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IMPLEMENTATION OF EU REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN N. MACEDONIA: FOCUS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

In 2021 N. Macedonia adopted a Law on balanced regional development and a Strategy of balanced regional development 2021-2030. N. Macedonia is divided in 80 local units and city of Skopje, as a local government unit with a special status. Local units have a status of legal person and they have own directly elected institutions. Also the country is divided in 8 regional administrative planning regions, that do not have their direct elected institutions. These regions have adopted regional actions plans, that among the others included environment.

N. Macedonia following the EU practices in the last ten years has been making efforts to establish comprehensive regional policy with a goal to support and enhance regional development which will mitigate the big differences between different parts of the country. This approach also strives to mitigate migration from other regions to the Skopje capital region and migration outside of the country. One of important elements of regional approach is environment. Improvement the environmental conditions in all parts of the country will lead to the better quality of life of the population and it can contribute to the development of local and regional economy.

European Union is strongly dedicated to the enhancement of regional development, which is supported by EU regional structural and cohesion funds. N. Macedonia as a country with candidate status has an opportunity to use a part of these funds. One of the main aim of this manuscript is to research the potentials for stronger regional balanced development in the country and capacity building for using EU funds, especially in the area of environment.

.Key words: *regional development, environment, regional differences, potentials.*

The European Union is strongly dedicated to the regional development and considers that the EU development as a community and the development of the 27 members countries is closely related with the development of the regions in the countries.

Recognition of the importance of regional policy, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (EU) devotes 5 articles to economic, social and territorial cohesion (Articles 174–178).

The EU regional policy aims to mitigate the differences between the countries in the EU and differences between the regions in the member countries and inside of member countries.

The EU cohesion and regional policy strengthens economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU Member States and regions by supporting job creation, competitiveness, economic growth, improved quality of life and green and digital transition.

To reach these goals, the EU has set aside €392 billion for its economic, social and territorial cohesion, delivered through specific funds for the period 2021–2027. More than 30 % from this amount is intended to the environment and climatic issues and the area connected with the environmental and climate change.

The EU invests locally through its regional policy. Addressed to all EU regions and cities, it contains measures to boost economic growth and jobs and improve quality of life through strategic investment. Thanks to this active form of EU solidarity, people in less developed regions can seize the opportunities raised by the largest market in the world. The EU is community with a very high level of environmental standards.

The significant part of this policy is the environment and EU aims to mitigate differences between the regions in the EU and in the countries.

The EU cohesion and regional policy strengthens economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU Member States and regions by supporting job creation, competitiveness, economic growth, improved quality of life and green and digital transitions, improve the environment and combating the climate change threats. Special focus are on the green economy which creates new jobs and improve the environment conditions.

The most important EU financial resources for regional development are:

The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), to invest in the social and economic development of all EU regions and cities.

The Cohesion Fund (CF), to invest in environment and transport in the less prosperous EU countries.

The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), to support jobs and create a fair and socially inclusive society in EU countries.

The Just Transition Fund (JTF) to support the regions most affected by the transition towards climate neutrality.

The most important part of EU regulation in the sphere of regional development is Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 on the European Regional Development Fund and on the Cohesion Fund.

This Regulation lays down rules for the tasks, specific objectives, thematic concentration of and scope of support from the Cohesion Fund and the European Regional Development Fund with regard to the Investment for jobs and growth goal and the European territorial cooperation goal. The specific objectives are: a more competitive and smarter Europe by promoting innovative and smart economic transformation and regional ICT connectivity, (a greener, low-carbon transitioning towards a net zero carbon economy and resilient Europe by promoting clean and fair energy transition, green and blue investment, the circular economy, climate change mitigation and adaptation, risk prevention and management, and sustainable urban mobility, a more connected Europe by enhancing mobility, a more social and inclusive Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights, and a Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories and local initiatives.

The Cohesion Fund provides support for the poorer regions of the EU with a view to promoting growth, employment and sustainable development. Member States with a gross national income (GNI) per inhabitant below 90 % of the EU average are eligible for funding from the Cohesion Fund. The ceiling for the Cohesion Fund's contribution to public expenditure in the Member States is set at 85 %.

The Cohesion Fund provides support to Member States with a gross national income (GNI) per capita below 90% EU-27 average to strengthen the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the EU.

The Cohesion Fund supports investments in the field of environment and trans-European networks in the area of transport infrastructure (TEN-T).

For the 2021-2027 period, the Cohesion Fund concerns Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Croatia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

European Regional Development Fund, aims to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union by correcting imbalances between its regions. In 2021-2027 it will enable investments in a smarter, greener, more connected and more social Europe that is closer to its citizens.

N. Macedonia is divided in 80 local units(municipalities) and capital city of Skopje, as a local government unit with a special status. Municipalities and city of Skopje have a status of legal person and they have own directly elected institutions.

Also, the country is divided in 8 regional administrative planning regions, that do not have their direct elected institutions. The regions are consist on the municipalities that exist on the territory of the region. These regions have adopted regional actions plans, that among the others included environment. The regions has own centers for development and council that conduct the regional policy. This council consist of the mayors from municipalities in the region.

