STATEMENT

from Associate Professor Kamelia Vunova – Narleva, Ph.D.

Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy

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

in professional field: “Organization and management”

outside the sphere of material production”

Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar"

Author of the dissertation: ANDREAN JOE
Scientific supervisor: Professor, SNEZHANKA OVCHAROVA Ph.D.

Topic of the dissertation:

"Challenges for Leaders in Human Resource Management in the Era of the Circular Economy"

This opinion has been prepared pursuant to Order No. 595 dated September 29, 2026, issued by the Rector of Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar," and in accordance with the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its Application, and the Ordinance on the Acquisition of the Educational and Scientific Degree of "Doctor" (PhD) and the Scientific Degree of "Doctor of Sciences" (DSc) at Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar."*

- **General Characteristics of the Dissertation**

The dissertation research of Mr. Andrean Joe, titled "Challenges for Leaders in Human Resource Management in the Era of the Circular Economy," is a theoretically profound work with demonstrated practical outcomes. The scientific approach employed by the author, combined with empirical research on the subject, leads toward a viable model for enhancing the efficiency of human capital management within the context of contemporary challenges.

In terms of structure, the dissertation complies with the provisions of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and its Regulations for Implementation. It consists of an introduction, a main body divided into three chapters, a conclusion, an extensive list of literature and information sources, and two appendices. This dissertation — submitted for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor"— clearly highlights the author's perspective, the practical applicability of the proposals put forward, and the researcher's contributions to the relevant fields. The author demonstrates a thorough understanding of contemporary management theories and an ability to adapt them to the specific context of the circular economy.

- **Brief Description and Content Analysis of the Dissertation**

The dissertation is structured into three main chapters, which systematically examine the theoretical, methodological, and empirical aspects of human resource management in the era of the circular economy.

In the introduction, the author substantiates the topicality of the subject; the research problem, scientific thesis, goals, and objectives are outlined; the subject and object of the dissertation research are defined, as are the limitations (which are also presented in detail in Appendix 2). A comprehensive methodology is described, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches; an integrated, interdisciplinary, and empirically oriented approach is employed, framing the transition to a circular economy as a managerial transformation linked to human capital, leadership, and organizational culture within SMEs. The methodological logic of the dissertation is based on the necessity of examining the challenges faced by leaders—both through quantitative data and through a content analysis of managerial stances, opinions, arguments, and practical judgments.

Chapter One examines the fundamental principles of the circular economy and the managerial challenges facing leaders of SMEs. The concept is rooted in the synergy between human and natural capital—a managerial prerequisite for the transition to a circular model—as well as in corporate social responsibility and information disclosure, which constitute an additional layer of sustainable business management. Emphasis is placed on the distinction between linear and circular models, the core principles of the circular economy and their managerial implications for SMEs, the interplay between human and natural capital as a condition for sustainable transformation, and the European regulatory framework within the context of mounting environmental and regulatory challenges. In summarizing this part of the dissertation, the author argues that the transition to a circular economy cannot be viewed merely as an environmental or technological shift; rather, it represents a managerial transformation that requires SMEs to fundamentally alter how they generate value.

Chapter Two establishes the methodological framework for the empirical research and analysis of successful management within the circular business models of SMEs in Germany. It outlines the key methodological dimensions, incorporating critical indicators (p. 66). The chapter also explores successful management practices within circular business models—including a brief comparison with the Bulgarian context—across the sectors studied: financial and consulting services, real estate management, and the craft/artisanal sector. It is beneficial to analyze these sectors in greater depth, as they demonstrate a distinct logic regarding the interplay between human capital, natural resources, and the circular economy. The study concludes that the management of human resources during the transition toward a circular economy should be viewed as an integrated management system. This system synthesizes research methodology, sectoral context, circular business models, competency development, partnerships, and leadership into a unified scientific and practical framework.

Chapter Three presents a systematic analysis of an empirical study involving 102 SMEs, organized into three thematic sections. The findings are structured according to six analytical dimensions: the circular economy, HRM, leadership, ESG orientation, CSR, and the synergy between human and natural capital. Based on the identified barriers—such as knowledge gaps, financial constraints, a lack of partners, and the insufficient formalization of practices—the author develops management strategies and recommendations. These are designed to

effectively foster the knowledge, competencies, and organizational capacity required for the sustainable management of human and natural capital within SMEs. The strategies proposed by the author, along with the integrated model and practical toolkit, are derived directly from the study's findings. They highlight the need for knowledge development, better structuring of HRM processes, the formation of partnerships, the use of digital tools, the adoption of ESG-oriented criteria, and the phased development of organizational capacity. The current stage of development of the enterprises studied makes it possible to conceptualize a model for the sustainable management of human and natural capital within the context of a circular economy (p. 187). Furthermore, the results allow for the identification of key problem areas and the formulation of applicable management guidelines for the sectors under study.

The conclusion confirms that the central research thesis has been validated. The summary of the results indicates that the challenges leaders face in human resource management within the context of a circular economy are not limited to external economic, political, regulatory, and technological factors; rather, they are largely determined by the internal organizational capacity of SMEs to create, integrate, develop, and share knowledge, foster an innovation culture, and attract and retain motivated employees through personal example and organizational contribution.

- **Contributions of the Dissertation**

The dissertation presents both theoretical and practical contributions:

- Contemporary human resource management (HRM) theory—within the context of the transition to a circular economy—is synthesized and critically analyzed, drawing on an examination of successful practices and empirical research conducted among SMEs in three German sectors (financial consulting services, real estate management, and skilled crafts).
- A model for the sustainable development of SMEs is developed, integrating leadership, strategic HRM, knowledge, organizational culture, motivation, digitalization, and partnerships into a unified theoretical and practical framework.
- A functional mechanism for the sustainable, integrated development of human and natural capital within SMEs—during the transition to a circular economy—is established; this includes a set of strategies for reorienting HRM to address the specific challenges of a circular economy.
- Original empirical research was conducted, highlighting the significance of motivation, coaching, and mentoring. These elements should be viewed as integral components of the internal infrastructure supporting the social dimension of a sustainable transition. Furthermore, the author demonstrates that mental health, work-life balance, overall well-being, and opportunities for reskilling create the conditions necessary for change to be embraced as an informed, conscious participation in sustainable development.

- **Guidelines for Improving the Dissertation**

The dissertation is characterized by an extensive empirical basis and sound structure; however, several areas for further improvement can be identified:

- The developed model for the sustainable development of SMEs—which encompasses leadership, strategic management, knowledge, culture, motivation, digitalization, and partnerships—could be more effectively integrated with the concepts of entrepreneurship and innovation.
- To achieve greater methodological depth, I recommend including a comparative table of indicators based on sector-specific characteristics; this would highlight the applicability, comparability, and effectiveness of the proposed model.
- Given the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods employed, the dissertation would benefit from a more detailed description of the sample, as well as the statistical assumptions underlying the factor analysis concerning knowledge, culture, motivation, digitalization, partnerships, and their interdependencies.

Conclusion:

The dissertation research of Mr. Andrean Joe, titled "Challenges for Leaders in Human Resource Management in the Era of the Circular Economy," represents a substantial and independent scientific study with a clear practical focus. Taking into account the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its Implementation, and the Ordinance on the Acquisition of the Educational and Scientific Degree of "Doctor" and the Scientific Degree of "Doctor of Sciences" at Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar," I consider that Mr. Andrean Joe's dissertation contains theoretical and practical contributions that fully satisfy the requirements for the acquisition of the scientific degree of "Doctor."

October 28, 2026 **Signature:**

Varna **(Associate Professor DKameliya Vunova– Narleva, Ph.D.)**