

# **Regional Development and Spatial Planning in Bulgaria: geographical perspectives**

**Assist. Prof. Kosyo Stoychev, PhD**

*Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Faculty of Geology and Geography  
k\_stoychev@mail.bg*

## **Abstract**

In the recent years the development process in Bulgaria came into a very controversial manner of functioning. On the one hand there has been macroeconomic progress and stabilization but on the other side the regional disparities and differentiation has deepened. The regions that have been influenced in the main by direct foreign investments were marked by the high growth rates, such as in the construction sector. The last five years have been a period characterized by public investments in infrastructure and facilities and private in investments in residential buildings, office space and tourist infrastructure (Hotels and vacation houses). As a result many agglomeration cores, vacation sites and environmental sites have been "polluted" by new buildings but with a lack of public infrastructure and utilities. The objective of this article is to investigate the correlation between regional development objectives and the "regulative" regime of the spatial planning in Bulgaria. However, the final practical result shows some negative examples of vulnerable urban, social and environmental impact.

Keywords: Regional development, spatial planning, planning regions plans, general structure plan

## **Introduction**

In the countries that we often mark as developed, spatial planning is a result not only of policy created by market forces, but also a specific type of planning that reflects the stage of socio-economic development and collaboration between the private and public interests. However, these interests should follow-up the modern principle for sustainable spatial development through which the stakeholders – politicians, administration, business associations, entrepreneurs and nongovernmental civil organizations are able to influence the spatial planning process. The stakeholders have many different points of view and different approaches to the process, that we as geographers call "location decisions". As a result of the strong market dependence, location decisions of private and the public authorities always depend on the different land use and their price rates. The specific situation in this case is that the prices reflect the relative individual demand and needs of the stakeholders, their desire to enlarge as well in the business, as well in the space, but on the other side are the real physical and environmental restrictions caused by the different territories and the controversial business and public interests. On the other side these location decisions depend by the spatial planning, that must maintain the good development of all types of territories.

This initial discussion aims to underline the significance of the basic factors and conditions, which determine the political framework in conduction to the spatial planning policy – aiming sustainable development of all territory types. On the other side of the spatial planning is the socio-political task that shapes the different intensity and activity of the economic cycle by sectors, that is why we need absolutely precise, clear and on time statistical information and forecasts, concerning the territories status. In accordance with this, Bulgaria has made efforts

to create a new more effective system for spatial planning and regional development associated with the market needs and municipal self-government administration level. Another factor that plays key role in the spatial planning policy is the necessity to integrate the ecological policies equally to social and economic effects that will shape the future development of space. The result is that spatial planning is being initiated, which is part of the initial environment for achievement of sustainable development and further growth.

In fact, the citizens and the economy create the requirements for spatial structures, which often are controversial. Usually, people expect to be provided with good residential places and prefer the “open space” residences with garden and low intensity and density of constructions, green area and naturally protected landscapes.

In addition, people expect work places that are having locations with high level for services supply and vast commodity goods, which could be reached in short time and low transport expenses. Society needs transport connections, but also low noise levels and polluters. However, the creation of spatial planning that ensures and guarantees all the needs of citizens are a high priority government objective. This is not a prerequisite for further economic development, but it is important for the future competitiveness in relation to the world markets. Such kinds of policy will ensure future social peace and sustainability of the political system. This is why spatial planning should be considered as a high priority political objective. Spatial planning policy should divide several important levels – territory types (urbanised and rural regions), as well as the close located different types of towns which are having the potential to execute the role of spatial cores.

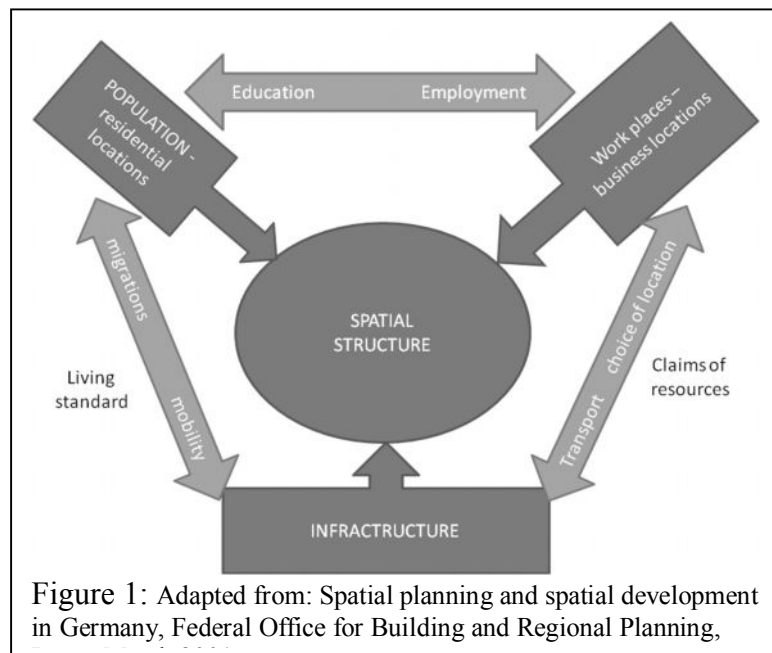


Figure 1: Adapted from: Spatial planning and spatial development in Germany, Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning,

