



TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF BULGARIAN REGIONS FOR THE PERIOD 2000-2012

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ABSTRACT

Cohesion policy of the European Union, which aims harmonious development through creation and implementation of actions, leading to strengthening of economic and social cohesion, is substantial for the Bulgarian regional policy objectives and principles. A top priority of the Bulgarian strategic documents, developed in accordance with the European regulations, is sustainable and balanced development of the regions in Bulgaria by reducing inter-regional and intra-regional disparities and development of endogenous capacities at regional and local level.

The objective of the report is to make a thorough study of the economic and social development of the six Bulgarian regions at level two for the period 2000-2012, using the method of comparative analysis.

The survey results show a growing trend of concentration of population and economic activity in the capital city, which leads to rise of the Southwestern region gross value added to more than 70%. Contrary to that ascertainment is the conclusion that the other five Bulgarian regions are among the last ten EU regions as concerning the indicator GDP per capita.

The results of the study concluded that by 2012 Bulgaria has not made much progress in the process of leveling the regional differences, set as primary objective of the regional policy in 2005.

Key words: Economic and Social Cohesion, European Union, NUTS regions, reduction of regional disparities

INTRODUCTION

The formulation and implementation of the national regional policy in Bulgaria is based on the Constitutional allegation that "The State shall create conditions for a balanced development of the different regions in the country and assist the territorial authorities and activities through financial, credit and investment policies" (1). In accordance with the Cohesion policy of the European Union, which is a concentrated expression of the integration process and is based on the principle of mutual solidarity in support of the lagging regions, Bulgarian regional policy is a policy for social and

economic development with a specific focus on the underdeveloped areas.

Under the conditions of transition to market economy the regional disparities are exacerbated further as major reforms in recent years take into account to a small extent the regional differences and this leads to an increase in the imbalance of the regional characteristics and to a different adaptability of the different regions and settlements.

The principle of territorial solidarity requires the establishment of relatively equal living conditions in the different parts of the country as the regional and national economies are closely linked and market forces cannot ensure balanced regional development. (2)

Regional policy is undoubtedly one of the most dynamic areas of development in Bulgaria in the last years. A legal framework and institutional structure has gained experience in the planning

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and coordination between the different sectors. With the completion of the negotiations on Chapter 21 "Regional policy and co-ordination of structural instruments", the adoption of the Regional Development Act in 1999 and the additional normative documents favorable conditions are created for the implementation of a modern regional policy in our country.

The strategic documents, developed in Bulgaria for the implementation of the national and European regional policy include:

- Strategy for the participation in the Structural and Cohesion Funds;
- National Development Plan for the period 2000 - 2006;
- National Strategic Reference Framework;
- National Strategy for Regional Development of the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2005 - 2012 period;
- National Strategy for Regional Development of the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2012 - 2022.

As each of the 27 European Union Member States Bulgaria aims at reduction of the economic and social disparities, at development of the economy and at achievement of a sustainable growth and higher employment, using stimulus functions of the competitiveness and innovation. These objectives are set out in both the regulatory framework and in each of the strategic documents, concerning the development of the Bulgarian regions. The National Strategy for Regional Development (NSRF) for the period 2005-2015 is the basic document for determining the long-term objectives and priorities of the regional policy. It provides strategic direction and levels of the regional policy and the starting point for the acquisition and distribution of EU aid in the implementation of programs related to regional development (3).

Operational Program "Regional Development" 2007-2013, on the other hand focuses on the practical implementation of Priority 4 of the National Strategic Reference Framework - "Balanced Territorial Development" and outlines the main areas in which Bulgaria receives funding for the regions by the European Fund for Regional Development. The program is a real expression of the need to improve socio-economic conditions in the Bulgarian regions at

level two, and to overcome their gap with the EU regions on the one hand, and to reduce inter-regional disparities in Bulgaria on the other (4 and 5).

