



ИКОНОМИЧЕСКИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ ВАРНА

REVIEW

Вх. № PL20-904/26.05.2026г.

By: Assoc. Prof. Desislava Borislavova Serafimova, PhD, University of Economics – Varna, Department of Management and Administration, Professional Field 3.7 Administration and Management, Scientific Specialty “Social Management”

Regarding: Dissertation thesis for awarding the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences” in Professional Field 3.7 “Administration and Management”, Doctoral Programme “Social Management”

Grounds for presenting the review: participation as a member of the Scientific Jury for the public defense of a dissertation thesis pursuant to Order No. RD-06-92/05.05.2026 of the Rector of the University of Economics-Varna

Author of the dissertation thesis: Svitlana Anatoliivna Bilan

Title of the dissertation thesis: “BUSINESS SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: CONCEPTS, INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS AND IMPACT ASSESSMENT”

I. General Presentation of the Dissertation Thesis According to the Requirements of Art. 37 and Art. 40, (3) of the Regulations for the Implementation of the Academic Staff Development Act in the Republic of Bulgaria

1.1. General Presentation of the Dissertation Thesis

The submitted dissertation thesis comprises 311 pages and is structured into an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography. The topic of the dissertation is highly relevant and significant from both theoretical and practical perspectives, given the increasing importance of corporate social responsibility, ESG regulations, and sustainability requirements in the contemporary business environment.

The subject of the research concerns the processes of corporate and business social responsibility within modern business ecosystems developing under the influence of global challenges and institutional transformations. Special emphasis is placed on post-transformation economies and the business environment within the European Union.

The aim of the dissertation thesis is clearly formulated and directed toward the development of an integrated neo-institutional framework and practical recommendations for the formation, implementation, and monitoring of CSR mechanisms, while substantiating the influence of institutional systems and responsible business practices on national competitiveness and organizational performance.

To achieve the stated objective, the author formulates a system of research tasks related to theoretical systematization of the CSR concept; analysis of institutional and cultural determinants; development of mechanisms and tools for CSR implementation; construction of a methodological framework for assessment and monitoring; quantitative modelling of the

relationships between sustainable development, ESG factors, and competitiveness; as well as formulation of practical recommendations.

The author uses a substantial body of specialized scientific literature, international regulatory documents, databases, and empirical sources. The bibliography includes both classical and contemporary scientific publications in the fields of CSR, sustainable development, ESG regulations, institutional theory, and non-financial reporting.

The dissertation thesis includes tables, figures, and analytical models supporting the presentation and interpretation of the research results. The interdisciplinary approach applied enables a comprehensive examination of CSR issues within the contemporary institutional and business environment.

1.2. Compliance with the Requirements of Art. 37 of the Regulations for the Implementation of the Academic Staff Development Act

Art. 37. (1) The dissertation for the acquisition of the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" must contain theoretical summaries and solutions to major scientific or applied science problems that correspond to modern achievements and represent a significant and original contribution to science

(2) The dissertation under para. 1 is prepared independently and cannot literally repeat the topic and a significant part of the content of the submitted for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor".

The dissertation thesis complies with the requirements of Art. 37, Para. 1 of the Regulations for the Implementation of the Academic Staff Development Act, as it contains theoretical generalizations, methodological propositions, and solutions to significant scientific and applied scientific problems related to corporate social responsibility, ESG regulations, institutional environment, and mechanisms for assessment and monitoring of sustainable development. The dissertation corresponds to contemporary scientific achievements in the examined field and contains original authorial contributions related to the integration of a neo-institutional approach, systems for assessing corporate social responsibility, and analysis of institutional factors influencing organizational competitiveness and sustainability.

I also consider that the requirement under Art. 37, Para. 2 of the Regulations for the Implementation of the Academic Staff Development Act has been fulfilled, insofar as the presented dissertation thesis has been independently developed and does not duplicate the topic or content of a previous dissertation thesis submitted for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor". The diploma for the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" presented by the candidate Svitlana Bilan has been officially recognized by Decision No. RD26-6/04.05.2026 of the Rector of the University of Economics – Varna, and was issued by the Institute of Pedagogy of the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine in the scientific specialty "Theory and Methodology of Teaching the Ukrainian Language" in 2004.

1.3. Compliance with the Requirements of Art. 40, Para. 3 of the Regulations for the Implementation of the Academic Staff Development Act

Art. 40. (3) Candidates for the degree of Doctor of Sciences who meet the relevant minimum national requirements shall be admitted to the defense of a dissertation.

The submitted documents and reference materials demonstrate that the minimum national requirements under Art. 2b of the Academic Staff Development Act and Art. 1a of the Regulations for its implementation for awarding the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" in

Professional Field 3.7 “Administration and Management” have been fulfilled. The submitted reference statement shows that the candidate not only meets but also significantly exceeds the minimum required number of points across the indicator groups for Higher Education Area 3, “Social, Economic and Legal Sciences”. Particularly impressive are the results under indicator groups “G” and “D”, related to publication activity and scientific citations, which substantially exceed the minimum required values.

