

## PROBLEMATIC ASPECTS OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN BULGARIA

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### Abstract

*Bulgaria implements a socio-economic policy aimed at the development of an efficient and competitive economy and equitable integration in the European structures. The regional development policy, which is assuming importance, is part of this policy. The problems in the development of urban territories are particularly topical in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe due to the ongoing processes of transformation. The settlement structure forms the basis of the existence and interaction of society and thus offers geo-demographic characteristics of the territory. The problems of the urbanized systems are brought to the fore with increasing problems of the improvement and functioning of the individual settlements. These problems raise the need to systematize geographical theory through the prism of regional development and the development of intelligent urban management systems.*

**Key words:** accession; regional; development; integration; processes; urban; territory

**JEL:** R1, R5, P48, Q24

### Introduction

The object of the study is the regional development planning in Bulgaria. Smaller administrative units of different ranks have been formed in this territory, studying their structure and behavior is a prerequisite to understanding the core of their vital activity designed mainly through their development and regional development. In our country these areas are the object of the author's research and also the ensuing problems with their administrative spatial planning and overall implementation of policies for regional development. The settlement structure forms the basis of the existence and interaction of society and thus offers geo-demographic characteristics of the territory. Thus the combination of population and urban structure highlights approaches and methods for use in the most efficient way of territorial resources, including the potential of poles/development centers. Bulgaria implements a socio-economic policy aimed at the development of an efficient and competitive economy and equitable integration in the European structures (Bachtler, Downes, 2000). The regional development

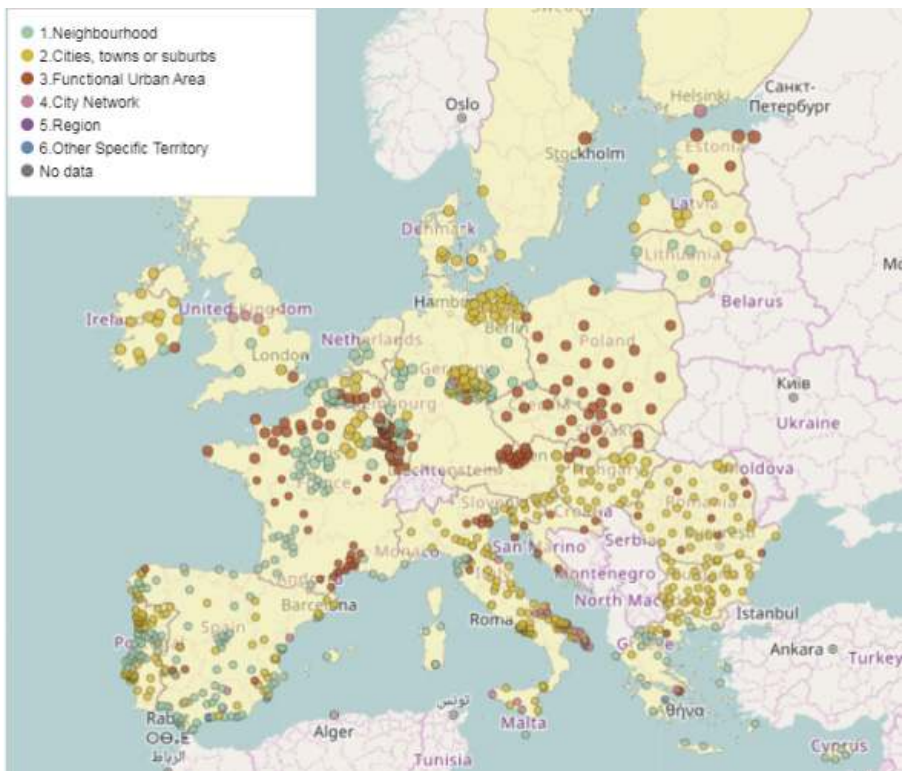
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policy, which is gaining importance, is part of this policy. After the adoption of the Regional Development Act, the Bulgarian institutions gradually gain experience and capacity in the implementation of the regional policy. Later this gives us grounds later to assume that planning is an element of the polycentric development that takes into account the various ongoing grades as well as in horizontal and in vertical directions and economic processes stimulating competition in the development of society and cooperation between the major urban centers of each level, too. The author's purpose was to highlight the processes of regionalization that could promote regional development policies and moreover to show deficits of the structure and management of regional communities in Bulgaria. However, regional development is never a smooth process, and researchers have been intrigued by the restructuring of the development models. Regional development should be approached functionally. This means bringing to the fore the established structure of regional development in spatial and territorial terms. Thus, the model of regional development can be considered from the point of view of the polycentric development, the structuring of the settlements and the branch structure of the regional business measurement with the respective indicators and considered in the respective rank. On the other hand, the public sector is essential for managing the problems of the structure and vitality of the national territory from the point of view of the formation of the institutional and regulatory framework. This brings out the need to consider regional development as a system influenced by a number of factors and conditions shaping the regional economy at the macro, meso and local levels.

From what has been said so far, we can conclude that regional development is influenced by factors such as geographical location, natural resource potential and others on the one hand, and on the other hand the demographic situation or the state of society. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the State of nature and society (Anand, Liu, 2019). Their uniqueness makes them a well assembled "army" of which human vision can bring powerful new industries and seek an optimal disposition of population. For example, the leading analysts tried to explain why a natural environment has different goods, different ethno-confessional and other structure of the population. At the same time other scientists attempted to describe the world with the classical paradigm and man was placed in its center. The humanist's regional science began to "read" in a new way the regional development. Here comes the notion of "the pleasure of the way of life", including the choice of location for the realization of human life. In practice, the formation of local spaces and the development of territorial systems is based on the structure and functional features of the settlements in them. Accordingly, the functioning and structure of the settlements is determined by their socio-economic role, and hence by the need for development of the territory through programming and planning. From the point of view of public attitudes, the inhabitants are crucial for the place of residence of the

person and form his role in society and his possibility for activity. Depending on the pace of development, the settlements expose the regional differences, the regional economic structure and the level of public works. There are many socio-economic processes taking place at a regional level, which have their own laws, specificities and peculiarities. Their elucidation is becoming increasingly necessary due to the evolving processes of urbanization and the increased urban lifestyle. The problems of the urbanized systems are brought to the fore with the increasing problems of the improvement and functioning of the individual settlements. These problems raise the need to systematize geographical theory through the prism of regional development and the development of intelligent urban management systems. In the 21st century, geo-economic problems shifted from a spatial to a territorial plan with a focus on urbanized systems and the management of socio-economic processes swirling along infrastructure corridors. The problems in the development of urban territories are particularly topical in the Central and Eastern European countries due to the ongoing processes of transformation (Charles, Damianova , Maroulis, 2008).



