

JEL: H76, Q00, Q01, R11

Petar Borisov¹, Kamen Petrov², Nikolay Tsonkov²

¹*Agricultural University – Plovdiv*

²*University of National and World Economy
Bulgaria*

INTEGRATION PERSPECTIVES FOR IMPROVING REGIONAL POLICY IN RURAL AREAS OF BULGARIA

Purpose. *The purpose of the research is to determine the degree of implementation of specific regional policies in rural areas in the context of Bulgaria's integration into the European Union through the prospects of the changing economic situation and new trends in the implementation of regional policy.*

Methodology / approach. *The focus of the research is the need for a working regional policy that gives importance to the development of rural areas and influences the demographic and socio-economic processes in Bulgaria. The study is defined by comparative analysis, reference to expert assessment, use of statistical data, and analysis of strategic documents and programs related to regional development.*

Results. *This research has shown that the applied regional development policies within the European Union have partial success. At the same time, the problems and emerging deficits are successfully defined, but it is more difficult to find optimal solutions that can be applied in more than one municipality. In this direction, regional policy has its achievements in its development, but new solutions are still being sought for several spatial and territorial problems in connection with integration into a common European market. This means a comprehensive process of functional impacts in the socio-economic development of nearly 281 regions. In Bulgaria, the situation is even more complicated, because it is necessary to have a dual approach in regional politics. On the one hand, the development of the most urbanised regions, and on the other hand, the development of the rural areas, which are decisive for the development of the greater part of the territory of Bulgaria.*

Originality / scientific novelty. *The regional development policy carried out in the years after 2007 has a static and spontaneous character, the new approach of the measures and programs after 2023 are based on new concepts and elements in line with information technologies, development of intelligent systems, economic connectivity to overcome the backward development of rural areas. New approaches and moments are proposed in the construction of a regional policy, which has a new framework and provisions for the development of the European economic space. In this direction, the need for expert decisions related to the management of regional development comes to the fore.*

Practical value / implications. *It is necessary to make regional development a national priority. In addition, governments should facilitate access to young people and medium-sized businesses for the use of inputs and the promotion of projects. Access to financing, strategic, and planning activities, which have their characteristics at different levels, must be further developed.*

Key words: *regional policy, regional integration, rural areas, sustainable development.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The ongoing processes of integration and globalisation have formed a new framework for socio-economic interaction in the modern state. As a result of the transformations carried out in society in general and in the economic sphere

specifically in the last three decades, the Bulgarian state is forming a new geo-economic direction. This change has its regional and spatial dimensions. The formation of regional policy takes place in conditions of change in society, which leads to the emergence of new social attitudes, institutions, norms, and values. Thus, regional development itself has three characteristics: reversibility (which means the constancy of the processes of accumulation of quantitative and qualitative changes), orientation (the lines on which this accumulation takes place), and regularity (the process of accumulation of such changes). In Eastern Europe, most countries are transforming and quickly taking the course towards integration with the countries of the European Union. This process of integration has spatial implications by forming specific urbanised territories that attract investment and rural areas where the process of defragmentation continues despite positive changes (Georgiev, 2008). This approach gives us reason to look for the manifestations of regional politics in these rural areas as a driving factor of development. At the same time, the state in Eastern Europe faces several groups of problems in the process of its transformation. The first group of problems is related to the modeling of the national policy, which embodies the macroeconomic model of development, which is built based on the functional framework of the regional policy in the country (Geshev, 1999). The second group of problems covers the relationship of regional economic development, which defines the center, the meso-level, and the local level of development of settlements formed by regional business and their administrative role in the state hierarchy. The third group of problems is in line with the vision of the implementation of the common agricultural policy in the European Union, as well as the development of rural areas in the countries in the European space (Wilder, 2007). These three groups of problems indicate the contours of the development of rural areas in the European space. In this direction, our research aims to highlight those processes of the implementation of regional policy, which would bring rural areas to the fore as zones of influence for advanced development and the formation of a new tradition of organisation and management of regional communities in Bulgaria (Penkova & Gorchilova, 2013). This approach requires a structural approach to the problems of the structure and vitality of the national territory, on the one hand, and the other hand, an evaluation and analysis of the selected models of polycentric development and structuring of the settlements according to the respective rank and importance. In this direction, we must consider the state of variables related to the state of nature, society, and the state of rural areas. The direction of rural areas is facing the change in people's lifestyle and the strengthening of information technology on the lifestyle and technology of life. In practice, we have a changed functional role in the development and structuring of settlements, the conduct of work in agriculture (animal husbandry and plant breeding), so that a new way of working and a way of life are imposed in these territories. The new role of rural areas calls for another type of regional policy to outline a shift from rural activities (typically traditional agriculture) to those with higher added value in manufacturing and many service industries relevant to the national economy and regional markets (Osmani et al., 2022; Khirivskiy et al., 2020). This process is a key factor in the development of

rural areas and the growth of their local economies. This is practically a new way of development, which, however, is not realised in most European countries, as a result, the depopulation of the rural regions increases and the concentration of the population in the big cities continues. In this direction, the problems not only with the construction of settlements but also the need for effective management and administration of territorial communities are gradually coming to the fore (Trono & Castronuovo, 2016). A key moment is the emergence of the need for functional zoning of settlements as a place of life for different strata of society and the implementation of production activities on the other hand. The formation of favorable conditions and environment determines the modeling of settlements and their transformation into sustainable territorial communities. On the other hand, improving the quality of the environment is strongly linked to public works and public services. This brings to the fore the introduction of a new type of regional policy in non-urban regions and rural areas. Another important aspect is the financing of rural areas. It is based on the National Program for the Development of Rural Areas (NRDP), through which impacts on local economic development are carried out by solving the main tasks facing agriculture and the development of rural areas.

Agricultural policy can thus be perceived as two pillars of impact. Under the first pillar, measures to support the agricultural market are financed, with direct payments (per unit of area) representing the predominant form of income support for EU farmers. The second pillar is addressed both to agriculture and, more broadly, to the population in rural areas, through a complete package of programs for the development of these areas. The experience of other EU member states shows that electoral programs for the development of rural areas with well-ordered priorities are more effective in attracting, mobilising, and ultimately absorbing the available support funds. Here is the place to emphasise that the new policy for development in rural areas needs optimisation with the aim of better strategic planning (Kolev, 1997). In this regard, it is necessary to make more systematic efforts within the administration to maximally strengthen the interaction in the use of European agricultural and structural funds. This should be a priority of the new concept for the development of sustainable territories characterised by green infrastructure and finding opportunities for intelligent economic growth (Hristoskov, 2015).

The purpose of the research is to determine the degree of implementation of specific regional policies in rural areas in the context of Bulgaria's integration into the European Union through the prospects of the changing economic situation and new trends in the implementation of regional policy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To define the problems of rural areas and the need to implement regional policy in them, it is necessary to see what are the meanings of social development. According to expert assessment, it includes social growth that can satisfy the needs of modern society from social, demographic, and health characteristics. More specifically, social development implies choosing and promoting strategies for social and economic

development, which in turn contribute to the sustainable development and meet the needs of society. Social development is also related to activities for creating favorable living and working conditions, supporting the local community, charity, and good social practices within the community. Social development is also expressed in the implementation of social programs, both internally and externally oriented. The social programs that are carried out are voluntary and aim to contribute to the development of the local community (supporting socially vulnerable segments of the population, supporting children and young people, sponsoring local cultural, educational, and sports organisations and events, support of socially significant research and campaigns, participation in charity events). In general, questions related to decision-making and the manner and process of decision-making under a dynamic external environment attract many scientific researchers. Among them are Lee et al. (2002), Ives et al. (1983), Vaughan & Wu (2004), Yang (2005) and others. In particular, social challenges for Bulgaria are already becoming national security issues, for example, brain drain, education, and health care, as well as creating conditions for economic security (Tsonkov, 2022). The framework for the state and development of rural areas is similar. Among the main tasks of the government is to play an active and decisive role in the complex process of adjusting society's needs for development, and security, as well as the state's ability to ensure social order and a sustainable lifestyle for the population. How the authorities deal with this adjustment is evaluated for its effectiveness, on the other hand, the rural areas, that are lagging behind in their development, should be subject to some type of impact to improve their economic profiling and development. Thus, for the development of rural areas, it is important to achieve security for the individual, the society, and the state, which must be done through the implementation of specific regional policies. Moreover, for the characteristics of each territorial unit, the role of man and his/her attitude to nature is of great importance. This process is particularly acute in rural areas, where the modern type of development must be combined with efforts to preserve the environment for future generations. Other authors explain the entry into the agrarian sector (Mishev et al., 2009), mostly with the lack of alternative employment, both for salary and for starting a non-agricultural business. The authors also prove that the presence of low-paid work outside the agricultural sector contributes to decision to create an agricultural holding to generate additional income.

