Abstract

In the recent years the development process in Bulgaria came into very controversial manner of functioning. However, we have macroeconomic progress and stabilization but on the other side the regional disparities and differentiations has deepen. The regions that have been influenced by the major part of the direct foreign investments could be marked by the high growth rates in the construction sector. The last five years were a period characterized by public investments in infrastructure and facilities and private in investments in residential buildings, office space and tourist infrastructure (Hotels and vacation houses). As a result many agglomeration cores, vacation sites and environmental sites have been “polluted” by new buildings but with a lack of public infrastructure and utilities.

The objective of this article is to investigate the correlation between regional development objectives and the “regulative” regime of the spatial planning in Bulgaria. However, the final practical result shows some negative examples of vulnerable urban, social and environmental impact.

Keywords: Regional development, spatial planning, planning regions plans, general structure plan

Introduction

In the countries that we often mark as developed ones the spatial planning is a result not only a policy created by the market forces, but a specific type of planning that reflects the socio-economic development stage and the collaboration between the private and public interests. However, these interests should follow-up the modern principle for sustainable spatial development through which the stakeholders – politicians, administration, business associations, entrepreneurs and nongovernmental civil organizations are able to influences the spatial planning process.

Hence, the huge number of stakeholders determines different point of views, and different approaches in the process that we the geographers call “Location decisions”. As a result of the strong market dependence the location decisions of the private and the public authorities always depends by the different land use and their price rates. The specific in this case is that the prices reflects the relative individual demand and needs of the stakeholders, their desire to enlarge as well in the business, as well in the space, but on the other side are the real physical and environmental restrictions caused by the different territories and the controversial business and public interests. On the other side these location decisions depend by the spatial planning, that must maintain the good development of all types of territories.

This initial discussion aims to underline the significance of the basic factors and conditions, which determines the political framework in conduction to the spatial planning policy – aiming sustainable development of all territory types. On the other side of the spatial planning is the socio-political task that shapes the different intensity and activity of the economic cycle by sectors, that is why we need absolutely precise, clear and on time statistical information and forecasts, concerning the territories status.

In accordance to this considerations Bulgaria has made efforts to create a new more effective system for spatial planning and regional development in accordance to the market needs and municipal self-government administration level.

Another factor that plays key role in the spatial planning policy is the necessity to integrate the ecological policies equally to social and economic effects that will shape the future development of space.
More or less, we could make the conclusion that spatial planning is an inception condition, part of the initial environment for achievement of sustainable development and mentor for further growth.

Actually, the citizens and the economy create the requirements to the spatial structures, which often are controversial. Usually, people expect to be provided with good residence places and prefer the so called “open space” residences with garden and low intensity and density of constructions, green area and naturally protected landscapes. In addition, people expect work places that are having locations with high level for services supply and vast commodity goods, which could be reached in short time and low transport expenses. The society needs and transport connections too, but low noise levels and polluters. However, the creation of spatial planning, that ensures and guarantees all the needs are a high priority government’s objective.

This is not just some kind of prerequisite for further economic development, but it is important for the future competitiveness in relation to the world markets. Such kind of policy will ensure the future social peace and sustainability of the political system. That is why we could consider the spatial planning as a high scale political objective.

The spatial planning policy should divide several important levels – territory types (urbanized and rural regions), as well as the close located different types of towns which are having the potential to execute the role of spatial cores.

The economic and social changes always expose to danger this desired spatial structure. When the agglomeration cores increase enough and include all the surrounding territories, this urban growth in territory and traffic lead to overload of the urban areas and finally threat their vitality and attractiveness for more migrants – people and businesses. As a result of the decline of the employment rates in the so called “old industry regions” some agglomerations fall into danger to lack behind in their economic rates – so their space gain less profits. On the other side the rural regions are in unequal position because of the unfavorable economic structure and the weak transport accessibility. As a result these regions are having very few development opportunities.

Bulgaria is a specific case for country in the South-East Europe. It is one of the countries in which the so called transition period takes too much time, but finally our society experienced some positive development trends. The crucial factors of this success were the
NATO and the EU accession which were the geopolitical strengths that labeled Bulgaria as a stable zone of Europe. This indicator and the international development trends caused unprecedented interest to investments in real estates and properties by people and corporations from all around the world. Fortunately, this possible reaction of international markets coincides with the economy stabilization of Bulgaria, low bank credit interest rates and lighted credit procedures. In all these processes the state regulation regime should play a key role.

