



UNIVERSITY OF NATIONAL AND WORLD
ECONOMY



ИКОНОМИЧЕСКИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ ВАРНА

Bx. No. PA20-355/08.03.2024r.

REVIEW

of dissertation

for acquiring the educational and scientific degree “**Doctor**”,
according to a procedure, announced by the University of **Economics – Varna**

1. General information

Reviewer: Prof. D.Sc. Tanya Parusheva

UNWE – Sofia, Department “Economics of Tourism”

Field of Higher Education 3. “Social, Economic and Legal Sciences”

Professional Field 3.8. “Economics”

Scientific Specialty “Economics and Management (Tourism)”

Reason for writing the review: Order No. RD-06-18/02.02.2024 of the Rector of the University of Economics – Varna for the appointment of a Scientific Jury and decision from the first meeting of the Scientific Jury held on 12.02.2024.

Author of the dissertation: Stetka Veselinova, Hristova – part-time doctoral student in the Department of “Economics and Organization of Tourism” at the University of Economics – Varna

Topic of the dissertation: “Increasing the competitiveness of a destination for conference tourism (on the example of the municipality of Varna)”

Scientific supervisor: Prof. Dr. Stoyan Petkov Marinov

2. Information about the doctoral candidate

Stetka Hristova graduated from Shumen University “Bishop Konstantin Preslavski”, Bachelor’s degree, specialty “Tourism” (2006). She obtained a Master’s degree in “Tourism” also at the Shumen University (2007) and in the “Economics of Tourism” specialty at the same University (2011). In 2021, she participated in training on the project “Let’s make a tour of the Black Sea” and in a seminar to promote cycling tourism on the same project, financed under the Program for Cross-Border Cooperation in the Black Sea Basin.

Her professional development began in K.k. “Golden sands” in private tourist companies as a seasonal employee in various positions (1998 – 2006). She continues to work as a manager in RE under the so-called “Black Sea Elite”, Varna (2006 – 2020). During the

period 2018 – 2020, she held the academic position of “assistant” at the Episcopal Konstantin Preslavski Higher Secondary School at the Department of Geography, Regional Development and Tourism. From 2020 to the present, she is a teacher at the same University in the Department of Information, Qualification and Continuing Education – Varna, Department of “Educational Sciences”. She speaks Russian and German.

Stefka Hristova is enrolled in **part-time doctoral studies** with order No. RD-17-447/03.02.2015 of the Rector of the University of Economics – Varna in the field of higher education 3. “Social, Economic and Legal sciences”, professional direction 3.9. “Tourism”, on the doctoral program “Economics and Management (Tourism)” at the Department “Economics and Organization of Tourism”, for a period of **4 (four) years**, starting from 02.02.2015 – 02.02.2019.

She completes the work provided in the individual plan. Successfully passed the **doctoral exams** as follows:

- Theory of management – Very good (4.50);
- Management of the tourist enterprise – Excellent (5.50);
- Research methodology – Very good (5.00);
- Russian language – Good (3.50).

During the period of her doctoral studies, she conducted classes – “Hospitality Practicum” – 3 course, 2 groups; “Restaurant Practicum” – 3 course, 3 groups and “Anthropogenic and tourist resources” – 2 course, 3 groups. She participated in the work of 2 doctoral level courses: “Preparation; structuring, shaping and defense of a dissertation” and “Academic writing for doctoral students. Copyright”.

During her studies as a doctoral student, Stefka Hristova was certified with a **positive grade**. The dissertation work was discussed at the Faculty Council of the “Economics and Organization of Tourism” department. She was dismissed with the right of defense by order No. RD 17-304/06.02.2019 of the Rector of the University of Economics – Varna, effective from 02.02.2019.

A defense procedure was opened before a Scientific Jury, in accordance with Art. 31, para. 1 and para. 2 of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at the University of Economics – Varna, Section II – Conditions and procedure for acquiring the educational and scientific degree “doctor”.

3. General presentation of the dissertation work

The dissertation work of doctoral student **Stefka Veselinova Hristova** submitted for review, the abstract and scientific publications related to the dissertation work are the result of

independent scientific research. **The actuality and significance** of the researched issues are highlighted in a well-argued and convincing manner. It is emphasized that conference tourism is important for the development of tourist destinations. It is related to the construction of specific infrastructure and superstructure and to the creation of a special organization of tourist services.

