Revisiting the Administrative-Territorial Structure of Municipalities in Bulgaria through the Concept of Centrality

Ivaylo Stamenkov, Nikolay Popov

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

1. Introduction and problem statement

The administrative-territorial organisation of local government is closely related to the spatial distribution of population, economic activity, public services and settlement functions. When these patterns change substantially over time, administrative boundaries and the functional organisation of space may increasingly diverge. This raises questions not only about the demographic and financial viability of local government units, but also about the capacity of their centres to provide services to the populations and territories assigned to them.

This issue is particularly relevant in Bulgaria. The municipality is the basic territorial unit of local self-government and plays a key role in the provision of public services, local development and spatial planning. The present municipal structure comprises 265 municipalities and has been shaped by successive administrative-territorial transformations, while the country has simultaneously experienced prolonged population decline, ageing and increasing spatial concentration. As a result, a growing number of municipalities have very small populations, particularly in peripheral, border and mountainous areas. However, population size alone cannot determine whether a municipality continues to perform an important territorial role. A small municipality may retain essential central functions and serve a relatively extensive or poorly accessible surrounding territory, whereas another municipality may be strongly functionally dependent on a nearby larger centre.

This paper therefore argues that the discussion on the future administrative-territorial structure of Bulgarian municipalities should be complemented by a functional perspective based on the concept of centrality. It draws particularly on the German-speaking tradition of central-place and centrality research, in which the classical concept of central places (*Zentrale Orte*) has developed towards increasingly empirical approaches focusing on central functions, catchment areas, accessibility, spatial behaviour and functional relations.

The main research question is: **to what extent can the concept of centrality provide a functional basis for reassessing the administrative-territorial structure of Bulgarian municipalities beyond predominantly demographic criteria?** The study combines an analysis of the Bulgarian institutional and demographic context with a conceptual and methodological review of German-speaking centrality research. On this basis, it proposes a framework for a future empirical assessment of Bulgarian municipalities combining functional centrality with demographic, fiscal and administrative viability.

2. The Bulgarian municipal context

Bulgaria has a two-tier administrative-territorial structure consisting of 28 districts and 265 municipalities, with municipalities constituting the level of local self-government (NSI, 2025a; Stamenkov, 2026). As of the end of 2025, the country had a population of 6.42 million, distributed highly unevenly across its municipal territory. This structure operates in the context

of long-term demographic decline, ageing and increasing concentration of population and economic activity in the largest urban centres, while many peripheral, border and mountainous territories are characterised by low population densities and considerable distances from major service centres (NSI, 2025b).

The present municipal structure has important historical roots in the territorial reform of 1979, when the previous 1,389 municipalities were consolidated into 291 settlement systems. Significantly, this transformation was not based exclusively on demographic size. The formation of the new territorial units also considered geographical proximity, economic, social and cultural relations, common infrastructure and the capacity of centres to provide services to their surrounding settlements. Subsequent administrative-territorial changes resulted in the present system of 265 municipalities (Koulov, 2025).

The current *Administrative-Territorial Structure of the Republic of Bulgaria Act*, adopted in 1995, also combines demographic and functional criteria. Article 8 requires a population of more than 6,000 inhabitants for the establishment of a new municipality, but additionally requires a traditional unifying centre with established social and technical infrastructure, the inclusion of neighbouring settlements, maximum road and transport distance of 40 km from the municipal centre, and demonstrated financial capacity (Administrative-Territorial Structure Act, 1995). Importantly, the population threshold applies to the establishment of new municipalities and does not constitute an automatic legal requirement for abolishing existing municipalities that subsequently fall below this level.

Nevertheless, the demographic divergence from this threshold is substantial. At the end of 2025, **81 of Bulgaria's 265 municipalities (30.6%) had fewer than 6,000 inhabitants, while accounting for only 4.4% of the national population**. Furthermore, 147 municipalities (55.5%) had fewer than 10,000 inhabitants and contained only 12.5% of the country's population (NSI, 2025b). At the opposite end of the distribution, a substantial share of the population is concentrated in a relatively small number of large municipalities.

These disparities, however, do not provide sufficient grounds for a purely demographic approach to territorial reform. Small municipalities differ considerably in geographical position, accessibility, settlement structure, fiscal and administrative capacity, and, most importantly for the present study, in the functional role performed by their centres. Bulgaria already applies a national categorisation of municipalities based on multiple territorial and socio-economic characteristics (MRDPW, 2024), while national spatial and regional development documents establish a hierarchy of settlement centres (MRDPW, 2012; MRDPW, 2026). These classifications serve different policy purposes and should not be equated with empirically observed functional centrality. The resulting analytical gap is therefore not simply whether a municipality is demographically or administratively "small", but whether its administrative territory corresponds to the actual functional role and spatial reach of its centre.

