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**STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS FOR POVERTY REDUCTION IN THE
NORTHWEST PLANNING REGION**

AUTHOR'S ABSTRACT

of a dissertation for the award of educational and scientific degree “Doctor”

Field of higher education: 3. “Social, legal and economic sciences”

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The dissertation was discussed and approved for defence pursuant to the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria by a scientific jury of the Department of Strategic Planning at the Faculty of Management and Marketing at D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics – Svishtov. The dissertation has 204 pages. Structurally, it consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and a summary, a list of references – a total of 187 sources, of which: 71 in Cyrillic script and 116 in Latin script. It includes 46 tables, 32 figures and 7 appendices.

The defence of the doctoral dissertation will be held on 26th August 2024 at 1 p.m. in the Rectorate Conference Hall of D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics – Svishtov. All materials related to the defence are available at the Department of Doctoral Studies and Academic Development at D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics – Svishtov.

I. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISSERTATION

1. Relevance of the dissertation topic

Poverty is a global problem that affects millions of people and its solution requires a multifaceted approach. It is not only limited to the lack of financial resources, but also includes the lack of vital resources to meet basic human needs for a decent life.

A number of interdisciplinary studies seek to understand the root causes of poverty, its manifestations and the most effective ways to alleviate it (Oxford Bibliographie, 2024).

Poverty research is essential to addressing one of the greatest challenges of our time – the search for solutions to poverty and social exclusion. This challenge is a problem of global importance, based on the fact that the first of the 17 Global Goals for Sustainable Development until 2030, adopted in 2015 by the United Nations, is End poverty in all its forms everywhere.

The multidimensional poverty debate (Valentin Beck, 2020) is associated with low education, high crime rate, poor health status and low living standards. Although poverty research has a long history, the evolution in the collection and accumulation of knowledge about the poor, and the distinction between poverty research and poverty knowledge, is a theme that continues to be relevant over the past decade (O'Connor, 2017). The study of the genesis of poverty and the fight against it by the international community is ongoing (Pietras-Eichberger, 2021)

One-size-fits-all strategic solutions to poverty reduction do not exist. Each region needs to develop its own specific measures to overcome poverty and social exclusion. The choice of priorities is determined by the characteristics of the area – demographic, economic, social, structural, political and cultural and the available resources.

Research on the topic of poverty is important for understanding socioeconomic disparities and for formulating public policies interventions to improve the lives of poverty-stricken populations.

Multidimensional poverty encompasses factors such as low education, high crime rate, poor health and low living standards. Various approaches to define and measure poverty have been developed.

The historical, economic and political causes of poverty in specific regions should be studied so as to find effective mechanisms to overcome it.

2. Aim and objectives of the dissertation

The aim of the dissertation is to study the implementation measures and perspectives of strategic solutions for poverty reduction and social inclusion in the Northwest Planning Region (NWPR).

The defined research objectives to achieve the aim are:

- 1) Clarifying the nature of poverty;
- 2) Analyzing the socio-economic processes in the Northwest Planning Region that are related to poverty;
- 3) Researching the interaction of stakeholders in the fight against poverty;
- 4) Developing a conceptual model for the implementation of strategic solutions to reduce poverty, also applicable in the Northwest planning region;
- 5) Developing a system of indicators for evaluating the efficiency (the degree of achieving the aims) of the strategic solutions to combat poverty and social exclusion in order to form a basis for developing a software solution.

3. Object and subject of study

The object of study is poverty in the Northwest Planning Region.

The subject of study are the strategic solutions for poverty reduction in the Northwest Planning Region.

4. Research thesis statement

The *research thesis statement* is that poverty in the Northwest Planning Region can be overcome with clear, purposeful and innovative strategic solutions, expressed in: a regional principle when developing the strategic national projects and directing investments; a regional principle of taxation; empowerment and partnerships with citizens and businesses for efficient and effective participation in joint activities; legislative changes for transforming the economy towards a socially responsible one; a holistic approach and digitalization in strategizing and implementing anti-poverty policies.

5. Research methodology

The following methods are used in the dissertation: synthesis, analogy, desk research, comparative analysis, questionnaire survey, statistical methods of analysis.

The empirical research is based on an electronic questionnaire. The questionnaire is created in Google Forms. Excel and SPSS are used to process the results. The survey data are analyzed using statistical methods.

6. Restrictive Conditions

The dissertation examines socio-economic development as a factor in the level of poverty in the Northwest Planning Region (NWPR). Although the main focus is on the NWPR, comparisons are made with the national level as well as with the policies and decisions adopted at the European Union level in order to provide a better rationale for the solutions examined.