The subject of research *“the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a tourist destination for conference tourism”* and the **object of research** – *“the municipality of Varna as a tourist destination for conference tourism, interpreted in the context of the general theory of tourism and in particular – of tourism management”* are correctly distinguished. **The main goal** is clearly and precisely defined: *“on the basis of a developed theoretical model for assessing the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna, to propose strategic guidelines for the formation and development of its competitive advantages in the field of conference tourism”*. The goal was achieved by solving **10 specific research tasks**.

The **research thesis** is appropriately formulated: *“the competitiveness of a tourist destination for conference tourism is a function of many factors, the main ones being: infrastructure, superstructure, accessibility, security and safety systems, marketing mix, effective organization and partnership between the interested parties”*. **4 working hypotheses** are correctly defined.

The research toolkit includes the use of the following **research models** – *descriptive-inventory, exploratory and causal*. Two **general scientific methods** were mainly used – induction and deduction. **The information provision** is based on data from a variety of secondary sources, as well as data from an empirical study. Specialized scientific publications by Bulgarian and foreign authors were studied.

The main limitations and problems of the research work are related to the lack of sufficiently adequate and reliable statistical information on the problem under consideration; company confidentiality on the investigated factors and limiting the competitiveness of a tourist destination at the municipal level, specifically the municipality of Varna.

The dissertation meets the requirements of Art. 27, para. 2 of the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria.

4. Assessment of the structure and content of the dissertation

The dissertation is 218 pages long. 10 tables and 33 figures are illustrated in the main text. **The structure** of the dissertation work is maintained in the spirit of well-grounded logic, consistency and connection between the treated problems. It consists of an introduction (7

pages), an exposition in three chapters (178 pages), a conclusion (8 pages) and references (7 pages). 4 appendices have been prepared for the dissertation work. **The bibliographic apparatus** includes 111 titles, of which 35 are in Bulgarian, 52 foreign titles and 24 specialized Internet sites.

Doctoral student Stefka Hristova **knows well** the theses and concepts of established authors on the researched problems, and successfully interprets them. Literary sources have been used in **good faith and correctly**.

The style of the thesis is concise and precise. The text is written in **scientific language**. **The content of the dissertation** testifies that the doctoral student Stefka Hristova has carried out a thorough **scientific study** and a **very good practical proof** of the author's goals and tasks.

The logical framework of the exhibition is presented in the **introduction**. The need to increase the competitiveness of a destination for conference tourism (for the example of the municipality of Varna) is substantiated.

In the **first chapter** of the dissertation "**Theoretical foundations of conference tourism**" the essence of conference tourism is examined. The research interest is focused on the competitiveness of a tourist destination for conference tourism. A methodology for researching the competitiveness of a destination for conference tourism is presented.

In the **second chapter** of the dissertation "**Analysis of the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism**" the development of conference tourism in Bulgaria is analyzed. The characteristics of conference tourism in the municipality of Varna are indicated. An in-depth assessment of the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism was carried out.

In the **third chapter** of the dissertation "**Guidelines for increasing the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism**" the trends in the development of conference tourism are presented. Emphasis is placed on the improvement of the components of the marketing mix of the municipality of Varna, as a destination for conference tourism. A special place is dedicated to the management of the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna, as a destination for conference tourism.

The **conclusion** summarizes the main analyzes and conclusions regarding the increase in the competitiveness of a destination for conference tourism (for example, the municipality of Varna).

Outstanding scientific and scientific-applied results represent an original contribution to science. They give grounds for the conclusion that **the main goal** of the dissertation work

has been **achieved**. The set research tasks have been **fulfilled**. The research thesis is **confirmed**. The formulated working hypotheses have been **proven**.

In terms of structure and content, the dissertation corresponds to 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, Section II – Conditions and procedure for acquiring the educational and scientific degree “doctor”.

4.1. Evaluation of the abstract of the dissertation work

The abstract is **20 pages in Bulgarian and 20 pages in English**. It correctly corresponds with the dissertation work and reliably presents the researched problems in a synthesized form. **The lexical and stylistic characteristics of the text are sustained and precise**. It consists of **5 parts**, which include: 1). general characteristics of the dissertation work; 2). structure and content of the dissertation; 3). a brief statement of the dissertation work; 4). a reference to the scientific and scientific-applied contributions in the dissertation work; 5). list of publications on the topic of the dissertation.

5. Identification and assessment of scientific and scientific-applied contributions in the dissertation work

Doctoral student Stefka Hristova **correctly formulated the contributions** in her dissertation. We assess the submitted statement of contributions as correct and realistically reflecting the achieved results.