The candidate’s scientific output includes a considerable number of publications indexed in internationally recognized scientific databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, published in reputable international scientific journals in the fields of management, sustainable development, institutional economics, corporate social responsibility, and ESG-related issues. The submitted references also demonstrate significant international visibility and recognition of the candidate’s scientific research. As of 01.05.2026, Scopus reports 55 publications, 899 citations excluding self-citations, and an h-index of 18, while Web of Science reports 37 publications, 543 citations excluding self-citations, and an h-index of 13.

The declaration of originality submitted by the candidate certifies that the dissertation thesis and the related publications are the candidate’s own work and that the requirements of academic ethics and copyright regulations concerning the use of scientific sources have been observed.

Based on the submitted documents, I conclude that the requirements of Art. 40, Para. 3 of the Regulations for the Implementation of the Academic Staff Development Act for admission to the procedure for awarding the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences” have been fulfilled.

II. Evaluation of the Structure and Content of the Dissertation Thesis and the Abstract

2.1. Evaluation of the Relevance and Degree of Development of the Scientific Problem Addressed in the Dissertation

The topic of the dissertation thesis is highly relevant and significant in the context of contemporary transformations in the business environment, increasing regulatory requirements related to ESG practices, sustainable development, and organizational social responsibility.

The relevance of the study is further determined by the need for an integrated scientific approach to CSR research, combining economic, institutional, managerial, and social aspects of the problem. In this sense, the dissertation goes beyond the traditional understanding of CSR as a voluntary practice and interprets it as an element of contemporary institutional and managerial mechanisms for sustainable development and competitiveness.

Although numerous studies exist in the fields of CSR, ESG regulations, and sustainable management, many issues remain insufficiently explored. These include institutional mechanisms for developing and implementing socially responsible business practices, assessment of CSR impact, the relationship between ESG factors and competitiveness, as well as the specifics of implementing these mechanisms in different institutional and economic environments.

The dissertation examines these issues comprehensively through an interdisciplinary and neo-institutional approach, allowing the formulation of authorial concepts and models with considerable theoretical and practical significance.

2.2. Evaluation of the Language, Volume, and Methodological Framework of the Dissertation Thesis

Structurally, the dissertation consists of three chapters devoted respectively to: the conceptual framework of CSR: mechanisms, tools, and models for CSR implementation; and methodological and analytical support for CSR assessment and monitoring.

The dissertation is developed in a sufficient volume corresponding to the complexity of the researched scientific problem. The exposition is logically consistent and organized in accordance with the stated objective, research tasks, and methodological framework.

The language of the dissertation is characterized by an academic style and a high degree of scientific argumentation. The author demonstrates knowledge of specialized terminology and contemporary concepts in the fields of CSR, ESG management, institutional theory, and sustainable development.

From a methodological perspective, the dissertation stands out through the application of a broad and diverse research instrumentarium, including systematic and comparative analysis, bibliometric analysis, institutional and neo-institutional approaches, statistical and econometric methods, methods for assessment and monitoring, and index analysis.

The use of a wide range of research methods contributes to the scientific validity and reliability of the conclusions and generalizations made in the dissertation.

2.3. Evaluation of the Abstract

The abstract complies with the requirements concerning structure and content and consists of 48 pages. It accurately and concisely presents the dissertation thesis, including the most important research results and achieved contributions.

III. Quantitative and Content Characteristics of the Submitted Scientific Publications

The candidate Svitlana Bilan has submitted 12 publications thematically related to the dissertation thesis. The publications have been published in reputable international scientific journals, including journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science.

From a content perspective, the submitted publications may be grouped into several main thematic areas.

The *first group* includes publications devoted to the conceptual and applied aspects of *corporate social responsibility, sustainable development, and ESG frameworks* (e.g., publications No. 10 and No. 12). They examine the theoretical foundations of CSR, the mechanisms for CSR assessment, and the relationship between socially responsible management, sustainable development, and organizational effectiveness. Approaches for integrated CSR assessment are proposed, its internal and external dimensions are analyzed, and the role of sustainable management under conditions of contemporary economic and institutional transformations is explored.

The *second thematic area* includes publications related to the *institutional environment, social development, and interinstitutional interaction* (No. 9 and No. 11). They analyze issues concerning institutional differences and imbalances among different countries, the role of social capital and social infrastructure, mechanisms of interinstitutional cooperation, and the influence of the institutional environment on sustainable social and economic development.

The third area includes publications related to *sustainable human resource management, competitiveness, and factors of economic development* (No. 6 and No. 8). They address the influence of human capital, innovations, and foreign direct investment on competitiveness, sustainable human resource management practices, organizational adaptation to crisis conditions, and the relationship between sustainable management, organizational resilience, and economic effectiveness. Some of these publications focus on the impact of COVID-19 on organizational practices and the need to develop sustainable management models under conditions of high uncertainty.

The *fourth group* of publications is devoted to *sustainable development in the context of circular economy, green infrastructure, and environmental sustainability* (No. 5 and No. 7). They examine the factors and barriers to the implementation of circular economy models, the role of the institutional environment in developing sustainable models, green infrastructure as a tool for environmental and social sustainability, and the relationships between sustainable development, climate policies, and governance mechanisms. These publications demonstrate an interdisciplinary approach and the use of contemporary bibliometric, comparative, and analytical methods.

