

STATEMENT OF OPINION

by **Assoc. Prof. Irena Kirilova Emilova, PhD**, New Bulgarian University, Department of Administration and Management, Tourism Section,
research field of the most recent habilitation: **3.9. Tourism**,

regarding the dissertation submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree “**Doctor**” in professional field **3.9. Tourism**, academic specialty **Tourism**, entitled:

“Innovative Marketing Tools for Enhancing the Competitiveness of Agritourism in Bulgaria”

by **Kamelia Evgenieva Karadocheva**, PhD candidate at the Department of Administration and Management, New Bulgarian University,
under the academic supervision of **Assoc. Prof. Nadya Marinova, PhD**

1. Significance of the Research Problem from a Scientific and Applied Perspective

The topic of the dissertation is highly relevant and of considerable societal significance. Agritourism is approached in the study not as an exotic niche, but as a viable instrument for addressing the imbalance between the overconcentration of tourist flows in seaside and mountain resorts and the underutilized potential of rural Bulgaria. The candidate appropriately relates the topic to major contemporary developments in tourism—digitalization, changes in consumer behaviour following the COVID-19 pandemic, and the growing demand for authentic and personalized experiences—and applies these developments to the specific context of agritourism, a sector for which comprehensive aggregated statistical data and systematic marketing research are currently lacking in Bulgaria.

This identified knowledge gap concerning the digitalization of agritourism businesses in Bulgaria constitutes a major factor determining the scientific and applied value of the research.

2. Justification of the Aim and Objectives of the Dissertation

The aim of the study—to investigate the role of innovative digital marketing tools in enhancing the competitiveness of agritourism and, on this basis, to develop an applicable model for assessing and improving the level of digitalization in the sector—is clearly formulated and follows logically from the relevance of the research problem as outlined in the dissertation.

The seven objectives formulated in the introduction adequately cover the theoretical, analytical, and applied dimensions of the research: from clarifying the conceptual and practical toolkit of digital marketing, through analysing the current state of agritourism and relevant European good practices, to formulating guidelines for collaboration between the agricultural and tourism sectors.

The three working hypotheses are appropriately linked to the overarching research thesis and are amenable to empirical verification through the proposed methodological instruments. This demonstrates a coherent and well-structured research logic.

3. Correspondence between the Research Methodology and Methods and the Aim and Objectives of the Study

The candidate applies a comprehensive methodological framework comprising desk research, systemic, comparative, deductive and inductive approaches, SWOT analysis, as well as a three-sided survey conducted among tourists, tourism business operators, and agricultural producers, complemented by semi-structured interviews.

The choice of a purposive rather than a random sample is adequately justified in view of the applied nature of the research and is appropriately identified as a methodological limitation of the study. This represents sound research practice and demonstrates methodological awareness on the part of the candidate.

Of particular practical value is the digital diagnostic tool developed and piloted by the candidate, available at **agrotour.digital**, which is structured according to the Balanced Scorecard model. Through this instrument, the theoretical propositions developed in the dissertation are translated into a verifiable practical application.

Overall, the methodology provides sufficient grounds to conclude that it is appropriately aligned with the stated aim and objectives of the research.

4. Scientific and Applied Contributions of the Dissertation

I consider the contributions identified by the candidate to be correctly formulated and support them. Among these, I would particularly highlight the following:

- the systematization and critical analysis of contemporary concepts of digital marketing in tourism, applied specifically to agritourism, as well as the clarification of the conceptual relationship between “**rural tourism**” and “**agritourism**”;
- the SWOT analysis of agritourism in Bulgaria in the context of digital transformation;
- the comparative analysis of the Bulgarian and Italian models for the development and digitalization of agritourism, which enriches existing knowledge with validated good practices that may be adapted and applied in Bulgaria;
- the integrated applied model, comprising a checklist and a system of KPIs based on the Balanced Scorecard methodology, for the self-assessment of the level of digitalization of agritourism businesses, implemented as a functioning online tool.

