

STATEMENT

on a dissertation for obtaining an educational and scientific degree of “Doctor”

Author of the dissertation: Elitsa Venelinova Gramadska

Topic of the dissertation: Development of regionalization in the Republic of Bulgaria

Scientific field: 3.7. Administration and management

Doctoral program: Regional development

Dissertation supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kliment Minev Naidenov

Scientific unit: Regional Development Department, Faculty of Geology and Geography, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

Member of the Scientific jury, who prepared the statement: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elena Simeonova Petkova, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Faculty of Geology and Geography, Geography of Tourism Department

Reasons for preparing the statement: Order of the Rector of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, number ПД 38-353/ 15.07.2021 г.

The statement has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB), the Regulations for Implementation of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (RILDASRB) and the Rules on Terms and Conditions for the Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and the Occupation of Academic Positions at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

Data about the author:

Elitsa Gramadska obtained a bachelor's degree in Geography, a teacher of geography, at the Faculty of Geology and Geography (GGF) at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (SU) and a second specialty to the bachelor's degree at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of the same university. Subsequently, she also received a master's degree in Regional and Political Geography at the GGF at Sofia University. She was an intern in the Committee of the Regions, where she worked mainly with the team responsible for European cross-border co-operation associations, for which she holds a certificate of internship.

She started her career at New Bulgarian University as a coordinator in the Department of Plastic Arts. For a long time, she worked in the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, where she successively held the positions of Senior Expert in the Directorate of Territorial Management and Decentralization and Chief Expert in the General Directorate of Regional Development Programming. That gave her the opportunity to acquire appropriate competencies in order to focus on the development of scientific research on the topic of this dissertation in the field of regional development and management at the regional level.

Details of the procedure:

Elitsa Gramadska was enrolled as an independent doctoral student in the professional field 3.7. Administration and management in the "Regional Development" doctoral program at the Department of "Regional Development", as of October 1, 2020 to October 1, 2023 by Order of the Rector of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, number ПД 20-1512/ 29.09.2020 г.

Due to a positive decision of the primary unit concerning the readiness for defense of the dissertation Elitsa Gramadska was expelled early with the right to defense, as of June 30, 2021 with an Order of the Rector of Sofia University, number ПД-20-1317/ 9.07.2021 г.

General characteristics of the dissertation:

The dissertation addresses the topic of introducing decentralization in Bulgaria at the regional level - understood as an intermediate level, which includes districts and regions of planning. The focus of the dissertation is the ongoing processes of decentralization in the country at the regional level and the impact of Europeanization and democratic changes on them. A review of the processes of regionalization and the approach for the establishment of an intermediate level for local self-governance in two EU Member States - Greece and the Czech Republic - was done too in order conclusions relevant to Bulgaria could be drawn. Special attention was paid to the new regional approach of the EU, as well as to the new Program for Development of the Regions 2021-2027 in Bulgaria. Suggestions were made for changing the NUTS 2 classification of the regions in the country. The problems of the process of decentralization at the regional level in Bulgaria were outlined and possible scenarios for future development of regionalization in the country for the next decade were indicated.

Topicality of the problem, which is developed in the dissertation:

The topicality and significance of the topic of the dissertation are determined by the necessity for introduction of decentralization at the regional level. The author has identified two main circumstances for that necessity, namely: the changes in Bulgaria after 1989 and the trends in the development of the EU. For its part, decentralization at the regional level is associated with developing effective levels and appropriate governance according to the needs of the country. For many years there has been a periodic debate in the country on the need for administrative-territorial reform and the introduction of territorial self-governance, which have not yet been implemented. That need is determined both by the democratic changes in Bulgaria, including the negative trends in the development of Bulgarian regions in terms of key socio-economic indicators, and by the cohesion policy in the European Community, which requires efficient allocation of European funds in order financial assistance to be provided, as well as good coordination of public policies leading to effective governance. The topicality of the topic is also determined by the recent changes in the Regional Development Act (from 2020), as well as by the planned implementation of Integrated Territorial Investments of the Regional Development Program 2021-2027. Due to all these arguments, performance of research is required, which based on scientific methods, to answer the current and important questions related to the development of regionalization processes in the Republic of Bulgaria.

The terms and concepts related to the implementation of the process of regionalization are gaining more and more popularity. That is why clarification of these concepts before proceeding to conduct scientific research in that area is required. The countries of Western and Central and Eastern Europe have been developing different ideas and processes of regionalization. That is why, the issue of deriving the main trends in the approaches to regionalization of these countries is becoming increasingly important. The influence of Europeanization and of the internal processes of the country on the administrative-territorial structure and the regional policy of Bulgaria are important for contemporary scientific research in the field of regional development. In order effective governance in the country to be achieved, it is important to study the processes and formulated ideas regarding decentralization at the regional level, as well as their relationship to the implemented Operational Program for Regional Development. On this basis, it is possible the main challenges to be outlined and assumptions for the future development of the process of regionalization in Bulgaria to be made.

