

REVIEW

OF A DISSERTATION PAPER FOR THE AWARD OF EDUCATIONAL AND SCIENTIFIC DEGREE 'DOCTOR' UNDER DOCTORAL PROGRAMME "ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT BEYOND THE SPHERE OF MATERIAL PRODUCTION (PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION), PROFESSIONAL FIELD 3.7. "ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT"

Reviewer: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Radoslavova Stanimirova, University of Economics - Varna, professional field 3.8 "Economics" and scientific specialty „Economics and Management (Agriculture)”

Author of the dissertation paper: Dimitrina Lyubenova Prodanova

Topic of the dissertation paper: Stimulating the economic development of rural areas through activation of local communities

Scientific advisor: Prof. Borislav Dimitrov Borissov, DSc

I. General presentation of the doctoral thesis

This review is prepared pursuant to Order № 268 / 28.04.2022 of the Rector of the D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics – Svishtov – Prof. Dr. Mariyana Bozhinova in accordance with the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for application of this law.

The dissertation paper is of total volume of 268 standard pages, incl. 44 pages appendices, and consists of: an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a list of references and a statement of originality. The structure of the paper is well-balanced, the conclusions that close each chapter make a good impression, there is a logical development of the research from the theoretical, through the analytical, to the strategic and the prescriptive part of the work. The dissertation is illustrated by 52 figures and 41 tables. The cited sources are of a total number 125, including 49 in Bulgarian.

Attached is a reference for the contributions of the dissertation and for compliance with the minimum national requirements for the award of educational and scientific degree 'Doctor' in professional field 3.7 'Administration and Management'. A list and

publications of the doctoral student on the topic of the dissertation are included in the set with the received materials.

Dimitrina Prodanova has been studying under doctoral programme “Organization and Management beyond the Sphere of Material Production (Public Administration)” at the Department of Strategic Planning at D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics - Svishtov, with scientific advisor Prof., DSc. Borislav Dimitrov Borissov.

Dimitrina Prodanova has a master's degree from D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics (1999) and has specialized in training for work with EU institutions and for acquiring IT skills. From 2000 to 2004 she was a Senior Expert Economic Development in the municipality of Svishtov, from 2004 to 2015 she held the position of Chief Expert in the Project Management and European Affairs Unit of the same municipality, and as from 2017 she has been the Executive Director of LAG Belene - Nikopol.

II. Assessment of the format and the contents of the dissertation.

1. Relevance of the topic and expediency of the formulated subject, object, thesis, purpose, tasks and research methods.

The dissertation is devoted to a topical issue related to the lagging behind of rural areas in Europe and in particular in Bulgaria in terms of key economic and social indicators, strong dependence on agriculture and the need for a comprehensive approach to stimulate development by activating the capacity of local communities. The relevance of the research problem stems from the necessity to measure the results of the implementation of the LEADER approach in Bulgaria during the past two programming periods of the RDP and to consider its application in the new programming period (2023-2027).

The object and the subject of the research are clearly formulated. The research purpose and tasks are correctly defined. This directs attention to the subject of the research and provides an opportunity for their achievement in the process of work.

The author sufficiently justifies the choice of a topic and has sound knowledge of the related issues. On the one hand, the knowledge of the specialized literature and research in the field of endogenous and integrated rural development and on the other

hand the practical experience of the position of Executive Director of an operating LAG allows her to highlight issues that have not yet been analysed in depth and / or not thoroughly researched.

2. Characteristics and evaluation of the dissertation.

The introduction of the dissertation presents its relevance, the research object, subject, purpose, tasks, thesis statement and constraints,

In **the first chapter**, the doctoral student has conceptualized the main theoretical aspects of the regulatory framework and the current problems of the approach to stimulating the overall development of rural areas by activating local communities. Emphasis is placed on the concept of multi-level governance, based on the sharing of responsibilities and cooperation at different levels in the decision-making process and in the implementation of European policies. The program periods of rural development after Bulgaria's accession to the European Union are presented. The LEADER approach on which the Rural Development Program (RDP) is based is described in detail. Attention is drawn to the accepted definition of rural areas in our country which allows to "distort the LEADER approach to support of rural areas" (p. 15 of the Abstract on the dissertation). The focus in the presentation of the LEADER approach is to integrate the efforts of the stakeholders in the development of the region.

At the same time, it can be added that the LEADER approach is based on the achievement of diversification of agriculture and the integration of the various economic activities that can be developed in the so-called rural areas, as well as the role of cooperation between local communities at national and international level in building local capacity. These issues are addressed to a lesser extent when presenting the conceptual framework. The different typologies of rural areas and LAGs have not been described, which could be the basis for their more detailed consideration (for example, according to regional specialisation).

In **the second chapter**, the main focus is on the debate on the definition of rural areas for the needs of the practical implementation of rural development policy. It presents a territorial analysis (geographical method) for evaluation of the activities of the LAGs, a comparative analysis and a statistical study of the effects of the LEADER

approach in municipalities in Bulgaria. Based on the above, variants are proposed to precise the definition of a rural area.

