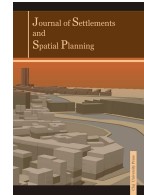




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# Actual Problems of Bulgarian Rural Regions

**Veselin BOYADZHIEV<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> "St. Kliment Ohridski" University, Faculty of Geology and Geography, Department of Social and Economic Geography, Sofia, BULGARIA

E-mail: [v.boiadjiev@abv.bg](mailto:v.boiadjiev@abv.bg)

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## ABSTRACT

In Bulgarian Regional Development, rural regions hold an important place. They are new elements in the organization of Bulgarian territory, imposed by its membership into the European Union. More than 40% of the Bulgarian population lives in the rural regions. They cover more than 80% of the national territory. The main problems of their development are: depopulation, poverty, weak economy, poor infrastructure, low management capacity. Rural regions have been drawn up by the administrative municipalities (obshtini). Their activity does not meet the needs of local development. We need an administrative-territorial reform, especially at the local level. Cross-border collaboration is minimal, too. Unfortunately, the participation of geographers in the development of rural region is insignificant. It is not organized and it is from time to time and here and there.

Rural regions turned out to be a new problem for Bulgarian science and practice. In accordance with traditions, there are two main types of settlements in Bulgaria – villages and cities. They have different functions and way of life (in the city people live in a modern way).

Their development cannot be characterized by an aspiration for better life, but by a conflict between them. This conflict lies in the traditional politics of the centre (city) to exploit the periphery (village). That is why every village strives to become city because this is the only thought that guarantees future development.

This medieval tradition since the Ottoman Empire has kept unchanged till nowadays. Although the law sets out several criteria for a village to become a city, the periodic process of increasing the Bulgarian cities continues. This also stays the same in periods of heavy social crisis, including the demographic crisis.

Various models of administrative-territorial organization used by the Bulgarian authorities could not overcome the conflicts in relations between

villages and cities. These conflicts shift into the concepts for territory, as well. In accordance with the Bulgarian tradition cities are separate islands among the hostile territories that they exploit. All researchers in the past pointed out that Bulgaria is a rural country and that a smaller part of Bulgarian population and greater part of the minorities, except the Turkish minority, live in the city.

The migration of a greater part of the Bulgarian population from the village to the city and the development and transformation of the main villages into cities was fast and unfocused process. In this process, often called urbanization, planning and science were missing. Very often the reasons were just political. That is why the territorial organization serves the cities, while the villages are subordinated settlements with unclear functions.

As late as the '70s of the past century the concept of spatial planning started to change. In 1977 for the first time localities were created, as called system of settlements. The main aim for Bulgarian municipality today is to remain a system of settlements, in which relations of conflict should be

replaced by solidarity for development and competitiveness.

In fact, the urbanization still goes on today, especially statistically. The number of cities keeps on growing. Their share in the national economy, education, science and culture gets bigger and bigger. Two hundred villages have less than 10 inhabitants, whereas nearly the same number of villages has no population at all. At first the depopulation spread over the periphery and mountainous regions, although today it has spread in the area of direct city influence. The membership into the European Union provided new opportunities for the development of Bulgaria. The compliance of Bulgarian with the European territory created numerous problems. The rural has to remain in the Bulgarian heritage. It turned up as a new, unknown element in our life.

At the same time, the Bulgarian society expected a fast membership in the EU. After the economic crisis in 1996-1997 there was a unanimous consent about the membership in EU, in the fastest possible way. In terms of territorial organization, the country reached one very worrying paradox. In 2000 Bulgaria returned to the territorial-administrative organization model which used to function in the former socialist period.

Today, democracy still has not provided a new model for territorial development of Bulgaria. That is why the EU's demands were accepted mechanically and were placed over the scheme of the socialist period. The next step was plagiarism. The state authority stole from the geographers one of the schemes for the economic organization from the end of the '50s and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it was announced as the new European territorial scheme for the Bulgarian development.

This scheme, whose structure included six regions, was announced as a part of the adaptation to the NUTS system (Eurostat). The regions from the '50s were named "economically - planned" at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The idea and competence for their content were missing.

Today we are waiting for new indicators, methods and politics from abroad; it is considered better to be provided by the EU, whereas the Bulgarian politics for the national, regional and local organization are missing. The centralization is maintained. There is no power and no economy in the regions. Their governor is appointed from the prime-minister, whereas municipalities (the local level) completely depend on the ministry of finance and the state government.

The process of planning and insurance of territorial units of different ranks was very fast and of a very poor quality. It is a curious fact that it all started from the smallest local units and municipalities.

The role of the state was not clear in their first regional plans for development (2000-2006). The role of the middle level of planning and governing was obscure. The idea was the fast adaptation to NUTS, which aimed to facilitate the decision for the important territorial tasks such as: planning, government, demography, economy, settlements etc. A large part of the Bulgarian and European money was sold in order to be announced that Bulgaria is ready for the EU membership.

