

OPINION

by Prof. Ljudmil Ljubomirov Georgiev, PhD, Honorary Professor of the NBU, Member of the NBU Board of Trustees, Chairman of the NBU Financial Control Committee

on the dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" ("PhD")

in: field of higher education "Social, economic and legal sciences"

Professional field: 3.8. Economics

PhD programme: Political Economy

Author: Julian Elinov Mollov

Topic: Decentralised Regional Policy - an Opportunity for Sustainable Regional Development in Bulgaria

Scientific supervisor: Prof. Dr. Yordan Atanasov Christoskov, Institute of Economic Research, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

1. General presentation of the procedure and the PhD student

By the Order ПД 21- 1440/03.07.2023 of the Rector of UP I am appointed as member of the Scientific Jury with the task of writing an OPINION in the competition for the award of the educational and scientific degree PhD to Yulian Elinov Mollov.

For this purpose on July, 3rd2023 I received by email in accordance with Article 36 (1) of the Regulations for the Development of Academic Staff of University of Plovdiv (UP), the following documents:

- Application to the Rector of UP for the disclosure of the procedure for dissertation defense;
- CV in European format;
- The minutes of the departmental council related to the reporting of the readiness for the opening of the procedure and the preliminary discussion of the dissertation;
- Dissertation;
- Abstract;
- List of scientific publications on the subject of the dissertation;
- Copies of the scientific publications;
- List of citations noted;
- Declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents;

- Statement of compliance with the specific requirements of the faculty concerned (only for PhD students enrolled by 04.05.2018);

2. Topical relevance

The dissertation develops three essential areas of regional development (decentralization, regional policy and sustainable development), which individually are not new, but in combination, their cohesion and interaction have not been studied, which allows the topic to be defined as relevant. . This relevance is further strengthened by the fact that the issue is considered influenced by European regional policy, the provisions and regulations of which are highly dynamic, and their inclusion in the research defines it as continuously relevant.

3. Knowledge of the problem

My assessment of the PhD student's work is on two levels. The first is related to the literature review used, which I define as detailed and very well done. The second level concerns the PhD student's practical experience, which is highly expert in the exact field of the dissertation and in this sense predetermines a high degree of knowledge of the research problem. A total of 311 sources have been selected, including scientific literature in Bulgarian and English, as well as normative documents. The latter are not presented in a separate list, but are included in the list of literature in Bulgarian, which is not a serious omission, but is beyond the requirements for the description of the literature used.

4. Research methodology

The research methodology chosen by the dissertator fully allows the achievement of the set goal and research objectives, as it contains a large set of modern and classical, mostly quantitative methods, the critical application of which leads to the achievement of reliable estimates and results. Although highly educated and with considerable practical experience, the PhD student is only just entering the research field professionally. This makes it understandable, though not excusable, for the mixing of the terms "methodology" and "method" (pp. 14 - 15), where in the "Research Methodology" section, the candidate primarily describes the methods they intend to apply, rather than:: Statement of the problem and formulation of the aim and objectives; Literature review; Formulation of hypotheses or objectives; Selection of data collection methods; Data collection; Data analysis; Interpretation of results; Conclusions and inferences; Publication of results; Review and reactions. This content and consistency in the requirement for the presentation of the research methodology is not implemented in the narrative, although largely implemented.

5. Description and evaluation of the thesis and contributions

The dissertation is structured correctly (according to the classical scheme - Introduction, three chapters and Conclusion) and proportionally between the three chapters (54:54:61 pp.) The Introduction contains all the required components to structure its content. The purpose is op-defined in accordance with the author's intention declared in the title of the thesis. It is disturbing fact that on p. 36 the author makes us hesitate in the hierarchy of meaning of his use of "main objective" and "main focus" by the sentence "It is the role of public institutions in regional development and decentralization of governance that are the main focus of this dissertation", which differs from the stated objective.

The stated objectives are in line with the main goal. The defended thesis outlines the details of the research intention.

General remarks:

The author has used the term "localization" universally, which is over-used and therefore its adoption and application universally leads to errors.

Its use in this form is valid for processes related to taxonomic adjustments or for processes related to constraints of some kind, since "localize" translates as "restrict", "constrict". It is, however, completely incompatible with the processes of locating objects of the productive and non-productive spheres, for which the term "locate", meaning "place on top of", is appropriate.

On p. 15, in listing the contents of the individual chapters, the judgment of chapter two is omitted.

Specific notes:

Chapter One is a scholarly and detailed thereminological dissection of the main concepts of the dissertation title (regional policy, decentralization and sustainable development). Additionally, the issues related to fiscal decentralisation, the relationship between multi-level governance and regional policy and the integrated territorial approach to regional development are scientifically illuminated. It is in this chapter that the author provides a basis for praising the theoretical awareness of the candidate. The categorical substantiation through the vast number of citations underline it. At the same time, against the background of this axis-awareness, the author has failed to assert himself theoretically by proposing new formulations or additions and modifications to the terms used, which would have multiplied his contribution and which the still

young science of Regional Economics is in great need of. Moreover, the Ph.D. candidate gives me the impression through his work that he is within his capabilities to do so.

The different definitions of 'region' in the academic literature provide ample justification for the dissertant to respond more critically and non-absolutistically to the term “regional policy”, which he has failed to do in Chapter One, but has developed well enough in Chapter Three of the dissertation. The same applies to decentralisation, which leads to a successful regional policy when there is administrative and financial capacity in the territory. On its own, it is unable to carry out effective development if the initial conditions are not at the required level. Particularly with a severely deteriorated administrative-territorial structure and an initially unspecified definition of regions.

The functional difference between territorial policy, regional policy, municipal policy, etc. has not been worked out in sufficient detail. Is the mere reference to the taxonomic unit sufficient to give a clear presumption of the essential difference?

