

INTEGRATED TERRITORIAL INVESTMENTS AS A FACTOR FOR IMPROVING REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN BULGARIA

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ABSTRACT

This article is devoted to the problems of integrated territorial investments. The present paper attempts to clarify the philosophy of integrated territorial investment, as well as the different aspects and problem areas of the necessity of this approach. An assessment is made of the programmes and ways in which financial instruments can be used to finance municipalities. On the basis of reference to a number of sources and normative documents, an attempt is made to analyse and evaluate the processes and phenomenon taking place. The outlining trends and processes in regional development are examined, which may also have opportunities for improving regional development and increasing the sustainable development of individual territories.

KEYWORDS: integrated, regional, changes, development, programs, factors, management, coherence

ABSTRAKT

Dieser Artikel ist der Problematik der integrierten territorialen Investitionen gewidmet. Es wird versucht, die Philosophie der integrierten territorialen Investitionen sowie die verschiedenen Aspekte und Problembereiche der Notwendigkeit dieses Ansatzes zu klären. Es wird eine Bewertung der Programme und der Art und Weise vorgenommen, in der Finanzinstrumente zur Finanzierung von Gemeinden eingesetzt werden können. Unter Bezugnahme auf eine Reihe von Quellen und normativen Dokumenten wird versucht, die stattfindenden Prozesse und Phänomene zu analysieren und zu bewerten. Es werden die sich abzeichnenden Trends und Prozesse in der regionalen Entwicklung untersucht, die auch Möglichkeiten zur Verbesserung der regionalen Entwicklung und zur Steigerung der nachhaltigen Entwicklung der einzelnen Gebiete bieten können.

STICHWORTE: integriert, regional, Veränderungen, Entwicklung, Programme, Faktoren, Management, Kohärenz

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article est consacré aux problèmes des investissements territoriaux intégrés. Il tente de clarifier la philosophie de l'investissement territorial intégré, ainsi que les différents aspects et problèmes liés à la nécessité de cette approche. Il évalue les programmes et les moyens par lesquels les instruments financiers peuvent être utilisés pour financer les municipalités. Sur la base de références à un certain nombre de sources et de documents normatifs, une tentative est faite pour analyser et évaluer les processus et les phénomènes en cours. Les tendances et les processus qui se dessinent dans le

développement régional sont examinés, ce qui peut également offrir des possibilités d'améliorer le développement régional et d'accroître le développement durable des territoires individuels.

MOTS-CLÉS: intégré, régional, changements, développement, programmes, facteurs, gestion, cohérence

INTRODUCTION

The state of the settlement network and urban development, as well as the process of zoning, mirror the state of regional development and the regional policies and vision for the implementation of EU-wide policies. Many of the conclusions and evaluations of regional development can be represented by the evolution of the processes of zoning and settlement network development mainly by the imposition of the stereotypes of international relations. Thus, in the nearly 150-year history of our country, the problems of spatial planning policy always come to the fore. This process of optimization was most pronounced after the 1960s, when mainly resource-based zoning was developed, incorporating the regional-economic complex approach. In the 2021-2027 programming period, integrated territorial investments are coming to the fore, in addition to the existing instruments. The philosophy of these territorial development investments is more strategic and more complex. That is to say, a project is not expected to begin and end with construction work alone, but with the introduction of innovations, the implementation of part of the European climate objectives and human resource development policies. The types of investments, they can actually be combined - in terms of the sources of funding, and they can be sectoral in terms of what the lead applicant is that proposes the concept. The highest number of points in the scale score are given to concepts that are partnered by a public body, a private entity and an NGO at the same time. This is no coincidence, as these projects are more strategic and have a wider impact than the direct impact of a project implemented by a single beneficiary. Almost 70% of the budget of the flagship programme, Regions in Development, is earmarked for the funding of such concepts, which means that local stakeholders are given the opportunity, I would add a very good opportunity, to flesh out their ideas and vision for development that are embedded in local development strategies. The aim of our article is to provide more pragmatic information on the importance of these investments and to show their relevance for the regional development of the country. What is new in this approach to integrated territorial investments is that the concepts to be developed for the territory of the respective planning region must involve partners from public institutions, the business and non-governmental sectors in order to achieve a truly integrated and synergistic effect. That is, the concepts are expected to include ideas and project proposals in different sectors, with different partners, funded by different programmes. There are some uncertainties in this direction, mainly in the direction of what exactly the concepts should include. At the moment, there are information days organised by the Managing Authority of the Regional Development Programme, in which colleagues are trying to explain exactly how the process of preparing the concepts will go. The municipalities are an important player in this process, as the final approval of the concepts is carried out by the regional development councils, where all the mayors of the respective region are members. It should be stressed here that in the context of the development of market relations, regional development is particularly relevant because its applied value in the new political and market conditions outlines the problems of the regions and sets the horizon for the development of local resources in new conditions. This also determines the functional focus of