The last thematic group includes publications related to the ethical aspects of digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and new technologies (No. 1, No. 2, and No. 3). They analyze ethical dimensions, academic perceptions and trust in artificial intelligence, as well as the transformation of business models and leadership practices under conditions of digitalization and platform economy. These publications broaden the traditional understanding of CSR by linking it to issues of digital ethics, transparency, trust, and responsible governance.

The submitted scientific publications demonstrate strong thematic coherence with the dissertation thesis, good international visibility, and a pronounced interdisciplinary character. They complement the main research directions of the dissertation and confirm the candidate's consistent and long-term scientific interest in the problems of CSR, sustainable development, and responsible governance.

IV. Scientific and Applied Scientific Contributions of the Dissertation Thesis

I accept the scientific and applied scientific contributions outlined in the abstract, which I would formulate as follows:

Scientific-Theoretical Contributions

1. The theory of corporate social responsibility has been further developed through the application of an integrated and neo-institutional approach combining economic, social, environmental, institutional, and cultural dimensions of socially responsible management.
2. The methodological instrumentarium for CSR assessment and monitoring has been improved through the combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators, integrated indices, non-financial reporting mechanisms, and approaches for reputation capital analysis.
3. The study deepens the analysis of the relationships between institutional environment, sustainable development, and competitiveness of national economies through a comparative analysis of European Union member states.

4. The scientific understanding of the role of non-financial reporting and ESG mechanisms as instruments for institutionalizing CSR, increasing transparency, and engaging stakeholders has been further developed.
5. The dissertation substantiates the contextual conditionality of CSR models, where regulatory environment, cultural characteristics, digital technologies, and crisis factors shape different patterns of socially responsible behaviour.

Applied Scientific Contributions

1. Practical approaches for integrating CSR into organizational strategy, stakeholder interaction, and non-financial reporting systems have been proposed.
2. Recommendations have been formulated for improving institutional mechanisms supporting responsible business, the development of ESG practices, and strengthening partnerships between business, public sector, and civil society.
3. The obtained results and analytical models may be applied in assessing corporate sustainability, reputation, quality of governance, and the influence of institutional environment on long-term organizational development.

V. Established or Non-Established Plagiarism in the Dissertation Thesis

No evidence of plagiarism has been identified in the submitted dissertation thesis. No improperly borrowed texts, ideas, or scientific results without appropriate citation of the sources used have been established.

The candidate has submitted a declaration of originality certifying that the scientific results, conclusions, and achievements presented in the dissertation thesis are the result of independently conducted scientific research and that the requirements of academic ethics and copyright have been observed.

VI. Critical Remarks, Recommendations, and Questions to the Candidate

During the preliminary discussion of the dissertation thesis within the primary academic unit, I made a number of recommendations and remarks, which have been reflected in the final version of the dissertation. Therefore, I have no substantial critical remarks regarding the current version.

In connection with the public defense, I would like to pose the following question to the candidate:

In your opinion, what are the most significant challenges related to the practical implementation and institutionalization of corporate sustainability reporting and non-financial reporting in countries with different levels of institutional maturity, and what should be the role of state regulators in this process?

VII. Overall Evaluation of the Dissertation Thesis and Conclusion

Based on the conducted evaluation, I consider that the submitted dissertation thesis represents a completed, independent, and significant scientific study that complies with the requirements of the Academic Staff Development Act, the Regulations for its implementation, and the internal regulations of the University of Economics-Varna for awarding the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences".

The dissertation contains substantial theoretical generalizations, methodological propositions, and applied scientific solutions concerning a relevant and complex scientific problem of high scientific and public significance.

The author Svitlana Bilan demonstrates a high level of scientific competence and the ability to conduct independent scientific research. The obtained results possess significant theoretical and applied scientific value and contribute to the development of scientific knowledge in the fields of corporate social responsibility and corporate sustainability.

The above arguments give me sufficient grounds to provide a positive evaluation of the dissertation thesis and confidently recommend that the esteemed Scientific Jury award Svitlana Bilan the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" in Professional Field 3.7 "Administration and Management".

26.05.2026 г.
Varna

The review is prepared by: ...
(Associate Professor D. Seratin)

Заличена информация съгласно
ЗЗЛД и регламент (ЕС) 2016/ 679

REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Margarita Yordanova Bogdanova
Department of Strategic Planning, D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics – Svishtov
of the dissertation paper of Svitlana Anatolyevna Bilan for acquiring the scientific degree
"Doctor of Science"

Topic "Corporate Social Responsibility: Concepts, Institutional mechanisms and impact assessment",

Field of higher education: 3. "Social, economic and legal sciences"
Professional field: 3.7. "Administration and Management"
Doctoral Program "Social Management"
at the University of Economics - Varna

1. General information

The basis for writing the review is Order No. RD 06-92/ 05.05.2026 of the Rector of the Varna University of Economics on the composition of the scientific jury and the Decision of the first meeting of the scientific jury (Minutes 1 of 11.05.2026) on determining the authors of reviews and opinions.

When evaluating the dissertation, the conditions of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ADSRB), the Regulations for its Implementation (RIADSRB) and the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at the University of Economics - Varna are decisive.

2. General description of the dissertation

According to the requirements of Art. 37 and the RIADSRB:

Paragraph 1: The dissertation paper for acquiring the scientific degree "Doctor of Science" shall contain theoretical conclusions and decisions of major science or applied science problems, which correspond to the contemporary achievements and represent a significant and original contribution to science.

