

European Committee of the Regions, Stakeholder Consultation on

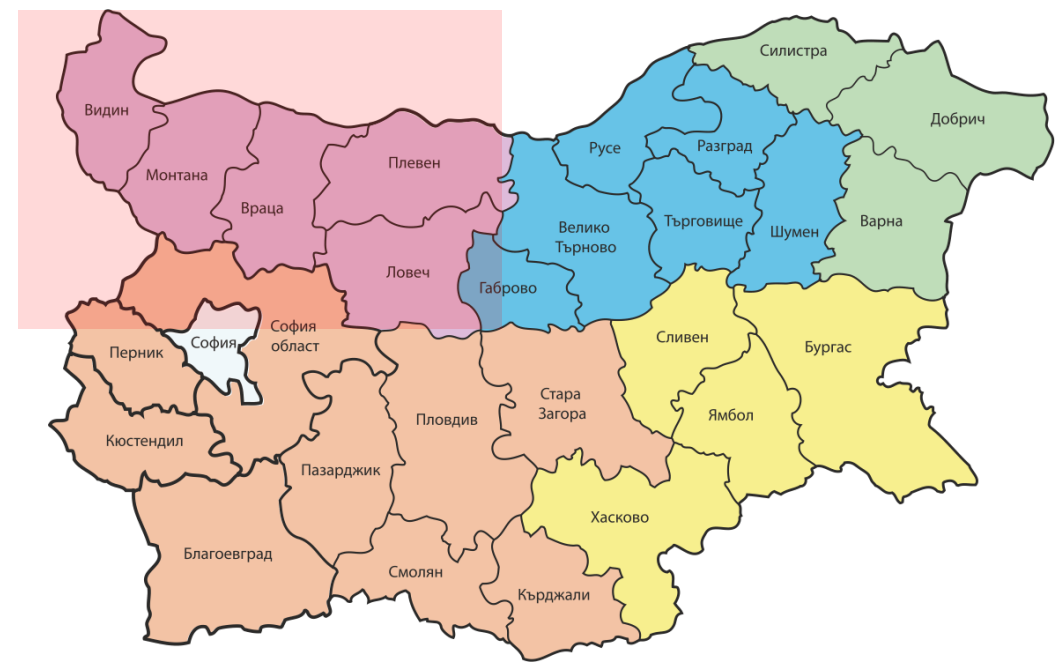
**„How to exploit the full potential of Cohesion policy to tackle demographic change?“**

**Can the EU help stop depopulation of  
Northwestern Bulgaria?**

**Prof. Dimitar Hadjinikolov, UNSS – Sofia, Bulgaria**

**[www.hadjinikolov.pro](http://www.hadjinikolov.pro)**

# 1. The situation



- Northwestern Bulgaria (Severozapaden, BG 31) is the poorest NUTS 2 region in the EU with only about 1/3 of the EU GDP per capita average.

- For the last 5 years (2019 - 2023) the population of the region has decreased by almost 10 percent. Without the Covid-19 pandemic population decline would be even higher at about 12 percent.

- If this rate of depopulation of Northwestern Bulgaria remains (minus 25 thousand people per year), the present population of the region of about 670 thousand will fully disappear in 25 years!

## **2. What is to be done?**

**A new kind of cohesion program is needed for most underdeveloped and rapidly depopulating EU regions.**

Highlights of such a complex cohesion program for the Northwestern of Bulgaria are:

- ✓ **Education** (there are currently 50 universities in Bulgaria but only one in the North-West region);
- ✓ **Health care** (all leading medical centers are in Sofia and in some other major cities. EU support is needed to create modern medical centers also in Northwestern Bulgaria);
- ✓ **Investments** (the region has 5 times less foreign direct investments per capita than the national average). Some stimulus are needed to attract new private investments.
- ✓ **Infrastructure** (with 17 percent of Bulgaria's territory the region has only 2 percent of country's highways). Many settlements, even cities with tens of thousands of inhabitants, do not have a regular supply of water. Special cohesion measures are necessary to improve poor regional infrastructure.

The northwestern region is a periphery in Bulgaria, and this is its weakness, but if we look from a wider angle, in the larger framework of the EU, the region is not more periphery because of its good cooperation opportunities alongside the river Danube and in the southeastern part of the EU, especially with partners is neighboring Romania.

### **Cohesion measures can be directed to:**

- **Develop more connections in Danube region. Traditions and good practices are enough available. Vidin, one of the main cities in Bulgaria's North-West, was for centuries the gateway of the country to Central Europe.**
- **Increase cross-border cooperation with Romanian businesses and institutions.**



The Danube bridge between the Bulgarian city of Vidin and the Romanian city of Calafat was built with EU money and named "New Europe".

Unfortunately, It is used currently quite below capacity.

### 3. Prerequisites for success

To successfully implement a complex regional cohesion program in the conditions of Bulgaria, there is one important prerequisite:

**To give real administrative power to the regions NUTS 2**

**Currently in Bulgaria they are used only for statistical purposes.**

But a complex cohesion program for the North-West should be managed locally, in the region, by the people who are mostly interested to succeed.

Cohesion projects in Bulgaria are carried out mainly by subjects in the central administration in Sofia and in a couple of other big municipalities. We have in Bulgaria 265 municipalities. The biggest one is the capital Sofia with about 1.34 mill. inhabitants and the smallest is Trekljano with only 550 inhabitants. In our law all municipalities have the same rights. The average number of inhabitants of a municipality in the Northwestern region is only 13.5 thousand. How can these small municipalities compete with Sofia and other big cities?


**To change the situation a reform of the local administration in Bulgaria is needed to reallocate power from the municipalities to the NUTS 2 regions. But it can happen only with the support of the EU institutions.**

**Another serious problem to overcome, if we want to use transborder economic synergies, is the chaos at the checkpoints on the Bulgaria-Romanian border (see picture below).**

Long delays at the borders make business unprofitable and human contacts very difficult.

To solve the problem, and to give transborder cooperation a chance, it is necessary to include Bulgaria and Romania as soon as possible in the Schengen space for land transport.





*Thank you for your  
attention!*