regional development, which is intended to frame spatial development towards resource utilisation and spatial planning that create conditions for the sustainable development of local regional communities. This implies that the focus of regional development management should shift towards schemes that are tailored to the contemporary needs of regional policy, especially in terms of its sustainable development and the implementation of integrated territorial investments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nature of the integrated territorial approach. The integrated territorial approach is a locally specific approach aimed at effectively exploiting the potential of each territory through close dialogue and cooperation between institutions working at different levels of government and other stakeholders¹ and actors operating in the territory. The Integrated Territorial Approach in Bulgaria will be implemented through the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) instrument on the basis of Integrated Territorial Development Strategies for NUTS 2 planning regions (ITSD), and the types of activities to be supported should be in line with the NUTS 2 ITSD (bottom-up approach). ITSDs have been developed for each of the six Level 2 planning regions, as required by the Regional Development Act (RDA), setting out the medium-term objectives, priorities and prospects for sustainable integrated regional and local development in the territory of the respective planning [The ITSDs of the six Tier 2 planning regions can be found at: <https://www.eufunds.bg/bg/oprd/node/11503>]. An ITI concept is one or more project ideas for one or more activities/investments which, in combination with each other or with other existing or forthcoming investments in a given territory with common characteristics and/or development potentials, serve to implement a specific objective or priority of the ITSD of the relevant Level 2 planning region. A combined ITI concept is an ITI concept for which at least one of the following conditions is met:

a) the concept contains project idea(s) with integrated measures from different sectors (health, social services, culture, education, transport, housing, economy, environment, tourism);

(b) the concept contains a project idea in the preparation and/or implementation of which at least two of the following types of stakeholder are involved in partnership: public body , private body, non-profit legal entity;

(c) the concept contains a project idea implemented in partnership that addresses the needs of more than one municipality;

(d) the concept contains project ideas that are funded by more than one programme co-financed by European funds for shared governance (see section 5 "Mechanism for the implementation of the integrated territorial approach in Bulgaria"). The emerging philosophy of regional policy is linked to attempts to enforce the principles of territorial cohesion, meaning a balanced distribution of human activities across regions . This means creating development centres that are an alternative to the spatial pentagon in Europe (concentrated on 18% of its territory), including countries where half the wealth and 40% of the population of the old continent is. Thus, in Bulgaria, a policy is being adopted at national and regional level that means polycentrism to promote the construction of complementary and independent networks of small cities as an alternative to large cities or capital cities and networks of small and medium-sized cities, which can help to integrate the regions into a common market, functioning in a way that brings out the strengths of individual territorial communities. In practice, the set policies do not find the right expression through the implementation of regional development policies in Bulgaria (Georgiev, 2014). The Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 335 of 7 June 2019, as amended by the Decision of

