



Comenius University  
Faculty of Natural Sciences  
Bratislava, Slovakia

Mlynská dolina  
Ilkovičova 6  
842 15 Bratislava 4

Professor Ján Buček  
Department of Economic and Social Geography,  
Demography and Territorial Development

## Doctoral Thesis Review Report

on Ph.D. dissertation submitted by **Mr. Flavio Besana** under the title:

### ***„The future of shrinking areas in the EU: potential policy impacts in light of pressing pandemic, environmental and institutional challenges“***

Completed at: Adam Mickiewicz University Poznan, Faculty of Human Geography and Planning

Supervisor: Prof. dr hab. Tadeusz Stryjakiewicz

Assistant Supervisor: Dr. Kai Böhme

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In my review, I will focus primarily on the dissertation position within current research trends in the field of shrinkage (state of art, significance, interdisciplinary linkages); goals and research questions; adequacy of selected methodology and methods/materials; structure and style of the dissertation; results, contribution and novelty of the research, as well as overall evaluation.

The position of submitted work within current research trends we can derive already according to its introductory chapters. „Shrinkage“ as such is not any old research concept, we can observe the rising number of interested scientists and plenty of research outputs, with growing impact. It rapidly penetrated the scientific community and attracted attention going now beyond science and went into intensive touch with praxis (e.g., in planning, government). Nevertheless, many aspects of this process are not covered in sufficient detail, or a wider perspective, so there is a large potential for scientific contribution. The author's discourse document very good knowledge of „state of the art“ in shrinkage-related research and its achievements until the time of his dissertation submission. The primary theoretical concept of the dissertation is suitably designed, and it is fully in consent with the most current research trends in shrinkage within geography, spatial sciences and planning.

The goals of the dissertation are explicitly presented in the introductory section. It reflects previous good orientation in the field and focuses on the analysis of the latest as well as the future development of shrinking areas in the EU, under the pressure of the most relevant societal challenges. It is further



elaborated into a clearly defined research question and set of sub-questions. The objectives are adequately ambitious, but realistic, reflecting current trends in research, and providing a promising opportunity for research results novelty. Since the beginning of the work on dissertation research, the author considered the issues regarding the contribution of his research.

Methodologically, the submitted dissertation is clearly focused, based on a sound debate on methodological opportunities and leading to own selection of methods. It is framed in a coherent way, with high respect to comparability, the role of context and attempting for a more complex type of research. The methods used are adequate, properly applied, and non-trivial. They are based on good knowledge of the research apparatus of more disciplines and used in various research domains (e.g. geography, demography, regional development, political sciences). As far as concrete methods are concerned, although I prefer the cohort-component approach in population forecasting, I fully accept the reasons for the selection of modification of the extrapolation and share of growth approach as a reasonable approximation for the used purpose. All methods (demographic projection, impact assessment, content analysis) are transparently presented (with sufficient details) within analytical chapters, which supported readability and overall understanding of analytical sections. Application of all methods required extensive preparation of large data sets, their elaboration in numerous steps, and partial results analysis (e.g., as typologies, classifications, pathways, geographical distribution). Empirical parts are typical by a good selection of indicators, a systematic approach, a search for relevant linkages, accompanied by realistic interpretation, and regular results explanation concerning the research questions. Details concerning used data are in annexes, including the approach to specific "data cases" (e.g., how he managed the amalgamation of units within public administration reforms adopted in some countries).

The submitted dissertation contains 266 pages (including annexes). The text accompanies rich documentary and illustrative attachments (30 tables, 8 maps, 6 graphs) of good quality and relevance. References cover more than 180 titles of literature, with significant and justified attention paid to policy documents (primarily at the level of EU). The dissertation structure is appropriate and logical. We can find balanced attention to contextual, conceptual and theoretical chapters (1), more analytical chapters (2) and chapters discoursing results, cross-analysis, conclusions and policy recommendations (3). It is lucidly written, with appropriate professional language, reflecting good orientation in terminology. It fulfils the usual formal requirement expected from PhD dissertations in the fields of geography, spatial sciences, and planning.

