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REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN FOCUS: ANALYSIS OF THE LEADING PARTIES' PROGRAMS IN BULGARIA 2026 PARLAMENTARY ELECTIONS

ABSTRACT

Bulgaria has held 8 early elections for a National Assembly in the last 5 years. This political instability is affecting the effectiveness of public governance and the country's regional development. The study aims to compare the election programs of the political formations that entered the new parliament. The analysis assesses the extent to which the programs prioritize regional development. The paper outlines the relationship between a full-mandate parliamentary governance and the implementation of effective regional policy. Parliamentary election programs of six parties are evaluated with the OECD criteria for the implementation of regional policy. The results show the place regional development has in the political vision of the new legislative authority in the country. A limitation of the analysis turned out to be the weak applicability of the methodology used to election programs. The main conclusion is that regional policy is clearly and comprehensively represented in the parties' proposals for the

development of different sectors. A need is outlined for the development of a more precise tool for analyzing political documents on regional topics.

KEYWORDS: regional development; regional policy; Bulgaria; political parties; election programs

JEL: H11, O20, R58

INTRODUCTION

Bulgaria has been in a political crisis since 2021, which has resulted in eight parliamentary elections (Vinarov, 2025). During the same period, the country has had seven caretaker governments and only three regular ones. This period coincides with the European Union's multiannual financial framework for 2021-2027 (Laffan, De Feo, 2020). The investments and projects that Bulgaria can implement with funds from the structural and cohesion funds require consistent policy, continuity of governance, and inter-institutional cooperation. Constant changes strongly hamper these processes in the legislative and executive authorities. The period 2021-2026 also coincides with the planning, development, negotiation and implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Plan for Bulgaria. This is an investment instrument of the European Union to support member countries after the COVID-19 crisis (Ceron, 2023). Investments under this plan differ from those available through the structural funds because they require legislative reforms in previously agreed areas. A recent study shows that in different EU countries, "the divergence between the parties that designed the plans and those tasked with implementing them underscores the importance of adaptability in ensuring the

success of the NRRPs” /National Recovery and Resilience Plans/ (Borghetto, Quaglia, Guardiancich, 2026, p. 88). In Bulgaria, with 3 regular and 7 caretaker governments during the development and implementation of this plan, the challenges ahead of a possible success are enormous. Pastarmadzhieva and Angelova (2021) examine the association between governmental strategies and measures, on the one hand, and societal trust in political elites, on the other. They conclude that "not only the measures resulted in trust, but trust is relevant for the effectiveness of the measures" (Pastarmadzhieva & Angelova, 2021, p. 22). From that perspective, political parties' programs serve as an essential link between declared policy measures and societal expectations.

In this study, the analysis focuses on the election programs of the five political parties that achieved parliamentary representation in the eighth early parliamentary elections held on April 19, 2026. The subject of the study is the place of the policies and measures in the field of regional development that the parties prioritize for the new parliamentary mandate (April 2026 - April 2030). The purpose of the analysis is to determine whether there is a regional focus in the visions of the political parties granted the right to participate in legislative power.

The main limitation is that the study examines only the election programs for the April 19, 2026, parliamentary elections. The programs are compared by their regional policy focus at the subnational level. The content analysis did not consider geostrategic regional issues. The hypothesis tested here is that parties have a limited regional approach in their election proposals.

1. METHODOLOGY

Several considerations drive the methodological approach. “Regional development policy, because of its degree of development, is a policy that covers several fields of activity, which means that a large number of institutional actors are involved in its design and implementation” (Tsonkov, Petrov, 2025, p. 200). First, the ongoing political process in the country was analyzed for the period May 2021 - May 2026. This was a time of political instability, leading to a dysfunctional legislature. Second, from a regional studies perspective, basic factors are defined for the successful implementation of regional policy. The empirical part is a content analysis of six election programs. They are examined with OECD criteria for regional policy development. The chosen approach is used to avoid subjectivity in the assessment. The OECD's ten criteria for regional policy development are as follows (OECD, 2023):

