



## POSITION PAPER

ИКОНОМИЧЕСКИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ ВАРНА

Вх. № ПД20-444/25.03.2024г.

Prepared by: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Evgeniya Georgieva Tonkova  
University of Economics – Varna

Subject: Procedure for obtaining an academic and scientific degree "Doctor" for the defense of the dissertation of Yana Georgieva Balashova-Stefanova, a regular doctoral student, professional field: 3.8. Economics, University of Economics – Varna

Author of the dissertation: Yana Georgieva Balashova-Stefanova  
Topic of the dissertation: Marketing Development of Territorial Comparative Advantages

### 1. General Information

The position is prepared in accordance with Order No. RD-06-20/02.02.2024 by the Rector of the University of Economics – Varna for the opening of a procedure for the dissertation defense of Yana Balashova-Stefanova, a regular doctoral student at the University of Economics – Varna. All necessary materials have been provided including the dissertation work, abstract, orders, protocols from doctoral exams, publications of the doctoral student, etc. All materials and documents fully comply with the legal requirements.

### 2. General Presentation of the Dissertation Work

The presented dissertation by the doctoral student Yana Georgieva Balashova-Stefanova has a total volume of 348 pages and is structured into an introduction (7 pages), three chapters (214 pages), conclusion (4 pages), list of references (16 pages), and appendices (99 pages).

### 3. Publications and Participation in Scientific Forums

The doctoral student Yana Georgieva Balashova-Stefanova has presented a total of 4 independent publications related the dissertation topic: 3 scientific articles and 1 scientific report. All publications are in English. The scientific publications are presented with complete bibliographic descriptions and free access to their content. The presented publications comply with the quantitative requirements of Article 35, para. 1, items 1-4 of the Regulations for the Development of Academic Staff at the University of Economics – Varna and meet the minimum national requirements required for the acquisition of the academic and scientific degree of "Doctor," according to Article 2b, para. 2 and para. 3 of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria.

### 4. Assessment of the Structure and Content of the Dissertation Work

The dissertation work "Marketing Development of Territorial Comparative Advantages" by the author Yana Georgieva Balashova-Stefanova is focused on the potential for marketing development of territorial comparative advantages. The dissertation work consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, and appendices. The introduction presents arguments regarding the relevance of the problem and its significance, the main practical problems related to the identification and utilization of territorial comparative advantages in marketing development, the subject and object of the research, the research thesis, the main goal, and tasks of the dissertation work.

The first chapter covers the theoretical aspects of marketing development of territorial comparative advantages as follows:





- A theoretical overview of territorial marketing.
- Examination of theories of comparative advantages and their application to territory.
- Identification of prerequisites for marketing development of territories.
- Presentation of basic principles and the role of marketing development of territorial comparative advantages.
- Identification of types of marketing development of territorial comparative advantages.

The second chapter presents a methodology for marketing development of comparative advantages of territories:

- The process of marketing development of comparative advantages of territories.
- A project for studying the comparative advantages of territories.
- A conceptual model for studying the comparative advantages of territories.
- Arguments supporting the choice of the municipality of Varna as the territorial unit for conducting the study, based on the main characteristics of the municipality of Varna, which can be defined as prerequisites for comparative advantages.

The third chapter covers the applied aspects of marketing development of comparative advantages of territories:

- Testing of the research hypotheses.
- Derivation of the comparative advantages from the results of primary research (data is gathered from residents, visitors, and local businesses in the municipality of Varna).
- Comparison of the importance of comparative advantages across target groups.
- Establishment of a starting point for marketing development of comparative advantages of territories.
- Guidelines for marketing development of comparative advantages of territories.

In the conclusion, the main results are presented along with guidelines for future research. There is a discussion on the applicability of the proposed sequence of actions for identifying the comparative advantages of the territory and determining their importance for different target groups, suggesting that this approach could be applied to any territory with minimal adjustments.

The dissertation has clearly formulated objectives, subject, aim, and tasks. The research is well-argued.

The dissertation presented for opinion corresponds to the requirements of Article 34, para. 2 and para. 3 of the Regulations for the Development of Academic Staff at the University of Economics – Varna.

