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THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BASIS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TERRITORIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

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Abstract

Rural areas in Bulgaria have an untapped potential, both in the use and protection of available resources and their socio-economic development, and for generation of additional income. Their sustainable development would balance the economic, social, and environmental growth and significantly improve the rural quality of life. The aim of this study is to identify the theoretical and methodological foundations for the management of sustainable development of rural areas in Bulgaria. On the basis of the general scientific methods of induction, deduction and translation, content analysis, and critical analysis of documents and literature sources, the following are reasoned: 1) the theoretical foundations of sustainable development; 2) the strategic framework for sustainable development; 3) the problems in defining the rural territories; 4) the development of alternative tourism as a good practice for the diversification of the functional use of the territory. The article argues that the management of sustainable development is based on the collaboration between the authorities, local communities and businesses for the diversification in the functional use of the territory and the optimal utilization of available resources.

Keywords: sustainable development, rural areas, strategic framework, diversification

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, sustainable development has been the focus of global policies and strategies. The problems related to sustainable territorial development have been the subject of numerous studies in the specialized literature (Doichinova & Stoyanova, 2020), (Doitchinova & Stoyanova, 2014), (Kunchev I. , Dojchinova, Miteva, & Stanimirova, 2013), (Simeonov, Nikolova, Linkova, & Pavlov, 2012), (Nikolova, Linkova, & Ferhad, Problemi i perspektivi v ustojchivoto razvitie na agrobiznesa v Bulgaria, 2014), (Linkova M. , 2013), (Pavlov P. , 2013) and others. The adaptation of the organizational structures in agriculture to the dynamic changes of the market environment has been studied by Kanchev, Nikolova, Linkova, and others, emphasizing the coordination between the

subjects in the production and sale of agricultural products (Kunchev & Dojchinova, 2020) (Nikolova M. , 2013) (Linkova, Nikolova, & Lazarova, 2016) (Nikolova M., 2013) (Nenova, 2016) (Pavlov P., 2015). Structural changes and regional models of agriculture are the subjects of attention in Doichinova's, Stoyanova's publications, and others (Doichinova & Stoyanova, 2020) (Stanimirov & Stanimirova, 2014) (Nikolova M., Problems and opportunities for realization of Bulgarian organic production, 2019) (Nikolova M., 2020) (Doitchinova, Miteva, & Zaimova, 2019) (Nikolova M., 2017). Despite the growing interest in the analysis and assessment of the consequences and interactions between government and business organizations, it is necessary to conduct more in-depth research. It is imperative to develop a methodology for the effective implementation of the institutional and territorial approach in

managing the sustainable development of rural territories. This need grows even more in the conditions of transformation of economic systems and the research for sustainable models for their prosperity. The European Union policy focuses on the cohesion development of territories in seeking a synergistic effect from different public impacts. The territory of each country has a different functional use, but agriculture and forestry occupy a significant part of it. This predetermines the need to define the concept of "rural area" as an integral part of the region concerned (Petrova, 2019). Today, in the modern economy there are growing imbalances in the natural and social dimensions, which raises the question of *a new paradigm* in understanding the fundamental role of rural areas. This paradigm examines not only the relationship between urban and rural areas, but also draws attention to the possibilities for achieving sustainable economic growth and social policy in the pursuit of maintaining the vitality of rural areas in the long term. There is a need to outline the main guidelines for the implementation of *a new policy for rural management* and the implementation of a comprehensive regional policy to achieve the national priority for harmonious economic and socio-cultural spatial development. The institutional aspect reveals the possibilities of the government to achieve sustainability in the development of economy in the long term. To achieve sustainability in rural areas, the institutional framework must be aimed at integrating the agricultural business with other economic activities in a specific area, with the main goal of achieving *sustainable integrated management of the entire ecosystem*. This in itself requires and implies the unification of stakeholders through the development of appropriate strategies with multilateral benefits - food (including organic products), welfare, renewable energy, ecosystem services, biodiversity, sustainable tourism, and more. Ensuring sustainable development (Stojkov, 2010) (Todorov, 1998) is largely determined by

