of higher education 3. Social sciences according to Order № 271 / 23.02.2017. of the Rector of Thracia University. The training was carried out in a regular form during the period 2017-2020. In connection with the procedure for public defense of a dissertation on “Effective interpretation in sustainable tourism development” PhD student Zheleva presents: dissertation, abstract, autobiography, 4 publications, whereby the PhD student fully covers the scientometric requirements for obtaining the scientific and educational degree “Doctor” and minimum requirements set in the Act of the academic staff development of the Republic of Bulgaria and in the Regulations of its application at the Thracia University.

## II. General presentation of the dissertation

The presented dissertation is dedicated to the possibilities for development of alternative forms of tourism in Stara Zagora district. The proposed research is relevant given the modern socio-cultural and economic criteria for the development of the regions, as well as due to the growing role of new forms of tourism at the micro-destination level. With these two features, the work takes on an interdisciplinary character, and the chosen complex approach to analysis, combined with the author's in-depth view, opens up real prospects for regional diversification. The presented scientific approach is indisputably necessary for enriching the theory and practice of the native economic thought and tourist science. In a highly changing environment, including during a global pandemic, it is assumed that travel and tourism will continue to generate benefits for local economies in the future, but will change their traditional formats. The author's view that the consumption of goods and services will change in the direction of consumption of experiences and culture is just as true, and it will also be crucial for the tourism industry. The study is fully in line with this trend, focusing on alternative types of tourism.

The dissertation is in the volume of 251, which are the result of author's searches and subordinated to the opportunities for increasing the tourist interest in Stara Zagora district. A deeper focus on the general problem has been achieved through the study of a significant number of foreign and Bulgarian scientific papers, a total of 187 literature and information sources, regulations, regional statistics and indicators. The predominant sources are in Bulgarian, which confirms the relevance of the topic in the specialized economics and tourism science. The used literature and official data are correctly cited. The main text (180 pages) is within the scope of the subject of the study, although in some places some excesses are observed. I also believe that the object of the study could be clarified more precisely in view of the ultimate goal, which is to analyze and assess the tourist resource potential of some municipalities in Stara Zagora through the development of specific forms of tourism and evaluation of results and opportunities for this development. The tasks set for the implementation of this goal are six, which I consider solved in the dissertation. Particular attention should be paid to the implementation of the second, fourth and sixth tasks, which in particular relate to the methodological approach, analysis and evaluation of the results of field researched and identification of possible solutions to identified problems, because they provide the author's thesis. The doctoral student has made significant efforts to verify and prove that in Stara Zagora district there is untapped potential in the field of alternative forms of tourism (rural tourism, tourism related to traditional industries, cultural tourism, festival tourism, ethnographic tourism, wine tourism, sports and hobby tourism). The author validates her research goal by conducting a broader empirical study. It was conducted very conscientiously and covered an impressive number of respondents (1360 respondents). Some of the primary data are contained in the appendices, and they are presented in the form of 240 figures and 15 tables.

Impact assessments do not offer a universal methodological framework, which is the main difficulty that the study overcomes. The author applies her own assessments, which includes the following methods: the method of included observation, the method of field research, the method of survey, the graphical method for qualitative assessment of the achieved results, methods for descriptive statistics and interfering statistics. Additionally, the method of expert assessment based on SWOT analysis is applied, systematizing the literature review, the assessment of natural and anthropogenic factors, the state of the area and the state of alternative tourism according to the tourists who participated in the survey.

I find the application of combined qualitative and quantitative methods not only as appropriate but also as necessary for the present study. The conducted empirical research, the detailed description of each stage in it, unequivocally prove that the achieved conclusions are the result of the author's efforts, who went through all the difficulties and hard field work. The solution

of the general issues (analysis and assessment for modern forms of tourism) in the direction of the specifics of their interpretation with a view to achieving economic growth is noticed.