Some authors predict that the new farms will mostly be organised as family farms. Mostly they will be inherited from a previous generation (Hayes, 2014). Also, new farms are generally more crop-based than animal-based. This necessitates the implementation of a specific regional policy for individual entities and settlements on the earth's surface, which creates a territorial system that includes settlements, territories of economic activity, recreation areas, territories with a special status. Thus, chronological changes that occur as a result of the interaction of the population by territoriality, as well as the internal content of the process unfolding on the territory, are of great importance for the implementation of regional policy (Boyadzhiev, 1995). This approach entails applying the concept of place as an approach or study of location

in space. Such is the basic meaning (eng. location in space) given by von Wright (1983) in his “Logic of Place”. He explores the differences between modal concepts in the temporal and spatial systems of formal logic and bases his system on spatial logic (“near”, “somewhere”, and “somewhere else”). Ramon (1994) later developed von Wright’s system of formal logic by adding the aspect of distance. On the other hand, Casati & Varzi (1999) refer to a “place” as a region in space that has an address. In this direction, rural areas are specific holographic areas on which it is necessary to conduct a regional development policy. Thus, we can assume that regional development in rural areas represents a synthesis between economic, social, geographical, mathematical, technical, and ecological aspects of the development of settlements and their lands, to improve management, coordination, and control at the regional and local level (Trono & Castronuovo, 2016). All these aspects are directly related to the localisation of production and non-production spheres, the settlement network and settlements, technical, production, and social infrastructures, resource and market security, ecological balance, rational utilisation of outside settlement territories, the governance and self-governance of regional communities and society as a whole.

According to Blakely & Bradshaw (2002), regional development is “a process by which local government and/or socially formed groups manage their available resources (natural, labor, capital, investment, transport, communications, production activities, technology, external markets, national and international conditions, local government capacity, etc.) to create new jobs and stimulate economic activity in a clearly defined economic area”. It becomes clear that in this case regional development is seen primarily as local development, local policy, or planning related to a specific territory (Beer et al., 2003). Regional development is seen as a process of achieving sustainable and balanced development by channeling resources, infrastructural construction, and economic activities in certain areas. connects this development process with the regional development policy, which is an element of the structural policy of the state (Geneshki, 2000). In rural areas, the main problem remains the importance of the social infrastructure in the space ensuring a harmonious and, under certain conditions, an optimal development process of life in rural areas and entire regions and spaces. Thus, authors such as Glaeser & Redlick (2009) assume, that social infrastructure spending can be important for relatively troubled regions to discourage migration, and increase birth rates, thus encouraging investment in social infrastructure. According to Brink (2004), social infrastructure consists of “institutions and government policies that define the economic environment in which individuals accumulate skills and firms accumulate capital and produce output”. According to Soares (2004), social infrastructure has the positive role of preventing the devaluation and depersonalisation of territories. The social infrastructure also preserves the demographic resources of the territory. The spatial formation of social infrastructure ensures a high quality of life for the individual and the entire society. Social infrastructure affects not only the economy in a given space, but also the efficiency of production processes (Patyka et al., 2021). Large differences are found in the social sphere of the territories, which is why it is necessary to conduct an effective regional

policy with a social orientation. These differences are a major problem of social development and ongoing social reform, influencing the formation of new social management models. These social models include other new problems expressed in the social sphere and its development. The social sphere indirectly influences and creates imbalances in the social development of any territory (Osypova et al., 2023).

The main research thesis of the authors is that the regional policy in Bulgaria does not solve the existing territorial differences and it must be redefined theoretically, strategically and normatively in order to also respond to the processes of transformation in the European Union.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present paper is primarily theoretical, the authors use a normative and systematic approach to research the main trends in the development of regional policy. A regional policy aims to reach the economic, social, and administrative standards planned in strategic documents, tied to a specific time interval. The analyses carried out, the summaries drawn about the factors predetermining the territorial organisation of the social sphere, and the geographical analysis of its state were carried out by collecting, processing, and visualising statistical information from local, regional, and national sources. A widely used method of evaluation is the reference to questionnaire surveys that have the appropriate representative character. Through them, existing similarities and differences in demographic, social, and economic development in rural areas are established. Statistical methods make it possible to establish the distribution of the population by number, age, marital and educational structure, place of residence, and family status, to determine migration flows and their intensity. For example, the conclusion about the aging of the population in rural areas can be seen from the answer to the question, how old are farmers.

4. RESULTS

The geographical characteristics of rural areas in Bulgaria are favourable physical prerequisites for their economic and social development, taking into account the resources necessary for the maintenance and development of human activity and life on the territory. The defining general deficit is the lack of a sustainable population. The location of the municipalities is key to their transport accessibility to the country, the Western Balkans and Greece, Turkey, Serbia, and Romania, respectively to the Middle East and the Mediterranean. This advantage is essential for developing a strong local economy and infrastructure. According to the national definition, the population in rural areas is divided into 4,128 settlements (208 cities and 3,920 villages). 48 % of the population in rural areas live in cities, and 52 % in villages. The small towns in the country are quite numerous, and sufficiently evenly distributed over the territory, to be able to exert an organising influence on the nearby villages. The population in rural areas is concentrated in the administrative centers of 110 rural municipalities, which makes 231 out of a total of 4,128 settlements in rural areas. They are home to 50 % of the total rural population, including 20 % of the rural population under 15 years of age,

53 % of the population aged 15–64, and 40 % of the population aged 65 and over. In the period 2007–2022, the population of Bulgaria and rural areas continues to decrease, but the population decline in rural areas is twice as high as the average for the country. The population in rural areas, according to the national definition, decreased by 10 % during the mentioned period. The main reason for population loss in rural areas is negative natural growth and to a lesser extent population migration. The diverse relief is not an obstacle to the implementation of the main transport and communication links necessary for the functioning of a modern community, including considering the location of the settlements on the territory. Figure 1 shows the age structure of farmers.

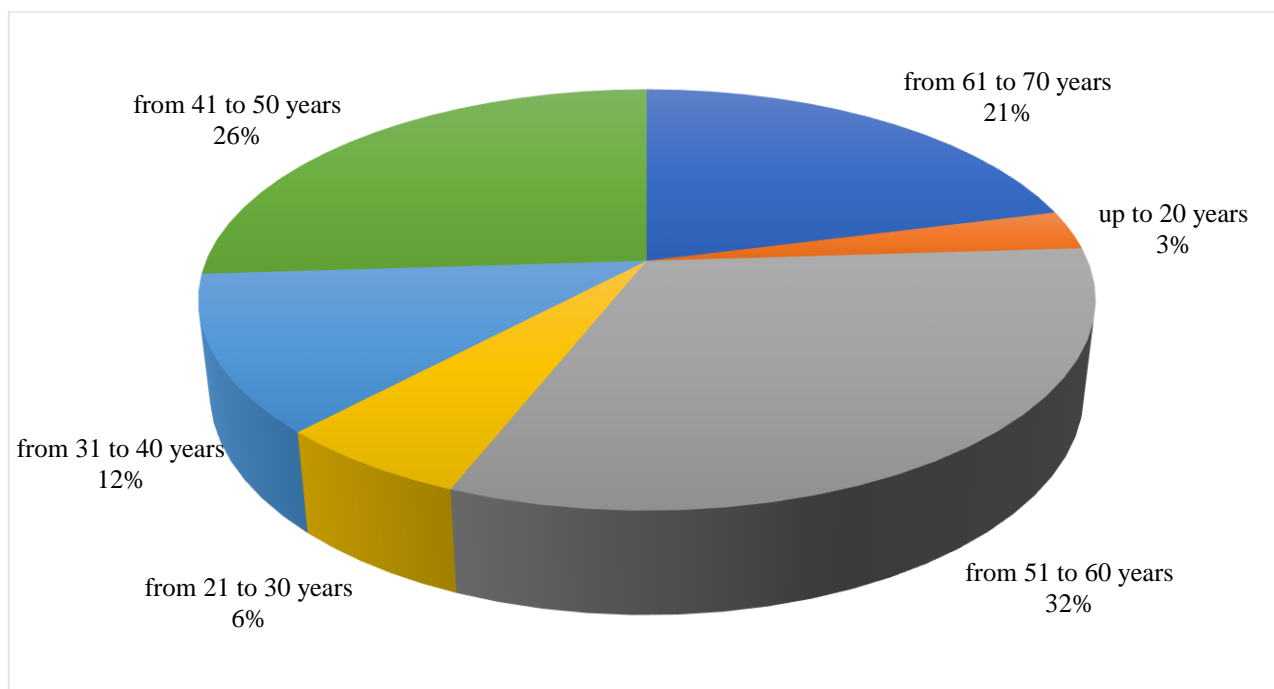


Figure 1. Farmer age by interval groups in Bulgaria

Source: built based on data of the State agricultural fund, Agricultural report 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, comparative analysis of similar data for the period 2017–2022.

