

REVIEW

From: **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stela Stoyanova Raleva**
Faculty of Economics, Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski"
professional field 3.8. „Economics"
scientific speciality „Political Economy"

Regarding: procedure for the defense of dissertation thesis for conferring an educational and scientific degree „Doctor" in professional field 3.3 „Political Sciences“, Doctoral Programme „European Studies“ at the Faculty of Philosophy of Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski"

Author of the dissertation: **Mariela Ivanova Savkova**

Dissertation topic: **Monitoring and Ex-post Assessment of the Impact of EU Cohesion Policy in Bulgaria**

Scientific consultant: Assoc. Prof. D.Sc. Kaloyan Dimitrov Simeonov

Grounds for the submission of the review: Member of the scientific panel for the defense of the dissertation in accordance with Order No. RD-38-621/22 November 2022 of the Rector of Sofia University.

The review is prepared in accordance with the Act on the Development of Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Rules for its application, and the Terms and Conditions for the Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and Taking Academic Positions at Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“.

1. General characteristics of the dissertation

The dissertation presented is an interesting and complex study on an issue, the topicality of which stems from the existence of a limited number of studies on the instruments for ex-post assessment of the impact of EU cohesion policy on the socio-economic development of Bulgaria, especially in a regional perspective, as well as from the possibility, should such an instruments to be developed, to be applied for subsequent programming periods. At the same time, the topic presents a serious scientific challenge due to its interdisciplinary nature and its very broad scope, both in terms of content and in reference to the period under investigation and the comparisons

made with other countries. In view of these features, the scale and the multi-layered character of the analysis should be pointed out as a serious merit of this peer-reviewed work.

The dissertation has a total volume of 263 non-standard pages, of which 246 constitute the main text. The structure of the thesis consists of an introduction, three chapters, main recommendations, a conclusion, a bibliographical reference and two appendices. The selected structure is very appropriate from the point of view of the purpose and tasks of the study and allows the analysis to be upgraded, with the independent basic structural units being highly detailed.

The *introduction* focuses on the topicality of the problem and precisely sets forth the object and subject matter of the dissertation work. The main hypothesis is formulated and the most important questions of the study are raised. Its main objective, which is specified through a set of six research tasks, is explicitly stated and the scope of the cohesion policy is outlined. The structure of the dissertation is described, the territorial and temporal scope of the study are characterised and the main limitations of the analysis are outlined. A general characteristic of the research methodology is made, the specific methods used in the separate parts of the thesis are clarified and the most important sources of empirical information are indicated.

The first chapter presents the theoretical foundations of the cohesion policy and justifies the use of a complex, historical and systemic approach to it. The main ideas of the evolutionary theories of growth and optimal spatial development are outlined and the fundamental causes of regional inequalities are discussed. The essence of the concept of “Europe of the Regions” is analysed and underlying formulations of regional science have been covered. The evolution of the European cohesion policy is examined and the main stages in its implementation have been identified. What is of great value in this part of the work is the definition of basic concepts and principles relevant to this policy, which are usually perceived ambiguously. Special attention is paid to the similarities and differences between the concepts of “cohesion, convergence and coherence” and between “European integration, Europeanisation and EU enlargement”, the essence of the concept of “region” and the identification of different categories of regions, as well as the characterisation of the cohesion method, the differentiation of its varieties and its presentation as being dependent on the EU enlargement. Other important points in the theoretical part of the thesis are related to the definition of the concepts of “boundary of cohesion” and “regional poverty line” and to the submitted content-related comments on the current MFF of the EU and Bulgaria. It becomes clear from the analysis made in the first chapter of the dissertation work, that Mariela Savkova has sound

theoretical background and demonstrates very good abilities for conducting classification of existing knowledge.

The second chapter presents the conceptualisation of the model for ex-post assessment of structural and cohesion funds in Bulgaria and the empirical analysis of its building indicators. It begins with the identification of the two main structural elements of this model — horizontal and vertical indicators, and the rationale for their use. The focus then goes to the behaviour of 30 horizontal indicators, forming three groups and referring to economic, social and territorial cohesion, respectively. The measurement of economic cohesion is made by the levels and dynamics of GDP and GDP per capita for the country, by planned areas and/or economic sectors, of social cohesion — through household income and consumption, employment and unemployment, and of territorial cohesion — according to the allocation of SCF, their size and rate of return. The third step of the analysis focuses on the behaviour of 22 vertical indicators describing the state and changes of infrastructure, human resources, the business environment and entrepreneurship and the balance of the territorial development. The research in this part of the thesis is based on the use of vast amounts of empirical information from various sources and the constitution of multiple derivative indicators. It includes different levels of analysis — national, by planning regions and by districts - and enables comparisons between them. The comparisons made between horizontal and vertical indicators and between their individual groups, as well as the positive and negative consequences of the absorption of SCF, are professionally made.