the targeted government policy and effective legislation, which ensure compliance with the established criteria and restrictions of other entities - public authorities, institutions, business, and local communities and their implementation in their planning practice. In unison with the Pan-European priorities, the National Strategy for Regional Development of the Republic of Bulgaria defines the strategic framework of the state policy for achieving balanced and sustainable development of the country's regions and overcoming regional inequalities in the context of the Pan-European policy for cohesion and smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, 2022). In this regard, the present study aims to identify the theoretical and methodological foundations in the management of sustainable development of rural areas in the Republic of Bulgaria. To achieve the research goal, the following tasks have been set: 1) researching the theoretical foundations of sustainable development; 2) outlining the strategic framework for sustainable development; 3) identification of the problems in defining the rural territories; 4) argumentation for the development of alternative tourism as a good practice for diversification in the functional use of the territory. The article argues that the management of sustainable development is based on the collaboration between the authorities, local communities, and businesses for diversification in the functional use of the territory and optimal use of available resources.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Territorial, institutional, evolutionary, systematic, process and adaptive approaches are applied to achieve the set goal of the study. In our opinion, the territorial approach should be used as the basic approach in the analysis of the sustainable development of rural territories. In contrast to the applied institutional approach in the management of rural areas, which excludes

from the scope of rural areas the towns with a population over 30,000 people, and for the new program period the limit is being discussed to become 15,000 people (AgriGate, 2022), the territorial approach allows analysis of the entire territory and optimization of ways for its functional use and sustainable development. Evolutionary, systematic and adaptive approaches are used to characterize the participation of public authorities and local communities in the formulation of sustainable development management policies. Based on the applied territorial approach, the following are used in the article: general scientific methods; empirical-theoretical - observation, measurement, description; logical-theoretical - comparison, generalization, analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, translation, analogy. Content analysis and critical analysis of strategic documents and literature sources are attached.

The analytical tools analysis and summarization of literature, tabular, graphical and schematic representation of characteristics and trends are used. The wide range of issues presupposes the formation of an interdisciplinary research team from the Department of Agrarian Economics, Department of Strategic Planning and Department of Tourism Economics and

Management at the D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics Svishtov.¹

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1) Strategic framework for sustainable rural development

With the adoption of the European Green Deal in December 2019, the community has united around the ambitious goal of ensuring a climate-neutral transition across the European Union (European Commission, 2019). In the coming months, a number of strategic and legislative documents are being worked on to move from policies, concepts and strategies to actions. In terms of the research objectives set, the focus of this publication is on sustainable rural development. Agriculture generates 10% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions, which for such a fundamental sector in the Union calls for a shift towards a greener, fairer and more transparent policy in this regard. At the moment (May 2022), such documents at European level are the European Green Deal, the Farm-to-Table Strategy, the Biodiversity Strategy, the Territorial Agenda 2030, the Soil Strategy and the Common Agricultural Policy, which are chronologically distributed in Figure 1.

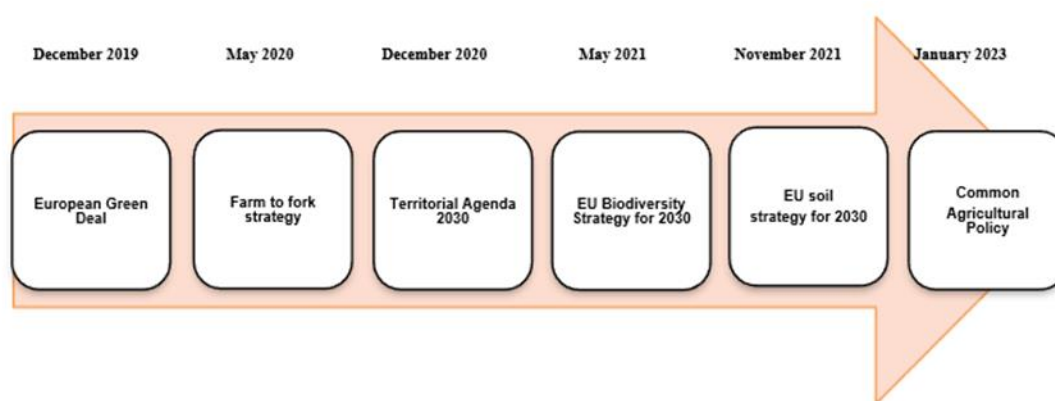


Figure 1. Strategic framework for sustainable rural development at European level – chronology.
Source: own distributions

