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REVIEW OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION OF

AHMED LOTFY MAHMOUD AHMED
ENTITLED

**PERFORMANCE AND FINANCIAL SOUNDNESS OF FRENCH, SPANISH
AND ITALIAN COOPERATIVE BANKS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS,**

FIELD OF SCIENCE: SOCIAL SCIENCES SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINE:
ECONOMICS AND FINANCE

MADE UNDER THE SCIENTIFIC SUPERVISORS:

PROF. DR. HAB. EWA MIKLASZEWSKA INSTITUTE OF FINANCE,
CRACOW UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS

PROF. JOSANCO FLOREANI, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT
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Introduction

This review has been prepared based on the formal letter no. RDC.600.57P.3.2025 of 10 June 2025, signed by Prof. Stanisław Popek, the Director of the Doctoral School of the Cracow University of Economics, with a request to evaluate the above-mentioned doctoral dissertation, based on the Law of 20 July 2018 on Higher Education and Science (Dz. U. 2024, item 1571, with later amendments). The review follows the requirements specified in the Law on Higher Education and Science of July 20, 2018 (particularly regarding Article 187). In this letter I was requested to review the doctoral dissertation of M.A. Ahmed Lotfy Mahmoud Ahmed, entitled *PERFORMANCE AND FINANCIAL SOUNDNESS OF FRENCH, SPANISH AND ITALIAN COOPERATIVE BANKS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS*. The dissertation was conducted under the academic supervision of Prof. Ewa Miklaszewska, from the Cracow University of Economics, and Prof. Josanco Floreani, Associate Professor, Department of Economics and Statistics, University of Udine, Italy. The letter also noted that, at its meeting on June 9, 2025, the Council of the Discipline of Economics and Finance at the Cracow University of Economics appointed me as the reviewer of this dissertation. The purpose of the review is to evaluate whether

the submitted doctoral dissertation meets the requirements necessary to award the degree of doctor. The review should include a detailed and justified assessment of whether the doctoral dissertation constitutes an original solution to a scientific problem, as well as whether it demonstrates the candidate's general theoretical knowledge in the discipline of economics and finance and the ability to conduct independent scientific research.

This review is structured as follows:

- Formal characteristic of the dissertation.
- Assessment of the significance of the research problem and the originality of the solutions presented.
- Evaluation of the scope of knowledge applied and the candidate's ability to conduct independent research.
- Conclusion.

1. Formal Characteristic of the Dissertation

The doctoral dissertation is written in English and comprises 234 pages.

It consists of the following elements:

- Abstract in both Polish and English.
- Table of Content.
- List of Abbreviations.
- Nine chapters, the first being the *Introduction* and the ninth serving as the *Conclusion*.
- In addition, the dissertation includes a List of Figures, a List of Tables and a References section (394).
- The attached list of graphic materials contains 15 figures and 9 tables.

2. Assessment of the Significance of the Research Problem and the Originality of the Solution Presented in the Dissertation

The dissertation submitted for substantive evaluation constitutes a comprehensive analytical study devoted to the examination of highly relevant and timely issue, namely the performance and financial soundness of cooperative banks in selected European countries: France, Spain and Italy, during the global financial crisis of 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic. Cooperative banks play a crucial role in European financial systems, particularly in retail lending and SME financing, yet comparative and longitudinal evidence of their performance across crises remains rare. Their distinctive organizational model, characterized by democratic governance, mutual ownership, and community orientation, distinguishes them from shareholder-driven commercial banks and raises important questions about institutional diversity in banking. By adopting a cross-country and data-driven perspective covering 2008-2023, the study fills an important gap in the literature and offers insight into whether cooperative banks' resilience stems from their governance model, business practices, or regulatory frameworks. The research problem is therefore of considerable academic and practical discussions on financial stability and supervisory policy in Europe. The research problem is also highly relevant in the current policy debate. As financial systems struggle with the legacies of past crises, as

well as new challenges related to climate risks, digital transformation, and economic inequality, there is a growing need to reassess what constitutes a stable, inclusive, and socially responsible banking model. The thesis contributes to this debate by systematically testing whether the observed resilience of cooperative banks is attributable to their governance structure, business model, or regulatory environment, or to a combination of these factors. The choice of France, Spain, and Italy, representing three of the largest cooperative banking markets, is deliberate and well-justified, offering meaningful institutional set within a shared European regulatory framework.

