

## THE REGIONAL VARIATIONS AND PECULIARITIES IN THE STRUCTURING AND DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS IN BULGARIA

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### Abstract

*This article is dedicated to the problems of rural areas in Bulgaria. The article focuses on municipalities that need to implement regional policies in rural areas. Reducing the rural population is a serious challenge to the potential of the rural labor force. Labor supply restrictions apply to municipalities with an unfavorable demographic structure and a growing population over working age. Social problems are related to the aging population and vulnerable social groups. In order to identify groups of problems close to other countries in Southeast Europe, we need to take a closer look at rural development in Bulgaria.*

**Key words:** rural development, space, modeling, management, rural population, labor force

### INTRODUCTION

The approach to the development of the settlement and especially the inhabited territories outside the cities can define as rural areas included municipalities (LAU 1), in which there is no settlement with population over 30,000 people. According to 232 out of a total of 265 municipalities in Bulgaria are classified as rural. They cover 81.16% of the territory and 39% of the population. Rural areas are the municipalities on whose territory there is no city with a population over 30,000 people and the population density is less than 150 inhabitants per sq. km. Population in the villages in the rural areas is seriously decreasing in in the following years they may be depopulated. Internal and external migration, low birth rate, economic disparity in the development of regions are factors that lead to a change in the number and structure of the population of the settlements on the territory of the country. Depopulation is mainly in villages that are in rural areas. In practically all municipalities in rural areas, settlements are grouped around the municipal center (usually a small town or a larger village). The institutions providing basic services are in the municipal center for the

population - educational, health, administrative, cultural and information centers, bank offices and shopping centers. The investments are mainly in the municipal center (the largest city in terms of population) and access and the quality of services is better than in the settlements outside the municipal one center in which the technical infrastructure is in poor condition, health and social service is of poor quality.

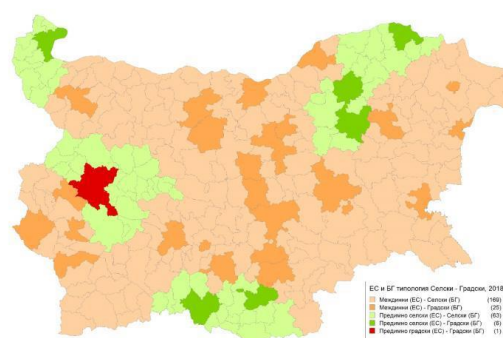


Fig. 1. The structure of settlements and their differentiation into rural and urban by 2019  
Source: NSI - Bulgaria [9].

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this exhibition is to bring to the fore the rural areas in Bulgaria, which are in fact the object of regional policy. In

practice, in Bulgaria, in addition to the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, as the main managing authority of the rural development program, it turns out to be an essential factor for the implementation of regional policy in Bulgaria. Thus, from a methodological point of view, it is important to illustrate processes and phenomena related to rural areas that are consistent with cohesion policy and rural policy. The analysis is related to the assessment of the territorial capacity and the possibilities for implementation of integrated policies and investments with territorial dimension, which should be focused on local and regional problems [1]. As a method for data collection and analysis, it is based on the institutional approach and evaluation of the policy framework at the regional level. Our study aims to show the spatial structuring of large areas designated as rural areas, but with the need to conduct targeted regional development policies. An important method of research is the demographic analysis of the territory.