Sources: European Policies Research Centre Delft (EPRC Delft)  
<https://www.eprc-strath.eu>

**Figure 1:** Levels of urban development in the different territories of the European Union

The focus of regional development in the European space is the cities, because there are the main regional imbalances. Traffic congestion, air pollution, climate change, the provision of clean water and energy, problems with jobs, housing and social segregation are concentrated in urban areas. Cities can also develop innovative solutions to these and other challenges. Doing so effectively means that cities must expand their cooperation, seek new solutions and develop a solid knowledge base for policy development for regional development and effective local governance. On the other hand, it is necessary to work towards overcoming the gap in the development between urban and rural areas, both at European level and in Bulgaria. Work is needed to improve accessibility between central and peripheral regions, in particular through targeted regional policies and concrete projects to improve the living standards of the population in peripheral and sparsely populated rural areas.

In summary, we can conclude that the object of regional policy in Bulgaria is the whole territory. An important point in the policy for regional development is the use of the administrative approach. This also determines the institutional approach to regional development through the impact on the administrative-territorial units.



Source: NSI (Bulgaria)

**Figure 2:** Municipalities in Bulgaria

Thus we can assume that the territorial organization is a complex, purposeful activity of dividing the territory of the country into territorial communities and creating in them institutions and administrative bodies for conducting the policy of the state and local authorities in accordance with their hierarchical subordination and powers according to laws.

### **The need for regionalization and establishing regions of Bulgaria**

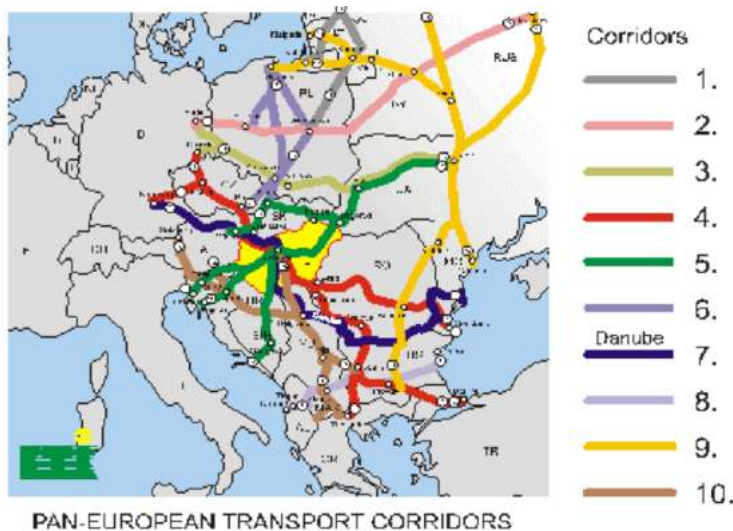
Bulgaria's membership in the EU in 2007 changed our vision for spatial and territorial development. At the national level, the concept of polycentric development of the national territory has developed. Conditions have been created for the development of part of the urban areas, and the rural areas have become part of the Rural Development Program. Thus, the dichotomy of regional development emerged at the very beginning of the membership in the European Union. This created conditions especially after 2009 for deepening regional differences and imbalances between the regions in Bulgaria. It can be assumed that the available EU funds in Bulgaria have created expectations for reducing existing regional disparities and ensuring a level of overall economic and social development, along with the construction of new infrastructure to improve territorial connectivity (Patarchanov, 2019). Funds were also directed to improve the administrative capacity of public administration. However, as an approach, the business-public sector link was lost because the overall model of regional development began to depend on planning and programming at the national level in terms of supporting regional development. This further intensified the contrast in the development of settlements in Bulgaria. In practice, the city of Sofia is becoming an engine of development, with a slower pace they have improved their regional economy and the cities of Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, Varna, Burgas and Haskovo. In general, the initially good results in the absorption of funds under the programs by large and medium-sized cities in the period up to 2013 encouraged the focus of programming to move to them. Thus, the regional development program in the period 2014-2020 focuses on urbanized systems that can generate growth. To a large extent, this approach also corresponds to the common vision for the spatial development of the European Union. The development of a balanced and functional polycentric system of cities is a not only a prerequisite, but also the objective of sustainable spatial development (defined at EU level in numerous planning documents such as the European perspective spatial development (ESDP), the Territorial Agenda of the European Union and Leipzig Charter) from a theoretical and applied viewpoint. They are a considerable part of territorial systems also within the field of regional science. The aim of any regional policy (regional economic development strategy) is to obtain the balanced regional development in which, on the one hand, regional economic differences may play

a positive role (as far as the differences are always a stimulus for development), and on the other hand, they shouldn't give rise to acute socio-economic problems in regional terms (León, Miedzinski, Reid 2010).

Returning to the spatial development plan of the country - the settlements, their social and economic infrastructure, density and population, are not evenly spaced. The three main factors that have influenced the development of Bulgaria in various historical stages, were the natural, historical and economic ones. In the nineteenth century, the adopted territorial approach filled the space, trying to “sort” the world requirements of nature in the home and reminiscent of Hellenistic-Roman concepts, where the south means heat and the north means cold. The search for identification of the way of life with social development is not decisive, but it does set the need for modernization of development. The supporting structure is a change, because the country gained its independence relatively late and is looking for an opportunity to overcome its lag in terms of space and territory. The agricultural way of life was imposed, but gradually the state was modernized and developed. Modernization in Bulgaria is slower, mainly due to relatively low industrialization. At the same time, the emerging cities imposed the tradition of concentration. The model of urbanization is imposed as a factor for active human activity, which embodies the local and regional market. On the other hand, the city is called to be the engine of cultural development and industrialization. The creation of a centrifugal model of settlement development became a reality through the development of railway transport and the industrialization of the country in the twentieth century. This model also leads to an increase in the share of urban areas and the emerging more complex problems in the functioning of modern cities in Bulgaria and their socio-economic development. The intensified processes of industrial development in the 60s and 70s of the XX century created conditions for the formation in the 80s of the urban-territorial structure of Bulgaria, the completion of which in its entirety continues in the XXI century.

From a regional point of view in the XXI century we can assume that in Bulgaria there are some axes of development, showing the availability of the necessary transport and communication infrastructure. These are Sofia-Varna, Sofia-Plovdiv-Stara Zagora-Burgas, as well as those who are in a depressed state such as Sofia-Karlovo-Kazanlak-Sliven-Aytos-Burgas. In practice, these axes of development were formed due to previously established economic relations with the former Soviet Union. The new economic reality and the development of relations with the EU member states suggest the formation of new development axes in the direction of Western Europe and new major trading partners of Bulgaria. Of course, the new geo-economic realities lead to the conclusion that for Bulgaria more important is the “North-South” axis part of which can emerge due to the economic interactions between Sofia and Thessaloniki (with further direction to Athens), than the “East-