The time frames of the study are reduced to the period from 2016 to 2022 and to 2023 where possible. This time limit is important because a significant part of the statistical information related to poverty from 2016 is determined using a new methodology. The strategic solutions that are examined in the dissertation are within the planning periods after Bulgaria's accession to the European Union – 2007-2013, 2014-2020 and 2021-2027, which allows for the analysis of long-term trends and the impact of policies on the region.

7. Dissemination

The results of the conducted research have been shared with the academic community through the publication of two articles and one study in peer-reviewed scientific journals. Four papers were presented at scientific conferences with international participation. One article was published in English in Ukraine

II. STRUCTURE AND CONTENTS OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation has 204 pages. Structurally, it consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and a summary, and a list of references – a total of 187 sources, of which: 71 in Cyrillic script and 116 in Latin script. The main text includes 46 tables, 32 figures and 7 appendices. The structure of the dissertation is as follows:

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE. OVERCOMING POVERTY – DOMINANTS

- 1.1. Poverty as a socio-economic phenomenon
- 1.2. National and global dimensions of poverty
- 1.3. State intervention to tackle poverty
- 1.4. Good global practices for overcoming poverty

CHAPTER TWO. POVERTY IN THE NORTHWEST PLANNING REGION

- 2.1. Key features of the Northwest Planning Region
- 2.2. Territorial aspect of poverty in Bulgaria and the Northwest Planning Region – national and district level
- 2.3. Socio-economic potential of the Northwest Planning Region for overcoming poverty by district

CHAPTER THREE. POLICY AND BUSINESS SOLUTIONS FOR POVERTY REDUCTION IN THE NORTHWEST PLANNING REGION

- 3.1. Coverage of poverty in the Regional Development Plan of the Northwest Planning Region for the period 2007–2013
- 3.2. Anti-poverty stakeholder survey
- 3.3. Poverty reduction and social inclusion measures in the Northwest Planning Region

3.4. Anti-poverty strategic solution model

CONCLUSION

LIST OF REFERENCES

APPENDICES

III. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DISSERTATION

The **introduction** presents the research framework of the dissertation – the relevance and significance of the problem, as well as the degree of development of the topic. It defines the main elements of scientific research: the object, the subject and the research thesis statement; the main aim of the dissertation, the research objectives, the methodology and the restrictive conditions of the research are formulated.

CHAPTER ONE. OVERCOMING POVERTY – DOMINANTS analyses poverty as a socio-economic phenomenon (*paragraph 1.1 Poverty as a socio-economic phenomenon*), since it is a complex and multifaceted problem that affects society worldwide. The reasons that necessitate the study of poverty as a phenomenon are commented on: multidimensional nature, relative and absolute measurements, normative frameworks, structural factors, global challenge, policy relevance.

The topic of poverty is closely related to the main statements of a number of international and national documents presented in: Millennium Development Goals until 2015 (Declaration signed by 189 countries at the beginning of the 21st century); Basic Principles of the UN Global Compact; UN Global Goals for Sustainable Development by 2030; Millennium Goals for Bulgaria; Green Book of the European Commission “Towards adequate sustainable and secure European pension systems” (EC, 2019); European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion, established in 2010; “Europe 2020”; Assessment of the social dimension of the Europe 2020 strategy; European Disability Strategy 2010–2020: Renewing a Barrier-Free Europe (European Commission, 2019); Decision No. 1098/2008/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2008 on the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010); EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 (European

Commission, 2019); National strategy for promoting gender equality between women and men for the period 2021–2030 (Council of Ministers, 2020); European Pact for Gender Equality 2011-2020; Leipzig Charter for Sustainable European Cities (EU, 2007); European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EU, 2013); Thematic objectives approved by DCM 328/25.04.2012; National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Promotion of Social Inclusion 2030 (2024).

Publications that examine the issues related to poverty from 1996 to 2022 are examined. Scenarios with applicability in Bulgaria are indicated. Thematic areas in which international and Bulgarian poverty researchers work and the methodological approaches used are presented. Innovative solutions proposed in the publications are summarized.

An analysis of the Comparative Research Programme on Poverty (Zed Books in association with CROP, 2006) is made, summarizing the causes, consequences and solutions to address poverty.

The most important points of the strategic national documents for dealing with poverty are summarized.