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The Farm to Fork Strategy was presented at the same time as the EU's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 as part of the European Green Deal and is at the heart of the development of all other strategic plans. The main objectives of the Farm to Fork Strategy are aimed at building sustainable food chains that not only ensure the protection of nature, but also help ensure the production of healthy food and the creation of sustainable farms. (European Commission, 2020) The EU's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 sets targets for restoring ecosystems, enhancing protected areas and preventing the extinction of insects and pollinating animals. Although announced at the same time as the Farm to Fork Strategy, the EU Biodiversity Strategy was officially adopted one year later (in May 2021). (European Commission, 2021) It provides for specific impacts on agriculture in the direction of increasing organic farming, as well as reducing the use of hazardous pesticides and fertilizers. At the end of 2020, the Territorial Program 2030 was adopted (Territorial Agenda 2030 - A future for all places, 2020), in which the goals set in the European Green Pact are specified in order to ensure a future for all countries and to leave no one behind. TA2030 sets two priorities - A Just Europe, which is focused on achieving Balanced Europe, Functional Regions, Integration beyond Borders and A Green Europe, which is aimed at creating a Healthy Environment, Circular Economy and Sustainable Connections. Immediately before the announcement of TA2030, the Implementation of the Territorial Agenda 2030 - Examples for a territorial approach in policy design and delivery was proposed, where 52 pilot examples of implemented projects in the direction of achieving the set goals were presented. (Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR), 2020) It is noteworthy that 25% of the identified good practices are aimed at ensuring sustainable development of rural areas, which is an indicator of their role

and importance in the EU, but also of the progress in this regard. Based on the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, a Soil Strategy was adopted later in 2021, which will help achieve the objectives set in the European Green Deal, such as soil revitalization, prevention of desertification, reduction of nutrient losses of at least 50% as a result of more limited use of pesticides, fertilizers and antibiotics. (European Commission, 2021). Although the Common Agricultural Policy is the oldest policy in the EU, its reform has proved necessary to meet the environmental challenges facing the European Union. In 2016, preparations for the new CAP began at an informal meeting, but as the replacement of a policy must be carried out carefully and gradually, the current CAP rules have been extended (after their regulated expiry in December 2020) until the end of 2022. The new CAP is expected to be launched in January 2023 only when the new rules are approved. The new CAP sets out nine objectives, covering the environmental, economic and social aspects of the policy. In 2019, the new strategic European framework was launched, which should lead to the achievement of the objectives of the Green Deal, which in 2021 should be ensured by the development of national strategic plans by each member state of the union and to start simultaneously with the new CAP in 2023.

Already in 2020, Bulgaria has developed a preparatory document for the new CAP, which is entitled List of agricultural practices beneficial to the climate and the environment. (Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, 2020) It aims to acquaint the country with the goals of the new CAP, as well as to draw attention to the advantages and disadvantages of sustainable and innovative practices in agriculture in Bulgaria. At this time (May 2022), the strategic framework for the new CAP is not fully developed, despite the EU requirements.

