

TO

THE CHAIRMAN OF THE SCIENTIFIC JURY
DETERMINED BY Rector's ORDER
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS - VARNA

according to the procedure for acquiring the educational and scientific degree "doctor"
in the scientific specialty "Economics and management (tourism)"

STATEMENT

Regarding dissertation thesis for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in professional field 3.9. "Tourism", doctoral program "Economics and Management (Tourism)" according to the announced procedure from the University of Economics - Varna

2. General information

Author of the statement: Ass. Prof. Elena Ilieva, PhD, University "Prof. Dr. Asen Zlatarov" - Burgas, College of Tourism - Burgas.

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 of the Scientific Jury on 02.12.2024.

Author of the dissertation: Stefka Veselinova Hristova, full-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)".

Research supervisor: Prof. Stoyan Marinov, PhD.

2. General presentation of the dissertation

The dissertation work of PhD student Stefka Veselinova Hristova is a comprehensive independent study, dedicated to the extremely current topic for the development of MICE tourism, based on theoretical and empirical research (within the municipality of Varna). The subject of the study is very well motivated and logically justified in the introduction. MICE tourism is instantly growing worldwide, proving itself not only as one of the successful types of tourism, but also as a sustainable model for tourism development. However, scientific studies in the field of conference tourism are still at an early stage, and moreover in Bulgaria they are also fragmentary. Given the fact that the EU is among the top receptive markets for MICE tourism and Bulgaria has a key geographical location, the stated arguments prove the **significance and relevance of the presented research** by Stefka Veselinova Hristova.

The **subject and object** of the scientific research are precisely and clearly defined. They, both, indicate the particular context of the study – within the theory of tourism and tourism management theory in particular.

The **scientific goal** of the dissertation corresponds to the stated need by the author, and more specifically, based on a theoretical study of MICE tourism, to assess the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a conference tourism destination. In order to achieve the thus stated scientific goal, the PhD student defines and implements ten specific research tasks, which are correctly formulated and completed in the dissertation work.

In the **introduction** of the dissertation, the **research thesis** is excellently formulated and is subsequently successfully attested in the study based on **four main hypotheses**. The author's valuable contribution to science is the conceptual model for assessment of the competitiveness of a conference tourism destination at a regional level.

The selected **research methods** correspond to the research goal and tasks set in the dissertation. Logically, taking into account the complexity of the object and the subject of the research, the author chooses the interdisciplinary approach. For data processing during the empirical study, an appropriate statistical approach was also correctly used. The author's interpretation of the results from the empirical study and the proposed guidelines for increasing the competitiveness of Varna as a tourist destination for MICE tourism, are clearly stating the author's position.

The **sources of information** correspond to the research topic. PhD student Stefka Veselinova Hristova thoroughly reviewed diverse Bulgarian and foreign scientific literature, which corresponds to the interdisciplinary approach in the study. Predominantly, these are scientific papers in the field of tourism management, sustainable tourism business, tourism destination management, competitiveness, conference/MICE tourism. The **limitations** of the study mentioned by the author are relevant and acceptable.

As a result of the presented so far, I believe that the presented dissertation **fully meets** the requirements of Art. 27, para. 2 of the Regulation for the Implementation of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria.

3. Publications and participation in scientific forums

PhD student Hristova presents three scientific publications directly related to the topic of the dissertation work – 1 article and scientific 3 reports, with which she achieves 45 points. The article is published in scientific journals, refereed and indexed in world-known databases of scientific information, which testifies to the valuable contribution of the author to the promotion of Bulgarian science internationally. The scientific production presented by the PhD student meets the minimum national requirements for awarding doctoral degree according to Art. 3 of the Law for development of the academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the quantitative requirements under Art. 1-4 of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at the University of Economics – Varna.

4. Assessment of the structure and content of the dissertation

In relation to the **structure of the dissertation** of Stefka Veselinova Hristova, it has a total length of 218 pages, of which: introduction (7 pages); exposition in three chapters (178 pages); conclusion (8 pages); used literature (7 pages) The main text contains 10 tables and 33 figures necessary for visualizing the presented information. There are also 4 Appendices with a total length of 14 pages.