The relative share is the largest – 32 % of those aged 51 to 60. Only 6 % are aged 21 to 30, and 12 % are aged 31 to 40. The explanation lies in the unattractiveness of agricultural work, its prestige, and somewhat low efficiency. It is also considered that it remains a high-risk production, which in our country is compensated unsatisfactorily compared to other European countries. In addition, in Bulgaria, the percentage of graduates of specialised secondary and higher agricultural education who return to rural areas to develop agrarian businesses remains small. The reason is the institutional difficulties faced by businesses and the lack of living conditions in these areas, which cannot provide a standard of living equal to that of larger cities. Therefore, the trend of depopulation of rural areas continues, which condemns them to even greater disintegration if the necessary measures are not taken. The tendency from the nineties of persons with low educational qualifications to deal with agrarian business is maintained. This can also be seen in Figure 2, where the educational level of the registered farmers is indicated.

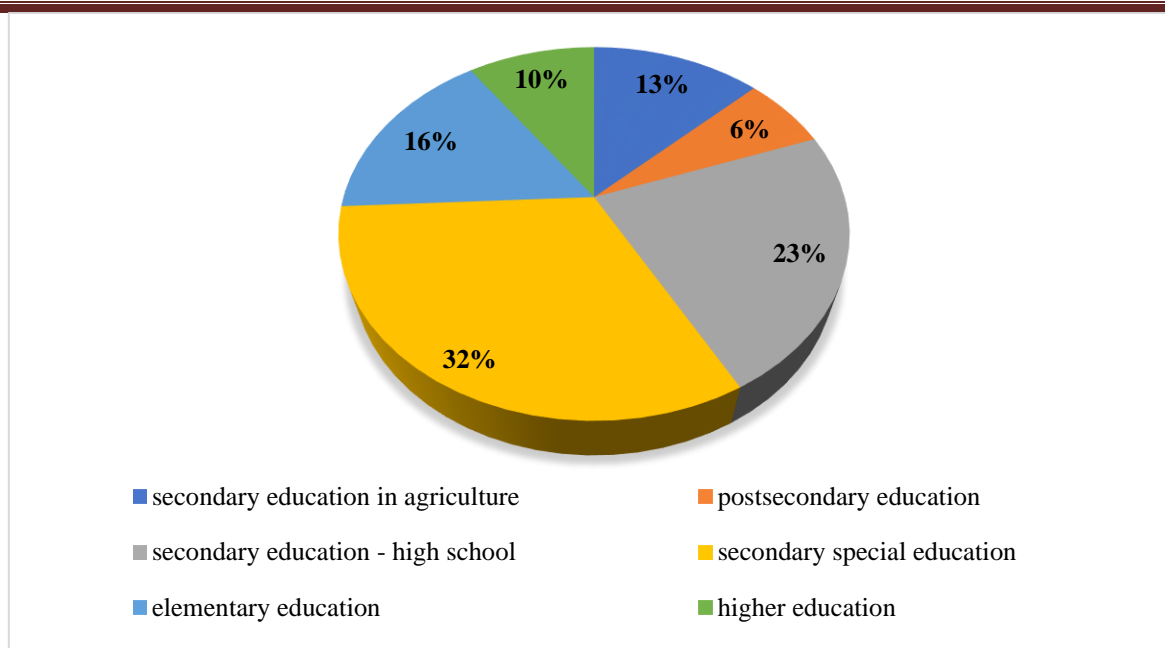


Figure 2. Structure of farmers according to their educational level in Bulgaria

Source: built based on data of the State agricultural fund, Agricultural report 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, comparative analysis of similar data for the period 2017–2022.

Among the respondents, 16 % have a primary education, 22.6 % have a high school education, and 32.2 % have a technical education. Only 12.9 % have completed specialised, agricultural education, and 9.7 % – higher education (Figure 2). This unfavourable trend will be difficult to overcome.

A very small proportion of farmers accept the positive measures, but nearly half of them have hope for improvement (Figure 3).

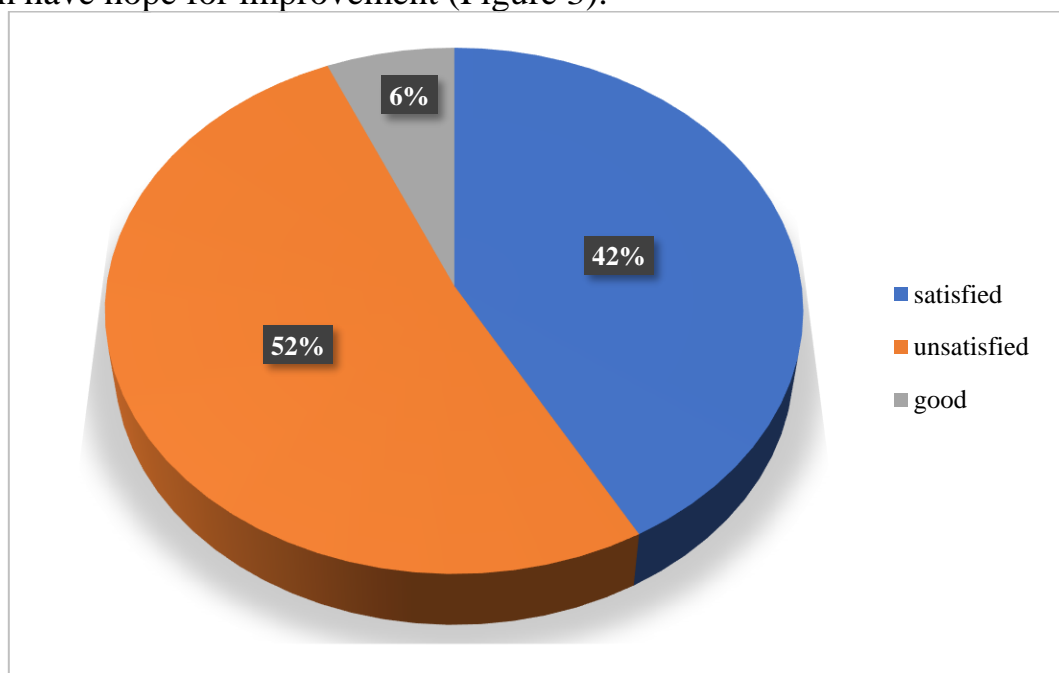


Figure 3. Assessment of the development of the area in which the farmers live over the last 10 years

Source: built based on data of the State agricultural fund, Agricultural report 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, comparative analysis of similar data for the period 2017–2022.

In practice, these data show that the regional policy implemented by the state government has suffered a complete failure. This means that the most important issue in rural areas is to work to improve the level of development through massive investment in all types of infrastructure. Real achievements are needed in the social sphere, especially at the municipal and local level. Demographic factors, number, and gender-age structure should be boosted by creating even artificial employment, to encourage production, and increase income and consumption of the population. An important trend in the reproduction of the population in our country is its aging. Population aging affects the social sphere in several main directions: employment, workforce structure, pension provision and the standard of living of older people as a significant part of the population, organisation of health care, and social services. In rural areas in the period 2020–2023, stagnation in development is noticeable, which is evident from Figure 4 for the development opportunities of local economic entities.