The study on the effects of the LEADER approach on local economic development, presented in the dissertation, is based on official statistical information at the national level on key indicators concerning the socio-economic development of rural areas such as: population; natural and migration increase of population; age structure; relative share of employees in the industry; average annual salary; unemployment rate; net revenues from sales of local businesses.

Using a system of absolute and analytical indicators, a comprehensive evaluation of the results of the work of the LAGs for the implementation of the Community-Led Local Development Strategy (CLLD Strategy) was carried out.

The third chapter summarizes the results of a survey of the mobilisation of the local capacity in municipalities in Bulgaria, based on a created for the purposes of the design for assessment of the impact of the LEADER approach on activating local communities.

Each of the three chapters of the dissertation closes with conclusions regarding the content and research described in them.

In the presented **conclusion** the author has successfully synthesized the achieved results in theoretical, conceptual and analytically-prescriptive plan, regarding the application of the LEADER/ CLLD approach as a main instrument of the EU CAP.

The bibliographic reference (listing 125 sources) shows good literary awareness of the author of the dissertation. **The language and the style** are scientific.

I consider that the set **purpose and tasks** have been achieved.

The main points of the dissertation have found a place in the submitted **abstract**. In this sense, the content of the abstract corresponds to the main work of the author.

3. Contributions and significance of the dissertation for science and practice.

The presented report on the contributions correctly reflects the main achievements of the doctoral student in the overall research which, in general, can be characterised as practically feasible. The claimed six contributions can be summarized

as follows:

1. Functional and territorial analysis of the LAGs in the Republic of Bulgaria that justifies the role of this form of public-private partnership for decision-making in the areas of effect of the local development strategies.

2. The author has proposed a new definition of a rural area, that can be used in implementing the policies for stimulating the local economic development.

3. A comparative analysis of the municipalities that implement the LEADER approach in Bulgaria and other municipalities in Bulgaria has been conducted thus revealing regional disproportion in the surveyed aspects.

4. Based on a comprehensive evaluation of the results of their activities, it is justified that the CLLD strategies supported under several funds provide for better opportunities to activate local communities and stimulate local economic development.

5. Based on an expert survey, a conclusion is drawn that there is no dependence between the capacity and location of the LAG according to the accepted distinction between Northern and Southern Bulgaria, which justifies the application of a unified approach.

6. A system of indicators for analysis and assessment of the effects of LAG functioning in terms of activating local communities and achieving the objectives of CLLD Strategies has been developed.

4. Evaluation of the publications on the topic of the doctoral thesis

The doctoral student has submitted a list of 5 publications on the topic of the dissertation: 1 study, 2 articles (one of which in co-authorship) and 2 reports. Structurally, 4 of the publications are independent, all are published in Bulgaria, mainly in journals and proceedings of D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics – Svishtov.

5. Personal participation

The dissertation is an independent and comprehensive research. It is declared that the theoretical and practical developments, conclusions and recommendations presented in the dissertation are independently prepared by the doctoral student, as

well as the scientific works published in co-authorship, and that the dissertation uses those parts that are the result of personal scientific research.

6. Abstract

The main points of the dissertation have found a place in the presented abstract. In this sense, the content of the abstract reflects the submitted paper.

11. Critical remarks and questions

In order to create preconditions for convincing defence of the work of the doctoral student, I allow myself to ask the following questions:

1. The territorial analysis of the LAGs operating on the territory of the country evidences that "the most deprived municipalities are not included in the map of LAG coverage". The endogenous approach to development is based on the capacity of the local community to initiate activities related to its own development. How can such capacity be built in practice, and are there no potential risks if we limit the definition of a rural area, which would exclude municipalities that can be given as an example of implementing the concept of integrated development?

2. Is it sufficient when doing the territorial analysis of the LAGs functioning in the country to use the distinction between Northern and Southern Bulgaria so that the specifics in the development of the LAG can be identified? What other territorial criteria and typologies for rural areas can be used?

3. On page 68 of the dissertation, when commenting on the characteristics of rural areas presented in the specialized literature, "the relatively lower price in the province, in contrast to urban areas" is mentioned. How would you comment on the substantial differentiation of the price of agricultural land in Bulgaria, which in this 2022 reaches 4500 BGN per decare in some typical rural areas in Northeastern Bulgaria (Dobrich region) and is below BGN 700 per decare in rural areas in Southwestern Bulgaria (Sofia region). To what extent does this characteristic correspond to the competitiveness of the rural area, incl. building local structures to initiate activities for its own development?

CONCLUSION

The submitted dissertation paper is a large-scale study of a significant and current problem. The author's contributions enrich the existing knowledge in the field of integrational development of rural areas. Therefore, I give my **positive assessment of the research** presented by the above-reviewed dissertation, abstract, results and contributions, and I invite the esteemed scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Dimitrina Lyubenova Prodanova in the field of higher education: 3. Social, economic and legal sciences; Professional field: 3.7. Administration and Management; doctoral programme "Organization and Management beyond the Sphere of Material Production (Public Administration)".

Reviewer:

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Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Stanimirova

22 May, 2022