



TRAKIA UNIVERSITY – STARA ZAGORA

FACULTY OF ECONOMICS

ИКОНОМИЧЕСКИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ ВАРНА

Бх. № PA20-480/19.03.2026

REVIEW

regarding a dissertation for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" (PhD) in: higher education area 3. *Social, economic and legal sciences*; professional field 3.8. *Economics*; doctoral program: *Agricultural business*

Author of the PhD Thesis: Dimitar Dimov Varnanov

full-time PhD student at the department of "Agricultural economics", Faculty of economics at the University of economics – Varna

Theme of the PhD Thesis: SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF STATE-OWNED AGRICULTURAL LANDS FROM THE STATE LAND FUND IN BULGARIA

Reviewer: Prof. Dr. Nadka Stefanova Kostadinova

Trakia University, Stara Zagora, Field of higher education 3. *Social, Economic and Legal Sciences*; professional field 3.8. *Economics*; scientific specialty *Economics and Management (agriculture, management accounting)* appointed as a member of the Scientific jury with Order № RD–06-27/ 28.01.2026 by the Rector of the University of economics – Varna and a decision from the first meeting of the Scientific jury from 10.02.2026.

1. Short introduction of the candidate.

The PhD student **Dimitar Dimov Varbanov** completed his Bachelor's degree in "Agricultural economics" in 2001 and obtained his Master's degree in "Agricultural economics" in 2003 from the University of economics – Varna. In the period from February 2009 to July 2009, he underwent French language training at a college in Montreal, Canada. From September 2002 to August 2004, he worked in the agricultural sector in France. From November 2004 to July 2008, he served as an employee in the "Distribution" department of a fashion design company in Montreal,

Canada. From June 2010 to December 2014, he held the position of junior expert at the "Agricultural Development" general directorate in the Regional directorate of agriculture – Shumen. From December 2014 to April 2020, he served as the director of the Regional directorate of agriculture in Shumen. Since August 2021, he has been an operational accountant at Miltonia Ltd., Sofia.

In January 2018, he was enrolled as a full-time PhD student at the department of "Agricultural economics", UE-Varna, by order No. RD-17-181/29.01.2018 and was struck off with the right to defense as of 01.02.2021, by order No. RD-17-441/12.03.2021. He possesses a good command of English and French and has excellent computer skills.

2. Relevance of the problem.

The relevance of the dissertation is determined by the necessity for sustainable management of agricultural lands within the State land fund, as it is of particular importance for the state governance of land use in Bulgaria. Sustainability regarding state resources is not merely the achievement of a result but also includes the predictability of rules, risk manageability, interaction between instruments, and the system's ability to respond adequately to changes. Consequently, there is a need for in-depth scientific research and the application of an evaluative approach that measures the sustainability of State land fund land management in an integrated manner – not only through individual indicators but through a framework that combines outcome-based and process-based criteria.

3. Aim, tasks, hypotheses and methods of research.

The objective of the research is clearly and precisely formulated. The research tasks, the subject and the object are logically connected to the set objective. In accordance with the stated goal and tasks, the research methodology includes several main groups of methods, combining a process approach (evaluation of functioning through input-output and stage transitions) and a systems approach, which allows for an integrated assessment of sustainability both as a systemic quality and as a process of predictability and efficiency. Comparative analysis, correlation and regression

analysis are utilized, as well as a synthesis of empirical results from primary surveys and secondary statistical datasets. The research results are presented through methods of tabular grouping and graphical data analysis, which makes a very positive impression. Several research limitations have been correctly established.

Through this methodology, the primary research thesis has been confirmed.

4. Visualization and presentation of the obtained results.

The dissertation is excellently illustrated and structured into an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography, with a total volume of 156 standard pages. A good balance has been achieved regarding the length of the individual chapters. A classical structuring approach has been adopted with distinct and logically linked theoretical, methodological-analytical, and project-based sections, which in their entirety represent an independent and complete scientific study. The dissertation is illustrated with 22 tables and 23 figures. A total of 135 literary sources were used, of which 40 are in Cyrillic, 72 in Latin script, and the remainder consist of regulatory frameworks, internet sources and others.

