

Abstract: *The article aims to clarify in the first place the concept of "spatial planning" and its meaning in the scientific discourse in Bulgaria. There are no commonly accepted definitions of spatial development and regional development in the field of planning and management system of the territory in the country. Therefore, they often incorporate the same meaning and are used as interchangeable concepts. Due to the extremely broad scope of this issue, there are many definitions in use that vary between traditional land-use planning and strategic planning of regional development. Sometimes spatial planning procedures and tools refer to the coordination and / or integration of spatial dimensions of sectoral policies through targeted territorial strategies, largely approaching them to the classic strategic planning of regional development rather than to the spatial planning. On the other hand, the article analyses the system for planning and management of the territory in Bulgaria, with an emphasis on the nature and role of spatial planning in it. This system includes both the regulatory framework in this field, as well as, the regional and spatial development policies and institutions responsible for their development and implementation. Another important aspect of the article is the analysis of the necessity and the presence of vertical and horizontal integration between the strategic documents for spatial development. Their vertical integration ensures consistency by applying a unified approach to the different territorial hierarchical levels. Horizontal integration, on the other hand, provides for the possibility of wider spatial treatment of problems that are often common to both the target area and its neighbouring territories (regions) which affords opportunity for cooperation and joint efforts to solve them. The results of the article are based on theoretical and practical studies of the authors.*

Key words: *spatial planning, regional development, policy, planning and development of the territory*

Introduction

The research seeks to explore the essence and aspects of spatial planning in the context of the regional development and the system of planning and management of the territory in Bulgaria as a member state of the EU. The work is steered by the following research question: What is spatial planning in regard to the institutional and legislation framework in Bulgaria and how is it implemented in practise? The field of spatial planning is mainly defined by the Regional development act and Spatial planning act. In Bulgaria the institutional framework and legislation was Europeanized during the pre-accession process (1991-2005) and it was harmonized with the European legislation and a number of procedures, structures and institutional arrangements were "accommodated" in the existing institutional structure in order to realize the spatial and regional policy. This had a great effect on the development and subsequent amendments of the Regional development act and to some extent the Spatial planning act. The article shed light on the spatial planning in Bulgaria through investigating how regional development and spatial planning are related and interconnected. Spatial planning and regional development are inevitably intertwined and often there are no clear borders between

these two fields of study in practice. The present study aims to provide current analysis of the state-of-the-art of the spatial planning policy and its structure in Bulgaria after the first programming period as a full-fledged member of the EU and thus filling the 'gap' in the literature. Addressing the aforementioned research questions and accomplishing the objectives of the study will contribute to a better understanding of the functioning of the institutional framework for policy implementation of the spatial planning policy in Bulgaria. Investigating this issue has a high social relevance because spatial planning has great effect on the development of the economy on the territory, the development of infrastructure, green areas, etc. which influences our everyday life.

Methodology

The authors carried out a desktop research in order to gather necessary data to address the research question. The data collection included different literature sources, such as official legal documents, laws and their amendments, strategic documents, scientific articles, statistical data. In order to answer the research question, the study includes further document analysis of all data gathered in regard to the research topic. The justification of this research method derives from the objectives of the study to investigate the changes and state-of-the-art of the spatial planning practice in Bulgaria which inevitably requires analysis of the main normative regulations in the field of regional development and spatial planning. The focus of research are the Regional Development Act and the Spatial planning act, as well as their relative ordinances and amendments, because they lay down the formal regulations on the institutional structure and the channels for implementation for spatial planning policy. A content analysis on the changes of these acts is provided in order to assess the degree of domestic change. Moreover, the authors investigate the availability of spatial planning documents on all levels and the underlying reasons and the effects of their presence or absence. Detailed analysis of the applicability of the National concept of spatial development is carried out in order to assess the basis that the documents sets for adequate spatial planning in Bulgaria.