ANALYSIS OF THE GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT IN THE BULGARIAN REGIONS AT LEVEL TWO

For the purpose of the regional policy in the Republic of Bulgaria in 2000 six regions at level two were established according to the criteria of European Union NUTS 2 regions. The Classification that Bulgaria adopted was agreed between National Statistical Institutes and Eurostat (Statistical Office of the European Union). The establishment of the Bulgarian NUTS regions at level two was determined by at least two sets of reasons: the objective requirements of the regional planning and the formal requirements placed on the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union.

Regions at NUTS 2 are used for two main purposes (6):

- Collection and analysis of comparable statistical information;
- Identification of eligible areas and allocation of resources for economic and social cohesion of the EU, as financial resources in priority EU objective 1 are targeted to regions at NUTS 2.

Bulgarian regions at level two are not administrative-territorial units within the meaning of the Administrative and Territorial Division of the Republic of Bulgaria Act (7) and are used solely for the purposes of regional development and regional statistics. Their scope is defined by the Regional Development Act and comply with the requirements of Regulation (EU) No 1059/2003 of the EU, which aims to ensure comparability and comparability of the statistical information for the European regions. Bulgarian regions at level two are six in number and have the following names (8): Northwest (Severozapaden) – NW; North Central (Severen centralen) - NC; Northeast region (Severoiztochen) – NE; Southeast (Yugoiztochen) - SE; Southwest (Yugozapaden) - SW; South Central (Yujen centralen) - SC.

According to the size of the created GDP Bulgarian regions are among the least developed in the EU. Compared with the largest EU NUTS 2 region Île de France, which encompasses Paris

and the areas around it, Bulgarian regions create from 0,46% to 2,59% in 2007 and from 0,43% to 2,94% in 2010 of its GDP.

The contribution of the six Bulgarian region at level two in the country's GDP is unequal (**Table 1**). In 2000, 34,6% of the GDP is created in the Southwest region, and only 11,8% is the

contribution of the Northwest region. By 2010, the differences between the most developed and least developed region grow, and the contribution of Southwest reached a level of 48,1%, while that of the Northwest fell to 7,17 percent.

Table 1. Regional gross domestic product for 2000-2010 by Bulgarian NUTS 2 regions - million Eur (9)

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
NW	1662	1796	1860	1895	1985	2188	2252	2506	2783	2601	2586
NC	1482	1654	1846	1849	1975	2219	2376	2647	2965	2827	2851
NE	1680	1801	1962	2110	2317	2604	3001	3406	3973	3703	3836
SE	2164	2168	2249	2492	2757	3193	3416	3690	4317	4248	4333
SW	4858	5715	6549	7184	8168	9453	11422	14053	16394	16651	17371
SC	2189	2420	2561	2846	3186	3599	4010	4470	4999	4904	5074

In terms of the indicator GDP in PPS per capita Bulgarian regions are also well below the EU average and leading regions as concerning this indicator. Half of Bulgarian regions - Northwest, North Central and South Central are at about 30% of the EU average. In 2008 Northwest region ranks last in GDP per capita indicator, which classifies it as the most undeveloped area across the EU. South-East and Northeast regions reach values of about 36-37% of the EU average. Leading region in the country is South West region, which reaches 75% of the EU average in 2010 (**Table 2**).

Data on the Gross Domestic Product in PPS per capita in a percent of the EU27 average allow the following conclusions about the changes in the indicator in 2010 compared to 2000 :

- GDP in PPS for the Southeast region increased by 20%;
- For North Central region the indicator increased by 26%;
- GDP in PPS for the Northeast region grew by 33,3%;
- For the South Central region the indicator increased by 36,3%;
- GDP in PPS for 2010 increased by 102,7% in the Southwest;
- For the Northwest region the indicator has not changed.

The trend that is observed in the five of the Bulgarian regions is gradual and small in size reduction of the large distance to the average EU level. Northwest region, however, continues to lag significantly while maintaining its level of 2000. Despite the increase in the GDP in most of the six Bulgarian regions the interregional differences in Bulgaria are exacerbated. For the period 2000-2010, the greatest rise in GDP is observed in the Southwest region, as the difference between him and most underdeveloped region from 15% in 2000 increasing to 49% in 2010.