Paragraph 2: The dissertation paper under para 1 shall be prepared independently and it may not reproduce literally the subject and a significant part of the content of the paper presented for acquiring the educational and scientific degree "Doctor".

According to Art. 40. (3) of the RIADSRB, candidates for the degree of "Doctor of Sciences" who meet the respective minimum national requirements are allowed to defend a dissertation.

The evaluation of the candidate Dr. Svitlana Bilan is in accordance with the requirements listed above.

The title of the dissertation "Social Responsibility of Business: Concepts, Institutional Mechanisms and Impact Assessment" is clearly formulated and is closely related to the research thesis, goal, objectives and structure of the study. The work has a current scientific topic and focus, given the wide possibilities for application of the theory of social responsibility of business. The overall

impression is of a work with a wide scope, affecting various aspects of integrating into a single analytical framework the economic, social, environmental, institutional and cultural dimensions of CSR.

The dissertation is 311 pages long and consists of an introduction, 3 chapters, a conclusion, used sources, the list of which includes 183 titles. 27 figures and 33 tables are included to support the presentation. I accept that this volume is sufficient to substantiate the author's thesis.

12 publications on the topic of the dissertation and an Abstract on the dissertation work (in a volume of 49 pages) are also presented.

For the possession of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (PhD), the candidate has submitted a Diploma for the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (PhD), issued on 10 November 2004 by the Institute of Pedagogy of the National Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of Ukraine, specializing in "Theory and Methodology of Teaching the Ukrainian Language", recognized by Decision No. RD26-6/04.05.2026 of the Rector of University of Economics – Varna for the recognition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (PhD).

The fulfillment of the minimum national requirements for the groups of indicators for Area 3. "Social, Economic and Legal Sciences", Professional Direction: 3.7. "Administration and Management", are as follows:

Table 1

Fulfillment of minimum national requirements

Indicator group	Contents	Doctor of Science	Presented by the candidate
A	Indicator 1	50	50
B	Indicator 2	100	100
C	Indicator 3	-	-
D	Sum of indicators 4 to 10	100	351.04
E	Sum of indicators 11 to 13	100	13485
F	Sum of indicators from 14 to the end	-	

For group D, the candidate has presented a list of 54 publications in scientific journals in refereed and indexed in world-renowned databases (Scopus, Web of Science) and one published chapter of a monograph.

For group E, the author provided a reference for 899 citations (excluding self-citations) in Scopus and 543 citations (excluding self-citations) in Web of Science, the scientometric expression of which is 13485 points. H- index is 18 and 13 respectively in both databases Scopus and Web of Science. This remarkable success clearly shows that the minimum quantitative indicators of the Varna Economic University for acquiring the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" have been exceeded many times.

The candidate declares that: 1) the information submitted in connection with participation in the competition for the academic degree is accurate and truthful; 2) the submitted dissertation and the publications related to it are her own original work; 3) she has complied with the copyright requirements regarding the sources used; and 4) the scientific publications submitted for participation in the competition do not duplicate publications previously submitted by her in earlier competitions for academic positions or in procedures for the acquisition of an Educational and Scientific Degree

(ESD) and/or a Scientific Degree (SD) under the Academic Staff Development in the Republic of Bulgaria Act.

Therefore, **the requirements** of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ADSRB), the Regulations for its Implementation (RI ADSRB) and the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at the University of Economics - Varna **have been met**.

3. Assessment of the structure and content of the dissertation and an opinion on the correctness of the dissertation abstract.

Svitlana Bilan's presented dissertation paper demonstrate a high degree of theoretical maturity and practical applicability. The work is organized into three chapters, which sequentially cover the evolution of the concept, the methodology for its implementation, and modern monitoring and evaluation tools.

The purpose of the study is two-fold , but related: 1) developing a comprehensive theoretical and methodological framework and practical recommendations for the formation, implementation and monitoring of business social responsibility systems and 2) substantiating the interrelationship between responsible business practices, the competitiveness of organizations and the parameters of sustainable development in the context of institutional transformation.

I find that the thus formulated goals, object of the study and the defined 8 tasks are **correctly formulated** and provide sufficient opportunities for conclusions and recommendations.

The scientific thesis states that *corporate social responsibility is an institutionally conditioned and organizationally integrated strategic mechanism through which enterprises transform their interaction with stakeholders into sustainable competitive advantages*. The author further justifies how to achieve the effectiveness of this mechanism, namely - it depends on *the interaction between the quality of the institutional environment, internal corporate policies and management mechanisms, non-financial reporting tools and reputational capital*.

To test the formulated thesis, **nine research hypotheses have been derived**, structured in the logic of the transition from the macro-institutional level to organizational mechanisms and outcomes. For the empirical testing of these hypotheses, an operationalization scheme has been developed, and appropriate indicators have been proposed for the transformation of theoretical constructs into solutions at the systemic and organizational levels.

There are well-founded theoretical and methodological foundations that rely on the neo-institutional approach, combined with stakeholder theory, corporate reputation theory, the resource approach to the firm, as well as modern concepts of sustainable development.

