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## BULGARIAN URBAN SETTLEMENTS IN THE EARLY 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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**ABSTRACT.** The article presents the main changes in Bulgarian urban settlements during the last two decades and the present-day situation and processes of their development. A pronounced tendency towards a decrease in the urban population in Bulgaria can be observed in this period, which is closely related to the continuing drop in the total number of the country's population. A comparison with earlier periods shows that there is a greater concentration of population in the cities and middle-sized towns. The processes of transformation in Bulgarian urban settlements are similar to those in the other Central and East-European countries in transition. The economic transformations and the changes in the urban economy affected the urban territorial structure. The last two decades have witnessed considerable changes in the spatial pattern of the complex systems links established between the settlements as well as between the settlements, gravitating to the cities or agglomerations. The regional policy, which has been implemented for the past two decades, aims to consolidate the importance of Bulgarian urban settlements (over 20 thousand inhabitants) and agglomerations in regional development.

**KEY WORDS:** Bulgaria, urban settlements, urban population, social-economic changes, territorial structure.

### INTRODUCTION

Settlements are considered to be a specific indicator of socio-economic changes. The current development and transformation of urban settlements and the formation of urban structures in Bulgaria display a number of characteristic features. Although they are different by nature, this paper will focus just on some of them, concerning the state, the changes and the problems of Bulgarian cities and towns.

### CHANGES IN THE NUMBER OF URBAN SETTLEMENTS AND URBAN POPULATION IN BULGARIA

The trends in the changing number of Bulgarian urban settlements and their population in the past two decades substantially differ from the trends common for the period from 1950 to the early 1980s. In contrast to the earlier period, the number of towns has increased slowly (Table 1). It is only in recent years that a larger number of villages have been granted the status of towns. With regard to their population, they can be assigned to the category of “very small towns” (up to 10,000 people).

Table 1. Number of settlements in Bulgaria

Year of census	Number of settlements		
	A	B	C
1946	6,033	105	5,928
1956	5,903	112	5,791
1965	5,687	175	5,512
1975	5,373	214	5,159
1985	5,383	237	5,146
1992	5,336	238	5,098
2001	5,340	240	5,100
2007 <sup>a</sup>	5,305	253	5,052

Explanation: A – total; B – urban; C – rural;  
a – for 2007 current statistics

Source: National Statistical Institute

As a result of the negative demographic processes, a pronounced tendency towards a decrease in the urban population in Bulgaria can be observed in the last two decades, which is closely related to the continuing drop in the total number of the country's population. The population as a whole and particularly the urban population in Bulgaria had been decreasing until the 1980s (Fig. 1).

The reduction in the urban population is due to the adverse demographic processes and phenomena in the country – a drop in the population's natural increase (lower birth rates and higher death rates), deterioration of the age structure, etc. It has to be mentioned that the rates of decrease have slowed down in the last few years (Fig. 1, 2). The unfavourable demographic processes, caused by the nation-wide crisis and the restriction of the urban population, are admitted to be one of the characteristic features of transformation which Bulgaria's urban settlements are undergoing.

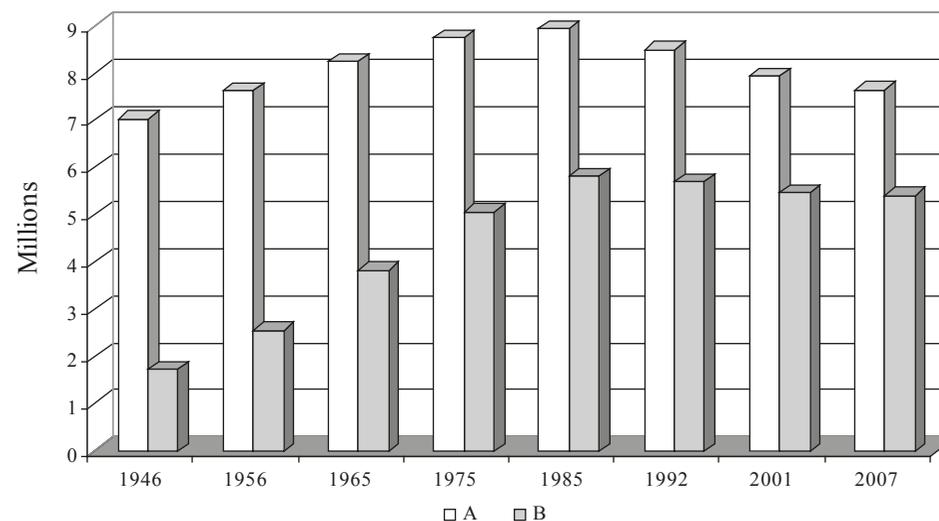


Fig. 1. Number of Bulgaria's population according to censuses (1946–2001)  
Explanation: A – Bulgaria, B – urban settlements, \*2007 – according to current statistics