The used **scientific literature** numbers 111 sources, including 87 scientific papers, of which 35 in Cyrillic and 52 in Latin, and 24 web pages. The used sources correspond to the subject and object of the study and are used and cited appropriately in the presented text.

Regarding the content, the dissertation follows a classical model: introduction; theoretical chapter; analytical chapter; applied chapter and conclusion. The content is well balanced and logically coherent.

In the **first chapter**, based on an historical overview of the development of business and conference tourism and theoretical formulations from recognized scientific researchers, the terminological apparatus in the field of MICE tourism is constructed. The main types of meetings and events in MICE tourism are discussed with their distinctive characteristics indicated. The main organizations working for the development of conference tourism are presented. Additionally, international statistics highlight factual support to the author's outlined trend towards the growth of the MICE sector worldwide.

Following the thematic of the thesis, the author makes an in-depth analysis of the development of competitiveness, based on different theories, and the competitiveness of a tourist destination. Additionally, factors and key indicators of international competitiveness are presented and very well examined. As a logical conclusion of the theoretical chapter, the

author compiles and proposes a suitable conceptual model for assessment of the competitiveness of a tourist destination for conference tourism.

In the **second chapter** the author provides an overview of conference tourism in Bulgaria, on which the key indicators of the MICE tourism in the country and the main stakeholders and organizations in the sector are identified. Regarding the object of the study, a profile of Varna municipality as a destination for conference tourism is constructed. Two empirical surveys among an 'expert group' and a 'control group' are presented and analyzed. Consequently, the author follows the constructed model, on which basis the municipality of Varna is assessed as a destination with potential for MICE tourism development. The author justifiably points out the competitive advantages and disadvantages of Varna as a destination for conference tourism. The provided SWOT-analysis is proposed with a comparative characteristic at the national level with the municipalities of Burgas, Plovdiv and Sofia, and at the cross-border level – with Thessaloniki and Constanta.

The **third chapter** presents discussion of the results from the empirical study. The PhD student outlines the perspectives in conference tourism development in the municipality of Varna with an emphasis on technological innovations. The profile of Varna Municipality as a destination for MICE tourism is constructed as also guidelines for improvement are suggested, which would increase the competitiveness of the destination. Emphasis is placed on human resource management, more precisely concerning the need of specialised and continuing training.

The **introduction and conclusion** of the PhD thesis effectively fulfill their role. The author uses appropriate scientific and professional terminology from the field of tourism and business economics.

The **abstract** is in volume of 40 pages and fully meets the requirements for this type of scientific papers and correctly reflects the main results of the dissertation work.

In conclusion, the dissertation is presented in a form and volume that meets the requirements of Art. 34, paragraph 2 and 3 of the Rules for the terms and conditions for the acquiring scientific degrees and occupying academic positions at the University of Economic - Varna.

5. Evaluation of scientific and scientifically applied contributions

I fully accept the scientific and scientifically applied contributions highlighted by the PhD student within the presented conclusion of the dissertation work. These are theoretical (enrichment of theoretical statements in the theory of tourism); methodological (conceptual model for a competitiveness assessment of a conference tourism destination) and applied (approbation of the competitiveness of Varna municipality as a MICE tourism destination) contributions. I would like to especially emphasize the unique nature of the conceptual model.

6. Confirmed or unconfirmed plagiarism in the dissertation or the abstract

I find no plagiarism in the doctoral thesis and the abstract presented by the PhD student.

7. Remarks and recommendations

I have no critical remarks and recommendations regarding the dissertation work.

8. Questions to the PhD student

I have no questions for the PhD student, in view of the comprehensive and logically stated research in the PhD thesis.

