

Municipalities constitute the most stable level of subnational governance in Bulgaria and represent the only territorial-administrative units endowed with constitutionally guaranteed self-government. Despite this institutional importance, the current administrative-territorial configuration of 265 municipalities reveals substantial spatial fragmentation and pronounced asymmetries in demographic, economic, and administrative capacity. Ongoing population decline, strong dependence on intergovernmental transfers, and the growing role of the public sector as a major employer in many peripheral municipalities increasingly raise questions about the long-term sustainability of the existing municipal structure.

Debates on possible administrative-territorial reform periodically re-emerge in policy and academic discussions. However, they tend to remain largely focused on normative criteria such as population size, fiscal capacity, or administrative efficiency. Much less attention has been paid to the spatial dimension of the issue — namely, the relationship between institutional boundaries and the actual territorial patterns through which services, functions, and daily interactions are organized. In this sense, the problem of municipal fragmentation is not only administrative but also geographical.

This paper approaches the question of municipal organization through the lens of centrality. Rather than treating municipalities solely as administrative units, it considers them as potential nodes within wider functional territorial systems. From this perspective, the key issue becomes the extent to which existing municipal structures correspond to real spatial patterns of service provision, accessibility, and everyday socio-economic interactions.

To address this question, the paper turns to the German-speaking planning tradition, where the concept of centrality has long played an important role both in spatial analysis and in applied territorial planning. While rooted in the theoretical foundations of central place theory, this tradition has developed a strong empirical orientation, using a variety of indicators to identify and structure central places within settlement systems. These include measures related to accessibility, functional service provision, commuting patterns, institutional presence, and others.

Without seeking to transfer institutional models directly, the paper explores how selected empirically oriented approaches to centrality developed in German-speaking contexts might inform the examination of Bulgarian municipalities. Particular attention is paid to indicators that capture functional relationships between places — such as accessibility to services, the presence of key public functions, daily commuting flows, and other dimensions of spatial interaction — insofar as these can be operationalized using available statistical data in Bulgaria.

On this basis, the paper revisits existing Bulgarian attempts to categorize and hierarchize settlements and municipalities, including those embedded in major national strategic and planning documents (National Spatial Development Concept 2013–2025, National Regional Development Strategy 2012–2022, and the recent categorization methodology developed by the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works in 2024.). By placing these approaches alongside a centrality-oriented perspective, the aim is not to propose a ready-made reform model but to open a spatially grounded analytical viewpoint on the organization of municipalities.

The contribution of the paper lies in shifting the discussion on administrative-territorial reform from a predominantly normative and demographic frame towards a more explicitly spatial and geographical one. In doing so, it highlights the potential relevance of centrality-oriented thinking for understanding the relationship between institutional structures and functional territorial organization in Bulgaria.