The abstract is 61 pages long and provides a detailed presentation of the structure and content of the research, as well as the main results of the studies with their corresponding analyses, applied aspects, and conclusions. The scientific contributions are clearly presented. Both the dissertation and the abstract use an appropriate language and style of exposition that corresponds to academic work. Citations of external sources are correct.

### **1. Identification and Evaluation of Scientific and Applied Contributions in the Dissertation**

The contributions in the dissertation on the topic "Marketing Development of Territorial Comparative Advantages" by author Yana Georgieva Balashova-Stefanova consist of the following results in the specified sequence:

1. Systematization, critical analysis, and synthesis of the theoretical aspects of the categories "territorial marketing" and "comparative advantage," as well as the possibilities for applying the "theory of comparative advantages" to territory.





2. Development of a model for the process of marketing development of territorial comparative advantages and a conceptual model for their study.
3. Identification of the comparative advantages of the territory of the municipality of Varna and derivation of guidelines for their marketing development.

I find the author's contributions to be exceptionally important and applicable in territorial marketing and its management in the public sphere.

I believe that the dissertation contains the derived scientific, scientific-applied contributions, and applied results, and I assess them as original and significant for both science and practice.

### **2. Identified or Not Identified Plagiarism in the Dissertation and Abstract**

As of the writing of this position paper, I have not found any plagiarism in the dissertation and abstract of Yana Georgieva Balashova-Stefanova. I believe that the theoretical analysis and systematization, research, conclusions, and recommendations are entirely the work of the doctoral student.

### **3. Critical Notes and Recommendations**

As critical notes for the dissertation on the topic "Marketing Development of Territorial Comparative Advantages" by author Yana Georgieva Balashova-Stefanova, I highlight the following:

- In some parts of the text, there are repetitions of small sections of the content.
- Some of the guidelines for marketing development of territorial comparative advantages are conceptually developed but lack specificity.

I find the topic to be very relevant and highly applicable, and I would like to make a recommendation to the doctoral student to publish the dissertation in a book format that would be accessible to interested parties.

#### **Questions to the candidate:**

Does the candidate believe that territorial marketing, and specifically the marketing development of territorial comparative advantages, can lead to more effective management at the municipality level and achieve better balance in distributing the positive effects among different target groups?

#### **2. Conclusion:**

After reading and analyzing the presented dissertation on the topic "Marketing Development of Territorial Comparative Advantages", the abstract, and the publications on the topic, a conclusive assessment can be made regarding the relevance, originality, and depth of the research, which includes specific theoretical and practical results.

Based on this, I propose to the esteemed academic jury that Yana Georgieva Balashova-Stefanova **be awarded the academic degree of "Doctor" in the scientific major 3.8. "Economics" (Marketing).**

25.03.2024  
Varna

Member of the academic jury:  
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Evgeniya Georgieva T



# OPINION

on dissertation  
for the award of the educational and scientific degree Doctor  
in the professional field 3.8 Economics,  
doctoral programme Marketing, University of Economics - Varna

Author of the dissertation: **YANA GEORGIEVA BALASHOVA-KOSTADINOVA**

Title of the dissertation: **MARKETING DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMPARATIVE  
ADVANTAGES OF THE TERRITORY**

Prepared the opinion: **PROF. DR. TODOR BORISOV KRASTEVIKH**

*The opinion was prepared on the basis of Orders No. RD-06-20 of 02.02.2024 and No. RD-06-25 of 14.02.2024 of the Rector of the University of Economics - Varna, Art. 36, par. 3 of the Regulations for the Development of Academic Staff at the University of Economics - Varna and the decision of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Management (Minutes No. 8 of 30.01.2024).*

For the preparation of this opinion, only the submitted package of documents was used, including the dissertation, the abstract with a reference to the doctoral student's contributions, a reference to the fulfillment of the minimum national requirements for the dissertation, copies of the author's publications on the topic of the dissertation, as well as her CV. I declare that I do not know the author in a personal capacity and we have no joint scientific publications.

