

The Focus Of The European Programs And Their Role In The Regional Development Of Bulgaria

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Abstract: *The presented report highlights the role of European Union funds and their impact on regional development. In this context, an attempt has been made to examine the philosophy and role that funding methods can play. The methodological and technological framework related to clarifying the processes of regional development and environmental management is considered. Municipalities have an important role and main beneficiary in Bulgaria and the exhibition analyzes their role in the process and the elements of the financing itself. An example of the low level of partnership between the municipalities of the Northeast and Southeast planning regions is also presented. Relevant conclusions and recommendations have been made.*

Keywords: funds, management, regional development, territory, connectivity, municipality, financing

Introduction

Most European programs are provided to businesses or citizens who apply for grants and subsidies. The rules for the payment of funds from the EU budget and the conditions for their receipt are laid down in the legislation and are often supplemented by other criteria and eligibility requirements. They are often defined by and complementary to the EU managing fund bodies in the Member States. In this situation, the individual countries, in coordination with the European Commission, create rules and requirements for the economically active persons who receive these funds. Depending on the field of influence to the receipt of these funds there are additional requirements. Seven operational programs operate within the Bulgarian state, and only one of them is directly involved in the actual regional development policies. It is important to note that through the operational program with a focus on regional development, funds are directed mainly to municipalities. An important distinction for Bulgaria is that the Rural Development Program also benefits regional development through rural areas and municipalities with a low level of urbanization. Thus, in our country conditions have been created for the provision of funds for regional development, but to a large extent there are still created administrative and organizational obstacles for the proper management of funds coming from the European Union. Therefore, in this presentation we try to clarify once again the philosophy of the funds provided for the needs of regional development and de facto how they reach economically active people. We also look at some aspects of control systems at different levels, which are not always sufficient to verify all conditions. It is important to emphasize that in recent years the effect of the funds provided for the needs of regional development in Bulgaria is not high and therefore it is necessary to look for opportunities to change and reach a larger number of users of these funds. In the period after 2007 so far, the absorption of European funds has become a key tool for implementing a number of local policies in the field of public works, infrastructure development and environmental protection. This way of attracting funds turned out to be an essential tool in making local policies in Bulgaria. To a large extent, the focus of municipalities has shifted to European funds at the expense of attracting key investments in the real economy. This has put the public sector and especially municipalities in a new role as a factor in determining the design of local government in terms of attracting EU funds. The focus of our exhibition is to show what funds and how they are managed by municipalities in order to show the funding mechanisms. On the other hand, there are a number of municipalities where the absorption of European funds proves to be a complex problem. Their lagging behind can become an increasingly difficult problem to solve, because the implementation of such projects is important for promoting local development. Thus, a group of municipalities is formed, which accumulate project experience and good practices, while others lag behind. In this regard, we need to emphasize that good practices are mainly related to good management of financial resources at the municipal level. In this regard, let us assume that good governance of public spending implies that taxpayers' money is used for priorities recognized as useful and desired by society (through its elected representatives). In this good governance, the goals set are achieved in an efficient, effective and economical way, and the existence of a system of inspections and balanced powers ensures compliance with the democratic principle of accountability and effective governance. In order to benefit all stakeholders involved in the implementation of the EU budget in their respective areas of competence, the focus should be on results and added value at EU level and the principles of integration. In addition, the management of the implementation of activities, the management of the budget, the control mechanisms and the activities carried out by other stakeholders are the foundation of mechanisms for the establishment of a system for the management of European funds.

The budget process and financial management targeted at the regions

The budget process involves stakeholders from Member States (national, regional and local), third countries outside the EU and international organizations, as well as a number of Commission services (known as Directorates-General), agencies and other EU bodies. Funding from the Structural Funds is provided in addition to the relevant national structural operations. The partnership covers the preparation, financing, ex-ante evaluation, ex-post monitoring and final evaluation of structural operations. When

financing from the Structural Funds, partial financing of operational programs is provided. Also partial financing of national support schemes, including reimbursement of payments or the provision of a global grant managed by an intermediary designated by the Member State, in agreement with the Commission. Also partial financing of appropriate projects. In some cases, technical assistance is still provided, including preparation, assessment, monitoring and evaluation measures (1). More specific is the support through financial assistance from the European Investment Bank (EIB) and other financial instruments.