2) Problems in defining the rural territories

In the theory and business practice, a

definition of a rural area and a planning area has been adopted, but there is still no correct definition of rural territories. The basis for the implementation of the state policy for regional development in Bulgaria is the classification of territorial units for statistical purposes (NUTS 1, 2 and 3), applied by the EUROSTAT. The EU regional development policy defines the scope of the regions and makes NUTS second-level regions the main object of planning. According to the national definition formulated for the purposes of the rural development policy, they cover 80% of the territory and almost 40% of the population of Bulgaria (Ministry of Agriculture). The main part of the land resources, the settlements, the socio-economic, infrastructural and other potentials of the country is concentrated in them. Later, a team of authors presents a Map of rural areas in Bulgaria, defined by Regulation No. 14/01.04.2003 of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, according to which 232 out of all 265 municipalities have the status of rural areas (Ivanov, et al., 2021, p. 87). The definition of a rural area is formulated very generally and in itself is not a sufficient condition for the successful implementation of measures addressing the problems in these areas. The study of rural areas with the help of a set of criteria and indicators (demographic, social, economic, infrastructural, etc.) and their grouping into types with similar characteristics will ensure the application of a differentiated approach in planning and implementing measures and incentives for the development of these areas. The implementation of different strategies for different types of rural areas according to their specific problems and needs is an important condition for achieving efficiency in achieving the goals and priorities of the implemented rural development policy. (Georgieva, 2018). It is argued that rural areas should be defined in terms of achieving a complex synergistic effect of public impacts and that **the guiding lines for differentiating rural**

areas should be based on activities/sectors and target groups/beneficiaries, and in rare cases on a territorial basis (but not only on the rural/urban line) (Mishev, Stoyanova, Aleksandrova, Harizanova, & Harizanova, 2020). According to (Petrova, 2019), **the concept of rural territories** includes another meaning that can be derived from the center-periphery problem. According to her, rural territory means a periphery that differs from the centers and axes of development, which are organized in huge cities and large cities during the process of urbanization. As a result, each center has its own periphery, which is characterized by its rural character. Our opinion is based on the understanding that the rural territory is part of the territory of each specific region in which agricultural production takes place and is inextricably maintained with the sustainable development of the whole territory. The process of development and management of rural territories is connected and aimed at retaining and/or increasing the number of local population and preserving rural identity, values, culture and way of life. This process is regional in nature and does not only mean the development of agriculture, but also of other economic activities in order to provide favorable conditions, income opportunities and quality of life, according to the specific needs and characteristics of each rural area. Sustainable development of rural territories is associated with compliance with specific principles, innovative approaches, investment in the use of available resources in a given area in the most optimal way. In this regard, the best solutions are achieved through the initiative of local communities themselves. They are the creators of innovative business ideas with the potential not only to generate profit, but also to solve environmental problems, which makes it possible to achieve a value-creating economy in rural development and a better standard of living for the local population. Green businesses can focus on various initiatives related to reducing greenhouse gas emissions,

environmental pollution - pesticides, etc., renewable energy sources, environmentally friendly tourism business, etc. More importantly, they can have different scales and also bring demographic benefits to a specific area on a regional scale, giving them opportunities to create jobs, reduce carbon emissions, and protect and restore natural capital. The economic orientation for rural territories development requires a creative

understanding of the essence of the desired business idea in-depth and the use of appropriate mechanisms to achieve long-term sustainable results. To this end, it is necessary to interact between state bodies and economic structures and to study the effectiveness of external influences on rural territories development and the degree of collaboration between stakeholders.