This is not a prerequisite for further economic development, but it is important for the future competitiveness in relation to the world markets. Such kinds of policy will ensure future social peace and sustainability of the political system. This is why spatial planning should be considered as a high priority political objective. Spatial planning policy should divide several important levels – territory types (urbanised and rural regions), as well as the close located different types of towns which are having the potential to execute the role of spatial cores.

Economic and social changes expose this desired spatial structure to danger. When the agglomeration cores expand to include the surrounding territories, this urban growth in territory and traffic can lead to an overload of the urban areas and finally threaten their vitality and attractiveness for more migrants – people and businesses. As a result, the decline of employment rates in the some of the so called “old industrial regions”, some agglomerations lag behind in their economic rates, so their space is less profitable. At the same time, rural regions are in an unequal position because of unfavourable economic structures and weak transport accessibility. As a result, these regions have very few development opportunities.

Bulgaria is a specific case of a country in the South-East Europe in which the so called transition period has been taking too much time. Finally Bulgarian society has experienced some positive development trends. The crucial factors for this success have been accession to NATO and the EU membership. These were the geopolitical strengths that labelled Bulgaria as a stable zone of Europe. This indicator and the international development trends caused unprecedented interest to invest in real estates and properties by people and corporations from all around the world. Fortunately, this possible reaction of international markets coincided

with the economy stabilisation of Bulgaria, low bank credit interest rates and lighted credit procedures. In all these processes the state regulation regime should play a key role.

## **Spatial Planning in Bulgaria**

In Bulgaria self-government level is immature, in a retrospective context, as well as in administrative capacity and management tradition. For less than 50 years the country has suffered nationalisation and denationalisation of the corporations, arable lands, the forests, and finally the opposite process, mass privatization of the state property corporations. The new owners and stakeholders acquired the gained property with quite different information and expectations for their future development and finally they acted in accordance with their corporate interests.

For a long period of time farming in Bulgaria has had few development perspectives. This caused significant migrations of people of fertile ages and a decrease of farming outputs. This was the reason that real estate had very low price rates. However, the urban agglomerations due to the restitution processes that took place there and created a class of property owners, created another line of development – a real estate price “balloon”.

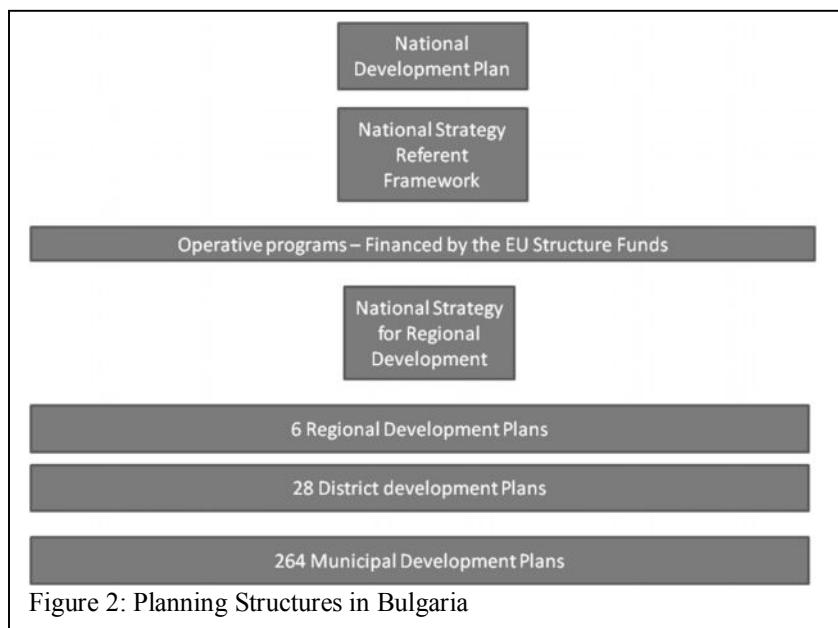
After 2000, the municipalities which were a self-government level of administration, began to use municipal real estate properties as an instrument for investment attraction. This caused changes in the land use of many regulated lands, in zones vitally important for transport infrastructure for the urban centres. As a result of these new economic conditions in 2001 Bulgaria adopted a new Act regulates the interrelations between public and the private needs (the Spatial Planning Act). This Act replaced the Act for Territorial and Settlement Development of Bulgaria. In accordance with the new Act, the requirements for spatial planning in the Republic of Bulgaria are defined by structure, frame schemes and structure plans. The structure frame schemes are two types – national one and regional ones. In accordance to their content they could be divided in two types – complex areas and specialised ones. All the regional schemes reflect the predictions of the National structure scheme. Actually, these regional schemes are the connection with the programming of the regional development.