In summary, the dissertation addresses a problem of substantial academic and practical relevance, contributing to the literature on banking diversity, financial stability, and institutional resilience, while also providing useful insights for policymakers and regulators regarding cooperative banks. The problem investigated is therefore not only significant from academic perspective but also highly relevant for the ongoing evolution of the European financial architecture. The idea presented in the doctoral dissertation is obviously original and constitutes a significant asset of the work, as well as added value in terms of assessing the stability of the banking system.

3. Evaluation of the Scope of Knowledge Applied and the Candidate's Ability to Conduct Independent Research

3.1. Assessment of the Correctness and Completeness of Research Objectives, Hypotheses and Question

With the identified research gap in mind, the Doctoral Candidate takes a multifaceted approach to performance and financial soundness of French, Spanish, and Italian cooperative banks: a comparative analysis, combining issues from the fields of politics, economics and management, finance, and law. I consider the use of the phrase performance and financial soundness in the title of the dissertation to be a very good move, given the popularity of this phrase, but not in the context of a comparative analysis of cooperative banks in countries such as France, Spain, and Italy. The title of the dissertation is clearly formulated, emphasizing the problematic value contained in the work. As a starting point for the considerations undertaken in the dissertation, the Doctoral Candidates adopts the **general objective**, which he defines as follows:

GO: To analyze and compare the performance, efficiency, and resilience of cooperative banks in France, Spain, and Italy during the 2008 global financial crisis and the COVID-19 crisis, using panel regression analysis applied to key financial indicators.

The general objective of this thesis is clearly formulated, relevant, and appropriately. It focuses on performance, efficiency and resilience, which are central dimension for assessing the role of cooperative banks in times of crisis. By adopting a comparative, cross-country perspective and applying panel regression methods, the objective provides a strong framework for producing robust and policy relevant findings. The identified objective covers important research issues and has been achieved in the dissertation. The Doctoral Candidate presented credible, logical arguments resulting from the work, justifying and confirming the achievement of the main objective set out in the introduction.

The specified general objective allowed for the identification of seven **specific objectives**, which included:

- *SO1: To assess the financial resilience of cooperative banks in France, Spain, and Italy during the 2008 financial crisis: This includes examining capital adequacy ratios, liquidity levels, and lending continuity, to determine whether cooperative banks were less affected by the systemic financial disruptions than their commercial peers.*
- *SO2: To evaluate the financial efficiency and profitability of cooperative banks during the 2008 crisis: Metrics such as Return on Assets (ROA), Return on Equity (ROE), and cost-to-income ratios are used to determine the extent to which cooperative banks maintained their operational performance in a period of economic downturn.*
- *SO3: To measure the resilience of cooperative banks during the COVID-19 pandemic: Unlike the 2008 crisis, the COVID-19 shock was exogenous and non-financial in origin, yet it had profound implications for global banking. The study assesses whether cooperative banks maintained their commitment to local lending and stability under these conditions.*
- *SO4: To examine the financial efficiency and profitability of cooperative banks during the COVID-19 crisis: Using the same performance metrics as in the earlier crisis, this objective investigates whether the cooperative model remains effective in today's volatile and highly regulated financial environment.*
- *SO5: To analyze the impact of macroeconomic variables and regulatory developments on cooperative bank performance: This includes exploring how GDP growth, inflation, interest rates, and country-specific regulatory changes influenced the observed trends in cooperative bank performance.*
- *SO6: To compare the performance of cooperative banks with that of commercial banks in the same countries and under the same macroeconomic and regulatory conditions: This allows the study to isolate the effect of the business model from external factors and provides a robust comparative evaluation.*
- *SO7: To identify patterns of performance across the two crisis episodes, highlighting whether cooperative banks consistently outperformed or whether their success is context dependent: This final objective addresses the broader theoretical and practical implications of the findings and helps to inform future banking policy, particularly regarding financial inclusion, crisis management, and systemic risk mitigation.*

