

## STATEMENT

on a doctoral dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (PhD)  
Professional Field: 3.7. "Administration and Management"  
Doctoral Program: "Organization and Management Outside the Sphere of Material Production"

**Dissertation Topic:** Challenges Facing Leaders in Human Resource Management in the Era of the Circular Economy

**PhD Candidate:** Andrean Dzhoe

**Academic Supervisor:** Prof. Snezhanka Kostadinova Ovcharova, PhD

**Reviewer:** Assoc. Prof. Maria Dimitrova Velikova, PhD

This statement has been prepared on the basis of Order No. 595 dated September 29, 2026, of the Rector of Varna Free University (VFU) for appointing a Scientific Jury, as well as on the basis of the dissertation, summary (abstract), statement of scientific contributions, publications on the topic, and scientometric indicators submitted by the PhD candidate.

### I. RELEVANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation addresses significant, relevant, and undeniably researchable issues related to Human Resource Management (HRM) and organizational processes in the context of the transition to a circular economy in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Germany. Specialized academic literature still lacks sufficiently in-depth research on the specific challenges and competencies required for effective human resource management under a circular economy model.

In existing academic literature, the circular economy is primarily examined through the prism of technology, material flows, and business models, while the human factor (competencies, motivation, employee organizational culture) remains insufficiently explored. In this context, the dissertation seeks to answer what specific competencies, management mechanisms, models, and leadership strategies are needed to ensure the effective implementation of circular economy principles in human resource management.

### II. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS AND ASSESSMENT OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation is 211 pages long and consists of an introduction, three main chapters, a conclusion, a list of references, and two appendices. The main text contains 26 tables and 35 figures. The reference list includes 102 sources in Bulgarian, English, and German, focusing on contemporary publications from the past 5 to 10 years, including those indexed in reputable databases. Citations are correctly attributed in footnotes on the relevant pages.

The **introduction provides** a well-reasoned justification for the choice of topic in terms of its relevance, significance, and practical applicability. The object and subject of the research are defined correctly. The research problem, the candidate's thesis statement, the main objective of the dissertation, and the tasks set for its completion are formulated accurately. The limitations of the studied subject matter and the scientific methodology used are explicitly stated.

The relevance of the dissertation is thoroughly justified. The transition to a circular economy is becoming not only an environmental necessity but also an economic and managerial imperative linked to the sustainability and long-term competitiveness of SMEs. The significance of the study is reinforced by the fact that SMEs represent the backbone of the European economy, yet they frequently face knowledge deficits, financial barriers, a lack of internal HRM capacity, and difficulties in integrating ESG principles. The author highlights the pivotal role of leadership and strategic HRM in overcoming these barriers, addressing a substantial gap in specialized literature.

Appropriate scientific methods and approaches applicable to the object and subject of the study have been selected. The established research boundaries focus attention on HRM challenges within the circular economy, specifically targeting SMEs in the real estate management, financial advisory services, and craft sectors in Germany. Technological innovations, political aspects, and regulatory frameworks are examined to the extent that they intersect with HRM and the circular

transition, while financial factors are considered a major element of organizational adaptability.

The structure of the dissertation corresponds well to the object and subject of study, the stated objective, tasks, and thesis statement, which emphasizes internal organizational capability, knowledge, ESG culture, and sustainable leadership as key drivers for the circular transition.

In accordance with the adopted structure, **the body** of the dissertation logically presents comments, analyses, and evaluations regarding:

*1) The core principles of the circular economy, leadership challenges in SMEs, the synergy between human and natural capital in business management, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and information disclosure (Chapter One).*

A thorough theoretical and methodological framework is established. The author draws a parallel between linear and circular economies, systemizing the main principles of the circular transition (R-strategies, slowing and closing resource loops, the "Butterfly Diagram"). The synergy between human and natural capital is analyzed, and "green HRM" is examined as a critical intangible asset. Particular attention is devoted to CSR, ESG reporting, the CSRD directive, ESRS and VSME standards, and stakeholder engagement.