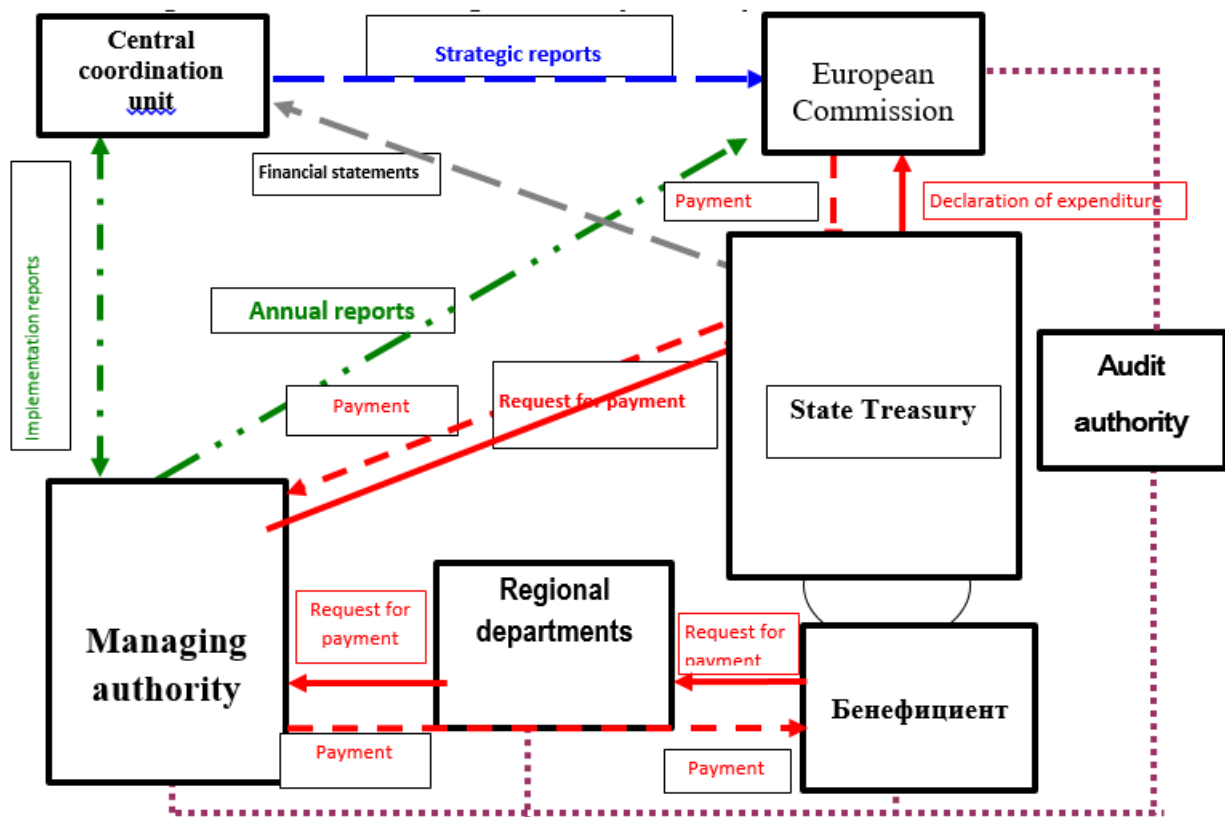
They are provided through individual, global and framework loans or other forms of partial financing of an investment project or program; partial financing of technical assistance, as well as guarantees. In this regard, support should appropriately combine funding in the form of loans and grants in order to maximize the incentives provided by the budget. This is because operational programs as a form of financial assistance from the Structural Funds cover a series of compatible long-term measures that can be implemented through one or more Structural Funds, one or more financial instruments and the European Investment Bank. In this case, an integrated approach is applied in individual municipalities with a view to their application with specific projects for funding from different funds. This approach makes it possible to impose the model of conducting a differentiated policy for balanced regional development. The objectives of this policy should in practice contribute to the local development and improvement of the national and regional infrastructure facilities (European transport corridors, border checkpoints, telecommunications) with a view to the rapid integration of the country into the European space. The problems related to the promotion of development, cooperation and cooperation in cross-border regions and zones have become especially topical recently. In general, in Southeast Europe, the creation of institutional infrastructure supporting socio-economic development and entrepreneurial activity in individual regions is also slowing down. This implies working in the medium term to set up local or central regional development funds to ensure better efficiency in EU co-financed regional cooperation programs.