5. Discussion of the results and references.

Chapter one provides a detailed exploration of the theoretical and methodological foundations of the sustainable management of state-owned agricultural lands. Emphasis is placed on land reform and state ownership of agricultural land in several European countries (Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Romania), alongside Bulgarian specificities. The evolution of the concept of sustainable management is presented: from sustainable development to the management of natural resources, land and state assets. A systematic concept for investigating the sustainable management of agricultural lands within the State land fund in Bulgaria is formulated. It combines two complementary perspectives—one that explains how sustainability is managed as a process, and another that defines what sustainability signifies as an outcome. Thus, Chapter one establishes a solid theoretical foundation for the research framework, upon which the empirical and strategic analyses in the dissertation are built.

In *Chapter two*, the PhD student presents an empirical study and evaluation of the sustainable management of state-owned agricultural lands from the State land fund in Bulgaria. A detailed and in-depth methodology for assessing the sustainable management of State land fund agricultural lands is provided. The data sources for the study are specified: Annual reports on the state and development of agriculture by the Ministry of agriculture and food (agrarian reports for the period 2007-2025), data from the Bulgarian agricultural forecasting and statistics survey, as well as detailed reports on the implementation of the program budget of the Ministry of agriculture as of 31.12 for each respective year. The analysis utilizes annual secondary data for the period 2007-2024. The State land fund is presented as a managed portfolio of regulatorily distinct mechanisms. To this end, the scale of the portfolio is positioned through relative indicators that compare the activated resource with national land-use bases; the distribution of annual management activity is tracked; and the fiscal result is analyzed through the dynamics of State land fund revenues. The results of the sustainability assessment of State land fund agricultural land management are presented with great precision and through visual illustrations. In this way, the PhD student establishes a stable foundation for the subsequent empirical section of the research. The mastery of the conceptual apparatus, clearly based on a broad theoretical foundation, makes a very positive impression.

The third Chapter is dedicated to the opportunities for improving the management of agricultural lands within the State land fund it is based on empirical material from a survey conducted by the PhD student. It is conducted between June 2024 and September 2025 among two target groups: farmers who are users of State land fund agricultural lands and employees of municipal agricultural offices. The questionnaire contains 49 statements measured on a 5-point Likert scale, constructed to cover key elements of sustainability in state land management.

In this section, the PhD student consistently applies the methodology from Chapter two, thereby achieving the primary objective of the dissertation. The research tasks have been fulfilled, and the research thesis has been defended. In this chapter,

theory is complemented by the practical results of the study.

Based on the analyses conducted in the dissertation, the conclusion presents a series of significant findings aimed at both increasing outcome-based sustainability and strengthening functional sustainability. Drawing upon these conclusions, the PhD student formulates strategic directions for improving the management of State land fund agricultural lands in Bulgaria.

I consider the dissertation to be an original and in-depth scientific study, representing the author's own work. The PhD candidate has adhered to the rules of scientific ethics by correctly citing the literary sources used. The computational procedures and the statistical processing of the empirical data have been performed correctly. The dissertation is excellently illustrated and visualized.

The dissertation presented to me for review proves that the author has acquired profound theoretical knowledge regarding the researched subject matter and possesses the capacity to conduct independent scientific research.

6. Scientific contributions of the PhD thesis.

As a result of the work on the dissertation, scientific-theoretical and practical-applied contributions have been derived. I highly evaluate the contributions specified by the PhD candidate.

I accept the statement of contributions. It realistically reflects the results achieved in the dissertation and emphasizes its significance and merits.

7. Critical notes and questions.

It is noted that the bibliography used in the dissertation is not categorized by type: Cyrillic sources, Latin script sources, regulatory frameworks, internet sources, etc. Furthermore, it is not arranged in alphabetical order. This remark does not diminish the merits of the dissertation.