West” ones like Sofia-Nish-Belgrade with Budapest in the north and Zagreb in the west part. Continuation of the latter is the direction Sofia-Istanbul toward the Middle East. The question is which of these axes has a greater significance. The new economic axis with a particularly positive outlook and potential growth can be developed after the construction of the third bridge over the Danube River at Silistra, which will have an important multilateral positive effect. Another opportunity to improve connectivity in Bulgaria is to build a highway in the direction of Silistra-Shumen-Yambol-Lesovo-Istanbul. This direction will create an opportunity to increase north-south traffic and an alternative to Corridor №9. In Northeastern Bulgaria the infrastructure is in a very bad condition, so it is necessary to build highways in the direction Kardam-Dobrich-Dulovo-Ispereh-Kubrat-Ruse, and the railway line Ruse-Varna should be renovated and its doubling tackled. This is how the region will increase its centrifugal role, and more opportunities will be created for the development of regional business and attracting investment. Necessary economic prerequisites for the rapid development of these new axes are present, but their implementation will depend not only on the economic cooperation in Southeastern Europe, but also on the political one. These new economic axes will involve the improvement and expansion of the infrastructure of trans-European transport corridors. Actually 5 out of 10 of those corridors pass through Bulgaria. Further development of regional infrastructure and connectivity at the local level in Bulgaria is the key to socio-economic development and reduction of migration processes.



*Source:* European Commission – Directorate General for Mobility and Transport

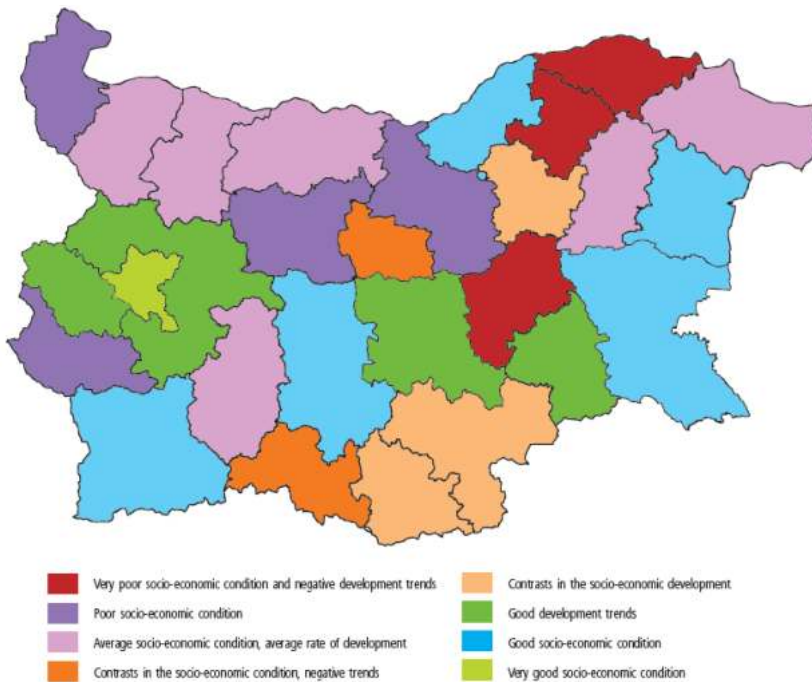
**Figure 3:** The Pan-European or Helsinki Corridors approved by the Third Pan- European Transport Conference in 1997

This means that the focus of regional development should be on the implementation of large infrastructure projects of local importance. This determines the need to create an intermediate level of self-government in Bulgaria. Taking steps towards the establishment of an intermediate regional level of self-government can be done through legislative changes and the will of the state. Only with the strengthening of the processes of regionalization will conditions be created for the removal of the strengths and effective management of the regions in Bulgaria. From an economic point of view, the present and future development of regional communities goes through the process of zoning the territory and creating opportunities for economic development through respective cores, with axes and poles of regional development. In this respect, the role of socio economic zoning is to identify differences in the territories and to propose ways of solving these problems – and rationally exploit the potential of these areas with the aim of improving people’s lives. In this respect, we can once again bring to the fore localization theory, where “place” is important. In practice, the localization choice in modern conditions is based on a number of factors that are often not influenced by the natural resource potential of the territory. They include more and more macroeconomic indicators, geodemographic factors and infrastructural security of the respective territory (Pataarchanov, 2005). This brings to the fore the factor analysis and the conjectural processes in the separate territory. There is a need for an assessment of ideas for space choice. Another important problem is border areas, where mutual influences of two surrounding territories are observed. It is linear or an area in which the transition is not abrupt. And in both cases is an important contrast between foreclosed natural or social phenomena. As the contrast is greater, the greater is the dividing function of the boundary, and vice versa. Border classic is the antithesis of the center, but with minor differences between separation phenomena it could play the role of center. The creation of traditional EU regional economic centers of the countries in Western Europe are situated far from the borders between the countries. In the conditions of spatial development and integration processes the location of the border territory changes. Opening and promoting the development of border areas are an essential element of the regional development of European countries. Unfortunately, socio-economic development in these regions is still relatively slow. The future is for these territories to attract investment and population, creating an opportunity for the formation of a regional economy that connects two separate countries. In these areas, the trend should be related to the promotion of the territorial division of labor. It must be closely related to the spatial differentiation of natural and socio-economic conditions, the territorial concentration of production and population. On the other hand, the spatial specialization and economic structure of the regions must bring out their strengths. This means in the border areas



to achieve the development and location of sustainable production and social infrastructure. This will create conditions for enhanced socio-economic processes around the border areas, most often related to the construction of specialized economic zones, but also an opportunity to solve problems related to population migration and ensure ecological balance in these border areas. Thus, from a geo-economic point of view, the emergence of emerging spatial patterns requires bringing forward an interdisciplinary approach with a focus on the evaluation of intensive urbanization processes in different parts of the territory. Thus, in the new conditions, it is necessary for the regional sciences to seek points of contact in engineering and other sciences in order to optimally explore the territory. The regional development policy should focus on them and propose a set of integrated measures designed to contribute to the achievement of the long-term development goals of the country by incorporating also the territorial factors of growth. Instead, we must identify possible short- and medium-term regional development pathways relative to this broader structure. This consists in specifically determining whether prosperous regions are sustainably prosperous, and whether less-prosperous regions have opportunities to converge upwards. In practice, for the designation of the individual territories and the criteria used in the formation of criteria can be derived as geographical (distance between the administrative centers and settlements, transport accessibility). Second group of demographic criteria (population number and density). Third economic criteria (availability of potential - economic, financial and property, sufficient to provide the necessary administrative and other services for the population, as well as for ensuring the normal functioning of the objects of the social infrastructure on the respective territory). Next is the infrastructural criteria, which is related to the presence, degree of construction and functional condition of transport, economic and social infrastructure. There is a serious difference in social and economic development between the center and the periphery both in the country and at the regional and local level. We can give an example with the Northwest region. It is the least populated. The region is affected by outflows of migration, is in industrial decline, investment in it is not enough to promote economic development. In recent years, the region has been identified as a priority for public administration, but the slow pace of development still does not help to solve the problems of unemployment and emerging serious social problems. Other regions also have their socio-economic difficulties. Infrastructure security is poor in the North Central region, where an increase in migration flows has also been observed in recent years. The Northeast Planning Region also has a significant deficit in terms of infrastructure and investment in him. In southern Bulgaria, the south-eastern and south-central planning regions are experiencing some economic recovery, but it seems insufficient and needs state support, especially in rural and

mountainous areas in southern Bulgaria. The southwestern region is the most densely populated region due to the better opportunities for life and work offered by the capital. In practice, however, we also have growing regional disparities in the South-West region. This is especially reflected in the districts of Pernik, Kyustendil and Blagoevgrad. The condition of the smaller municipalities in the region is quite difficult and in practice we have an emerging regional imbalance in the development of the planning region. In conclusion, it can be concluded that there are serious imbalances in the country, which means that the state must take a series of measures to overcome regional disparities. In practice, the established model of regional development does not lead to the mitigation of differences.