These contributions possess both theoretical and, particularly, practical value for small and medium-sized enterprises in rural areas, for management consulting practice, and for the development of sector-specific policies.

5. Assessment of the Publications Related to the Dissertation

The candidate has presented **eight publications** related to the topic of the dissertation, some authored independently and others co-authored with her academic supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Nadya Marinova, PhD.

The publications have appeared in proceedings of national and international scientific conferences, including conferences with international participation from Serbia and North Macedonia, and have been assigned ISBN numbers. This provides evidence of the academic dissemination and scholarly validation of the research within the academic community.

The number and nature of the publications are consistent with established academic practice and with the requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor”. They also demonstrate that the principal theses of the dissertation have been presented for academic discussion during the development of the research.

6. Citations by Other Authors, Reviews in the Academic Press, and Other Indicators

The dissertation abstract does not contain an explicit account of citations of the candidate's publications by other authors, which is not unusual at this stage of an academic career.

The bibliographic basis of the dissertation, identified in the abstract as comprising **111 sources in Bulgarian, English, and Russian**, includes both classical works in the field of tourism marketing and contemporary international studies, as well as official statistical and strategic documents. This provides the necessary theoretical and contextual foundation for the research.

7. Comments, Recommendations, and Remarks

Alongside my overall positive assessment of the dissertation, I would like to make the following comments and recommendations. These do not diminish the value of the results achieved, but should be taken into consideration by the doctoral candidate when finalizing the dissertation and during the public defence:

- The dissertation abstract contains internal inconsistencies in several quantitative indicators. For example, the reported total number of participants in the survey (**148**) does not correspond to the sum of participants reported for the three indicated focus groups (**92 + 34 + 42 = 168**). There is also a discrepancy in the stated number of tables in the dissertation (**23 and 22**, respectively) in different parts of the abstract. I recommend that these technical inconsistencies be carefully checked and corrected in the final version of the dissertation;
- Certain passages in the abstract—for example, the enumeration of activities stimulating the development of rural tourism according to Roberts and Hall—are reproduced verbatim in more than one place. I recommend editorial streamlining in order to improve the overall structure, coherence, and readability of the dissertation;
- The sample of **92**, respectively “more than 90”, respondents used in Chapters Three and Four leaves some ambiguity as to whether this refers to the same survey or to two separate surveys conducted among tourists. This should be clarified unambiguously during the public defence;
- It would be useful for the candidate to elaborate further on the expected economic returns from the implementation of the proposed digital diagnostic tool for different types of agritourism enterprises, as well as on the possibilities for its institutional support;
- I recommend that, during the public defence, the candidate place greater emphasis on the applicability of the Italian model of geographical zoning of agritourism to the six regions of Bulgaria already identified in the dissertation.

The above comments are advisory and clarifying in nature and do not call into question the scientific value or the substantive contribution of the dissertation.

8. Conclusion

The dissertation of **Kamelia Evgenieva Karadocheva**, entitled “**Innovative Marketing Tools for Enhancing the Competitiveness of Agritourism in Bulgaria**”, represents a completed, independent, and scientifically sound research study that combines theoretical analysis, substantial empirical research, and a concrete diagnostic tool with practical applicability.

The dissertation is undoubtedly relevant, has clearly formulated aims and objectives, employs a methodology appropriate to its subject matter, and offers genuine scientific and applied

contributions. The dissertation abstract accurately reflects the content and findings of the research.

On the basis of the above assessment, I give a **positive evaluation of the dissertation** and recommend that the esteemed Scientific Jury award **Kamelia Evgenieva Karadocheva** the educational and scientific degree “**Doctor**” in professional field **3.9. Tourism**, academic specialty **Tourism**.

Date: 17-th of August 2026

Reviewer:
(**Assoc. Prof. Irena Emilova, PhD**)