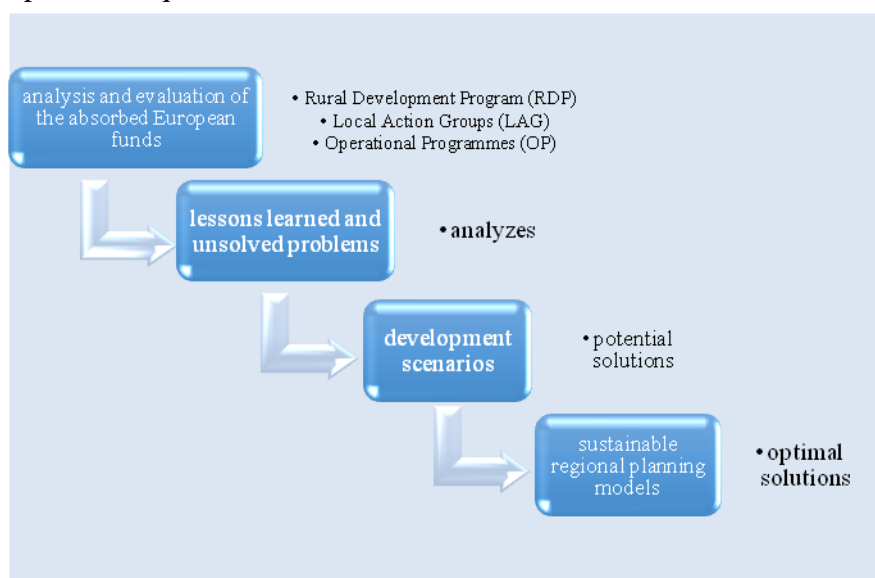


Figure 2. Steps for sustainable development and management of rural areas.

According to the authors (Islamgaleyev, Karibdzhanov, & Petrova, 2020) sustainability means the ability of a dynamic production system to function effectively in an ever-changing probabilistic competitive environment, despite the uncertainty of the production load. Sustainability is provided with a focus on the client; innovative business models; legality and legal support of the state; knowledge and technology; trust and increase the flow of customers. Competitiveness as one of the obligatory components of sustainability in the development and management of rural areas is undoubtedly an important priority not only for the European and Bulgarian economy, but also for the territorial development of specific regions. Because the lack of economic competitiveness in the territory means ecological and social instability and gradual

depopulation, depopulation of villages, which is already a fact for some regions in the Bulgarian reality. It is important to evaluate the approaches/measures used in the different planning areas, the initiative of the local communities, incl. local government, participation in projects, funds used, greening of tourism, etc. This requires researching for the effect of the absorption of European funds in the past programming period, analysis and assessment of problems and preparation for sustainable models for each region with its specific characteristics and potential for sustainable rural development. (See Figure 2)

3) The development of alternative tourism as a good practice for diversification in the functional use of the territory

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the European Community policy has focused on

the cohesive development of territories and on seeking a synergistic effect from different public impacts. The results of the joint efforts of stakeholders to ensure the sustainable development of the territory are already available (Butler & Klark, 1992) (Magliacani, 2003). Achieving economic, social and environmental sustainability in each region requires cooperation and collaboration between government institutions, NGOs, business, local authorities and communities to build optimal diversification of functional use of land, production and economic activities. For this purpose, a significant financial resource of public support is directed. The National Development Program "Bulgaria 2020" formulates the goals and priorities for the development of all sectors, emphasizing the achievement of sustainable integrated regional development and the use of local potential. (Council of Ministers, pp. 106, 114)

The National Strategy for Regional Development of the Republic of Bulgaria (Council of Ministers, 2012) sets as its main strategic goal the achievement of sustainable integrated regional development, based on the use of local potential and cohesion of the regions in economic, social and territorial aspects.

The territory of each country has a different functional use, but agriculture and forestry occupy a significant part of it. The Bulgarian Survey for Monitoring the Agricultural and Economic Conjuncture (BSMAEC) observes the changes taking place in the employment and functional use of the territory for almost 25 years. Functional use provides information about the socio-economic dimension of the observed territory in three groups: primary production - mining, agricultural production, forestry and fish farming; secondary production - industry (including construction) and energy production; services - national road network, trade, tourism, administration and local government, education

and research, culture, health and social centers, etc. More than half of Bulgaria's territory is used for agriculture, over a third for forestry and environmental protection and only about 15% for other activities, of which 8% are unused land and have no special purpose (See Figure 3)