1. Regional development strategy (approach) that creates conditions for all regions to contribute to the country's economic performance, national well-being, environmental sustainability, socio-economic stability, and the overcoming of regional inequalities. This strategic approach includes integrating sectoral policies and investments to support regional development and using the specific advantages of each region. The well-being of people in the regions, especially the various vulnerable groups. Support for the regions to develop their strengths and attract investors, talent, young people, and businesses.
2. Territorial scale(s) for policy action, which include creating better conditions for decentralization at the local level. This also includes ensuring that small towns and rural areas are included in the focus of national and regional territorial development policies.
3. Co-working with local authorities for policy making with regional specifics and stakeholders.
4. Resilience and sustainability. This includes indicators for the development of a carbon-neutral economy, a green transition, including investments in a circular economy. Another emphasis is access to digital infrastructure at all levels, including in rural areas. This category also includes support for regions in demographic transition. This includes proposals to provide

services needed for the ageing population in some towns and villages, and to address the pressure from an increased population in large cities. Building policies that lead regions into the future, rather than deepening the gap.

5. Data-driven regional policy planning, based on dynamic quantitative and qualitative data from the regions themselves through geo-statistics, big data, etc.

6. Multi-level governance, which includes effective interaction between authorities at national, regional and local levels for the benefit of developed policies. This also includes better inter-sectoral coordination in the implementation of strategies, investments, and projects such as more active bottom-up interaction in the management of regional problems.

7. Administrative capacity and their staff in terms of regional planning, regulations, program and project management, public procurement and public-private partnership, finance and budgeting, infrastructure investments, data management, working with stakeholders, building partnerships, monitoring and evaluation of activities in the field of regional development.

8. Financial resources for regional development. Financial resources for regional development. This includes recommendations for better coordination between national and regional goals in budget planning. Prioritization of regional infrastructure projects in the national budget. Targeting funds to specific regions and regional themes through dedicated funds and broadening the sources of funding for regional policies and development.

9. Integrity in Dissemination and Transparency. Better interaction between national, regional and local authorities to raise awareness of opportunities, promote results, reduce uncertainty and risks for successful regional policies.

10. Monitoring, control, and efficiency mechanisms that allow regular measurement of regional development outcomes. This indicator for regional policy is most useful with the recommendation that it is important to measure coherence between individual policies in the context of regional objectives.

2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Political parties and the role of their programs

Political programs are a fundamental element of political parties. They express their ideology, principles and philosophy and “reflect the vision of political entities regarding the role of the state in economic life, the scope of functions of regulatory institutions, the understanding of the degree of permissible state intervention in the form of restrictions and support for the business” (Nusheva, 2022, p. 18). Political parties are “define as public political organizations whose goals are to express the will of citizens, participation in the political process and state governance” (Asenov, 2011, p. 293). Programs express the nature and goals of the proposed policy. Programs explain how parties intend to use state power, but they also outline sectoral policy priorities. Generally, parties develop a long-term program for the country's development with a horizon of more than 15 years or more than 3 governing terms. In this way, even the longest-term sectoral reforms can be implemented. Parties should also regularly develop election programs that outline their goals for one governing term. Such a program is expected to follow the long-term party program.

Parties also develop a governing program in accordance with the country's current Administration Law. Such a program can be prepared when they win the elections, but also earlier. Some parties prefer to have their own governing program to use in subsequent coalition

negotiations. Other parties make hybrid programs. Then their election program is titled 'governing'. There is also a marketing effect that indicates that this party sees its place in power.

Not all parties follow these alphabetical rules when organizing party documents. In some cases, they do not have time for this. In other cases, they do not develop the necessary culture for the purpose. When a party is new, established before elections, it does not have time to prepare comprehensive party programs. It usually proposes a longer pre-election program that provides a guideline for this party's longer-term intentions. One of the first checks whether parties approach elections responsibly and professionally is the development of an election program. All the parties we are considering here have such documents.