Source: Own calculation on the basis of data from National Statistical Institute

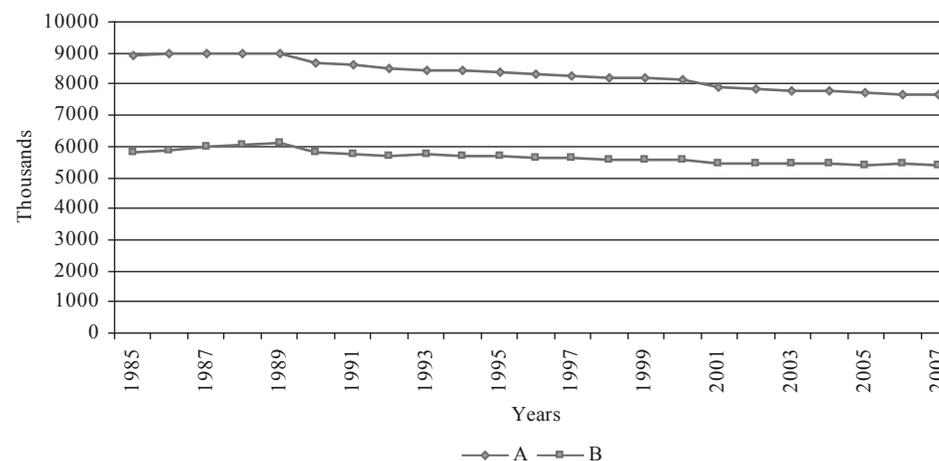


Fig. 2. Changes in urban population in Bulgaria (1985–2007)  
Explanation: A – Bulgaria, B – urban settlements

Source: Own calculation on the basis of data from National Statistical Institute

In 1994 the natural increase of the urban population assumed negative values (i.e., 4 years later than the whole country's population). In recent years the situation has slightly improved (Fig. 3). The high share of the urban population has considerably influenced the population's natural increase in the country. The growing migration has partially counterbalanced the negative natural increase, mainly in the cities, as internal migration is dominated by town-to-town migration movements. In the last two decades the number of people who wanted to live in cities and towns has become smaller because of the lower migration mobility in the conditions of economic hardship, the continuously rising rents and prices of flats in the capital and in other cities, the higher cost of living, etc. Among the factors which also make a considerable contribution to the migration increase are the attractiveness of the cities, the greater expectation of people to find a job and succeed in life, the impressive economic emigration in the early 1990s, and many others.

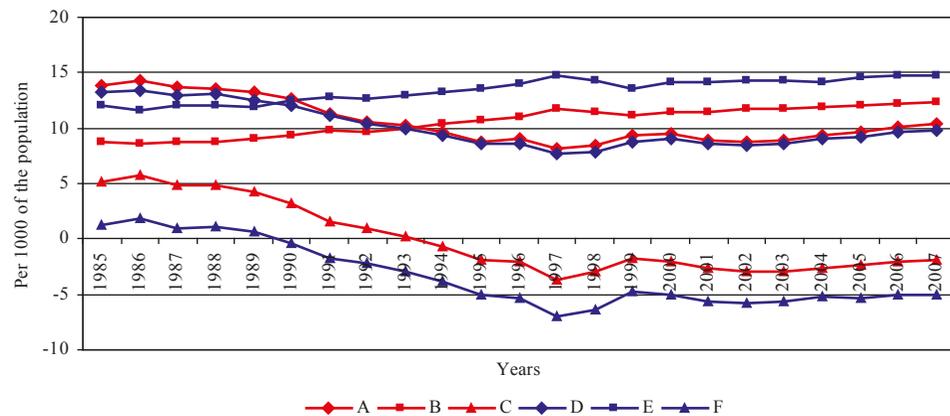


Fig. 3. Natural increase in population (1985–2007)  
 Explanation: A – birth rate (urban settlement); B – death rate (urban settlement); C – natural increase (urban settlement); D – birth rate (Bulgaria); E – death rate (Bulgaria); F – natural increase (Bulgaria)

Source: Own calculation on the basis of data from National Statistical Institute

The number of the urban population is falling but its proportion of the country's total population is going up (Fig. 4), because the latter is experiencing faster rates of decrease.