Evaluation of the structure of the dissertation:

The dissertation includes 247 pages. Structurally, it contains a title page, content, an introduction, three chapters, a concluding part and a bibliography. There are also a list of abbreviations (at the beginning) and lists of images, tables and applications (at the end).

The dissertation contains 16 images and 15 tables.

The list of literature includes 194 literature and information sources, in Cyrillic and Latin. There are books, monographs, articles in scientific journals and periodicals, reports, normative and strategic documents, statistical reference books and websites. The sources are specifically related to the research topic, used and cited in proper places in the text.

Each of the three chapters consists of three paragraphs, and wherever appropriate they are divided into separate smaller parts. This gives the impression of balance, as well as the impression that all three chapters are important. Each chapter ends with conclusions.

The structure of the dissertation, the included components (parts) and their sequence, reflect the views of the author, which is a prerequisite for the development of a paper that is distinguished by its ideas and originality. In its turn, the originality is one of the most important requirements for scientific papers of this kind (i.e., for dissertation papers).

The main components of the dissertation are few in number – only 3 chapters - and are related to the general theme of the paper, which creates the impression of a unified and comprehensive research, which is a subject to a common theme and goal. That impression is confirmed by the content itself, as well as by the exposition of the dissertation.

Review of the content of the dissertation:

The content of the dissertation paper is a subject to the general topic and the set goal, and there are no deviations from the topic in the exposition of the text.

The introduction reveals the topicality of the subject in the context of the development of the European Community and the democratic changes of the country. The main thesis of the research is presented, namely: *“the system of management at regional/ intermediate level in Bulgaria (supra-municipal and sub-state) needs optimization (fixing the territorial scope, reviewing and rethinking the functions and powers of the management structures), with the aim of implementing a more effective regional development policy in order the reported problems to be overcome and a more concentrated and effective use of financial assistance through the EU Structural Funds to be realized for balanced development of the Bulgarian regions.”*

The such formulated thesis is decomposed by the author of the dissertation into three working hypotheses, which would determine its acceptance or rejection. The formulated hypotheses helped the author to achieve the goal of the dissertation. The goal of the dissertation is formulated precisely and clearly, and the tasks that the author must perform in the process of her work in order to achieve that goal are structured by meaning and significance. In particular, the goal is: to study *“the dynamics of the circumstances that have led to the territorial and administrative situation at the regional level (districts and planning regions) in the country at present, by following the main directions of the Europeanization process, the regional policy performed, the processes and the formed ideas for decentralization at regional level in the country, the tendencies regarding the regionalization in the EU member states and the implementation of the Operational Program “Regional Development” since 2007.”*

In that introductory part the object and the subject of the research, as well as the methods applied are indicated. The place and focus of the research are considered. The limitations of the research are determined and a general characteristic of the dissertation is presented.

The next first chapter is characterized by theoretical and methodological nature. It presents an overview of the main processes related to the beginning of the introduction of democratic governance and Europeanization of Bulgaria and, accordingly, the formation of the model of territorial governance of the country. The basic concepts related to the topic of the dissertation are introduced. The essence, meaning and use of the term “region” are considered.

An in-depth study of the external (Europeanisation and European cohesion policy) and internal factors (decentralization and deconcentrating) related to regionalization has been made. The issues of the nature, significance and types of regionalization have been analyzed. The legal characteristics of the development of regionalization in Bulgaria have also been reviewed here. The impact of the negotiation process for accession to the EU on the territorial organization and regional policy in the country as an external factor has been revealed. An overview of the administrative-territorial division of Bulgaria has been made, as the competencies of the territorial communities have been indicated. The formed normative framework for regional development and the resulting institutional framework at regional level as a result of the applied regional policy of the government as an internal factor have been revealed. The necessary place and attention are paid to the development of ideas and processes of regionalization in the EU member-countries. The specifics of the regionalization and the implemented reforms of the member states from both Western and Central and Eastern Europe have been described. Attempts for the introduction of a common document on regional self-governance at European level, as well as for the classification of the regions in Europe, have been presented.