It is clear that while by the year 2000 (the beginning of the analysed period) between Bulgarian regions there are no fundamental differences in terms of the GDP per capita (with the exception of the South West with 37% of the EU27 GDP other five regions are at a level between 22% and 30% of the EU27 average), at 2010 interregional differences are substantial. At the end of the analyzed period three types of regions are formed and the differences in their economic development increased considerably: the most developed (SW) with a GDP 75% of the EU average; NE and SE regions with GDP, amounting to 36% of the Community average and the third group of underdeveloped regions with a GDP between 26% and 30%: Northwest, North Central and South Central regions.

Table 2. Regional gross domestic product (PPS per capita in % of the EU27 average) for 2000-2010 by NUTS 2 regions (9)

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
NW	26	26	27	27	27	28	26	27	28	27	26
NC	23	25	28	27	27	28	28	28	30	29	29
NE	27	27	28	30	30	32	33	34	37	36	36
SE	30	28	28	31	32	34	33	33	36	36	36
SW	37	41	46	49	51	54	60	66	73	75	75
SC	22	23	23	26	27	28	28	29	30	30	30

TRENDS IN THE POPULATION, EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT IN BULGARIAN REGIONS AT LEVEL TWO

Demographic trends could not be seen as an immediate object of the regional policy impact. This development is a result of the influence of many socio-economic and cultural factors that are within the range of economic, social, educational, health, cultural, etc. policies. Therefore the study of the main characteristics of the regional demographic differences aims rather to identify the location of territorial trends and problems in this sphere.

The least populated NUTS 2 region within Bulgaria is Northwest region whose population in 2011 decreased by 21,59% compared to the initial period of the study (2000). The negative trends are also high in: North Central region, whose population has decreased by 17,82%; South Central region with 12,19% reduction of the residents and Southeast region whose population decreased by 10,84% (**Table 3**).

There are two Bulgarian regions whose population also declined, but much more slowly: in the Northeast region, the reduction amounted to 5,6% and in Southwest it the variation is negligible and the rate is 0,4%.

These statistics lead to the conclusion that in terms of the indicator for population number regional disparities and territorial imbalances in Bulgaria for the period 2000-2011 has worsened. In 2000 the inhabitants of the most sparsely populated Bulgarian region (Northeast), amounted 12,5% of the total number of the Bulgarian population, while in the Southwest region lived 26% of the population. In 2011 Northwest region is the most sparsely populated region with 11,5% of the population, while the population in the Southwest region has risen to 29%. These negative trends in the depopulation of the small towns and villages will extent in the future in view of the migration intensification to the Southwest region or outside Bulgaria, where there are more and better opportunities for employment, higher income and standard of living.

Table 3. Annual average population (1 000) by Bulgarian NUTS 2 regions for 2000-2011 (9)

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
NW	1074,2	1045,9	1016,2	999,4	982,9	966,3	950,8	936,8	923	909,3	894,7	842,4
NC	1043,9	1013,3	981,5	971,8	962,9	954,1	945,3	936,6	928,1	919,6	908,4	857,8
NE	1021,9	1018,3	1015,4	1009,1	1003,8	999,2	995,2	992,8	991,8	990,2	985,7	964,1
SE	1206,5	1183	1158,8	1150,8	1143,3	1137,3	1132,3	1127,9	1123,8	1119,1	1111,5	1075,7
SW	2142,9	2120,4	2101	2107,1	2112,4	2116,8	2117,8	2115,7	2114,8	2113,8	2113	2132,5
SC	1680,7	1639,3	1595,6	1585,3	1575,8	1566,1	1557,6	1550	1542	1533,2	1520,9	1475,8

In terms of the employment rate of the population in the age group 20-64 comparisons with EU regions reveal (similar to the GDP) that nearly all European regions have a high level of employment than Bulgarian regions of level two.