The development of the rural economy is undoubtedly an important, specific aspect of the organization of the territory. Unlike in the past, today there is an evolutionary development in the understanding of urban and rural populations not only in Bulgaria but also in Europe. Urban and industrial society has been at the forefront for many years, and public policy has been detrimental to the development of many rural areas, and even more so of peripheral ones or those far from urban centers. Achieving comprehensive efficiency in the country's spatial planning requires the inclusion of measures and activities for rural development, promoting the diversification of their economy and improving the quality of life. That is why the creation of economic, housing and recreational value, maintaining the attractiveness of villages, making them an attractive place to live outside urban areas becomes a great challenge to the revival of villages. This is a difficult and time-consuming process that requires an in-depth analysis of the current situation and a search for mechanisms of higher efficiency. It is increasingly imperative to look for opportunities to "renovate" the rural reality by turning these areas into attractive places to live with all the comforts of the modern society. These opportunities are still not well exploited for one reason or another. There are the opportunities determined by the localization of a specific territory, the available natural resources, cultural and natural heritage, landscape diversity, etc. In the current economic conditions, there are more and more rural areas where, unlike in the past, in addition to agricultural activities, various sources of income are sought.

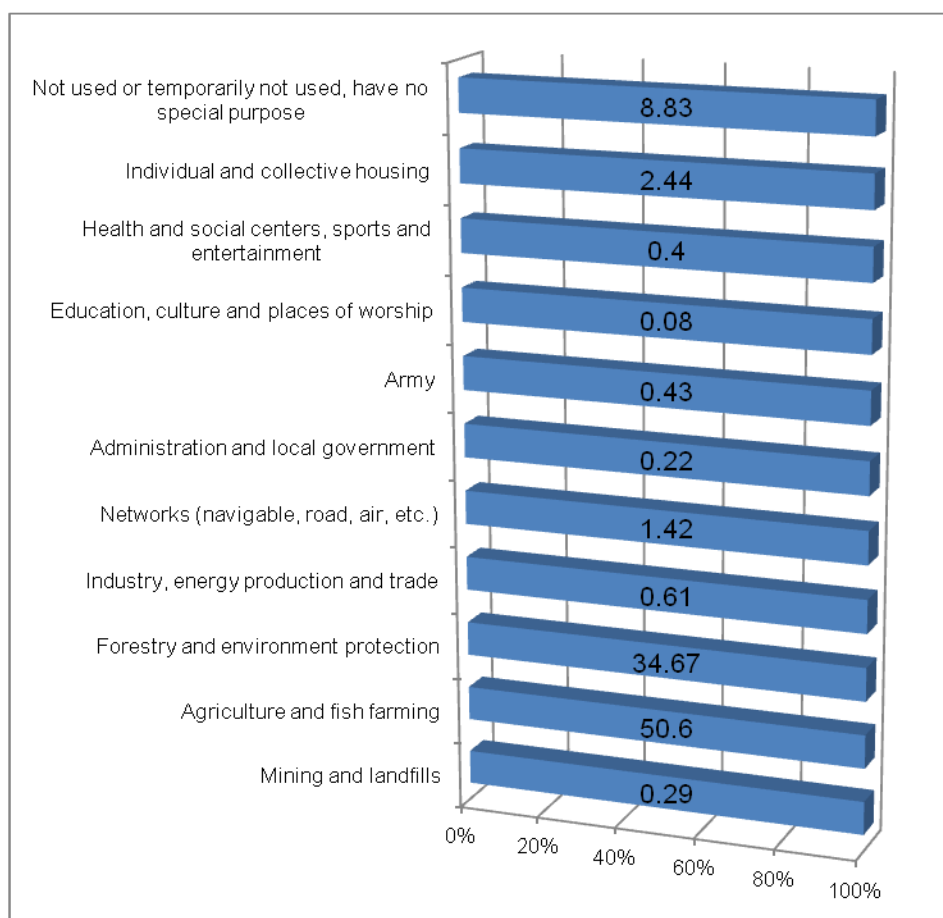


Figure 3. Functional land use in the period 2012-2021.

Source: BSMAEC: Employment and land use in 2021, own distributions

For example, rural tourism, small-scale innovative production, RES, etc. i.e. multifunctional development. Some of these areas with the potential for construction of unique tourist products attract more and more tourists, while others, even if there are such opportunities - lack initiative and interaction between government and business structures, as well as fail in the implementation of strategic approaches to sustainable development. In some of the districts in the southern regions of the country and near the larger urban centers, the development of organic farming, direct sales and diversification of agricultural activities are carried out faster. There are serious difficulties in the transition to the production of high-quality products and in organizing manufacturers to register and protect their products (Doitchinova & Stoyanova, 2020).