The specific objectives presented form a logical sequence, which indicates a well-thought-out research structure. Assessing the substantive nature of the specific objectives, I find that they are presented in a comprehensible and, for the most part, precise manner, cover both areas of research: theoretical and empirical, and contain innovative elements. They cover both financial performance (efficiency, profitability), and resilience (capital adequacy, liquidity, lending), while also considering macroeconomic and regulatory factors. The cross-country and long-term approach makes the objectives more complete, helping to separate the effects of the cooperative model from national and crisis-specific influences.

In addition, the following four **research hypotheses** was formulated in the study, which *aim to evaluate the performance and financial resilience of cooperative banking systems in France, Spain, and Italy under the stress of two major global crises — the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic*. The hypotheses are formulated as follows:

- *H1: The cooperative banking sector in the three countries showed resilience during the financial crisis of 2008.*

- *H2: The cooperative banking sectors in the three countries performed well during the financial crisis of 2008.*
- *H3: The cooperative banking sector in the three countries showed financial resilience during the COVID-19 crisis.*
- *H4: The cooperative banking sector in the three countries were well-performed during the COVID-19 crisis.*

The Author of the dissertation adds an explanation that *hypotheses are examined empirically using regression-based techniques, supported by descriptive and comparative analyses. Each hypothesis is tested using financial indicators including return on equity (ROE), return on assets (ROA), non-performing loans (NPLs), Tier 1 capital ratios (CET1), and Z-scores. The outcomes are interpreted across two crisis periods, with country-specific focus on the cooperative banking sectors in France, Spain, and Italy.*

The research hypotheses are generally consistent with the objectives and clearly linked to empirical testing using financial indicators such as ROA, ROE, NPLs, CET1, and Z-scores. However, their formulation could be improved in terms of precision and clarity. For example, “performed well” (H2, H4) is vague and could be replaced with a more specific reference to the financial indicators or comparative benchmarks. Similarly, “showed resilience” (H1, H3) could be operationalized more explicitly to reflect measurable outcomes like stability of capital ratios, continuity of lending, or maintenance of profitability under crisis conditions. Overall, the hypotheses are correct in principle and cover the essential aspects of resilience and performance across two crises.

For the purposes of achieving the main objective of the dissertation, four **research questions** were identified, as follows:

- *To what extent did cooperative banks in France, Spain, and Italy demonstrate financial resilience and stability during the global financial crisis of 2008? This question investigates whether cooperative banks maintained better capital positions, continued lending activity, and avoided the extreme losses experienced by many commercial banks.*
- *How did cooperative banks in these three countries perform in terms of efficiency and profitability during the 2008 crisis? This explores whether the cooperative model translated into better financial performance under stress, using standardized measures such as ROA, ROE, and capital ratios.*
- *What was the performance and stability profile of cooperative banks during the COVID 19 pandemic, and how did it differ from the 2008 crisis context? This seeks to understand how the different nature of the COVID-19 crisis—external, sudden, and government-mediated—affected cooperative banks’ resilience and ability to serve local economies.*
- *Did cooperative banks maintain operational efficiency and profitability during the COVID-19 pandemic? This final question assesses whether the cooperative banking model remains financially viable in the face of modern challenges and evolving regulatory expectations.*