the Council of Ministers No. 496 of 21 July 2020, provides for each of the programmes co-financed by the European Social Fund+, the European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund for the programming period 2021-2027, with the exception of the Transport Connectivity Programme, the Food and Basic Material Assistance Programme and the Technical Assistance Programme, to allocate resources amounting to at least 10% of their financial allocation to the implementation of integrated territorial development approaches, i.e. to the ITI instrument. The flagship programme for the implementation of the ITI approach, according to the Implementing Rules of the Regional Development Act (RDA), is the Regional Development Programme 2021-2027. The Regional Development Council (RDC) RDC of each NUTS level 2 region is the territorial authority responsible for the ITSD and will be involved in the selection of measures for funding as required by the Regulation. This participation is carried out through the selection of ITI concepts [2]. The members of the RDS are defined in accordance with Article 18 of the RDA. When adopting decisions relating to the selection of ITI concepts (Article 19(1)(3) of the RDA), some of the observers (according to Article 18(14) of the RDA) have the right to vote, in which case the composition of the RAC is referred to as 'broad-based'. The work of the RDB shall be supported by an expert staff composed of three distinct units with specific functions: the Mediation Unit shall facilitate the formation of partnerships between stakeholders at regional level and coordinate the preparation of concepts for integrated territorial investments; it shall carry out awareness-raising campaigns and information activities to promote the opportunities for the implementation of integrated territorial investments; it shall be responsible for the information strategy of the Regional Development Council in introducing

Opportunities for project selection evaluation and pre-approval. In practice, the new regional policy approach has undergone a complete overhaul in order to minimise existing imbalances. According to expert assessment, similar trends are not only in Bulgaria, but in the whole EU. Europe is experiencing very complex processes in terms of the links between cities and their adjacent territories, ranging from sub-urbanisation to the complete isolation of the least populated areas. This means that different policies must be used to promote partnerships between cities and rural areas that are tailored to the problems of depopulation, integration and access to areas around cities, diversification and support for economic activities in specific areas, by building on their potential and making use of cultural and natural assets. In this direction, the approach needs to highlight the need for effective regional policies that create the conditions for integrated investment in areas, in line with their natural and geographical assets, making use of the links and partnerships that have been built up, and attracting new investment (Grozdanov, 2021). In spatial terms, the current picture in Bulgaria raises more questions about the state of regional development than a clear and distinct differentiation by municipality of the socio-economic status of municipalities (Grozdanov, 2021). Thus, in the evaluation of project proposals, the Public Consultation Unit, which organizes and conducts public consultations and presentations related to the examination and discussion of submitted ITI concepts, will be essential. Through these, the participation of local communities in the selection process is ensured, with the views and comments from the consultations being presented to the broad membership of the RDB, which must take them into account before approving the Overall Programme Concept for the contribution of EU funds to the ITSD. The functions of the public consultation units shall be carried out by the District Information Centres located in the regional cities. The pre-selection unit is composed of representatives of the managing authorities of the