The second chapter, although not entitled as methodological, is in fact experimental in terms of the stated methods of analysis. The results and conclusions demonstrated are correct and inform the state of the problem under study in the EU regions. Mostly quantitative methods of analysis are used, which can show us the state of the problems under study without giving us an idea of why it is so, and this is what is important in this case. The joint use of different data analysis methods, as in this case, including descriptive analysis, graphical analysis of relationships and dependencies, variance analysis, regression analysis and cluster analysis, can be a powerful tool to uncover information and trends, but can also lead to drawbacks, such as: omitted or distorted data, misinterpretation of relationships, correlation does not always imply causation, data overload and noise. Regression analysis can be sensitive to outliers and inconsistencies in the data, which can lead to incorrect conclusions.

The analyses carried out are interesting and add to the methodological output, having their place and usefulness for the research. However, they seem somewhat „attached, as they are likely results of a realized project involving the PhD candidate. This is evident from the utilization of a predominant period in the calculations – the year 2019.

In places, results are presented (without looking for interactions between them) from methods that examine municipal, national and international processes p.96.

A common mistake, not avoided in this thesis, is the perception of the Cohesion Fund as regional. It targets and finances the national level of governance and development.

The claim of Meijers & Burger, 2017 (p. 79) does not apply to Bulgaria, as rural areas in Bulgaria are influenced by the dynamics of large cities, providing them with a workforce through daily work commutes of up to 50 km or more. The quotation is true for rural locations in Western European countries where the basic life functions of work, habitation, recreation and services are provided in both small and large settlements with the same quality.

Particularly valuable is the doctoral conclusion that EU cohesion policy is becoming an "urban" policy. This leads to a strong contrast in the development of centres and their periphery and blasts the whole process of levelling out regions, in particular municipalities, in terms of economic and social development.

The third chapter could be defined as a significant contribution of the PhD student, in which he develops his capabilities and competence on the researched topic, especially critically.

I can confidently assert that I share his opinion in the vast majority of the opinions expressed. Especially those related to the fact that *"Governance in Bulgaria is over-centralised and does not allow for the implementation of meaningful decentralised policies initiated by regions and local authorities. The NUTS 2 regions in Bulgaria are not institutionalised, but created for statistical purposes. NUTS 3 regions, on the other hand, are administrative-territorial units but without real policy-making powers. Municipalities as local authorities suffer from a lack of financial self-sufficiency, which hinders their development."* This chapter also contains the main contributions of Mr. Mollov described in his abstract, which I fully confirm with the following addendum:

The first contribution formulated by the author can be divided into three separate contributions.

A specific package of methods is selected, the joint use of which can be described as a separate contribution.

A significant but unnoticed contribution is the application of the integrated territorial approach, in particular the application of integrated territorial investments.

As an important contribution can also be added the study on the Prospects and Challenges for Regional Policy in Bulgaria in the Context of the Transition to a Green Economy.

The conclusion summarizes the results and complements the conclusions presented generously in chapter three, but a shortcoming is the fact that the basic requirement to make an account of the research thesis, main goal and objectives of the study is not fulfilled.

6. Assessment of publications and personal contribution of the PhD student

The PhD student has submitted 3 articles in Bulgarian (of which one is in press) and one article in English in a Bulgarian publication. The total number of pages with those of the unprinted article is 46 pages. Three of the publications were presented as papers at scientific conferences in three different universities. Three of the papers are with the candidate's own participation and one at University of Plovdiv – is in co-authorship. All four publications are related to the topic of the dissertation - both as titles and content. The three papers in the university conferences are entirely authored by the PhD candidate and are the result of his independent research on the dissertation. In the publication, which is in the University of Plovdiv, it is assumed that the author has a 1/3 participation, but due to the lack of a split protocol this cannot be proven. The candidate has not submitted articles or papers to journals with impact factor.

Technically, I find no signs of plagiarism, but I refrain from making a definitive statement on this issue because of the widespread use of artificial intelligence, which is not regulated by law.

7. Abstract

The abstract of the thesis is correctly composed and contains all the components required for this type of publication.

8. Recommendations for future use of the dissertation contributions and results

Regional development should have been linked to the measurement of the outcome indicator “regional well-being”.

Regional well-being refers to the general condition of a region, usually defined administratively or geographically, and includes an assessment of the social, economic and cultural aspects of the lives of the people who live in that region. It can be measured by a variety of indicators and metrics, including: economic well-being, social well-being, quality of life, environmental well-being, more political and institutional well-being.

CONCLUSION

I find it extremely positive and scientifically supportive of Mr. Mollov's candidacy for a PhD that his professional career is specifically related to the topic of his dissertation, and as a

manager in the public administration. In this sense, it would represent a natural academic summary of his high practical training.

I recommend that the doctoral candidate, after the successful defense of the dissertation and if possible, be engaged as a lecturer at the university.

The dissertation contains, scientific and applied results, which represent an original contribution to science and meet the requirements of the Law for the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of the LDASRB and the relevant Regulations of the Paisii Hilendarski University in Plovdiv.

The dissertation work contains scientific and applied results, which represent an original contribution to science and meet the requirements of the Law for the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LADAB), the Regulations for the Implementation of the LADAB, The National Minimum Requirements for the Degree "PhD" and the relevant Regulations of the Paisii Hilendarski University.

Due to the above, I give my positive evaluation for the conducted research, presented by the above analyzed dissertation, abstract, achieved results and contributions and I propose the Honorable Scientific Jury to award the educational and scientific degree "PhD" to Julian Mollov, in the field of higher education: Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field: 3.8. Economics, PhD program: Political Economy.

24.08.2023

.....
(signature)

Prof. Ljudmil Georgiev, PhD