As an explanation related to the search for answers to these questions, the Author adds that *the thesis aims to provide robust evidence on the structural and contextual factors that shape cooperative bank performance during crises. It also contributes to the broader literature on banking diversity and financial system stability, arguing for the continued relevance of cooperative models in an era marked by uncertainty, regulation, and digital transformation.* The research questions are clear, relevant, and

well-connected to the gaps the Author found in the literature on cooperative banking. They are achievable by combining theoretical concepts such as resilience, stability, efficiency, and profitability with measurable financial indicators, and they distinguish the 2008 financial crisis from the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the questions are original, methodologically rigorous, and can provide significant empirical evidence relevant to both science and practice. In conclusion, the formulation of the general objective, specific objectives, hypotheses, and research questions can be regarded as accurate, well related, and forming a coherent and substantive whole. The hypotheses tested are directly connected to the Doctoral Candidate's research results, while the clearly define objectives and research questions help to organize the structure and stages of dissertation.

3.2. Evaluation of Research Methods Used in the Dissertation

The Doctoral Candidate applied various research methods in his dissertation, both in the theoretical and empirical parts, characteristic of economic and legal sciences. In particular, he used methods such as critical studies of economic literature and analysis of legal regulations. Thanks to his analysis of extensive literature on the subject, he conceptualized concepts, determined the subjective and objective scope of his own research, and described in detail historical development of the European cooperative banking and the southern European cooperative banking model, and reforms in this sector. The next methods are case-studies, connected with three countries: France, Spain and Italy. In addition, the Author presented methods used to determine bank financial performance of cooperative banks, in the context of efficiency and stability includes parametric and non-parametric methods and the Z-score index. The research is grounded in a robust empirical framework, combining descriptive statistics with panel regression analysis. The data covers detailed financial and macroeconomic indicators for cooperative banks in France, Spain, and Italy between 2008-2023. It includes financial indicators (ROAA, ROAE), capital ratios (CET1, TCR, TETA) and macroeconomic variables (GDP growth, inflation, interest rates etc.), ensuring a full picture of cooperative banks performance and stability. The descriptive statistics provide a clear overview of the variables' distributions, ensuring transparency and establishing a solid basis for further econometric analysis. This made it possible to analyze changes across banks and over time, providing a clear framework to capture the dynamic links between internal bank features, economic conditions, and performance.

A key strength of the methodology is its ability to track performance during two major crises, the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, offering valuable insights into cooperative banks resilience. However, the study also has some limitations. It focuses only on three countries (France, Spain and Italy), which limits generalization of the results. The use of national data obscures differences between banks. Despite these limits, when assessing the research methods used in the reviewed work, it should be noted that the methodology is rigorous, coherent, their selection is adequate for the objectives and hypotheses and research questions set and corresponds to the theoretical and empirical nature of the work. The combination of descriptive statistics, panel modeling, and cross-country comparison makes this dissertation a solid and meaningful contribution to studies on banking performance and resilience.

In summary, the assumptions adopted, the methods used, and the conclusions formulated confirm the Doctoral Candidate's ability to conduct independent scientific work. The research process,

its stages, conclusions, and their interpretation demonstrate the Doctoral Candidate good preparation for independently designing, implementing, and analyzing the results, and demonstrate the ability to conduct independent scientific work.

3.3. Assessment of Information Sources, and Work Structure

I evaluates the selection and use of information sources, especially subject literature, very highly. The doctoral dissertation draws on numerous sources (394 references), both current and relevant to the topic, considered to be key publications describing the issue of threats to the stability of the financial system in the context of the banking sector's response to crisis situations, especially with regards to cooperative banks. The references demonstrate interdisciplinary awareness, effectively integrate classic and contemporary sources across bank efficiency, financial stability, risk management, and sustainability.