programmes co-financed by the EU shared management funds that are involved in the implementation of the integrated territorial approach through the financing of projects under the ITI instrument. The unit carries out administrative and eligibility screening and prioritisation of ITI concepts in accordance with the criteria set out in the programme. Preparation and submission of ITI concepts - Stakeholders shall develop ITI concepts (alone or in partnership) by completing an application form, in accordance with the content requirements and according to the regulated way of their submission as set out in point 6 "Preparation and submission of Integrated Territorial Investment concepts. An essential element of the work of the programme at the outset is the checking of administrative compliance and eligibility - The checking of administrative compliance and eligibility of all submitted ITI concepts shall start within 8 working days of the expiry of the deadline set out in the Guidelines, in accordance with the provisions of point 2. 3.2 and 3.3 of Annex No 4 to Article 39(4) of the RDPP and the administrative compliance and eligibility criteria set out in point 9 'Selection and prioritisation criteria and methodology' of these Guidelines, by marking 'Yes', 'No' or 'N/A' (not applicable). Only concepts submitted within the application deadline set out in point 10 (Dobrev, 2015) be subject to verification. The procedure for the preparation and selection of ITI concepts and the elaboration and approval by the Regional Development Board of a Joint Programme Concept for the EU Funds contribution to the ITSD of the region concerned shall be completed by the publication of the approved Joint Programme Concept for the EU Funds contribution, together with the accompanying lists of ITI concepts. The procedure shall be completed within 55 working days of the start of the administrative compliance and eligibility check. The approved Overall Programme Concept for the contribution of the EU Funds shall be published on the website of each of the funding programmes and/or on the Single Information Portal and on the EMIS within 5 working days of the completion of the selection procedure (Grozdanov, 2021). Submission and selection of ITI concepts with RDP Priority 1 funding Urban municipalities under Priority 1 (Vidin, Pleven, Ruse, Veliko Tarnovo, Varna, Burgas, Stara Zagora, Plovdiv, Stolichnaya municipality and Blagoevgrad) or stakeholders in their territory may partner with each other or with other municipalities from the same or another region (or stakeholders in their territory) to implement ITI concepts in accordance with the ITSF of the respective Level 2 planning region. This expands the opportunities for stakeholders within the 10 urban municipalities by providing access to resources for the implementation of complementary or soft measures. The prospects for implementing such projects are that they will have a greater impact and scale than if they were to be implemented on their own in a single municipality or within an urban cluster. Project ideas for measures focusing on industrial zones/parks, road infrastructure and sustainable mobility to be implemented only in the territory of an urban municipality covered by Priority 1 and its neighbouring rural municipality shall be financed only with funds from Priority 1 of the RDP and therefore their selection is not subject to these Unified Guidelines. Where such project ideas are included in larger-scale ITI concepts with other types of RDP-funded infrastructure in the rural municipality (outside the listed sectors), they may be included in ITI concepts as project ideas under point i. Where the activities in the ITI concept are to be implemented in more than one region, the procedure under point 5.1 "Preparation and selection of ITI concepts" shall apply. The only difference is that when entering the ITI concept in the application form in the "Location" field of the "Main Data" section, all regions on whose territory the concept will be implemented should be noted, and in the "Implementation Plan/Project Activities" section of the respective programme it should be noted which activity on the territory of which region will be implemented. The RDP is eligible to finance activities

to be implemented on the territory of another country where this is in line with the objectives of the programme. Concepts are considered to be consistent with the objectives of the programme if they are in line with the objectives and priorities of the ITSD of the region to which they are submitted and contribute to addressing the needs of that region or exploiting its potentials. In this case, the application form shall indicate in the 'Implementation Plan/Project Activities' section of the RDP which activity will be implemented where. In the framework of the integrated territorial approach under this procedure, all stakeholders may initiate and submit ITI concepts, subject to the specific eligibility requirements for beneficiaries under individual programmes (where available) described in Section II. The Mediation Unit of the RDB has a leading role in this process. It assists stakeholders by informing them about the possibilities for implementing integrated territorial investments, facilitating the formation of partnerships between stakeholders at regional level and coordinating the preparation of concepts. The partnership principle will be promoted in the selection process and, in this respect, priority will be given to concepts for ITIs whose preparation and implementation involve partners from different sectors - public, non-governmental, private. Participation of target groups through their civil society organisations and associations is recommended. For the purpose of the application, one lead partner is selected to represent the partnership to the respective RDB, coordinate between the partners, facilitate communication between them and be responsible for the overall preparation and submission of the concept. There are no restrictions on the choice of lead partner - this is a decision to be taken by all involved in the ITI partner concept. Each of the partners of the ITI concept has a commitment in the preparation and/or implementation of a specific measure or activity of the concept, and does NOT necessarily have to implement activities requiring financial resources from the programmes. Although encouraged, the participation of partners in ITI concepts is only allowed when clearly linked and justified to the specificity of the activities for which funding is requested under the programmes. For example, an NGO may commit to assist a partner municipality in ensuring that social infrastructure measures comply with the cross-cutting principles of equality, non-discrimination and inclusion by providing its expertise and advice in the preparation and implementation of measures without receiving funding from the programmes to do so (Kostev and Petrov, 2020). Similarly, business representatives can participate in an ITI concept with their own funds for joint investment with a municipality, or private and NGO representatives can get involved by making commitments related to the future use, management or sustainability of the investment.

