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POSSIBILITIES FOR IMPROVING THE ADMINISTRATIVE AND TERRITORIAL STRUCTURE IN BULGARIA

ABSTRACT

This article is devoted to the consideration of some territorial problems in the Republic of Bulgaria. Proposals have been made for a new structuring of the regions for planning and change in the functional structure of the settlements and respectively the Bulgarian village. Some new trends in regional development related to the spatial development of our national territory have been captured.

KEY WORDS

regional, development, territory, structure, economy, level.

JEL

R10, R15.

INTRODUCTION

The object of study of regional development is territory. In this territory there are formed smaller administrative units of different rank. In our country, these distinct territories subject to our study are rural territories. In theoretical and practical-applied character they are part of territorial systems and fall within the field of regional science.

Returning to the spatial development in the territorial plan of the country, the economy, settlements, social and economic infrastructure, population density and numbers are not evenly distributed. This is due to the three main factors that have influenced the different historical stages of development: natural, historical and economic. The role of socio-economic zoning is to identify the differences in the territories and to propose measures to resolve them, in order to make more rational use of the potential of the areas to improve the lives of the population. In recent years, spatial disparities and imbalances in the country's territory have become more pronounced. The imposed need to search for a more efficient spatial planning passes through the prism of regional development. Certainly, in the context of the coronavirus crisis, the process of electronisation further brings to the fore regional issues and the need for innovation at territorial level.

Even in the most remote locations, digitisation and information technology are now becoming a necessity. In addition, individual territories increasingly need systematic scientific analyses, measurement of regional efficiency, the state of demographic potential, etc., in order to access funds from EU programmes and conduct up-to-date regional policy. Thus, the optimised territorial division should be based on the experience and practice of regional development management in Bulgaria.

EXHIBITION

The current state of the districts and municipalities is an embodiment of the socio-economic development of the country. Under the governance and financing mechanisms in place, municipalities and districts can continue to function, with the gap between large and small municipalities in terms of population likely to widen. The reason for this is rooted in the fact that territorial systems are usually made up of interrelated elements of a natural, demographic, social, economic, cultural, and environmental nature. Thus, in chronological order, territorial and socio-economic regionalisation has developed in two main directions. First, by applying practical skills in the territories to implement targeted policy and attempt to create an optimal governance model. Socio-economic regionalisation issues have always been the subject of research by Bulgarian economic geography. The first attempts at regionalisation of the territory of Bulgaria were made by Anastas Beshkov in 1934. He proposed to divide the country into 7 economic regions. The next stage in which a new economic division was proposed was in the period 1952÷1953. A scientific conference of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences was formed with the participation of a wide range of econometricians, who expressed the opinion that "the economic regionalisation of the country does not coincide with the existing scheme of administrative-territorial units: 'districts and municipalities'". At the discussion, Acad. Beshkov again proposes the 1934 scheme of 7 regions. Prof. Bashkek also proposed the new plan for the same period. Ignat Penkov supports the opinion that "the administrative-territorial units "districts" are economic regions, i.e. there is a coverage of administrative units with economic regions. Another scheme proposed is that of prof. Tiansko Yordanov of 5 economic regions. Prof. Iordan Yandoran and the South-South region. Hristo Marinov proposes to divide the country into three regions. The results of the studies were published in Geography of Bulgaria, Volume II in 1961 and Economic Regionalisation of the NDR, 1963, proposing a total of 10 regionalisation schemes, which included, industries, demographic indicators and socio-economic activities, etc. Another scheme to be considered in the present study is on the lower hierarchical units: sub-districts and micro-districts proposed by a collective of BAS (1983)¹⁸. A large number of econometricians consider districts as formations formed by interconnected sub-districts. Each subregion is formed by a different number of micro-districts with varying degrees of social and economic status. The micro-districts are taken to be the former districts, now municipal centres. The research in which all of the above hierarchical units were evidenced is mainly from 1965 to 1985. As a final result of the research and analysis, 9 socio-economic regions were formed: the South-Western, Western Upper Thracian-Rhodopean, Eastern Upper Thracian-Rhodopean, South-Eastern, North-Eastern Primorsky, North-Eastern Pridunavsky, Yantrensky, Vitsko-Osamsky and North-Western, a collective of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (1989)¹⁹.