I have the following question: Who can provide feedback regarding the sustainability of functioning as a "closed loop"?

I recommend that the PhD candidate, in his future scientific activities, publish his research in specialized, peer-reviewed, and indexed scientific journals.

8. Publications and citations.

Three independent publications related to the dissertation have been presented. With a required minimum of 30 points, the PhD candidate has accrued 30 points. Thus, the requirement of Art. 9 of the Regulations for the implementation of the development of academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria for admission to defense has been met.

The presented abstract, with a volume of 51 pages, objectively reflects the structure and content of the dissertation, as well as the achieved primary scientific and applied results.

CONCLUSION:

Позволявам си да предложа на почитаемото Научно жури също да гласува положително и да присъди на **Димитър Димов Върбанов**, редовен докторант към катедра „Аграрна икономика“ при Икономически университет - Варна образователната и научна степен **“доктор”** по докторска програма Аграрен бизнес.

The dissertation of the PhD student **Dimitar Dimov Varbanov** is a complete and independent scientific study dedicated to a topical economic problem. The research objective and tasks have been successfully fulfilled. I consider that the presented dissertation meets the requirements of the Development of academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria act and the Regulations of the University of economics – Varna for its implementation, which gives me reason to evaluate it **POSITIVELY**.

I take the liberty of proposing to the esteemed Scientific jury to also vote positively and to award **Dimitar Dimov Varbanov**, a full-time PhD student at the department of “Agricultural economics” at the University of Economics – Varna, the educational and scientific degree of **"Doctor"** in the doctoral program: Agricultural business.

17.03.2026

Stara Zagora

REVIEWER: 

(*Prof. Dr. Nadka Stefanova Kostadinova*)

REVIEW

on a dissertation submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree

“Doctor” in professional field 3.8 “Economics”

Prepared by: Assoc. Prof. Maria Radoslavova Stanimirova, PhD, scientific specialty “Economics and Management (Agriculture)”, Department of “Agricultural Economics”, University of Economics – Varna (UE–Varna).

Subject: dissertation submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in professional field 3.8 “Economics”, field of higher education 3 “Social, Economic and Legal Sciences”, doctoral programme “Agrarian Business”, UE–Varna.

Grounds for the submission of the review: participation as a member of the scientific jury appointed by Order No. RD–06-27/28.01.2026 of the Rector of the University of Economics – Varna and a decision of the first meeting of the scientific jury held on 10.02.2026.

Author of the dissertation: Dimitar Dimov Varbanov – full-time PhD student at the Department of “Agricultural Economics”, Faculty of Economics, University of Economics – Varna.

Title of the dissertation: “Sustainable Management of Agricultural Land from the State Land Fund in Bulgaria”

I. Information about the PhD Candidate

The PhD candidate Dimitar Dimov Varbanov has been enrolled in full-time doctoral studies in the doctoral programme “Agrarian Business” within professional field 3.8 “Economics” at the Department of “Agricultural Economics”, University of Economics – Varna.

According to the submitted orders, the PhD candidate was admitted to full-time doctoral studies by Order No. RD-17-181/29.01.2018 of the Rector of the University of Economics – Varna, effective as of 01.02.2018, with a duration of study of three years. Initially, Assist. Prof. Radmil Dimitrov Nikolov, PhD, was appointed as academic supervisor.

Following the fulfilment of the prescribed training requirements, the PhD candidate was dismissed with the right to defend the dissertation by Order No. RD-17-441/12.03.2021, effective as of 01.02.2021. At a subsequent stage, the academic supervision was taken over by Assoc. Prof. Tanya Nikolova Georgieva, PhD.

The training has been conducted in accordance with the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the internal regulations of the University of Economics – Varna. The PhD candidate has fulfilled the required academic obligations and has successfully passed the necessary doctoral examinations.