The prepared abstract reflects exactly the main points of the conceptual framework, the conducted research and the main results, is proposed in a systematic way, contains contributing moments. The doctoral student has 4 publications on the topic, three of which are independent, and one of them is in a monographic study.

### **III. Assessment of the structure and content of the dissertation**

Doctoral student Jeleva demonstrates in-depth knowledge of the problems of modern forms of tourism in the region of Stara Zagora, and in particular considers them in the alternative tourism defined by her. She reaches the goals of the developed methodology and based on the analysis of a survey with a representative sample of 1360 respondents and reaches specific proposals related to the opportunities for evaluation of regional tourism. In view of the huge amount of empirical material, the doctoral student specifies in particular some more important recommendations: raising awareness and tourist culture of tourists; development of adequate advertising and marketing strategy, diversification of the offered types of alternative tourism, activities for reduction of the expressed seasonality of the organized events, improvement of the partnerships with cooperation between the interested parties, and especially with the specialized educational institutions, cooperation with other areas for preparation of joint travel packages. I find especially valuable the recommendation to stimulate sports events and achieve greater national and international significance. Taking into account the merits of the overall research, I summarize and highly appreciate the following scientific and applied contributions: a comprehensive assessment of the opportunities for development of alternative forms of tourism in the district of Stara Zagora has been achieved; new empirical material provided for scientific use and derived methodology for the assessment of these possibilities; specific practical and applied measures are proposed, suitable for setting the aggressive approach for the development of regional tourism in Stara Zagora district. The contributing aspects are accepted as such.

### **IV. Critical notes, recommendations and questions on the dissertation**

The presented study is a completed work, which includes theoretical interpretations, author's concept for the application of complex assessment - all placed in the context of regional development of Stara Zagora on the basis of tourism development. What the author manages to achieve to the highest degree is to validate and defend his thesis, working in the field and processing real data. However, there are some remarks and criticisms that are reasonable to encounter when confronted with the analysis of such voluminous primary data.

*First:* I would have a recommendation for a more purposeful selection of strictly scientific sources and avoiding those with a popular scientific nature (p. 30 and p. 34). On the other hand, in some of the types of tourism, established authors are omitted, in the scope of wine tourism, for example (p. 39).

*Second,* some well known facts and extensive descriptions are used, mostly in regards of the types of tourism and in the characteristics of the municipalities. Parts of Chapter One could be

combined with parts of Chapter Two). Some minimal inaccuracies in layout and style have also been noted.

All these remarks in no way diminish the merits of the dissertation, which is a large-scale study. I recommend that the PhD student continue to work towards sustainable growth in the future by developing specialized forms of tourism, because they actually open up untapped potential and opportunities, even in times of social crisis and restrictive measures.

In view of the accumulated expertise through the fieldwork, I would like to ask the following question: The evaluation of a tourist product is largely subjective, but if you have to evaluate the hospitality of the tourist place at the micro-destination level, then: 1. *Which destination (festival) is has the most hospitality character;* 2. *What are the nationalities of foreign tourists?;* 3. *Were there any differences between tourists of different nationalities in terms of requirements for the tourist product?*

#### **V. Conclusion**

The presented dissertation of PhD student Violetka Zheleva has the character of a completed scientific research. I find the study extremely useful in two ways: it gives an accurate idea of the state of regional forms of tourism and identifies ways to optimize them in order to achieve growth in the regional economy. In addition, the rich empirical material provided will give information on other issues that fall outside the scope of this analysis. My final evaluation of the presented dissertation on "Assessments of opportunities for development of alternative forms of tourism" is entirely **POSITIVE** and I strongly suggest that the members of the distinguished jury vote for the award of scientific and educational degree "Doctor" of Violetka Lyubenova Jeleva in scientific specialty "Economics and Management (Agriculture)", professional field 3.8 Economics, Higher Education 3. Social sciences, economic sciences and law.

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Academic reviewer:

Blagoevgrad

(**Assoc. Prof. Dr. Teodora Kiryakova-Dineva**)