In our opinion, **scientific and scientific-applied contributions** clearly stand out in the dissertation work, which can be summarized as follows:

first – the theory for defining and classifying conference tourism as a manifestation of business meetings and events is clarified. The factors determining the development and competitiveness of the destination for MICE tourism are systematized.

secondly – an author's model was developed for research and assessment of the competitiveness of a destination for conference tourism, which was tested on the example of the municipality of Varna.

thirdly – the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism was investigated, analyzed and evaluated through a survey. The strengths and weaknesses of the destination are brought out by comparison with main national (Burgas, Plovdiv, Sofia) and international (Thessalonica, Constanta) competitive destinations.

fourth – author's ideas and recommendations are proposed for increasing the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism.

6. Publications and participation in scientific forums

Doctoral student Stefka Hristova **meets the minimum national requirements** for awarding the educational and scientific degree “doctor”, according to Art. 2b, para. 2 and para. 3 of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria. She has **4 scientific publications** directly related to the topic of the dissertation work. It has achieved points by group of indicators “G” as follows:

Articles and reports published in non-refereed peer-reviewed journals and edited collective volumes.

- **1 scientific article**, independent in Bulgarian, indexed in secondary databases;
- **3 scientific reports**, 2 independent and 1 co-authored, included in the National Reference List.

The reports were printed in Bulgarian in collections of participation in scientific forums, as follows:

1). International Scientific Conference “The Economy in the Changing World – National, Regional and Global Dimensions”, Publishing House “Science and Economy” at the University of Economics – Varna, 2017.

2). Black Sea Tourist Forum – “Black Sea Region – a destination for sustainable tourism products”, Slavena Publishing House – Varna, 2018.

3). Black Sea Tourist Forum – “MICE tourism – festivals, incentives, conferences, exhibitions”, Slavena Publishing House – Varna, 2019.

The publications of doctoral student Stefka Hristova are **representative** and **ensure sufficient dissemination of the research results** among the academic community and interested circles of the tourism business. *The scientific production, dedicated to the treated issues, meets the minimum national requirements for awarding the ESD “Doctor”, according to Art. 2b para. 2 and 3 of LDASRB and Art. 35, para. 1, item 4 of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at the University of Economics – Varna, Section II – Conditions and procedure for acquiring the educational and scientific degree “doctor”.*

7. Confirmed or unconfirmed plagiarism in the dissertation or abstract

There is no proven plagiarism in the dissertation and the abstract.

8. Critical notes and recommendations

Some notes can be made to the thesis that would improve the overall presentation of the work.

1. The content of paragraph 3.1. "Trends in the development of conference tourism" should be specified, linking the trends more directly with the development of conference tourism in the municipality of Varna.

2. Paragraph 3.3. "Management of the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism" is recommended to be further developed on the basis of the phases of the management process.

The mentioned notes do not reduce the merits of the study and do not affect the general positive assessment of the dissertation work, as an independent study with indisputable scientific and scientific-applied contributions.

I recommend that in her future research work, doctoral student Stefka Hristova should focus on the economic aspects of MICE tourism in the tourist destination, and specifically in the municipality of Varna.

9. Questions for the dissertation student

The investigated issue raises the following questions for a decent defense:

1. In the Program for the development of tourism in the territory of the municipality of Varna for the period 2021 – 2030, the construction of a conference center in the city of "St. St. Constantine and Elena". Do you consider the chosen location for a new conference hall to be appropriate, in view of the development of MICE tourism in the municipality?

2. What should be the role of TIC Varna for the development of MICE tourism in the municipality and can it perform the functions of a specialized congress office?

10. Conclusion

With conviction, I give a **positive assessment** of the dissertation work on the topic "Increasing the competitiveness of a destination for conference tourism (on the example of the municipality of Varna)". I confirm that it fully **complies with the requirements** of LDAS in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its implementation and the Regulations for the development of the academic staff at the University of Economics – Varna, Section II – Conditions and procedure for acquiring the educational and scientific degree "doctor".

The dissertation is a **scientific-applied solution** to a real practical problem of social significance. The doctoral student has in-depth theoretical knowledge in the field of "Tourism" and the ability to conduct independent scientific research.