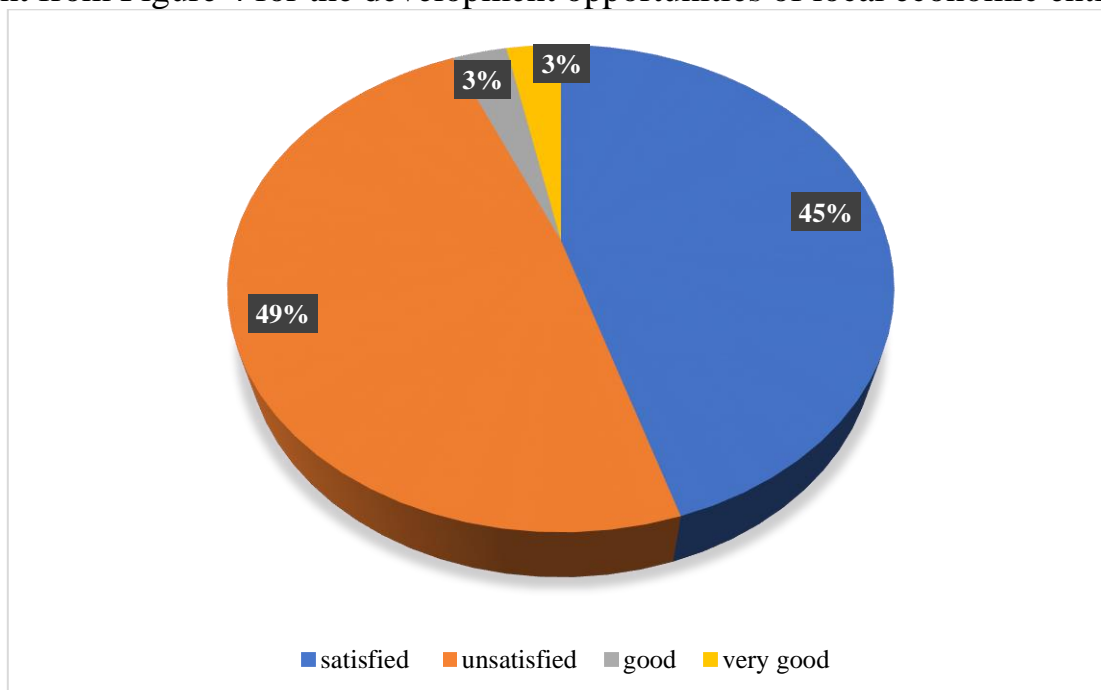


Figure 4. Farmers' assessment of their business development potential in Bulgaria

Source: built based on the Report of National Statistical Institute for the period 2020–2022.

The potential of the agrarian business significantly affects not only its development, but also the rural area in which it is located. It can be seen that only 3.2 % of farmers answered as “very good”, and others 3.2 % as “good”, while 45.2 % as “satisfactory”, and 48.4 % as “unsatisfactory”. The vision for the development of rural regions in the last 10 years is a little more optimistic. Farmers who intend to reduce or stop their agrarian activity claim that it is not profitable enough and consider redirecting their efforts to other sectors. For many farms, financial support from the state is the only way to stay in the sector. Still, others are looking to enter the agricultural business through innovation and new technology. Many of the measures for the development of rural areas include several favourable measures through which the new farms would be competitive and would support the development of the sector.

At the same time, new actors are beginning to have an increasingly significant impact on the innovative activity of producers, performing functions of supplying knowledge and information about agricultural production. Under these conditions, the view of the chain nature of the innovation process in agriculture becomes increasingly inadequate to economic realities. Here it is important to bring out the vision of the participants in the agrarian sector regarding the development of rural areas (Figure 5).

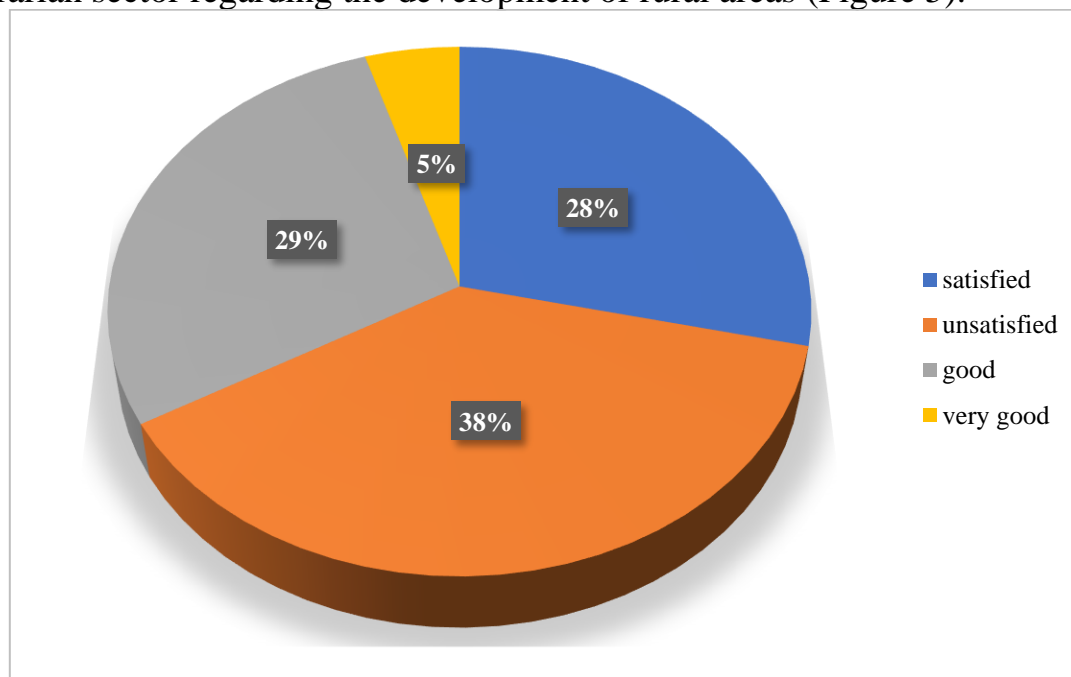


Figure 5. Assessment of the development of the region and agriculture over the last 10 years (local government views)

Source: built based on the Report of National Statistical Institute for the period 2020–2022.

Thus, in the society in which we live, the main argument for an unsatisfactory assessment of rural areas remains the weak infrastructure, the “small subsidies for agriculture”, another problem is the need to commodify it, as well as “the large migration of the rural population to the cities”. But in general, from the data in Figure 5, it can be assumed that nearly 65 % of the respondents have positive attitudes towards positive change. Of course, the share of 35 % who rate the regional development in the last 10 years as unsatisfactory is not a small percentage and it has its weight. Old problems remain, such as the aging of the population and the need for people at a young age, leading to problems in employment and the overall functioning of the social system in rural areas. The elderly population requires systematic care regarding health and purely domestic needs when the elderly cannot take care of themselves. For this, in municipalities with a higher percentage of elderly population, the level, variety, quality, and accessibility of social services offered are of particular importance (Valkov, 2018). The urban structure is important for the development of rural areas. Another example is that in Bulgaria there are 39 municipalities (or 15 % of all municipalities) which are composed only of villages and 326,806 inhabitants live in them according to the data of National Statistical Institute, or in other words 4 % of the country’s population. The largest is the municipality of Rhodopi, Plovdiv region with

32,602 people, and the smallest is Treklyano, Kyustendil region – with 629 people (Table 1).

Table 1

Profile of Rhodopi region

Indicator	Municipalities	Population	Max. population	Min. population	Average
Value	39	318,806	31,602	835	8,283
Share	16.0 %	5.3 %	Rhodopes	Trekliano	-

Source: formed based on the Report of National Statistical Institute for the period 2020–2022.

A large part of these municipalities have their administrative center in the surrounding cities. This raises the question of how far they are capable of providing quality services to their population, including social, educational, and administrative, for which considerable financial resources are required. At the same time, their territory is relatively large, for example, the municipalities of Tundzha, Rhodopi, Maritsa, Kirkovo, etc., and in the event of a hypothetical unification of these common areas with their neighboring large cities, one coherent area would be obtained, providing quality social and administrative services for its population, possessing more resources for the development of infrastructure (transportation, water supply, etc.) and economically expedient.

Another significant problem remains the optimisation of the administrative-territorial structure. It represents a consciously conducted activity of dividing the territory of the country into territorial communities and creating the relevant territorial bodies in them. Administrative-territorial units are built by the historical, geographical, economic, social, demographic, and ecological conditions of the territory, and rural areas do not always coincide with the territorial characteristics. Local self-government is part of the state system. It is a basic form of the territorial organisation of any country, which is built on the principles of democracy.