Main funding programmes for integrated territorial investments. Overall assessment of the need for financial resources and actual funding programmes. The sustainability of the settlement network and the high quality of the environment in the settlements, which can guarantee favourable socio-economic and environmental development, are priority tasks that challenge the integrated policies of regional and territorial development of urban systems among the Bulgarian planning regions. In practice, regional development at the national level macroeconomic, budgetary and monetary reforms have a direct impact on the local economy (Marinov, 2018). National regulatory and legal frameworks such as tax reform, telecommunications deregulation, and environmental standards directly influence the local economic climate by enhancing or diminishing the potential for local economic development. Thus, in the first instance, we can look for financial support from a programme - the Regional Development Programme 2021-2027 (RDP). The Managing Authority (MA) of RDP 2021-2027 is the Directorate General Strategic Planning and Regional Development Programmes in the Ministry of Regional Development and Public

Works. The MA of the flagship programme carries out the overall coordination of the implementation of the ITI approach. This programme aims to promote innovative practices in local government that are linked to improving the quality of service delivery. Thus, in the rapidly changing environment of global markets, customers are more active in seeking the products and services they need. They are much better informed through the Internet and often have a range of alternative choices. With unlimited access to information and suppliers, and comparing the options on offer is routine. Good customer service is synonymous with quality and the need for innovation. Quality is synonymous with good work. Of a product with valuable consumer properties. Of professionalism. Therefore, quality and its management is perceived as an important area for business. The first thing people think of when it comes to quality is product quality (Paquet, 2001). This perception of quality is as a sign and indicator of a high standard. That is, quality is thought of as a characteristic of the product that an organization delivers to its customer. Customer requirements concern something that can be seen, touched, felt and relates to the product or service intended for them. The concept of quality has evolved over the years, expanding its objectivity and changing its orientations, starting from the pure control or inspection of the final product until it becomes a global strategic entity for the organization. The most complete information on quality and its management is contained in the standards of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). It defines quality as 'the extent to which a set of intrinsic characteristics satisfy requirements'. According to another definition in the standard, quality is defined as "... the coordinated activities for the direction and control of an organisation with respect to quality". This includes "...establishing quality policy and quality objectives, quality planning, quality management, quality assurance and quality improvement". Therefore, quality management is the unity of all the quality objectives related to the product and the organization, all the activities and processes necessary to fulfill them (Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020 - Towards an Inclusive, Smart and Sustainable Europe of Diverse Regions). A look back in history makes it possible to trace the development of the concept of quality. The second half of the 20th century and especially the 1980s was a period of revolution in quality. Thus, other programmes are the Research, Innovation and Digitalisation for Smart Transformation Programme 2021-2027 (RIDIT) with the MA Directorate General European Competitiveness Funds in the Ministry of Innovation and Growth. As well as the Competitiveness and Innovation in Enterprises Programme 2021-2027 (CIP) with the MA Directorate General European Competitiveness Funds in the Ministry of Innovation and Growth; Education Programme 2021-2027 (EP) with the MA Executive Agency Education Programme. Through these programmes, more added value is certainly being sought at regional level. This is because the earliest and probably most common approach to quality assurance is the value-added approach and new programming. Until recently, the industry was still dominated by quality inspection, which was applied at certain points in the production cycle and on the final product, the output of production. This approach relies on finding defects in a good or service before it reaches the consumer by introducing inspection stages. To this end, specifications are developed for what the product should be and subsequently a check is made to ensure that the standard for that product has been met once it has been manufactured. However, in innovation this approach focuses on noting improvements and added value (Hristov and Daskalova, 2011). In the second phase (buyer's market), the Acceptable Quality Level (AQL) is used to assess the quality level. It is calculated by the acceptable number of defects per a certain number of units of production. During this period, the need to develop quality assurance methods for the customer

