



## OPINION

**By:** Prof. Ingrid Simeonova Shikova, PhD, Political Sciences 3.3 – European Studies – Policies of the European Union

**Subject:** Doctoral dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in professional field 3.3. Political sciences – European studies

**Reason for presenting the opinion:** participation in the scientific jury for the defense of the doctoral dissertation according to the decision of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Philosophy from 08.11.2022 protocol No. 4 and order of the Rector of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

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

**Title of the dissertation:** "“Monitoring and ex-post assessment of the impact of EU cohesion policy in Bulgaria”"

### 1. Information about the doctoral student

Mariela Savkova has been enrolled in the Department of European Studies as a doctoral student of independent study preparation in the academic year 2020/2021 after presentation of a draft dissertation and positive review and feedback from the members of the department with Order No. RD 20-151/26.01.2021. Associate Professor Kaloyan Simeonov was chosen as her scientific consultant.

Since November 1, 2011, Mariela Savkova is Head of the Regional Information Center in Vidin. She has extensive practical experience within the field of the dissertation. She has over twenty years of experience in the development and management of regional development projects financed

by the European Union and international financing programs. She was part of the team of the international consultant who prepared "Inter-regional measures for development after the construction of the Danube bridge Vidin-Kalafat", 2006. She was head of the team which prepared the first Development Strategy of the Municipality of Vidin, 2000-2006.

The dissertation was discussed at a meeting of the European Studies Department. It was recommended for defense before a scientific jury according to the decision of the Faculty Council of Faculty of Philosophy from 08.11.2022 protocol No. 4 and an order of the Rector of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

## **2. General characteristics of the presented dissertation**

### **• Volume and structure**

Mariela Savkova's dissertation has a total volume of 263 pages, including an introduction, three chapters, conclusions and recommendations, a bibliographical reference and two annexes. In support of the entire study are included: 82 tables, 13 figures, 2 graphs and 9 maps. The bibliography contains a total of 194 sources in Bulgarian and English.

In the introduction, the doctoral student's motivation for choosing the topic of the dissertation is argued, the relevance and importance of the problem is indicated. The goals and specific tasks of the research are formulated. The main objective of the study is to analyze the implementation of the objectives of the European cohesion policy and the effectiveness of the European funds from the multiannual financial framework 2007-2013. in Bulgaria. The goal of developing a model for monitoring and ex-post assessment of the impact of the Structural and Cohesion Funds in Bulgaria is not less ambitious.

A number of specific research tasks have been formulated - research on the development of cohesion policy and European funds, selection of indicators for building a model for subsequent evaluation and monitoring of the impact of EU cohesion policy in Bulgaria, conducting research and analysis of the results of the evaluation model of the cohesion policy in Bulgaria, development of a logical matrix of the model for ex-post assessment of the impact of the multi-annual financial framework on the level of cohesion of Bulgaria, etc.

The limitations that the author sets for herself are also listed - time limits, as well as limitations regarding the indicators used to construct the model. A working hypothesis was formulated. The methodological basis of the study is indicated.

• **Importance and relevance of the dissertation topic**

The vision of Jacques Delors according to which integration policies should be carried out around three important elements: "competition that stimulates, cooperation that strengthens and solidarity that unites" is well known. Cohesion policy is the clearest expression of this solidarity, but the problem has always been whether it really unites. Isn't the cohesion policy an illustration of the tensions between solidarity and responsibility, of the contradictions in determining the budget of the European Union, as well as of the unrealized, although written in the main treaties aspirations to overcome socio-economic differences? Cohesion policy is one of the most researched and discussed policies in the European integration process. And every researcher of cohesion policy faces its challenges – complexity, peculiarities of its practical application, differing local conditions and goals, different instruments and spheres of their application. Precisely because of this complexity, cohesion policy research uses different approaches, pursues different goals, even leads to different results and conclusions.

Having said all this, I want to emphasize that, although the cohesion policy is very often in the research field of many analysts, it can be considered from different perspectives and with different research objectives. Bulgaria has been a member of the European Union for 15 years. The question inevitably arises - what is the result? As an element of this question, there is the sub-question whether Bulgaria was able to overcome the regional economic differences in the country with the support of the cohesion policy. Any research, any analysis on this topic is important and relevant, especially when carried out by independent researchers. Specifically, in the considered dissertation, the author also has extensive practical experience and observations related to the least developed region in Bulgaria.