The system of decentralisation implies that part of the state administration is given to the local self-government bodies. The achievement of modern local self-government is always an expression of the decentralisation of state power (Varga, 2021; Siryk et al., 2021). The financial stability of the municipalities improves the social policy, which in turn is aimed at increasing the quality of life and creating favorable conditions for the development of the social sphere. Municipal budgets must actively show that they are committed and consistent in their actions regarding the development of the social sphere. The disappearance of small settlements leads to the bareness of the territory, makes the economy and the whole public life more expensive, and hinders the modern regional development of the country (Dimov, 2008).

Most still have not understood that the main capital is people. Despite any claims at the national and supranational level (EU) for convergence, for cohesion between territorial units, the truth is exactly the opposite (Sağlam Çeliköz et al., 2022). Continued growing differences between territorial units and individual settlements are holding back the modernisation of the country, hindering its socio-economic development (Boyadzhiev, 2011). In this direction, an interesting functioning of the

network of small and medium-sized towns is developed evenly throughout the territory of the country, which is favourable in terms of serving the rural areas around them. However, the decreasing population in these cities and the difficulties in realising their economic and socio-cultural functions an alarming phenomena and require serious efforts to stabilise them. The geographical proximity of cities to villages is a factor that should be well used in the future, as it creates opportunities for improving the “city-rural” relationship and for turning small towns into support centers of the settlement network, serving rural areas with the offer of a wide range of social services. Another important element of the implementation of policies for the regional development of these regions is the Program for the implementation of activities in the regions for targeted support, which is aimed at increasing the employment of the population and attracting investments in the economically lagging regions of the country. A Targeted Investment Program is also being developed to support the development of North-West Bulgaria, the Rhodopes, Strandja, mountainous, semi-mountainous, and border underdeveloped regions. The targeted intervention of the state is to help overcome key problems such as negative demographic processes, strong internal and external migration processes, lack of jobs and low incomes, limited access, and low quality of public services offered (Dimov, 2008). One of the main principles in the formulation and implementation of regional development policy is the principle of concentration of resources to achieve regional development goals. The principle of concentration of resources is applied with the main goal of overcoming established disparities and differences in the degree of economic, infrastructural, and social development. The aim of the Local Initiative Groups (LAG) in rural areas of Bulgaria is to create conditions for promoting regional development and sharing public capacity between municipalities. So, the following Table illustrates the structure of the LAG in the past program period of 2014–2020.

Table 2

Profile of Local Initiative Groups by 2022

Indicator	The value of the indicator
Number of operational LAGs	67
Number of involved municipalities	119
Involved population (as of 31.12.2020)	1,826,631
Covered territory (sq km)	58,171
Number of funded projects (till the end of March 2023)	3,041
Total value of project aid (thousand BGN) (till the end of March 2023)	265,772

Source: own calculation based on Agricultural report of Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Bulgaria – 2018, 2019, 2020.

By the end of 2023, 66 LAGs have been built, including 119 municipalities with a population of about 1.6 million people and covering over 58 thousand square km of the territory of Bulgaria. It is expected that around 30–35 more municipalities will be able to realise the possibilities of building “Local Action Groups”. The purpose of these LAGs is to show how local authorities in partnership with businesses and citizens can

build capacity to manage financial resources themselves to achieve sustainable economic growth, as well as to implement initiatives between two or more municipalities. In general, this example shows that there is a basis available from the European Union for the development of the regions, but they are also tied to many commitments, which for local business and public administration are perceived as a difficulty.

We can summarise that there are a large number of strategic and planning documents that support the spatial development and functioning of the social sphere. But we believe that changes in municipal policies are necessary, with their activity being directed to the preparation of effective local strategies or plans, tailored to their conditions and the available demographic resources to improve the functioning social sphere.

Existing and functioning strategic documents are a good basis for planning and implementing policies aimed at providing conditions for a normal life for people. But it is even more important that they are implemented that measures and activities for their implementation are scheduled and that results are achieved that are visible and tangible for the local population. The implementation of regional development policies in rural areas should be based on four priority directions: 1) care for children and families at risk; 2) social inclusion of vulnerable groups; 3) disadvantaged persons and 4) care for the elderly. This policy in rural areas should rest on a social policy aimed at providing basic life rights to disadvantaged people and retirement is an important factor for social security in the state (Mytelka & Goertzen, 2013).

There is a need to mitigate the negative consequences of the market economy through public redistribution of resources and services and provision of state social services. Ensuring access to services, and especially access to basic health, education, and social services, is another key tool for overcoming the effects of poverty. It is the access to education and healthcare that is crucial for the social security.

A low level of education is one of the main factors causing poverty and social insecurity. Therefore, equal access to education for all children, regardless of their social status, ethnicity, and specific needs, is of key importance for the prevention of social security. In this regard, the main challenges in this area are related to reducing early school leaving, and ensuring equal access of vulnerable groups, including vulnerable ethnic groups and children with disabilities, to quality education in a general education environment. At the same time, against the general background, it is noticeable that the rural areas continue to lag behind the urban areas in the country in their economic development. In this regard, based on a survey of agricultural producers, it is clear that nearly 97.6 thousand companies are engaged in agricultural activity, employing 501 thousand people or about 25 % of all employed in the country in 2022. The same values with small changes are also noticeable in the following years. The share of companies is of the type of micro-companies and number about 90,000, which employ about 170,000 people. The density of companies in rural areas is 34 companies per thousand population, which is almost twice as low as in urban areas – 61, which directly corresponds to the different rates of socio-economic development

and modeling of regional development. In this direction, the regularity can be deduced that investments and labor productivity in the rural economy are lower compared to urban areas. This is particularly relevant in the field of agriculture, where the lag is greatest. This gives us reason to assume that the economy of rural areas has a low degree of diversification and different infrastructure (Madjarova et al., 2013).

The synthesis of the results of the analysis indicates the need for new approaches in the regional policy of Bulgaria. The different territorial potentials of the regions must be determined and mobilized to achieve sustainable economic growth and job creation in the EU. Every region and city can commit and contribute to energy savings, decentralised energy supply, and reducing the effect of climate change, for example by supporting the development of settlements with low or zero greenhouse gas emissions, developing potential new sources of energy, and promoting the energy efficiency of the building stock. Our cities and regions must become more resilient to climate change. This means that regional policy in the European Union must be effectively applied to territorial development (Koteva et al., 2008). On the other hand, strategies for individual development of settlements and regions must be more clearly integrated into the national and European context. Regional, national, and local problems must be defined and solved. This is particularly true for rural development policy, environment and transport policy, and EU cohesion policy. We can summarise that the regional policy is aimed at the regions and settlements in the EU, which seeks to achieve an increase in economic growth, and quality of life through education and sustainable strategic investments. In addition, regional policy can be perceived as a policy of regulatory impact. As we know, regional development policy is aimed at improving the environment and conditions, which is related to socio-economic changes resulting in a higher quality of life. In this sense, regional policy can support the process of regulating social, economic, and environmental processes at the local level through the process of programming and creating a favorable environment for investments (Tsonkov, 2022). In Bulgaria, regional policy has more of an institutional meaning than a donor approach. In practice, the legal framework answers several issues related to territorial planning and regional development, but the planning process is not sufficiently regulated either in the Law on Regional Development or in the Law on Territorial Planning. It is necessary to link the content of the development plans with the national and regional planning schemes in more detail, to set deadlines and control by the state. In Bulgaria, it is necessary to proceed with the optimisation of the legislation, as well as the simplification of several regulatory processes and regimes to create conditions for the development of regional business and increase the regional economic activity of the population in the country (Valkov, 2018).

A significant deficit in Bulgaria is that the planning regions do not have their financial resources. The district administrations receive funds only for their current activities but do not have the financial resources for the implementation of district plans for regional development. The formation of municipal revenues is a very centralised process and, in general, revenues are limited in quantity. For this reason, local authorities are assessed as not a particularly reliable partner in the co-financing of

projects.

The pragmatic consideration of regional development policy is not so much a direct distribution of resources, but above all a coordination of sectoral policies and actions and directing them toward solving regional problems. Therefore, the key factor for the success of regional development plans is the achievement of an integrated approach and effective use of resources, as well as the coordination of sectoral policies. In this direction, if we look at the regional structure of GDP in Bulgaria (Figure 6), we will notice the need for support from the state to direct more investments to certain regions that need support. However, there is a hidden picture here, which shows that the South-West region is leading, but this is because it is home to the city of Sofia, which is the absolute leader in the national economy. The other regions should implement effective regional policies to at least promote the inclusive socio-economic development of rural areas within them.