In Bulgaria, in the preliminary elections held on April 19, 2026, the five political formations that found a place in the new parliament are: Coalition "Progressive Bulgaria", Coalition GERB-SDF, Coalition "We Continue the Change - Democratic Bulgaria", Political Party "Movement for Rights and Freedoms", and Political Party "Vazrazhdane". The parties are listed in the text according to their current electoral weight (CEC, 2026).

A series of anti-government protests after 2020 triggered a transformation of the Bulgarian political system (Tachev, 2024, p. 66). Actually, most of the parties analyzed here are new, established shortly before or even after 2021, and achieved parliamentary presence during this short but politically turbulent period. As Asenov (2021) analyses, the Bulgarian political parties and political representativeness are in crisis due to complex deficits in the relationship between citizens and political elites.

As a result, the country moved between the 45th and 52nd parliaments in six years. One plan for the legislative activity of the National Assembly is for a period of six months, from January to June and from July to December, respectively. Four of the parliaments from the period under review do not have a full six-month legislative cycle. In these conditions, it is very difficult to implement a sustainable regional policy to overcome inequalities and balance regional development in the country. In the described conditions, there is no predictability in the legislative process.

2.2. Factors of a working regional policy and the legislative authorities' role

Regional policy at the subnational level can be considered at the micro, meso and macro levels. At the micro level, this primarily involves activities within the scope of the Ministry of Regional Development. At the meso level, regional policy is also the implementation and management of EU-funded projects. European funds and projects are the most direct expression of the regional policy and objectives of the EU in terms of the balanced development of the different regions of the union. National governments play a leading role in achieving this balanced development within each member state's territory. Regional policy entails a comprehensive state strategy to overcome inequalities and develop the country.

"In the process of regional development management, it is important to formulate goals and priorities that are tailored to the specific needs and internal potential of each region. A fundamental issue that deserves attention is how the state regional development policy would support the competitive advantages of the regional economy "(Vasileva, 2025, p. 36). The essence of that approach "means supporting and prioritizing the development of regions and administrative units that can become locomotives of progress and development" (Georgieva, 2022, p. 58). At the macro level, regional policy is more than the work of a ministry, the overall management of European funds, or a strategy for the development of regions. It is about

balanced territorial development, not only at the regional level, but in each town and village. Such development is a subject of policies in all sectors and spheres. This is the implementation of sectoral policies that also take into account territorial effects, so that there is no opposition between sectors. “Territorial development in Bulgaria seems to be related to the state’s desire to achieve a balance of interests” (Petrov, 2019, p. 47). Inter-sectoral synchronization is required. “In the institutional and spatial aspects, regional level analyses are important for the assessment of regional development and the implementation of regional policies” (Tsonkov, Petrov, 2025, p. 198). More data-based governance and management is the new mainstream planning approach, enabling the foreseen differences in the territorial effects of a given policy.

Only regular governments can propose a full mandate for the country's development. Over the analyzed 5-year period, the country had 3 regular governments and 7 caretaker governments. In such circumstances, even if political parties have regional policies in their programs, there has been no time to implement them. That is why, because “the regional development policy is a long-term, cross-sectoral, multi-level policy that aims to improve the contribution of all regions to national performance and reduce inequalities between places and between people by promoting long-term sustainable development in all regions through strategic and targeted public policy, investment and service provision measures that are tailored to the specific needs and opportunities of regions and their inhabitants” (OECD, 2023). At the same time, the implementation of public policies and programs requires evaluation based on previous results, adjustment to current societal expectations and regional development needs, and alignment with political possibilities (Nikolov, Tanakov, Bakardziev, 2018, p. 32).

On the one hand, in this paper, the intentions of political parties are monitored for the future realization of policies. It has to be taken into account that "the public policy is the decision made, not the intention or promise to do something, i.e. its implementation is evaluated" (Veleva, 2024, p. 21). On the other hand, the members of parliament are elected from electoral districts, most of which coincide with the so-called 3rd-level regions (NUTS 3). The administrative districts are, at the same time, the 3rd-level regions for regional planning and also multi-mandate electoral regions for political elections and public policy development. The deputies from these districts are interested in prioritizing local and regional problems that they can link to the parties' election programs.

3. RESULTS

In the April 19, 2026, parliamentary elections, the Progressive Bulgaria Coalition won an absolute majority with 131 seats. The GERB-SDS coalition came in second with 39 seats. The third was the We Continue Change - Democratic Bulgaria coalition with 37 MPs. However, this coalition split into two parliamentary groups - one of the Democratic Bulgaria coalition with 21 seats in parliament and one of the We Continue Change party with 16 representatives in the legislative body. The fourth in terms of votes is the DPS party with 21 MPs. The fifth is the Vazrazhdane political party with 16 MPs (CEC, 2026). Following the split of one coalition, there are six formations in parliament, whose programs are analyzed here.

It turned out to be very difficult to precisely determine whether an election program has a regional and territorial focus using the OECD criteria. They seem more applicable to the evaluation of government strategic documents. They are not entirely suitable for election programs because these programs contain more ideological and political presumptions, not good governance principles. However, the results here are presented in a manner consistent with the OECD criteria and by party.

Table 1. Results of the comparative analysis of six election programs from the preliminary parliamentary elections in Bulgaria (19/04/2026) based on the OECD criteria for regional policy development

OECD criteria	PB	GERB	DPS	DB	PP	Vazrazhdane
1. Regional development strategy (approach)	yes	yes	yes	yes	partly	no
2. Territorial scale(s) for policy action	yes	yes	yes	yes	partly	no
3. Co-working with local authorities for policy making with regional specifics	partly	partly	yes	partly	partly	no
4. Resilience and sustainability	yes	partly	no	yes	yes	yes
5. Data-driven regional policy planning	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no
6. Multi-level governance	partly	partly	partly	yes	partly	no
7. Administrative, strategic and technical capacity	yes	partly	no	yes	yes	partly
8. Financial resources for regional development	partly	yes	yes	yes	partly	partly
9. Integrity in Dissemination and Transparency	yes	yes	yes	yes	partly	partly
10. <i>Monitoring & control of an efficiency mechanism and an efficiency mechanism</i>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	partly

Source: author's results

Legend:

PB – Coalition “Progressive Bulgaria”

GERB – Coalition “GERB-SDF”, only the program of the leader of the political party GERB is presented

DPS – Party “Movement for Rights and Freedoms”

DB – Coalition “Democratic Bulgaria”

PP – Party “Continuing Change”

Coalition “Continuing Change – Democratic Bulgaria” is divided into two parliamentary groups in the new National Assembly, as defined in the table according to their current place in the structure of the National Assembly.

Vazrazhdane – Party “Vazrazhdane”

Progressive Bulgaria aims to develop the country into a "regional hub for innovation and technology". GERB brings to the forefront the "reindustrialization of the regions". DPS advocates "a new model of regional policy, which includes modern digital analysis of resources" with a multi-sectoral approach. The political party "We continue the change" talk about "unlocking the growth of the regions". The coalition "Democratic Bulgaria" stands behind the idea of a "strong regions, sustainable communities and true decentralization". The Vazrazhdane Party proposes a targeted state policy for “development of the regional economy and overcoming regional imbalances”. These formulations are the titles of special sections in the electoral programs devoted to regional policy.

However, regional policy and development are not only narrowly limited and isolated, and therefore, this analysis attempts to derive regionally significant proposals from other sectoral topics in the monitored programs.

The comparative analysis shows that all parties have a strategic vision for more developed regions. An example of this to the greatest extent is the infrastructure, transport and industrial ideas. Most of them have a strong commitment to territorial development with special proposals for the lagging regions. They are declaring their intention to direct industrial zones, lead tourist infrastructure development, and digitalize less developed regions. However, political parties' readiness to work with local authorities for regional development is more limited. Their ideas have a regional scope, but are centralized as policies and investments. Decentralization of municipalities, including financially, is not among the leading priorities of most parties. All parties support regional initiatives to strengthen resilience to crises and promote sustainable development. Such are the proposals for restoring irrigation systems, ensuring energy security, and promoting sustainable green public transport. Most parties have identified the implementation of monitoring systems and the measurement of various indicators of policy effectiveness. They emphasize new technologies, intelligent systems, big data, and artificial intelligence as tools to improve visibility, traceability, and policy outcomes.