Many questions primarily related to the choice of the model for the future development of European integration and its manifestation in Bulgaria arise. The answers to these questions in modern conditions are complex and ambiguous, and this determines the importance and relevance of the problem studied in the reviewed dissertation.

The reading of the proposed doctoral research confirms without a doubt the significance of the topic and its practical importance for Bulgaria. The fact of taking on the burden of researching a complex topic on which there are different and often conflicting opinions, at the same time in a difficult period of the first years of Bulgaria's membership in the EU, is a serious challenge.

### **3. Evaluation of the dissertation and the obtained scientific and practical results**

The dissertation submitted for review meets the legal requirements - it proves that the author has in depth knowledge of the subject of the cohesion policy of the European Union, knows the theory and academic literature in the researched area and demonstrates the ability to carry out scientific and applied research.

I will emphasize that the initial text, which was submitted for admission, needed additional work in order to acquire all the characteristics of a doctoral work, but the author demonstrated ambition and potential for its implementation in very close cooperation with the scientific consultant from the Department of European Studies, associate professor Kaloyan Simeonov. She has made considerable efforts to comply with the recommendations made by the participants in the discussion and the internal defense of the thesis before the members of the European Studies Department.

The author seeks answers to important questions such as: how effective is the current management model of regional development projects, what are the main difficulties and problems, what is the impact of European structural and investment funds on regional socio-economic inequalities in Bulgaria. An analysis of the existing academic literature was made, and comprehensive empirical material was collected. The research was carried out not only on the basis of the studied documents and collected empirical data, but also on the basis of the author's practical experience. This specific practical experience in the research area, the good knowledge of the problems "from the inside" have helped her to develop a useful practical-applied research. Analytical conclusions concerning the growth of regional differences in Bulgaria have been drawn. Empirical research, which is the main contribution of the dissertation, has been carefully approached. The conclusion is logically formulated - the conducted research proves the validity of the hypothesis that during the analyzed

period the cohesion measures carried out in our country did not lead to a reduction of regional differences.

In conclusion, the general impression is that the doctoral student Mariela Savkova has the necessary knowledge on the topic of the dissertation, as well as the skills to analyze, to summarize and to draw conclusions.

#### **4. Abstract, publications and contributions**

The abstract correctly reflects the content of the dissertation. It is carefully prepared and gives an idea of the dissertation work, its goals, tasks and results.

The contributions cited in the abstract are worded sparingly. They are mainly in the scientific-applied field and could be summarized mainly in the conclusions of the empirical research and the applied methodology, the compilation of a methodological model for cohesion monitoring and evaluation.

Mariela Savkova has seven publications related to the dissertation topic. They have been presented at national and international conferences. Three of them are in English.

#### **5. Critical comments, recommendations and questions**

Critical comments can be made to each dissertation work. I underline that my comments are well-intentioned and intended to provoke reflection on the issues raised. It is the author's right to accept or disagree with them.

Upon careful reading of the dissertation, small gaps can be identified that should be corrected - for example, Bulgaria is recognized as a market economy in the regular annual report of the European Commission on Bulgaria's progress in the accession process from October 9, 2002, and not in 2004 {COM (2002)700 final}.

In table 26 - Share of EU funds in Bulgaria's GDP in percentage terms, there is a need for clarification - the data refer to which period - (2003-2015, 2007-2015, 2010-2015) in billions or in millions.

At the end of the first chapter there is a statement that, in my opinion, needs further clarification and argumentation - "The main problem that was inherited from the first programming period and

continues in the second and third programming periods is the lack of commitment to introduce the programming method and management of cohesion funds." I hope that during the defense, Mariela Savkova will provide more clarity and argumentation on this statement.

With these notes and recommendations, I would like to support the future research and practical endeavors of Mariela Savkova, who has embarked on a complex and dynamic research field that requires continuous and systematic efforts.

## **6. Conclusion**

The dissertation submitted for review meets the requirements for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor". Mariela Savkova's dissertation is a completed study, based on knowledge of the subject, academic literature and official documents in the field of cohesion policy. The research was carried out earnestly, the sources used are properly cited. The dissertation shows the educational and scientific awareness of the doctoral student Mariela Savkova.

Based on the positive assessment, the stated merits and specific contributions of the dissertation work "Monitoring and ex-post assessment of the impact of EU cohesion policy in Bulgaria", I support the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Mariela Ivanova Savkova.

December 15, 2022

Sofia

Prof. Ingrid Shikova