I propose to the respected members of the Scientific Jury to make a **decision "FOR"** the awarding of the **educational and scientific degree "doctor"** in the field of higher education 3. "Social, Economic and Legal Sciences", professional direction 3.9. "Tourism", scientific specialty "Economics and Management (Tourism)" by **STEFKA**

VESELINOVA CHRISTOVA -- part-time doctoral student in the Department "Economics and Organization of Tourism" at the Faculty of "Management" at the University of Economics -- Varna.

Sofia,

17.02.2024.

REVIEWER:

(Prof. DSc. Tanya Parusheva)

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

for dissertation of **Stefka Veselinova Hristova**,

PhD student in full-time education at the Department of Economics and Organization of
Tourism at the University of Economics - Varna

on the topic: *"Increasing the competitiveness of a destination for conference tourism /on
the example of Varna Municipality/"*

Scientific field: 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences

Professional field 3.9. Tourism

Scientific speciality: Economics and Management (Tourism)

Scientific supervisor: Prof. Stoyan Petkov Marinov, PhD

Reviewer: Assoc. prof. Genka Ivanova Rafailova, PhD

Department of Foreign Languages and Communication in Tourism

College of Tourism – Varna at the University of Economics – Varna

This review was developed on the basis of a decision of a scientific jury dated 12.02.2024,
appointed by Order No RD-06-18/02.02.2024 of the Rector of the University of Economics -
Varna.

I. General characteristics of the dissertation

The dissertation work is developed in a total volume of 218 pages and the main text is
structurally presented in an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. There are 4 annexes
and 111 sources of information are used, of which 35 in Cyrillic. The development is in a
classical structure and the main text is illustrated by 10 tables and 33 figures, which not only
illustrate it, but are its essential content part.

The topic of the dissertation is undoubtedly topical and its choice is very well justified by the rapid pace of development of the tourism industry sector related to organizing and conducting congresses, conferences, business and business meetings. The argumentation is complemented by key opportunities that conference tourism provides for destinations by: achieving high economic growth; providing employment and social benefits for the local population; promotion of areas; attracting public and private investment.

In the introduction, all the necessary attributes of scientific research are available. A goal, ten research tasks, a thesis and four hypotheses have been defined and formulated. In addition to the in-depth and wide-ranging theoretical analyses and evaluations, the dissertation paper also contains many well-presented and commented texts that present the results of the independent studies of a PhD student Hristova. In order to collect the empirical data necessary for the study, it conducts a meaningful and large-scale questionnaire survey.

The essence and directions of the scientific study are specified in the thesis of the dissertation, according to which *"the competitiveness of the tourist destination for conference tourism is a function of many factors, the main ones of which are: infrastructure, superstructure, accessibility, security and safety systems, marketing mix, effective organization and partnership between stakeholders."*

The defined author's goal in the paper is *"on the basis of a theoretical model for assessing the competitiveness of a tourist destination for conference tourism to analyse the competitiveness of Varna Municipality and to offer strategic guidelines for the formation and development of its competitive advantages in the field of conference tourism."*

The object of study in the dissertation is *"Varna Municipality as a tourist destination for conference tourism, interpreted in the context of the general theory of tourism and in particular - tourism management"*. It is analysed in the context of the concept of the complex socio-economic essence of the municipality as a tourist destination through research subordinated to the interdisciplinary approach. In this regard, the subject of research in the paper is *"the competitiveness of Varna Municipality as a tourist destination for conference tourism"*.

The research methods used in the dissertation are appropriately selected and applied. In the introduction of the elaboration, the more important limitations in the study are correctly

defined. Some of them are related to gaps and incompleteness in the statistical data, reflecting the scale and activity of the conference tourism sector and the company confidentiality of specialized information.

For the preparation of the dissertation PhD student Hristova has used a large number of information sources (111 pcs.). The scientific information is derived from authoritative and officially recognized publications. They are quoted precisely and correctly, according to the requirements. They are sufficient in volume, scope and content for the overall in-depth study of the topic. The PhD student, to a high degree, knows the specialized publications in the relevant scientific field. Their use and interpretation correspond to the structure and content of the dissertation. The presented positions are thoroughly studied, very well understood and adapted appropriately according to the purpose and research tasks of the study. The intervention of the doctoral student is consistent with the requirements of the research methods applied in the dissertation. This ensures the authenticity of the source data and the credibility of the statements, assessments and conclusions on which the scientific results are based. We believe that they are a personal deed and a merit of a PhD student Hristova.

