

REVIEW

for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the scientific speciality "Finance, Monetary Circulation, Credit, and Insurance."

Reviewer: **Associate Professor PhD Nadezhda Georgieva Blagoeva**, scientific speciality "Finance, Monetary Circulation, Credit, and Insurance," Agricultural University of Plovdiv

Author of the dissertation: **Ivelin Simeonov Kichukov**, a full-time doctoral student at the Department of "Finance and Credit," D.A. Tsenov Academy of Economics, Svishtov

Scientific Supervisors: **Professor PhD Andrey Zahariev and Associate Professor PhD Petya Ivanova**

Title of the dissertation: "**Financial and Economic Analysis of the Strategic Transformation of Tourism in Bulgaria**"

Reason for the presentation of the review: Order No. 1234/18.11.2024 by the Rector of D.A. "Tsenov Academy" of Economics, Svishtov

1. General Overview of the Dissertation

The dissertation submitted for review addresses a highly topical subject, considering not only the economic significance of the sector and the post-COVID-19 development boom but, more importantly, the pressing need for reform and support of the tourism industry in the Republic of Bulgaria. The dissertation comprises 183 pages, of which 165 constitute the main text. Its structure is classical, consisting of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a list of figures and tables, two appendices, a bibliography, and a declaration of originality. To illustrate the presented arguments, the work includes 6 tables and 23 figures. There is a logical sequence and coherence among the three main chapters, with the work being relatively balanced, albeit with a slight emphasis on the third chapter.

During the dissertation preparation, the doctoral candidate reviewed 82 literature sources, 43 in foreign languages and 39 in Bulgarian. The author has diligently cited the referenced literature sources, adhering to the requirements of the APA citation style. Standard and specialised software tools, namely MS Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics, are utilised for data processing and analysis.

The dissertation's primary objective is to conduct a financial and economic analysis and propose solutions for operational adaptation and strategic transformation of the entire tourism sector to ensure its viability during and after the COVID-19 pandemic by considering the country's competitive advantages. The doctoral candidate has formulated three research tasks aligned with the defined research goal to achieve this objective. In the process of addressing these tasks, the candidate substantiates the central research thesis, namely: "... Force Majeure impact of the global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 disease the has requires refinement and reassessment of all previous decisions for financing and investing in the tourism industry in the direction towards operational adaptation and strategic transformation of the entire tourism sector during and after the pandemic."

The object of study in the dissertation is the tourism sector in the Republic of Bulgaria, while the subject is its strategic transformation in the context of post-pandemic recovery. To substantiate the thesis, the doctoral candidate employed various methods, including comparative analysis, survey methods, correlation analysis, methods of deduction and induction, statistical analysis methods, graphical representation of processed data, and survey analysis using the Likert scale.

II. Evaluation of the Format and Content of the Dissertation:

The topic the doctoral candidate and his academic advisors selected is distinguished by its exceptional relevance, practical applicability, and potential for scholarly exploration. The author effectively justifies this in the introduction to their research, highlighting the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the tourism sector and the resulting necessity for a strategic transformation of the final tourism product to adapt to new conditions and requirements.

The composition of the dissertation is concise and logically structured. The introduction outlines the research framework, substantiates the topic's relevance, and defines its object, subject, goals, methods, tasks, main thesis, and three working hypotheses. The first chapter presents the theoretical framework, which focuses on analyses and perspectives regarding the strategic transformation of tourism in Bulgaria. This chapter is divided into four sections.

First, a critical analysis of key national strategic documents for tourism development, such as the *National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development in the Republic of Bulgaria 2014–2030* and its corresponding *Action Plan for 2017–2020*, is conducted. These documents define tourism as a structural sector of Bulgaria's national economy. Next, a critical analysis of the Black Sea transport infrastructure is presented, emphasising its importance for the industry's post-pandemic recovery. The author argues for the necessity of government investments to address bottlenecks in two major regional cities by constructing bypass and transit roads. The

potential for tourism development along the Danube Limes is also explored, focusing on grant support from the *Bulgaria–Romania CBC Programme 2021–2027*, which could revitalise the economies of the two poorest Danube-adjacent regions. Finally, the first chapter concludes with a stock market analysis and evaluation of significant tourism companies on the Bulgarian capital market, including a correlation analysis of the stock prices of Albena AD.

The second chapter develops a methodology for a survey on the directions for the strategic transformation of tourism. The author demonstrates how survey-based research among 174 respondents using the Likert scale can identify key directions for transformation. The chapter justifies the chosen methodology, provides the main question groups and their formulations, and summarises the results. These findings allow the author to present critiques and recommendations for adjustments to strategic tourism development documents. Key issues identified include the lack of funding (including EU projects), the absence of national prioritisation of tourism, and the underutilisation of Bulgaria's natural resources for promoting spa, adventure, historical, balneological, seaside, and winter tourism. The author concludes that due to these shortcomings, recovery of the tourism sector, particularly in terms of export potential, is unrealistic, as the number of foreign tourist arrivals remains significantly lower than pre-2019 levels.