There are significant differences between the urban settlements in terms of their number of population, demographic structure, socio-economic, infrastructural, spatial, and cultural-historical development (Szymańska, 2009).

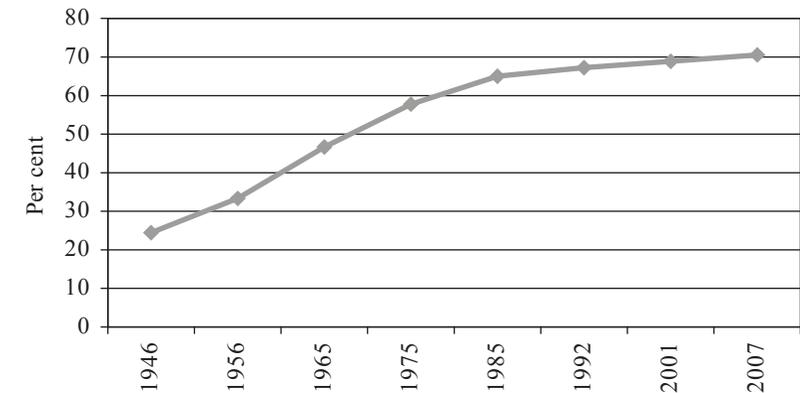


Fig. 4. Share of urban population in Bulgaria by years  
 Explanation: \*2007 – according to current statistics

Source: Own calculation on the basis of data from National Statistical Institute

According to the classification, accepted by the Bulgarian experts, the urban settlements are divided into five groups: very large cities (above 400,000 people), cities (100,000 – 400,000), middle-sized towns (30,000–100,000), small towns (10,000–30,000) and very small towns (up to 10,000 people) (*Naredba No. 5...*, 1995). Over 2/3 of the towns have a population of up to 10,000 people (Table 2).

Table 2. Classification of urban settlements in Bulgaria

Categories of urban settlements	A			B			C		
	1992	2001	2007	1992	2001	2007	1992	2001	2007
Very small towns (less than 10 thousand)	151	157	174	734.7	741.6	773.6	8.7	9.3	10.1
Small towns (10–30 thousand)	53	50	46	882.6	822.8	752.5	10.4	10.4	9.9
Middle-sized towns (30–100 thousand)	25	24	26	1,465	1,347.6	1,463.9	17.3	17.0	19.2
Cities (100–400 thousand)	8	8	6	1,507	1,470.7	1,256.4	17.8	18.5	16.4
Very large cities (over than 400 thousand)	1	1	1	1,115	1,091.8	1,156.8	13.1	13.8	15.1
Total	238	240	253	5,705	5,474.5	5,403.2	67.3	69.0	70.7

Explanation: A – number of urban settlement; B – number of urban population (in thousand persons); C – share of urban population from Bulgaria's population

Source: Authors' calculations on the basis of National Statistical Institute data

Population decrease is a common phenomenon and can be seen in almost all towns and cities. Combined with other factors, it changes the urban settlement structure (Table 2, Fig. 5). During the period 1985–2001 even in the capital city of Sofia and in some other cities the population decreased (Table 3). Since the 2001-census taking, there has been a trend towards population growth only in the three largest cities. Particularly susceptible to the current changes are the small and very small towns whose town-formation basis is in its initial stage of development and the town functions are inadequate. At the beginning of the transition period they were the main source of outward-migration, directed to the cities, especially to Sofia.

Table 3. Number of the population of the cities in Bulgaria (in thousand persons)

Cities	1946	1956	1965	1975	1985	1992	2001	2007 <sup>a</sup>
Sofia	473.3	652.1	825.5	990.3	1,120.9	1,114.9	1,091.8	1,156.8
Plovdiv	128.6	164.9	229.0	299.6	342.0	341.1	338.2	345.2
Varna	80.3	123.8	184.7	252.5	302.8	308.4	312.9	314.0
Burgas	51.3	79.1	117.5	162.8	193.7	195.7	192.4	187.5
Ruse	57.8	88.4	128.9	159.6	185.4	170.0	161.5	156.8
Stara Zagora	38.3	56.2	88.6	122.3	150.3	150.5	143.4	140.3
Pleven	39.1	57.6	78.7	107.6	129.7	130.8	121.9	112.6
Sliven	35.3	47.3	69.9	90.2	102.1	106.2	100.4	94.7
Dobrich	32.7	44.0	56.6	88.2	109.1	104.5	100.0	93.3