The third chapter is dedicated to the comparative analysis of the impact of EU cohesion policy in the EU Member States from CEE and the countries in the Danube macro-region. The idea is to characterise Bulgaria's relative position among these countries and to obtain an assessment of its cohesion in a comparative perspective. The study in the first part of the chapter focuses on the CEE countries and is based on their population, GDP per capita per in PPP relative to the EU average and growth rates. The use of the second indicator allows countries to be classified as more developed, in transition, lagging behind and catching up, as well as tracking the changes in their status in the period 2010-2018. It is very appropriate here to target the analysis at regional level, which allows for the subdivision of regions according to the same criterion and the link between their positioning in the respective groups and the levels of cohesion at national level. The inclusion of the Danube macro-region countries in the second part of the chapter adds a new approach to the comparative study, which follows the same logic, but also relies on several additional indicators,

including the volume of goods transported by inland waterways, internet access, the amount of external transfers, etc.

The conclusion summarises the most important conclusions from the conducted analysis, which are related to the solution of the specific research tasks and to the justification of the basic hypothesis of the study. It distinguishes between the empirical and methodological results of the dissertation, gives an overall assessment of the effectiveness of EU cohesion policy in Bulgaria during the first programming period for the country and highlights the prospects for achieving territorial cohesion.

Immediately before the conclusion synthesised recommendations to the state administration, municipal administrations and businesses are formulated, which are based on the research results.

The bibliographical reference contains 194 sources in Bulgarian and English, including scientific publications, other Internet sources and normative documents.

The appendices include tables presenting the logical matrix of the model and the roadmap for the growth of the planned areas, which summarise the results from the analysis in the main text.

The different structural units are content-interdependent and are subject to the general logic of the dissertation.

2. Assessment of the achieved scientific and applied scientific results

The main scientific and applied results of the dissertation can be summarized as follows:

First: The theoretical analysis of the evolutionary theories about growth and optimal spatial development, as well as the nature, characteristics and changes of the cohesion policy over time, which is highly focused and serves as a reliable basis for subsequent methodological and empirical analysis.

Second: The researched impact of SCF on economic, social and territorial cohesion based on the use of 52 indicators selected according to their ability to reveal different dimensions of each of the three types of cohesion, as well as from the point of view of the two main European goals of cohesion in Bulgaria and the national priorities under the NRDS.

Third: The analysed dynamics of the indicators and the comparison between them, which allow for a comparative evaluation of the role of SCF in achieving the different types of cohesion — economic, social and regional — and for the implementation of national priorities in the areas

of basic infrastructure, human resources, business environment and entrepreneurship, and the balanced territorial development.

Fourth: The detailed study of the inequalities between the planned regions and the districts in Bulgaria, the characterisation of their positioning against the “boundary of cohesion” and the “poverty line” and the tracking of their respective changes over time.

Fifth: The comparative analysis of CEE Member States cohesion with the EU, the identified similarities and differences between them, the assessment of the degree of inequality between their regions and the classification of the regions at NUTS2 level into more developed, in transition, lagging behind and catching up.

Sixth: The discussed levels of cohesion of the individual countries of the Danube macro-region, the classification of the countries and their planned regions into different groups, the identification of their most problematic areas and the identification of the main trends in the transport connectivity between them.

Seventh: The recommendations made for change in the focus of the cohesion policy, for upgrading the coordination mechanism of the European programmes, for implementing innovative approaches for regional planning and for enhancing administrative capacity, and for the preparation of integrated territorial investments and ensuring long-term results.

3. Assessment of the major scientific and practice-related contributions

The most important scientific and practice-related contributions of the dissertation are:

First: The author’s systematisation of the theoretical views on cohesion policy and the outlined achievements and problems of this policy viewed from an evolutionary perspective.

Second: The selection of a system of horizontal and vertical indicators to assess the effects of the cohesion policy.

