

REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Stefan Dimitrov Ivanov, Trakia University, Stara Zagora

of a dissertation for awarding the educational and scientific degree of "**PhD**"

in: the field of higher education: 3. Social, economic and legal sciences

professional field: 3.8 Economics

doctoral program: Political economy

Author: Yulian Elinov Mollov

Topic of thesis: Decentralized Regional Policy - An Opportunity for Sustainable Development of the Regions In Bulgaria

Research supervisor: Prof. Dr. Yordan Atanasov Hristoskov, Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv

1. General description of the presented materials

By order No. PD-21-1440 dated 07/03/2023 of the Rector of the Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv, I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury to facilitate a procedure for the defense of a dissertation on the topic "Decentralized Regional Policy - An Opportunity for Sustainable Development of the Regions In Bulgaria", for awarding the educational and scientific degree of "PhD" in field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.8 Economics, doctoral program: Political economy. The author of the dissertation is Julian Elinov Mollov – a full-time doctoral student at the "Economic Sciences" department, with scientific supervisor Prof. Dr. Yordan Atanasov Christoskov from Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

The set of materials, presented by the doctoral student, **is** in accordance with Article 36 (1) of the Regulations on the development of the academic staff of the Plovdiv University, and includes the following documents:

- request to the Rector of the University of Plovdiv to initiate the procedure for defense of the dissertation;
- CV in Europass format;
- protocol from the departmental council, reporting on the preparedness to open the procedure and on the preliminary discussion of the dissertation;
- dissertation;
- abstract;
- list of scientific publications on the topic of the dissertation;

- copies of scientific publications;
- declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents;
- certificate of compliance with the national minimum requirements for the educational and scientific degree "PhD"

The doctoral student has attached four publications, one of which is in English. The last publication is in print, for which the author has attached an official notice from the ERI at BAS. The rest of the documents are also in order and meet the requirements.

2. Brief biographical information about the PhD student

Julian Mollov was born in 1980. In 2003, he graduated with a bachelor's degree in "Political Science" from Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv, and in 2005 he graduated with a master's degree in "Economics" from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". He started work as a junior expert at the Plovdiv Regional Administration, where he was responsible for regional development and the regional policy, within the framework of the Regional Council for the Development of the South-Central Region. After one year, he transferred to the "South-Central Region" department at the "Regional Development Programming" Directorate of the Ministry of Regional Development. There, he worked as a senior expert until 2011, and has since been appointed head of the "South-Central Region".

In 2019, he was enrolled as a full-time PhD student in the doctoral program "Political Economy" at the Department of Economic Sciences of the University of Plovdiv.

These brief data clearly outline the profile of Julian Mollov, whose professional interests are focused in the field of regional development and regional policy and who has gained practical experience in the planning and management of the South Central region. These are circumstances that undoubtedly contribute to the quality of Mr. Julian Mollov's dissertation.

3. Relevance of the topic and of the set objectives and tasks

In the dissertation, the author examines regional policy. This is indeed a relevant issue from the standpoint of both theory and practice, since as there is no such policy in Bulgaria, or as the doctoral student writes, "the present study ... is aimed ... at identifying the reasons for the failed regional policy in Bulgaria". Perhaps here the doctoral student should have presented the main arguments in support of this conclusion, rather than describing the importance of regional policy, its links to decentralization, sustainable and balanced regional development, environmental challenges and the Green Deal. In theoretical terms, the need for the study is conditioned by gaps in the scope of existing studies, which do not present the entire picture, as decentralization is studied from a fiscal point of view, while the sustainable development of the regions is not comprehensively examined.

In conclusion, the author substantiates the relevance of the dissertation topic with the new realities (the green transition initiated by the EU) and the unsatisfactory development of the regions in Bulgaria, which "give rise to the need to search for new solutions to achieve sustainable and balanced development and overcome regional disparities".

This expansion of the scope of the research also reflects on the formulation of the subject – namely, regional policy, but in the context of the cohesion policy of the EU, the green transition, the utilization of the European Structural and Investment Funds, etc.

The subject of the dissertation refers to new focal points of regional policy - the decentralized approach as an opportunity to achieve sustainable and balanced regional development.

