

Renewal of the functions of the Regional Development Councils in Bulgaria as a place for synergetic participation of the stakeholders at regional level

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with role and functions of the Regional development councils established in the Planning regions in Bulgaria through the recent changes in their structure introduced by the amendments in the Regional Development Act 2020. The main question that arises is that change can be in practice a step towards more active engagement of the participants in the Councils and boost for their active role in preparation of the integrated territorial development strategies and development of the regions concerned. Recent research, made for the preparation of the implementation of the Operational Program for Regional Development for the 2021-2027 programming period have been noted, apart from inefficiencies in regional policy and increased regional disparities in recent years, a lack of a strong administrative structure for the implementation of regional policy at planning area level. The Regional development councils at that level can't manage to improve coordination and partnership between participants in regional policy and to form themselves as strong administrative structures for the protection of regional interests. Having in mind that the partnership principle is one of the basic ones, used in allocation of the Structural funds of EU and being the basis of the multi-level governance concept that enables all stakeholders to express their views: from the Community institutions, through countries, regions and municipalities to the public and non-governmental sector, there is a lack of representation at the regional level in Bulgaria. This lack is seen as a problem also for implementation of the Placed based approach that is realized through the Integrated territorial investments of the European cohesion policy for the last programming period.

To answer the main question the establishment, functions and structure of the Regional development councils will be traced. They were created like administrative structures at the level of Planning regions for the conduction of the regional policy. From the beginning of their creation, with a planned development of relevant capacity and strong partnerships, they were seen as a future place for management of the European projects and even a territorial basis for possible regional self-government that was not at the end implemented in practice. To deal with that, the recent approach in Bulgaria is to make a reform of multilevel governance in support of a Placed based approach application by strengthening district administrations as a deconcentrated administration and planning regions as regional development bodies. This was a basis for the extension of the functions of the Regional development councils. Given that this is a recent reform that is still being implemented in practice, it is realistic to draw conclusions about its effectiveness at the earliest after the end of the current planning period of the Structural Funds. Based on the development of the Regional development councils so far and the fact that this reform was imposed as a result of priorities in the implementation of EU Cohesion policy, and was not a product of internal needs and initiative, several options can be outlined for the development of cooperation between stakeholders at this level. These options are based on the successful or respectively unsuccessful implementation of the planned capacity building of the RDC and the creation of skills for synergistic actions of the parties concerned.