It should be noted here that access to funds is based on a system of commitment and payment, in which beneficiaries do not receive assistance directly from the European Commission, but through the intermediary of the certifying authority. This implies the construction of a three-tier aid system. The financial procedures are not based on the principle of reimbursement and verification of the eligibility of costs incurred before making payments to beneficiaries (2).

Imposing the cost certification model

The certification model is related to the asset management model. There are three management methods within the European Union. According to the method of direct management, the task of the institutions concerned is to supervise the use of the funds.

Figure 1: Financial management and financial flows under OP RD



Source: Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, OP “RR“

Indirect governance mainly concerns agencies, non-EU countries and international organizations. Under shared management, the funds are managed through national executive agencies, which are audited separately by certification bodies. The Financial Regulation provides for control and audit mechanisms for each of these management methods. It can be seen from the figure how the processes themselves are located and in practice how the regions can be integrated into this system. The issue of joining the work in the separate areas remains open, but the municipalities and the economically active persons fighting for the funds are placed in this system. Beneficiaries are responsible for reporting and proving the correct and actual spending of funds and the supply of goods and services subject to funding. They shall submit paid invoices or accounting documents of equivalent probative value to the central administration. The supervisory authority receives and verifies the invoices and certifies the eligibility of the costs. It is important to mention that the verification is based on a forecast submitted by the managing authority, after which the certifying authority approves limits on payments from national and European funds. Once we have incurred expenses with a special report to the managing authority for certification of payments to the Certifying Authority. Based on the certified costs, the managing authority makes the payments to the beneficiaries. The principle of governance and whether the European Union is the sole donor of funds for the activities carried out determine the control, audit and reporting mechanisms put in place (3). There are a large number of separate programs, projects and actions that pursue similar or complementary objectives, in which different management and control rules apply. A large number of policy areas receive funding from different sources (for example, research and innovation projects may be funded from three different sources of EU funding, each with a different management method and eligibility rules. For example, in the field of external actions, some initiatives may be financed from the EU budget as well as from the budget of the European Development Fund (EDF). These numerous sources of funding also exist within different policy areas. As a result, when financing programs, projects and actions from different sources (EU budget and national budgets, EIB, etc.), the total cost may be difficult to determine. In addition, each source of funding will have its own management and reporting mechanism. This has an impact on sound financial management for Member States that provide funding through the use of different channels (4). The funds are also received through payments from the European Commission to bank accounts for the ERDF in euros opened with central banks (for example, for us at the Bulgarian National Bank (BNB)). Funds that are not used at a given time will be deposited in accounts with different maturities. The funds from the euro account are transferred to BGN accounts of the operational programs each time the Certifying Authority sends a certificate to the European Commission. The co-financing from the state budget is transferred at the same time from the central budget to the BGN accounts of the operational program on the basis of an internal letter sent by the Certifying Authority to the state treasury. The process of making payments to beneficiaries is carried out through the system of a separate accounting account as a unified system of accounts and payments and reporting procedures for collection, storage, payment and reporting of budget funds. Payments to the Beneficiaries can be made only in national currency (BGN). The Certifying Authority and the Managing Authority shall ensure the receipt of the full amount of public funding from the Beneficiaries as soon as possible and in full. No deductions shall be made and no special or other charges of a similar nature shall be