Paragraph 1.2 National and global dimensions of poverty analyzes and tabulates the main indicators of poverty in Bulgaria in the period 2016–2023 through the methods of statistical analysis: Poverty line – average monthly expenses; Persons below the poverty line; Relative share of the poor; Relative share of the poor before receiving social transfers; Relative share of the poor before receiving social transfers with pensions included; Ratio between the incomes of the poorest and richest 20% of the population; Gini coefficient. A ranking of the European countries according to the level of the risk of falling into poverty in 2017 and 2022 is presented. Various population groupings are indicated for the purpose of poverty research, including impact on the risk of poverty and modern tools for its measurement (PSE indicator, Guio Index, EU-SILC, Multidimensional Poverty Index, Human Poverty Index). Indicators that help to understand the depth and breadth of poverty are also presented and summarized

(Degree of risk of poverty; Degree of permanent poverty; Degree of severe material deprivation; Very low work intensity).

Poverty is among the most serious challenges facing the modern global economy. It is a complex phenomenon against the background of an increasingly developed and egalitarian world. Poverty, regardless of its geographical location, has its global impact, which, apart from the economic aspect, is often expressed through criminal acts and threatens world peace and prosperity. In its global dimensions, poverty requires that different stakeholders work together, and overcoming any adverse phenomenon begins with its investigation. This led to the development of the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (Univ Oxford, 2017) in 2010, which examines poverty among 5.4 billion people. This index shows how many and where the poor are, what the type of poverty is, how it is represented in the different social groups and ethnicities.

Poverty, like wealth, is a reflection of the lack of balancing mechanisms for a fair distribution of goods. Poverty is a phenomenon, it is a lack of political will and an expression of human and political weakness, a mirror image of the power of the economically strong over the weak. A stable socio-economic environment also implies a strong state that acts as a regulator and creates conditions for a balanced and decent coexistence of both the poor and the rich strata of the population.

Various research questions on poverty and stakeholders at different levels, from global to local, are analyzed and presented, which can help in the development of anti-poverty strategies and policies, taking into account the specific needs and roles of the different stakeholders at all levels.

Paragraph 1.3 State intervention to tackle poverty from **CHAPTER ONE** summarizes and presents the attitudes of EU citizens regarding poverty according to data from Special Eurobarometer 355: Poverty and Social Exclusion, which could serve as a starting point for meeting the needs and expectations of the public on this issue.

A number of national planning documents that outline the intervention of the Bulgarian state in the fight against poverty and social exclusion are analyzed, such as the National Strategy for Fight against Poverty, which was developed on the basis of and in accordance with previous strategic documents related to poverty. With the new National Strategy for Fight against Poverty, it is expected that efforts will be concentrated and interventions will have a more sustainable impact to address the problem.

Interrelationships between policies, focus and actions that can be successfully implemented in the Northwest Planning Region are presented, namely: Labour market policies; Policies in the field of education; Policies in the field of social assistance and pension affairs; Regional policies.

The role of the state in the fight against poverty is highlighted, not only as a provider of various forms of assistance and support, as a conductor of policies, but also as a regulator in the relationships between all stakeholders and especially between the two socio-economic extremes expressed in wealth and extreme poverty. Another essential role of the state administration is undoubtedly in the study and multiplication of good practices in the fight against poverty which are to be used at the local level.

Paragraph 1.4 Good global practices for overcoming poverty presents good global practices in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. These are: creation of safe and decent jobs; implementing programs for the economic empowerment of disadvantaged groups; ensuring decent working conditions for all employees throughout the supply chain; creating and marketing goods and services that satisfy and improve the lives of vulnerable groups; partner international commitment, etc.

CHAPTER TWO. POVERTY IN THE NORTHWEST PLANNING REGION examines key features of the Northwest Planning Region. Particular attention is paid to the characteristics of the population. Economic potential is explored as a factor in overcoming poverty.

Paragraph 2.1 Territorial aspect of poverty in Bulgaria and the Northwest Planning Region – national and district level, outlines the main characteristics of the Northwest Planning Region, including its administrative structure, through the analysis of statistical data, normative acts and strategic documents (Table 1).

Table 1

Administrative structure of the Northwest planning region in 2022

Administrative structure	Municipalities	Town councils	Settlements	Towns	Villages
District of Vidin	11	59	140	7	133
District of Vratsa	10	104	123	8	115
District of Lovech	8	80	110	8	102
District of Montana	11	67	130	8	122
District of Pleven	11	105	123	14	109
Northwest planning region (NWPR)	45	423	626	45	581
Bulgaria	265	3159	5256	257	4999
Share of the NWPR structures to those of Bulgaria (%)	19.2	17.51	16.98	13.39	11.2

Compiled based on the author's data and calculations from the specialized electronic publication "Regions, Districts and Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria" for 2022 of NSI (ROO.zip, III-22.xls))

The structure of the territory of the NWPR in terms of the permanent use of the landed property by district as of 2022 as a potential for economic development is examined.

The aspects in which the population of the NWPR and the districts included in it are studied are: total number; population by sex and age; by place of residence; forecast until 2050; ethnic origin; labor force, employed, unemployed and persons outside the labor force; educational structure.

The educational structure of the population is presented and analyzed, and it was found that in the NWPR and its adjacent districts the share of the population with higher education is lower than in the country, and the share of the population with secondary education is higher. Lovech and Vratsa districts have lower values for the population with primary and lower education.

The economic activity of the population in 2017 and 2023 is represented by the following indicators: the economic activity rate; employment rate and

unemployment rate (Table 2). Despite the fact that the values of the three coefficients in the districts of the NWPR show a positive trend, the lag compared to the national average values is significant. These values are one of the indicators of an impossibly fast solution to poverty problems.

Table 2
Economic activity, employment and unemployment rates (aged 15-64) in 2017 and 2023
(%)

	Economic activity rate		Employment rate		Unemployment rate	
	2017	2023	2017	2023	2017	2023
Vidin	69.6	69.7	56.2	60.7	19.3	12.9
Vratsa	62.3	65.7	55.3	57.3	11.2	12.8
Lovech	61.3	65.8	55.8	63.7	8.9	(3.1)
Montana	63.4	64.7	57.3	57.5	9.7	11.1
Pleven	69.2	69.3	61.7	66.5	10.7	4.1
Northwest Planning Region	65.4	67.1	57.9	61.7	11.4	8.0
Bulgaria total	71.3	73.9	66.9	70.7	6.2	4.4

The employment of the population of the NWPR by economic sectors in 2022 is studied. The highest share of employed people is in the sectors: Processing industry (26.2%), Commerce and repair for cars and motorcycles (14.3%), Government (6.6%) Agriculture, forestry and fisheries (5.5%).

The economic potential of NWPR is characterized by the non-financial enterprises. They are presented according to the number of employees, net sales revenue; tangible fixed assets, profitability and operating profitability. Operating enterprises are shown through the Top 10 ranking of the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce (BEIS rating) by number of employees as of 31.12.2023 and by total sales revenue for 2022.

Attention is paid to the results of economic activity in the NWPR based on an analysis of the indicators Gross Domestic Product and Gross Added Value by economic sector.

Achieving dynamic growth is the main challenge facing the Bulgarian regions. Despite some positive trends and a limited increase in certain indicators of economic growth, the outcome for the Northwest Planning Region compared to other Tier 2 regions can be assessed as stagnation and economic decline.

Paragraph 2.2 Territorial image of poverty in Bulgaria and the Northwest Planning Region - national and district level of **CHAPTER TWO** is devoted to an analysis of the territorial image of poverty in Bulgaria and the Northwest Planning Region. The main highlights of the analysis are:

1. Differences in poverty indicators in the districts and planning regions in Bulgaria in 2022;
2. Indicators of poverty and social inclusion by district (open method of coordination) survey year 2022 (2021 reference year of income) and 2023 (2022 reference year of income);
3. Average total income per household by source in 2022 and by statistical region;
4. Average gross monthly wages and salaries of employed persons under labour contract by economic activities (a21) and statistical regions and districts (2017–2022);
5. Monetary household expenditure by group in 2021 in Bulgaria and NWPR;
6. Top 10 of the population in Bulgaria by relative share of the poor by district level (NUTS3);

A ranking of the Top 10 districts in Bulgaria by relative share of the poor is presented (Table 3).

According to the ranking by the sum of the ranks, the districts are ranked as follows: Lovech (with the worst grades), Vidin, Montana, Vratsa and Pleven. The Northwest Planning Region most often falls into this ranking, with the exception of four of the groups – adults (65+ years old), workers, population with higher education and population by gender. This is further evidence of the need for a special focus on the NWPR as an object of impact in the fight against poverty.

Table 3

Top 10 of the population in Bulgaria by relative share of the poor by district (NUTS3)

Place	Total	Children (0-14 years old)	Children (0-17 years old)	Adults(15-64 years old)	Adults (18-64 years old)	Adults (65+ years old)	Working	Primary and lower education	Secondary education	Higher education	Men	Women
1	38.7 Sliven	56.5 Sliven	55.1 Sliven	34.5 Sliven	33.8 Sliven	43.2 Smolyan	17.2 Targovishte	56.0 Sliven	26.8 Vidin	11.3 Vidin	37.2 Sliven	40.1 Sliven
2	36.1 Targovishte	46.2 Lovech	44.9 Lovech	33.1 Targovishte	32.7 Targovishte	39.6 Targovishte	16.2 Razgrad	53.2 Lovech	26.1 Lovech	10.7 Lovech	34.3 Targovishte	37.8 Targovishte
3	34.2 Lovech	46.0 Targovishte	44.6 Targovishte	30.6 Vidin	30.3 Vidin	38.5 Lovech	15.9 Vidin	49.7 Targovishte	25.0 Vratsa	9.9 Vratsa	32.1 Lovech	36.3 Vidin
4	34.1 Vidin	45.7 Vidin	44.1 Vidin	30.2 Lovech	29.8 Lovech	38.0 Kardzhali	15.2 Lovech	49.7 Pazardzhik	24.8 Targovishte	9.8 Targovishte	31.7 Vidin	36.3 Lovech
5	33.1 Pazardzhik	44.8 Pazardzhik	43.6 Pazardzhik	30.2 Lovech	29.7 Pazardzhik	37.3 Vidin	14.1 Vratsa	49.6 Vidin	23.1 Pleven	9.7 Smolyan	31.5 Pazardzhik	34.6 Pazardzhik
6	31.6 Montana	44.4 Montana	42.8 Montana	28.0 Montana	28.7 Razgrad	37.1 Sliven	13.9 Kardzhali	48.2 V. Tarnovo	24.3 V. Tarnovo	9.6 Kyustendil	29.8 Razgrad	33.5 Montana
7	31.5 Razgrad	43.4 Yambol	41.1 Yambol	27.7 Vratsa	27.6 Montana	35.8 Razgrad	13.9 Pazardzhik	48.1 Montana	22.3 Gabrovo	9.4 Gabrovo	29.7 Montana	33.1 Razgrad
8	31.1 Vratsa	41.6 Pleven	40.4 Pleven	27.7 Shumen	27.4 Vratsa	35.4 Vratsa	13.7 Montana	47.3 Pleven	22.3 Smolyan	9.3 V. Tarnovo	29.3 Vratsa	32.8 Vratsa
9	30.3 Shumen	40.9 Vratsa	39.6 Vratsa	27.2 Kardzhali	27.3 Shumen	35.2 Kyustendil	13.5 Sliven	46.9 Vratsa	22.1 Montana	9.1 Pleven	28.7 Kardzhali	31.9 Pleven
10	30.2 Pleven	40.1 Shumen	39.1 Shumen	26.8 Pleven	26.4 Pleven	35.1 Pazardzhik	13.2 V. Tarnovo	45.1 Shumen	21.6 Razgrad	8.8 Pazardzhik	28.7 Shumen	31.7 Shumen
11						35.0 V. Tarnovo	13.2 Smolyan			8.8 Pernik	28.4 Pleven	
12						34.7 Montana	13.1 Shumen			8.5 Sliven		
13						33.5 Pleven	12.7 Pleven			8.3 Montana		

The maximum values of the poverty indicators are marked.

Source HCl https://www.nsi.bg/publications/powmap_nuts#.xlsx

According to the ranking by the sum of the ranks, the districts are ranked as follows: Lovech (with the worst grades), Vidin, Montana, Vratsa and Pleven. The northwestern planning region most often falls into this ranking, with the exception of four of the groups – adults (65+ years old), workers, population with higher education and population by gender. This is further evidence of the need for a special focus on the NWPP as an object of impact in the fight against poverty.

The presented information indicates the significant regional differences in the profile of poverty and the socio-economic conditions in Bulgaria, which are related to it. There is a clear need for targeted policies to reduce poverty and social exclusion and more meaningful support for vulnerable groups in the fight against poverty. Significant intra-regional differences also stand out, which suggest targeted actions according to the specifics and needs of the specific territory in the region itself for development at the level of a municipality or even a settlement.

Paragraph 2.3 Socio-economic potential of the Northwest Planning Region for overcoming poverty by district of **CHAPTER 2** consistently interprets indicators related to income and standard of living; labour market; investment and business; tax rates; administrative capacity. Demographic characteristics of the regions in the NWPR are examined in detail. Education, health care, the state of the environment, as well as indicators related to living conditions are analyzed.