Third: The developed model for ex-post evaluation and monitoring of the impact of EU cohesion policy in Bulgaria at national level and by planned regions.

Fourth: The convincingly proven research hypothesis that during the first programming period SCF led to the exacerbation of regional inequalities in the country and the conclusions formulated with reference to achieving comparatively best results in terms of economic cohesion and basic infrastructure.

Fifth: The prominent relative position of Bulgaria among the other CEE and Danube macro-region countries and the conclusion that the accelerated development of the most developed central regions in all former socialist countries is at the expense of the poorest regions.

Sixth: The justified proposal for the introduction in Bulgaria of the cohesion method and the emphasis on financing planned regions and districts whose income per capita is lower than the national average.

4. Assessment of the summary of the dissertation

The summary of the dissertation has 50 pages. It describes the structure and gives a concise general description of the dissertation. A brief summary of the content by chapter has been made, focusing on the achieved more important research results. A reference to the scientific contributions is enclosed, as well as a list of the related publications by the author. My overall assessment of the summary is that it presents accurately, correctly and with the required explicitness the main points of the dissertation.

5. Evaluation of the publications related to the dissertation

Mariela Savkova has presented a list of seven individual publications on the topic of her dissertation, all of them being papers from conferences and other scientific forums. They are devoted to the lessons of the recent EU enlargement, regional development, federalism and Europeanisation, economic and social cohesion, EU cohesion policy and the monitoring and evaluation of its impact on the CEE countries. Three of the publications are in English and have been published abroad. It is clear from the titles of the reports that they include significant results from the dissertation and therefore it can be defined as sufficiently approved.

With these publications, the author of the dissertation fully meets the minimal national requirements for acquiring the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in scientific field 3 „Social, economic and legal sciences“, professional field 3.3 „Political sciences“, according to Article 2b of the ADASRB and the Rules for its application.

6. Personal impressions

My personal impressions of Mariela Savkova were formed during my participation in her internal defense at the European Studies Department and from other thematic discussions. She

impressed me as a very ambitious and knowledgeable researcher who consistently asserts her position and exhibits rare scientific courage at this stage of academic development.

7. Critical remarks, recommendations and questions

Along with the merits of the dissertation, some *critical remarks* can also be made. One of these concerns the overly emphatic nature of some conclusions linking the behaviour of key indicators of economic and social cohesion to SCF. It should be borne in mind that the period considered in the dissertation is too complex and includes the years immediately before, during and immediately after the Great Recession, in which the dynamics of many of these indicators was highly dependent on the influence of factors relevant to the current situation at the time. The identified specificity of the period, as well as the presence of lag effects, of cohesion policy included, require the interpretation of some of the empirical results as indicative. The second remark concerns the very wide scope of the development which is sometimes at the expense of the depth of analysis and the insufficient justification of some of the selected variables. This is the case, for example, with indicators of overseas transfers and internet access in the countries of the Danube basin, which are not present in the model and are not previously analysed for Bulgaria and the CEE countries. The study would also have benefitted if the distinction between convergence and cohesion was further refined and applied in the empirical part, if some repetitions (e.g. the structure of horizontal and vertical indicators) had been avoided, and if certain technical and terminological inaccuracies had been eliminated. These remarks do not alter the overall highly positive impression of the dissertation.

My recommendation to Mariela Savkova is to continue to deal with the evaluation of the effects of EU cohesion policy for Bulgaria in the next programming periods and to publish her dissertation as a book.

I would expect her to answer the following question during the defence:

What are the similarities and differences between the model proposed by her and the SIBILA model in terms of the variables they feature and the results obtained for the first programming period?

Conclusion

The presented dissertation is a large-scale, multi-layered and independent scientific study of an up-to-date problem of interdisciplinary nature. It shows a very good knowledge of the existing theory and practice, has a distinctly expressed analytical character and contains undeniable empirical and methodological contributions. It fully complies with the requirements of ADASRB, the Rules for its implementation and the Terms and Conditions for the Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and Taking Academic Positions at Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“.

In view of all the above stated, I give a firm positive assessment of the peer-reviewed dissertation work on the topic „Monitoring and Ex-post Assessment of the Impact of EU Cohesion Policy in Bulgaria” and with full conviction I propose to the members of the respected scientific jury to vote in favour of awarding Mariela Ivanova Savkova the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in professional field 3.3. “Political Sciences”, PhD program „European Studies”.

19 December 2022
Sofia

Signature: