

# ELECTORAL GEOGRAPHY AND SUSTAINABLE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN BULGARIA: CASE STUDY OF NORTH-WEST BULGARIA AND VIDIN DISTRICT

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**Abstract:** The transition to sustainable development depends on political factors, concerning regional disproportions, principles of regional policy and local self-government. They are dependent on the electoral behavioral models in society. The change of social conditions in Bulgaria demands an actualization of research methods and indicators so that territorial division is optimized. Electoral geography has a great potential for such actualization. Main operative statistical units in this study are the administrative regions and municipalities as well as their macroelectoral compounding. This approach is combined with the correlative-typological potential of the "geographic passport" method. It is used for the derivation of traditional electoral types of administrative units and macroelectoral regions. Their characteristics are distinguished by clearly expressed dependencies between natural and social features on the one hand and electoral behavioral models, on the other hand. The North-West region is characterized by an unfavorable combination of natural potential and negative social tendencies – broken age structure, negative migration balance, low economic activity and agricultural specialization. This economic basis is combined with a left political orientation. The most typical example for this is the Vidin district. During the last 2-3 years there are social tendencies which lead to the assumption that Bulgaria is entering a new electoral cycle that is to replace the post communist governmental model of the last two decades. This change is also going to affect the regions subject to research.

**Rezumat. Geografie electorală și dezvoltare regională durabilă : studiu de caz NV Bulgariei și județul Vidin.** Tranziția la o dezvoltare durabilă depinde de factori politici, ce au în vedere disproportii regionale, principiile politicii regionale și locale de auto-guvernare. Ele sunt dependente de modelele comportamentale electorale din societate. Schimbarea condițiilor sociale în Bulgaria cere o actualizare a metodelor de cercetare și a indicatorilor, astfel încât împărțirea teritorială să fie optimizată. Geografia electorală are un potențial mare pentru o astfel de actualizare. Principalele unitățile operative statistice în acest studiu sunt regiuni administrative și municipalitățile, precum și compoziția lor macroelectorală. Această abordare este combinată cu potențialul corelativ-tipologic a metoda pașaportului. Este folosită pentru derivarea de tipuri tradiționale electorale de unități administrative și regiuni macroelectorale. Caracteristicile lor se disting prin dependențe exprimate în mod clar între caracteristici naturale și sociale pe de o parte și modele de comportament electoral, pe de altă parte. Regiunea Nord-Vest se caracterizează printr-o combinație nefavorabilă a potențialului natural și tendințe sociale negative - structura de vârstă dezechilibrată, soldul migrației negativ, activitatea economică scăzută și specializarea agricolă. Această bază economică este combinată cu o orientare politică de stânga. Exemplul cel mai tipic pentru acest lucru este districtul Vidin. În ultimii 2-3 ani, există tendințe sociale care duc la presupunerea că Bulgaria este intrată într-un nou ciclu electoral, care urmează să înlocuiască modelul post-comunist governmental din ultimele două decenii. Această schimbare va afecta regiunile care fac obiectul cercetării.

**Key words:** *sustainable development, regional policy, electoral type, electoral cycle*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *dezvoltare durabilă, politică regională, tip electoral, ciclu electoral*

The research of the contemporary global and regional aspects of the transition to sustainable development requires the application of methodological approaches from the field of geography, sociology, politology, law, history, demography, economics and statistics. The great geographic differences between particular countries, planing-economic and administrative units arouse a discussion on the principles, indicators, mechanisms and priorities of transition. Their optimal selection is mostly dependent on the political conditions, institutional features of state authority, the extent of maturity of civil society, the local self-government mechanisms, the possibilities for development of private initiative, the civil stand of each member of society. Their regional interpretation brings to the foreground problems, related to regional social-economic contrasts, regional justice (egoism), principles of state regional policy and local self-government. This is why behavioral models and electoral preferences in particular countries and their regions should be treated as important scientific aspects.

The study of the behavioral processes in Bulgaria requires analysis on different spatial hierarchic levels – districts, municipalities, settlements and electoral sections. Mainly quantitative demographic and economic criteria and indicators are traditionally used for the needs of the correlational regional analysis. The changing social conditions during the last 20 years require an actualization of the regional research approaches in accordance to the leading world experience. Qualitative social, culture-political and ecological criteria are more and more frequently used and they serve as a new motivational basis for the optimization of the administrative-territorial division. Typical examples are the regional studies, related to cultural, political and electoral geography.

Districts and municipalities are used in this study as main operative territorial statistical units and the author's ambition is directed towards the creation of a mixed district-municipal level of analysis. Methodologically, this approach is combined with the use of the potential of the so called "geographic passport".

## **1. TRADITIONAL ELECTORAL TYPES OF ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS IN BULGARIA (1991-2005)**

The integral electoral regionalization of Bulgaria requires a typologization which has to put the accent on the diffusion district-municipal consolidation. The natural-social regional interaction and the developed particular resultative behavioral models provide an opportunity for a relatively clear distinction of four general electoral types of administrative units:

**1.1. Districts (constituencies) with predominating left political preferences.** There are 6 districts which match this criterion – Vidin, Vratsa, Montana, Yambol, Plevan and Kyustendil. Their total relative share in the country in reference to the indicators of territory, population and GDP is respectively 19,2 %, 14,4 % and 11,4 %. This is a sign for low values of demographic and economic density and living standard. These districts receive scarcely 3,6 % of all foreign direct investments (FDI) in the country. They are defined by the

abundance in land resources. Other important characteristics of those districts are the fast depopulation, the high relative share of the elderly, rural and Christian population, the low extent of economic activity, the clearly expressed agricultural specialization of economy.

During the period that is subject to research they form 15 % of the total parliamentary votes, but provide 20 % of the parliamentary votes for the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and its coalition partners in the country. The support for the BSP-candidates at the first stage of the presidential elections is average 43 %. Over 54 % of their municipal mayors are either nominated or supported by the BSP.

**1.2. Districts (constituencies) with clearly expressed ethno-social vote.** There are four such districts – Kurdjali, Razgrad, Turgovishte and Silistra. Their total relative share regarding the indicators territory, population and GDP is respectively 10,1 %, 7,4 % and 5,2 % of the national potential. This could be treated as a sign for even lower values of the indicators such as demographic and economic density and living standard. They receive scarcely 2,5 % of the total FDI in the country, though they have favourable features in reference to land resources and ecological state of the environment. They are also characterized by a high relative share of Turkish and Muslim population, wide spreading of the rural way of life, high levels of unemployment and predominating economic activity in the primary sector branches as well as an average of 39,4%-support for the Movement for Rights and Freedom (MRF) in parliamentary elections.

They form 8 % of the total parliamentary votes, but provide 41 % of the parliamentary votes for the MRF and its coalition partners in the country. In the presidential elections in 1992 and 1996 these districts support the candidates of the Union of the Democratic Forces (UDF), and in 2001 and 2006 – those of the BSP. Over 61 % of their municipal mayors are either nominated or supported by the MRF.

**1.3. Districts / constituencies / municipalities with predominating right and right-center political preferences.** This paragraph concerns remote districts with clearly expressed centre-peripheral structure. The most typical examples are Sofia-city, Plovdiv-city, Varna and Gabrovo districts. Right electoral centres are also the municipalities of big cities such as Bourgas, Rousse, Stara Zagora, Dobrich, Pernik, Pazardzhik, Blagoevgrad and Veliko Tarnovo. The total territorial share of this electoral type is 11 %, the population – 41 %, and the GDP – 48 % of Bulgaria. They receive 84 % of all FDI in the country (mainly the capital – 51 %). Their population has a relatively preserved age structure. The share of the Turkish and Muslim population is small. On the other hand, the share of the gipsy population is rather big. The economic specialization is mainly in the branches of the secondary and the tertiary sector. The high extent of anthropogenic pressure causes social and ecological issues.

The dominating electoral preferences of the population are orientated to parties from the right political space. They form 39,4 % of all actual votes in the country, but the BSP receives barely 26,7 % of its votes there, and the MRF – 1,2 %.

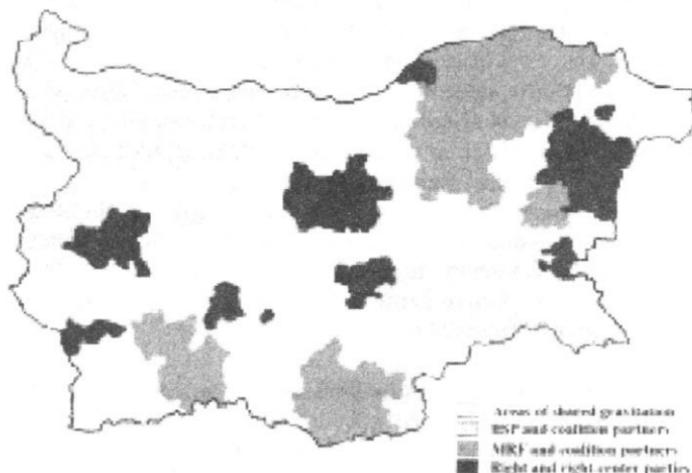
**1.4. Districts and municipalities in areas with shared electoral gravitation.** The remaining administrative units comprise around 60 % of the territory of the country, there lives 37 % of the population, they produce 35 % of the GDP and receive scarcely 10 % of the FDI in the country. Most parts of them are low populated, mainly mountainous and semi-

mountainous areas. They are characterized by a dynamic alteration of electoral moods by the emergence of new populist formations.

## 2. TRADITIONAL MACROELECTORAL REGIONS IN BULGARIA

Stabile district-municipal diffusion core-periphery formations with a traditional political orientation to a particular political spectrum in Bulgaria are several macroelectoral regions – North-West, West Sofia-Pernik periphery, South-East, North-East, East-Rhodopean, Westrhodopean–Mesta region, Sofia–Pernik, Gabrovo–Veliko Tarnovo and Varna regions. (see Fig. 1). The indicative differences, the spatial range and diffusion borders between them are to a certain extent relative.

Fig. 1. TRADITIONAL MACROELECTORAL REGIONS IN BULGARIA (1991-2005)



## 3. NORTH-WEST MACROELECTORAL REGION

Its main inner geopolitical centre consists of the Vidin, Montana and Vratsa districts, where the electoral support for the BSP and its coalition partners in the parliamentary elections in 1991–2005 is over 41 % of the actual votes. The average Isard's (1960) index of localization of the BSP-upholders in them is 1,34 (Table 1). Here the party receives 9,9 % of the total number of its votes in the country during the period subject of research. With a relatively smaller electoral support for left political formations are the municipalities of district centres, industrial, transport-industrial or tourist towns such as Lom, Kozloduy, Chiprovtsy, Berkovitsa, Varshets and Mezdra, where right or right-center parties have a relatively better performance in the person of comparatively non-persistent coalition formations with dynamically changing political platforms.

From east to south-east there are 12 neighbouring municipalities from the Sofia, Lovech and Pleven districts which gravitate to the mentioned geopolitical centre – Pravets,

Etropole, Yablanitsa, Lukovit, Ugarchin, Cherven bryag, Knezha, Iskar, Dolni Dabnik, Dolna Mitropoliya, Gulyantsy and Nikopol. The left coalition formations manage to receive about 42 % of the votes for Parliament there. Additionally, they provide a total of 3,1 % of the votes for the BSP at parliamentary elections. In the east and south-east the North-West macroelectoral region borders on municipalities such as Teteven, Troyan, Lovech, Pleven and Belene, where there is a gradual reduction of the BSP- and its coalition partners' representation in the left political space, which is why they can be defined as a diffusion border of the region in North Bulgaria.

*Tab. 1. Geographic passport of the North-West macroelectoral region*

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Relative share of Bulgaria (%)</i>
Number of the votes for the MRF and its coalition partners	2,57
<i>GDP*</i>	7,26
<i>Number of the population*</i>	8,89
Number of the actual votes	9,42
Number of the votes for the BSP and its coalition partners	13,00
<i>Territory*</i>	13,57

*\*Key indicators of the geographic passport*

#### 4. VIDIN DISTRICT (FIFTH CONSTITUENCY)

This is the district with the smallest demographic and economic potential in Bulgaria. It is situated in the north-west parts of the country, which (combined with the outlet on the Danube) provides favourable conditions for intensive economic relations with the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, the lack of a suitable communication infrastructure and the negative influence of specific political factors put the region in a long-lasting social-economic isolation not only towards Bulgaria, but also towards the European countries. Its situation in the north-west parts of the Danube plains, the Fore-Balkan and Stara planina mountain determines the various natural resource potential and is a precondition for the development of multiple-branch economy.