Sources: Institute for Market Economics and NSI (Bulgaria)

**Figure 4:** Regional profiles of the regional development of the districts in Bulgaria

### The need for territorial and spatial development measures for settlements

Territorial development is a multifaceted complex activity aimed at establishing rules and dependencies in organizing environmental protection. Its evolution is part of the biological and social development of every individual. We can assume

that the administrative territorial structures at the respective levels according to the legal provisions are engines and implementers of regional development. The general regional dynamics of Bulgaria in the last 5 years has shown that deficits in terms of regional development of the administrative units have been identified. The emerging dichotomy between the public sector and regional business has led to an increase in regional disparities, and hence the correct setting of priorities for local development. For example, regional business focused on increasing the share of production activities, and expectations from the public sector to reduce administrative procedures and burdens did not materialize. This created a favorable environment for unregulated relations between business and the public sector, which resulted in the erosion of statehood at all levels of government. To a large extent, economic uncertainty and political instability have a negative impact on employment and production. The emerging model of functioning of the regional economy has the corresponding weaknesses and leads to the loss of labor and a corresponding reduction of the potential of the regions. Unfortunately, the internal and external migration of the labor force cannot compensate for the technologicalization of production activities. At the same time, innovation is difficult to implement at the regional level due to the weak competitiveness of regional business and its ability to apply innovation in production. In recent years, the larger regions have been dominated by the services sector, but they cannot compensate for the need for industrial production. This also increases the cost of living in urban areas. Even within Sofia, industrial production is encouraged, although in large settlements services create more added value in general. In this regard, at the regional level in Bulgaria a balance between the different sectors is needed in order to promote the regional economy based on sustainable regional development. It is necessary to strengthen the role of production activities in agricultural areas, with the exception of the Northwest region in the districts of Vidin and Montana, the share of agriculture is decreasing in other areas is declining. In practice, however, the production from the agricultural sector is a reason to look for opportunities for processing and creation of new productions. In this respect, Bulgaria has significant reserves because the structure of the country's economy can be improved. It is dominated by services, which form 67% of it, industry - 28%, and agriculture is only 5% and this distribution. A condition can be created for agriculture to increase to 7-8%, which will be beneficial for the use of the natural resource potential of the country.

Thus, the search for solutions for the derivation of new priorities in the regional economy in terms of the sectoral structure of the development of the regional economy must rest and the natural resource potential of the territory. In a country like Bulgaria, the relief is also important, and hence the setting of priorities in individual regions and settlements. The development of the individual branches

must be in accordance with the respective natural-geographical peculiarities of the territory. The identification of problems with territorial division in the modern state is linked to the process of zoning or territorial division. Territorial division is often associated with the optimal functioning of the socio-economic system, which is consistent with the relevant territorial features and opportunities for development of regions and settlements. In a country like Bulgaria, the promotion of regional development through financial incentives is also important, and hence the priorities in individual regions and settlements will be derived. The development of the individual sub-sectors must also take into account the available demographic potential, the possibility for labor mobility of the population and a high level of public works in the settlements. Thus, regional development has a functional role for the functioning of the Socio-economic territorial system at the regional level. The implementation of policies for regional development has an impact on the regional economy. Conditions are also created for better interaction between the public sector and regional business at the local level. Thus, it is necessary to analyze the state of the economic system at the regional level. It consists of people, economically active persons and institutions, including their attitude towards productive resources and natural resources, for example through the ownership and management of the territory. The monitoring of the development of a settlement network is a recognized necessity both for its past development, for identification of past processes and problems, as well as for its future development and creation of forecasts using socio-economic development. Promoting development processes necessarily goes through regional development management. The settlement network is the created structure of settlements connected with functional, spatial and virtual connections of different intensity between settlements. The study of settlements and their links has always been a key point in all survey studies. The stabilization and improvement of the functional hierarchical system of settlements as polycentric and its relatively uniform location throughout the country with a view to acquiring a sustainable and open character is an open problem to overcome. Thus focusing on regional development focuses on settlements.

The presentation of the problem central - peripheral territories is one of the main ones in regional policy. The study of these regional structures through the municipal territorial unit is another important point in regionalism. The municipality is seen as a system that must be in a balanced and sustainable state in order to be able to overcome the imbalances of socio-economic development and eliminate deficits in the management of the territory. By its nature, regional policy is defined as a complex policy which, through the totality of economic, legislative, administrative actions of state and local governments, aims at accelerating regional economic growth and overcoming regional disparities development.

In addition, the integration of Bulgaria into the common European space imposes the need to apply in the country the achievements of the countries of the European Union. This also determines the framework for the use of mechanisms to support the development of settlements through European Union programs and funds. The integrated regional policies are identified as an appropriate mechanism for the development of urban areas, which is why they are supported by a number of Community initiatives: URBAN (1994–2006), URBACT (2007–2013), Leipzig Charter sustainable European cities (2007) and more. For about 15 years, the URBACT programme has been the European Territorial Cooperation programme aiming to foster sustainable integrated urban development in cities across Europe. The philosophy of the program embraces the idea that cities are places where active human activity takes place. Within the cities, functional processes are taking place that are important both for the current development and for the development of the European economies, as well as solving problems of ecological and social nature. This makes strengthening urban policies in the EU one of the main policy objectives after 2013.

Along with the modeling of urban development, the regional approach to land management is important. Most often, these problems are related to the influence of factors and conditions that are given and are related to the concentration of the settlement or the geographical location of the region.