The methodology of the study is mixed, covering qualitative and quantitative methods, including network visualization using VOSviewer; correlation and regression analysis to establish relationships between indicators of social responsibility, sustainable development and competitiveness; analysis of international composite indices, including the Global Competitiveness Index, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Index , the Human Development Index, the Global Innovation Index, the World Happiness Index and the Environmental Performance Index.

The dissertation is structured in a way that allows for a consistent transition from abstract theoretical debates to concrete quantitative modeling.

- Chapter 1 establishes the conceptual framework by defining corporate social responsibility (CSR) not simply as philanthropy but as a strategic imperative embedded in neo-institutional theory.
- Chapter 2 proposes a methodological design for forming CSR mechanisms, incorporating innovative econometric modeling of the relationship between sustainable development and national competitiveness.
- Chapter 3 focuses on analytical issues of CSR assessment and monitoring, looking at digitalization (AI, blockchain), ESG indicators and non-financial reporting (CSRD) as drivers of transparency.

The dissertation is fully in tune with modern scientific achievements. In addition to using bibliometric mapping (VOSviewer) to reconstruct the intellectual structure of research on the topic, the impact of exogenous shocks (COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine) on the architecture of corporate governance is also analyzed.

We can summarize that the dissertation represents a significant and original contribution, as it succeeds in transforming normative expectations of social responsibility into measurable management models applicable in a dynamic and unstable institutional environment.

4. Quantitative and content characteristics of the presented scientific publications,

The total number of publications submitted (outside the dissertation) is 12. All of them were published during the period 2019 - 2026 and concern current issues related to the subject of the dissertation.

To conduct the research, large amounts of primary data were generated – for example, a survey of 637 university employees on AI, a survey of 385 tourists in Armenia, an analysis of 105 social organizations in Lithuania. The presented bibliometric review of 716 scientific articles on the circular economy is noteworthy.

The works have a wide geographical scope, including Ukraine, the EU-28 countries, Armenia, Lithuania, as well as emerging markets such as Kazakhstan, India and China.

The scientific content is structured around four main pillars:

- 5) **Corporate Social Responsibility and Leadership.** The publications explore the evolution of CSR from the 1950s to the present, proposing integral indices for assessing efficiency in the food industry and models for diversifying service architecture in e-commerce. The role of ethical business leadership as a moderator of financial performance is emphasized.
- 6) **Artificial Intelligence and Ethics.** A significant portion of the material analyzes cognitive and ethical perceptions of generative AI (GenAI). The consistency of large language models (LLMs) with respect to ethical categories such as fairness and impartiality is examined, as well as the impact of AI on academic integrity.
- 7) **Sustainable development and circular economy.** The implementation of circular economy principles in emerging markets is analyzed, identifying barriers such as lack of infrastructure and low environmental awareness. It also examines tourists' attitudes towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and some institutional gaps in the social sector.
- 8) **Competitiveness and institutional development.** The publications demonstrate the link between innovation, foreign direct investment, human capital and national competitiveness within the EU. The importance of inter-institutional cooperation for the quality of social services is also examined.

A common feature of the publications is the good argumentation of the challenges in the indicated areas, their theoretical summary and, above all, the proposed practically applicable models for managing ethical and sustainable business behavior in the face of global macroshocks.

5. Identification and evaluation of the scientific and applied scientific contributions in the dissertation and other scientific publications under the procedure.

I fully accept the contributions formulated in the abstract of the dissertation. They are structured in two groups – scientific-theoretical and scientific-applied contributions. I allow myself to expand this list and enrich the contributions by adding some additional achievements noted in other scientific publications.

A. Scientific (theoretical) contributions

These contributions expand the conceptual framework of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and institutional economics:

1) An Integrated Neo-Institutional Framework: The author develops a coherent analytical model that connects the macro level (national sustainable development systems), the meso level (public-private partnerships) and the micro level (firm practices), overcoming the fragmentation in the existing literature.

2) The concept of “resilience of CSR systems” is conceptualized. An original understanding of CSR resilience is introduced, including the absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacity of organizations to respond to exogenous shocks such as pandemics and military conflicts.

3) An evolutionary model of strategic CSR has been developed, the transformation of CSR from a peripheral ad hoc philanthropy to a “strategic imperative” that integrates economic, ethical and societal considerations into the core of corporate governance.

4) A cognitive and ethical assessment of AI is proposed. The publications discuss an innovative distinction between cognitive (functional) and ethical assessment of artificial intelligence technologies in educational and business environments.

The author argues that these two dimensions are fragmented and weakly connected, i.e. people can simultaneously acknowledge the high functional utility of AI (cognitive assessment) but remain highly skeptical and concerned about its moral implications (ethical assessment). In the educational sphere, for example, concerns about academic integrity are most pronounced, with trust in the accuracy of AI remaining low.

B. Scientific and applied (practical) contributions

These contributions offer concrete tools and models for solving significant economic problems:

1) Econometric modelling of competitiveness. Through an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis for 27 EU Member States, it has been shown that national sustainable development systems, which combine social, economic and environmental dimensions, explain nearly 80% of the variation in macroeconomic competitiveness (IMD index). This finding confirms that CSR and competitiveness are mutually reinforcing.

2) Interpretive typology of EU countries. An original interpretative clustering framework has been developed, which groups countries into five categories (innovation and well-being leaders, “institutional reformers”, “human capital-focused countries”, “SDG accelerators” and “small but highly diversified economies”) and proposes differentiated strategic CSR priorities for each group.