imposed which would reduce this amount, except where appropriate. All payments are made through the System of Electronic Budget Payers (SEBRA) as a system for monitoring payments initiated by budgetary enterprises. The servicing organization (the institution that serves the payments of all budget enterprises through SEBRA) for the Managing Authority of OPRD, as well as for the managing authorities of the other operational programs, is the Bulgarian National Bank (BNB). The use of the BNB's automated Internet banking system is mandatory and the use of paper payment orders is allowed only in exceptional cases, such as technical impossibility to use the system for more than one day, which requires the signatures of the head of the Managing Authority and a senior financial officer (or the relevant authorized staff). It is important to note that the eligibility of expenditure must be in line with the purpose of ERDF interventions. They need to be related to the subject of the operations and have funds in the estimated budget. To be necessary for the implementation of the activity and to be reasonable and well-argued and to comply with the principles of sound financial management, in particular the principles of value for money and cost-effectiveness. Also to be actually performed by the beneficiary, to be entered in his books in accordance with the applicable accounting standards and to be declared in accordance with the requirements of the applicable tax and social security legislation, as well as to be identifiable and verifiable (6). The Managing Authority should immediately report to the Certifying Authority all suspected and / or actual cases of fraud and / or irregularities, as well as the relevant measures taken by the Head of the MA in connection with these cases. The irregularity report will be prepared according to a standard format. On a quarterly basis, the Head of the MA should report to the Certifying Authority on the follow-up of already reported cases of suspected and / or detected irregularities / fraud (7). If there are no irregularities to be reported or traced, the Certifying Authority must be informed on a quarterly basis and receive a declaration from the Managing Authority explicitly stating the name of the operational program, the period and the absence of suspected / detected irregularities. The Managing Authority maintains an analytical financial and accounting system of the double signature, which covers all contractual and other financial operations related to OP "Regional Development"(7). The accounting system contains records for all operations coded by priority, operation, contract and source of funding. Both the certifying and the audit authority will have access to this information. The fact that funds are spent through 27 national administrations, as well as many regional local authorities with unequal administrative capacity, increases the risk of errors in legality and regularity, as well as the risk of poor absorption of funds. Inconsistencies in systems and checks for the application of eligibility criteria, the assessment of the reasonableness of expenditure, compliance with public procurement rules, the application of fines and the recovery of amounts unduly paid, on-the-spot inspections of grants and subsidies (8).

Problems of local institutions and capacity of municipalities

Regional development is aimed at stimulating economic and social cohesion as a priority EU policy in the context of strengthening European solidarity and as a prerequisite for economic efficiency and global competitiveness. Regional policies and programs aim to strengthen EU stability, strengthen competitiveness and employment in assisted areas, address structural issues in order to generate sustainable growth and adapt to new labor market conditions and global competition (9). The question of the capacity of the modernizing state administration of our country is most often associated with the "absorption" of funds provided by the European Union. The popular term "absorption" means that the funds are spent within the prescribed period. There are two main steps in this process: 1) concluding contracts for all funds that have been granted and 2) spending the funds within the concluded contracts. Therefore, administrative capacity should be understood as the ability to prepare projects of good quality and good quality of project implementation. The factors for this are several: 1. organization and management of the structures engaged in the process of preparation and implementation of projects; 2. number and qualification of the employees who participate in the process; 3. motivation of the employees; 4. procedures and standards for project management; 5. technical means for carrying out the activity for preparation and implementation of the projects; 6. project management infrastructure (10).