Analysis

Theoretical remarks on spatial planning

In the field of spatial planning and regional development in Bulgaria, there is no commonly accepted definition of all terms in practice. In this regard, these closely related concepts are often used quite freely and as terms that can be interchangeable. The same statement could apply to the concepts of spatial planning and regional planning. The reason for this can be found in various causes, such as purely academic interpretations and concepts of understanding and exploring development in a spatial aspect, different translation from foreign languages of political/scientific documents, political and administrative meaning of these concepts in different national governance systems at different levels and from different public and private organizations. Due to the largely broad scope of the issue, there are many definitions of spatial planning in use that vary from traditional land-use planning/management to strategic planning of regional development. In some countries spatial planning relate to coordination and/or integration of the spatial dimension of sectoral policies through targeted territorial strategies that makes it rather closer to the classic strategic planning of regional development than planning of the territory (UN, 2008). Moreover, the term incorporates more complex processes in a strategic sense for aggregative political actions aimed at different governmental tiers for

optimization of the social processes in a spatial aspect (Faludi, 2002). In this context, the term spatial development refers directly to the processes of evolution/development of the territory and all their dimensions, the concept of spatial planning is interpreted as an organized set of methods and the concept of spatial policy - as structured set of planned activities and interventions that influence on the spatial development of the people and activities in various categories such as production, marketing and communication systems realized in an environment with natural, urban and social character (CEMAT, 2006). One of the most cited definition for spatial planning is presented in the Compendium of European Spatial Planning - "spatial planning refers to methods used largely by the public sector to influence the future distribution of activities in spaces. It is undertaken with the aims of creating a more rational territorial organization of land uses and the linkages between them, to balance demands for development with the need to protect the environment and to achieve social and economic objectives" (European Commission, 1997).

As a member state of the EU, Bulgarian spatial planning institutional framework and practice is inevitably affected by the European methods and approaches in the field. However, the EU has no officially assigned competencies in the field of spatial planning, they lie in a national and, in some countries, even sub-national or local level. Nevertheless, the Lisbon Treaty and the EU high-level strategy Europe 2020 introduce a third dimension to the existing main objectives of economic and social cohesion in the union: territorial cohesion. This action already places a strong emphasis on the spatial dimension of the European policies. Moreover, a number of scientist analyze the process of "Europeanisation" of the spatial planning in the member states (Faludi, 2014; Colomb, et.al. , 2010; Nadin & Stead, 2008).

Spatial planning is usually associated with supra-local (supranational) territorial levels and is understood as a centralized, wide-ranging process of planning and optimizing the structure and development of a particular territory. The definition "wide-ranging" refers to the functions of "spatial coordination" and "harmonization" of those elements of sectoral policies which have a pronounced spatial impact, and the term "supra-local" emphasizes the fact that, in general, the territories as a subject of spatial planning go beyond the scale of local interests and the jurisdiction of local self-government. The centralized nature of the process derives from the necessity to realize a well-organized and centrally managed system for planning and coordination of interventions. This stems from the need to achieve a realistic structure/organization of the anthropogenic elements and systems and their combination with the components of the natural environment, acknowledging certain requirements for minimization of negative impact on natural processes occurring in the territory. On the other hand, "a particular territory/space" in spatial planning terms does not necessarily coincide with the administrative boundaries for the respective territorial level, since most natural and socio-economic processes and structures are not limited by administrative boundaries.

The process of spatial planning also includes the development of logically related, subordinate and integrated system of spatial planning documents. An essential feature of the developments of strategic documents for spatial development is the necessity of their vertical and horizontal integration. The vertical integration ensures consistency by applying a unified approach to the different territorial hierarchical levels. Horizontal integration, on the other hand, provides for the possibility of wider spatial treatment of problems, which are often common to both the target area and its neighboring territories (regions), therefore, it provides an opportunity for cooperation between them and pooling their efforts to solve them. The horizontal aspect also translates all sectoral policies in their territorial representation.