N. Macedonia following the EU practices in the last ten years has been making efforts to establish comprehensive regional policy with a goal to support and enhance regional development which will mitigate the big differences between different parts of the country. This approach also strives to mitigate migration from other regions to the Skopje capital region and migration outside of the country. One of the important elements of regional approach is environment. Improvement the environmental conditions in all parts of the country will lead to the better quality of life of the population and it can contribute to the development of local and regional economy.

The administrative regions have centers for development of the region, which are supported by the administrations of the region. The Council for development of the Skopje region is formed for each region separately.

The managing body of the centers are Council for development of region, which members are the mayors of the units of local self – government within the region.

Council is chaired by the President, who is elected among the mayors, for a period of 2 years. The main function of the planning region is to strengthen the capacity of the municipalities and cooperation between the local units in the framework of the region and stimulate the economic development on local and regional level and improve quality of life of the citizens including environmental conditions.

In 2021 N. Macedonia adopted Law on Regional balanced Development ((Official J. of NRM 24/21). Law define regional development as a process of planning the regional development aimed toward to reduce disparities within the planning regions and among the planning regions, in the directions of achievement balanced sustainable regional development. The Law define planning region as functional statistic territorial unit for statistic according to nomenclature for territorial units for statistic NTES 3.

The goal is to improve balanced development both in urban and rural areas and to provide 1% of Gross domestic products(GDP) for balanced regional development.

In 2021 the country adopted The Strategy for regional development 2021- 2030, which aims towards to more balanced regional development between the regions and in the frame the regions and to mitigate differences between the regions.

The Strategy is aligned with the basic strategical goals of the European Union regional policy.

The Strategy determine a need for stronger financial resources for balanced development , from the state budgets, from the EU pre - accessions funds and other sources.

But the Strategy has a number of weaknesses. At the first the Strategy is based on the census from 2023, according to which the total population in the country was 2.076. 694. The census from the 2021 shows decreasing of the population in the country and in all regions with exception of Skopje region.

According to the census form 2021 the total population in N. Macedonia is 1.836. 713 citizens which is a significant difference from the previous census. These besides the other issues affect also environmental issues. Taking account that the Strategy is mainly based on the previous census it produces a some incredibility of the Strategy and shown on the lacks of the Strategy.

The Strategy has a part which is dedicated to the environment. The main elements from the Strategy regarding to the environmental matters are: climate change, waste management, nature and water management.

The Strategy has not define the clear and precise measures and activities for improving the regional policies in the environment. Only in the sector of waste management are define some more clear and realistic sustainable measures.

T.1. Amount of collected and generated municipal waste in 2022, by regions in N. Macedonia in 2022 , by regions, in tones.

Region and total	Collected municipal waste	Generated municipal waste
N. Macedonia, total	605 638	856 766
Vardar Region	60 284	87 944
East Region	90 108	107 431
South West Region	56 499	183 521
South East Region	57 717	71 724
Pelagonia Region	76 646	90 758
Polog Region	57 672	84 423
North East Region	34 423	56 562
Skopje Region	172 288	174 404

According to these statistical data of the State Statistic Office, the highest amount of collected municipal waste was registered in the Skopje Region - 172 288 tones or 28.4% of the total collected amount in the N. Macedonia. Of the total amount of collected municipal waste, 506 257 tones or 84% were collected from households, and the remaining 16% from legal and natural persons (commercial waste). By waste type, the highest amount of collected waste is mixed municipal waste, 494 693 tones or 81.7%, and the lowest amount is rubber waste, 1 487 tones or 0.2% of the total amount of collected waste.

Unfortunately, most of the collected municipal waste (99.8%) is disposed of at the landfills.

In the country exist 55 municipal landfills and only one landfill in municipality Gevgelia fulfill some EU standards.

Eventhough , according to the Waste Management Strategy from 2010 and National Waste Management Plan from 2006 it was designed to built 8 regional landfills according to EU standards (one for each region), where will be exist plants for waste processing, recycling, and recovering, where only waste that can be processed will be disposed at the landfills, for now there is not built any landfill.

The reasons for these situations are different, problems with the location for the landfill and resistance of local population related with the location, lack of financial resource, lack of political will on the state and local level, etc.

New revised approach for regional landfills projects 5 regional landfills: One common landfill for North and North East Region, One common landfill for South West and Pelagonia region one common landfill for South East and Vardar region. Other two landfills should be built one for Skopje Region and one for Polog Region. For the Landfill which will be cover North and North East region the fusibility study is prepared and the significant part of financial reassures are provided, so the contraction work should start in 2024 and the regional landfill should start operating by the end of 2025.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

N. Macedonia has to undertake more efforts for improving the situations with big differences in the development of the regions.

The more balanced regional development will lead toward the mitigate the economic conditions and mitigate the migration from the regions and inside the regions.

Environmental sustainable regional development will produce better quality of life and should stimulate environmentally friendly economy and open a green jobs.

In that direction there is a need for much stronger support the regional environmentally friendly projects that will improve the conditions of living in a significant part of the country and higher economic development. The investments must be in the water supplying, sustainable agriculture, production the energy from renewable sources, sustainable waste management and environmentally friendly industry and economy.