importance is agriculture population. During the same period, there is rapid growth of its cash lasted until the mid-twentieth century. The imbalance in the territorial distribution of the population is deepening. As of December 31, 2019, 5,125,407 people, or 73.7%, live in the cities, and 1,826,075 people, or 26.3% of the country's population, live in the villages. The settlements in Bulgaria are 5,257, of which 257 are cities and 5,000 are villages. There are 171 settlements without population. The largest number is in the districts of Gabrovo, Veliko Tarnovo and Kardzhali - 63, 58 and 11, respectively. Half of the country's population (50.4%) lives in the Southwest and South Central regions, and the smallest in population is the Northwest region - 728 thousand people, or 10.5% of the country's population. Along with the aging of the population, the migration processes within the country continue, accompanied by depopulation of small settlements. At the beginning of 2011 the following ratio was established between urban and rural population: 5,339,001 people, or 72.5% of the population in the country live in cities with - 2,025,569 people, or 27.5% in the villages. Here it should be borne in mind that the migration process "village - city" does not lead to an increase in the population of cities as a whole, but only the largest of them. At the census in 1946 the rural population reaches its absolute maximum of 5,294 thousand people, which compared with Census in 1887, representing a doubling of its numbers. This requires searching a look of important strategic dependence of the structure of the population and rural areas in the administrative and territorial unit of Bulgaria. Practically rural areas are areas that are not urbanized. They are low-density population and typically much of the land is occupied with agriculture. After the start of the accession of Bulgaria to the EU is to create strategies and modernization of existing contracts and accepting programs of territorial development. In this regard EEC/EU pursues a policy of rural development for all member states. Rural areas in the EEC/EU occupy more than 90% of the territory and are home

Table 1. Condition of rural areas in Bulgaria

<i>Basic data for the rural areas of Bulgaria, 2018.</i>		<b>Areas</b>	<b>Population</b>	
<i>Type of region</i>				
square kilometers	title	number	proportion	
All of Bulgaria, according to the European classification (NUTS level 3)				
<b>intermediate</b>	84,654.4	76.7	4,766,622	68.1
<b>Mostly rural</b>	24,387.9	22.1	905,297	12.9
<b>Total rural areas</b>	1,329.4	1.2	1,328,120	19.0
<b>Total for Bulgaria</b>	<b>110,371.7</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>7,000,039</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Rural areas by national definition (LAU level 1)</b>				
intermediate	68,882.7	77.1	2,040,957	77.3
Mostly rural	20,438.9	22.9	600,117	22.7
Total rural areas	<b>89,321.6</b>	<b>80.9</b>	<b>2,641,074</b>	<b>37.7</b>

Source: NSI - Bulgaria [9].

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In a sufficiently long period of time rural population was crucial for the overall development of the country. From Liberation to the first years after World War II, Bulgaria retains the agricultural character economic development of Bulgaria as its dominant

to approximately 60% of the population. Policies pursued by the EU Rural Development aims to support a significant proportion of the rural population of the Community. Many of these areas are facing major social, economic, environmental and infrastructural challenges. Business activities and operating enterprises, employment in rural areas, agriculture and forestry are still not sufficiently competitive [5].

By 2011, the country and in other countries in EU rural areas were selected on a single indicator, namely the population of the main village not exceed 30 thousand residents. In the same year introduced a new, more complex methodology requiring digitization in the country and the determination of geographical population density on territorial cells.

In literature the term "rural areas" is considered individually by given their specialization aimed at developing activities related to the agrarian economy. The formation of rural areas is carried out under the influence of certain factors: location, agro-climatic, ecological, socio-economic, geo-demographic, policy formation, infrastructure and others. These areas are in a continuous process of change and development depending on their location, proximity to large social and economic center, metropolitan areas, availability of technical and social infrastructure and others. In terms of terminology and the formation of "Rural areas", there are various explanatory and opinions. We share the view that rural areas can be defined as those areas in which the agricultural sector (agricultural workers) occupy a relatively high share of the population and live in them and the rural way of life predominates or the main activity is agricultural. According to the latest typology of the EC for the regions, the only urban center is the capital Sofia. The number of municipalities defined as intermediate rural is 169, intermediate urban are 25, and 63 municipalities fall into the typology of mostly rural. These areas are described as areas with less developed technical and social infrastructure, lack of capital, low labor

productivity, deteriorating social services and a lower standard than the national average. The role of municipal center has been successfully implemented in each village or a small town in the administrative unit determined by regulations. Other authors define rural areas as: smaller administrative territorial units that are part of the regionalization of the country [7]. This population is engaged in agricultural activities typical of rural life. The economic activities have reduced performance compared to the national average, technical and social infrastructure in their territory is underdeveloped. These areas are the smallest in the administrative territorial structure of the country.