## I. SUMMARY OF THE PRESENTED DISSERTATION WORK

The dissertation is 348 pages long. It contains an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion (248 pages), as well as 18 appendices (100 pages). The author refers to 277 references. Of these, 53 are in Cyrillic (Bulgarian or Russian), 205 in Latin (English or French) and 19 are references to web pages and/or electronic documents. Sources are cited according to the APA academic standard. I find no violations of the rules of scientific ethics and no improper use of other people's ideas and/or texts, without appropriate reference to the source and respect for copyright. The doctoral student's accompanying scientific publications meet the minimum national requirements for the award of the PhD degree as stipulated in Article 35, para. 1, items 1-4 of the Regulations for the Development of Academic Staff at UE-Varna.

## II. ON THE CONTENT OF THE DISSERTATION

### 2.1. Adequacy of the research thesis

The dissertation is organized on the traditional three-component structure for this kind of work, consisting of theoretical, methodological and applied parts (chapters). The title of the dissertation informs us in general about the research problem, as its concretization we find in the defined object of research (quotation: "... the comparative advantages on the territory of the municipality of Varna ..." p. 12) and the subject of research ("... the possibilities of marketing development of the comparative advantages on the territory of the same municipality ...", p. 12). The author's thesis is that the identification and segment-oriented evaluation of the

comparative advantages of the territory can be used for their "marketing" development. The theoretical basis for her understanding of comparative advantages of territory is grounded in the classical theory of comparative advantages in international trade (p. 35) and the theory of competitive advantages (p. 36), without clarifying the difference between these two categories in the context of the spatial organization of the economy. Mechanistically, it is postulated that "... the comparative advantages of territories represent the different types of resources and specific features that each place presumably possesses..." (p. 45). This reasoning essentially corresponds to Adam Smith's theory of absolute advantages, and differs conceptually from Ricardo's concept of 'comparative advantages' traditionally associated with the ability to produce a good at a lower relative opportunity (i.e. marginal) cost. Therefore, the existence of comparative advantage does not imply differentiation - it merely provides a measure of cost-effectiveness. The author's interpretation that "... comparative advantages are givens that a particular territory possesses and that make it more attractive to live and/or work in..." does not correspond in any way with the theories mentioned and does not exhaust the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon, since a subset of the factors influencing the attractiveness of a territory are not "givens" but rather variables.

The very concept of "marketing development" is artificially related to the problem. The justification for such a finding is the completely redundant and tediously wasteful loose interpretation of types of marketing in Chapter I, Section 5, which is essentially an eclectic mix of concepts that can be "stitched" onto any market-oriented topic. This work could quite easily be titled, for example, "Comparative advantages of territory as a basis for formulating and implementing local policies and strategies for regional development on the case of...." or "How to turn comparative advantages of territory into competitive advantage (on the case of....)", and this would not take us away from the main idea of the exposition.

## **2.2. Fulfillment of the research purposes and objectives**

I would like to focus on the stated objective of the study, "... to model a process for marketing development of the comparative advantages of the territory (of the municipality of Varna), through which to (1) identify the comparative advantages of the territory, (2) assess their status from the point of view of the target groups studied, (3) determine guidelines for their marketing development and use..." (p. 12). The rationale for pursuing this goal is not found until p. 89, where a review of the literature finds that "...no specific process has been developed to identify them, assess their importance and status from the perspective of the territory's target groups." Having studied the overall statement in detail, I find a discrepancy between the research approach followed, the results described and the research objective thus defined. The findings presented on p. 98, c. 108, c. 110, p. 111 process models as well as the conceptual model proposed on p. 118 are not empirically supported and, in our view, could not serve to (1) identify and (2) evaluate the comparative advantages of the territory. The fact that a synopsis of types of factors that could be prerequisites for comparative advantages of a territory is attempted (pp. 105-106) does not automatically turn them into hypothetical constructs (e.g., "territory value" or "satisfaction ..... of target groups," cf. p. 32, Fig. 1), which the author claims to have identified herself as comparative advantages of Varna municipality (see p. 151) and which were the subject of a survey of three target groups in Chapter III - residents of Varna municipality, visitors to Varna municipality and local businesses.