We can assume that spatial planning is an important factor in the management of regional development. In this direction, the Regional Development Act adopted in 1999²⁰ defines the object, subject and objectives of spatial and territorial management of our national territory. The Regional Development Act is the formal marker of a new stage, which seeks to solve the main problems of regional development policy and transition to a conceptual, integrated, financially secured and publicly announced and monitored regional policy. It is aimed at establishing rules for the allocation

¹⁸BAS Collective, Territorial Production Complexes in South Central Bulgaria, ed. Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia 1983, Collective of Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Physical and Socio-economic Geography of Bulgaria, ed. Regional Geography of Bulgaria. Kliment Ohridski, 2001.

¹⁹ BAS Collective, Physical and Socio-economic Geography of Bulgaria, ed. ForCom Sofia 2002.

²⁰ Regional Development Act. SG 26 of 23.03.1999.

and use of regional development funds and regulating relations between regional development agents, as well as creating the conditions to meet EU requirements in terms of regional policy. The law should not be seen as the end, but as the beginning of a long and difficult process. The Law on Administrative Territorial Planning, the Law on Local Self-Government and Local Administration, the Law on Municipal Budgets and others are important in this respect. All this shows that in our country the normative character is leading in managing the processes of regional development. In this respect, it is important to accept the role of the European Union in making regional policy in Bulgaria.

European regional policy and territorial planning in Bulgaria.

The formulation of regional policy within the Community throughout its development aims to reduce structural disparities between regions in the EEC/EU and to accelerate the balanced development of territories throughout the Union. All the objectives and targets set are based on the concepts of cohesion and economic cooperation between the Member States. An accepted practice in the Union is to create strategies and update existing treaties. In this respect, the EEC/EU pursues a rural development policy for all member countries. Rural areas in the EEC/EU occupy more than 90% of the territory and approximately 60% of the population live in them. The rural development policy pursued by the EU aims to support a significant proportion of the population in rural areas of the Community. Many of these areas face major social, economic, environmental and infrastructural challenges. The economic activities and enterprises in operation, rural employees, agriculture and forestry are still not sufficiently competitive.

Thus, in Bulgaria, after our EU membership in 2007, changes to the Regional Development Act of 2008²¹ were necessary²¹, through which regions are formed based on their geographical location and population size. The regions that form *level 1* do not represent administrative-territorial units and are as follows:

1. North and South-East Bulgaria Region, comprising the North-West Region, the North-Central Region, the North-East Region and the South-East Region;
2. South-West and South-Central Bulgaria Region, including the South-West Region and the South-Central Region.

The districts which form *Level 2* are not administrative-territorial units and have the following territorial coverage:

1. North-West region, including the districts of Vidin, Vratsa, Lovech, Montana and Pleven;
2. North Central Region, including the districts of Veliko Tarnovo, Gabrovo, Razgrad, Ruse and Silistra;
3. Northeast region, including the districts of Varna, Dobrich, Targovishte and Shumen;
4. Southeast region, including the districts of Burgas, Sliven, Stara Zagora and Yambol;
5. South-West 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.

Based on this classification, the Republic of Bulgaria is divided into three levels:

NUTS1 covers the two territorial areas of North and South East Bulgaria and South West and South Central;

NUTS2 covers the six statistical regions (North West, North Central, North East, South East, South Central and South East);

NUTS3 with 28 administrative territorial districts. At the local level LAU1 264 municipalities, 231 belong to rural areas (as of 2014).

It should be stressed that the interest in regions and, in particular, in regionalism comes from the larger countries of Western Europe, Germany, France, Italy, England, etc. The activation of "regional ideas" on the Old Continent was recorded in 1996, when in that period there were more than 300

²¹ZPP of 31.08.2008. amend. 66 of 26.06.2013 sets out in Chapter Two: Territorial basis of regional development in Article 4.(2)

regions in Europe with different territories, political and administrative governance with a population of more than 400 million. In the adopted "Declaration of Regionalism in Europe", the idea of "distant" regions to represent their countries in institutional frameworks was enshrined. The initiator of this event is the Assembly of Regions in Europe, and the aim is to establish the 'Declaration' not so much for Europe as beyond it.

