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REVIEW

of PhD thesis for acquiring the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in scientific specialty "National economy (incl. regional economy and history of the national economy)", professional field 3.8. Economics, field of higher education 3. Social, economic and law sciences

Prepared by: Prof. Dr. Darina Ruscheva Todorova, Economic Research Institute at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The review was prepared in accordance with Order № 1123 / 20.05.2021 of the Rector of Trakia University - Stara Zagora, pursuant to Art. 5 (3) and (4) of the Regulations for the development of the academic staff at Trakia University – Stara Zagora.

Author of the PhD thesis: Petya Dobrinova Atanasova, part-time PhD student, higher education field 3. Social, economic and law sciences, professional field 3.8. Economics, PhD program "National economy (incl. regional economy and history of the national economy)" at department "Regional development" of Faculty of Economics at Trakia University – Stara Zagora

Topic of the PhD thesis: "Intelligent specialization of the regional economy (the case of Yambol district)".

1. Information about the PhD student

The PhD student Petya Atanasova was born in 1977. She completed her secondary education in 1996 at the High School in mathematics "Atanas Radev" in the town of Yambol. In 2001 she obtained a Bachelor's degree at the University of Economics - Varna, specialty "Banking", and a master's degree - in 2017 at Trakia University - Stara Zagora, specialty "Economic Analysis and Regional Development Projects".

Experience. Petya Atanasova has been working consecutively: from 2000 to 2013 in Mobiltel EAD and from June 2013 until now - as an accountant at Trakia University - Stara Zagora, Faculty of Engineering and Technology. She has very good computer skills (including work with various accounting software products).

Petya Atanasova was enrolled as part-time PhD student (Order № 479 / 01.03.2018 of the Rector of the Thracian University - Stara Zagora) under the PhD program "National Economy (incl. Regional economy and history of the national economy)", professional field 3.8. Economics, field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences at the Department of Regional Development, Faculty of Economics, Trakia University - Stara Zagora. The term of study is four years - from March 1, 2018 to March 1, 2022. Prof. Dr. Yuliana Ivanova Blagoeva - Yarkova has been appointed as a scientific supervisor. I am extremely pleased to note the fact that the PhD student Petya Atanasova managed to successfully fulfill the commitments related to her PhD studies one year earlier than her term of study. In accordance with Order № 948 / 29.04.2021 of the Rector of the University, she was expelled from the doctoral program with the right to defense her thesis. With a decision (№ 156 / 13.05.2021) of a meeting of the extended departmental council for preliminary discussion of the dissertation (internal approbation) of the Department of Regional Development at the Faculty of Economics of the Trakia University - Stara Zagora, after unanimous voting, the members of the department give a positive assessment of the dissertation of Petya Atanasova and propose it to be admitted to public defense.

2. Overall presentation of the PhD thesis

The PhD thesis consists of 190 pages main text, incl. 45 figures, 27 tables and 14 appendices. It is structured as follows: introduction, three chapters, conclusion, references and appendices, as well as a list of figures and a list of tables. The list of references includes 179 sources, of which 60 in Cyrillic, 106 in Latin and 13 on Internet addresses. The list of references is comprehensive and rich in content. It lists basic research, important laws and regulations. The review of the used literature gives grounds to note that the PhD student knows very well the various sources related to the problems of the dissertation.

The topic of the dissertation is important and relevant. In the introduction the dissertation justifies the relevance of the topic with the following circumstances: a) characteristics of the regional economy - highlighting specific challenges that Yambol district faces: demographic decline, energy transformation, climate change, global competition, pandemic crisis, risk of environmental degradation and loss of cultural heritage and the main direction for overcoming them, related to a new vision for development of the district by highlighting unique opportunities of the region for "smart" areas of development, full use of economic and human potential of Yambol district to adapt to changes in conditions and achieving sustainable economic growth; b) the need to study regional specialization in the view of economic sciences (defining a concept for regional specialization based on

economic theories; defining factors that determine it and the choice of approach and indicators for its measurement); (c) emphasis on the "smart specialization" of the regions, which is associated with the priority development of activities and technologies based on knowledge and innovation at a sub-national level.

The object of the study is a region of NUTS 3. In 2018, it ranks 14th out of 28 districts in the country, ie. it is at an intermediate level of development.

The subject of the research are: the development and structure of the regional economy for the period 2009-2018, the production specialization and concentration, the development of the research and development activity.

The formulated goal of the PhD thesis is to establish the potential of Yambol district for development of key thematic areas of intelligent specialization and to determine opportunities for future economic development based on an analysis of the level, dynamics and structure of the regional economy. It fully corresponds to the idea of the dissertation. Six tasks for its realization are presented, which correspond to the title and the purpose of the dissertation, following the classical scheme of a doctoral research.

The thesis of the dissertation is that "Yambol District has resources and opportunities for intelligent and competitive economy, but there are problems in developing the innovation potential, the solution of which is related to policy at the national level and measures at the regional and local level."

In her dissertation Petya Atanasova uses a set of general scientific and economic-statistical methods for analysis and evaluation. The limitations of the survey are related both to the information available at regional level and to the fact that the official economic data on employees in the individual activities for the NUTS 3 regions are up to a second level of aggregation.