## **2.3. Critical remarks on the adequacy of the research methods and analytical tools used**

The author convinces us that the method of survey has been used to collect empirical data to assess the opinion of three target groups related to the territory of the municipality of Varna (p.



151). The instrument (the three questionnaires) is not available online at the time of writing. The method used to select the respondents (non-random, convenience, principle of respondents) from the first and second target groups (residents and visitors of the municipality of Varna) does not ensure representativeness. This is clearly evident from the socio-demographic profile of the respondents, which is not weighted according to the actual socio-demographic profile of the residents of the municipality. The use of non-representative data is dangerous and manipulative to draw even symptomatic conclusions. Because of this circumstance, I cannot accept as reliable the statistical generalizations and hypotheses tested about the existence of relationships between sociodemographic attributes and respondents' stated attitudes.

Even more confusing is the information presented on Table 6 (p. 151), whereby the author claims to prove statistically, by means of Cronbach's alpha, the internal consistency of the scales used in the two questionnaires. This internal consistency is not seeded between which items in the questionnaires (see Appendices 11 and 12) and in relation to which construct(s)? This kind of imprecision is unacceptable in an empirical study that is supposed to convince the reader of the validity, reliability and objectivity of empirical results with claims to scientific. Confusion is also caused by the reliance on uninterpretable statements in the surveys, such as "... personal perception of the municipality, compared to others in the country...". Such a monadic research design assumes that respondents are equally familiar with all possible alternatives (which assumption is untenable to say the least in this case). We find similar fuzzy, ambiguous, and uninformative statements in other questions in the surveys used (e.g., questions related to assessing the "effectiveness" of using comparative advantages of territory, or related to the most important advantage of the municipality retaining the respondent's residence.

I consider the dozens of hypothesis tests applied between pairs of nominal variables, some of which inadequately include even the "Can't decide" option, to be redundant, chaotic, and uninformative for the purposes of the development (see p. 167, Fig. 12 in conjunction with Table 2 in Appendix 15, p. 315). How this helps the marketing development of comparative advantages is never clear.

I express the view that the between-group comparisons using radar charts and the differences found between the summary scores of respondents from the three observed target groups in Section 3 of Chapter III are not reliable and informative because they are not tested with appropriate statistical tests to test hypotheses about differences between independent and unrelated samples.

Also controversial is the approach to compiling the strategic SWOT analysis in Section 4 of Chapter III, entitled "Distribution of comparative advantages ... through the eyes of the subjects under study". Clearly, what is meant here is the assessment of the factors influencing the attractiveness of a particular territory. However, it is not logical to interpret 'comparative advantages' as weaknesses, or as threats (p. 200). It is also not clear how the relative weights of these factors were determined (see Table 11, p. 201) - no trace of such empirical assessments can be found in the exposition and/or the annexes. The same questions arise in examining Tables 12, 13 and 14 on pp. 201-204. Hence, the conclusions drawn on p. 205 and the strategic guidelines for the marketing development of comparative advantages for the municipality of Varna (Section 5, Chapter III) do not have the hallmarks of scientific results and are, in our opinion, controversial. Undoubtedly, they can be used as a conceptual framework for the development of a strategic development plan for the municipality, but suggestions such as "...to create a new website with elements of artificial intelligence" (p. 227) and "...to create a software platform for information gathering or the deployment of intelligent systems and devices in the

urban environment" (p. 227), although sounding meaningful and relevant, are not relevant and pertinent to a scientific study.

Overall, despite the obvious efforts made to process and synthesize a huge corpus of literature, it cannot be strongly and reasonably assumed from what is presented in the empirical part of the dissertation that the author (1) has mastered and uses recruitment tools at the expected high scientific level, processing and analyzing primary and secondary data in order to make sense of, adapt and synthesize theoretical concepts and (2) is able to derive from them valid, reliable and useful recommendations and conclusions of a contributory nature for improving local policies.

