OPINION

Given by: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hristo Sirashki

Author of the dissertation paper: *Dimitrina Lyubenova Prodanova*

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

Grounds *for the submission of the opinion*: appointment for a member of the scientific panel for defence of the dissertation paper acc. to Order No. 268/ 28.04.2022 of the Rector of D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics - Svishtov

1. General characteristics of the dissertation paper

The dissertation paper submitted by Dimitrina Prodanova consists of: an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a list of references and appendices. The dissertation paper is in the volume of 268 standard pages, including 221 pages main text and 44 pages appendices. The text includes 52 figures and 41 tables. The cited sources are of a total number 121, which I accept to be sufficient. The sources are properly cited. The introduction presents the research focus as follows: relevance, object and subject of research, thesis statement, purpose, research tasks, working hypothesis and methodology. The object of the research is the economic development of the rural areas in Bulgaria as a specific combination of local resources and institutional capacity. The subject of research are the problems and ways to promote the economic development of rural areas using the "bottom-up" approach to activating local communities. The purpose of research is formulated in a clear and concise way and is successfully decomposed into six research tasks. The conclusion presents the main results of the dissertation paper. The enclosed reference includes 4 publications on the topic of the dissertation, including one in co-authorship.

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

The research topic chosen is of high relevance and scientific and applied value. EU rural development policy has been growing in importance and is part of the Union's Common

Agricultural Policy. The Rural Development Progam has been implemented in Bulgaria since joining the EU with the main objectives of improving living standards, increasing the level of services in rural areas, development of agriculture and forestry, protection of natural resources and other. It is an important tool for converging the level of development of urban and rural areas. Rural economic development, based on the involvement of local communities, ensures growth and meeting the needs at the local level through the application of the multi-sectoral LEADER approach. In a convincing and consistent way, the dissertation justifies the thesis statement that the LEADER approach ensures balanced development and improves the quality of life in rural municipalities based on the development of local resources and capacity building at the local level. The topic is particularly relevant in the context of the debate on the European Union budget and the future of the common agricultural policy - especially after the recent challenges Europe and the world face, such as Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The related issues have been explored in a number of publications abroad, but the topic is definitely under-researched in the Bulgarian scientific literature. Thus, the dissertation fills an existing knowledge gap on the implementation of the LEADER approach and the extent to which this stimulates the economic development of rural areas by activation of local communities in Bulgaria.

The thesis statement formulated by doctoral student Dimitrina Prodanova is clearly defined, of high scientific-applied value and it is ambitious enough. The ideas are well-described and logically constructed to justify the thesis statement through consistent and diligent fulfilment of the research tasks. The language and style used are scientific, but at the same time understandable and clear. The chapters are proportionate and the structure is well-balanced. The personal style and views of the author on the topic are expressed. To me, the volume of the dissertation paper is appropriate. The charts and the tables included illustrate the author's ideas and accurately present the studies, summaries and interrelations made and described in the text. In my opinion, the formulated purpose and research tasks have been performed. The evaluation of the compliance and the necessity of statistical processing of the rich empirical data was performed with the use of appropriate calculation procedures and skillful use of software products - Excel, SPSS, Survey Planet.

The abstract is in the volume of 47 pages and fully and accurately reflects the content of the dissertation paper. It includes a list of the scientific contributions of the dissertation paper, a list of publications on the topic of the dissertation paper and a statement of originality.

III. Scientific and applied contributions of the dissertation paper.

Based on the results achieved in her dissertation paper doctoral student Dimitrina Prodanova claims six contributions. I accept as existing the thus described scientific and scientific applied contributions.

IV. Questions on the dissertation paper.

At the defence session doctoral student Dimitrina Prodanova can comment on whether at the end of the programming period there is a follow-up assessment of the implementation of the approach in Bulgaria and what is expected as regards the implementation of the LEADER approach for the next programming period.

V. Summary assessment of the dissertation and conclusion.

The dissertation paper titled "Stimulating the economic development of rural areas by activation of local communities" is a topical and in-depth study. Based on the aforementioned merits, scientific and scientific-applied contributions I give a positive assessment of the dissertation and support the proposal for awarding to Dimitrina Lyubenova Prodanova the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in doctoral program "Organization and management beyond the field of material production (Public Administration) "

Signed by: ....

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hristo Sirashki

17 May, 2022