3. Centrality in the German-speaking research tradition

The conceptual basis for a functional reassessment of Bulgarian municipalities can be found in the long tradition of central-place and centrality research in German-speaking geography and spatial planning. Its classical starting point is Christaller's (1933) theory of central places (*Theorie der zentralen Orte*), which explains settlement hierarchies through the provision of central goods and services to populations extending beyond the settlement itself. From the

perspective of the present study, the enduring significance of this tradition lies less in Christaller's idealised geometric model than in the relationship between **central functions, hierarchical position and the surrounding area served by a centre**.

Subsequent research increasingly transformed this theoretical proposition into an empirical research programme. Of particular relevance are two complementary approaches: the **catalogue method (*Katalogmethode*)**, which assesses centrality through the number, type and level of functions located in a centre, and the **hinterland method (*Umlandmethode*)**, which examines the spatial reach of these functions through the origins and orientations of their users (Weichhart and Fassmann, 2005, p. 27). These approaches make it possible to distinguish analytically between the functional endowment of a centre and its actual catchment area (*Einzugsbereich*). Statistical indicators relating to population, employment, commuting and accessibility can provide an additional description of the wider structural context in which these functional relations operate.

A particularly important empirical application was developed by Bobek and Fesl (1978) for the Austrian central-place system. Their analysis treated central places and the territories oriented towards them as related but analytically distinguishable components of the spatial system. The hierarchy of centres was assessed through their provision of central services, while spatial orientations were used to identify their areas of influence. This perspective is particularly relevant for administrative-territorial analysis because functional areas need not coincide with administrative boundaries and populations may display orientations towards more than one centre.

Later research increasingly questioned whether centrality and catchment areas could be adequately represented through fixed hierarchies and unambiguous spatial affiliations. Deiters (1978), in examining the empirical testability of central-place theory, emphasised the probabilistic character of consumer behaviour and challenged the assumption that consumers consistently orient themselves towards the nearest centre. His later work further highlighted multiple orientation (*Mehrfachorientierung*) and the resulting overlap of catchment areas, reinforcing the shift from fixed spatial affiliations towards behavioural and relational interpretations of centrality (Deiters, 2006). Heinritz (1999) further demonstrated that catchment areas (*Einzugsbereiche*) cannot simply be “found” in reality, but are empirically constructed from observed user origins and depend substantially on the methodological rules applied; moreover, such areas may change over time as competitive and behavioural conditions change. More recent approaches extend this perspective towards functional relations and overlapping spatial configurations. Terfrüchte (2015), for example, conceptualises regional action spaces through multiple types of functional interrelations (*Verflechtungen*) and emphasises that functional regionalisation should not be predetermined by existing administrative boundaries. Accessibility, commuting and other spatial flows therefore become important for understanding centrality as a relational characteristic of places embedded in wider and potentially overlapping functional systems. More explicitly from a planning perspective, Terfrüchte, Greiving and Flex (2017) demonstrate how central-place systems can be empirically validated by combining functional endowment with spatial interrelations and the formation of service areas.

The Austrian ÖROK study *Zentralität und Raumentwicklung* (Weichhart, Fassmann and Hesina, 2005) is particularly relevant in this respect. It revisited the applicability of the central-

place concept under contemporary socio-economic and spatial conditions and emphasised the role of different actors in producing centrality. Public, private and semi-public services follow different location logics, and their spatial concentration does not necessarily increase uniformly with the hierarchical level of a centre. Consequently, a simple count of services cannot adequately capture functional centrality; the type, level, spatial distribution and accessibility of functions also need to be considered. The study explicitly sought to reconsider the contemporary applicability and limitations of the central-place concept rather than merely reproduce the classical model.

The continuing relevance of the central-place concept in spatial planning does not imply a uniform model of its application. In both Germany and Austria, its operationalisation varies between the federal states (Länder), with differences in the number and hierarchy of central-place levels, their definitions and the criteria applied, reflecting different institutional and spatial conditions (BBSR, 2014; ÖROK, 2006).

Taken together, these developments suggest an important distinction between **normatively designated central places and empirically observed centrality**. For the Bulgarian case, this means that the formal hierarchical level assigned to a settlement centre cannot in itself demonstrate the functional role that the centre actually performs. The relevant empirical questions are instead which functions are provided, who uses them, how accessible they are, and how the resulting functional relations structure the surrounding territory.