### III. CONCLUSION

Referring to Article 34 (2) and (3) of the Regulations for the Development of Academic Staff at the University of Economics - Varna, namely that "The dissertation ... must contain scientific or applied results that represent an original contribution to science.." and that " ... the candidate (must) possess in-depth theoretical knowledge of the relevant specialty and the ability for independent scientific research" I consider that the work submitted for review has the formal features of a dissertation, meets the minimum national requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor", but does not contain clear and indisputable contributions. The contributions declared by the author in the abstract (p. 61) are controversial and do not convince that there is a scientifically applied solution to a real practical problem of public importance. Proceeding from the above considerations, at this stage, I refrain from a categorical recommendation for the award of the degree of Doctor of Education and Science in Economics, scientific specialty "Marketing", to doctoral student Yana Georgieva Balashova-Stefanova, reserving the right to form my final decision during the public defense.

March 19, 2024  
Town of Svishtov

Signature

  
(Prof. Dr. T. Krastevich)



**STATEMENT**

ИКОНОМИЧЕСКИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ ВАРНА

Вх. № PA20-400/19.03.2024г.

From: Prof. Dr. Krasimir Marinov Marinov  
Scientific speciality: Marketing  
University of National and World Economy, Sofia

Subject: Awarding of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy under an announced procedure  
by the University of Economics - Varna, professional field 3.8. Economics

The basis for this opinion is the Orders № RD 06-20 of 02.02.2024 and RD 06-25 of 14.02.2024  
of the Rector of the University of Economics - Varna for the appointment of the  
scientific jury, as well as the decision of the scientific jury of 16.02.2024.

Author of the dissertation: Yana Georgieva Balashova-Stefanova

Dissertation topic: Marketing development of comparative advantages of the territory

**1. General characteristics of the dissertation**

The dissertation is developed in 348 pages and contains Introduction, three chapters, Conclusion, References and Appendices. The size of the individual structural elements, as well as their content, generally correspond to the requirements for such a scientific product. The dissertation meets the requirements of Article 27, paragraph 2 of the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria.

The bibliography includes 277 sources - scientific publications, publications of local governments and regional organizations, institutional websites, websites for statistical and market information. The sources used are in Bulgarian, English, French and Russian. The number of cited sources corresponds to the requirements for such scientific work. The sources included are relevant to the object and subject of the research and reflect the current achievements in the range of issues under consideration. The analysed scientific sources testify to the good awareness of the dissertation's subject matter.

The doctoral candidate has also submitted: an abstract; a list of publications on the topic of the dissertation; and a list of the contributions sought; therefore, the formal requirements for the dissertation to be reviewed and to proceed to the procedure for the award of the doctoral degree have been met, in accordance with the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, its Implementing Regulations, and the internal regulations of the University of Economics - Varna.

**2. Publications and participation in scientific forums**

The doctoral student submitted a total of 4 publications: 3 articles and 1 report. These publications are on the topic of the research and present essential elements of the dissertation.





The submitted publications comply with the minimum national requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree "PhD", according to Art. 3 of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, also laid down in Art. 1, items 1-4 of the Regulations for the Development of Academic Staff at UE-Varna.

### **3. Evaluation of the structure and content of the work**

*The topic of the dissertation can be defined* as topical and significant. I find grounds for this statement in at least two directions:

First and foremost, the adequate and meaningful development of territories is among the most important issues on the agenda of regional, national and supranational, including the European Union, governing bodies and institutions. A number of economic and legislative decisions taken at EU and Member State level in recent years have been geared towards strengthening it. Territorial communities themselves face many challenges and are affected by a number of national and supranational factors. In this context, research into the problem of managing processes and activities at local and regional level so that municipalities and regions can achieve their complex objectives in terms of their current state and future development is fully justified.

Secondly, as a logic, approach and philosophy, marketing has much to contribute and can be useful in the process of creating, delivering and communicating the comparative advantages of territories. In this sense, the dissertation presented here is a timely attempt to argue for a marketing approach to developing the comparative advantages of the territory (the municipality of Varna) for the benefit of the target groups studied - residents, visitors and local businesses.

