

## REVIEW

**In accordance with the procedure for acquiring the educational and scientific degree "Doctor",**

**announced in "D. A. Tsenov" Academy of Economics - Svishtov, pursuant to the Rector's Order No. 472/11.06.2025**

**Reviewer: Prof. Dr. Maria Zlatkova Stankova, South-West University "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad**

**Author of the dissertation: Simeon Ventsislavov Simeonov**

**Topic of the dissertation: State and development of culinary tourism in Bulgaria**

This review was prepared under the procedure for public defense of part-time doctoral student Simeon Ventsislavov Simeonov at the Department of "Economics and Tourism Management" at the "D. A. Tsenov" Academy of Economics - Svishtov.

Reason for submitting the review: participation in the scientific jury for the defense of the dissertation, according to Order No. 472/11.06.2025 of the Rector of the "D. A. Tsenov" Academy of Economics - Svishtov for conducting a procedure for acquiring the Educational and Scientific Degree "Doctor" in professional field 3.8 Economics, in the doctoral program "Economics and Management (Tourism)".

Dissertation, abstract and CV of doctoral student Simeonov were submitted under the procedure. The abstract includes lists of publications and contributions made as a result of the research. The materials are provided on an electronic format. A declaration of originality of the research is also attached.

**Simeon Simeonov** is a part-time doctoral student at the Department of "Economics and Tourism Management" of the "D. A. Tsenov" Academy of Economics - Svishtov, since 2018, with the scientific supervisor Assoc. Prof. Dr. Petya Ivanova.

During the years preceding his studies within the Educational and Scientific Degree "Doctor" program, he successively completed secondary specialized education in "Technology and Management of Production and Service in Catering Establishments" at the Vocational High School of Tourism and Food Technologies "Aleko Konstantinov" in Targovishte. His specialized education in the field of tourism continued in a bachelor's program in the specialty "Economics of Tourism" and in a master's program in the specialty "Management of Commercial Activities". Both degrees were acquired at the Academy of Economics "Dimitar Apostolov Tsenov" in Svishtov. Candidate Simeonov also has additional professional qualification from the same higher education institution in "Economic Pedagogy" - Professional Qualification from the Center for Postgraduate and Optional Training. All this has contributed over time to his realization in the field of tourism and education. He speaks English and Russian languages.

In the period 2018-2024, he led and participated in ten educational projects.



## **I. General presentation of the dissertation**

Simeon Simeonov's dissertation is a comprehensive and in-depth study of the state, trends and prospects of culinary tourism in Bulgaria. The topic is current, of interest and scientific and practical value, especially in the context of the search for sustainable and authentic tourist experiences.

The dissertation structurally consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, one appendix, a list of used literature and applications. Its total volume is 225 pages and can be assessed as meeting the established practice of formatting a dissertation. There are 31 figures and 16 tables used for illustrative purposes. A total of 108 sources are referenced in the study, of which 37 - in Cyrillic and 71 - in Latin, and the use of literary sources dated within the last five years should be noted.

The dissertation thematically investigates issues of interest that maintain their constant relevance in the work of researchers and scholars in tourism. The object to which it is oriented is the culinary tourism in Bulgaria, examined in the context of its role in the economic and social development of the tourism sector. The subject of the study is the environmental factors and those that have an impact on the satisfaction of practicing culinary tourism in Bulgaria. The scientific apparatus used is robust and corresponds to the style of a typical doctoral study.

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

The topic of culinary tourism in Bulgaria is of significant and contemporary scientific interest, as it combines interdisciplinary knowledge from the fields of tourism, economics, cultural studies and gastronomy. This type of tourism is directly related to global trends for sustainable development, promotes the use of local resources, preserves traditions and contributes to the social and economic revitalization of regions. The relevance of the topic is determined by the growing demand for authentic tourist experiences related to local cuisine, both by domestic and international tourists. Bulgaria has a rich culinary heritage, which puts it in an advantageous position for development and promotion as a gastronomic destination. The institutional interest in the topic is also indicative - there are initiatives to build wine and culinary routes, create a national culinary map and support for small producers. From a scientific point of view, the topic provides an opportunity to apply various research methods, as well as to develop models through which to analyze the factors influencing the development of the sector. It is this combination of theoretical potential and practical significance that defines the topic as justified, timely and suitable for in-depth dissertation research.