Explanation: a – for 2007 current statistic; 1946-2001 – according to censuses

Source: Authors' calculations on the basis of National Statistical Institute data

A comparison with earlier periods shows that there is a greater concentration of population in the cities and middle-sized towns. Most of the cities took shape in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The low share of the urban population and the lack of large cities in the country until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century indicated a low urbanization level (Table 3). In 2007, 50.7% of Bulgaria's population was concentrated in 33 cities and middle-sized towns, i.e., 71.8% of the urban population. About 44.7% of the urban population live in the cities of over 100,000 inhabitants such as Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, Ruse, Stara Zagora, Pleven (of them 21.4% live in Sofia). This is one of the characteristic features of the urbanization process in Bulgaria observed in recent years.

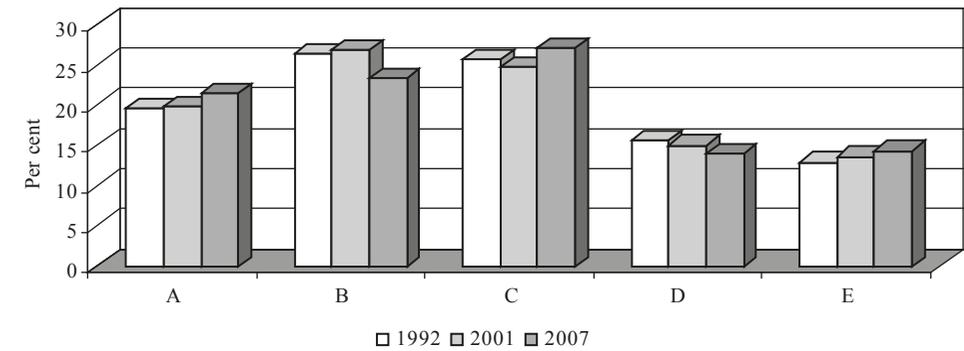


Fig. 5. Structure of urban settlements in Bulgaria by size (urban population = 100 %)

Explanation: A – very large cities; B – cities; C – middle-sized towns; D – small towns; E – very small towns

Source: Own calculation on the basis of data from National Statistical Institute

## URBAN ECONOMY AND URBAN TERRITORIAL STRUCTURE

The comparisons indicate that the processes of transformation in the Bulgarian urban settlements are similar to those in the other Central and East-European countries in transition. The only difference is that in Bulgaria they are somehow delayed because of the deep economic crisis in the 1990s, the retarded socio-economic reforms, the restricted direct foreign investments and other specific features of the Bulgarian transition. A very important aspect in the transformation of urban settlements and agglomeration, which took place in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is their changing economy and the impact it has on the social sphere. During this period Bulgaria like the other nations in transition is notable for some changes in the urban economic structure: the role of the private sector grew, the share of services rose (particularly in the cities), and the share of industry decreased. A comparison between the number of people employed in the industrial sector of Sofia and throughout the country (1989–1999) proves that the economy of the capital city is subject to a much higher rate of deindustrialization (about three times greater) (Ilieva, 2006). The deindustrialization together with the economic restructuring in compliance with the requirements of the market economy and with the development of the service sector are considered to be a common feature of the transformations in the capitals of some other countries in transition – Warsaw, Budapest, Prague

(Węclawowicz, 1998) and in smaller towns. “Political system transformation and free market competition caused on one hand de-industrialization, and on the other the expansion of the services section” (Hołowiecka, Szymańska, 2008: 64). Besides, substantial changes occur in the structure of industry. Most of the Bulgarian urban settlements are characterized by an economic structure in which the share of the agrarian sector is very small.

The growing share and importance of services, especially of those related to the market economy, is also a specific aspect of the changes in the urban economy over the past 20 years. In their economic structure the Bulgarian urban settlements do not differ much from the Central and East European ones. But in comparison with the West European urban settlements, it can be concluded that the services in the Bulgarian cities and towns are underdeveloped. A wider range of services is to be found in the urban settlements which are administrative centres. Recently, most of the investments have been directed to the service sector as the latter focuses the attention of foreign investors.