The educational background of the PhD candidate is in the field of agricultural economics. He obtained a Bachelor's degree in Agricultural Economics in 2001 and a Master's degree in Agricultural Economics in 2003 from the University of Economics – Varna.

The professional biography of the PhD candidate is characterised by substantial practical experience, including work in agriculture in an international environment, as well as professional experience in Canada. Particularly noteworthy is his experience within the system of public agricultural administration – as a junior expert at the General Directorate “Agrarian Development” and as Director of the Regional Directorate of Agriculture – Shumen. This experience is directly related to land resource management and the functioning of the State Land Fund.

The accumulated professional and managerial experience is directly related to the topic of the dissertation and contributes to its practical orientation, allowing for the integration of theoretical concepts with real management practices.

In summary, it can be concluded that the educational background and professional experience of the PhD candidate are consistent with the research topic and provide a solid basis for conducting independent and in-depth scientific research.

II. General Presentation of the Dissertation

The dissertation of Dimitar Dimov Varbanov addresses a topical and significant scientific and applied problem related to the sustainable management of agricultural land from the State Land Fund (SLF) in Bulgaria. The topic is of high social and economic relevance, given the role of state-owned land resources for the development of the agricultural sector and the need for their effective and transparent management as a limited resource.

The dissertation comprises 156 pages, including an introduction – 5 pages, a main body structured in three chapters – 135 pages, a conclusion – 4 pages, and references – 12 pages. The study includes 22 tables and 23 figures, and the bibliography covers 135 sources, including scientific publications and internet resources.

The object of the study is the agricultural land from the State Land Fund in Bulgaria, while the subject concerns the management mechanisms and their sustainability in the allocation and regulation of access to this resource.

The main objective of the research is, on the basis of a theoretical analysis, to develop and apply a methodology for assessing the sustainable management of agricultural land from the SLF, as well as to formulate opportunities for improving the existing management mechanisms.

In order to achieve this objective, specific research tasks have been formulated, aimed at systematising the theoretical foundations of sustainable management, developing a conceptual framework, constructing an assessment methodology through a combination of outcome-based and process-based indicators, and applying it to empirical data for the period 2007–2024.

The main research thesis is that the management of agricultural land from the SLF can be considered sustainable only when economic, social, and environmental objectives are achieved simultaneously, as well as when predictability and consistency in management mechanisms are ensured.

The methodological framework combines a systems approach and a process-based approach, enabling the examination of management as a system of interrelated mechanisms. In the empirical part, an analysis of secondary data over an extended period (2007–2024) is applied, complemented by a survey among stakeholders, which allows for the integration of quantitative assessments with perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, and social legitimacy.

Structurally, the dissertation is organised into three main chapters. The first chapter examines the theoretical foundations of sustainable management and derives criteria for assessing sustainability. The second chapter develops and applies a methodology for evaluating the management of SLF land based on a combination of process and outcome indicators. The third chapter analyses the results obtained and formulates guidelines and specific measures for improving management, structured as “manageable levers”, including rules, transparency, control, and inter-institutional coordination.

III. Assessment of the Form and Content of the Dissertation

The submitted dissertation complies with the requirements of Art. 34, para. 2 and para. 3 of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at the University of Economics – Varna. The dissertation has been prepared in accordance with established academic standards and meets the requirements for the structure and content of a scientific study for the award of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor”. A clear distinction

between the individual structural elements is observed, and the exposition follows the logic of the stated research objective and tasks.

In terms of content, the work is characterised by a well-developed internal logic, in which the theoretical framework, the developed methodology, and the empirical analysis are consistently interconnected. The author succeeds in constructing a comprehensive research model in which the management of State Land Fund land is considered not as an isolated activity, but as a system of interrelated mechanisms.

The theoretical part is distinguished by a purposeful selection of scientific sources and an effort toward conceptual clarification of the notion of “sustainability” in the context of public management of land resources. A significant contribution of this section is the derivation of evaluation criteria that go beyond the traditional understanding of sustainability solely through outcome-based indicators and include process-related characteristics such as predictability, consistency, and risk manageability.