Increasing competition today, especially in the product line, turns diversification for business organizations into a mechanism, not only for risk prevention, but also for optimization of available production resources/factors. It is important that economic entities assess the market situation not only as a right moment for a profitable purchase or sale, but also as a choice of a certain consumer segment. Diversification of the activities in rural areas is an opportunity for the development of entrepreneurial initiatives and a successful combination of interests of all stakeholders, stimulating sustainable development of the territory/region through the development of alternative types of tourism, construction and development of infrastructure, diversification of agricultural production and activities and others. Of course, the specifics of each region or the remoteness of

the villages from the nearest town predetermines and includes the implementation of various measures in areas with potential for sustainable tourism: improving accessibility, environment, cultural landscape, promoting ecotourism, environmentally friendly production practices and others. The development of alternative types of tourism - ecological, rural, agricultural, hunting, wine, festival, cycling, wellness tourism, ornithological and others in rural territories is not only a tool for the growth and development of the rural economy, but also an effective option for achieving economic and social benefits for the local population (Raimondo Montecuccoli, 2022).

In two pilot regions in Latvia and Andalusia, packages of over 40 new tourist products have been developed for the development of sustainable tourism in Natura 2000 sites. (European Commission, 2019). In the Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in the Republic of Bulgaria (2014-2030) (Ministry of Economy and Energy, 2014, pp. 92-93) there are eight hunting areas identified with several regions suitable for the development of hunting tourism and identified wine tourism as one of the fastest growing alternative types of tourism, with a significant growth in the national tourism product in recent years. Given that sustainable tourism is practiced in non-urban areas with a distinctive appearance, landscape diversity, cultural characteristics, etc., the benefits of its development are multifaceted - economic, social, environmental, territorial, for the local population and business, and the tourists themselves.

CONCLUSION

This study defines the general framework for studying the theoretical and methodological foundations in the management of sustainable development of rural territories in the Republic of Bulgaria. On this basis, the

following generalizations and conclusions can be drawn:

First. Regardless of the ever-growing interest in sustainable development, it is necessary to carry out more in-depth scientific research on the entire territory and to develop a methodology for an effective implementation, in addition to the institutional and territorial approach in managing the sustainable development of rural territories as an essential part of every region. The basic territorial approach to research requires, when developing the methodology of future studies, to systematize and select indicators measuring economic, ecological and social sustainability by planning areas, taking into account the role of rural territories for the sustainable development of the entire territory.

Second. Since 2019, the European Union has been working hard on numerous strategic and legislative documents, through which to move from policies, concepts and strategies to actions to achieve sustainable development. Agriculture generates 10% of the greenhouse gas emissions in the EU, which requires a change to a greener, fairer and more transparent policy. Based on the chronology and analysis of the strategic framework for the sustainable development of rural territories at the European level, their key role is highlighted (25% of the identified good practices are aimed at ensuring the sustainable development of rural territories).

Third. A definition of a rural area and a planning area has been adopted in theory and economic practice, but still there is no correct definition of rural territories. The definition of a rural area is formulated too generally and, this, in itself, is not a sufficient condition for the successful implementation of measures aimed at the problems in these territories. Our opinion is based on the understanding that the rural territory is a part of the territory of each specific region in which agricultural production is carried out and the entire territory is inextricably linked to sustainable development.

Fourth. The territory of each country has

different functional uses (primary and secondary production and services), but agriculture and forestry occupy a significant part of it. The diversification of activities in rural territories is an opportunity for the development of entrepreneurial initiatives and a successful combination of the interests of all interested parties, stimulating the sustainable development of the specific territory/region through the development of alternative types of tourism, construction and development of infrastructure, diversification of agricultural production and activities and etc. More and more rural territories are developing alternative types of tourism, providing additional income and employment, which is a good practice for diversification in the functional use of the territory.

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