In my opinion submitted dissertation represents a case of unique research. The most remarkable is the research in wide-ranging time and spatial scale. It addresses a very long-time dimension (especially the attention to a "more distant" future is until now less frequent) and is specific in combining local and regional aspects of shrinkage within the dimension of the EU. It is innovative in its focus on very actual societal challenges related to shrinkage - the COVID pandemic and its



restrictions, the rising role of the environmental agenda and the role of citizens in shaping EU policies. It is firmly embedded into the current discussion on the role of EU institutions, policies and tools. We also can not overlook innovative methodological frameworks, various methods combinations and data used. There are numerous original results (some of them already published in various forms, including reviewed journals). We can observe results that confirm previous trends but in updated and more precise forms, identifying geographical patterns, expansion and intensity. It once again emphasizes that shrinkage is hard to reverse. It presents a rare case of long-term shrinkage projection analysing, with special attention to the local level. Nevertheless, this research also confirmed diverse situations of shrinkage areas, when, for example, many shrinkage areas are sufficiently resilient to sudden external shocks. Among other results, I can mention governance quality in a multilevel framework as an important factor that can substantially influence the struggle with shrinkage and its outcome in particular areas. It also confirms that shrinkage is a serious challenge, and it is not sufficiently incorporated into EU policies (as is documented according to some of them).

In search for eventual weaknesses, my role was finally circumscribed because my crucial points for discussion are already identified and discussed within the dissertation, explicitly mentioned as limitations or reflections of research (primarily in Conclusions). Research in such dimensions is inevitably accompanied by certain compromises, e.g., methodological. It faces limits concerning data availability, as well as limits accompanying research at the interplay of more spatial scales (NUTS<sub>2</sub>, NUTS<sub>3</sub>, LAUs) having often serious intraregional and local differences. But the author did a large effort to reduce such limitations and expressed his awareness of them. He avoided any inappropriate or exaggerated interpretations of his results.

*I have a few final questions for discussion during the dissertation defence:*

- 1. Do you think that more extensive attention to population forecasting (e.g. within national statistical offices, EU), including more elaborated forecasts at the local level (or on a similar scale e.g. according to the urban functional regions), could improve our understanding of shrinking processes and future policies shaping?*
- 2. Although it is partly outside the goals and approaches of the dissertation (referring to the author's experiences accumulated during his research), are there any indices that shrinking areas were among those more seriously hit by the COVID pandemic, or it is just hypothetical?*
- 3. Chapter focusing on the relevance of shrinking in the public debate I consider as innovative, although "input" data were partly circumscribed. How the EU could improve linkages between citizens and EU institutions in such early stages of policy-making, and what we could do in favour of a larger understanding and attention of citizens to shrinkage areas?*



My overall evaluation of the submitted dissertation thesis is highly positive. The theoretical part aptly reflects conceptual and methodological issues, including relevant literature frameworks. In the empirical part, suitable and sophisticated methods were chosen and properly applied. Finally, at the same time, the dissertation offers interesting and original results. The work is substantially enriched by the discussion of results obtained, as well as the section focusing on policy recommendations (often absent in Ph.D. dissertations). It includes arguments and an urgent appeal to pay more attention to this issue and related challenges. Mr. Flavio Besana confirmed excellent orientation in shrinkage and related fields, presented multifaceted research skills, and abilities in results interpretation and setting future research agenda. The work submitted contributes to the research in the field shrinking in interaction with pressing societal challenges and provides a considerable contribution to the field. In my view, it goes far beyond the usual Ph.D. dissertation prerequisites and reflects huge personal involvement and research passion.

**The dissertation meets the requirements defined by Article 187 of the Act of 20 July 2018 Law on Higher Education and Science (Journal of Laws 2022.574 as amended) in the discipline social and economic geography and spatial management. I apply for admitting it to public defence and for its distinction.**

Bratislava, September 02, 2022



prof. RNDr. Ján Buček, Ph.D.