According to some authors, regional policy is a way for the government to intervene in the distribution of different activities across different regions/territories, focusing primarily on the distribution of economic activities and the construction of infrastructure of national importance. The implementation of regional policy often involves a wide range of actions aimed at redistributing economic activities to regions in decline facing the need to restructure the developed sectors within their scope. More specific, regional planning offers solutions through a system of coordinated action to solve the problems in the regions of the particular level. While regional policy focuses on intra-regional problem-solving mechanisms, regional planning focuses on a wider range of issues within the region, through the preparation and implementation of an integrated regional development strategy realized by the relevant institutions (territorial government bodies as well as local authorities). Spatial planning, in the broader context, studies the organization and utilization of the territory, the available resources and existing issues (natural, socio-economic, urban and infrastructural), then the identified resources and problems are analyzed and evaluated and, on this base, forecasts are developed, as well as vision, alternatives (territorial models / spatial proposals) and an appropriate spatial strategy for implementation.

In some countries spatial planning is rather understood as a strategic procedure, providing methods and tools that help "the public sector to influence the future distribution of activities in space. It is undertaken with the aims of creating a more rational territorial organisation of land uses and the linkages between them, to balance demands for development with the need to protect the environment, and to achieve social economic objectives" (European commission, 1997, p. 24)

Spatial planning within the framework of the statutory structured planning and management system is a complex strategic toolbox. It generates information in the medium and long-term horizons of the state of the national territory and for the creation of desirable models for the "adaptation" of spatial components, resources and potentials that are key to spatial development. On this basis, specific policies aimed at sustainable territorial development are formulated, initiated and implemented. The results from the application of this toolbox should be used to determine the territorial dimensions of specific target interventions that are subject to strategic regional planning and the actions and requirements that are necessary for these interventions in terms of spatial planning.

Development of the spatial planning in Bulgaria

The spatial planning legislation in Bulgaria has a long history that can be traced back to the late 19th century, soon after the liberation of the Ottomans (Bianco, 2011). The historical review of the documents shows that there are five official regulations adopted in the field of spatial planning so far:

1. The Human Settlements Public Work in the Kingdom of Bulgaria Act - 1897;
2. The Human Settlements Public Work Act - 1941;
3. The Human Settlement Planning Building Act - 1949;
4. The Territorial and Settlement Planning Act - 1973; and
5. The Spatial Planning Act - 2001.

The first two acts were introduced during the Kingdom of Bulgaria and laid down the basic principles of planning with focus on the human settlements. Then, with the act from 1941 the broader view was introduced through the idea of masterplans.

The Human Settlement Planning Building Act from 1949 was introduced during the Communist regime. It proposed more enhanced planning approach including cadastre activities. The act from 1973 already established a system of planning documents for different territorial level (Bianco, 2011).

Until 1989, the Territorial and Settlement Planning Act (1973) was in force in Bulgaria. Planning was centralised and regulated by a territorial development plan for the whole national territory. After 1989 with the political changes in the country, this planning model was ignored thus creating a vacuum resulting in the abandonment of planning practice in Bulgaria. A National Spatial Development Strategy was introduced in 1995. It was not implemented by the Government because the country was going through an economic crisis and the projected major positive changes for the year 2010 were not then seen to be realistic (Bianco, 2011).

The dynamics of the development of the regional and spatial planning, both in terms of legislation and institutional framework, as well as in terms of the geodemographic and socio-economic changes in the territory after 1989, can be characterized in three main periods - till 2012, during the period 2012-2020 and after 2020.

Period till 2012

The accession process of Bulgaria to the EU and the subsequent programming periods as a full-fledged member-state caused changes in terms of harmonization of legislation and procedures, that led to the necessity of new strategic and spatial documents and plans. They should reflect, investigate and develop future scenarios for the dynamics of the urbanization processes in the country, as well as, the effects of climate change and related natural hazards, the large new infrastructural projects and the restructuring of the territory as a result of their exploitation, the real demographic and socio-economic situation and their manifestation in the national space.

By 2012, the regional and spatial development processes are regulated by two core laws - the Regional Development Act and the Spatial Planning Act - the former focusing on regional development and the latter focusing on detailed regulations in the lowest local spatial level.