Centralized regional development remains the leading approach in most of the programs. The monitored programs rarely consider local government and civil society participation as a factor in the proposed regional policy. Most parties have ideas for administrative reform. One direction for change is to reduce the number of civil servants, but there are also ideas for merging and closing governing structures, such as ministries and agencies. The other direction focuses on the digitalization of administrative services. Financial resources for regional development are expected to be provided by European funds. This is understood from the fact that the proposals addressed to the regions overlap to a high degree with European priorities and programs. In the election programs, measures for better monitoring and publicity are not in focus, but there is a serious commitment to the fight against corruption, a better regulatory framework, and the pursuit of results.

4. DISCUSSION

Many differences are not taken into account because the OECD criteria cannot be applied to election programs. A closer reading reveals a different weight given to the regional focus in the individual programs. Progressive Bulgaria Party and GERB prioritize general socio-economic development over regional development in their program approach. We continue the change, and DPS pay more attention to the role of regions and to the adaptation of policies through the leading goal of improving regional welfare, opportunities, and quality of life. Their proposals have a different philosophy, but are strongly tied to more opportunities for the regions. Democratic Bulgaria's party program has a different ideological foundation, grounded in initiatives from the regions themselves, but also pays great attention to regional development across policy sectors and cross-sectoral priorities. Vazrazhdane Party offers the least focused regional policy, but in its sectoral policy proposals, it includes several measures to develop regions.

The analysis allows it to be summarized that each party is focused on regional development, both sectorally and cross-sectorally. This is good news on the threshold of the new European funding period 2028-2034. The ruling party, Progressive Bulgaria, which won a full majority in parliament, can count on understanding and support on a number of regional issues, because they are also a priority for the opposition parties. At the same time, the new electoral situation allows the ruling party a full mandate, which regional development greatly needs.

If the programs are not viewed through an ideological filter but only pragmatically, similar priorities will be found in each. The analyzed documents contain proposals for industrial zones, the digitalization of economic activities and administrative services, access to services across all parts of a region, and transport connectivity to larger cities with social infrastructure. The priority for all is also large infrastructure projects, regional employment, the qualification of young people, and social integration of the elderly. In agriculture, irrigation is becoming a priority for political parties, including improving the functioning of agricultural holdings. The demographic crisis is less in focus in the programs than expected. Better transport accessibility to national resorts and tourist sites is a common priority in most programs. The emphasis is on developing a regional and local tourist product. For the energy sector, a wider range of proposals is included, mostly focused on energy sustainability and independence. Municipal financial decentralization is timidly stated in some programs but has not been widely developed with concrete proposals and specific measures.

The results lead to the conclusion that regional policy cannot be considered solely functional or a second-level policy governance. Regional policy is not a collection of technocratic decisions; it has ideological prerequisites, without which it cannot be analyzed, evaluated, or understood. The strong alignment of regional priorities across the different programs shows that the difference will lie in the political approach used to resolve these regional issues. The hypothesis that the parties do not prioritize regional problems in their programs was not confirmed. On the contrary, it turned out that there is a separate regional focus in the election programs. In addition, solutions to regional problems are sought through the different sectoral policies.

CONCLUSION

These OECD regional policy development criteria enable testing a new approach to evaluating election programs. The result is partial, insofar as the parameters of the analytical tool used do not apply to political documents, but rather to strategic ones. The work for finding a regional development-related method for an evaluation of political programs has to continue because regions are often also electoral districts. The same territory is a place for socio-economic planning and political campaigns. Although regional science has a serious interest in engaging more methodologically with political science, there are few tools for measuring political programs against regional development criteria.

Therefore, there remains a need for a more effective interdisciplinary analysis of regional issues and approaches in election programs. For a start, the very attention to these issues is a good basis for accumulating more and more in-depth analytical results. The debate on the need for a regional perspective and on examples of political priorities could help future candidates for parliament when presenting their election programs in their constituencies.

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