To some extent the functions and hierarchy of the Bulgarian towns were influenced by the administrative reform, owing to which the number of the administrative units of the highest rank (called districts) increased from 9 to 28 (1999). Thus, 18 urban settlements recovered their administrative and political functions, performed until 1987 (Table 4). Today, 27 cities and middle-sized towns function as district centres. Sofia city is an administrative centre of two districts – Sofia-capital and Sofia. This reform did not affect the lower-rank administrative units – more than 90 towns are municipal centres.

The socio-economic and demographic changes which took place in the period of transition did not disturb the urban settlements’ functions. The cities

and middle-sized towns preserved their poli-functional profile. The economic transformations and the changes in the structure of ownership and urban management affected the territorial distribution of new firms and enterprises.

The differences in housing conditions are a reliable indicator of urban areas’ polarization. The smaller living space per capita and the insufficient number of flats are a common feature of Sofia and the other Bulgarian cities. This is a consequence of the development trends in the cities until the end of the 1980s when the population grew faster than the number of lodgings, when there was centrally planned housing construction, when the citizens did not have enough freedom for private entrepreneurship, etc. Now the inability of most people to buy their own home because of their small incomes and high prices of flats and houses results in a “surplus” of real estate, i.e., the supply is greater than the demand. Bulgaria is remarkable for its very high proportion of private homes, which directly influences population mobility and hampers the social stratification of the urban spatial structure.

The present-day structure of the urban areas in Bulgaria is a result of their historical and contemporary development (the centuries-old experience and traditions in the settlement development, the forms of communication and some current trends). More drastic are the changes in the central parts of the urban settlements, and especially of the larger ones. The restoration of ownership of large urban real estate caused some specific changes in the use of the residential buildings. Changes occurred in the management of the industrial areas and the residential districts began to offer various services. As a consequence, the functions in the individual urban zones blended.

A new element in the urban spatial structure is the free trade zones (which emerged in the 1990s), the business-parks, the technological parks, etc. The changes in land use are characteristic of the areas in close proximity to urban settlements, especially to larger ones. Potential customers and investors are interested in the suburban zones because of the lower prices there. The spatial changes include the expansion of the cities along the main roads nearby. New residential districts, consisting of detached houses are built for wealthy people in the outskirts, although the process of suburbanization is slower compared, for example, to that in Poland. The relocation of housing construction, of storehouses, the trade and service network, production activities, and other establishments in the suburbs together with urban settlements’ territorial expansion will bridge the distance between them. Similar are the economic and spatial changes in the small towns but they are less apparent. The present-day structure of the urban areas can be acknowledged as a product of two “rival” tendencies – efficient land use and implementation of town-planning projects.

Table 4. Administrative-Political Functions of the Urban Settlements in Bulgaria

Year of census	Cities			Middle-sized towns					
	A	including:		50–100 thousand			30–50 thousand		
		B	C	A	including:		A	including:	
				B	C		B	C	
1985	10	10	0	16	13	3	8	4	4
1992	9	5	4	15	2	13	10	2	8
2001	9	9	0	12	10	2	12	8	4
2007 <sup>a</sup>	7	7	0	14	12	2	12	8	4

Explanation: A – total; B – with functions of district centre; C – without functions of district centre; a – current statistics

Source: Authors’ calculations on the basis of National Statistical Institute data

### SPATIAL RELATIONS BETWEEN URBAN SETTLEMENTS AND THEIR ADJACENT AREAS

The last two decades witnessed considerable changes in the spatial pattern of the complex systems links established between the settlements throughout their historical development as well as between the settlements, gravitating to the large cities or agglomerations. Significant changes could be observed in the scale and direction of labour, production and spatial links between the urban settlements and their adjacent areas.

The socio-economic processes shrank the economic, demographic and gravitational potential of the urban settlements. This weakened their role in the organization of the adjacent areas and lessened their importance as centres of different rank. In addition, the small, and particularly the very small towns changed their functions and economic links in those cases when the only large industrial enterprise in them was shut down. Other towns, which had a potential for the development of tourism, of various services and the food industry and which attracted direct foreign investments, could consolidate their settlement-forming basis and further develop their functions. There are such settlements along the Black Sea coast, in the mountain regions, near the border check-points, etc.