*The object of research* in the dissertation is clearly outlined - these are the comparative advantages of the territory of the municipality of Varna from the positions of their marketing development.

*The subject of the research* is precisely formulated - the possibilities for marketing development of the comparative advantages of the territory (Varna municipality) in the interest of the target groups - residents, visitors and local businesses, by identifying them on the basis of official information of Varna municipality and the opinions of the research subjects.

The possibilities that the object and subject thus defined have stimulated the doctoral student to formulate a research objective and related tasks.

*The research objective* is to model a process for the marketing development of the comparative advantages of the territory of the municipality of Varna, based on the literature sources studied, through which to identify the comparative advantages of the territory, to assess their status from the point of view of the target groups studied, to define guidelines for their marketing development and use.

The PhD student transformed the objective thus formulated into a logically justified complex of *three main research tasks*, which are logically arranged and clearly formulated. They are sufficiently specific; their implementation allows to achieve the set goal; and they direct the research in the right direction.

*The thesis* that the dissertation has tried to defend is that the identification of the comparative advantages of the territory and their evaluation from the point of view of different





target groups can be used as a basis for their marketing development, leading to their appropriate use.

*The structure of* the presented work reflects the logical completeness of the research and is an expression of the existing links and dependencies between the elements of the exposition - both between the individual chapters and between the points within them. The logical arrangement of the chapters enables the author to ask the right questions to the research problem and to make correct generalizations about the process of marketing the comparative advantages of the territory. The *style and language* of the doctoral dissertation are generally scholarly, yet clear and understandable.

*The abstract* is 61 pages long and adequately reflects the content and structure of the thesis as well as the results achieved.

#### **4. Evaluation of scientific and applied contributions**

In the abstract of the dissertation submitted for review, the doctoral candidate formulates three contributions. I accept that the dissertation contains the second and third of these, both of which are scientific-applied contributions sufficient for the award of the sought-after educational and scientific degree "Doctor".

#### **5. Plagiarism in the dissertation and abstract**

No plagiarism has been found in the thesis or abstract.

#### **6. Critical comments and recommendations**

A few remarks can be made to the thesis:

Firstly, there are repetitions of the same thoughts and sentences in the presentation - for example, on the target groups of a territory; Porter's diamond; the EU's regional development programme; the impact of globalisation on the development of territories. Such omissions should be cleared up in a doctoral thesis.

Second, in some parts of the exposition - for example, regarding the elements of the environment; SWOT analysis; the process of marketing the comparative advantages of a territory - the level is at the level of a textbook, not a dissertation. The desire to comprehensively clarify the issue at hand has led the PhD student to address issues that either should not be addressed or, if presented, lead to a lowering of the overall level of the research.

Thirdly, in some parts of the work the author's style is descriptive rather than analytical and evaluative - for example, on the forms for developing territory marketing; the 4-factor and 7-factor models of the marketing mix; the 4C model - these are certain things that should not be explained in a dissertation. The same is true with regard to the general characteristics of the municipality (p. 128) and the comparative advantages in the results of primary research (p. 159 ff.), in which the tables of the appendices are retold. A considerable amount of information is presented in these sections that could have been better contextualised and summarised.







Fourth, there are technical gaps in places related to the presentation of the charts - for example, the labels of many of the indicators in the radar charts are not readable due to their greater length.


### 7. Questions to the PhD student

During the defence, the PhD student should address the following question: to what extent do you consider it appropriate to give guidance on marketing development of the comparative advantages of a territory without taking into account the costs that will be incurred for individual marketing activities? The dissertation does not explore the level of specific marketing activities to realise comparative advantages, but when spending public funds is it appropriate to recommend one or other action without taking into account its relative effectiveness?

### 8. Conclusion

The presented dissertation is an independently conducted scientific research with clearly outlined results and scientific-applied contributions, corresponding to the requirements for such a scientific work. **This gives me a reason to recommend the scientific jury to award doctoral student Yana Georgieva Balashova-Stefanova the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the scientific specialty "Marketing". I myself will vote "Yes" with conviction.**

March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2024

  
Prof. Dr. Krasimir Marinov Marinov