Chapter two deals with the issues and problems in the implementation of the regionalization process in Bulgaria. The development of the ideas, the approach and the suggested options for the implementation of decentralization at the regional level in Bulgaria against the background of the ongoing decentralization at the local level have been reviewed. Here, on the basis of an in-depth analysis, the relationship between the programming periods of the EU cohesion policy and the priorities and experience of the implementation of the Operational Program for Regional Development in Bulgaria and the challenges to the applied regional policy regarding the changes in the Regional Development Act, concerning the regional level has been shown. The need for the analysis is justified by the fact that the issues of decentralization and regional development of the country are related to the cohesion policy and the use of EU funds. The general analysis has been supported by a study of the approaches to the territorial reforms and the development of the regionalization process in two EU member states - the Republic of Greece and the Czech Republic. The countries have been properly selected and illustrate the conclusions, which have been defended in the dissertation.

The third chapter is dedicated to the new approach and future development of the regionalization process in Bulgaria. The issue of how Bulgaria adapts to the new paradigm for applying an integrated territorial approach to regional development has been thoroughly studied. The new regional approach in the EU cohesion policy for the period 2021-2027 has been described and analyzed. The necessary attention has been paid to the suggestions for changes of the NUTS classification in Bulgaria in connection with the preparation for the implementation of the next programming period. The application of new approaches in the formation of regional policy in the country has been described. In this regard, considerable attention has been paid to the approach for programming the Operational Program Regional Development and the new way of forming regional policy in Bulgaria. The chapter ends with a review and analysis of the results of semi-structured interviews, as well as a study of documents, literature and information sources in order to reveal the challenges and guidelines for further development of the regionalization process in Bulgaria. The characteristics and problems of the decentralization process at regional level in the country have been indicated in chronological order and the main achievements and challenges faced by the regionalization process in Bulgaria outlined. On this basis, a hypothetical forecast has been developed, which identifies possible scenarios for future development of regionalization in the country for the coming years.

In the concluding part generalizations and conclusions, which correspond to the overall theme of the research presented in the paper have been formed and summarized.

Degree of knowledge of the state of the problem and creative interpretation of the literature material:

The author of the dissertation has selected appropriate literature and information sources, which are specifically related to the topic of the dissertation. She skillfully interprets and analyzes precisely those issues there that are relevant to the research topic of the dissertation paper. The presented analysis clearly shows the knowledge and competencies of the author, regarding the studied problems of the development of the regionalization process in Bulgaria, as well as about the ideas, concepts and principles of management at the regional level.

Correspondence of the chosen research methodology and the set goal and tasks of the dissertation with the achieved results and contributions:

The author has fulfilled the tasks set in the dissertation paper. She has precisely indicated and defined the main terms, concepts and processes in connection with the research topic, which is related to the implementation of the regionalization process. She has outlined the main trends in the approaches between the countries of Western and Central and Eastern Europe in the development of ideas and processes for regionalization. She has analyzed the role and influence of Europeanization expressed as an "external" factor of the EU and the "internal" processes in the country, participants and institutions in the processes of forming the current administrative-territorial structure and regional policy in Bulgaria. She has studied the ongoing processes and the formed ideas for decentralization at the regional level, as part of the implemented policy of regional development in the country and their relationship with the implemented Operational Program for Regional Development. She has derived the main challenges and outlined assumptions for the future development of the regionalization process in the Republic of Bulgaria on the basis of the changes made in the structures of the Regional Development Council in the planning regions with the Regional Development Act. By achieving the results in performing these tasks, the author has achieved the goal of the dissertation.

The set goal and tasks correspond to the achieved scientific contributions presented in the dissertation. The research methods, which are applied in the dissertation to achieve the goal, the tasks and the relevant results can be summarized as a study and analysis of literature, documents and official statistic data, as well as conducting semi-structured interviews with experts in the field of regional governance and development. I think that these methods are suitable for successfully achieving the results of the dissertation. The issues of regional development and the governance at the regional level are addressed specifically in these information and literature sources and documents that should be studied and analyzed. The statistical data allow for an in-depth and complete analysis and accurate assessments of the problems on the subject to be made. The semi-structured interviews with specialists and experts help to supplement and interpret more fully and thoroughly the information from the analyzes of the documents, literature and information sources, and from statistical data.