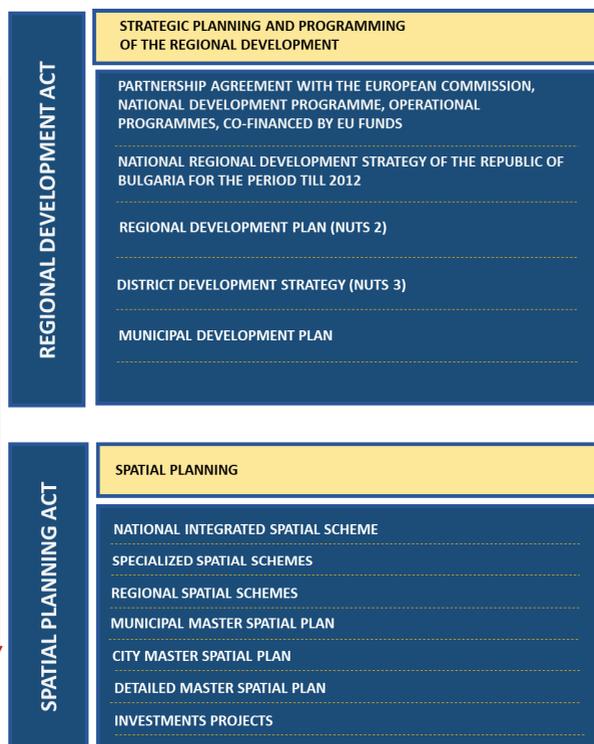


Fig. 1 Regional and spatial development documents till 2012

The Regional Development Act regulates the planning, programming, management, resource provision, monitoring, control and evaluation of the implementation of the documents for the implementation of the state policy for regional development. Strategic developments and planning have been defined and developed in this period - the National Regional Development Strategy was presented, as well as development strategies for all hierarchical levels – NUTS 2 regions, districts and municipalities. Thus, a coherent and logically linked systems of strategic planning documents was developed.

The implementation of the envisaged policies and the set strategic goals and financial resources, can be generally characterized as still quite centralized process, in terms of the power distribution towards all ties of the system of regional development policy, which does not allow for adequate treatment of spatial and socio-economic development of regions and districts, in view of their specifics. The decision-making functions and competencies in the field of regional planning of the defined regional (NUTS2) and district structures and territorial units are actually very limited or absent at all and of a purely administrative nature, without being able to take decisions on the respective territory and without available financial instrument and resource. There is a highly developed hierarchical structure (vertical aspect) with an explicit top-down approach. At the same time, the horizontal integration of all sectoral policies in the spatial aspect is also not well presented.

In this period, the Spatial Planning Act focuses on the regulation of the structure and purpose of the different types of territories and does not yet offer solutions for complete spatial development integrated with the different sectoral policies and strategies in the system of regional development documents.

During this period the "deficits" in the spatial and regional planning systems were defined and seen in practice allowing changes in the Regional Development Act and the Spatial Development Act to be underway with the start of the new programming period in 2014.

2012-2020 Period

In regard to the processes of the regional and spatial policy implementation for the period 2012-2020, the same trends from the previous period are evident. All structural/territorial units still retain the same core functions and power distribution, but they are still limited in decision-making process and realization of their own financial instrument and budget for spatial planning which leads to a continuing deepening of the existing problems. Institutional and legislation change is slow, difficult and characterized with a "path-dependency"

In order to address these problems and due to the harmonization of the systems of the documents to all EU requirements, changes in RDA and SPAs were introduced and a system of documents for "strategic spatial development planning" has been established to define the strategy for integrated spatial development taking into account the territorial potential and the principles of balanced sustainable development.

Thus, in 2012, the current scope of the spatial planning instruments in Bulgaria is defined in the Regional Development Act when the category "Strategic Spatial Development" is introduced as a new moment in the national planning and management system territory. The establishment of a "system of interrelated procedures and strategic documents aiming at the creation of an integrated spatial development strategy taking into account the territorial potential and the principles of balanced sustainable development" has been defined. They cover the same key levels of the territorial base for regional development (national area, regional level (NUTS 2) and district areas), with two main categories of instruments:

- Concept of Spatial Development (national level) and
- Spatial Development Schemes (regional NUTS 2 and district NUTS 3 level).

The location of these documents and their relationship with the other strategic documents in the system of spatial development planning is represented in Fig. 2.