The author demonstrates good awareness of the topic, using both Cyrillic and foreign sources. He also attempts to express his own attitude to the researched issues, evident from his proposals in connection with the recommendations for the development of culinary tourism in Bulgaria in an applied plan, as well as in the schematization of the model for measuring the factors influencing the development of culinary tourism in Bulgaria. The illustrative material he proposes is of a volume and quality that sufficiently reflects the specifics of the research. The total volume of the work is over 220 pages, which is an indicator of the depth and scope of the research.

The First Chapter (pp. 6–85) is devoted to the theoretical foundations of culinary tourism. It includes a historical overview, definition of the concept, demand analysis and innovative approaches. With its nearly 80 pages, this part provides a solid theoretical framework and demonstrates the author's broad scientific awareness. The second chapter (pp. 87–141) of the dissertation is devoted to the research approach to establishing the state of culinary tourism in Bulgaria. The author develops an algorithm and methodological model



through which the factors influencing the development of the sector are analyzed. Attention is focused on defining key issues related to the theoretical and methodological foundations of culinary tourism, tourist satisfaction and criteria for evaluating the tourist experience. Modeling is used as the main tool for structuring the analysis, and a consistent algorithm for assessing the state and potential of the sector is proposed. This approach allows not only to diagnose the current state, but also to formulate recommendations for future development, based on objective data and logical consistency. The presented model is innovative and creates a basis for implementing strategic planning in the field of culinary tourism. It is the most voluminous – over 110 pages – and includes the development of an analysis model, selection of criteria, study of factors from the macro- and microenvironment, as well as tourist satisfaction. This shows that the main emphasis is placed on the analytical and applied value of the work.

Chapter Three (pp. 143–206) contains a strategic model and substantiated recommendations for the development of culinary tourism in our country. The author emphasizes that tourist destinations and companies offering culinary experiences seek differentiation and competitive advantages by building unique products. Specific forms of culinary tourism are indicated, which are developing with increasing intensity – festivals, markets, tasting tours, culinary routes and interactive experiences, linked to traditional and regional culinary practices. The growing importance of food as cultural capital, a symbol of identity and social status, as well as a factor for tourist attraction is taken into account. The author logically builds the strategic model on the conclusions of the previous chapters, offering specific management guidelines for the sustainable development of destinations through culinary tourism. These proposals are tailored to local potential, consumer demand and good international practices. Although shorter, it plays an important role by synthesizing the conclusions and turning them into practically applicable recommendations.

The balance between the chapters is relatively well accomplished, although the second chapter dominates as a text. In summary, the following analysis can be made: The first chapter provides the theoretical basis, the second deepens the analysis through empirical data, and the third proposes strategic solutions. This logical sequence and proportionality between volume and content contribute to the overall scientific and applied orientation of the dissertation.

Simeon Simeonov's dissertation examines in depth the current and promising topic of the state and development of culinary tourism in Bulgaria. The main goal of the study is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the state of culinary tourism in the country, with an emphasis on identifying the main factors influencing its development, as well as formulating effective strategic guidelines for its sustainable improvement. The set goal determines the logic of the structure and the choice of methods, and the achieved results testify to the acquired skills for applying analytical skills by the doctoral student.

I assume that the object of research is correctly formulated, reflecting the logic and goals of the dissertation. As mentioned, it focuses on culinary tourism in Bulgaria, considered in the context of its role in the economic and social development of the tourism sector. It is analyzed as part of the specialized forms of tourism with the potential for sustainable growth and regional development.

The subject of the study are the environmental factors - both macroeconomic and microenvironmental, and the elements influencing the satisfaction of practicing culinary tourism in Bulgaria. Thus deployed, they correspond to the general structural framework. However, it should be noted that where it is located in the introductory part, the subject is insufficiently precise and not fully clarified in the formulation "environmental factors and those with an impact on the satisfaction of practicing culinary tourism in Bulgaria." I accept, however, that in the main text of the dissertation, the subject is further clarified in the direction of the interaction between tourist demand, the supply of culinary products and the perception of experiences by tourists.