Chapter One. Theoretical bases of the specialization of the regional economy there are considered the following groups of issues related to: study of concepts for spatial distribution of economic activities; EU policy and practice regarding Regional Smart Specialization; development of a methodology for analysis of the specialization of the regional economy.

Chapter Two. Intelligent specialization in Bulgaria it is presented in three paragraphs, which consistently consider: strategic guidelines for intelligent specialization in the country; trends in thematic areas of smart specialization in Bulgaria and regional specialization in leading innovation activities.

Chapter three. Specialization of the regional economy in Yambol district is dedicated to: characteristics of the level of development of the regional economy; its specialization and concentration and intelligent specialization of the regional economy in Yambol district.

3. Main results of the research

The results of the research are obtained on the basis of extremely rich literature review, factual and empirical material. By their nature, they enrich and expand the knowledge in the field of intelligent specialization of a regional economy.

The main results can be sought in the following areas:

1. An author's definition of "smart specialization" is formulated - "knowledge-based and innovative transformation of the regional economy, which builds on the local potential and strengths of the region to improve the well-being of the local community and competitiveness of the region."

2. There is a justified need to link the Strategy for Smart Specialization at national level with that at regional level by: providing a system of statistical information, which includes selected indicators for smart specialization at regional level; formulation of narrower thematic areas, based on a study of the dynamics of economic activities, enterprises and their innovation potential at regional level; enhancing the impact of measures by defining and implementing them as a result of prioritizing economic activities at a lower level of aggregation.

3. Important problems related to the active transformation of the regional economy as an intelligent system (lack of targeted strategic policy at the district level for intelligent orientation of the region's economy; demographic decline of Yambol district related to population decline and aging; weak entrepreneurial and innovation activity).

4. Specific measures are proposed to achieve smart specialization of the region, based on innovative policy and economics of knowledge. Measures should target three impact groups: people, economic operators and territory. The purpose of these measures is not only to improve the characteristics of the objects of impact, but through them the subjects of impact to respond and better adapt to the challenges.

4. Scientific and scientific-applied contributions of the research

The main scientific and scientific-applied contributions in the PhD thesis can be divided into the following directions:

a) with theoretical orientation - an original view of "intelligent specialization" is proposed, which combines historical facts and modern challenges;

б) a methodological approach for analysis of the intelligent specialization of the regional economy has been proposed and tested;

в) with practical-applied orientation:

- assessment of the trends in the economic development of Yambol district for the period 2009-2018 (the specialization of the regional economy; leading thematic areas that may form the basis of future smart specialization; factors - national, structural and regional for the dynamics of the economic structure);
- specific recommendations to the three leading sites of impact (human resources, economic entities and territory) are substantiated, as well as regarding the research for the intelligent specialization of Yambol district.

5. Publications in the field of the PhD thesis

There are 3 publications on the topic of the PhD thesis. Of these, 1 is independent and 2 - co-authored. These publications are in prestigious journal Trakia Journal of Sciences of the Trakia University - Stara Zagora and in conference proceedings of the International Scientific Conference at Bulgarian Academy of Science. They present the main results of the conducted research in relationship with the PhD thesis.

1. Atanasova P., Directions and trends of regional intelligent specialization in Bulgaria, Trakia Journal of Sciences, Vol. 17, Suppl. 1, 2019, ISSN 1313-7069, pp. 99-106.

2. Yarkova Y., P. Atanasova, Structural Dynamics and Smart Specialization of Regional Economy: A study on Yambol region's branch structure, international Scientific Conference, BAS 2019, ISBN 978-619-245-039-7, pp.559-568.

3. Yarkova Y., Atanasova P., 2020, Leading innovative practices in the thematic area "Healthy living industry and biotechnologies" at a region level, Trakia Journal of Sciences, Vol. 18, Suppl. 1, pp.451-459.

6. Assessment of the abstract of the PhD thesis

The abstract is 35 pages long and reflects the content, results, contributions of the PhD student and the list of publications related to the PhD thesis.

7. Recommendations

I give a positive assessment of the implementation of the research in the PhD thesis, the precise layout of the exhibition, the presentation of the graphic and tabular material, as well as the attached bibliography. The PhD student shows very good skills to interpret the opinions of various authors on the topic; to collect, process and correctly present the results of the research, to summarize and justify, as well as to offer specific constructive proposals. It would be useful for the local authorities in Yambol district to get acquainted with the results of the survey.

I would recommend to the PhD student, as a result of the accumulated research and expert experience and if she wishes, to continue the research on this issue, expanding and deepening it.

8. Overall assessment of the PhD thesis and conclusion

In conclusion, my overall assessment is that the PhD thesis is developed at a high professional level and in accordance with the requirements of the Law for the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the conditions and requirements for acquiring PhD degree at Trakia University - Stara Zagora. It contains original scientific and practical contributions and that is why I strongly believe that the esteemed members of the Scientific Jury will vote positively to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor", in the scientific specialty "National Economy", including regional economy and history of national holding), professional field 3.8. Economics, field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences to PETYA DOBRINOVA ATANASOVA.

Sofia, 01.07.2021

Заличено!

/prof. Dr. Darina Ruscheva/