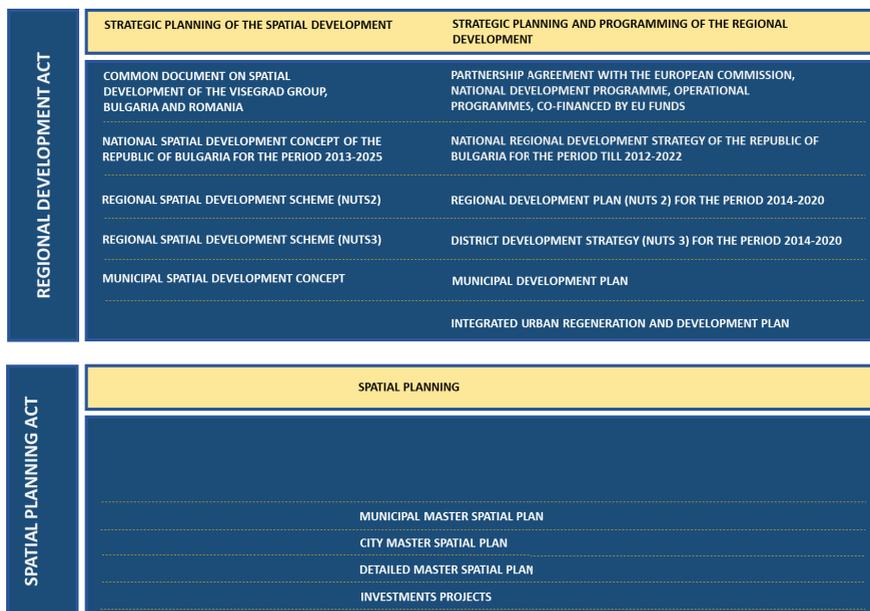


Fig. 2 System of spatial development planning documents in 2012

Regardless of whether the document is a concept or scheme, both categories of strategic instruments aim to define the spatial development strategy for the relevant territorial level. This implies the implementation of a common approach and identical development procedures related to strategic planning and management of the territory.

The developed system of documents aims to address the existing regional differences and disparities, to structure the different spatial elements in the national space, etc., by assessing the actual situation and the possible solutions for better structuring of the territory and allocation of the financial resources through the national space.

Due to the amendments introduced, the RDP already distinguishes spatial development planning documents from those for regional development by type and content, and at the same time it binds them and gives guidance to be corresponding to each other for the particular levels they are addressing. Article 3 (2) of the RDA determines that the state policy for regional development and the sectoral policies should be conducted in a coherent way and in synergy to the National Spatial Development Concept and the regional spatial development schemes – thus, a spatial focus of these processes is placed. The relation between spatial and regional development documents is clearly defined in Articles 10, 11 and 12, which state that the National Regional Development Strategy takes into account the country's spatial development strategy as defined by the National Spatial Development Concept, the Regional Development Plans being developed in accordance with the Regional spatial development schemes of the respective NUTS2 level, and the Districts Development Strategy is developed in accordance to the District spatial development schemes (NUTS 3).

The system for regional and spatial planning is underlying part of the Spatial Planning Act where it is said that spatial development concepts and schemes define the objectives of the state policy for spatial planning for the defined implementation horizon.

At the same period, Bulgaria is included in a common document on spatial development of the Visegrad group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) and together with Romania should develop their own National Spatial Development Concepts, which are actually the first documents of the newly introduced system of spatial development documents.

The common strategy aims to present the functional hierarchical structure of the network of urban centers (main growth areas), agglomeration formations and their zones of influence, the links between the network of urban centers in the country and the macro-region, the main and secondary axes of development, corridors and infrastructure sites of international and national importance, the long-term external infrastructure links of the country and the areas for cross-border and interregional cooperation (Institute for Spatial Development - the Czech Republic, 2014).

Despite the amendments introduced towards integrated spatial and regional planning, this period is defined only by a common national vision for what these documents should represent at regional, district and municipal level, how they should be elaborated and what they should examine in the national space.