3) Digitalization of ESG monitoring. Digital solutions using artificial intelligence and blockchain are presented (e.g. to track Scope 3 emissions and ensure transparency along the supply chain), which is in line with the latest requirements of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD).

4) Institutional Gaps Assessment Methodology (IDGSS). An econometric model has been created to measure deficits in the social sector (social capital, infrastructure and security) in an international context.

5) Integral CSR Index in the Food Industry: A model for assessing the effectiveness of CSR is proposed, tested on Ukrainian enterprises, which takes into account specific sectoral risks.

I believe that the scientific and applied scientific contributions in Svitlana Bilan's dissertation work and the accompanying publications represent a comprehensive and original body of knowledge integrating economic theory, ethics, and modern technological solutions.

6. Plagiarism detected or not detected in the dissertation and abstract

According to the attached declaration from the author, all achievements in the dissertation are the work of the candidate. The sources used have been cited correctly. I believe that academic ethics have also been observed in the publications submitted for review.

7. Critical notes and recommendations

I have no serious critical remarks. The work is sufficiently valuable and consistent. However, in order to contribute to even better results, I have a suggestion regarding the regression model.

In the model, the variable X6 (environmental performance) does not reach statistical significance ($p=0.21$). According to the author, this indicates that the relationship between environmental performance and competitiveness may be more indirect, mediated through innovation (green technologies) and institutional quality (environmental policy), or that additional time may be needed for environmental investments to translate into measurable competitive advantages.

My suggestion to Dr. Bilan is to investigate nonlinear dependencies or threshold effects. It is possible that environmental investments start to positively affect competitiveness only after reaching a certain level of economic development.

8. Questions for the dissertation candidate

I have a question regarding the concept of sustainability of CSR systems.

In your work, you define "CSR resilience" through three sets of capabilities: absorptive, adaptive, and transformative. Given the specific context of economies in transition and the exogenous shocks of the war in Ukraine, what are the main institutional factors that would allow small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to move from purely adaptive resilience (correction of procedures) to transformative resilience that redefines the very role of business in society?

9. Conclusion

My general opinion is that the author has developed a dissertation paper that has a clearly formulated problem, goal and objectives, implying scientific research. The dissertation is proof that Dr. Svitlana Bilan is familiar with the scientific literature and achievements in this scientific field, has identified unsolved or partially solved problems, has systematized and critically analyzed existing theses and has taken a reasoned position, has correctly interpreted the results of the scientific research, has shaped them and presented them in an understandable and logical way.

I believe that the dissertation contains theoretical generalizations and solutions to major scientific or applied scientific problems that correspond to modern achievements and represent a significant and original contribution to science. For this reason, I give my support for a positive assessment of Dr. Svitlana Bilan's dissertation, for the acquisition of the scientific degree "Doctor of Science" in Professional field: 3.7. "Administration and Management", doctoral program "Social Management" at the University of Economics - Varna.

05/26/2026

Reviewer:

Prof. Dr. Margarita Bogdanova

Заличена информация съгласно
ЗЗЛД и регламент (ЕС) 2016/ 679

REVIEW

Вх. № PA20-900/26.05.2026г.

Under the procedure for awarding the academic degree of “Doctor of Science”

As announced by the University of Economics – Varna,

Academic field: “Social Management,”

Professional field: 3.7 Administration and Management, Doctoral Program in “Social Management”

1. General Information

Reviewed by:	Prof. Velislava Nikolaeva, Ph.D., VFU “Ch. Hrabar”
Reason for writing the review:	Order of the Rector of the University of Economics – Varna No. RD 06-92/May 5, 2026
Author of the dissertation:	Svitlana Bilan
Thesis topic:	Corporate Social Responsibility: Concepts, Institutional Mechanisms, and Impact Assessment

2. Information about the dissertation author

Ph.D. candidate Svitlana Bilan is an associate professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Faculty of Management of the Rzeszów University of Technology in the Republic of Poland and a researcher (research associate) at the Faculty of Economics of Széchenyi István University in Győr, Hungary.

She has held a Ph.D. in Education since 2003 and has been an associate professor since 2022. Her professional career has involved teaching and research at universities in Poland, Ukraine, and Hungary. Her research interests lie in the areas of corporate social responsibility, migration studies and the labor market, financial literacy, and education.

A document certifying the recognition of the academic and scientific degree of “Doctor” in accordance with the requirements of Bulgarian law has been submitted, along with documents certifying that the candidate meets the minimum national requirements for participation in the procedure for obtaining the scientific degree of “Doctor of Science.”

The procedure is conducted pursuant to Article 13(1) of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, Article 40(2) of the Regulations for its implementation, Article 68(2) of the Regulations on the Development of Academic Staff at the University of Economics – Varna, and a decision of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Management, Minutes No. 34 of April 29, 2026.