The main objective is to prove the advantages of the decentralized approach towards conducting regional policy, which is achieved by: firstly, highlighting the link between decentralized management and the sustainable development of the EU regions and secondly, justifying its application in Bulgaria.

The tasks presented by the doctoral student are in accordance with the set objective. My only note is about their order - task 6 should be positioned among the first ones, since institutional relations largely predetermine the type, content and approaches towards policy-making. Both hypotheses are well-formulated; proving or disproving them poses a challenge for the author. The methodology generally follows the set tasks.

It is common practice for the introduction to briefly outline the content of the individual chapters. The second chapter should have also been included. The presented research logic is sound. Personally, I would not devote a whole chapter to the EU and would have expanded the third chapter. Considering the author's achievements in the field of regional planning and management, he could be less modest in formulating the objective of the study and propose more substantial changes to institutional relations that would lead to the implementation of regional policy in Bulgaria. Unfortunately, he stops at the identification of such changes, for example "as is widely known in most Member States, operational programs are territorial and regional institutions and authorities are actually involved in their management" (p. 134).

4. Knowledge of the issue

Undoubtedly, the author knows the state of the issue well, both from a theoretical and a practical point of view. It seems that it has become common practice to present, as part of the theoretical justification, all the concepts and authors who worked on the issue, without selecting only those that will serve as the basis of the analysis and the formulation of the proposals. I accept that insofar as the dissertation is aimed at obtaining an **educational** and scientific degree. However, I

would be inclined to get rid of the passages on "fiscal federalism", since as they are not relevant for Bulgaria.

5. Research methodology

The PhD student uses a wide variety of tools and indicators for analysis and evaluation. They are mainly demonstrated in the second chapter in the analysis of EU regions. The third chapter - on the Bulgarian practice, presents informative data on basic demographic, economic and social indicators or on operational programs. Some of the presented data are absolute numbers, which cannot serve as the basis for comparison between the regions (table.3 (141), table.3.2 (152)). Some of the data are controversial (e.g. p.129 the share of local expenditure in total public expenditure for the EU-28 is 34%!?). If I have to draw a conclusion, the combination of quantitative methods and qualitative analysis is sufficient to achieve the thus formulated objectives and tasks of the dissertation.

6. Characterization and evaluation of the dissertation

The structure and logic of the Introduction follow the requirements for this kind of research. My notes refer to the unfocused definition of the issue, the object of the research and the formulation of proposals for solutions, and the limitation of the objective to the establishment of correlations without seeking a policy rationale.

The first chapter is devoted to a literature review of various theories and approaches (centralized and decentralized - bottom-up) towards conducting Regional Policy and the main factors (exogenous and endogenous) influencing regional development. The concepts of sustainable and balanced regional development in the context of EU cohesion policy are presented. The links between regionalization and decentralization of state administration and the Europe 2020 strategy, the decarbonization and the green transition, are outlined. The principles of multi-level management and the integrated territorial approach towards regional development are presented. The overall coverage of the object, subject and goal of the dissertation are presented here in their logical sequence (excluding fiscal federalism). In short, the author arrives logically at the need for conducting decentralized regional policy.

The second chapter examines the regional cohesion policy of the EU and the impact of decentralization on sustainable development. The author examines the development of EU regional policy, correctly noting the new approach that began to be applied during the 2007-2013 programming period - "... from a policy aimed at compensating regions for their shortcomings to a policy designed to improve regional growth and competitiveness". The link between the level of decentralization of the EU countries and the achieved social progress is analyzed. A detailed quantitative analysis is conducted through a system of indicators at the national and regional level, by

using different tools - variation, regression, cluster analysis. The general conclusion is that increased fiscal decentralization has a positive effect on the regional development of countries. Bulgaria is characterized by a low level of decentralization and large social disparities among the regions.

The third chapter "Regional policy in Bulgaria..." presents the main characteristics of the sub-national authorities, their legal powers, revenues and expenditures, the results of the decentralization and regional development policies implemented in the country. I would only challenge a few of the author's claims: firstly, the suggestion that small municipalities are ineligible (p. 128); secondly, that the mayor is a representative of state authority in the municipality (p. 129) and thirdly, that the share of local expenditure in total public expenditure is 34%. The doctoral student reaches valid conclusions, which are mainly the result of qualitative rather than quantitative analysis. The possibilities and prospects for the application of the planned integrated territorial investments in the 2021-2027 programming period are presented. The third section presents the establishment and results from the operation of the "Trakia Economic Zone" as well as from project "Plovdiv 2019", which the author uses to prove the effectiveness of a decentralized policy for regional development. Section 4 presents the role of sub-national authorities towards the Green Deal.