When it comes to the data use in the dissertation they have been carefully compiled from official annual reports and statistical yearbooks published by the European Association of Cooperative Banks (EACB) and covers the period 2008–2023. These yearbooks contain standardized, comparable financial indicators for cooperative banks at the national level, making them a reliable and consistent source of information for long-term and cross-country analyses. Additional figures were obtained from national federations of cooperative banks and from central bank reports. The choice of these specific sources ensures high data quality. However, the data are aggregated at the national level, which limits the possibility of assessing performance at the micro level. Despite these limitations, the dataset remains relevant and well-suited to research purposes, providing a solid empirical basis for analyzing the performance and resilience of cooperative banks during crises. The erudite layer of the reviewed work is correct. The terminology and conceptual apparatus have been used correctly, and the text has been illustrated with graphic objects, such as figures and tables. However, there is a lack of diagrams explaining and reflecting the stages of research or the processes related to the verification of individual hypotheses in the relevant places in the dissertation.

The structure of the dissertation consists of nine chapters, is well-organized, coherent, and clearly aligned with research objectives, hypotheses and research questions as evidenced by the content of individual chapters, which demonstrate a connection to the main topic. The chapters guide logically from the introduction and theoretical background through the empirical analysis to conclusions. The conclusions obtained and presented are based on reliable evidence, resulting from references to the literature on the subject and own research concerning three countries: France, Spain, and Italy. The structure of the thesis complies with the requirements for doctoral theses, and its empirical part, in the form of investigation, testing resilience, both performance and stability of cooperative banks, during each crisis, which confirms that cooperative banks maintained solid capital positions, operational efficiency, and community engagement during both crises, constitutes a significant scientific and practical contribution.

1. The introductory chapter

(1) *Introduction*

Effectively presents the motivations, research problem, objectives, hypotheses, and methodological overview, providing a strong foundation for the study. The inclusion of scope and theoretical significance ensures an understanding of the study's purpose and contribution to the science.

2. Chapter 2 to 5

- (2) *Historical Development of the European Cooperative Banking,*
- (3) *Characteristics of the Southern European Cooperative Banking Model,*
- (4) *Post-2008 Crisis Reforms and the Cooperative Banking Sector,*
- (5) *Post-2008 Legal and Organizational Reforms in the Southern Cooperative Sectors.*

Provide a strong contextual and institutional background. Chapter 2 presents the historical and structural development of cooperative banking in Europe. Explains how major crises influenced its evolution. Chapter 3 focuses on the Southern European model, with national case studies of France, Italy, and Spain. Highlighting similarities and differences. Chapter 4 and 5 analyze post-2008 reforms and legal transformations, explaining how these changes shape cooperative banks evolution. These chapters establish the necessary background for the empirical investigation.

3. Chapters 6 to 8

- (6) *Measuring Bank Performance,*
- (7) *Comparison of Cooperative Banks' Stability in France, Spain, and Italy,*
- (8) *Cooperative Bank Performance and Stability – Empirical Investigation.*

Form the analytical and empirical core of the thesis. Chapter 6 introduces main methodological tools and performance, and stability measures- indicators used to assess efficiency and resilience. Chapter 7 provide a comparative overview, of cooperative banks stability during the 2008 and COVID-19 crises, across countries. Chapter 8 presents the econometric analysis, main empirical results from the panel regression, testing hypotheses and interpreting results across countries. This logical sequence ensures a smooth transition from conceptual discussion to statistical modeling.

4. The Final Chapter (9)

Conclusions

Summarizes the main findings, discusses theoretical and policy implications, and proposes direction for future research. This chapter effectively connects the empirical results with discussion on financial stability and cooperative banking, also outlines directions for future research.

In general, the structure of the dissertation is balanced and logically organized. It combines historical, regulatory, and empirical perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of cooperative banking in Europe. A small suggestion concerns improving the smoothness the links between the part that present the context (theoretical, economic, or regulatory background) and the part that present empirical research (data and findings). Therefore, it would be useful to separate them more clearly, for example by placing them in distinct subsections or paragraphs. Nevertheless, the structure is methodical, coherent, and appropriate for a doctoral dissertation in European finance. Despite these minor suggestions, the organization of the doctoral thesis is methodologically sound and academically relevant, demonstrating a well-developed progression from theory to evidence and interpretation.