There is no clear vision regarding whether to develop such spatial development documents at the municipality level or to be completely abolished in view of the similarity to the spatial/territorial planning document according to the SPA where the state conducts another policy related to the development of the important master spatial plans of municipalities which should determine the predominant purpose and territorial modes of the individual structural parts of the territories and aim to regulate the processes related to the development or protection of specific types of territories.

It is only in 2015 when Methodological guidelines for the elaboration of the spatial development concepts and schemes under Art. 7b-7e of the Regional Development Act have been developed and adopted in accordance with Art. 17, item 11 of the RDA, but this considerable delay from the beginning of the programming period, in practice, stultifies and makes this type of document redundant till the end of the period.

In 2016 an Ordinance was adopted on the terms, procedure and deadlines for drawing up, coordination, adoption, updating and implementation of the concepts and schemes for spatial development of all defined levels in the country. This enhanced the normative framework for spatial planning, however, in practice those documents were never put in force for the two middle tiers – NUTS2 and NUTS3.

Thus, a detailed legal framework for spatial development planning in the Republic of Bulgaria is developed, which is a prerequisite for the creation of working documents in this sphere at national, regional, district and local levels.

The analysis of the system of spatial planning and regional development documents by 2018 shows that:

- In 2012 and 2013, respectively National Regional Development Strategy 2012-2025 and National Spatial Development Concept 2013-2025 were developed as fundamental documents of the Bulgarian Planning and Management System.
- As a continuation of the National Regional Development Strategy, the Regional Development Plans of the six planning NUTS2 regions, the District development

strategies for all 28 districts and the Municipal development plans for all municipalities for the period 2014-2020 were developed and are in a process of implementation (including assessments and evaluations according the RDA).

- As a continuation of the National Spatial Development Concept, a Regional Planning Scheme for Pleven District and Spatial Development Concepts of a several municipalities in the country were developed. However, the development of the spatial plans subsequently has been removed from the RDA.
- National Regional Development Strategy is an instrument implemented in practice, medium-term strategic document that provides guidance on the design, management and protection of national territory and the aquatory of Bulgaria and provides future forecasts for sectoral policy coordination.
- The National Spatial Development Concept has defined the hierarchical structure of the network of urban centers and cross-border and interregional cooperation areas, which are also the basis for allocating future funding corresponding to the level and location of a particular territory.

Despite the enhancement of the system of documents for spatial and regional development in the RDA, the difference in the pace of drawing up and implementing documents respectively for regional development and spatial development planning is tangible. The location and role of spatial planning in the national planning and management system is underestimated.

Along with the ongoing centralization approach of the units, the MRDPW does not manage to carry out a real policy in regard to the space development of the territory and the newly established system of spatial documents at the regional and district levels remains only at the project level, while the documents at the municipal level are removed.

Main findings of the analysis can be summarized as follows:

A normative, methodological and strategic basis for the planning of spatial development in the country has been established, however, it does not produce the desired results, namely the creation and implementation of documents addressing problems in regard to territorial connectivity and access to public and private services, natural and cultural heritage, improving the status of specific areas with unfavorable socio-economic, geographical and demographic characteristics, promoting investment, competitiveness and innovation, etc.

The reasons behind this non-working spatial toolkit can first be found in the lack of administrative and expert capacity in the competent authorities – the documents are new to the country and there are no qualified personnel to ensure their drawing up, implementation, monitoring and reporting.

Spatial information deficits on all levels is another important issue that hinders the development of adequate key documents for spatial development. It is essential for the preparation of each spatial development planning document to have available spatial data and information about the particular territory, which is systematized in a GIS database. The use of general and thematic cartographic visualization is critical to understanding the essence of the document and the problems that are the subject of strategic spatial planning.

The changes in terms of enhancement / complicating the system of strategic and spatial documents at some point are a burden for regional and municipal administrations and they become documents that are not actually developed or implemented.

After 2020 - recommendations

The paper is showing that at the end of the 2012-2020 programming period, there is a need for a change in regard to the system of regional and spatial development documents, and the conclusions of the analysis of the current national policy for regional and spatial development have revealed serious problems overcoming inter-regional and intra-regional disparities and inequalities. The review of all data gathered shows insufficient effectiveness in the implementation of the set measures, a large number of strategic documents, an ineffective control and assessment mechanism, of strategic documents, additional administrative burden in the collection and processing of information for the purposes of regional and spatial development as well as the existence of large disproportions in the development and lagging of Bulgarian regions by key socio-economic indicators compared to other EU countries.