There are only two types of structure plans, the General Structure Plan – which defines the predominant and structure pattern of the separate parts of the territories, and the Detailed Structure Plan – they make concrete the structure of the territory, its construction regimes and the functions of each land.

## **Regional Development in Bulgaria**

Regional development and regional policy have been a very important part of the policy in Bulgaria for a long period of time, but as a legal imperative of the state it is having very short history. The Regional Development Act was adopted in 1999. For the geography scientific society in Bulgaria it was very important fact. Many geographical researches for decades has “alarmed” for the negative demographic, economic and social changes, which are having strong spatial differentiation among the regions. (Karastoyanov and Popov, 2000; Dimov *et al.*, 2005). More or less, this Act can be considered as a consequence of the scientific discussions and the public expectations, so that development problems can be managed or mitigated.

One of the first results was the initiation of the regional development plans. These plans were created following the “bottom-up” principle. In the first variant some of the levels were missing but the final structure is shown in Figure 2. This planned system was based on a completely new for Bulgaria. It is too early to discuss the results because their actions are planned up to 2013, but I suppose that they will reach at maximum 30 % of its objectives.



My view is that the main problem of the development process in Bulgaria is the changes and the regional differentiation of the population (Figure 3).

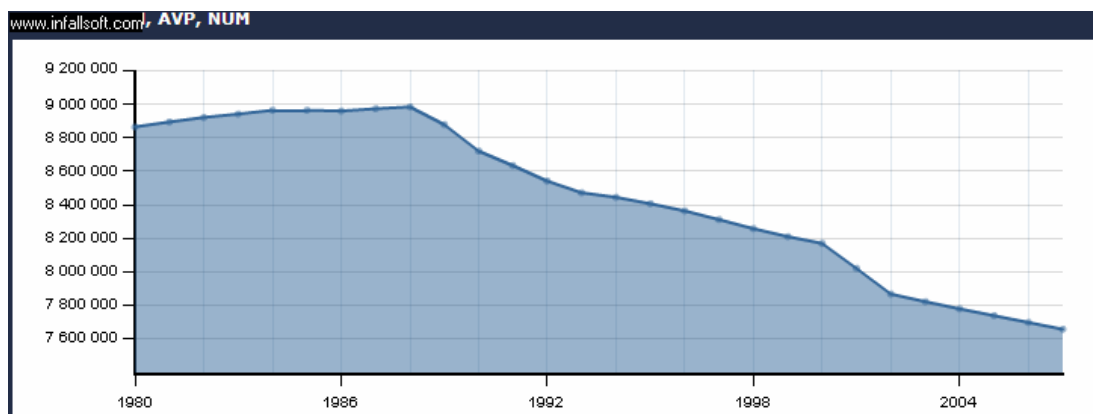


Figure 3: Population in Bulgaria for the period 1980-2007, Source: www.stat.bg

External migrations to the EU countries and USA increased the relative number of older people and the median age reached 42 years. Some regions experienced a situation of rapid depopulation, which caused the liquidation of hundreds villages. On the other side the internal migrations caused unprecedented concentration of population in the South-West region and especially the capital city Sofia. Hence, the North-west region and the South-East regions decreased their relative weight and caused the changes in the spatial configuration of the NUTS II system in 2006, only 7 years after its initial adoption. (See Figures 4, 5 and 6)