The individual parts in the structure of the dissertation are logically consistent and very well connected. In the first part, based on the modern theory of competitiveness of a tourist destination, Stefka Hristova skilfully commented and differentiated the peculiarities and essence of the tourist venue for conference events. The very good knowledge of the issues and the logical connection between the theoretical considerations and the conclusions on their basis allow the doctoral student to justify and construct an appropriate methodology for studying the competitiveness of a conference tourism destination at municipal level.

In the second part, again in a very good logical sequence and in accordance with the derived conceptual model, the methodological steps and a specific toolkit are justified. They provide and analyse empirical data from independent studies in order to formulate logically well-grounded conclusions and assessments of the competitiveness of conference tourism in Varna Municipality. PhD student Hristova complements the study with a summarized SWOT analysis of the Bulgarian municipalities of Varna, Burgas, Plovdiv and Sofia as competitive destinations for MICE tourism. The competitive advantages of the foreign municipalities of Thessaloniki and Constanta in terms of conference and business events are also studied.

In the third part of the dissertation, the directions for improving the system elements of Varna Municipality as a tourist place for conference tourism are defined argumentatively. The guidelines for managing the competitiveness of the municipality as a destination for organizing and conducting conference events with positive effects and impacts for all stakeholders are defined. Specific structural components of the vision and mission of Varna Municipality as a destination for conference tourism and the key objectives for their achievement have been defined.

II. Main contributions to the dissertation

The dissertation contains contributions of a theoretical and scientifically applied nature. They enrich, expand and complement the available research on the topic and support its practical and applied aspects.

(a) theoretical contributions:

- a comprehensive and thorough critical review and evaluation of theoretical concepts and achievements in the specialized literature on tourism related to the site and the subject of the study has been carried out;
- the theory on the nature and peculiarities of conference tourism and the specifics of its competitiveness at the municipal level is upgraded and supplemented;
- A specific methodology for studying the competitive advantages of a conference tourism destination at municipal level has been developed.

(b) Scientific and applied contributions:

- the resources for conference tourism in Varna Municipality are analysed and evaluated. An assessment of the competitiveness of this type of tourism in the studied territory has also been made;
- management goals for conference tourism in the municipality of Varna are defined, in accordance with the formulated content elements of the vision and mission of the municipality as a destination for organizing and conducting business events;
- Practical and applied aspects of human resources management and the quality of the tourist product within the scope of conference tourism on the territory of Varna Municipality are systematized.

The presented contributions are defined as balanced in theoretical and practical aspect. Our deep conviction is that they will be assessed by tourism stakeholders as useful and necessary to increase competitiveness Varna Municipality as a conference tourism destination.

III. Fulfilment of other requirements

The dissertation abstract publication is in a volume of 20 pages and reflects correctly and accurately the structure, main parts of the content and more important results of the studies in the dissertation. It also includes the contributions to the dissertation, presented argumentatively and correctly by the doctoral student.

The candidate for acquiring scientific and educational degree "PhD" presents a total of 4 publications on the dissertation, including 1 article and 3 scientific reports. The presented papers are published in reputable scientific publishers and exceed the number of publications presenting the main results of the research on the dissertation for acquiring the PhD. Publications reflect to a sufficiently high degree important parts of the content of the dissertation and give it the necessary level of publicity.

IV. Questions to the PhD student

1. (pp. 152 – 162) What is the summarized assessment of the doctoral student for the specific manifestation of the trends in the development of conference tourism in the municipality of Varna presented in paragraph 3.1?

2. (pp. 188 – 189) What are the main difficulties and challenges in the realization of the mission, vision and goals Varna Municipality as a conference tourism destination?

V. Conclusion

The dissertation presented for review on the topic: "Increasing the competitiveness of a destination for conference tourism /on the example of Varna Municipality/", authored by Stefka Veselinova Hristova, contains the necessary theoretical and applied scientific results. These results we evaluate as an aggregate original scientific contribution. The characteristics of the dissertation show that the doctoral student demonstrates in-depth theoretical knowledge combined with relevant research skills and abilities to independently conduct scientific research in the professional field 3.9. Tourism.

These arguments and findings are an objective reason to recommend, with conviction to the members of the Scientific Jury, to award to PhD student **Stefka Veselinova Hristova** the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the scientific specialty "Economics and Management (Tourism)", professional field 3.9. Tourism

Varna

Prepared the review, member of the Scientific Jury:

March 21, 2024

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

(Assoc. Prof. Genka Iv. Rafailova, PhD)