Following the theoretical, institutional, and regulatory discussion, the author correctly concludes that "CSR is gradually transforming from voluntary social behavior into a structural management framework for sustainability, ethics, transparency, and accountability. CSR establishes the principle of responsibility for the enterprise's impact on society, employees, the environment, clients, and partners, whereas an ESG orientation translates this responsibility into a system of data, internal/external indicators, and management decisions. The primary challenge for SMEs is not merely implementing isolated sustainable actions, but embedding them into a traceable and measurable management practice."

*2) Human resource management during the transformation toward a circular economy (Chapter Two).*

An assessment is conducted on Germany's National Circular Economy Strategy (NKWS), the role of digitalization, Product-as-a-Service (PaaS) models, RemanLab, and partner networks. Theoretical models and management approaches applicable to HRM during the transition from a linear to a circular economy are analyzed.

The candidate conducted empirical research on leadership challenges in HRM across Germany within the circular transition framework, utilizing a mixed-methods research design. The LimeSurvey platform was used to collect data across 235 SMEs, yielding a final sample of 102 completed surveys across three main sectors: financial/advisory services, real estate management, and crafts. Compliance with strict ethical and legal frameworks under GDPR is commendable.

The author's practical background facilitates a clearer understanding of daily managerial challenges, communication with employees, clients, partners, and suppliers, as well as SME constraints. However, this background is utilized as contextual competency rather than standalone evidence. Conclusions are grounded strictly in the collected empirical data and documentary research.

The author demonstrates that imbalances exist between political/regulatory frameworks and real-world SME management practices, manifesting as knowledge deficits, financial constraints, a lack of partners, and varying degrees of organizational maturity. Furthermore, barriers to circular transformation are interdependent. I concur with the candidate's view that insufficient sustainability knowledge limits an enterprise's ability to allocate financial resources strategically; financial constraints hinder technology adoption, employee training, and value-chain partner projects; and a lack of partners restricts access to external expertise, sustainable suppliers, innovations, and networked solutions. Consequently, overcoming these barriers requires a systemic managerial approach in which leadership and HRM play a central, driving role.

From the analysis of best practices, the author logically concludes that a circular business model in SMEs does not arise by mechanically adding isolated sustainable activities, but by integrating them into the overall organizational system. This system unifies research methodology, sectoral context, circular business models, ESG orientation, competency development, partnerships,

and leadership roles into a single analytical domain. This framework forms the basis for the subsequent chapter, where empirical results are analyzed not just as isolated survey responses, but as evidence of concrete managerial problems, opportunities, and strategic directions for SME development in Germany.

3) *Analysis of empirical study results, strategic guidelines, and recommendations for sustainable human and natural capital management in SMEs during the circular economy transition (Chapter Three).*

Chapter Three encompasses a systematic analysis of the 49 questions from the empirical survey across 102 SMEs, divided into three thematic sections. The results are structured across six analytical domains: circular economy, HRM, leadership, ESG orientation, CSR, and the synergy between human and natural capital. Based on identified barriers, seven management strategies are proposed and synthesized into a *Model for Sustainable Human and Natural Capital Management in SMEs in the Transition to a Circular Economy*.

An integrated SLOT SMEs (*Sustainable Leadership Oriented Transformation in SMEs*) formula is introduced, bringing leadership, strategic HRM, knowledge, culture, motivation, well-being, digitalization, and partnership into a single framework for sustainable leadership-oriented transformation. Its value lies in presenting the circular economy not as a technical set of practices, but as a synchronized management mechanism. Recommendations are outlined for the effective development of knowledge, competencies, and organizational capacity for sustainable management in SMEs.

The **conclusion** follows the logical structure of the text and summarizes the achieved results.

The **attached scientometric report shows that the candidate fulfills the minimum national requirements** under Art. 2b, Para. 2 and 3 of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (DASRBA).