Rural areas are an important part of regional policy within the European Union. In the literature, the concept of 'rural areas' is considered individually, taking into account their specialisation aimed at the development of activities related to the agricultural economy. The formation of rural areas is influenced by certain factors: location, agro-climatic, ecological, socio-economic, geodemographic, formation policy, infrastructural, etc. These areas are in a continuous process of change and development depending on their localization, proximity to a major socio-economic centre, urbanized areas, availability of technical and social infrastructure, etc. Regarding the terminology and formation of the term "Rural Areas", there are different interpretations and opinions. According to Madjarova (2000), these are areas "...in which agricultural workers occupy a relatively high proportion of the population and live in them and the rural way of life prevails..."²². These areas are described as having less developed technical and social infrastructure, lack of capital, low labour productivity, deteriorated social activities and lower standards than the national average. The role of a municipal centre is successfully fulfilled in a given village or smaller town in the respective administrative unit, as defined by legal provisions.

In the European Union, rural areas are defined as territorial units which have a population density of up to 100d/km² or a relative share of agricultural employment equal to or twice the Community average for any year since 1985.

Implementation of regional development policies in Bulgaria

In methodological terms, regional development can be approached by compiling an integrated assessment within a specific spatial and territorial scope. This approach allows us to derive a spatial overall assessment of the situation in a given unit (municipality, locality) as a sum of individual assessments of their indicators. This makes it possible to frame the respective community deficits in the socio-economic development of individual territorial units by measuring regional development. Hence, through regional development, a vertical disaggregation of the spatial structure of the modern nation-state can be carried out in order to reveal the degree of economic linkages between them and characterize the environment. This can be done by determining the zones of gravity and the role of large settlements and settlement structures in their functioning and the state of the regional economic system. In this direction, the correct typification and functioning of the areas based on the concept of pole development in accordance with the national and regional location and development can be important.

For each country, relevant types of regions can be identified: hypertrophied, highly industrialised, weakly industrialised, highly urbanised, regions dominated by small settlements and dispersed localisation of population, transport regions, regions with peripheral economy, specific functional regions (agrarian, industrial, tourist, mountainous), etc., and the corresponding regional policy can be pursued. This leads to a further necessity that, for the assessment of spatial development, indicators should be derived into at least two groups. Thus, let us assume that there are core and complementary indicators in regional development. Such a division can be derived depending on the objectives of the categorization or due to their specific features to distinguish the objects (municipalities and localities). This process should undoubtedly be linked to the structuring of an information database in which primary data are accumulated. The second step is to translate the indicators into a single scale, by defining a baseline integral score for each of the municipalities and each locality, and forming groups and categories of territorial communities. In practice, in order to proceed to the analysis of the results and proposals for categorization to match the defined criteria and indicators

²² See. Madjarova, S., Rural areas in Bulgaria.

with the necessary primary and derived values of the indicators to be measured and valued. This necessitates the derivation of appropriate data interpretation models. Thus, regional development can have a corresponding cybernetic model expressed in the establishment of relationships (straight and backward) and regulations in a certain territorial scope of the organized and self-regulating system. In this direction, regional development can be perceived as a process that obeys general regularities, regardless of the nature of the environment, whether it concerns governance in living nature, in inanimate nature or society. Thus, from a theoretical point of view, regional development is related to the functioning of governance in complex dynamic systems, abstracting from their substantive characteristics. Regional development proves that systems are characterized by continuous changes, complexity of structure and increasing or decreasing degree of stability of their existence depending on the amount of information in them. In this direction, regional development is called to be a necessary component of self-governing systems. Primary data from supporting institutions or sources of specific information are used. Where necessary, preliminary analyses and calculations are carried out using standard statistical calculations including the application of geospatial analyses. The Unified Classification of Territorial and Administrative Units (ECATTE) maintained by the National Statistical Institute (NSI) shall be used in forming the base and in subsequent calculations for municipalities and settlements. If data are not available for some of the indicators for all units, this indicator is excluded from further analysis or data from previous years are taken if possible. If data are not available for some of the units (municipalities and/or localities) for any of the indicators, average or approximate values are used. It is assumed that the base has been formed and all indicators have been valued when the data for each indicator have been completed for each municipality or locality.