### **The aspects of European Rural Policy**

In the European Union for rural areas adopt territorial units have a population density of 100 people per km<sup>2</sup> or share of agricultural employment equal to two times higher than the Community average for any year after 1985. Developments in socio-economic objectives of a particular EU country affects the overall development of rural regions. The most general by the term "rural area ... means: certain small administrative units that have population below the threshold for urban area [6]. This threshold varies too widely EU than 200 residents of Sweden to 10,000 Italy or Germany. The European Commission in 1988. in his post: "The future of rural society" provides a definition of rural areas: rural areas are shaped by socio-economic and environmental structure. Those entities may include villages, towns, regional centers and other places. Based on this conclusion, the EC determined that rural areas occupy 80% of the territory of 12 states and they live ½ of the population of the EEC/EU.

Cork Declaration, adopted at the European Conference on Rural Development (ECRSR) in 1996, defined these territories as areas covering 80% of EU territory and they live in 25% of the population, characterized by a unique culture, economic and social structure unusual combination of economic activities and varied landscape (forests, farmland, natural areas, villages, towns and small

industries). In the Declaration of Cork for the first time rural areas are defined as a source of public goods outside the sector of agricultural development, they are autonomous regions, which are not only a source of food resources and habitats forming its own appearance and development on the basis of a developed landscape, natural resources, cultural heritage, geo-demographic potential and others [8]. A new element in rural development is to overcome the socio-economic differences. It appears as a new European base for development of this type of development. Parallel Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) adopted Recommendation №1296/1996 on the European Charter of rural areas. In this document the rural area is defined as follows: "... internal and coastal areas, including villages and small towns where most of the land is used for: 1) agriculture, hunting, fishing and forestry; 2) economic and cultural activities of the population in these areas; 3) development of non-urbanized areas into areas for leisure or reserves; 4) for other needs such as residential areas [2].

#### **A look at the framework for setting rural priorities**

Rural areas generally have an agricultural function which said social and economic influence in the development of the area. It is important to create acceptable living conditions in rural areas in terms of all economic, social, infrastructural, ecological and ethno-cultural aspects. Distinguished areas are located near large administrative center or near agglomerations to those located on the periphery of region. In areas for development must consider the specific way of life of local people and landscape protection. With this type of territories it is needed for additional construction and development of infrastructure facilities social and economic type [12]. The transformation in agriculture and raising its competitiveness will be determined by diversifying economic activity in rural areas; the development of the service sector is a preservation of rural communities as a source of labor force and a prerequisite for the realization of those employed in agriculture. The criteria for

classification of rural areas must be considered essential links between these regions and urban centers. On this basis, there are two methods: one is developed by the OECD, (OECD - Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) and the second from Eurostat (European Statistical Office). Both classifications are useful in survey and analysis of rural areas in the EU. The OECD method is applied on two levels, locally and regionally. Local municipal level method of OECD (2006) defines rural areas as: Municipalities with a population density of less 150 people per km<sup>2</sup>. The population density between rural and urban areas is the most used criterion, but in itself is not sufficient for final definition of rural areas. At the regional level the OECD method includes widely administrative units according to their "rural" level, depending on what share of the region's population lives in rural areas. With this type of criteria to distinguish between three types of areas: predominantly rural areas; intermediate areas and predominantly urban town areas.