**I have no suspicions of plagiarism regarding the submitted dissertation. No written reports or alerts regarding plagiarism or falsification of scientific data have been received during this procedure under Art. 4, Para. 11 of the DASRBA.**

### III. EVALUATION OF RESULTS AND SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS

The obtained results and contributions directly correspond to the defined research objective and thesis statement. The research objective has been achieved, and the thesis statement has been proven through the step-by-step execution of the research tasks.

The main challenges facing SME leaders in Germany have been identified, the evolving role of HRM has been analyzed, core competencies and development needs have been defined, strategic directions to bridge existing gaps have been established, and an integrated model for the sustainable management of human and natural capital has been developed. To facilitate the practical implementation of the theoretical model in SMEs, actionable recommendations with phased steps have been prepared.

I accept the author's formulation of 2 scientific, 5 scientific-applied, and 1 practical contribution, **which represent the candidate's original work, objectively reflect their achievements, and serve to expand and enrich scientific knowledge and its practical application.** To achieve greater academic rigor, the contributions could be summarized as follows:

#### **Scientific Contributions:**

- 1) Expanded theoretical understanding of HRM as a strategic mechanism in the transition to a circular economy and ESG reporting in SMEs.
- 2) Conceptualized the synergy between human and natural capital through the introduction of green competencies, green leadership, and cultural mindsets.

#### **Scientific-Applied and Practical Contributions:**

- 1) Developed and validated a mixed-methods research framework (LimeSurvey, R, qualitative analysis per Kuckartz), successfully applied across 102 SMEs in Germany.
- 2) Structured a new integrated model for the sustainable management of human and natural capital.
- 3) Proposed practical tools for SME leaders, including an evaluation framework, formula,

and a 3-year roadmap for implementing ESG and circular practices.

#### **IV. DISSERTATION ABSTRACT AND PUBLICATIONS**

The dissertation abstract (autorreferat) accurately reflects the structure and content of the dissertation, highlighting the key aspects, findings, and conclusions of the research.

Five publications related to the dissertation are listed (4 single-authored and 1 co-authored with the academic supervisor), which adequately present essential parts of the research.

#### **V. CRITIQUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

During the finalization of the dissertation, the candidate diligently addressed almost all comments and recommendations, including those provided by me in my capacity as an internal reviewer. For future academic pursuits and professional development, the following areas for improvement are suggested:

1) Minor technical, stylistic, and linguistic inconsistencies remain in certain parts of the text, which should be polished prior to any future publication of the monograph.

2) Section 3.1 of the dissertation spans 99 pages, which is disproportionately long compared to other structural components. Better balance could be achieved by placing raw tabular data in an Appendix, keeping Section 3.1 focused on synthesized analytical text.

3) The empirical study focuses primarily on the managerial perspective (owners and executives). Future research would benefit from directly incorporating operational staff to complete the analytical scope.

4) Although the abstract successfully highlights the primary findings, conclusions, and contributions, its overall length exceeds conventional limits. A higher level of academic synthesis could be achieved by reducing descriptive transitional text in favor of concise thesis points presenting the core findings.

These comments and recommendations do not diminish the value of the work, nor do they affect the quality and quantity of the results and contributions achieved, or my overall positive evaluation.

#### **VI. CONCLUSION**

The details presented above provide sufficient grounds to consider the dissertation complete and in compliance with the requirements of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (DASRBA), its Implementing Regulations, and Regulation No. 12 on the Acquisition of Educational and Scientific Degrees at VFU "Chernorizets Hrabar". It contains scientific-applied results representing an original contribution and demonstrates that the candidate possesses deep theoretical knowledge and skills for independent academic research in the field of human resource management during the circular economy transition.

I confidently recommend to the esteemed members of the Scientific Jury to vote **"IN FAVOR"** of awarding the educational and scientific degree **"Doctor" (PhD)** to **Andrean Dzhoe** for the dissertation titled *"Challenges Facing Leaders in Human Resource Management in the Era of the Circular Economy"*, Professional Field 3.7. Administration and Management, Doctoral Program "Organization and Management Outside the Sphere of Material Production".

**August 23, 2026**  
**Varna, Bulgaria**

**Reviewer:**  
**Assoc. Prof. Maria Velikova, PhD**