In practice, regional development is meant to characterize the pattern or pattern of development of the country as a whole. This implies a significant level of decentralisation and linkage of the governance system to the available resources for the implementation of the relevant measures and policies. To a large extent, regional development management requires the setting of priorities for each individual territorial community - the respective autonomous space in search of realising the potential and comparative advantages for better participation in national and international markets within the global framework of the national development strategy.

Focusing regional issues on Northern Bulgaria

Territorially, Northern Bulgaria is located north of the main ridge of the Balkan Mountains, which conditionally divides the country into northern and southern parts. The northern border is entirely with Romania. It extends from the mouth of the Timok River to Cape Kartal on the Black Sea. In the stretch from the mouth of the Timok to Silistra, it is along the Danube for 470 km. There are 48 islands along the river, which are in the territory of Bulgaria. Their total area is about 85 - 90 km². The largest is Belene Island. It has an area of about 41 km². From Silistra to Cape Kartal, the border is land. This section is 139 km long. The western border of northern Bulgaria is with the Republic of Serbia and it runs through the Balkan Mountains (Berkovska, Chiprovka and St. Nikolska Mountains), the Belogradchik Pass, Babin Nos, the Vraška Chuka Pass and along the Timok River Talweg to its mouth on the Danube. To the east, Northern Bulgaria borders the Black Sea. The area of Northern Bulgaria is 48,495.1 km², and the population as of 2018 is 2,455,507 (55.05 people/km²).

Historically, today's Northern Bulgaria, together with the remaining after 1918 in Romania Northern Dobruzha, is the historical region of Mysia, one of the three - together with Thrace and Macedonia - historical-geographical areas in which initially in the 9th-10th century, and later in the 19th century the Bulgarian nation was formed. It includes from south to north, first of all, the Pre-Balkan, which makes the transition from the Danube Plain to the Balkan Mountains, which run parallel across the country, from the mouth of the Timok River to Cape Emine, dividing Bulgaria into North and South. The Danube Plain is divided into three parts - western, middle and eastern, the boundaries of which are the rivers Vit and Yantra. The Danubian Plain is a hilly area, the maximum height of which

reaches 502 m (Turnov peak in the Shumen plateau). An important part of northern Bulgaria is also occupied by southern Dobrudja, which is divided into two parts along the virtual line between the village of S. Pillar and s. Rosica - the flat eastern plateau and the hilly western part of Dobrudja. The average altitude of plain Dobruja is about 230 m and the coastline is steep. A characteristic and unique part of the Dobrudzha coast is the alternation of wetland and steppe areas, which makes it particularly interesting for specialised tourism.

Regarding the climatic features of Northern Bulgaria, the predominant air mass transport is from the west. The meridional transport of air masses alternates between northerly and southerly directions during different months of the year, without either direction predominating. There is a marked decrease in the annual number of cyclones, especially in north-eastern Bulgaria. The number of cyclones also decreases significantly in January, June and November. This is due to the extension of the range of major anticyclone centres such as the Azores Maximum and the Siberian Maximum. At the same time, the meridional index decreases its values in all months of the year. This leads to an increase in the northerly component of air mass transport. As a result, we have an increase in transport from the northwest in winter, which leads to warming in the north, heavy snowfall in the west and drought in the east. On the other hand, an increase in transport from the northeast in summer, the occurrence of short heavy rainy periods. Thus, in terms of regional development in northern Bulgaria, we have the presence of a suitable environment for the development of agriculture and the food industry.