The third chapter focuses on potential directions for the strategic transformation of tourism in Bulgaria based on the survey findings. The survey results are presented and summarised graphically, inspiring the formulation of possible solutions to address weaknesses and challenges hindering the post-pandemic recovery of Bulgaria's tourism sector.

In the **conclusion**, the doctoral candidate summarises the main findings and recommendations, highlighted at the end of each chapter. This enhances the systematic structure and comprehensibility of the research. The quality of the dissertation is further improved by effective visualisation through figures and tables. The author's writing style and use of terminology meet academic standards, demonstrating a good understanding of the scientific literature in the relevant field.

The doctoral candidate includes two **appendices** in the dissertation. These provide schematic data on the number of registered tourists in Bulgaria during the 2023/24 winter season from key markets, and the percentage change in tourist overnight stays in the EU in 2023 compared to 2022.

The dissertation's **abstract** is 33 pages long, summarising the compositional elements and qualities of the research. It includes a detailed account of the scientific and applied

contributions, which are entirely the doctoral candidate's work. I accept the author's stated contributions, considering them fully aligned with the dissertation's content.

Regarding the research topic, the author has published three individual scientific articles and two conference papers, one co-authored with other researchers. Some of these contributions were presented at three scientific forums in which the author participated. Thus, the total number of publications amounts to five. However, there is a discrepancy between the numbers cited in the dissertation and the abstract. For this review, I recognise five publications, which collectively earn 42.5 points, exceeding the required 30 points as per regulatory standards. These publications prove that at least part of the author's findings have gained public recognition and received scholarly critique and evaluation. The topics of the publications are closely related to and reflect key aspects of the overall content of the dissertation.

III. Scientific and Scientific-Applied Contributions of the Dissertation

The summary of the contributions in the dissertation highlights four main points, which are not explicitly categorised into scientific and applied contributions. These are as follows:

First, through a thesis approach, the need for investments in high-speed meridian routes to ensure accessibility to the Bulgarian Black Sea Coast is justified. Fast transit from Sarafovo airport to the resort villages located south and north of Burgas is key to the region's development. The Black Sea transport network and air transport from the airports in Burgas and Varna categorically increase the occupancy of the bed base during the summer tourist season.

Second, opportunities have been identified for support with grant funding for tourism in the Danube region, with a justification for a Danube Limes destination, which would be a priority for cross-border cooperation between Bulgaria and Romania in 2021-2027. Unleashing the potential of the Danube River and its islands requires large-scale investments in the tourism sector of the Danube municipalities.

Third, based on a customer-centric empirical study among 174 benchmark respondents, with a five-point Likert scale assessment, the current state, problems, and guidelines for strategic transformation of tourism in Bulgaria have been established.

Fourth, through financial and economic analysis and descriptive statistics, the strong negative effect of the pandemic has been confirmed with a rank of over 4.6 million tourists (Bulgarian and foreign) for 2019-2023 and a coefficient of variation of 28.40%. The massive loss of profits from unoccupied bed capacity for the sector's economic operators is due to the

pandemic and the negative effect of the war in Ukraine. This has led to the practical loss of two strategic markets representing the more significant part of foreign tourists.

The dissertation's contributions can be categorised into two main groups: Enrichment of Scientific Achievements and Application of Scientific Knowledge in Practice.

IV. Critical Remarks, Questions, and Recommendations Regarding the Dissertation

I believe that doctoral candidate Ivelin Kichukov has competently developed his dissertation, and therefore, I have no significant critical remarks. However, I would like to pose the following questions:

1. What specific investments in Black Sea transport infrastructure would you recommend?
2. What concrete measures would you propose to address the 12 author-identified criticisms regarding the strategic development of tourism?

V. Summary Conclusion and Opinion

In conclusion, the dissertation titled "Financial and Economic Analysis of the Strategic Transformation of Tourism in Bulgaria", submitted for review, represents an independent and comprehensive scientific study on a topic relevant to academia and practice. The research addresses the need for the strategic transformation of tourism in the context of post-pandemic recovery.

The dissertation fully meets the requirements set forth by the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and its accompanying regulations. The doctoral candidate successfully achieves the initial goals, validates the working hypotheses, and substantiates the central research thesis. All this demonstrates the candidate's ability to conduct independent scientific and applied research.

The above arguments lead me to provide a positive assessment and to recommend that the esteemed scientific jury award the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" to Ivelin Simeonov Kichukov in the field of higher education 3. Social, Legal, and Economic Sciences, professional field 3.8. Economics, and scientific speciality "Finance, Monetary Circulation, Credit, and Insurance."

Date:

10.12.2024

Reviewer: (Signature:)

Associate professor PhD Nadezhda Blagoeva