Despite the abundance of natural resources, the unfavorable peripheral geographic position of the region causes depopulation and stagnation in its social-economic development during the last decades. Vidin is one of the five districts with the lowest values of demographic density in the country. It is also characterized by the biggest relative share of the elderly population. Among the small ethnic groups only the gipsy one has a more expressed presence. The relative share of the Turkish and Muslim population is small (see Table 2). The level of unemployment is much higher than the average for the country, which has a negative influence on the population's living standard. There are rather big inner regional contrasts. Only in the administrative centre of the district lives around the half of its population. The rest of the settlements are relatively evenly allocated in the territory of the region, but they have a low average demographic potential, which is a precondition for the formation of small electoral sections.

Tab. 2. *Geographic passport of Vidin district (1991-2005)*

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Relative share of Bulgaria (%)</i>
Total amount of foreign direct investments	0,28
<i>GDP*</i>	1,08
Total amount of the sulphur, nitrogen and carbon oxide emissions	1,27
Number of the city population	1,30
Number of the registered crimes	1,54
<i>Number of the population*</i>	1,55
Number of the actual votes	1,74
Number of the Bulgarian population	1,88
Number of the Christian population	1,96
Forest areas	2,03
Number of the elderly population	2,10
Number of electoral sections	2,12
Used agricultural areas	2,27
Number of registered unemployed	2,32
Gross added value in the primary sector	2,45
Number of the votes for the BSP and its coalition partners	2,49
Number of settlements	2,66
<i>Territory*</i>	2,73

*\*Key indicators of the geographic passport*

Vidin is one of the most underdeveloped districts in the country in terms of social-economic conditions. The investment activity and the economic density are very low. There is a clearly expressed specialization in the primary sector (mainly cereals and industrial crops, pasture stock-breeding and forestry enterprise). Leading branches of the secondary sector are the light industry, the food, wine and tobacco industries and in the south and south-west municipalities – the woodworking industry. The low extent of anthropogenic pressure combined with the preserved forestry resources provides favourable conditions for the development of mountain and rural tourism in the areas of the region which are situated in Stara planina mountain and the Fore-Balkan.

The Vidin district is defined as the Fifth constituency. The electoral activity is above the average for the country, which is directly related to the high relative share of the elderly population and is favourable to the electoral representation of the BSP and its coalition partners in the left political space.

A stable electoral activity and loyalty to the left electorate can be observed in the district as a whole. During the period subject to research (1991-2005) Vidin district takes the first place among all constituencies in the country regarding the relative share of the actual votes for the BSP in them (average 43 %). Only the city of Vidin has a relatively bigger right electorate.

## 5. ELECTORAL MAP OF THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS (2009)

The sudden political change, marked by the municipal, parliamentary and supernational elections in 2007 and 2009, is most commonly associated with the appearance of new political formations, the most important of which is the Citizens for an European Development of Bulgaria (CEDB). At the same time, it can be treated as a beginning of an emerging new electoral political cycle in Bulgaria, bound up with the exhaustion of potential of the first postcommunist formations and the new European integration conditions for social-economic development which the country is entering. The reasons for such an assumption can be found in the comparative geographic analysis of the average parliamentary election results during the period 1991–2005 (see Fig.1) and the ones in 2009 (see Fig.2). It is obvious that this process affects even traditional strongholds of the BSP such as the North-West macroelectoral region and Vidin district in particular.

**Fig. 2 LEADING POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS AT PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN 2009 BY MUNICIPALITIES (PROPORTIONAL SYSTEM)**



The following general conclusions can be drawn on this basis:

- there is an unprecedented narrowing of the spatial electoral representation of the BSP and the remaining left political parties
- the expansion of the spatial electoral representation of the MRF is continuing
- the biggest part of the population and the administrative units in the country give preference to right and right-center political messages and electoral platforms of a new type.

–the exhaustion of potential by the first postcommunist political formations in the country and the new European integration conditions for social-economic development that bring to the assumption that Bulgaria is entering a new electoral political cycle.

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