The area of the region includes the North West, North Central and North East planning regions. Administratively, the North includes 14 districts and 122 municipalities. It can be assumed that the main driving segment of territorial planning in Northern Bulgaria is local self-government. A municipality is a unity of functionally united settlements and inter-village territories, a distinct socio-demographic system. A number of economic-geographical publications emphasize that spatial disparities are sharply increasing at the municipal level. Thus, most researchers share the view that municipalities in Northern Bulgaria are less developed than those in Southern Bulgaria. On the other hand, much of the reason for the deficits is mainly related to the lack of a clear geo-economic profile of Northern Bulgaria, and the formation of strong regional economic nuclei that drive development in the north. This problem can be minimized if conditions are created for the establishment of a regional level of self-government, as well as the creation of 5 geo-economic centers in the cities of Vidin, Pleven, Veliko Tarnovo, Ruse and Varna, which will be the engines of development in Northern Bulgaria. It is assumed that on this basis, the respective regional government structure will be able to independently implement large investment projects, which, together with the promotion of the mono-profiling of most municipalities and the structuring of a dozen small and medium-sized enterprises in them, which will create conditions for increasing GDP per capita in the small municipalities of Northern Bulgaria.

Another important component influencing regional development is population. In Northern Bulgaria 36% of the population is concentrated. Larger cities are Varna, Ruse, Pleven, Dobrich and Shumen. Over the last 20 years, there has been a tendency for an imbalance in the territorial distribution of the population between Northern and Southern Bulgaria. In 2018, the population in Northern Bulgaria is 35.2%, while in 2050 it will be 31.3% of the total population of the country, or a decrease of 3.9%. In recent years, only a few regional centres in Northern Bulgaria have increased their number of inhabitants and these are only the cities of Varna, Veliko Tarnovo and Targovishte. At the same time, some of the regional centers in Northern Bulgaria are losing population, for example Ruse in 2018 lost - 1223 people. Other cities with declining populations include Pleven - with 947 people, Dobrich - 918, Gabrovo - 808 people. The population of Vidin also decreased by 612 inhabitants. and Vratsa - 503 people. With less but the negative trend is the same in the city of Lovech the population has decreased by 455 inhabitants, and of Silistra - by 423. In 2018, several other regional centers saw their population decline, such as Montana - 355 inhabitants, Razgrad 346 inhabitants and Shumen 337 inhabitants. This negative trend can also be seen in some important municipal centers in Northern Bulgaria, for example, in Svishtov the population decreased by 985 people, in Lom by 394 people,

Gorna Oryahovitsa -296 people, Troyan - 253 people, Popovo-210 people and Belene by 203 people. The deteriorated demographic picture further highlights the need to prioritize regional development policies. It is necessary to seek solutions by optimizing the municipalities and districts in the country. It is obvious that reforms are necessary, but whether we opt for a model of reducing municipalities or regrouping them is a political task that regionalists can solve with the necessary arguments. It is clear that Northern Bulgaria is the most affected by the transformation and changes in Bulgaria. The solutions must have a positive sign and set a future and have socio-economic potential. In addition, the current state of spatial organisation (planning structure) is also important. It is directly dependent on the existing structure of the settlement network and the displacement of the population and an assessment of its potential. Thus, in order to determine the trends in the regional development of Northern Bulgaria, it is necessary to implement spatial planning changes to meet the new needs of the population and settlements. The example of Northern Bulgaria can be considered similarly to Southern Bulgaria, where most territorial units have similar problems. The search for new opportunities for new socio-economic regionalisation and the establishment of a three-tier system of government in Bulgaria could be a step in the right direction. Undoubtedly, in this direction is the importance of regional development, which should be highlighted as a real national priority to set the trend towards the modernisation of the regions in Bulgaria.

CONCLUSIONS

Regional development is the science of the management, administration and economics of territory. To develop a territory to help solve economic and social problems in the territory. In our view, villages and small towns (by population) remaining outside the national definition of rural areas should enjoy the same rights and opportunities for the implementation of social, economic and financial programs. The country needs to optimize regional governance mainly due to the peculiarities created in territorial planning and imbalances outlined. By drawing up a new territorial division and collecting passport data and indicators for monitoring and evaluation, we will be able to put into perspective the new priorities for regional development. This means supporting and prioritising the development of regions and administrative units that can become locomotives of progress and development. Improving regional development can encourage the implementation of new and vibrant projects in settlements and towns experiencing difficulties in their socio-economic development.

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