All structures of the state administration - ministries, agencies and services work on projects. As a rule, only those of them who are directly involved in the management of projects funded by the European Union and other major international organizations have specialized project management units. It is paradoxical, but in some large administrations, which employ thousands of people, there is not a single project management specialist. Project management is a specialized activity, divided into a separate profession. These units should involve project management specialists, who may not be specialists in the respective professional field, object of the administrative structure. The units must work according to certain minimum professional standards, and for their development long-term investments are needed. The primary task of the management of the administration should be the creation of high potential and sustainability of the units. The existence of specialized units is not enough - all civil servants involved in projects (and these are most employees who do not work directly on the provision of services to citizens, businesses or other administrations) must acquire basic knowledge of managing projects (11).

First of all, it must be borne in mind that knowledge of European Union procedures is far from sufficient for the professional management of programs. In the particular case of utilization of European Union funds and in the general case for the implementation of effective and efficient public projects, the state administration must have knowledge and skills in all areas related to the management of programs and projects for socio-economic development. As a minimum, knowledge and skills include project cycle management, logical modeling, project identification and preparation, evaluation, monitoring, control and evaluation of implementation, supply of goods and services and contract management. In addition, the range of knowledge and skills should be expanded with modern business-oriented structured project management methods applied in developed countries (11). The administration lacks formal procedures and standards - systematized "good practices" for project preparation and implementation. Only the guidelines for organizing tenders and concluding contracts for projects financed by international organizations apply. Technical means for carrying out the activity of preparation and implementation of the projects include information, telecommunication and office equipment, general and specialized software, Internet access and office consumables. In general, the state administration has the necessary technical means to manage its projects. In a broader aspect, the unsatisfactory state of the administrative capacity for project management is a logical consequence of the underdeveloped national infrastructure for project management - the basis on which depends the quality of the projects that are prepared and implemented in our country. The main deficit is related to limited studies on the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of public projects. Improving project management infrastructure requires significant efforts from the professional community, government institutions, schools and businesses. Location choice is again important (10). Apart from the state, municipalities are really the main social engine of regional development in Bulgaria, as the districts as a whole take on only functions delegated by the state. However, they do not have the real legal powers and financial resources that are paramount to investment. The main functions that are the prerogative of the municipalities include:

- Management of municipal property
- Local socio-economic and spatial planning and development
- Education
- Healthcare
- Public and communal services
- Environmental protection
- Culture
- Protection and preservation of cultural and historical heritage
- Promotion of sports, recreation and tourism
- Tasks related to the protection of public order

In order to facilitate the start of financial decentralization, it was agreed that the legally assigned activities of the municipalities should be conditionally divided into two groups: activities delegated by the state and local activities. In 2003, the Law on the State Budget of the Republic of Bulgaria introduced a new principle for financing municipalities: municipal budget activities are divided into municipal and "delegated by the state". The activities delegated by the state are those services (according to the Constitution and the normative base), to which the population should have equal access in all parts of the country. In this direction,

the choice of location comes to the fore (10). Local activities are those that are provided depending on the needs of the population and the available municipal resources. Maintenance standards and staffing standards have been developed to calculate the activities delegated by the state. It should be borne in mind that this division of activities is conditional and is made for the purpose of calculating the costs of these services and their relationship to certain sources of revenue. Both groups belong to the activities related to local self-government. In the field of education as local activities are defined: all-day, half-day and seasonal kindergartens, for which the municipality provides support, student chairs. In the field of culture and religious activities local activities are: municipal theaters, orchestras, ensembles, as well as cultural monuments and ethnographic complexes. Activities delegated by the state are: libraries of regional character, community centers, regional museums and art galleries. In the field of social services local activities are: home social care; free kitchens; pensioner and disabled clubs; the maintenance of temporary employment programs. Activities delegated by the state are social institutions, homes for the elderly and children with disabilities. All activities related to housing, public works, utilities and environmental protection are entirely local responsibility. This is the definition of the functionality of regional policy and its European dimension (11). These include water supply and sewerage of settlements, management and control of housing construction and development planning, public works, cleanliness, garbage collection and garbage removal, landscaping, environmental protection, street lighting and more. With regard to recreation, sports and tourism in accordance with the needs of citizens and the ability of municipalities to generate their own revenues, municipalities plan and organize activities related to the maintenance of recreation and tourism areas, financing of sports clubs and sports facilities, as well as and mass sports and entertainment events. In the field of economic activities, transport and ICT, municipalities organize various initiatives for economic development (municipal markets and markets, fairs, exhibitions, etc.) with their own funds. The costs of activities related to traffic safety, the current maintenance of streets, sidewalks and squares, the organization of public transport and the possibilities for subsidies in the framework of the relevant regional policy are also at the discretion of the individual municipalities (12). By law, municipalities are responsible for providing administrative services in accordance with the competencies of local authorities: services related to the organization of economic activities; technical services; agricultural services; administrative service.