The uneven distribution of the cities and middle-sized towns (Fig. 6) is one of the causes of their different socio-economic development, of the disparities between the individual administrative districts and planning regions and mostly of the intraregional differences and of the appearance of the “centre-periphery” problem (*Operativna Programa...*, 2007). Only 5 of the total of 28 districts have more than one city or middle-sized town. The Operational Programme “Regional Development” (2007) emphasizes that the long distance from the city centres has favoured the formation of peripheral regions not only in the border areas but also in the inner margins of the Danube Plain, the Upper Thracian Lowland, etc.

The growing importance of the Bulgarian urban settlements and agglomerations in the regional development underlies the regional policy which has been implemented for the past two decades. The National Plan for Regional Development (1999) during the period 2000–2006 specifies levers, encouraging the better economic performance of the cities and middle-size towns’ municipalities. Now, after the change of the planning regions scheme (2008), each of the regions includes 4 or 5 districts with cities in them. These cities have different “weight” (Table 5). The economic and demographic potential of Sofia and the other cities turn them into major dynamic regional centres with highly diverse national and regional functions. Besides, the development of the middle-sized towns has to be promoted by an efficient policy (*Operativna Programa...*, 2007). Thirty six



Fig. 6. Territorial distribution of the urban settlements in Bulgaria

Explanation: 1 – very small town; 2 – small town; 3 – middle town; 4 – city; 5 – very large city

Source: Authors’ work

agglomerations can be delineated around the towns with a population of over 20,000 people (except for the town of Panagiuirshite, whose population is below this limit), which embrace about 1/3 of the municipalities in Bulgaria. It means that 75% of the country’s population lives in them.

Table 5. Domination of the largest urban settlements in regional settlement systems

Planning regions	A	B	C	D	E
		in thousand	%		
North-West	Pleven	112.6	12.0	1.83	Vraca
North Central	Ruse	156.8	17.0	2.36	Veliko Turnovo
North-East	Varna	314.0	31.6	3.36	Dobrich
South-East	Burgas	187.5	16.6	1.34	Stara Zagora
South Central	Plovdiv	345.2	22.3	4.43	Haskovo
South-West	Sofia	1,156.8	54.2	14.50	Pernik
BULGARIA	Sofia	1,156.8	21.4	3.35	Plovdiv

Explanation: A – largest city; B – population of the largest city (31.12.2007); C – share of the largest city’s population from region population; D – relation between population of the largest city and the second urban settlement; E – name of the second urban settlement

Source: Authors’ calculations on the basis of National Statistical Institute data

Bulgaria's integration with the European Union requires an integration of the Bulgarian settlement system with the European one. The geographical situation of the country on the Balkan Peninsula and in South-Eastern Europe is favourable and makes it an important trans-regional centre and a "bridge" between West and East Europe. This fact determines the unique location and significance of Sofia capital city as a political, administrative, social, transport and servicing centre on a national level as well its place in the European settlement network. Now the metropolitan agglomeration is assigned to the 4<sup>th</sup> category according to the MEGA scale while the urban zones of Plovdiv, Varna and Burgas are defined as European functional regions (*ESPON...*, 2004).

In the next decades the city of Sofia will continue to dominate over the other urban settlements in Bulgaria in terms of its demographic potential and its functions. It will still be the largest city in the country with a population exceeding several times the population of the remaining cities. During the next stage of development Sofia will be the only Bulgarian city which will partially meet the criteria for a metropolitan centre (Ilieva, Stefanova, Rukova, Petrova, 2000). The service functions will spatially extend, which in the mid-1990s as Grigorov maintains (1998) covered a large area (of over 100 km radial extension). If efforts are made and funds are earmarked for encouraging target-oriented and priority development of functions of regional and European importance, Sofia will have a better position amidst the European centres. Bulgaria as a member of the European Union will enable the further development of a number of Bulgarian urban settlements by promoting their regional and trans-border cooperation and the formation of Euro-zones.

## CONCLUSIONS

Today it becomes obvious that the implementation of a reasonable and objective policy, aimed at a better quality of life in the Bulgarian urban settlements, is badly needed. This goal can be achieved by drawing more investments, by innovations, modernization of production capacities, further development and improvement of the service sector (whose share will grow in the future in order to be in compliance with the European standards of services), introduction of high-technologies in the production sector (whose location takes into consideration the natural, ecological and socio-economic factors). The regional and trans-border cooperation will contribute a great deal in this respect.

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