3. General Description of the Dissertation

Length of the dissertation: 311 pages

Structure of the dissertation:	Introduction; three chapters, each with three sections; conclusion; list of references. Chapter 1 – 130 pages, Chapter 2 – 74 pages, Chapter 3 – 62 pages.
Bibliography for the presented dissertation:	Total number of sources used: 183, of which 120 are in print and 63 are electronic.
Relevance, subject matter, scope, purpose, and objectives of the dissertation:	Yes (The relevance is more clearly highlighted in PhD Thesis Abstract).
The author's thesis:	Yes. The author's main thesis and nine hypotheses.
Research question:	Yes
The methodology and methods of the dissertation research are as follows:	Yes
The following limitations of the dissertation research:	Yes
Contributions of the dissertation and solutions to significant scientific and applied problems:	Yes
Stylistic, lexical, and technical characteristics of the text:	At a good level

The introduction to the dissertation contains all the necessary elements for a study of this nature. The relevance of the topic is thoroughly substantiated, with a systematic presentation of what the author considers to be the main reasons for studying corporate social responsibility. These include:

- The shift in how business performance is evaluated.
- A shift in public attitudes, according to which business is both an economic entity and a full-fledged participant in social development. In this context, corporate social responsibility is an “institutional mechanism for reconciling private economic interests with the goals of sustainable development and the public good.”
- For countries with post-transition economies, the role of corporate social responsibility is a measure of stability and sustainable development. This is precisely the argument for the need to study it according to the principles of the neo-institutional approach, in order to explain “why practices that are identical in form in different countries yield different results, as well as why the mechanical transfer of models formed in mature market economies is not always effective for transition societies.”

- The emergence of regulatory changes that are transforming corporate social responsibility (CSR) from a largely voluntary initiative into an increasingly strictly institutionalized requirement.

The aim of this dissertation is to develop a “comprehensive theoretical and methodological framework and practical recommendations for the design, implementation, and monitoring of corporate social responsibility systems, understood as integrated organizational mechanisms, policies, procedures, tools, and practices through which enterprises institutionalize responsible behavior, as well as to substantiate the interrelationship between responsible business practices, organizational competitiveness, and the parameters of sustainable development in the context of institutional transformation.”

Eight objectives have been formulated to achieve the stated goal; the fulfillment of these objectives leads to the achievement of the goal and is clearly reflected in the structure and content of this study, namely: the conceptual foundations and evolution of corporate social responsibility; clarification of the conceptual framework regarding the issues under consideration; synthesis and analysis of influencing factors in various national contexts; systematization of the mechanisms and instruments for implementing corporate social responsibility; justification of the system for assessing the effectiveness, impact, and development of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and business, and generation of econometric models to assess the relationships between the degree of CSR development, the institutional environment, and key business indicators; assessing “the role of non-financial reporting as a tool for transparency, accountability, and the institutionalization of corporate social responsibility”; identifying the specific challenges in adapting CSR to various crisis conditions and synthesizing recommendations for different target audiences.

The subject of the dissertation is “the processes of corporate social responsibility in contemporary business ecosystems, which are evolving under the influence of global challenges and institutional transformations.” The scope of the study is defined as “an examination of the theoretical foundations, institutional mechanisms, assessment methodologies, and strategic tools for implementing and monitoring corporate social responsibility, viewed through the lens of their impact on organizational competitiveness and sustainable development.”

The thesis defended in the dissertation is that “corporate social responsibility represents an institutionally conditioned and organizationally integrated strategic mechanism through which enterprises transform their interaction with stakeholders into sustainable competitive advantages.”

The verification of the formulated thesis is articulated through nine research hypotheses, during the “transition from the macro-institutional level to organizational mechanisms and outcomes,” which were confirmed in the course of the study.

The methodology of the dissertation research includes various quantitative and qualitative analyses. The following were used: “bibliometric analysis of publications on CSR in the Scopus and Web of Science databases for the period 1982–2023, with network visualization using VOSviewer; correlation and regression analysis to establish relationships between indicators of social responsibility, sustainable development, and competitiveness; analysis of international composite indices, including the Global Competitiveness Index, SDG Index, Human Development

Index, Global Innovation Index, World Happiness Score, and Environmental Performance Index; systematic literature review; comparative institutional analysis of business social responsibility models; case study analysis of corporate practices and crisis adaptation; substantive analysis of international standards and regulatory documents in the field of non-financial reporting and corporate responsibility.”

The first chapter outlines and critically analyzes the theoretical foundations and institutional framework of corporate social responsibility. The cultural and institutional factors that shape social expectations of companies in different countries are examined. The interaction between the state, business, and society in the establishment and development of corporate social responsibility is discussed and critically analyzed.

In Chapter 2, Dr. Bilan conducts a detailed and in-depth examination of corporate social responsibility at the institutional and business levels, focusing on the mechanisms, tools, and models for its development and implementation. An innovative assessment approach is proposed, integrating a system of external and internal, qualitative and quantitative assessment indicators.

Chapter Three is devoted to the practical application of the methodology for assessing corporate social responsibility proposed in Chapter Two, as well as to non-financial reporting, which Svitlana Bilan identifies and argues is a driving force behind transparency and the development of corporate social responsibility.

My overall impression of the proposed dissertation is that it is distinguished by an exceptionally broad theoretical and analytical scope and significant methodological rigor, which demonstrate the author’s academic maturity.

The interdisciplinary approach employed reveals corporate social responsibility not only as a corporate tool for image-building and achieving sustainable development, but also as a specific social phenomenon involving collaboration between business, the state, and society.

