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**Published First Online:**  
22.12.2025

**Pages:** 262-270

**DOI:**  
[https://doi.org/10.37075/JOMS  
A.2025.2.08](https://doi.org/10.37075/JOMS<br/>A.2025.2.08)

# INTER-SITUATION CONNECTIVITY AS A KEY PROBLEM OF PUBLIC GOVERNANCE AT LOCAL AND SUB-SITUATIONAL LEVELS IN BULGARIA

## ABSTRACT

This article is dedicated to inter-situational connectivity as an essential problem of public governance at the local and national level in Bulgaria. The article analyzes the spatial features of the overlap between the concepts of connectivity and region. However, this shows us that the presence of an administrative-territorial unit and the determination of the parameters of public governance cannot help but reveal the features of regional development. To make it more straightforward, Bulgarian scientific thought does not perceive the change in the conjuncture with the use of a new methodology and the formation of regional development policies. Moreover, the entire palette of knowledge and skills that brings about new moments in regional life is essential for new and young specialists in regional development. Two examples, the municipalities of Pavlikeni and Tsarevo, are examined, and the corresponding characteristics and task levels are presented, which show the internal and external picture of spatial development. Some assumptions are made regarding connectivity and the region as concepts, which show how to use the new methodology of regional research more rationally and clarify several ongoing processes. The author proposes indicators for assessing the level of connectivity in regional development. Regional values present in small urban centers, and the technical

and environmental protection infrastructure, affect the state and load on the natural environment, which is a task of increased difficulty for Bulgarian municipalities. They do not make infrastructure an absolute municipal priority.

**KEYWORDS:** public governance, regional development, infrastructure, connectivity, administrative-territorial unit

**JEL:** R11, B40, J11, N9, O18, R23

## INTRODUCTION

The term "connectivity" is present not only in literature but also in everyday language and refers to the possibility of interaction between separate territorial entities by building a connection between them. Connectivity in the 21st century has increasingly been framed as an integrated concept that helps explain various scientific directions and clarifies some issues. In our case, we will accept connectivity as a concept encompassing technologies and infrastructure that connect two or more settlements or countries. Depending on the infrastructure in place at international borders, connectivity enables instant communication across time zones, regardless of geographical location. A massive set of telecommunications technologies, including the Internet, fiber optic cables, and mobile networks, made this global network possible, and it is an essential element of regional development. The development of

connectivity forms territorial system models, so settlements have naturally established ways of interaction or deliberate remoteness. Settlements in Bulgaria are formed in administrative structures, "municipalities", whose gravitational field from the center to the periphery must exceed 40 kilometers. This essentially reveals the peculiarities of the regional economy and local development. A key category for our municipalities is cash flow in circulation, through which the local economy's capacity is formed. Moreover, the impact of the connectivity market is evident in almost every aspect of modern life, from e-commerce and social media interactions to remote work and international business cooperation. It creates the backbone of the global digital economy, allowing faster communication, collaboration, and access to information. Thus, our study aims to verify the importance of settlement connectivity for the management of regional development and the formation of the regional economy. This need to assess connectivity stems from the need to outline the speed and stability of municipal development in Bulgaria. It is evident that in modern regional studies, more attention is paid to the processes taking place in a given region than to its specific characteristics. They focus primarily on the methods of shaping and transforming regions in various aspects, mainly economic, social (cultural), and political. There is a growing interest in regional studies, especially in the economic development of regions, based on knowledge and services that are generated by the agglomeration effect, or, in other words, by creating a market above the municipal level in which to achieve sustainable regional development with a perspective of reducing migratory mobility and improving the quality of life at the local level. Here, it is appropriate to say that, in addition to connectivity, we will supplement our searches with the Latin word "region". Initially, the concept meant movement in a particular direction or along a direction that defines a specific space (Slaveykov, 2000). Of course, here it is worth emphasizing that over time the scope of the concept of "region" has developed and increasingly reflected how essential relations with people are for a given area, their activities, including the three main factors of production (labor, land, capital), productive activity, and preferred ways of spending free time. The simplest, but also the most general definition of a region can be as a relatively homogeneous area, distinguished from neighboring areas by natural or acquired characteristics or as a spatial arrangement for satisfying human needs, which has its territorial and spatial expression (Tsonkov, N., Petrov, K., Berberova-Valcheva, T. 2023). In this regard, it is essential to note that there are many theories and criteria for distinguishing regions, which means that the number of variables that must be taken into account when developing an ideal definition is infinite. Let us assume that we will not introduce a working definition for deriving connectivity models, because this activity involves many interpretations, and the literature on the topic is replete with explanations of the concept of "region" formulated on the basis of selected assumptions or analyzed indicators. For our study, we can assume that the term is revealed in three meanings: as an object of knowledge, as a tool for research, and as a tool for action. There are many arguments in support of the acceptance and application of the last of the aforementioned meanings of the term "region". In this sense, regions are the basic territorial divisions of any modern country. Under Bulgarian conditions, units at the regional, district, and municipal levels are subject to a centrally implemented regional policy (Tsonkov, N., Petrov, K., 2024).