Eurostat method is based on the degree of urbanized in Europe regions, and may be used the following criteria. Densely populated areas - these are groups of contiguous, close to each other municipalities, each with a population density of over 500 people per km<sup>2</sup> and a total population of the area at least 50 thousand people. Intermediate areas - these are groups with dense populations over 100 people per km<sup>2</sup> not belong to densely populated areas. The total population of the area should be at least 50 thousand people or must be adjacent to densely populated areas. Sparsely populated areas - these are groups of municipalities, which are not classified nor as densely populated or intermediate. Municipalities or series of municipalities that have not reached the required level of density, but accounted density area near the foregoing is considered as such. If they placed between densely populated and intermediate areas are considered intermediate. It can be assumed that such groups of municipalities must have a minimum area of 100 km<sup>2</sup>.

### **Structuring of Bulgarian rural areas and support mechanism for them**

For Bulgaria the national definition that applies fixes for rural areas is as follows: rural areas - municipalities (LAU1), where there is no village a place with a population of over 30,000 people. This definition is used and applied in programs and development strategies of the country and rural areas. As a EU member Bulgaria complies with the concepts and rules for forming network rural and equates its law on regional development to that of the Union as follows: 1. EC Regulation 1698/2005. On support for rural development by European Fund for Agriculture and Rural Development; 2. National Strategic Plan for Rural Development – NSP (2007, 2014, 2020); 3. Program for Rural Development (2007, 2014, 2020); 4. Program for Rural Development (2014 ÷ 2020 and program 2021-2027).

Each Member State should establish a national network for rural areas that will unite all organizations working in this field. The concept of development must contain the following elements: Overview of existing prerequisites for rural development in the country; research on attitudes description of existing areas and needs the creation of new ones; Structure of the National Network, assumptions and targets; Viewing relationships between the National Network for Rural Development of Bulgaria and that of the EU and administrative-territorial unit with low population density, the municipal center can be village or city. Horizontal goals related to the common rural economic policies are mitigating the effects of climate change and on adaptation to it, as well as for sustainable energy; promoting sustainable development and effective management of natural resources such as water, soil and air. These goals predetermine to support resource-efficient economically activities. Includes three main areas: Development of competitive agriculture and forestry, The application of new technologies in the food industry [10]. Promotion of population employment and development of non-agricultural activities rural areas.

Development rural and socio-economic status of the population is an important element by agrarian socio-economic policy. Information on the population of Bulgaria and rural areas of South Central Region is based on information of the National Statistical Institute (NSI). Population in ES39 for 2011 is 503,492,041 people, more than half the population of the 27 states arise (through 2015 Member States with the 28th Croatia). Rural areas cover 90% of EU territory and approximately 60% of the population lives in them. According to the last national census in the country which is made to 01.02.2011 the population of the Republic of Bulgaria is 7,364,570 thousand people (in 2013, population was in Bulgaria is 7,245,677 and in rural areas of South Central region the populations is 686,491 people. On the other hand, in 2011 the number of cities was 255 and the villages were 5047. The functioning municipalities are 264, of which 231 belong to the rural areas and represent 87.5% of all municipalities. Since 01.01.2015, the municipality of Sarnitsa has received the status of an independent administrative unit. Rural areas in Bulgaria cover 90,371 km<sup>2</sup> or 81% of the territory and 43% of the population (which is 3,166,755 people). The average population density in the rural areas of Bulgaria is 40 people per km<sup>2</sup>, with an average density of 74.6 people per km<sup>2</sup> in other regions of the country. For example, in rural areas of the South-Central region, the average population density is 38 people per km<sup>2</sup>, which is below the national and EU averages. In 186 settlements or 3.7% of total settlements, no persons counted as 21% of the urban population is 50 people, while 36% of urban population is 100 ÷ 500 people. The European Commission dealing with rural development in the period (2007 ÷ 2012). defines the territory of the country: 15 of the areas they are "predominantly rural areas", 12 "intermediate areas" and one as "urban area" Sofia. In research and analysis for rural areas need to identify their weaknesses/strengths and to adopt strategic programs their future development. The problems in rural areas can be summarized in a few aspects: negative geo-