The abstract is 50 pages long (49 actual pages). It accurately and faithfully reflects the content of the dissertation. It includes all the structural elements of the dissertation’s introduction and clarifies the author’s understanding of the key concepts, objectives, tasks, scope, subject matter, methodology, thesis, and hypotheses. The limitations of the dissertation are specified. The scientific novelty of the dissertation is synthesized, with all the contributions of the study explained in detail. The text of the abstract unequivocally confirms my overall positive impression of the quality of the dissertation as a study of significant scientific value.

The text of the dissertation and the abstract are the author’s own work.

4. Publications and participation in academic conferences

To participate in the procedure for awarding the academic and scientific degree of “Doctor of Science,” Svitlana Bilan submitted a report on her fulfillment of the minimum national requirements, which shows that she has far exceeded the requirements under Sections G and D (more than three times and more than 13 times, respectively).

For me, this is indisputable grounds for concluding that the candidate fully meets the minimum national requirements of Bulgarian legislation for the award of the educational and scientific degree of “Doctor of Science.”

The attached texts of the publications on the topic of the dissertation directly or indirectly correspond to the author’s stated scientific and applied field, and the provided list of Svitlana Bilan’s publications not only demonstrates the broad spectrum of her research interests but also includes more than 50 articles in refereed and indexed databases. It is true that some of the publications have a more specific focus on competitiveness, the economy including the circular economy and artificial intelligence, but I view this as further evidence of the scientific potential and research qualities of the author of the dissertation.

5. Scientific and applied scientific contributions in the dissertation

In accordance with the regulatory requirements of Article 37 of the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, I consider that the presented dissertation contains the necessary theoretical generalizations and solutions to important scientific and applied scientific problems and can be regarded as a significant and original contribution to science.

I consider the scientific novelty of the dissertation to be the presented system of interrelated theoretical, methodological, and empirical studies and the results generated by them, which present corporate social responsibility as a strategic tool for sustainable development. It skillfully analyzes and integrates the economic, social, environmental, institutional, and cultural specifics of corporate social responsibility. It has been demonstrated that various regulatory mechanisms, cultural specifics, established management practices, digitalization, and the presence of crises create an environment that directly shapes corporate social responsibility.

I accept the proposed system for diagnosing, assessing, and developing corporate social responsibility as a two-part framework that enriches theoretical knowledge: on the one hand, through the proposed neo-institutional framework for developing, assessing, and analyzing corporate social responsibility; and on the other: through the applied research component, which relates to the practical application of the proposed toolkit via the synthesized conclusions and recommendations. Thus, it can be confidently stated that there has been an improvement in the toolkit for assessing the effectiveness of corporate social responsibility, as various quantitative and qualitative indicators have been skillfully and appropriately combined, which not only support business development but are also linked to macroeconomic indicators of development.

The link between the quality of the national institutional environment, the competitiveness of national economies, and the sustainable development of business, the economy, and society has been clearly demonstrated.

Non-financial reporting is explored in both theoretical and applied contexts as a tool for institutionalizing corporate social responsibility, as well as the need to engage stakeholders in the assessment and development of corporate responsibility.

The role of corporate image as a two-way mechanism comprising effective corporate social responsibility practices on the one hand, and its perception as a resource that supports the organization in developing and implementing strategies for responsible behavior on the other is substantiated.

Approaches to managing, developing, and integrating corporate social responsibility into the strategies and strategic management of business organizations and their relationships with external stakeholders are synthesized and substantiated.

The dissertation contains conclusions and recommendations that can successfully assist national regulatory bodies in improving the institutional environment and the partnership between the state and business in the field of social responsibility and sustainable development.

Undoubtedly, the results of the dissertation research can also be useful to other researchers and analysts, as well as applied in the educational process by updating plans, programs, and course content related to the topic of the dissertation.

In her dissertation, Svitlana Bilan formulates 6 theoretical and 3 applied scientific contributions, which I consider to be entirely original and in full compliance with the requirements for the award of the academic degree of “Doctor of Science.”

6. Recommendations and critical comments

The paper contains technical inaccuracies, which can be explained by the fact that it was not written in the author’s native language. This is likely also the reason why the text is stylistically difficult to comprehend in some places.

The length of the three chapters could be better balanced. The first chapter is almost twice as long as the other two.

I recommend that in her future work on corporate social responsibility, the author examine the extent to which the corporate social responsibility “declared” by companies is “tailored” to public and regulatory requirements without, however, yielding tangible results.

My comments and recommendations in no way diminish the quality of the proposed dissertation or my high regard for it.

I recommend that Dr. Svitlana Bilan continue her research in the field of corporate social responsibility, disseminate the findings, and make them available to interested parties.

7. Questions for the doctoral candidate

1. What are the roles and challenges facing the public sector in establishing and promoting best practices in corporate social responsibility within the context of sustainable development?

2. What is the impact of cultural differences and institutional specifics of business on the adoption and demonstration of social responsibility in individual countries?

8. Conclusion

Given the indisputable merits of the proposed dissertation, which constitutes a comprehensive and valuable piece of scientific research, I strongly recommend that the members of the academic jury award Dr. Svitlana Bilan the academic degree of "Doctor of Science" in the professional field 3.7. "Administration and Management," doctoral program "Social Management."

Prepared by

(Prof. Velislava Kostova)

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Информация съгласно
ЗЗД и регламент (ЕС) 2016/ 679