3.4. Identification of Disadvantages Dissertation

The weaknesses of the reviewed dissertation are:

1. Limited geographical scope, the study focuses only on three countries: France, Spain, Italy, excluding other important cooperative banking systems such as Germany, the Netherlands and Austria.
2. Data limitations, the dissertation relies mainly on national level data from European Association of Cooperative Banks, with limited detail.
3. Methodological constraints, dynamic or structural models (e.g. VAR) are not applied, which could better explain insights into how crises evolve and affect cooperative banks.
4. Modern challenges not fully examined (issues like: digitalization, fintech, and cybersecurity are mentioned only briefly, without empirical testing).
5. Missing sustainability measures, environmental and sustainability indicators are not included in the models.

3.5. Identification Advantages of Dissertation

The main advantages of the reviewed doctoral dissertation include:

1. Important and current topic, resilience of cooperative banks to the consequences of financial crises, examined in the context of financial stability, banking diversity, and the role of cooperative institutions in the Europe and financial system.
2. Comprehensive and well-structured research, with strong theoretical and historical foundation, connecting relevant literature, legal regulations and empirical findings.
3. Interdisciplinary approach, combining law, economics, finance, and management, to provide a holistic analysis of cooperative banks resilience to crises across European countries.
4. Use of reliable and consistent data sources from European Association of Cooperative Banks EACB and from national banking associations and central banks.
5. Comparative analysis, focusing on cooperative banks for three European countries: France, Spain, and Italy, providing new empirical evidence on long-term performance trends.
6. Analyzing of major crisis, both the 2008 global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, showing the adaptability and resilience of cooperative banks under different economic conditions.
7. Awareness and highlight limitations presented in the applied methodology.
8. Recommendations for future regulation and governance to strengthen the stability of cooperative banks.

In conclusion, based on the consideration above, I evaluate both the scope of knowledge demonstrated and the ability to conduct independent research by M.A. Ahmed Lotfy Mahmoud Ahmed as excellent.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the doctoral dissertation submitted for review provides grounds for stating that the work of M.A. Ahmed Lotfy Mahmoud Ahmed meets the requirements for doctoral dissertations, because: it presents an original solution to a scientific problem, demonstrates the Doctoral Candidate's general theoretical knowledge in the scientific discipline of economics and finance, in the field of social sciences, it confirms the ability to independently conduct empirical research, achieve the objectives set out in the introduction, and verify the research hypotheses, based on the appropriate selection of literature on the subject and other sources of information, as well as the application of appropriately selected methods. The dissertation has high application and systematizing value.

Therefore, I conclude that the doctoral dissertation prepared by Doctoral Candidate Ahmed Lotfy Mahmoud Ahmed, entitled *Performance and financial soundness of French, Spanish and Italian cooperative banks: a comparative analysis*, written under the scientific supervision of:

- prof. dr hab. Ewa Miklaszewska, Institute of Finance, Cracow University of Economics, and
- prof. Josanco Floreani, Department of Economics and Statistics, University of Udine, Italy.
meets the requirements specified in the Law on Higher Education and Science of July 20, 2018 (Dz. U. 2024, item 1571, with later amendments,), particularly regarding Article 187 and may **be submitted for public defense and further procedures** related to awarding M.A. Ahmed Lotfy Mahmoud Ahmed with a doctoral degree in the scientific discipline: Economics and Finance, field of science: Social Sciences.

Accordingly, I recommend to the Council of the Discipline of Economics and Finance of the Cracow University of Economics that **M.A. Ahmed Lotfy Mahmoud Ahmed, be admitted to the next stage of the proceedings for the award of the doctoral degree.**


Iwona Dorota Czechowska

Additionally, in the context of research analysis in the doctoral dissertation I formulated two questions:

1. Your dissertation compares cooperative banking across France, Spain, and Italy. How do differences in these countries influence the resilience of cooperative banks?
2. Based on your findings, what specific recommendations would you make for policymakers, regulators, or cooperative banks institutions to enhance financial stability and crisis resilience?