Figure 4

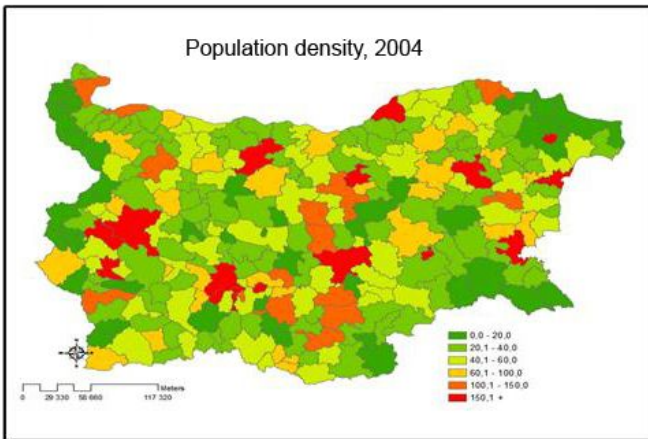
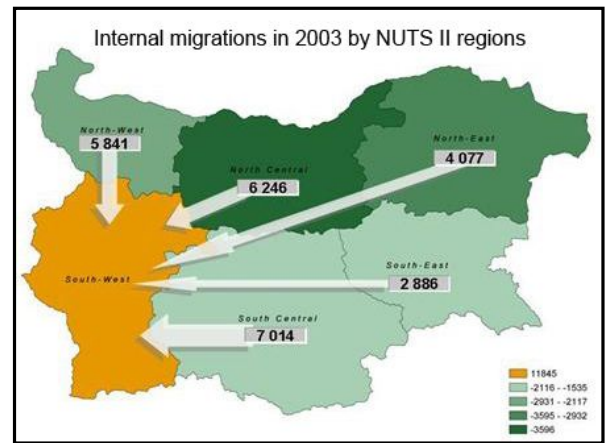
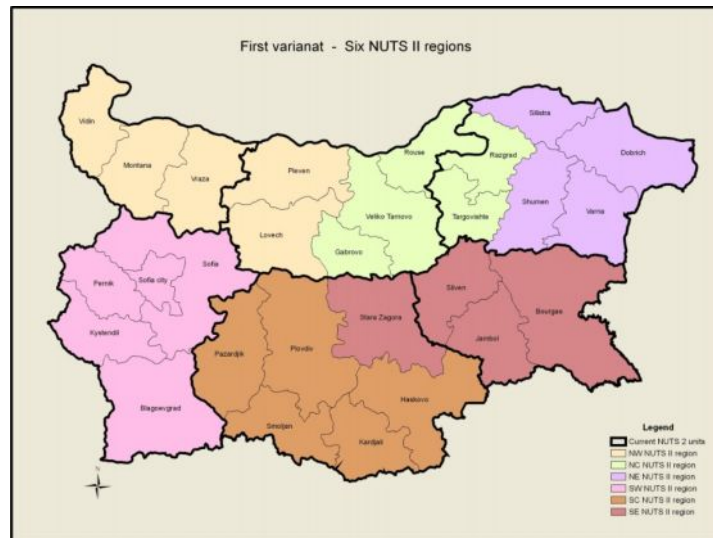


Figure 5



Source: National strategy for demographic development 2006-2020

Figure 6



## Conclusion

The spatial planning process and regional development in Bulgaria are facing many problems. The above mentioned structure plans apparently do not have any other normative and functional connections. Hence, the spatial planning and regional development are activities programmed by authorities with different competencies and what is more important the financial resources about these activities are not in reciprocal action. Because of this reason, spatial planning and its instruments is getting much more finance when compared with the regional development. The corporations and the municipal authorities prefer to invest on their structure plans because these plans are able to legalise their investment intentions. However, here comes the lack of connections with the long term objectives that regional development has to guarantee. Bulgaria has to overcome this disintegration of the both systems, otherwise the regional development system could become an instrument that is “capturing” the negative socio-economic trends but having no power to manage these negatives. One of the approaches for the decision of this problem is the initiation of wide scale public discussion, the initiation

of many scientific projects that have to create new regionalisation of the country and new future for its regions.

### **References**

Закон за устройство на територията, 31.08.2008 г. Обн. ДВ. бр.50 от 30 Май 2008г.

Закон за регионалното развитие, ДВ. бр.1 от 2 Януари 2001г.,

Димов Н., И. Марков, К. Стойчев, Балансирано развитие на районите в България – същност и главни инструменти. – В: Сборник доклади СУБ и развитието на науката и висшето образование том II, В. Търново 2005г. с. 53 – 58

Карастоянов, С., А. Попов. Регионалната политика и икономиката на България. – В: Обучението по география, кн. 4-5, 1997

Карастоянов, С., П. Славейков, Регионална география на България (райони за планиране – кратка характеристика), Университетско издателство “Св. Кл. Охридски”, София, 2000

Национална стратегия за регионално развитие на Република България за периода 2005-2015г., НИЦТР, София, 2005

Национална стратегическа референтна рамка, програмен период 2007-2013, София, 2006

National strategy for demographic development 2006-2020, Ministry council, 2005

Spatial planning and spatial development in Germany, Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning, Bonn, March 2001