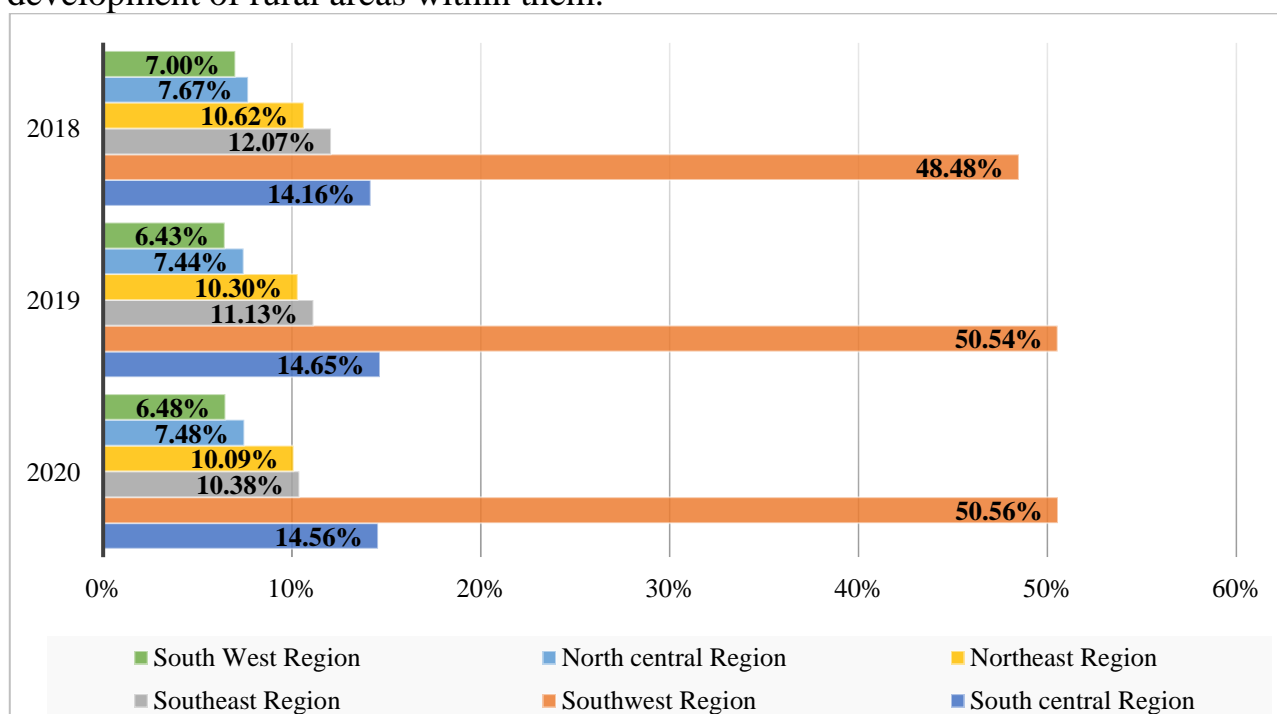


Figure 6. Regional structure of Bulgaria's GDP for the period 2018–2020

Source: built based on data of the statistical bulletin of National Statistical Institute and authors' calculations.

We can assume that the implementation of the regional development policy is a key tool for reducing the differences between the regions in Bulgaria and the European Union. It is necessary to understand that the regional policy should stimulate the regional economy by increasing the regional GDP levels, and especially by controlling the migration processes. These processes can be encouraged through the implementation of “Regional operational programs”, a changed normative and regulatory environment, the creation of innovative technological zones and the promotion of the development of agriculture throughout the country (Koteva et al., 2008). Production of food products and raw materials for the food, textile and other industries can outline new perspectives for several rural areas in Bulgaria. In addition,

it is necessary to study in detail the experience of most EU countries in dealing with regional problems and solutions for rural development. The priority of the regional policy in the rural areas is to create conditions for the opening of new jobs related to the prevention of urbanisation problems and labor migrations in the big cities.

In Bulgaria, the classic model of regional policy, which is based on exogenous growth, prevails. This implies the attraction of external resources to the region to assist in its development or functioning. These are usually the resources of the state budget, subsidies or programs of the state, as well as the opportunities of foreign investors. In the countries of the European Union, exogenous growth is becoming more and more important. It is based on the stimulation of the development of the region's resources for growth, as well as the attraction of structurally determining investments by the available strengths of the respective regional community.

It is necessary to prepare the corresponding passport in each region or administrative-territorial unit, which should include the following indicators: population; infant mortality rate; total number of residential areas per capita; educational structure of the population; employed population by sectors and industries; total GDP and by industry; industrial production by sectors; the number of production units by industry and size; the level of foreign investment by industry; unemployment rate by duration and age group; labor force participation rate; the level of energy consumption; agricultural production; the number of subscriptions to mobile and landline phones; the total length of modernised roads; the number of private cars; the percentage of households connected to the water supply network; percentage of the population with secondary and higher education; percentage of the treated industrial waste; the level of water and air pollutants in the specified areas. In the evaluation process, very specific results should be noted and recorded, including the development of individual areas and municipalities within them, as well as cooperation between central and local authorities. In this direction, National plans for regional development and plans for integrated development of municipalities must have predefined goals covering all areas in which specific achievements are expected.

Deducing the need for a regional policy shows that in the new conditions, the country needs a combination of theory, practice, and effective management of regional development, which necessitates updating and modernising the conceptual apparatus and methodology. In this direction, we consider it important to introduce the concept of "guaranteed sustainable regional growth" as a condition for dynamic equilibrium in the regional economy, consistent with the minimum needs for the socio-economic development of the individual territorial community. The other concept that we can introduce is "natural regional growth", which is based on the accumulated life tradition in the development of the individual territorial community and shows the real state of the socio-economic development of the respective territorial community.

This necessitates the introduction of three main levels of strategic documents in Bulgaria's regional policy – national, regional, and municipal level, and the local authorities will develop a plan for the integrated development of the municipality in the medium term for a period of 16 years. The plan should have three stages of 5 years

each, and the last year for 6 essays to prepare a municipal document “Evaluation and monitoring of the municipal plan for integrated development in the medium term”, and the other 6 months to work on the new plan for the next period. The purpose of such a change could be to tie the planned investments to the budget, because so far at the regional level it is difficult to achieve the effect of added value from the projects. After all, most of them are difficult to realise, and the rest do not have the necessary effect. This necessitates the creation of Regional Municipal Development Directorates to support the processes and supervise the implementation of development plans and programs. Thus, these administrative structures will also provide methodical assistance and support to the process of assessment and decision-making for investments at the regional level, as well as for the determination of various sources of financing.

It is necessary that the programs and activities that support rural areas have the relevant specificity and are aimed at the local economic potential in the direction of: clarifying the specific situation and needs of the respective region; provision of diverse funds for investments, on the basis of which it is possible to create a development strategy and identify specific policies that will affect labor resources and reduce emigration; tracking the changes during the “life cycle of the programs” looking at them over the years, what part of the local population they have reached, which will certainly require a proper evaluation of the effect of the programs.

5. DISCUSSION

In the modern nation-state, various instruments and policies are used for influence. In our case, we can assume that the implementation of regional policy in rural areas should be segmented and targeted with the imposition of a system of measures and activities to support local development and increase the capacity of human capital. In this context, the need for expert decisions related to the management of regional development comes to the fore. The opportunity to impose the profession of the regionalist in regional politics is necessitated by the need to solve a group of problems related to the management, technical, and financial problems of the spatial development of the territory at the national, regional, and local levels.

At the same time, the implementation of the regional policy must achieve the necessary balance between efficiency, rationality, and sustainability, so that it is carried out naturally during the development of rural areas and their settlements. This can be done through the balance between the population, the economy, and the space in which they are located. This balance is the basic, fundamental one, which is responsible for the effectiveness of the regional policy and which determines the vitality and development prospects of the individual territorial communities (Dmytriieva & Sviatets, 2023; Khirivskiy et al., 2022).

Bulgaria, as a part of the European Union, needs to bring out those features of the regional policy that can activate the implementation of active policies for regional development, and from there for the structuring of sustainable regional communities, generating a stable and sustainable regional development model.