In general, during the current programming period, negative trends have been identified in the key indicators of the country's development. In terms of demographic indicators for the country and by level 2 regions, a decline is recorded.

In practice, real spatial planning documents in implementation for regional NUTS 2 level are not found, and pilot documents for the district level do not deliver much.

All these factors confirm the lack of real results from the application in practice of the new system of spatial planning documents and the impossibility of their implementation.

According to Eurostat and the MRDPW, at the end of the current programming period, slow economic growth and the need for a more efficient and sustainable use of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIS) are observed. This could be achieved by integrating sectoral priorities and objectives with those of regional policy, and creating the conditions for a more balanced and sustainable development which again proves the need to make a change in the legislative framework for regional development and spatial planning that will lead to a new and adequate approach to regional policy in preparation for the post-2020 period and its implementation.

During the development of the paper, the MRDPW published proposals for amendments to the RDA, which to a large extent repeat the conclusions drawn by the authors (MRDPW, 2018).

The analysis is showing that, in spite of the elaborate system of spatial and regional planning documents, they do not actually provide the integrated development of these two interrelated spheres and, at the same time, create problems and burdens for the bodies that need to develop and implement them. This shows that these documents should be integrated into more complex, more effective documents that optimize regional and spatial planning processes developed on a broad and integrated information base.

A new type of document should be proposed combining the strategic regional planning and the spatial planning, and according to the authors, the district level should not be a mandatory level given the lack of regional decentralization, competence and budget for policy development of the level in this field. Such integrated strategic and spatial documents should facilitate the process of implementing the regional policy, make it more effective and at the same time more simplistic in terms of monitoring, control and evaluation.

The proposed amendments to the RDA also envisage the introduction of a geographic information system for regional policy purposes, which will inevitably have a positive effect on the development and subsequent implementation and reporting of progress on spatial documents (MRDPW, 2018).

Conclusion

The analysis carried out shows that spatial planning in Bulgaria is undergoing development, but there are still problems that need to be addressed. It is understood as a clearly defined top-down hierarchical system of laws, practices and documents that ensure a balanced development of the territory - a comprehensive planning concept that complements regional development. So far, the horizontal aspect of spatial development is poorly expressed in the country.

The existence of serious disproportions on the territory of a country is also a sign of the lack of adequate policy for spatial and regional development. The changes made in the laws related to these spheres in recent years have shown an overall development of spatial and regional planning processes in the country, but there are still weaknesses in this system. In practice, spatial planning documents remain poorly implemented and poorly implemented, with a lack of any political initiative for their establishment and implementation at level 2 and district level. This hinders the much-needed process of "integration" of regional and spatial development, and spatial problems instead of being addressed are deepened.

The lack of adequately structured databases for the whole country in the geographic information system, the lack of qualified experts in the state and local administrations in the sphere of urban planning and spatial planning and development and the lack of will to implement this policy are the main reasons for its not satisfactory implementation in the programming period 2012 -2020. The conclusions made by the authors show that changes in the legal and institutional framework in Bulgaria in this area are necessary. Integrated regional strategic planning documents, which must necessarily be of a spatial nature, must be developed. Developing such kind of single-team documents would provide a coherent, more effective and workable spatial planning policy. Moreover, these integrated documents should be developed by and for governmental levels that have a real motivation, interest and competence for their development and implementation. The existing "gap" in spatial documents at regional level NUTS2 and at district level NUTS3 should be changed by dropping out at least one of them and providing competencies and budget at the level for which they will be developed to ensure their practical realization and effectiveness. As a future area of research for the authors is the follow-up of the possible introduction of integrated regional and spatial development documents, the decentralization of the competences at the various levels related to the implementation of the spatial policy in the country as well as the provision of protection and sufficient green areas through spatial development as a factor impeding the development of economic activities in specific territories.

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