At the beginning of the analyzed period - 2001, only Southwest region had similar values to some of the most backward regions of the European Member States.

Despite the rear positions of the Bulgarian regions in comparison with other European countries, in the period 2001-2008 the employment rate of the age group 20-64 tended to gradually increase, which is manifested by slight fluctuations in each of the six regions at level two in Bulgaria. In 2001 the employment rate ranges from 46,1% for the Northwest region and 61,3% for the Southwest region, with an average of 53,9 percent for the country (Table 4). If the employment is seen as an objective criterion for the state of economic development, the Northwest region has emerged as the most troubled region.

Regional disparities in the employment are formed and developed in the following national context: relatively low level of employment than the European average (employment rate in Bulgaria amounted to 61,6% and is 7,4% lower than the EU 27 in 2012 – 69,04%), a clear downward trend in employment over the period 2007-2010, which is more pronounced than in

the EU 27. Therefore, the shocks of the economic crisis affected more strongly on the Bulgarian labor market compared to the EU average.

During the whole period Southwest region has the highest employment rate among all Bulgarian regions, and in 2012 the employment rate there (69,2%) is higher not only than the average for the country (59,7 %), but also from that of the EU27 (69,04%). The employment in Northwest region is the lowest among all Bulgarian regions throughout the whole period (Table 4).

It must be emphasized that, unlike GDP, the differences between regions at level 2 in terms of the employment of the population between 20 and 64 during the period 2001 to 2012 are smaller, with a slight tendency to decrease (the difference in employment between NW and SW region in 2001 amounted to 15,2% and in 2012 they are reduced to 11,2%).

Table 4. Employment rate of the age group 20-64 for the period 2001-2012 by Bulgarian NUTS 2 regions % (9)

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
NW	46,1	46,6	53,3	54,7	54,9	59,8	64	65,9	63,9	60,1	58	58
NC	54,5	55,1	55,7	57,9	58,2	59,7	63,2	64,4	64	60,4	59,4	59,8
NE	54,3	56	56,4	58,2	61,8	64,5	66	68,4	65,1	61,9	60,2	58,9
SE	50,8	53,6	58,3	61,2	61,7	65	66,8	69,5	67,9	64,9	62	62,4
SW	61,3	61,9	64,2	66,4	67,7	71,3	75	77,5	76,4	72,8	69,6	69,2
SC	56,2	55,4	58,1	61,9	60,3	63	67,3	69,8	66,9	63,3	60,1	61,2

Table 5. Unemployment rate by Bulgarian NUTS 2 regions for the period 2001-2012 (9)

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
NW	29,8	28,9	12,1	12,5	12,6	11	9	7,1	8	11	12,8	12,3
NC	19,6	17,4	14,7	14,8	12,5	13,5	10,7	8,5	8,4	11,5	12,8	14,3
NE	22,5	20,9	20,3	17,7	12,1	11	10,8	8,6	10,4	14,5	15,4	18,2
SE	25,4	22,3	15,4	13,1	8,3	8,1	6,5	5,8	6,6	10,6	11,5	11,9
SW	15,5	13,6	11,3	9,3	7,6	6,5	3,9	2,9	4,1	6,8	7,5	8,2
SC	18,6	17,3	11,9	9,7	11	8,2	5,6	5,1	7,3	11,4	12,9	13,8

In terms of the unemployment rates in the period 2001-2012 territorial differences are formed and developed in the following national context: discontinuance in 2008 of the downward trend in the unemployment, which in 2009 began to form a trend towards rapid increase, which already in 2010 is beyond the

average European level (the unemployment rate in Bulgaria is 11%, 1.65% higher than the EU 27). This again indicates the greater vulnerability of Bulgarian labor market to the economic crisis.

Differences between Bulgarian regions at level

2 over the period change from medium to low, which indicates a trend of reduction in the differentiation as concerning this negative indicator (**Table 5**). The main factors for these differences are:

- A low level of unemployment in the Southwest region: in 2010, the unemployment rate there (6.8%) was lower not only than the average for the country (11%), but also from that of the EU 27 (9,7%);
- The high level of unemployment in his constituency (14.5%), being more pronounced impact of seasonal factors.