demographic indicator in their territories; difficulty development in the construction of technical and social infrastructure; no new technology and capital [3]. Lack of information about the development of business projects will or no access to information technology, financial, legal, software nature; Weak sectoral specialization and lack of competition and development in only the primary sector in most areas and poor preparation of bureaucracy when dealing with European programs and documents. The definitions and interpretations of "rural" vary widely for Europe [11]. For some of the EU countries in their setting as rural areas the main indicator is the number of inhabitants. About main criterion is the density population (people per km<sup>2</sup>), because 60% of the EU population live in those areas where geo-demographic factor negative natural growth or missing values are minimum. In 1996, ECRSR accepted definition of rural areas as autonomous regions, emerging industries and activities other than agriculture sector. Using the methodology of the OECD definition of rural areas based on population density (people per km<sup>2</sup>) and the proportion of population in the region living in rural areas. The methodology of Eurostat also based on population density (people per km<sup>2</sup>). The country average density in rural areas is below the average. For Bulgaria the definition of rural is defined in the RDP and we adhere to the national definition of rural areas [13]. The villages that fall within the boundaries of municipalities with populations over 30,000 people drop formulation of rural areas, although eligible for such socio-economic, infrastructural, ecological and geo-demographic plan. Several types are determined on the territory of Bulgaria through regional analysis rural municipalities - developed municipalities, catching up municipalities, developing and lagging municipalities. The analysis showed that the municipalities in the rural areas are not homogeneous, but there are some significant differences in terms of economic activity, potential of labor resources, labor productivity and income of the population. To achieve

economic cohesion between rural municipalities is needed purposefully and cost-effective financing [14].

On the territory of Bulgaria 4 types of rural municipalities are formed, which can be described as developed municipalities, catching-up municipalities, developing municipalities and lagging municipalities. The analysis showed that municipalities in rural areas are not homogeneous, and there are significant differences between them in terms of economic activity, labor potential, labor productivity and income. Targeted and cost-effective financing is needed to achieve economic cohesion between rural municipalities [4]. To accelerate the development of the rural economy, it is necessary to invest in innovative products, which would lead to better positions of micro-enterprises, small and medium-sized enterprises in the local and international market. In this regard, the introduction of digital technologies, innovative business processes are solutions to improve the profitability of economically active people to develop the local economy [9].

## CONCLUSIONS

New concepts have been outlined in rural policy, for example Smart villages with a focus on helping rural communities address problems related to developing new features and services improved, through digital, telecommunication technologies, innovation and better use of knowledge for the benefit of society and business. Digital technologies and innovations can support quality of life, higher living standards, public services for citizens, better use of resources, less impact on the environment and new opportunities for rural value chains in terms of products and improved processes. The integrated territorial approach allows further targeting of program resources to territorial needs and a combination of support from various sources and funds. The programs and policy instruments of convergence can encourage smart villages to build strategic ones transport and digital networks. Cohesion policy (2021-

2027) emphasizes the need to apply an integrated territorial approach. Specific tools are integrated specialization strategies integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) and Community Led Local Development (CLLD). Territorial integration is based on integrated strategies use a functional approach that promotes territorial economic interaction between urban and rural areas. The exploitation of local potential corresponds to the goals: One Europe closer to citizens by promoting sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas and local initiatives and with a greener, low-carbon Europe, by promoting a clean and equitable energy transition, green and blue investments, circular economy, adjustment to the change of climate and risk prevention and management. Analysing the distribution of the sample depending on gender, age and origin we observed that most of the respondents have been males, the majority of respondents were included in the age interval of 18 and 25 years, taking into consideration the origin of the population interviewed it was observed that the majority came from the urban area. Rural policy outlines new concepts, such as Smart Settlement with a focus on helping rural people solve problems, connect with the development of new opportunities and services, similar, through digital, telecommunications technologies, innovation and better use of knowledge for the benefit of society and business.

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