On the other hand, in the European Union, efforts are focused exclusively on

policy areas that have the greatest impact on the effectiveness of regional development policy or the process of convergence between member states. The EU cohesion policy should be able to respond more effectively to the needs and characteristics of the territories, and the specific geographical challenges and opportunities of the regions and cities. In a Pan-European context, the choice of a specific policy objective means fewer specific objectives and simplicity in the use of indicators. Therefore, within the framework of the European Union, it is necessary to strengthen regional policy through the implementation of more territorial instruments (Dmytriieva & Sviatets, 2023). Another important document promoting the implementation of regional policy is the Leipzig Charter for Sustainable European Cities, which complements the ideas expressed in the Territorial Program, as it turns the integrated urban development policy into a task with a European dimension. In this way, the integrated urban development policy and the territorial cohesion policy each make a complementary contribution to the implementation of the goal of sustainable development. It is important to note that the regional policy in Bulgaria must be based on the principle of “housing-transport-work”. This is, in practice, an expression of the vision for conducting a regional policy based on the interrelationship “population-space-economy” and sets its expression for the need for a policy for regional development. In other words, the population and the economy are the two poles between which the regional policy takes place, which is visible through the spatial change. In regional development, a significant factor is the interaction “demography – economy – space”, which characterises the effectiveness of regional policy and opportunities for the development of the Bulgarian territory.

An important contribution is made by the functioning of the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON), which periodically makes a more in-depth analysis of the impact of Community policies on territorial cohesion and causality. This process requires the development of operational indicators to regularly monitor the territorial dimension. Territorial cohesion can only be achieved with an intensive and continuous dialogue between all stakeholders in territorial development. We call this collaborative process “territorial governance”. The private sector (and especially entrepreneurs at local and regional levels), the scientific community, public administration (especially local and regional authorities), non-governmental organisations, and different sectoral policies must act together to better exploit key investments in European regions, as well as to reduce the consequences of climate change. In this direction, we must emphasise that in the rural areas of Bulgaria, there are territories with a unique character and unused potential for the development of tourism, combining natural and cultural values, offering a recreational environment corresponding to modern requirements in terms of accessibility, bioclimatic comfort, and communication connectivity. There are over 40,000 registered immovable cultural heritage monuments in the country. At the same time, rural areas can strengthen their regional profile through the attraction of investments and the rational use of program instruments and ways of grant funding, which will create opportunities to support the regional development of rural areas.

Another important deficit that has not yet been resolved is support for the strengthening and expansion of the trans-European networks passing through Bulgaria. In practice, mobility and accessibility are essential preconditions for economic development in all regions. We need rail, road, and air networks of sufficient capacity (including a network of operational regional airports), efficient sea, coastal, and inland waterways, and a network of secondary roads (connecting urban centers to their hinterlands), as well as effective transport management of loads. Bulgaria must improve the development and modernisation of railway transport and, the development of the airports at Ruse, Silistra, Targovishte, Kardjali, Gotse Delchev, Gabrovnitsa, and Vidin. It is important to design expressways in the direction Silistra–Shumen–Yambol–Elhovo, Lovech–Troyan–Karnare–Karlovo–Plovdiv, Gorna Malina–Pirdop–Karlovo–Kazanlak–Sliven–Aitos–Karnobat–Vetren, Montana–Pleven–Svishtov, Pleven–Byala–Razgrad–Shoumen, Kubrat–Ispereh–Dulovo–Tervel–Dobrich–Kardam.

In practice, the particularities and differences in the potential of the regions, which can be the basis for conducting an effective regional policy on the environment and culture, are ignored. This could be a particularly strong development prospect for the regions within the Danube Plain, Pre-Balkan, Dobrudja, Trans-Balkan Lowlands, Rhodope, Strandja, and Sakar. Therefore, through coordinated management measures and appropriate infrastructural development, “cultural roads and networks” should be stimulated, as well as any other territorial projects of importance for the natural and cultural heritage.

From a theoretical point of view, the main conclusion is that for the national economy to function effectively, it is necessary to improve the well-being of rural areas and create an opportunity to improve regional connectivity. Rural areas need a strong regional economy and proper programming to achieve their sustainable regional development goals. The promotion of entrepreneurship in rural areas should be brought up as a government policy.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study determined the degree of implementation of specific regional policies in rural areas in the context of Bulgaria’s integration into the European Union due to the prospects of changes in economic situation and new trends in the implementation of regional policies. The population decline in rural areas during 2007–2022 was twice as high as the average rate of population decline in Bulgaria. Analysis of the age structure of Bulgarian farmers indicates that the largest relative share (32 %) is between the ages of 51 and 60; only 6 % are aged 21 to 30, and 12 % are aged 31 to 40. This is due to the unattractiveness of agricultural work, its low prestige and efficiency, as well as high risk. Also, in Bulgaria, few graduates of secondary special and higher agricultural education return to the countryside for the development of agribusiness. For example, among the interviewed farmers, only 12.9 % have completed a special agricultural education, and 9.7 % have a higher education. The potential of agribusiness has a significant impact not only on its development, but also on the rural areas in which it is located. However, there is noticeable stagnation of development in

rural areas, as evidenced by the results of surveys on the development opportunities of local economic entities: only 3.2 % of farmers answered as “very good”, and others 3.2 % as “good”, while “satisfactory” – 45.2 %, and “unsatisfactory” – 48.4 %.

In practice, Bulgaria’s regional policy in recent years has had a satisfactory systematic character. The process of strategic and planning activity is developing, which has its characteristics at different levels, but a mechanism of sufficiently sustainable synchrony and coherence between them has not yet been found. Planning regions are formed based on regions depending on their geographical location, economic development, population, and development prospects, but they do not have their institutional forms, and hence the possibilities for conducting regional policy at the meso-level. To a large extent, public administration perceives regional policy as a means of imposing the centralised model at the local level based on regulatory regimes and a centralized budget, rather than the implementation of regional development policies imposing institutional stereotypes creating conditions for decentralisation of management, as well as successful models of the socio-economic development of the regions. The need to introduce regional policy requires that individual approaches in its implementation represent a certain set of practices for solving a given local or regional socio-economic problem or the adaptation of the region to the pace of developed regions. More and more in Bulgaria, it is necessary to implement a specific socio-economic policy in the individual regions, which is aimed at the development of an efficient and competitive economy and full integration into the European structures. Regional development in Bulgaria is at an important stage, in which it is necessary to form the regional profiles of the districts in our country. This brings to the fore the effectiveness of the implemented policy for regional development. The main challenge now is to find the balance between the priorities of individual municipalities, districts, and planning regions, as well as solving the most important problems for them. To a large extent, the development of Bulgarian regions and districts must correspond with the national priorities and understandings for the development of the regions and the policy of the European Commission for the territorial development of the European Union as a whole. Efforts to implement the regional policy is related to finding the opportunities for purposeful impact on the territory using tools and activities that should bring regional development to the fore as a national priority of the modern state. In practice, regional development means a balance between the priorities of municipalities, regions, and planning regions and the search for the most important problems for them to solve related to national priorities and understandings of the development of regions as separate territorial communities. In practice, creating conditions for balanced development of the individual regions of the country and supporting territorial bodies and activities through financial, credit, and investment policy means that regional development must be the foundation of the regional economy and outline its contours through effective regional development policies.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The main limitation of this study is that in this article the authors focused mainly

on a qualitative analysis of trends, problems and prospects for the development of regional policy in rural areas in Bulgaria. A limitation of the data is that in this study we considered a limited number of indicators based on their availability in National Statistical Institute reports, which likely did not take into account other important indicators of agricultural and rural development. On the other hand, this study is limited to only examining the current state and does not explore the causal mechanism between the key parameters of the regional policy for the development of rural areas and does not make predictions about the efficiency of this policy in the long term.

Future research should be directed toward a deeper analysis of the relationship between the level of development of rural areas and agricultural business, as well as scenario forecasting of agricultural and rural development in Bulgaria. In this aspect, the development of a set of measures to stimulate the retention of young people in the village, in particular through the introduction of tax and other financial benefits for new investments in agricultural and rural development, is of great importance. The introduction of new approaches to the implementation of the regional policy for the development of rural areas in Bulgaria necessitates the improvement and modernisation of the conceptual apparatus, methodology and practice of strategic planning. It is also possible to refine the system of indicators for evaluating the regional development policy with other policies in the country.

Funding: the article is subsidised under project NID № 5/2021 of the University of National and World Economy on the topic “Concept for publication of a scientific journal at the Faculty of Management and Administration” at the UNWE (Sofia).

Acknowledgments: we express special thanks to colleagues from the National Statistical Institute for the information provided.