#### Territorial administrative units – 264 municipality



**Figure 5**

There are groups of conditions that affect territorial planning. First of all, these are natural and geographical factors. The most important is relief. According

to the experts in Bulgaria there is an optimal distribution of the territory. The low, hilly and mountainous terrain are almost evenly distributed. The average altitude of 470 m is also optimal. Mineral resources, water resources, historical factors and the level of development of science and technology are important for the development of the territory. The territorial arrangement is subject to certain principles. These are the basic principles that are relevant for all aspects of territorial organization: the principle of democracy, of complexity, of the contradiction between state, municipal and personal interests, of the combination of sectoral and territorial interests, of balance. Ensuring the resilience of the settlement network and building a quality settlement environment, guaranteeing favorable socio-economic and environmental development, is a priority task for the integrated regional development policies and territorial structure and is the object of the model of the territorial-urban structure of the country and planning regions. More generally, smart specialisation involves a process of developing a vision, identifying a competitive advantage, setting strategic priorities and making use of smart policies to maximise the knowledge-based development potential of any region, strong or weak, high-tech or low-tech. Another solution for regional development of urbanization systems is smart specialization. This is a strategic approach to economic development through targeted support to research and Innovation. The application of innovations in the management of regional development will create conditions for the modernization of the settlements. In addition, new standards will be created for the development of intelligent management systems for the territory and the settlements, respectively.



*Source:* NSI (Bulgaria)

**Figure 6:** Division of municipalities by economic, spatial and territorial development

The creation of a network of intelligent specialization in Bulgaria is a step that can promote regional integration and solve a number of problems of regional connectivity. The development of the territory will create conditions for the implementation of a successful integrated territorial policy, which will improve the level of public works in all territories in Bulgaria (Boyadzhiev et al., 2018). In addition, innovation will allow the creation of new professions and a number of activities in the field of regional development, which will outline new horizons, both in urban areas and in rural areas. The creation of intelligent infrastructure is the way of renewal and development of the Bulgarian regions, as well as their rapid integration into a common national market.

### **Approaches to regional spatial planning of the Republic of Bulgaria**

Spatial planning indicates the ways used by the public sector to model regional development and the distribution of people and activities in spaces (territories) of different scales, as well as the location of different types of infrastructure, natural and recreational areas. Spatial planning activities are implemented at different administrative and management levels (local, regional, national), and cooperation activities in this area are also implemented in the framework of cross-border, transnational and European cooperation. In this direction, regional development is a science of management, administration and economics of the territory in terms of establishing functional models of territorial development. Thus, the planning and programming process focuses on the center of the individual territory and considers it as a system of settlements surrounded by concentric sectoral-functional zones and areas. Approaching the limits of the system reduces the number of functions in the field. By moving away from the center of the system, the field shows high selectivity spheres of human activity and is the smallest functional load. Territorial systems such as spatial forms of life of the community are characterized by hierarchical subordination. The taxonomic status of each territorial system is measured on the basis of the analysis and synthesis of systemic connections and socio-economic regularities. When a taxonomic analysis of the territory is available, all hierarchical types of connections are taken into account, as only their combination can show how the regional connections are formed in the direction of public sector-regional business-society. The derivation of the levels of interaction and connectivity outlines the regional economic structure of the territorial system. Usually separate macro, mezo and micro. All these levels of assessment and analysis bring to the fore the peculiarities of the spatial development of the territory. This determines the need to compare regional differences, disparities, demographic situation and regional economic profile at the individual territorial level through comparative analysis.

Depending on the territorial scope, population and some macroeconomic indicators, they can distinguish hierarchical subsystems, as well as determine their sustainable framework. Spatial development refers to the evolution of territories in all their dimensions (economic, social, ecological and physical). Monitoring spatial (territorial) development (e.g. under ESPON) and analyzing trends and forecasting surveys are activities needed to develop spatial development policies. As a concept, spatial development policy is a newer concept that emerged in the 1990s (when the European Spatial Development Scheme (ESDP) and the Guiding Principles were adopted) and which refers to the policy to promote spatial development (on the territory) in accordance with the general principles. The various public policies (sectoral or not) need to be combined to trigger the common principles described in the Guiding Principles and the European Spatial Development Scheme. In this way we can summarize that the territorial development of settlements can be accepted as a complex concept that is applied through public policies (territorial development policy) and reflects on the development of regional business. This strongly affects Europe's current context, characterized by strong economic growth and regional imbalances. We can assume that the territorial development of settlements is beginning to have qualitative dimensions and socio-economic assessment. This requires closer interaction between business and the public sector through cooperation in the formation and implementation of public policies and regional development priorities.

### **Territorial and structural model of regional development of Bulgaria**

Nowadays the Republic of Bulgaria occupies an area of 110.9 thousand square kilometers and at the end of 2019 has a population of 6.98 million people. The country is divided into six planning regions (NUTS 2 level), 28 districts (NUTS 3) and 265 municipalities (LAU 1). According to the European typology of "urban-rural" areas, 15 areas are mostly rural, 12 - intermediate, and only one is established as a predominantly urban area (Sofia-capital).

**Table 1:** Average annual population in 2019 by regions, districts, location

Statistical regions Areas	Total			in the cities	in the villages
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Total
Total for the country	6 975 761	3 382 674	3 593 087	5 142 268	1 833 493
Northern and Southeastern Bulgaria	3 469 089	1 686 892	1 782 197	2 420 490	1 048 600
North west	735 231	358 720	376 511	469 217	266 014
North Central	778 809	378 231	400 579	523 808	255 002
Northeast	926 953	451 462	475 491	328 208	246 457



Statistical regions Areas	Total			in the cities	in the villages
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Total
Southeast	1 028 097	498 481	529 617	746 969	<b>281 128</b>
Southwestern and South Central Bulgaria	3 506 672	1 695 782	1 810 890	2 721 779	<b>784 893</b>
Southwest	2 098 233	1 012 785	1 085 448	1 770 43	<b>327 796</b>
South central	1 408 439	682 997	725 442	951 342	<b>457 098</b>

*Source:* NSI (Bulgaria)

Roughly three-quarters of Bulgarian citizens live in or around urban areas, and several sizable cities reflect this. The capital, Sofia, is also the largest city with an estimated population of 1.2 million people, meaning that around 1/6 of the population resides in the Sofia area. Sofia is surrounded by both the Vitosha Lyulin mountain, Lozenska mountain and Stara Planina. In addition to being the nation's capital, Sofia is also the economic center of Bulgaria. The second-largest city is Plovdiv, with a population of 338,153, which serves as the agricultural and educational center of Bulgaria. The port city Varna is the third-largest city in Bulgaria with 334,870 citizens located along the coast of the Black Sea. Burgas has a population of roughly 200,000 and is home to Bulgaria's fishing industry. It is necessary to comment the EU rules for the allocation and use of funds for regional development and settlement of relations between the agents of regional development and the creation of conditions to meet the requirements of the EU's regional policy. The law should not be seen as the end, but as the beginning of a long and difficult process. Table №1 shows that the population in some planning areas falls below 800 thousand and at the same time the gap between urban and rural population increases. This means that regional development must be targeted at both urban and rural areas. It is necessary to improve the regulatory framework and the programming process in order to create and strengthen a new institutional organization for better management and planning of processes at regional and local level.