Capacity for project development and absorption of funds

Similar to the above conclusions, the capacity of municipalities to develop projects in terms of human resources, knowledge and experience is concentrated mainly in a limited number of large and more urbanized municipalities with developed non-governmental sector and applying the principle of partnership at project development level. These are mainly the municipalities that have taken advantage of the opportunities of the “learning by doing” process under the pre-accession instruments (8). In more than 217 municipalities there are departments dealing with European programs and funds, and in the rest the competencies of the non-governmental sector are used. In the rest of the municipalities there is an appointed employee specializing in the issues of European integration, European instruments and structural funds. In most municipalities, staff have been trained in recent years in strategic planning, project management and the use of pre-accession tools. In general, the municipalities demonstrate experience in the field of projects and the above-mentioned instruments compared to the previous programming period 2014-2020. There is not only a quantitative increase in project experience, but also improved quality in project development. Most of the project ideas are further developed into project proposals and the better part of them succeed and grow into approved project proposals. In this regard, we can assume that there is an administrative capacity in project development. In addition, there seems to be some underestimation of the importance of developing municipal development projects. To this must be added the lack of pre-project studies and ready technical projects, as is the situation in 54% of the municipalities. The lack of development and cadastral plans also creates problems for the process of project development and implementation. The lack of a clear focus on information on economic development and investment opportunities in the districts and main municipalities, the lack of information centers and investor guidance can also be considered a deficit (13). Our municipalities need a regional development strategy based on the research in the components of the environment and the additional opportunities for development of the regional economy, created by the changes in the components of the environment, and the additional problems and dangers for the regional economy created by the same changes in the components of the environment.

The absorption of funds in the municipalities of two planning regions.

Focusing on the problem of projects at the municipal level in the Northeast Planning Region and the Southeast Planning Region, we just want to show general deficits in terms of implementation and findings that can be overcome. Another important problem is the declining opportunities of many municipalities for co-financing and project development, especially in the small municipalities in both planning regions. Relying on an expert assessment in the Northeast Planning Region, only 28% of municipalities can allocate funds for co-financing projects. Respectively, in the South-Eastern planning region only 44% of the municipalities can set aside funds for the preparation of projects. The reasons for this are in most cases limited resources and their untimely planning in the framework of the implementation of common regional policies (12).

The northeastern planning region has a territorial scope, which includes 4 districts - Varna, Dobrich, Targovishte and Shumen with a total of 35 municipalities. The area of the region is 14 487 sq. Km, constituting 13.05% of the country's territory. The degree of urbanization of the Northeast region is 77.4%. On the territory of the region there are a total of 721 settlements - 30 city centers and 691 villages. Settlements and other urbanized territories occupy 5.9% of the territory of the region. The main axes of urbanization in the region are in the transport direction Targovishte-Shumen-Varna and the coastal axis Shabla-Kavarna-Balchik-

Varna-Burgas. The Northeast region continues to be one of the last in terms of Regional GDP per capita in purchasing power parity (PPS) as a percentage of the EU-27 average.