Regional disparities in employment and unemployment have long term negative effect not only on the reproduction of the labor force, but also determine the intensification of the processes of desertification, non-use of resources, migration, overpopulation in a limited number of cities.

ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH, TECHNOLOGY, INNOVATION AND INVESTMENT IN BULGARIAN REGIONS

Knowledge and access to research, innovation and technology have become the driving force of growth in modern economies, such as the European union.

Existing indicators in Bulgaria, which serve to assess the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the regional differences in the development of research, technology and innovation capacity showed many disadvantages of Bulgaria and Bulgarian regions.

Traditional research centers in Bulgaria are universities, research institutes and units of the Bulgarian Science Academy. The network of research centers in the country covers a large number of universities (51) and independent colleges (8). Southwest, North Central, South Central and Northeast regions stand out with a high concentration of universities and colleges in comparison with Southeast and Northwest region.

The indicator for the costs incurred for research and development (R&D) in 2010 as a percentage of GDP is low (0,33%) compared to other European countries (0,65% for the

EU25), and the trend is stable in recent years (as compared with the target set in the Strategy Europe 2020 of 3% by 2020).

Data from Bulgarian Statistical Institute reveals that from 20,810 people employed in the research sector in 2011, 13 387 people (over 64%) are located in the Southwest region. Less staff in this sector works in the Northwest region - 578 people in 2011.

Data for research, technology and innovation show that regional disparities in these indicators are very high in Bulgaria. In Bulgaria there is a clear trend towards R&D expenditures to be made disproportionately in the most developed areas and the share of R&D expenditure to GDP shows very large differences in the regions at level 2 (**Table 6**).

By 2002, the share of Southwest region is 56,8%, while the contribution of the Northwest region is 5,6% of all costs incurred for research in Bulgaria. By 2010, 52% of all expenditure incurred in the Southwest region (and in the capital city). As a leading region in R&D expenditure to GDP Southwest region is with an increasing share: from 0,79% in 2007 to 1,03% in 2010, far away from this level remain other regions. Less resources for R&D as a percent of GDP in 2010 are set aside in North Central region: 0,13%, which represents only 6.6% of the total research expenditure incurred in the country. Despite the low percentage of research funds in the most underdeveloped Bulgarian region comparison to 2002 suggests that there is a very slight decrease in the index for Southwest region and this results in an increase of the share of the less developed areas of the Bulgarian regions at level two.

Localization of foreign investments in Bulgaria is stable over the years model expressing the preferences of foreign investors to choose regions that are highly urbanized, with well-developed infrastructure, skilled human resources and easy access to the space for maintenance and production. About 63% of foreign investment in the country are concentrated in the Southwest region, including about 50% in the capital city Sofia. In other regions, the share of foreign capital does not exceed 10% of the total, with the exception of the Northeast region (12%). Exclusively low is

the rate in the Northwest region: 2,6% (10). This shows the lack of prerequisites forming attractiveness for foreign investors and regional

policy should create conditions to overcome this imbalance.

Table 6. Total intramural R&D expenditure by Bulgarian NUTS 2 regions % GDP (9)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
NW	0,1	0,1	0,12	0,11	0,14	0,15	0,12	0,16	0,13
NC	0,2	0,17	0,16	0,08	0,1	0,08	0,09	0,13	0,13
NE	0,18	0,23	0,21	0,2	0,26	0,2	0,22	0,3	0,23
SE	0,15	0,15	0,1	0,08	0,15	0,16	0,18	0,18	0,22
SW	1	0,99	1,01	0,94	0,85	0,79	0,77	0,89	1,03
SC	0,13	0,15	0,13	0,14	0,14	0,22	0,36	0,21	0,23

CONCLUSION

Balanced regional development is a fundamental policy of the European Union, which is based on the principles of solidarity and cohesion. The need for regional development policy is determined by the fact that the principle of territorial solidarity requires relatively equal living conditions in different parts of the EU. The existing regional differences in each country give rise to social and political problems. In addition regional and national economies are closely related (national development can be represented as a sum of the development of the different regions in the country), and the market forces alone cannot ensure balanced regional development (11). The main purpose and priorities of the regional policy of Bulgaria are set out in the regulatory framework and strategic documents developed in the period 2004-2007 and are aimed at reducing disparities between regions, achieving economic, social and territorial cohesion.