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

From the perspective of the regional economy, the question of which economic development strategies could help peripheral municipalities achieve stability of regional development (creation of production capacity and localization of traditional business, being able to play the role of financial and service centers or of effective regional transport, also having the opportunity to implement their own research and technology centers) On the other hand, the

economic influence, cultural significance of cities and villages within municipalities and their development potential should be studied in more depth. The relationship between the influence of the spheres of responsibility and specific spheres of action of the administration, economy, and politics over the controlling factors, as well as good governance and self-organization of the public sector at the local level, should also be analyzed in greater detail (Vladeva, R. 2021). In the context of our study, the above-mentioned programmatic approach sets the vision that our municipalities have actually lost their autonomy and rely on the centralized “center-periphery” model to negotiate more of the state’s resources. This is perhaps an essential element of the implemented regional and local policies, but it does not align with the population's demographic potential. In practice, we have witnessed an increase in migrant flows to cities and, outside the country, to other large markets and megacities since 1990. We should not deceive ourselves here, because similar processes exist in the countries of the European Union, where new challenges of a territorial-structural nature and socio-economic development have emerged. For some reasons, the government is beginning to develop at different speeds, with regional imbalances, infrastructure problems, and a deterioration in the demographic structure of the population clearly emerging. To address the issues that have arisen, it is necessary to seek solutions and improvements in territorial management (Petrov, K. 2024). Thus, municipalities in Bulgaria are beginning to experience difficulties related to the quality development of populated areas. The slowdown in the process of quality development also means a reduction in the capacity of regional development of municipalities, and hence a deterioration of the regional economy. This brings to the fore the need to search for new solutions for the development of municipalities that will allow public administration at the local level to leverage the power of new methods, technologies, data, and processes to address challenges in effective and efficient ways. Moreover, a cohort of young people with fresh, diverse perspectives on development processes should be recruited to local government. This new approach to public administration will provide a vision and a path, balancing ambition with an understanding of constraints, to support Bulgarian public administration and enable it to make the most of new ways of working to improve the efficiency and impact of governance for the benefit of citizens. In practice, the public administration process is a path to innovation in the public sector, which helps to clarify the problems that impose a new cross-sectoral priority, which aims to improve the ability of the entire public administration at the municipal level to use innovative methods of work to achieve its goals (Dimov, N.2012). There is increasing recognition worldwide that local municipal governments can take proactive steps to increase innovation capacity - the systematic ability of the public sector to adopt new ways of working. The main problem this public policy addresses is the limited availability of electronic services that go beyond fundamental interactions with citizens and, at the same time, provide reliable monitoring of the condition of public works in municipalities. This public policy for improving public services addresses key life events that require significant public services affecting the lives of citizens and businesses. Each city is required to adopt a strategic document that identifies challenges in municipal public services in the context of e-government service provision and lists the specific measures needed to increase the number of e-services and strengthen civil servants' general digital skills by 2030. In this article, we propose a practical plan for implementation and management at the public services level (Borisov, P., Petrov, K., & Tsonkov, N., 2024).

The public services policy should also strengthen the single electronic point of contact. By offering a dynamic catalogue of electronic public services and a single sign-on solution, the ROeID application on the PDURO platform will simplify interactions among citizens, businesses, and public institutions, facilitating access to and use of digital public services. At the same time, regional policy can also focus on promoting the reward of public-private and

civil society cooperation initiatives to benefit from the experience and knowledge of different sectors and to provide complex and innovative approaches; some of the awards can be aimed at innovative techniques in the partnership between public administration and the associative environment and/or the business environment. Innovative solutions to many current social challenges, such as climate change, growing inequalities, and demographic changes, can be found through a cross-sectoral approach that involves not only stakeholders from central and local public administration but also the non-governmental and business sectors, where innovation is often the engine of development. Of course, here we must look at both cultural and civilizational aspects of the understanding of the nation as a mental construct, as the result of the conscious effort of a given elite to consolidate the community around some fundamental values, taking into account the variability of identity over time and the role of institutional and social influences (Karastoyanov, S., Stoychev, K. 2009). In essence, the economic development of territorial units in Bulgaria is often conflated with economic growth, which is precisely the result of this development. Economic growth is essentially the constant, annual increase in specific economic quantities: production, consumption, investments, foreign trade, etc. This means that it is a quantitative form of economic change. In the individual municipality, economic development is a qualitatively different form of change, since it primarily entails the creation of principles of rational action, the improvement of institutional frameworks, and the adaptation of the achievements of technical and technological progress (Tsonkov, N. 2023). In summary: from the point of view of the existing processes in regional development, and at the municipal level, it is evident that there can be no development without the necessary connectivity between municipalities, because economic development is a process of searching for an optimal distribution of production factors, which is expressed in quantitative changes in terms of, among others, employment, production, income and consumption and, above all, sharing of resources in terms of seeking competition and realization in competitive markets. Therefore, it can be linked to attempts to develop the most effective economic system across two or several municipalities, taking into account technological progress, the qualitative dimension of the social sphere, the demographic potential of the population, and the ability to consume high-quality goods. Ensuring theoretical clarity and conceptual precision requires recognizing the need for the concept of "connectivity" as the foundation of social development. It is a process that accumulates individual progressive changes occurring in separate elements and implies an integral assessment of opportunities for implementing regional policies. Connectivity is also a challenge because social changes within a system can also have negative consequences. Because they are caused by external (exogenous) factors, such as contact with other social groups, their culture, organization, economy, technology, and hierarchy of norms and values. Human attitudes, such as approval, indifference, passivity, disapproval, opposition, and resistance, are critical during periods of change caused by external factors, which, in many Bulgarian municipalities, generate not connectivity but closure and limitation in municipal cooperation.

## **2. METHODOLOGY FOR ASSESSING THE CONNECTIVITY PROCESS**

Methods for strategic research on connectivity are primarily used to inform regional development programming, but they also enable the assessment of local development. In addition, some of these procedures provide qualitative information developed during direct research or working meetings with representatives of the local community. This group of methods has been introduced into the field of research on the development of territorial units through the strategic analysis of the public sector, business, and the economically active population. It is worth remembering this, as the structure of municipal or regional objectives

is significantly more complex. The structure of strategic studies is not complex. They focus primarily on identifying and assessing development factors and their constraints, such as paths, shared interests, opportunities for association, municipalities, different approaches to management, level of development, availability of infrastructure, and others (Angelov K., 2008). One of the most popular procedures is the SWOT analysis. This is a basic, widely used method for multidimensional diagnostics of development, which underpins strategic planning. It allows for the study of the synergies of local territorial systems. It will enable the analysis of both the organization's external and internal environments, including positive and negative factors. The method distinguishes four areas: strengths and weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The first pair focuses on internal relations, while the second refers to external conditions. Methodologically, this method draws assumptions from the concept of force field analysis. In the SWOT analysis, it is not necessary to identify all factors – only those that have a decisive influence on the organization's future. Due to the variety of factors, sometimes the analysis is carried out at several thematic levels. Another method is Benchmarking, which involves comparing a given unit with others to learn and transfer good practices. It can also serve as a basis for positioning municipalities and settlements within them. Benchmarking also allows for qualitative comparisons. The so-called territorial benchmarking is particularly important, as it compares indicators describing a given territorial unit, such as a municipality or city, with similar units, using a specific set of indicators. Also, of interest is the “Stakeholder Analysis”, which aims to identify the group of entities with the most significant influence on shaping the local development process. The method also analyzes the relationships among individual entities. The analysis takes into account five groups: institutional entities (including public authorities), public and non-public entities, entities and individuals who are direct users, entities that shape public opinion, and entities for which local government is the main factor in development. The last method we will look at is Scenario methods, a group of “discontinuous” methods that involve a “jump” between the present and the future. The scenario should define the desired state and present a series of countermeasures to transform the current state into the desired state. The scenarios can be grouped in different ways, including central and peripheral. This division suggests that the central version is the most likely, while the others are contrasting. Here, it is essential to share that in our case, we will use municipalities of a smaller caliber for analysis, because the way we understand territorial perceptions of the region, districts, and their administrative-territorial projections has changed due to the growing importance of large urban centers, some of which have acquired metropolitan characteristics. The concentration of production factors, the emergence of a specific social class, the emergence of agglomeration areas, and from there the emergence of a new type of social ties and the weakening of the traditional relations have focused attention on the flow of value between the center and its surroundings. The more distant municipalities from large centers are beginning to be perceived as a territorial and functional unit, constituting the sphere of influence of a center - a large city - which is a source of information, collects products, organizes work and consumption and provides services, with the second level being the ability to increase its potential by creating a gravitational field by connecting with another city or cooperating its economy with several other towns (settlements). To test the need for connectivity, we will conduct a comparative analysis of two Bulgarian municipalities located in different parts of the country.