The southeastern region covers the districts: Burgas, Sliven, Yambol and Stara Zagora (NUTS level 3). There are 33 municipalities in the region. The area of the region is 19,799 km² and makes up 17.8% of the country's territory. The territorial structure is as follows: agricultural territories are 53%, forest 42%, urbanized 4.9%. The average population density in the South-Eastern region is 54.4 h / sq.km, significantly lower than the national average - 66.34 d / sq.km. The degree of urbanization in the region reaches 71.33%. On the territory of the region the largest cities are Burgas - 200 271 d. And Stara Zagora 138 272 d., the middle cities (between 30 000 and 100 000 d.) Are Sliven - 91 620 d., Yambol - 74 132 d. And Kazanlak. - 47 325 d. In terms of GDP in terms of purchasing power per capita, the regions of Bulgaria also lag significantly behind the EU average, as well as the leading regions in this indicator. Half of the Bulgarian regions - NWR, SCP and NSR are at a level of about 30% of the EU average. The two planning regions can be characterized by large cities with a satisfactory pace of development such as Dobrich, Shumen, Yambol, Sliven, leading cities such as Varna, Burgas and Stara Zagora, and the other cities and their surrounding municipalities have contrasting potential. For example, the situation has worsened in municipalities such as Nikola Kozlevo, Nova Zagora, Kotel, Straldzha and others, while others such as Aytos, Kavarna, Balchik, Elhovo and Radnevo are trying to model their local economic model. The main deficits within the two planning regions are generally the disrupted regional connectivity and the lack of new geoeconomic goals for the spatial development of the settlements and the formation of a sustainable economic profile of these regions. It is typical for the Bulgarian municipalities from the two planning regions that they do not make sufficient use of the opportunities for joint solution of common problems or for pooling of resources. Nearly two-thirds of them have never worked on a joint project with another municipality, and just over a third consult their projects with other municipalities. This limited capacity for horizontal partnership poses a serious risk to the country's capacity to absorb EU funds. Small municipalities have the clearest need to pool their efforts and resources to solve common problems in the most cost-effective way. In practice, they need a clearer strategic framework to create the conditions for their sustainable development and governance (12). At present, the horizontal links between the municipalities are weak. Referring to expert assessment in the North-East Planning Region and the South-East Planning Region, there is insufficient use of opportunities to find joint solutions to common problems and attract funds. Nearly 46% of the municipalities consult and plan projects together with the non-governmental sector (39% of the small municipalities, 54% of the large municipalities), 44% of the municipalities consult and plan projects together with the private business (30% of the small municipalities, 51% from large municipalities). It can also be stated that we are lagging behind in terms of regional development partnerships (in which both the district and the municipalities participate). This is a key moment for the development and implementation of projects with important synergies for regional development and for the participating municipalities themselves. Therefore, there is limited institutional, financial and technical capacity, especially in smaller municipalities (human resources, knowledge, experience and know-how) and unsatisfactory, based on partnership, between municipal cooperation to initiate joint projects. Capacity development is a time-consuming process and in many cases requires not only training and resources, but also external support and assistance. In this regard, most municipalities need to be more careful about their demographic needs and, accordingly, to develop a strategic framework for the development of human resources in them (13).

Conclusion

One of the most significant trends in the development of regional policy of the European Community is related to the fact that the regions must analyze their strengths and weaknesses, that they must consciously develop their strengths (advantages), their strengths. Another important trend is the increasingly consistent study of how a region is perceived by the people who live in it. Another important trend of change in regional policy is the desire to focus on a small number of priorities of Community interest, to focus limited resources on the implementation of these priorities, to identify and create factors that stimulate cohesion between regions. Perhaps the most significant trend of change in regional policy is that of changing the subject of discussion. In the practice so far, discussions have usually focused more on the distribution of funds and funding from these funds, and less on the substantive part of regional policy - the definition of its strategic goals and strategic priorities. The tendency is first to discuss and argue the priorities of the regional policy, and then to discuss the financial issues of their implementation. Of course, there is a connection between priorities and financing of their implementation. The change of the focus of the discussions from the issues of financing to the issues of the reasoned formation of the development priorities is an expression of the application of a higher and modern methodology - the methodology of a systematic approach.

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