The developed assessment methodology represents a strong aspect of the dissertation. It is based on the integration of process-based and outcome-based indicators and allows for a comprehensive evaluation of management sustainability. It is particularly commendable that the methodology is not only conceptually grounded but also applied to real data over an extended period (2007–2024), which enhances its analytical value.

The empirical analysis is characterised by an attempt at an in-depth interpretation of the obtained results. The author does not limit the analysis to the presentation of quantitative assessments but complements them with an examination of stakeholder perceptions, thereby introducing a dimension of social legitimacy and trust in management. This broadens the scope of the study and adds a higher degree of realism to the conclusions drawn.

The applied orientation of the work is clearly expressed through the formulation of specific measures for improving the management of the State Land Fund, structured as “manageable levers”. The proposals are logically derived from the research findings and are aligned with the institutional framework, which enhances their practical applicability.

The tables and figures are functionally integrated into the exposition and support the analysis by enabling a clear tracing of the identified relationships. They do not serve merely an illustrative role but form an integral part of the author’s argumentation.

The literature used is relevant and sufficiently diverse, demonstrating a good knowledge of scientific research in the field under consideration and an ability for its critical interpretation.

In summary, the dissertation is characterised by analytical depth, coherence, and a clearly expressed link between the theoretical framework, the developed methodology, and the empirical analysis, which defines it as a completed and well-argued scientific study.

IV. Evaluation of the PhD Candidate's Publications

A total of three scientific publications related to the topic of the dissertation have been presented, including one article and two conference papers published in scientific journals and proceedings of academic forums. The publications are thematically aligned with the dissertation and reflect key aspects of the research, related to the management of agricultural land from the State Land Fund, as well as to the role of public administration in this process. The submitted publications are single-authored and demonstrate the PhD candidate's active engagement in research activities and the dissemination of the obtained results within the academic community.

According to the submitted report, the PhD candidate meets the minimum national requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor", fulfilling the required number of points in accordance with the Regulations for the Implementation of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria.

V. Scientific and Practical Contributions of the Dissertation

The dissertation presents identifiable scientific and applied scientific contributions, which are the result of the author's independent research work.

Among the scientific contributions, particular emphasis may be placed on the further development of theoretical concepts related to the sustainable management of public resources, as well as on the elaboration of a conceptual framework and a methodology for assessing sustainability, based on the integration of process-based and outcome-based indicators.

Among the applied contributions, it is important to highlight the application of the developed methodology to empirical data for the period 2007–2024, the integration of

stakeholder assessments, and the formulation of practical guidelines for improving the management of the State Land Fund, structured as “manageable levers”.

The presented contributions are well substantiated, correspond to the content of the dissertation, and possess both theoretical significance and practical applicability.

VI. Questions on the Dissertation

With a view to creating conditions for a more convincing defence of the dissertation and to further deepen the scientific discussion, I would like to pose the following question to the PhD candidate:

1. What opportunities does the author envisage for further developing the proposed “manageable levers” in the context of digitalisation and increasing transparency in the management of land resources?

VII. Overall Evaluation of the Dissertation and Conclusion

The submitted dissertation represents an independent, in-depth, and relevant scientific study, devoted to a significant problem related to the sustainable management of agricultural land from the State Land Fund in Bulgaria. It demonstrates solid theoretical knowledge, skills in developing and applying research methodology, as well as the ability to formulate well-founded conclusions and practical guidelines.

The achieved results, the formulated scientific and applied contributions, and the presented publications provide sufficient grounds to conclude that the dissertation meets the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for its implementation.

On this basis, I give a positive evaluation of the dissertation and propose that the esteemed Scientific Jury award Dimitar Dimov Varbanov the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in professional field 3.8 “Economics”, doctoral programme “Agrarian Business”.

19.03.2026 r.

Varna

Prepared by: ... 

(Assoc. Prof. Mariya Stanimirova, PhD)