Conflicts of interest: the authors declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

1. Beer, A., Houghton, G., & Maude, A. (2003). *Developing locally: an international comparison of local and regional economic development*. Bristol, Policy Press. Available at: <https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/developing-locally>.
2. Blakely, E. J., & Bradshaw, T. K. (2002). *Planning local economic development: theory and practice*. London, Sage Publications.
3. Boyadzhiev, V. (1995). On the meaning and content of some basic categories of theoretical geographical knowledge. *Yearbook of the University of St. Kliment Ohridski GGF*, 2(87), 43–52.
4. Boyadzhiev, V. (2011). The role of small settlements for the regional development of Bulgaria. *Report in the collection “Opportunities and problems for the development of alternative forms of tourism in small settlements”*. Plovdiv, Academic Publishing House at the Center for European Integration and Culture of the University of Higher Education.
5. Boyadzhiev, V. (2005). *Region, regionalism, regional policy in the European Union*. Sofia, Sofia University.
6. Hayes, B. (2014). *Infrastructure: a guide to the industrial landscape*. New York,

WW Norton & Co. Publication.

7. Brink, A. (2004). Land consolidation and the emergence of the metropolitan landscape. Available at: https://www.fig.net/resources/proceedings/2004/france_2004_comm7/papers_symp/ts_03_vandenbrink.pdf.

8. Casati, R., & Varzi, A. C. (1999). Parts and places: the structures of spatial representation. Cambridge, MIT Press.

9. Chen, Y., Gibb, K., Leishman, C., & Wright, R. (2012). The impact of population aging on house prices: a micro-simulation approach. *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, 59(5), 523–542. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9485.2012.00593.x>.

10. Dimov, N. (2008). Regional sustainable development of Bulgaria: advantages, limitations and synergetic effect. In *European integration and sustainable development* (pp. 173–189). Sofia, Publishing House “Iztok-Zapad”.

11. Dmytriieva, V., & Sviatets, Yu. (2023). Agricultural business in independent Ukraine: thirty-year dynamics of the reorganization process. *Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 9(2), 136–162. <https://doi.org/10.51599/are.2023.09.02.06>.

12. Geneshki, M. (2000). Regional economics, 3rd ed. Sofia, Publisher Trakia-M.

13. Georgiev, L. (2008). Regional economics. Sofia, New Bulgarian University.

14. Geshev, G. (1999). Problems of regional development and regional policy in the Republic of Bulgaria. Sofia, Institute of Geography of BAS; YuZU “N. Rilski”.

15. Glaeser, E. L., & Redlick, C. (2009). Social capital and urban growth. *International Regional Science Review*, 32(3), 264–299. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1299086>.

16. Hristoskov, J. (2015). Nature, classifications and statistical analysis of the infrastructure of the territory. *Statistics*, 4, 29–66.

17. Ives, B., Olson, M. H., & Baroudi, J. J. (1983). The measurement of user information satisfaction. *Communications of the ACM*, 26, 785–793. <https://doi.org/10.1145/358413.358430>.

18. Khirivskyi, R., Cherevko, H., Yatsiv, I., Pasichnyk, T., Petryshyn, L., & Kucher, L. (2020). Assessment and analysis of sustainability of the socio-economic development of amalgamated territorial communities of the region. *European Journal of Sustainable Development*, 9(2), 569–578. <https://doi.org/10.14207/ejsd.2020.v9n2p569>.

19. Khirivskyi, R., Yatsiv, I., Petryshyn, L., Pasichnyk, T., Kucher, L., & Irtysheva, I. (2022). Assessment of the efficiency of employment of the communities’ resource potential using different approaches. *TEM Journal*, 11(1), 367–373. <https://doi.org/10.18421/TEM111-46>.

20. Kolev, B. (1997). Geographical space – a resource of the future. Geographical space – an investment for the XXI century. Sofia, Institute of Geography of BAS.

21. Koteva, N., Mladenova, M., Risina, M., & Bashev, H. (2008). Problems and prospects for the development of agricultural holdings under the conditions of the EU CAP. *Economics and management of agriculture*, 53(3), 17–25.

22. Lee, Y. W., Strong, D. M., Kahn, B. K., & Wang, R. Y. (2002). AIMQ: a methodology for information quality assessment. *Information & Management*, 40(2), 133–146. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-7206\(02\)00043-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-7206(02)00043-5).
23. Mishev, P., Ivanova, N., Shterev, N., & Harizanova, H. (2009). Status and prospects for the development of semi-market farms in Bulgaria. *Nauchni trudove*, 2, 3–60.
24. Mytelka, L., & Goertzen, H. (2004). Learning, innovation and cluster growth: a study of two inherited organizations in the Niagara Peninsula wine cluster. Discussion Paper Series 2004–15, Maastricht, Netherlands.
25. Osmani, M., Kolaj, R., Borisov, P., & Arabska, E. (2022). Why agricultural policies fail and two cases of policy failures in Albania. *Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 8(2), 86–104. <https://doi.org/10.51599/are.2022.08.02.05>.
26. Osyпова, O., Horna, M., Vashchaiev, S., Ishchuk, Y., & Pomazun, O. (2023). Convergence of food consumption across Ukrainian regions: approach using spatial panel data models. *Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 9(1), 28–43. <https://doi.org/10.51599/are.2023.09.01.02>.
27. Patyka, N., Gryschenko, O., Kucher, A., Hełdak, M., & Raszka, B. (2021). Assessment of the degree of factors impact on employment in Ukraine's agriculture. *Sustainability*, 13(2), 564. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13020564>.
28. Penkova, E., & Gorchilova, D. (2013). Social development of the regions. Sofia, Publishing complex UNSS.
29. Ramon, J. (1994). Some logics related to von Wright's logic of place. *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, 35(1), 88–98. <https://doi.org/10.1305/ndjfl/1040609296>.
30. Sağlam Çeliköz, Y., Yildiz, T., Arslan, Ü., & Kirmizioğlu, H. (2022). The relationship between economic globalization and ecological footprint: empirical evidence for developed and developing countries. *Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 8(4), 109–133. <https://doi.org/10.51599/are.2022.08.04.05>.
31. Siryk, Z., Popadynets, N., Pityulych, M., Chakii, O., Irtysheva, I., Panukhnyk, O., Hyk, V., ... & Lysyak, N. (2021). Decentralization of local self-government under the conditions of administrative-territorial reform in Ukraine. *Accounting*, 7(4), 781–790. <https://doi.org/10.5267/j.ac.2021.2.006>.
32. Soares, R. R. (2004). Crime reporting as a measure of institutional development. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 52(4), 851–871. <https://doi.org/10.1086/420900>.
33. Trono, A., & Castronuovo, V. (2016). Cultural landscape and sustainable tourism in rural areas. Case studies from the Puglia region in Southern Italy. *Budapest International Conference on Tourism and Cultural Landscapes: Towards A Sustainable Approach* (pp. 571–586). Budapest. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319987323_Cultural_landscape_and_sustainable_tourism_in_rural_areas_Case_studies_from_the_Puglia_region_in_Southern_Italy.
34. Tsonkov, N. (2022). Regulatory models for territorial development.

Publishing House of UNWE.

35. Valkov, V. (2018). The role of authorities at central and local level for social policy. *Nauchni trudove*, 4, 269–280.

36. Varga, Á. (2021). Local self-governments and the vertical division of power. *Public Governance, Administration and Finances Law Review*, 6(2), 121–132. <https://doi.org/10.53116/pgafnr.2021.2.9>.

37. Vaughan, L., & Wu, G. (2004). Links to commercial websites as a source of business information. *Scientometrics*, 60(3), 487–496. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:SCIE.0000034389.14825.bc>.

38. von Wright, G. H. (1983). Practical reason. Oxford, Blackwell.

39. Wilder, R. (2007). *Integrative Land Consolidation – an approach for fulfilling the objectives of the rural development policy*. Report on the workshop on effective and sustainable land management: a permanent challenge for each society. Geneva.

40. Yang, C. C. (2005). The refined Kano's model and its application. *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence*, 16, 1127–1137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14783360500235850>.

Citation:

Стиль – ДСТУ:

Borisov P., Petrov K., Tsonkov N. Integration perspectives for improving regional policy in rural areas of Bulgaria. *Agricultural and Resource Economics*. 2024. Vol. 10. No. 1. Pp. 260–283. <https://doi.org/10.51599/are.2024.10.01.11>.

Style – APA:

Borisov, P., Petrov, K., & Tsonkov, N. (2024). Integration perspectives for improving regional policy in rural areas of Bulgaria. *Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 10(1), 260–283. <https://doi.org/10.51599/are.2024.10.01.11>.