At the national level, ultimate responsibility for the formulation and implementation of regional policy is the Council of regional development Ministers. It adopted the National Plan for Regional Development (NPRD) and the National Economic Development Plan (NDP). The annual report on the implementation of the Regional Development Plan and its update sets special impact areas, the coordination of central and local executive authorities and their administrations. Members of the Administration Council of Ministers is a separate Regional Coordination Directorate, which supports the government and provides methodological assistance to local bodies of executive power, prepares opinions on regional development projects and others. The directorates for Economic

Policy and European Integration coordinate and monitor the implementation of the national plan for economic development and national investment programs and participate in the preparation of programs financed by the EU. The overall regional policy is implemented by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria. In essence, however, the management of regional development is assigned to the Minister of Regional Development and Public Works. At the local level, his work is supported by district governors, who represent state interests at the local level. The Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works plays a central role in the formulation and implementation of the regional development policy. At a regional level the main responsibility for conducting regional policy and coordination of national and local interests is that of the governor. It implements the state policy; coordinates the work of the executive authorities and their administrations region and their interaction with the local authority; organizes the development and implementation of regional strategies and programs for regional development; interacts with local authorities and local administration (Nikolov, Tanakov, Bakardzhiev, 2018). Regional governors interact also with the territorial structures of trade unions, employers' organizations, organizations for social protection and NGOs. In performing her functions, the governor is assisted by departments of regional development in regional administrations. Territorial units of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works that support the planning, coordination and control of implementation of the plans were established in regional centers. Municipalities play their role in regional planning and the implementation of a regional development policy. In practice, the Bulgarian Constitution provides municipalities as self-governing administrative-territorial units with significant autonomy in governance. The main problem of the municipalities is related to the lack of significant financial decentralization. Municipal budgets are still determined centrally through transfers from the central budget and so they have limited financial resources, and hence the implementation of regional development policies. Local authorities are the main generator of ideas, initiatives and projects for regional development, as they are a partner of central authorities in the preparation of regional development plans. They are a particularly suitable partner for attracting the private sector and NGOs to participate in the development and implementation of regional development projects. Strengthening the capacity of municipalities to implement regional development policies is a strategic necessity for socio-economic development in the regions of the country. Accepted is that the more successful will the influence pursued by central government regional policy in larger-scale regions. It is accepted that the influence pursued by the regional policy of the central government in the larger regions will be more successful. This is a very important confirmation of the thesis that the actual zoning and regionalization of Bulgaria

is unsustainable. This is a result of the incorrect goal setting and functioning of the regional government in the country. Failure to create an intermediate level of government is one of the serious deficits of regional development (Milkova, Dokov, 2017).

Planning regions are playing an increasingly important role in the implementation of regional development policy. During the programming period 2021-2027, the planning regions have been assigned more powers to support the implementation of regional development policies. Within the meaning of the Regional Development Act (RDA) of 2008, planning regions have been formed and the role of the districts with the status of regions is defined. Practically 28 regions are formed on the basis of their geographical location and population. Areas that form level 1 do not constitute administrative-territorial units and are as follows – “North and South Bulgaria”, including the Northwest region, North Central Region, Northeast Region and Southeast region. Region “Southwest and South Central Bulgaria”, including the Southwest region and the South Central Region.



*Source:* NSI (Bulgaria)

**Figure 7:** Planning regions (NUTS-2) and districts (NUTS-3) in Bulgaria

The areas that make up level 2 do not represent an administrative-territorial unit and territorial range as follows:

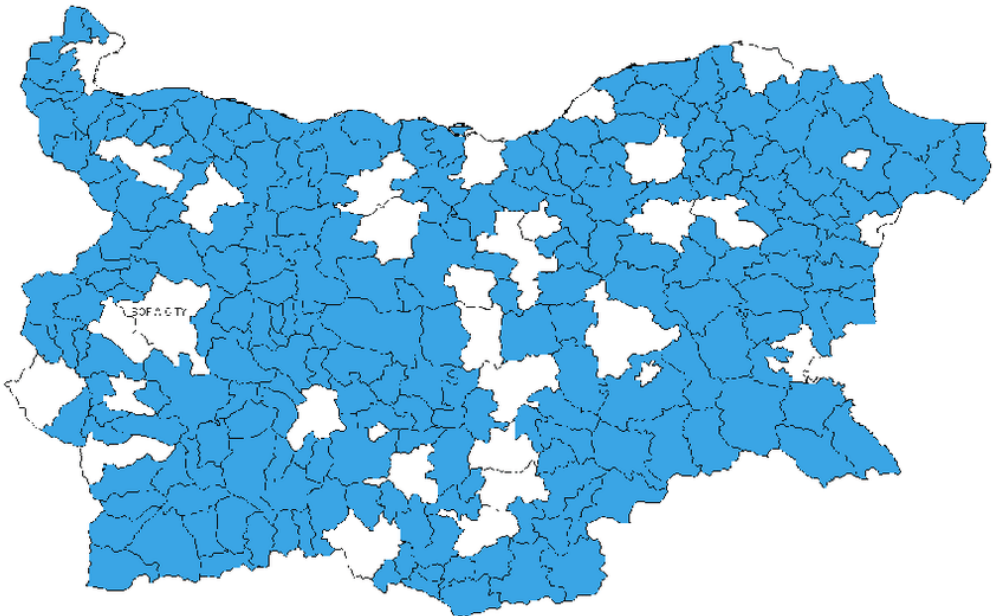
1. North region which includes the districts of Vidin, Vratsa, Lovech, Montana and Pleven;
2. North Central region, which includes the regions of Veliko Tarnovo, Gabrovo, Razgrad, Ruse and Silistra;

3. North region including the districts of Varna, Dobrich, Targovishte and Shumen;
4. South region including the districts of Burgas, Sliven, Stara Zagora and Yambol;
5. South region including the districts of Blagoevgrad, Kyustendil, Pernik, Sofia and Sofia;
6. South Central region, including the districts of Kardzhali, Pazardzhik, Plovdiv, Smolyan and Haskovo.

In recent years, there has been a discussion in Bulgaria about change in the planning regions. The aim is to create areas that are more sustainable over time, both with indigenous populations and with balanced territorial coverage (NUTS). Also, the aim is to create optimally separated geographical areas located along the main axes of development, with strong, accessible and with capacity and capabilities centers of the regions. Thirdly, the change will provide an important territorial basis on which to base the development and implementation of strategic documents and programs that will be supported by the European Union after 2025. The interaction between regions and the central and local authorities in Bulgaria complies with the principles of subsidiarity. Local cooperation could be given a higher assessment at NUTS 3 and LAU 1 levels, due to the local initiatives and civil society structures supporting the cooperation. Despite the cumulative economic growth achieved for the period 2014–2019, Bulgaria and our regions failed to make significant progress in catching up with other EU regions. And in the coming period, this fact sets the focus of national and regional policy on economic growth and supports the main drivers of growth. Doing so will require overcoming a thorny combination of low productivity in subsistence agriculture, limited scope for industrialization in many places, and rapid population growth and urbanization – all of which pose challenges to the developing nations' capacity to feed and employ their citizens. Important for the implementation of regional policy is the optimization of the territorial organization. The condition of the settlements, in turn, directly corresponds to the demographic situation (Karastoyanov, Stoychev, 2009).