The methodological framework of the dissertation is based on an integrated approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. A literature review was used to identify the theoretical foundations and existing research in the field of culinary tourism, surveys among tourists and representatives of the tourism business, a comparative analysis of good practices from the country and abroad, as well as expert interviews with key participants in the sector. The collected empirical data were processed using modern statistical methods, which allows the derivation of objective dependencies and trends related to the state and prospects for culinary tourism in Bulgaria.

The study includes the development of an analytical model through which the factors of the external and internal environment influencing the development of the sector, as well as the elements shaping the satisfaction of tourists, are assessed. Tools such as STEEP analysis, Porter's model and indicators of competitiveness and sustainability were applied.

The author's motivation for choosing the topic stems from his many years of practical and teaching experience in the field of tourism, gained at a vocational high school in tourism, as well as from observing the growing role of culinary tourism as a means of preserving cultural identity, stimulating the local economy and enriching the tourism offer in Bulgaria. The author's personal commitment to the topic and professional expertise contribute to the depth and practical focus of the research.

The abstract submitted under the procedure is 44 pages long and reflects the dissertation correctly and consistently in terms of content, preserving the structure and emphasizing the contributions and applied value.

My impressions regarding compliance with scientific ethics are based on the declaration of authorship of the dissertation thesis and its originality submitted under the procedure. In my opinion, the candidate has complied with the rules of scientific ethics, has used the APA style for writing and citing, according to the general rules in the Academy of Economics "D. A. Tsenov" - Svishtov for bibliographical citation of information sources. I do not find any case of "copy-paste" in his scientific work, when trying to do so and when searching online. I accept that the dissertation is the personal work of the doctoral student.

### **III. Scientific and applied contributions of the dissertation thesis**

The scientific and applied contributions of the dissertation thesis are presented systematically in the final part of the Abstract (p. 40). I accept them, believing that for the purposes of the review they can be considered as further development of existing knowledge about culinary tourism and the factors influencing its development and as application of scientific achievements in practice based on a proposed toolkit for analysis and assessment of the state and development of culinary tourism in Bulgaria and specific guidelines and recommendations regarding this type of tourism, taking into account national specifics and international practice.

I do not find among the documents submitted for the procedure, data on response and recognition in received reviews or in the specialized scientific literature for the achieved results. However, I believe that they are practically applicable as lecture and teaching materials. The basis for such an attitude is given to me by the publications realized on the dissertation, which are six in total (independent and co-authored) - two articles and four scientific reports. It is evident that they reflect essential parts of the research, which also fulfills the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for its Implementation.

The candidate fulfills the national minimum requirements for acquiring the Educational and Scientific Degree "Doctor".

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

Along with the listed positive aspects, some recommendations can be made to the dissertation research submitted for review with a view to improving the candidate's work in his future research activity.

First of all, I believe that in places (for example, on pp. 101-107) in the presentation of the STEEP analysis, the focus on culinary tourism is not direct enough and there is no connection with the Bulgarian environment. Another point that I would like to draw attention to is, to a certain extent, the generalized presentation of the strategic model set by the doctoral student (p. 193) through the Culinary Tourism Framework presented by him in Fig. 31, which he defines as a tool for strategic planning. In this sense, I find a certain dissonance in logical terms.

The above does not in any way diminish the value of the study. In this regard, I recommend that Simeon Simeonov continue his research work. I believe that his developments would also be of interest to the foreign-speaking audience.

I would like to ask a question to doctoral student Simeonov, driven by his professional curiosity – What is his opinion on the need for certification in culinary tourism?

#### **V. Summary conclusion and opinion**

Bearing in mind that the dissertation is an independent work of the doctoral student, and the requirements of the Law for the development of academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the regulations for its application and the internal requirements of the Academy of Economics “D. A. Tsenov”– Svishtov’s rules have been met, as well as the fact that Simeon Ventsislavov Simeonov possesses all the qualities, experience and competencies to conduct independent scientific research, I suggest to the Honorable members of the Scientific Jury to vote positively and make a decision to award the candidate the educational and scientific degree DOCTOR in professional field 3.8 Economics, scientific specialty "Economics and Management (Tourism).

Date: 12.06.2025

Reviewer: .....

(Prof. Dr. Maria Stankova)