The paper seeks an answer whether the statistics for the indicators GDP, employment and unemployment of the population, costs for R&D and foreign investment appear to confirm the basis of the declarations in the Regional Development Act and the National Strategy for Regional Development for equalization of interregional differences in Bulgaria. In the paper is used the method for comparative analysis of trends in the period 2000-2012 on selected indicators in the six Bulgarian regions at level two and this method allows an answer to the question for the progress, made in the reduction of regional disparities.

Bulgarian regions are one of the most economically weak regions in EU. The level of economic development, measured by GDP per capita, showed significant differences between the Southwest region, which has a tendency of increase in the level of development, and the other five regions. The lowest index permanently since 2004 emerged Northwest region.

In 2010 the GDP per capita in most developed Bulgarian region - Southwest, reaches 75% of the EU27average. Other regions have values between 26% (Northwest) and 36% (Northeast, North Central, Southeast and South Central region) compared to the average for the EU 27. In the capital city – Sofia, is concentrated a significant part of the economic activity, and it remains the most attractive place for business activities in the country. Regional differences are reinforced by deepening the concentration trend. The population is concentrated in Sofia, where is formed the biggest part of the gross domestic product. In practice, the territory of Bulgaria is characterized not so much by the differences between the different regions, but by the difference between the capital and the rest of the country.

Although regional differences in employment and unemployment of the population tend to decrease slightly in the period 2001-2012, the imperative is to conduct targeted regional policy for the creation of new jobs and create employment in the Northwest, North Central, Southeast and South Central region, where economic activity is below the average for the country and to avoid massive movement of labor from regions with lower employment to an area with higher employment. This is a prerequisite

for permanent migration of people (internal and external) in working age to areas with higher levels of employment.

The main conclusion of the analysis of the innovation level is that the share of R&D expenditure in GDP of the country is small. At regional level in 2010 Northwest and North Central region are last in European union R&D share in GDP with their 0,13%. Other Bulgarian regions except the Southwest region have R&D costs about 0,22% to 0,23% in 2010. Southwest region has the highest share of R&D in GDP of 0,89% in 2009 and 1,03 % in 2010.

The analysis by demographic and economic indicators show that the Southwest region stands out above the rest regions and that over the last ten years, this difference has increased. This region is close to the average level of European regions and displays options to go to the category of transition regions with GDP per capita of more than 75% of the European union average. There is no doubt that the differences between Southwest and other regions at level 2 is due to Sofia. The capital city and its agglomeration area dominates the national space much more than in past periods, exacerbating the problem "center-periphery" at national level.

Meanwhile Northwest region occupies the last place in almost all major development indicators. Other regions, especially the North Central region, however, are closer in their development level to Northwestern than to the Southwest, from which lag seriously.

The result of the analysis leads to the conclusion that Bulgaria has not achieved its main objective and nowadays the levels of development among the six regions at level two are not balanced and equal. While in 2000 general interregional differences in Bulgaria are relatively small, the trends in recent years show an increase in regional disparities in demographic and economic indicators.

Based on these findings, it is obvious that some of the most deprived regions at level two - Northwest, North Central and South Central

region are lagging increasingly in their development, and this is contrary to Bulgarian aims for reduction of the economic and social disparities among the regions at level two and to objective one of the EU Cohesion Policy - Convergence. This requires further efforts and application of appropriate national public policies to equalize regional differences between Bulgarian regions at level two in the next programming period 2014 – 2020.

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