The current demographic situation in the Republic of Bulgaria is characterized by a continuing decline and aging of the population, declining birth rates and maintaining a high level of overall mortality. The spatial location of the population is uneven in all territorial areas levels. At the end of 2019, 5 159 129 people live in cities (73.7%) and 1 840 910 people (26.3%) in the villages. The settlements in Bulgaria are 5,256 of which 257 are cities and 4,999 villages. There are 164 settlements without population. Fewer than 50 people live in each of the other 1,207 settlements. With a population of over 100 thousand of people are six major cities, home to 34.4% of the country's population. The overall decrease

of the population in Bulgaria is accompanied by concentration in the six largest Bulgarian cities - Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, Ruse and Stara Zagora. 34.4% of the country's population lives in them. The situation in rural areas is also worrying. In the conditions of regional integration and cohesion, rural areas have an important role in the development of the country. In practice, they are less urbanized, which is a serious problem for regional development. In Bulgaria, the doctrine of rural development can become an effective tool for conducting effective regional policies. It is necessary to increase the quality of life in rural areas. First of all, improving the social infrastructure and the level of public works in them. Creating a regional economy based on building a system of intelligent systems in rural areas and increasing security in them. Every rural area in Bulgaria covers a variety of agricultural lands, forests, farms, small industrial and regional centers. These areas have large natural, cultural and historic resources that are the basis for economic development. A total of 231 municipalities in Bulgaria have been classified as rural areas. Rural areas actually have a vast potential for economic growth pegged to food production and related sectors (Borisov, Radev, Nikolov, 2014).



*Source:* NSI, Ministry of Agriculture and Food of Bulgaria

**Figure 8:** Rural areas in Bulgaria

The rural areas need policies designed to ensure that small-scale producers are able to participate fully in meeting urban food demands. Rural strengthening

measures must be sustainable. In the first place, establishing the right to own land, ensuring fairness in supply contracts or improving access to credit. Next is the construction of the necessary infrastructure to connect rural areas and urban markets (Dobrev, Kolev, 2009). We can emphasize that in many regions the lack of passable rural roads, electricity networks, storage facilities and refrigerated transport systems is a major obstacle to rural development.

### **New projects to improve regional development in Bulgaria**

In general, all regions of Bulgaria need improvements and targeted measures for their socio-economic development. The main issues on the agenda are in several areas. The first is the construction of national and regional infrastructure to improve regional connectivity and the level of public works. Secondly, the preparation and implementation of a number of public and business projects related to the socio-economic condition of the regions in Bulgaria and the quality of life. Thirdly, it is necessary to develop the public-private partnership and attract funds from the European Union to build the national infrastructure that will improve the north-south connectivity. Next is the efforts for the construction of industrial zones in the regions of the country, as well as the improvement of the tourist infrastructure for the purpose of development of the mountainous semi-mountainous regions in Bulgaria. Improving regional development needs to identify priority areas (Naydenov, 2019). We can assume that the orientation of Northern Bulgaria towards the Danube River can contribute to the pulling economic development of the northern part of the country and our integration into the socio-economic processes of Central Europe. Looking more globally the Bulgarian Danube bank as an important part of the national territory is necessary to bring out the specific features of this coastal territory associated with its geopolitical and geo-economic dimensions. Development of the route of the 7th Euro corridor in the region is the most important element for its infrastructure development and the functional linkage of the Silistra, Ruse and Svishtov Danube ports. Their technical and technological modernization will allow for the development of intelligent transport systems in the whole region and also that of the Atlantic destinations from the Rhine-Main-Danube to the Black Sea and further to Caucasus-Central Asia and the Far East to the Middle East and North Africa. Furthermore, it will create conditions for the development of tourism along the Danube coast. In this context an example can be given of the need to build a new grain port on the Danube in Aydemir near Silistra. The size of the port terminal should be at least 4 places and storage places with a total capacity of 68,000 tons. Through this port, conditions will be created for the transportation of raw materials to Central Europe and trade will be accordingly encouraged. With the implementation of this new port, new priorities for Northeastern Bulgaria will emerge. First of all,

attracting funds for the doubling and electrification of the railway line in the direction of Tsar Samuel-Silistra. Priority in the programming period 2021-2027 is to invest in the electrification and doubling of the railway line Ruse-Varna. This line will help the fast connection between the Black Sea and the Danube River. In addition, if we work on the renovation and re-certification of the airports in Shtraklevo, Targovishte and Colonel Lambrinovo in international terminals for cargo and low-cost civil flights, a new socio-economic potential of Northeastern Bulgaria will be created. Undoubtedly, it is important for the Bulgarian state administration to bring out the indicated priorities by 2030 by concentrating more resources and support for the districts of Ruse, Dobrich, Razgrad, Silistra, Targovishte and Shumen. One can think of preparing a special investment program for these areas. This can be a meaningful response to the emerging new challenges for solving the problems of regional development in the North-South direction. Spatially, the construction of the European transport corridor №8 in the direction Constanta-Varna-Burgas is also important for Northern Bulgaria. This means looking for opportunities on the Bulgarian and Romanian sides to build the Constanta-Varna highway. From a strategic point of view, it would be good after the town of Aksakovo to create a connection between the Hemus highway and the future highway. For such a project and its implementation, it is appropriate to adopt new spatial development decisions. This means that in addition to the construction of a fast highway, it is necessary to modernize the railway connections in the direction of Dobrich-Kardam-Constanta, mostly through their electrification, reaching a maximum speed of 140-160 km. In addition, the role of the city of Ruse can be reconsidered by introducing a new integration role of the city as an intermodal center and a starting point along the route of Corridor №9 in Bulgaria. This would give Ruse need a real gravitational potential to influence the dynamics and direction of movement labour resources (labour force), the direction of the dominant vector of both cultural and educational ties, and those under the administrative, legal, communal services to the population in North Central Region Planning such overall strengthening the role of Ruse is logical and reasoned. In this regard, important for the development of the city of Ruse is the construction of a new bridge over the Danube. Also construction of a railway ring around the city in the southeast-north direction. Then it is important to build the highway Ruse - Gorna Oryahovitsa on a new route, in my opinion outside the urban areas and settlements. In the new conditions it is necessary for Gorna Oryahovitsa to become a major transport hub in Northern Bulgaria, where you will meet the Hemus highway. Thus, Gorna Oryahovitsa will emerge as a transport hub of national importance. For this purpose, it is necessary to build a new expressway in the direction Gorna Oryahovitsa-Lyaskovets-Sheremetiya-Malak Chiflik-Debelets, which will provide a reliable connection to Southern

Bulgaria. This new road will take the traffic past Veliko Tarnovo and direct it to the future tunnel under Shipka and the Republic Pass.