Evaluation of the scientific and / or scientifically applied contributions of the dissertation:

Elitsa Gramadska has identified four specific scientific or scientific-applied contributions of her dissertation, which she has formulated as follows: *“(1) Based on information from various Bulgarian and foreign sources and performed interviews, a follow-up, summary and analysis of ideas and suggestions for regionalization in the country for the period 1990-2020 have been made; (2) After a chronological follow-up of the achievements and challenges facing the ideas of regionalization in the Republic of Bulgaria, four periods in the development of the process of regionalization or decentralization at the regional level for the period 1990-2020 have been identified and analyzed; (3) An attempt has been made to identify possible scenarios for future development of regionalization on the basis of the problems reported so far and the suggested new approach to regional policy for the next 10*

years; (4) *The main obstacles to the implementation of regionalization have been identified and the most significant reasons that led to the occurrence of these obstacles have been outlined.*"

In her dissertation, Elitsa Gramadska has made a new study of the ideas and suggestions for regionalization in Bulgaria, highlighting the main obstacles to that process and their reasons. On this basis, the author has outlined periods in the development of decentralization at regional level in the country, indicated possible scenarios for the future development of regionalization and offered a new approach to the development of regional policy for the next ten years.

I agree with the so-formulated contributions and I think that they are important for further scientific research, as well as for the application of management science at the regional level, in the preparation of strategic and program documents, etc. The achieved results and contributions, presented in the dissertation would be useful for the practice of undertaking appropriate, based on the scientific approach, policy, measures and initiatives with regards to the development of the processes of regionalization in the Republic of Bulgaria.

Data for the abstract/ summary book:

The abstract book accurately and in a synthesized way or in a summary form presents the structure and the content of the dissertation. The most important moments and achieved results of the overall scientific research, which is presented in the dissertation are indicated.

Evaluation of the publications related to the dissertation:

Elitsa Gramadska has presented three publications on the topic of the dissertation of which she is the only author. They have been published in approved scientific journals with scientific review: Annual of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Faculty of Geology and Geography, Book 2 - Geography and Knowledge - International Journal.

Opinions, recommendations and remarks:

In my opinion, it is more appropriate the literature and information sources in the bibliography to be presented as a general list and in alphabetical order, first those in Cyrillic and then those in Latin, instead of dividing them into separate groups, as it is debatable whether some sources should be assigned to one group or another. In addition, the names of some groups do not make a clear distinction in their composition as of mutually exclusive categories of types of literature and information sources. I also think that it would be possible the applied methodology to be described in a little more detail, the reasons for choosing the methods to be explained, a little more information about the interviews to be given, etc.

These insignificant remarks do not diminish the value of the paper offered.

The dissertation is a complete study on the research topics. However, the issues studied are also related to a number of other scientific and practical problems in the field of governance at the regional level and regional development. Therefore, as a recommendation to the author, I would suggest to her to continue to study issues and problems of management at the regional level, which are beyond the scope of the research presented in the dissertation, but are related to it, in her role of expert and researcher with appropriate knowledge and skills.

My overall impression and opinion about the dissertation are that it is a scientific paper on an extremely topical and important topic, both for the scientific community and for the practice of management at the regional level in Bulgaria concerning the achievement of appropriate regional development of the country. Through her work, the author demonstrates in-depth knowledge in the field of the subject. She skillfully and expertly interprets and analyzes the complex issues related to regionalization, decentralization, Europeanization and regional policy. Overall, the author shows excellent ability to perform in-depth analysis and scientific research. In her dissertation, the author has appropriately used a scientific approach and tools to conduct a comprehensive and complete, individual scientific research. The structure and content of the dissertation reflect the views of the author and give originality to the thorough paper. All considered issues are a subject to a common topic, and no deviations from the topic have been found. The considered issues complement and expand the knowledge in the field of

regionalization in Bulgaria and in the EU. The author has successfully completed the tasks and achieved the goal of the dissertation. As a result, she has made significant scientific and applied contributions, which could lead to significant benefits related to the implementation of effective management practices at the regional level to achieve sustainable regional development.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the author Elitsa Gramadska meets the requirements of LDASRB, RILDASRB and the Rules on Terms and Conditions for the Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and the Occupation of Academic Positions at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" for awarding the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" in the Scientific field: "Administration and Management" for her dissertation on the topic: Development of regionalization in the Republic of Bulgaria. She has a master's degree. She was expelled with the right to defense. She meets the minimum national requirements. She has the required number of publications on the topic of the dissertation. The candidate has in-depth theoretical knowledge in the relevant specialty and the ability to conduct scientific research individually. She has demonstrated very good knowledge on the issues of regionalization in Bulgaria. The acquired knowledge was used by the author to upgrade the understanding of management issues at the regional level. Skills of the author for good interpretation and in-depth analysis performance of the problems on the researched topic have been revealed. Scientific and scientific-applied results, which represent an original and valuable contribution to the science of management and to the field of regional development have been achieved.

In view of the arguments presented in this statement, I confidently and clearly state my positive assessment of the presented dissertation and suggest that the Scientific Jury award the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" to the dissertation student Elitsa Gramadska.

Date:

August 27, 2021

Member of the jury:

/Assoc. Prof. Dr. E. Petkova/