9. Conclusion

The presented PhD is an original and in-depth study, that has a distinct contribution to the theory of tourism and to the tourism business. The research model and methodology are applicable, especially in terms of competitiveness assessment of a conference tourism

destination at a regional level. The author successfully combines her theoretical knowledge with her professional interests, demonstrating competence and a prominent author's position.

In conclusion, on the basis of the opinion presented by me, I give my **highly positive assessment of the presented doctorate and recommend the honorable Scientific Jury to award the PhD student Stefka Veselinova Hristova the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in professional field 3.9. Tourism, scientific specialty "Economics and Management (Tourism)"**.

15.03.2024,

Burgas

The statement has been prepared by:

/Associate Professor PhD Elena Ilieva/

OPINION
of dissertation work

**for the establishment of an educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in the
doctoral program “Economics and Management (Tourism)” of the University of
Economics – Varna**

1. General information

Reviewer: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Georgina Lukanova, University of Economics - Varna

Grounds for writing the review: participation in the Scientific Jury, determined
by order of the Rector at the University of Economics - Varna RD-06-18/02.02.2024,
and decision of the first meeting of the Scientific Jury, held on February 12, 2024.

Author of the dissertation: Stefka Veselinova Hristova, a PhD student at the
Department of Economics and Organization of Tourism at the University of Economics
– Varna.

Topic of the dissertation: "Improving the Competitiveness of a Conference
Tourism Destination: The Case of Varna Municipality".

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Stoyan Marinov

**2. General presentation of the dissertation (following requirements of Article
27, paragraph 2 of the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on the
Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria)**

The dissertation submitted for opinion is in a form and volume that meets the
specific requirements of the Department of Economics and Organization of Tourism.
The dissertation has a total volume of 245 pages, of which 206 pages are main text and
11 pages are appendices. The main text is structured as follows: introduction (7 pages),
exposition in three chapters (chap. I - 59 pages, chap. II - 79 pages, chap. III - 40 pages,

total 178 pages), conclusion (8 pages), list references (7 pages). The bibliographical apparatus includes 111 sources, of which 35 are in Bulgarian, 52 in English, and 24 Internet addresses are given. The quantitative and qualitative structure of the literature sources shows that the doctoral student has a good knowledge of both Bulgarian and foreign literature on the topic. The sources are predominantly modern, appropriately selected, correctly interpreted, and cited accurately. The presentation includes 10 tables and 33 figures, accompanied by 4 appendices. Additionally, a declaration of originality is attached.

3. Assessment of the structure and content of the dissertation (compliance with the requirements of Article 34, paragraph 2 and paragraph 3 of the Regulation for the Development of the Academic Staff at the University of Economics)

The dissertation focuses on the theoretical and empirical study of enhancing the competitiveness of a destination for a specific type of tourism. The topic is relevant and practical oriented, especially because in the conditions of negative socio-economic and market conditions, achieving a high degree of competitiveness is crucial for the successful market positioning of a tourist destination. This requires careful identification, analysis, and evaluation of the factors that are the drivers of competitiveness. The author clearly defines the research aim and formulates ten tasks for achieving it, which could be presented more generally. The research thesis, which specifies the essence and direction of the research, links the competitiveness of a conference tourism destination to multiple factors such as infra- and superstructure, marketing mix, effective organization, and stakeholder partnerships.

The structure of the research paper is classical. Following the approach from the general to the particular, the author starts with a comprehensive review of the theoretical formulations in the field of conference tourism and the competitiveness of a conference tourism destination. As a logical step, she derives a methodology for studying the competitiveness of a conference tourism destination. Chapter two analyses and evaluates the content elements of the internal environment of the studied destination, moving from the conceptual to the operational level according to

the proposed model's logic. Two independent surveys were conducted to assess the destination's competitiveness as a conference tourism destination. Chapter three presents recommendations for increasing the competitiveness of Varna Municipality as a conference tourism destination based on the empirical study results and conclusions.

The structure and content of the dissertation fully correspond with the set scientific research aim and tasks. A good logical sequence of the structural elements has been achieved. The style of the exposition is concise and precise, and understandable scientific language is used. In general, it can be concluded that the doctoral student has theoretical knowledge of the relevant specialty and abilities for independent scientific research.

The abstract is written according to the requirements and correctly and completely represents the main parts and content of the dissertation.

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

The submitted report on the usefulness of the dissertation contains eight contributing points. After the analysis of the dissertation, I confirm the 4 contributions, following Art. 6 para 3 of LASDRB.

5. Publications related to the dissertation

Doctoral student Stefka Hristova has submitted a list of four publications on the dissertation, including 1 scientific article and 3 reports, which are closely related to the subject of the dissertation, largely reflecting its essential parts and giving it publicity. The volume of the doctoral student's scientific outputs and the nature of the publications correspond to the requirements for acquiring the PhD degree. The report on compliance with the national requirements under the Regulations on the Implementation of the LASDRB shows achievement of the required points for acquiring the doctoral degree.

6. Detected or undetected plagiarism in the dissertation and the abstract

No plagiarism was found in the PhD thesis and the abstract submitted by Stefka Hristova.

7. Critical remarks and recommendations

No significant theoretical, logical, or methodological errors were found in the doctoral thesis of Stefka Hristova. Some inaccuracies, mostly of a technical nature, inherent in this kind of work have been admitted. It is recommended that the author continue to explore the topic of destination competitiveness and share her findings in more publications.

8. Questions to the doctoral student

1. What are the main barriers to positioning Varna Municipality as a competitive destination for conference tourism?

10. Conclusion

Based on the findings regarding the requirements outlined in the opinion, I believe there are sufficient grounds to provide a positive assessment and recommend to the esteemed members of the Scientific Jury that they award the educational and scientific degree of 'Doctor' in professional field 3.9 'Tourism', scientific specialty 'Economics and Management (Tourism)' to the doctoral candidate Stefka Hristova.

March 20, 2024

Varna

Author of the opinion

(Assoc. Prof. Dr. Georgi

TO

THE CHAIRMAN OF THE SCIENTIFIC JURY DETERMINED BY
RECTOR'S ORDER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS - VARNA
according to the procedure for acquiring the educational and scientific degree "PhD" in
the scientific specialty "Economics and Management (Tourism)"

STATEMENT

For acquiring the educational and scientific degree "PhD" in professional field 3.9.
"Tourism", PhD program "Economics and Management (Tourism)" according to the
procedure announced by the University of Economics - Varna

1. General information

The statement has been prepared by: Assoc. Ph.D. Veselin Ivanova Atanasova,
University "Prof. Dr. Asen Zlatarov" - Burgas, College of Tourism - Burgas.

In accordance for writing the statement: 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 of the Scientific Jury dated 02.12.2024.

Author of the dissertation: Stefka Veselinova Hristova, full-time doctoral student at
the Department of "Economics and Organization of Tourism" at the University of Economics -
Varna.

Dissertation topic: "Increasing the competitiveness of a destination for conference
tourism (on the example of the municipality of Varna)".

Scientific supervisor: Prof. Dr. Stoyan Marinov

2. General presentation of the dissertation work

The dissertation submitted for review on the topic "Increasing the competitiveness of a
destination for conference tourism (on the example of the municipality of Varna)" developed
by PhD student Stefka Veselinova Hristova is 218 pages long, incl. introduction, main text,
conclusion, bibliography and appendices. The volume of the dissertation work is sufficient and
allows the author to present his theoretical knowledge regarding the development of conference
tourism and its impact on the competitiveness of the destination (for example, the municipality
of Varna).

The presentation is presented through a standard structure for a dissertation
development, consisting of an introduction, presentation, conclusion and a list of used literature.
In terms of logic, meaning and content, the structure reveals a voluminous independent
development dedicated to current tourist topics, development of MAIS tourism.

The review of the specialized literature on the mentioned topic clearly reveals that the
scientific research and publications in Bulgaria are still limited and episodic and clearly prove
the relevance of the research carried out by Stefka Veselinova Hristova.

The introduction of the dissertation outlines the scientific and methodological
framework of the development. There is an accurate and correct formulation of the subject and
object of the study.

The subject of the research represents a significant scientific-methodological and
practical-applied problem and refers to the role and importance of MAIS tourism in the country.

A significant main scientific goal of the dissertation work was set: on the basis of a
developed theoretical model for assessing the competitiveness of the tourist destination for
conference tourism, to analyze the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna and to propose
strategic guidelines for the formation and development of its competitive advantages in the field
of conference tourism.

The defined goal is embodied in six specific research tasks related to clarifying the essence of conference tourism: determining the factors; systematization of the theoretical aspects of the competitiveness of the tourist destination and the models for its research; development of a methodology for assessing the competitiveness of the tourist destination for conference tourism at the municipal level; characteristics of the development of conference tourism in Bulgaria and in the municipality of Varna;

At the heart of the development is the research thesis that the competitiveness of a tourist destination for conference tourism is a function of multiple factors, the main ones being: infrastructure, superstructure, accessibility, security and safety systems, marketing mix, effective organization and partnership between stakeholders. The proof of the thesis is based on the acceptance or rejection of four specific hypotheses.

The research methods and scientific approaches used in the development correspond to the scientific goal and research tasks set in the dissertation.

At the heart of the development is the research thesis that the competitiveness of a tourist destination for conference tourism is a function of multiple factors, the main ones being: infrastructure, superstructure, accessibility, security and safety systems, marketing mix, effective organization and partnership between stakeholders. The proof of the thesis is based on the acceptance or rejection of four specific hypotheses.

The research methods and scientific approaches used in the development correspond to the scientific goal and research tasks set in the dissertation.

3. Publications and participation in scientific forums

Doctoral student Hristova presents three scientific publications related to the topic of the dissertation - 1 article and 3 reports. The scientific production meets the minimum national requirements for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor", according to Art. 2b, para. 2 and para. 3 of ZRASRB and the quantitative requirements under Art. 35, para. 1, items 1-4 of the Regulations for the development of the academic staff at IU-Varna.

4. Assessment of the structure and content of the dissertation

The volume of Stefka Veselinova Hristova's dissertation has a total volume of 218 pages, which are structurally distributed as follows: introduction (7 pages); exposition in three chapters (178 pages); conclusion (8 pages); list of used literature (7 pages). The main text contains 10 tables and 33 figures necessary to visualize the presented information. The dissertation also has 4 appendices with a total volume of 14 pages. The list of used scientific literature covers 111 sources, including 87 literary sources, of which 35 are in Bulgarian and 52 in English, and 24 internet pages.

Summarizing the existing scientific developments on the topic of the dissertation, the author skillfully shows his own approach in defining the conclusions and directions for future development.

From a content point of view, the dissertation has the classic structure for similar type of scientific works: introduction; theoretical chapter; analytical chapter; applied chapter and conclusion. The content is well balanced and logically coherent. Doctoral student Hristova knows well and correctly interprets the theses and concepts of established authors on the researched problems.

In the first chapter, "Theoretical foundations of conference tourism", based on an in-depth analysis of the development of business and conference tourism and theoretical statements, the theoretical foundations of this type of tourism are defined. The research interest is aimed at revealing the essence of MICE tourism, the development and the logical connection with the competitiveness of the tourist destination. A "Model for Analysis and Evaluation of the Competitiveness of a Conference Tourism Destination" was developed.

In the second chapter, the author makes a retrospective of the Bulgarian tourism industry for meetings and events from its creation until today. The conclusion is that Bulgaria has good conditions for holding business meetings, congresses and corporate events - for this purpose our country has the necessary superstructure. In parallel with the well-built superstructure, the

infrastructure is essential for the country, its condition is decisive for the development of tourism, including at the conference.

An in-depth assessment of the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism was carried out. The assessment of the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a MAIS destination is based on a field survey.

As a result of the evaluations and comparisons in the conducted survey, the strengths and weaknesses of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism are systematized.

On the basis of the theoretical discussion, the implemented field survey and the analyzed results of it, the formulated hypotheses are proved as follows: First, the hypothesis is confirmed that the competitiveness of the destination for conference tourism is a result of the correct combination of the content components of the destination in accordance with conference user profile. Secondly, the assumption that the Municipality of Varna has conditions for the development of conference tourism is confirmed. Thirdly, it is established that the Municipality of Varna has competitive advantages over its direct competitors - national and international.

In the third chapter of the dissertation, he reasonably formulates guidelines and ideas for increasing the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism. The trends in the development of conference tourism are systematized. The trends of conferences, business meetings and "new generation" events will be related to the systematization and structuring in the personalization and digitalization of events. In the near future, PhD student Hristova points out, the main actors (hosts) of the live meetings will be the host of the event, the interior designer and the digital operator.

In summary, the author outlines clearly defined and specific recommendations for the management of the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism, including: development of strategic documents of the municipality for development until 2030; establishment of a congress office of the Varna Congress Center - VKC; creation of communication infrastructure; increasing interest in the types of tourism additional to MAIS tourism: cultural, gourmet and wine, entertainment, spa and wellness, etc.

The presented abstract of the scientific work has a total volume of 40 pages and fully meets the requirements for creating such kind of presentations.

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. Attached is a list of publications on the dissertation work - 1 article and 3 reports, which correspond to the required volume for acquiring the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in professional field 3.9. "Tourism".

The publications of the doctoral student Hristova are representative and provide sufficient publicity of the research results among the academic community and the interested circles of the tourism business.

In conclusion, based on the findings presented by me, the dissertation work is presented in a form and volume that meets the requirements of Art. 27, para. 2 of the PPZRASRB and of Art. 34, para. 2 and para. 3 of the Rules for the terms and conditions for acquiring scientific degrees and occupying academic positions at IU - Varna.

4. Scientific and scientific-applied contributions

We fully accept the scientific and applied scientific contributions indicated by the doctoral student within the framework of the presented conclusion of the doctorate. Doctoral student Hristova correctly, precisely and clearly formulated the contributions in the dissertation work. We assess the submitted statement of contributions as correct and realistically reflecting the results achieved.

5. Scientific and scientific-applied contributions

We fully accept the scientific and applied scientific contributions indicated by the doctoral student within the framework of the presented conclusion of the doctorate. Doctoral student Hristova correctly, precisely and clearly formulated the contributions in the dissertation

work. We assess the submitted statement of contributions as correct and realistically reflecting the results achieved.

They can be classified as theoretical (enrichment of theoretical propositions from tourism theory); methodological (developed author's model for researching the competitiveness of a destination for conference tourism) and practical-applied (approbation of the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for MICE tourism and recommendations for enhancing its image as such).

6. Confirmed or unconfirmed plagiarism in the dissertation and the abstract

I do not detect plagiarism in the doctorate and abstract presented by PhD student Stefka Veselinova Hristova.

7. Critical notes and recommendations

With regard to the dissertation work - main presentation, author's thesis and the argumentation of the conclusions, we have no critical remarks and recommendations.

8. Questions for the PhD student

We have no questions for the PhD student, in view of the comprehensive and multifaceted research in the PhD.

9. Conclusion

The proposed doctoral dissertation by Stefka Veselinova Hristova represents an original, in-depth and multifaceted study that has a prominent contribution to the theory of tourism and tourism business. The research model and methodology are applicable in practice at the level of research on the competitiveness of a destination for conference tourism at the regional level.

In general, the dissertation work is a scientific-applied solution to a real practical problem from tourism practice with social significance.

In conclusion, based on the opinion presented by me with absolute conviction, I give my positive assessment of the presented doctorate and recommend to the Scientific Jury to award doctoral student Stefka Veselinova Hristova 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)".

22.03.2024
Burgas

The statement has been prepared by:

Associate Professor PhD Veselina Atanasova

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