increased strongly. In the 'competitive market' phase, the dominant view is that every employee and process in the product chain directly or indirectly influences quality. Each of them must therefore be covered in quality assurance actions. This means that we need strong and competitive regional development. In spatial terms and for improving human capital, the Environment Programme 2021-2027 (EPP) with the MA Directorate General "Operational Programme Environment" in the Ministry of Environment and Water and the Human Resources Development Programme 2021-2027 (HRDP) with the MA Directorate General "European Funds, International Programmes and Projects" in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy are also relevant. Ensuring innovations and their implementation is a task to take into account the experience of quality checks and quality analyses, as well as information from the placement departments. Further, the demands of the constructive and production preparation departments must be coordinated. The accumulated global experience allows us to look at innovation issues in our local administration in a different way.

Resource management and public good creation opportunities. The municipality must identify, secure and provide the necessary resources to implement, maintain and continuously improve the quality of governance, and to enhance citizen satisfaction. The municipal administration must determine the necessary competence of civil servants performing activities that have an impact on quality, provide training and evaluate its results, keep records of related training, experience, etc (Kolev, 2023). Municipalities must plan and develop the processes necessary to create and improve administrative services. Service requirements should be defined, efficient means of information exchange with citizens who appear as users of these services should be put in place. Design and development must be planned and managed, input and output elements must be defined, followed by review, verification, validation and, if necessary, amendment. The municipal administration must ensure that the purchased service or product is consistent with the defined purchasing requirements. Vendor evaluation and selection shall be performed. Verification of the purchased service is required to ensure that it meets the specified purchasing requirements. Methods for obtaining and using customer satisfaction rate information are determined. The municipality should conduct internal audits at scheduled intervals. Processes need to be monitored and measured to demonstrate their ability to achieve planned results. Monitoring and measurement of the service should be carried out to verify that the requirements for the service are being met. Municipalities in Europe and Bulgaria need to ensure that non-compliant service is identified and managed in a way that prevents its inadvertent use or delivery. "Integrated Urban Development" of the RDP is targeted entirely at the ten largest urban municipalities in the country, as follows. In this respect, the implementation of Priority 1 of the RDP is the subject of separate guidelines outside the scope of the integrated territorial approach described in these Guidelines. However, the participation of urban municipalities within the territorial scope of Priority 1 in the ITI approach will be encouraged. All other municipalities within the country (rural and urban) are eligible for funding under Priority 2 of the RDP, with some exceptions for rural municipalities as described below. All eligible activities under Priority 2 of the RDP are eligible for funding in the 40 medium-sized and smaller urban municipalities. In order to ensure demarcation with measures financed with Common Agricultural Policy funds, infrastructure measures that can be financed through the Strategic Agriculture and Rural Development Plan 2023-2027 (SARDP) should not receive RDP funding. In this respect and in order to strengthen urban-rural links and the development of functional zones in the territory of rural municipalities, only measures for: health

infrastructure, energy efficiency and sustainable renovation of housing, development of industrial zones/parks, tourism, sustainable mobility will be financed under the RDP, subject to a clearly justified need and the integrated nature of the investment, Roads of the national road network outside the TEN-T network subject to a proven effect on the territory of the region as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Increasing the quality of services in the municipal administration through the funds and European funding often leads to the realization of not only economic, but also social effects (easing of work, improvement of working conditions, etc.), which should also be taken into account when assessing the effectiveness. The subjective factor and, above all, the quality of work and the availability of funding have a decisive role to play in improving quality. The role of the human factor in improving quality can best be traced to the different phases of the reproduction process: the design, production and operation phases. The quality of municipal administration and its service is shaped in the design and production phase and depends largely on the quality of the project. The situation to which the use of the tools has been applied required very detailed analysis and decision making in order to improve the quality of the service, because the evaluations and comments of the end clients indicate a shortfall in the skills of the municipality's employees. It is very important to achieve the quality they expect, but also to exceed it, working on competence is a must. Municipal authorities must become part of the social and economic decision-making process. This means: increasing the powers of municipalities over the tax revenues from the territory of a municipality, as well as the financial autonomy that follows from this and absolute freedom in spending these funds.

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