The low quality and lack of scientific insurance have become most obvious in the documentation for the middle level – the regions (NUTS II) and districts (NUTS III). At first, the regions were announced as "economically-planned" and millions of Euro was spent for useless current documents for development. Later, the regions became only "planned" then only "economic" and by the end just "statistical".

This evolution sets the question, whether Bulgarian statistics is a science, which provides qualitative products, or it serves the current governing politicians. The lack of democratic territorial alternative of the post socialistic crisis placed Bulgaria on the last place in Europe.

Bulgaria became member of the EU only in 2007. This created huge expectations. The reality however was completely different. The economy went into recession.

The country disbursed only 1-2% out of the European programmes and structural funds. Today this share is of 4% and this is considered a huge success of the government. The membership fee in case of the poorest country in EU is three times more than the funds that it has disbursed so far.

In this complex situation the European idea for rural regions came to Bulgaria through the press. It is new for the Bulgarian society and still remains unknown. The origination of the rural regions has been carried out fast, at the administrative level, without any social debate and in relation to the national traditions.

On the one side Bulgaria has no participation in the policies of establishment and development of ruralism, but on the other side it has to implement it. Bulgarian settlements and territorial traditions are much more ancient than the European ones. For example, in Bulgaria, the settlements with population between 30 000 and 50 000 people are considered medium-size centres according to their population and economic potential. We even have centres equivalent to NUTS II with population of more than 50.000 people.

During socialism Bulgaria was considered a medium developed industrial-agricultural country. Today it is a poor, undeveloped country, although with market economy.

Mechanically and absolutely incorrect, from the science point of view, rurality was translated in Bulgarian as an issue related to the village. Its origins come from the term of village regions, which was set to replace the term rural regions, because in Bulgarian language it lacks in meaning, therefore it misses in Bulgarian science and culture, as well.

Nowadays, Bulgaria does not use the large selection of terms for regional organization of the economy, population and politics. Regional organization relies on the administrative territorial units.

Therefore, they are categorized into the following categories: the State (Nuts 0), statistical regions (Nuts II), which do not participate in the territorial development of the society, administrative districts (NUTS III) and "self-governing" municipalities (LAW I).

The functional organization (division) into city and rural regions significantly differs from the structure of state administration, according to which we pursue the state regional politics and use the funds from the European Union.

The determination of the rural regions' parameters has shown the lack of active local and regional territorial level. Bulgarian districts and especially municipalities do not have the necessary capacity for planning, governance and development. The realization of the "Leader" programme in Bulgaria is still in the phase of project.

The lack of sufficient capacity for administrative, demographic and economic purposes at the local level is the obstacle to the implementation of other policies for the development of rural regions. Their territory is a mechanical mixture of several municipalities in which the links in the chains of agricultural business are barely created today.

On the one hand, the contradiction between the goals to diversify the economy of rural regions, by decreasing the role of the traditional agriculture and increasing their attractiveness using the income effect, which to compete with the cities is obvious. On the other hand the tasks regulated by these politics to be pursued by the ministry of agriculture, is also noticeable.

The ministry of agriculture and foods has no regional policies of its own. As all the other state institutions do, it proves not to be interested in the geographer's opinions and other regionalists and use only the statistical territorial scheme.

That is why some Bulgarian municipalities are submitted to central administration to consider some agricultural policies, whereas in case of policies for the development of rural regions they are included in other territorial configuration, thus having different goals.

The documents for rural regions development are prepared and implemented under the direct control of the European Union. At the same time, there is no other policy for the development of the urbanized regions.

Bulgarian reality shows that agriculture and ruralism have existed in the urbanized regions, whereas the urbanization processes are reaching the rural regions.

This shows that the current municipalities and administrative districts cannot accomplish the rural aim with ineffective policies.

Agriculture holds the central place in the Bulgarian economy. It remains the main factor triggering the Bulgarian regional development.

The differentiation between rurality and development of the traditional agriculture cannot be the same as in the already developed western countries. Besides this, Bulgaria disposes of significant resources for the development of bio-agriculture, rural and agricultural tourism.

The policies proposed for the rural regions have to be considered in accordance with the traditions of the suburban agriculture, which makes that a significant part of the agriculture production becomes the only sector in the Bulgarian economy, which in the period of global economy crisis, still follows the tradition so as to have a positive trade balance.

Bulgaria has to decrease the number of its municipalities and sharply increase their economic capacity. Decentralization and deconcentration can be evinced in the creation of mechanism for the relations between the settlements within the municipality. This way, there will be established the principles for a steady, balanced and sustainable development and the diversification of the economy in rural regions. Nevertheless, the interests of the settlements will be guaranteed.

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