In practice, the development of the infrastructure of Central Bulgaria, especially the routes of the European transport corridors, will directly and indirectly affect the whole of Northern Bulgaria, and later there will be a direct connection for the technical modernization of the ports of Somovit, Belene. And the improvement of the road Nikopol-Pleven-Lovech-Troyan will outline a new direction in the north-south direction. This can be done by building a tunnel under the Balkan Mountains in the direction Troyan-Karnare. This will undoubtedly have a positive impact on the regional economy due to the faster connection with Southern Bulgaria. It is important to note that in addition to infrastructure, serious support is needed for the development of rural areas in Northern Bulgaria. Traditionally in this part of the country there are conditions for agricultural development, but in recent years there has been a serious decline in vegetables, fruits and other crops. In this direction it is necessary to develop national programs to finance the development of traditional local culture for the Danube regions, as well as along the rivers Yantra, Ruse Lom, Osam, Vit. In general, Northern Bulgaria needs the development and implementation of programs and projects to support the development of the food industry.

The regional problems in Northern Bulgaria are leading in the spatial development of the national territory, but there are also a number of unresolved regional problems in Southern Bulgaria. In Southern Bulgaria it is necessary to pay more attention to the construction of parallel roads on the Trakia highway. In the first place is the modernization of the route Sofia-Pirdop-Karlovo-Kazanlak-Sliven-Karnobat-Aytos and its transformation into a highway. This is the shortest connection between Sofia and Burgas and can be of great importance for the development of industry and agriculture in the Trans-Balkan plains, Srednogorie, the Tundzha river valley and the Stara Planina part of the Burgas region. In addition, one can think about modernization of the sub-Balkan railway line in the direction Sofia-Karlovo-Kazanlak-Burgas. Increasing the transport accessibility in this direction will create conditions for new investments in the municipalities of Karlovo, Pavel Banya, Kazanlak, Noza Zagora, Sliven, Karnobat and Aytos. In practice, these municipalities have a great natural resource potential for the formation around them of a sustainable regional economy, which in a short time to bring them out as pulling geo-economic centers and dynamically developing settlements in Bulgaria. These municipalities have serious socio-economic potential and opportunities for integrated development. In this direction the construction of the horizontal infrastructure and the vertical axes in the direction Shumen-Karnobat-Yambol-Lesovo-Istanbul, as well as the route of corridor №9 in the direction Kzanlak-Stara Zagora-Haskovo-Kardzhali-Makaza-Alexandroupolis will encourage the socio-economic development of all of



Southern Bulgaria. In addition, the realization of the Black Sea Highway, the construction of a tunnel under Shipka, the modernization of the Aytos and Rishki passes will undoubtedly set a new rhythm of north-south connectivity and a new model of regional development in the eastern part of the country.

In Southern Bulgaria, in terms of regional development, some of the districts in the South-Western region are also experiencing problems. It is dominated by the capital Sofia, but outside its outlines, even within a radius of 10-15 kilometers, contrasts and regional differences emerge, which are intensifying especially in the districts of Pernik, Kyustendil and Blagoevgrad. Despite the proximity to the capital, the region has its serious socio-economic problems and deteriorating demographic structure of the population. The analysis of the socio-economic indicators in the indicated areas shows that they need the implementation of active regional development policies. Significant investments are needed, as well as measures to improve the local infrastructure. What will boost the region's importance is the construction of transport corridor №8 and the completion of the Struma highway, as well as the implementation of a number of cross-border projects with Serbia and Northern Macedonia. The construction of the Rila highway, as well as the highways in the direction Simitli-Gotse Delchev and Sandanski-Gotse Delchev-Smolyan-Kardzhali may also be important. These projects do not figure on the agenda, but they are an investment in the region's future and a necessary condition for regional development in the territories to the south of Sofia.

In practice, it may be necessary to build projects that can change the regional development of entire regions in southern Bulgaria as a railway line in the direction of Kardzhali-Smolyan or Bansko-Velingrad-Pazardzhik highway, but these projects are difficult to implement due to the outlined. There are negative trends in the regional development of Bulgaria. In the last 15 years there has been a relocation of the population from the peripheral villages and towns in Southern Bulgaria mainly to Sofia, Plovdiv, Stara Zagora and less to Pazardzhik, Asenovgrad, Haskovo and others. This migration within the country has increased the territory of cities and created new challenges for them. This increased anthropogenic impact on large and medium-sized cities in Southern Bulgaria necessitated the expansion of their territorial scope beyond the structural boundaries. This increased the level of urbanization and the role of cities in the development of the national territory. But at the same time it causes the concentration of a number of problems related to the use of their territory. New problems have emerged such as redevelopment, environmental pollution, lack of green space, lack of parking spaces and others. Larger cities in southern Bulgaria are yet to face problems related to the living environment, provision of social infrastructure facilities, as well as construction and maintenance of networks and facilities for technical infrastructure. All of this brings to the fore the issues

of sustainable urbanization, and in particular of sustainable urban management. In summary, we can say that Northern Bulgaria needs targeted policies to promote its regional development and preservation of its demographic potential. At the same time in Southern Bulgaria we have processes of population relocation mainly in larger and medium-sized cities and a prerequisite for the creation of agglomeration areas at the expense of providing rural areas and small towns. This shows that the territory of Bulgaria needs an analysis and assessment of the territorial features in it and a clear derivation of the differences in the socio-economic development of the individual regions. This differentiated approach will enable us to bring out regional problems and seek solutions to them through proper regional policies.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of conducting regional policy is related to finding opportunities for purposeful impact on the territory through tools and activities that should highlight the regional development as a national priority of the contemporary modern state. In effect, regional development means striking a balance between the priorities of municipalities districts and planning regions and the search for the most important issues for their solution related to national priorities and the interpretation of development regions as separate territorial communities. In fact, the creation of conditions for balanced development of the individual regions of the country requires the support of territorial bodies of public administration. In addition, they must support businesses to implement projects through their access to credit and investment consequences. Thus, regional development will be able to formulate a competitive regional economy and the construction of sustainable regional and local infrastructure. In this way, the contours of effective regional development policies can be successfully defined. This should be done through constant and qualitative zoning and modeling of spatial development of the various territorial communities. The combination of sustainable development models based on the potential for modernization and efficiency of their development poles providing a high level of competitiveness; it is a prerequisite for long growth and prosperity. In Bulgaria, in addition to its functionality, regional development also outlines its differences with a focus on the policies pursued in urban areas and the difference for implementation of specific policies that cover suburban and rural regions. What the two types of regional development policies in Bulgaria have in common is the need to implement targeted programs to preserve our demographic potential. Undoubtedly, in countries like Bulgaria, regional development is an important priority, but it is often not recognized by the government. For this reason, the neglect of regional problems in the future may reflect negatively on the socio-economic development of the Bulgarian state.

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