

REGIONAL PLANNING IN BULGARIA: EMERGING DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES

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Abstract:

Regional planning within the European Union stands at the threshold of a new programming period (2028–2034), marking the continuation of the established cycle of defining strategic priorities at European level and their subsequent translation into national frameworks. These frameworks help guide how we allocate financial resources and design policies at regional and local levels over the next seven years.

Against this background, the paper identifies and analyses several key challenges confronting regional planning in Bulgaria. First, the country enters the new programming period with a revised territorial structure of planning regions (NUTS 2), raising questions regarding institutional capacity, administrative coordination, and statistical comparability. Second, the forthcoming National Concept for Regional and Spatial Development with a horizon to 2040 is expected to be adopted in a context of prolonged political instability, following a sequence of eight parliamentary elections within a six-year period. This political volatility constitutes a significant contextual factor influencing the coherence, continuity, and strategic orientation of regional policy and planning.

The analysis further highlights political and institutional determinants that directly affect the effectiveness of regional governance, including decision-making fragmentation, shifting policy priorities, and administrative discontinuities. Drawing on accumulated experience from the implementation of regional planning instruments at national, regional, and local levels, the paper formulates conclusions regarding structural weaknesses and adaptive capacities within the Bulgarian planning system. On this basis, it outlines prospective directions and critical considerations for the 2028–2034 programming period, emphasizing the need for enhanced strategic consistency, institutional stability, and multi-level coordination. Several conclusions have been drawn.

First of all, there is still no public (societal) understanding of what regional policy is. Society rarely directs electoral energy beyond local and national interest. Bulgaria does not have an

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administrative tradition at the regional level and this significantly complicates the work of local authorities which have to collaborate at the regional level. Local authorities are elected in municipalities, and the governors are appointable on NUTS 3 level. There is no administrative power in the regions (NUTS 2), but only interaction and partnership, which must be supported by a national intersectoral policy. In practice, however, sectoral policies are not implemented with a territorial approach. The future of the regional approach in the development of Bulgaria depends on a qualitative change in the paradigm of planning, first of all on political and policy level.