Finally, the main conclusions of the dissertation are summarized.

7. Contributions and significance of the dissertation towards science and practice

An analysis is conducted and an assessment is made of the regional policy implemented in Bulgaria. The author proposes the implementation of a decentralized regional policy and supports this proposal by presenting the positive example with the establishment and operation of the Trakia Economic Zone.

A group of indicators and appropriate tools are proposed as means to analyze the correlations between decentralization, social progress, sustainable development of EU regions.

The link between the degree of decentralization and the level of socio-economic development of NUTS2 European regions is proven.

These and the other contributions, described by the author, are proof of the scientific achievements made by the dissertation.

8. Evaluation of publications on the dissertation

The author has submitted four publications. These are reports, amounting to 10-12 pages each. They were published in university publications of UNWE, VUZF, Plovdiv University and in the publication of BAS Prof. Marin Drinov. The publications reflect different aspects of the dissertation - regional policy, the green transition, integrated territorial investments and the example of the Plovdiv - Trakia Economic Zone and the "Plovdiv 2019" project. The publications can be classified according to different criteria:

Three reports in Bulgarian and one in English.

Three reports were published in 2021 and one in 2023 (in press).

Three of the publications are independent studies and one is a collective study.

9. Personal involvement of the doctoral student

I have no doubt that the doctoral student has elaborated the dissertation by himself by creatively combining and subordinating to his logic the results of other studies, by choosing appropriate indicators and methods for analysis and evaluation, and by drawing adequate conclusions that can be used at the theoretical and practical level to improve Bulgaria's regional development policy.

10. Abstract

The abstract is 32 pages long. It has been elaborated in accordance with the national requirements and the Rules for training of the academic staff of the University of Plovdiv. It is very well-written. It reflects precisely and in a synthesized fashion the content of the dissertation, its main conclusions and recommendations. It outlines the contributions and presents information about the author's publications.

11. Critical notes and recommendations

The purpose of the critical notes is to encourage the author to think about additional circumstances, which affect the achievement of particular results, as well as to point out some technical errors that the author can easily correct in the event of publication of the study.

The presented recommendations are not associated with specific governing bodies. Inter-institutional relations are not described. When we talk about regional politics it is essential to describe who, at what level, does what.

When we talk about decentralization, we must also justify the need to develop local democracy.

The student should think about small municipalities – the democracy and its link to decentralization.

The distinction between the regional and the local level is not always clearly made in the analysis and recommendations.

The author uses the terms "disparities – inequalities - differences", without describing the essential differences between them.

It is not common for a section to have only one sub-section each (sections 2 and 3 of the first chapter, section 1 of the third).

Greece has been a member of the EU since 1981, not since 1986 (p. 75).

Bulgaria adopted the European Charter for Local Self-Government in 1995, not in 1985 (p. 60)

Table 3.4. is in English (p. 155).

On p.158 two texts are repeated.

12. Personal impressions

I have no personal impressions of the dissertation.

13. Recommendations for future use of the contributions and results from the dissertation

I refrain from giving recommendations, since I do not personally know the doctoral student, nor his intentions for future realization in science or in practice.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation *contains scientific and applied scientific results, which constitute an original contribution to science* and **meet** the requirements of the Act on development of the academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations on its implementation and the relevant Regulations of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

The dissertation shows that the doctoral student Julian Elinov Mollov **possesses** in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the scientific field of National Economy, incl. regional economics and **demonstrates** qualities and skills for independent conduct of scientific research.

Due to the above, I confidently give my *positive assessment* of the conducted research, presented by the reviewed dissertation, abstract, achieved results and contributions, and *recommend to the honorable scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "PhD"* to Julian Mollov in the field of higher education: 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.8 Economics, doctoral program, Political Economy.

August 24, 2023

Reviewer:

Prof. Dr. Stefan Ivanov