**The spatial planning in Bulgaria**

In Bulgaria the self-government level is too young, as well as in retrospective context, as well as in administrative capacity and management traditions. For less than 50 years our country has suffered nationalization, denationalization of the corporations, arable lands, the forests, and finally the opposite process - mass privatization of the state property corporations. The new owners and stakeholders acquired the gained property with quite different information and expectations for the future development and finally they acted in accordance to their corporate interests.

For a very long period of time the farming in Bulgaria has no development perspectives, which additionally exhausted the rural regions. This caused significant migrations of people in fertile ages and stable decrease of farming outputs. This was the reason all the real estate’s to be very low price rates. However, the urban agglomerations due to the restitution processes that took place there and created a class of property owners, created another line of development – the real estate price “balloon”.

After 2000 the municipalities which are the self-government level of administration initiated to use the municipal real estate properties as an instrument for investment attraction, which caused changes in the land use of so many regulated lands, in zones vitally important for transport infrastructure for the urban centers.

As a result of these new economic conditions in 2001 Bulgaria adopted new Act that must regulate the interrelations between the public and the private needs. (Spatial Planning Act) This Act replaced the Act for Territorial and Settlement Development of Bulgaria. In accordance to the new Act the requirements to the spatial planning in the Republic of Bulgaria is defined by structure frame schemes and structure plans. The structure frame schemes are two types – national one and regional ones. In accordance to their content they could be divided in two types too – complex ones and specialized ones. All the regional schemes reflect the predictions of the National structure scheme. Actually, these regional schemes are the connection with the programming of the regional development.

The structure plans are only two types - General structure plan – defines the predominant and structure pattern of the separate parts of the territories, and Detailed Structure Plan – they concretize the structure of the territory, its construction regimes and the functions of each land.

**The regional development in Bulgaria**

The regional development and the regional policy are very important part of the policy in Bulgaria for a long period of time, but as a legal imperative of the state it is having very short history. The Regional Development Act was adopted in 1999. For the geography scientific society in Bulgaria it was very important fact. Many geographical researches for decades has “alarmed” for the negative demographic, economic and social changes, which are having strong spatial differentiation among the regions. (Karastoyanov and Popov, 2000) (Dimov and others, 2005). More or less, we could consider this Act as a consequence of the scientific discussions and the public expectations, these development problems to be managed or mitigated.
One of the first results was the initiation of the regional development plans. These plans were created following the “bottom-up” principle. In the first variant some of the levels were missing but the final structure is shown in Figure 2:

![Figure 2](image)

This planned system was based on absolutely new for Bulgaria approach. It is too early to discuss the results because their actions are planned up to 2013, but I suppose that they will reach at maximum 30% of its objectives.

There are and another tremendous reason for the establishment of these planning system. According to me, this is problem “number 1” of the development process in Bulgaria. This is the changes and the regional differentiation of the population number.

![Figure 3](image)

Population number in Bulgaria for the period 1980-2007

Source: www.stat.bg

The external migrations to the EU countries and USA increased the number of the older population and the age median reached 42 years. Some regions went to the situation of depopulation, which caused the liquidation of hundreds villages. On the other side the internal migrations caused unprecedented concentration of population in the South-West region and especially the capital city Sofia. Hence, the North-west region and the South-East regions decreased their relative weight and caused the changes in the spatial configuration of the NUTS II system in 2006, only 7 years after its initial adoption. (See Figures 4, 5 and 6)
Conclusion

The spatial planning process and the regional development in Bulgaria are facing many problems. Unless the mentioned above structure plans, they do not have any other normative and functional connections. Hence, the spatial planning and regional development are activities programmed by authorities with different competencies and what is more important the financial resources about these activities are not in reciprocal action. Because of this reason, the spatial planning and its instruments is getting much more financings that the regional development. The corporations and the municipal authorities prefer to invest on structure plans because these plans are able to legalize their investment intensions. However, here comes the lack of connections with the long term objectives that the regional development has to guarantee. Bulgaria has to overcome this disintegration of the both systems otherwise the regional development system could become an instrument that is “capturing” the negative socio-economic trends but having no power to manage these negatives. One of the approaches for the decision of this problem is the initiation of wide
scale public discussion, the initiation of many scientific projects that have to create new regionalization of the country and new future for its regions.

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