### **3. RESULTS**

#### **Comparative analysis and level of connectivity of Pavlikeni and Tsarevo municipalities**

Structurally, the city of Pavlikeni is located in Northern Bulgaria, in the Veliko Tarnovo District, and the city of Tsarevo is located in Southern Bulgaria, in the Burgas District. The



two cities are part of the same-named municipalities. In terms of regional connectivity, the municipality of Pavlikeni (17,600 people) borders Svishtov, the Polski Trambesh municipality, the Sevlievo municipality, the Suhodol municipality, and the Levski municipality to the north. Pavlikeni's location is continental and transit, with good access to national roads, suggesting that it can develop a high degree of connectivity with the municipalities that share borders. Proximity to the city of Svishtov, where the Danube River passes, and to an available ferry to Romania are of great importance. On the other hand, the municipality of Tsarevo (8,481 people) is located in the southeastern part of the country, on a peninsula in the Black Sea (coastline) that borders the municipalities of Primorsko and Malko Tarnovo, as well as the Malak Samokov district (Turkey). Thus, the municipality of Tsarevo has an extremely peripheral, but specialized, coastal location with potential for cross-border cooperation and unloading for the city of Burgas. In my opinion, both municipalities have favorable opportunities, but fundamentally different natural geographic positions. A careful analysis of the two municipalities shows that, with an available settlement network, there are one city (Pavlikeni) and 10 villages (Batola, Bucha, Gabarevo, etc.), as well as one city (Tsarevo) and two villages (Lozenets, Ahtopol). It assumes an ineffective social situation in small towns and settlements with a limited set of basic services, defined as a social minimum that should be accessible to residents (in this case, education, healthcare, and culture). It seems reasonable to conclude that the base of services offered by small towns is an important element of the functional structure. From the perspective of the scope of service users (small municipalities and towns and their immediate surroundings), it is cost-effective because it improves the overall quality of life (Patarchanov, P. 2016). The example of Pavlikeni shows us that we have a classic hierarchical network for an internal municipality. Tsarevo has an extreme model with a minimum of villages, all of which are seaside resorts, which determines the economy. The comparison of indicators revealed a clear order in population changes, which is consistent with scientific publications on functional transformations in small towns. The framework defines Pavlikeni as a settlement with an internal development organization, respectively, Tsarevo as a settlement with specialized tourist and seaside orientation. The comparative analysis of geographical features shows that the settlements are at a relatively low altitude. On the other hand, they are risky due to potential erosion and drought. Moreover, activation of landslides (active and stabilized), fires, and sea erosion. The settlements are steeply terraced. Pavlikeni has a stable environment with few extreme risks. Tsarevo is in a dynamic, beautiful, but potentially dangerous environment that requires specific management (European projects for risks). The reserves in both municipalities are agricultural lands (the main resource), the presence of the Rositsa River, the Alexander Stamboliyski Dam near Pavlikeni, and the Yasna Polyana Dam near Tsarevo. There are no significant minerals in either municipality. Pavlikeni has agro-potential. Tsarevo has a tourist-recreational potential. This is the main difference determined by the resources. Natural landmarks (sea, beaches, steep slopes), forest areas (a significant share), mineral springs (Ahtopol). The two municipalities of Pavlikeni and Tsarevo have negative growth and aging, but they have some stability because they are in better condition than many other rural municipalities. In both municipalities, seasonal demographic pressure is often noticeable, especially when the population increases significantly in the summer. Pavlikeni has a classic upward demographic problem. Tsarevo has a specific seasonal pattern that also brings challenges (pressure on infrastructure). The cultural institutions located in the studied cities are a key element of their functioning and vary in importance across cities. For some settlements, they serve as sources of activity or recreation for residents and the local community. In contrast, for others, they complement the tourist function, offering more than just environmental benefits (Vladeva, R., Vladev, I., 2019). In general, the leading economic development sectors, in chronological order, are Agriculture (viticulture, fruit growing), the processing industry (food, textiles),