4. A centrality-based framework for reassessing Bulgarian municipalities

Drawing on these conceptual and methodological approaches, this study proposes that any future reassessment of Bulgaria's municipal structure should distinguish between the **functional centrality of municipal centres** and the **viability of municipalities as units of local government**. The two dimensions are related, but they should not be treated as equivalent. Functional centrality concerns the role performed by a centre within a wider spatial system, whereas municipal viability concerns the demographic, fiscal and administrative capacity of the municipality to perform its responsibilities. Their analytical separation makes it possible to avoid equating small population size directly with limited territorial significance.

The proposed assessment of functional centrality comprises four complementary dimensions. The first is **functional endowment**, identifying the public, private and semi-public services available in each municipal centre and differentiating them according to their level, specialisation and spatial distribution. Rather than assigning equal importance to all services, the analysis should recognise that different functions have different thresholds, ranges and location logics. The second dimension is **functional reach**, examining the settlements and populations actually served by these functions. Empirically identified catchment areas should therefore complement the administrative territory of the municipality and allow for competing centres and multiple spatial orientations (*Mehrfachorientierung*).

The third dimension is **accessibility**. The current Bulgarian legislation includes a maximum road and transport distance of 40 km from settlements to the municipal centre when establishing a new municipality. A functional assessment could extend this principle by considering actual network accessibility and travel time, the availability of public transport, geographical constraints and the accessibility of alternative centres. This is particularly important in mountainous, border and other peripheral areas, where similar physical distances may represent

very different levels of effective accessibility. The fourth dimension concerns **functional relations**, including commuting and, where suitable data are available, other spatial flows. These relations can indicate whether a municipal centre performs a relatively autonomous territorial role or whether its municipality is strongly integrated with and dependent upon a neighbouring higher-order centre. The contemporary applicability of such an approach is illustrated by recent German planning practice, where the empirical reassessment of central places combines service endowment, labour-market centrality, functional catchments and network-based accessibility (Scheunert and Siedentop, 2026).

These four dimensions would provide an assessment of functional centrality that could subsequently be combined with indicators of **municipal viability**, including population size and demographic trends, fiscal capacity and administrative capacity. Their combination could generate differentiated territorial policy scenarios rather than a uniform population-based response. Municipalities characterised by both stronger viability and stronger functional centrality would generally require no territorial intervention. Municipalities that remain viable but show strong functional dependence on another centre could instead be considered for enhanced intermunicipal cooperation or functional integration. Conversely, municipalities with limited demographic or administrative capacity but significant central functions, extensive catchment areas or poor accessibility to alternative centres may remain territorially important and could require maintenance or strengthening.

The strongest case for considering territorial consolidation would therefore arise only where **low municipal viability coincides with weak functional centrality, strong dependence on another centre, and the presence of a viable and accessible territorial alternative**. The proposed framework does not predetermine either the number or boundaries of future municipalities. Rather, it provides a basis for identifying mismatches between administrative territories and contemporary functional geography and for selecting cases requiring more detailed territorial assessment.

5. Conclusions and next steps

Bulgaria’s municipal structure is increasingly confronted with demographic decline, population concentration and growing disparities in the capacity of municipalities to perform their functions. However, these processes do not justify a uniform territorial response based primarily on population thresholds. Small municipalities may differ substantially in their functional role, accessibility and dependence on alternative centres.

The German-speaking tradition of centrality research provides a useful conceptual and methodological basis for introducing this missing functional perspective. By combining functional endowment, catchment areas, accessibility and spatial relations, centrality can help identify whether existing administrative territories correspond to contemporary patterns of service provision and spatial interaction.

The framework proposed here should therefore be understood as a methodological proposition rather than a completed territorial classification. The next step is to operationalise the proposed dimensions and test them empirically across all 265 Bulgarian municipalities, before considering differentiated policy responses ranging from maintaining or strengthening territorially important municipalities to cooperation, functional integration or, where justified by multiple criteria, territorial consolidation.

Ultimately, the question is not simply how many municipalities Bulgaria needs, but which municipal territories correspond to its contemporary functional geography.

References

Administrative-Territorial Structure of the Republic of Bulgaria Act (1995). *Zakon za administrativno-teritorialnoto ustroystvo na Republika Bulgaria* [Закон за административно-териториалното устройство на Република България]. State Gazette, No. 63/1995, with subsequent amendments. [In Bulgarian].

Bobek, H. and Fesl, M. (1978). *Das System der Zentralen Orte Österreichs: Eine empirische Untersuchung*. Schriften der Kommission für Raumforschung der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vol. 3. Vienna and Cologne.

Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2014). *Reform der Zentrale-Orte-Konzepte in den Ländern und Folgen für Siedlungsstruktur und Daseinsvorsorge: Endbericht*. Bundesamt für Bauwesen und Raumordnung (BBR). https://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/DE/forschung/programme/refo/raumordnung/2013/ReformZentraleOrteKonzepte_Bundeslaender/EndberichtZentraleOrte.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=1

Christaller, W. (1933). *Die zentralen Orte in Süddeutschland: Eine ökonomisch-geographische Untersuchung über die Gesetzmäßigkeit der Verbreitung und Entwicklung der Siedlungen mit städtischen Funktionen*. Jena: Gustav Fischer.

Deiters, J. (1978). *Zur empirischen Überprüfbarkeit der Theorie zentraler Orte: Fallstudie Westerwald*. Arbeiten zur Rheinischen Landeskunde, 44. Bonn: Ferd. Dümmlers Verlag.

Deiters, J. (2006). Von der Zentralitätsforschung zur geographischen Handelsforschung – Neuorientierung oder Paradigmenwechsel in der Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeographie? *Die Erde*, 137(4), 293–317.

Heinritz, G. (1999). Methodische Probleme von Einzugsbereichsmessungen. In G. Heinritz (ed.), *Die Analyse von Standorten und Einzugsbereichen: Methodische Grundfragen der geographischen Handelsforschung*, pp. 33–44. Passau: L.I.S. Verlag.

Koulov, B. (2025). Management of the Bulgarian geospace: Administrative-territorial structure of the Republic of Bulgaria [Управление на българското геопространство: административно-териториално устройство на Република България]. In *Geography of Bulgaria. Vol. 2: Social and Economic Geography. Regional Geography*, pp. 353–361. Sofia: Prof. Marin Drinov Publishing House. [In Bulgarian].

Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works (MRDPW) (2012). *National Strategy for Regional Development of the Republic of Bulgaria 2012–2022*. https://www.strategy.bg/bg/strategy-documents/770

Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works (MRDPW) (2024). *Categorisation of Administrative-Territorial and Territorial Units* [Категоризация на административно-териториалните и териториалните единици]. Sofia: MRDPW.

https://www.mrrb.bg/bg/kategorizaciya-na-administrativno-teritorialnite-i-teritorialnite-edinici/.

Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works (MRDPW) (2026). *Draft National Concept for Regional and Spatial Development 2026–2040*. https://www.mrrb.bg/bg/proekt-na-nacionalna-koncepciya-za-regionalno-i-prostranstveno-razvitie-2026-2040-g/

National Statistical Institute (NSI) (2025a). *Administrative-Territorial and Territorial Division of the Republic of Bulgaria*. Sofia: NSI. https://www.nsi.bg/en/press-release/administrative-territorial-and-territorial-division-of-the-republic-of-bulgaria-9010

National Statistical Institute (NSI) (2025b). *Population and Demographic Processes in 2025*. Sofia: NSI. https://www.nsi.bg/statistical-data/206/651

Österreichische Raumordnungskonferenz (ÖROK) (2006). *Zentralität und Standortplanung der öffentlichen Hand*. Schriftenreihe der Österreichischen Raumordnungskonferenz, No. 172. Vienna: ÖROK.

Scheunert, P. and Siedentop, S. (2026). *Raumanalyse Baden-Württemberg (2026): Zentrale Orte System und Landesentwicklungsachsen*. Kurzbericht Nr. 15. https://www.landesentwicklung-bw.de/img/stream/content/downloads/raumanalyse15-zentraleorte.pdf,p15

Stamenkov, I. (2026). Country Profile of Bulgaria. Hannover: ARL Country Profiles. https://doi.org/10.60683/jctk-8264

Terfrüchte, T. (2015). *Regionale Handlungsräume: Gliederung und Einflussfaktoren am Beispiel Nordrhein-Westfalens*. Lemgo: Verlag Dorothea Rohn.

Terfrüchte, T., Greiving, S. and Flex, F. (2017). Empirische Fundierung von Zentrale-Orte-Konzepten – Vorschlag für ein idealtypisches Vorgehen. *Raumforschung und Raumordnung | Spatial Research and Planning*, 75, 471–485.

Weichhart, P. and Fassmann, H. (2005). Begriffs- und Konzeptanalyse zur Theorie der Zentralen Orte und ihrer raumordnungspolitischen Anwendung. In P. Weichhart, H. Fassmann and W. Hesina (eds.), *Zentralität und Raumentwicklung*. Schriftenreihe der Österreichischen Raumordnungskonferenz (ÖROK), No. 167, pp. 11–44. Vienna: ÖROK.

Weichhart, P., Fassmann, H. and Hesina, W. (eds.) (2005). *Zentralität und Raumentwicklung*. Schriftenreihe der Österreichischen Raumordnungskonferenz (ÖROK), No. 167. Vienna: ÖROK.