trade, tourism, and hospitality (dominant in Tsarevo). Good transport connections with large centers, mainly related to trade and services, as well as tourism. The direction to the regional cities of Veliko Tarnovo and Burgas determines connectivity. In general, Pavlikeni is an agro-industrial municipality with a diversified economy. Tsarevo is a monofunctional tourist municipality with high seasonality. This determines all aspects of development. The socio-economic processes that affected small towns at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries transformed their functional structure and the conditions for their development (Simeonov, D., Simeonova, D., 2021). The economic situation, especially after we enter the European Union, has changed, and this is especially important given the connection to rural areas. From the point of view of competitiveness, the economic aspect seems key, as it is based on small towns' ability to gain advantages in the benefits they provide to residents, investors, and the immediate and distant surroundings. These benefits are evident in areas related to the economic aspect, such as entrepreneurship, infrastructure, employment, tourism, and economic conditions. All these segments identified in small towns, across a diverse range of accessibility levels, affect economic and overall competitiveness. As long as they are available. In terms of. Infrastructure for water supply and sanitation in the city and parts of the villages in both municipalities, and what to wish for. The critical infrastructure in the municipalities of Tsarevo and Pavlikeni is also complex, but in need of modernization. In this direction, the priority for Pavlikeni is the modernization of industrial zones, roads, and rural infrastructure. The priority for Tsarevo is the construction of the Burgas-Malko Tarnovo expressway, new treatment plants, and a new waste landfill to improve environmental infrastructure (treatment, waste) and transport accessibility. What are the prospects for development in the two municipalities? First of all, diversification in agribusiness (high processing), development of green tourism, and use of funds for rural areas (from the EU). Sustainable (ecological) tourism, transition from seasonal to year-round model (spa, cultural, congress tourism), nature conservation (Kabakchieva, D. Vasileva, V. 2023). Pavlikeni's integration into the EU is through a special program for rural areas and regional economies. For Tsarevo, through programs for sustainable tourism, nature conservation, and coastal regions. It is good for the municipality of Pavlikeni to be more active in developing the regional economy of the Veliko Tarnovo region to maintain a balance among industry, agriculture, and cultural tourism. Pavlikeni can integrate as an agro-center. At the same time, the municipality of Tsarevo offers an alternative niche, ecological tourism, which complements the regional profile of the Burgas region, which is trying to develop industry, energy, and mass tourism. Both municipalities can occupy niches and positions within their regions' economies. Thus, the municipality of Pavlikeni is a typical agro-industrial municipality for Northern Bulgaria with a stable but aging economy. Its integration into the EU is carried out through policies for regional development and rural areas, aimed at modernization, diversification, and population retention. Tsarevo is a typical monofunctional tourist municipality on the Southern Black Sea coast, with high natural potential but major environmental and seasonal challenges. Its integration into the EU is through policies for sustainable development, nature conservation, and sustainable tourism, aimed at overcoming seasonality and preserving the natural assets.

## CONCLUSION

The processes of regional development and connectivity seem to be in harmony with the natural environment. Still, today's approach to regions considers natural resource potential an essential condition for shaping development, especially for small and medium-sized municipalities, whose location determines their importance. Currently, connectivity is a significant factor in development and competitiveness, as it integrates with socio-economic

elements in a way that their development depends on access to individual points of the region, especially at what cost. This is the reason why several regions and municipalities fail to define sustainable management of natural resources. From the perspective of small municipalities' competitiveness, this aspect is equally important. However, as indicated, actions aimed at maintaining natural values can be considered barriers to development that hinder the prosperity of small towns. The concepts of sustainable development and environmental protection are present at every administrative level. Thus, for the mentioned municipalities, Pavlikeni and Tsarevo, it is evident that they can develop a regional economy and concentrate significant demographic potential, but, in terms of membership in the European Union, the exact opposite occurs. Thus, this segment should be treated as an aspect of the competitiveness and development of small towns. Still, connectivity is not defined by the public sector, and business has its own selfish motives. Therefore, the proposed indicators for assessing the level of connectivity in regional development relate, on the one hand, to regional values present in small urban centers, and on the other, to the technical infrastructure and environmental protection infrastructure, which affects the state and load on the natural environment, which is a task of increased difficulty for Bulgarian municipalities; they do not bring out infrastructure as an absolute municipal priority.

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