At the end of the chapter, the following conclusions and summaries are formulated:

- There are significant regional differences in economic conditions and social welfare, which require targeted efforts to improve economic conditions and social services.

- Need to develop policies to improve the labour market and educational structure, especially in the districts with lower indicators.

- The differences in economic activity and investment potential between districts highlight the importance of developing regional economic development strategies.

- The differences in infrastructure between districts require planning for future investments and improvements.

- Population aging and migration trends are demographic challenges with significant impact on social and economic conditions.

- There are differences in the indicators characterizing the education system in the NWPR. This highlights the need for improved investment in the education system.

- The disparities in the health system require improvements in services, especially in districts with lower life expectancy and high infant mortality.

- Intra-regional differences in the efficiency of the judicial system and the system of the Ministry of Internal Affairs require strategic measures for improvement.

- The differences in waste management and the use of RES are significant. Opportunities exist for better management.

- The differences in cultural activity and tourism between districts show the importance of these sectors for the economy and social life.

- The constructed combined road-and-railway bridge Vidin – Kalafat and the geographical location of the region provide opportunities for development through cross-border and territorial cooperation.

CHAPTER THREE. POLICY AND BUSINESS SOLUTIONS FOR POVERTY REDUCTION IN THE NORTHWEST PLANNING REGION examines key issues related to the impact of poverty in the Regional Development Plan 2007-2013, poverty reduction and social inclusion measures in the Northwest Planning Region and the effectiveness of strategic solutions. A major emphasis in this part of the dissertation is the empirical study of stakeholders in

the fight against poverty. Within this chapter, a conceptual model for the strategic solution to combat poverty is also developed.

Within *paragraph 3.1. Coverage of poverty in the Regional Development Plan of the Northwest Planning Region for the period 2007-2013* the study aims to indicate the place of poverty in the Regional Development Plan of the Northwest Planning Region for the period 2007-2013. It is established in accordance with national laws and strategies, covering the districts of Vidin, Vratsa, Lovech and Pleven. The vision for the development of the region has been changed towards achieving dynamic economic growth, high employment, improved quality of life and a clean environment. The plan addresses poverty and social exclusion by identifying four types of areas for targeted impact: industrial decline areas, backward border areas, backward rural areas and backward mountain areas, all with characteristics of poverty and social exclusion.

Information for the period 2007-2015 is analyzed and summarized for contracts for the implementation of projects under operational programs with completed payments by the end of 2015. Their total number is 1055 with 575 beneficiaries. Pleven district has the most fulfilled contracts and beneficiaries, and Lovech district has the least. The largest number of contracts for the implementation of projects and the number of beneficiaries are under the OP “Human Resources Development”, followed by the OP “Regional Development”.

Paragraph 3.2 Anti-poverty stakeholder survey of **CHAPTER THREE** is devoted to the empirical study of anti-poverty stakeholders. The methodology of the empirical study is presented in paragraph 3.2.1.

The research focuses on:

1. Establishing the causes and consequences of poverty in the Northwest Planning Region;
2. The role of institutions and organizations in the fight against poverty;
3. The tools used and their role in reducing poverty;

4. Deriving the three most important measures under the following priorities from the National Strategy for Fight Against Poverty, which are applicable to the Northwest planning region: Priority 1: Ensuring opportunities for employment and increasing income from labour through active inclusion in the labour market; Priority 2: Ensuring equal access to quality preschool and school education; Priority 3: Ensuring equal and effective access to quality healthcare; Priority 4: Eliminating the institutional model of care and developing intersectoral services for social inclusion; Priority 5: Ensuring sustainability and adequacy of social payments; Priority 6: Improving capacity and interaction in the field of education, health care, employment and social services in the realization of common goals for social inclusion; Priority 7: Ensuring an accessible environment – physical, institutional and informational; Priority 8: Improving the housing conditions of vulnerable groups and supporting the homeless; Priority 9: Working in partnership to overcome poverty and social exclusion and their consequences.

5. Generating information on the capacity and opportunities of the state/local government or organizations to implement the most important measures of the National Strategy for fight against Poverty in the Northwest Planning Region;

6. Evaluating the poverty alleviation potential of the programs from the previous program period (2014–2020);

7. Summary assessment of the potential of the Programs of the new programming period (2021–2027) and the Strategic Plan for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas to address poverty in the Northwest Planning Region.

Each respondent, based on their position and competence, was given the opportunity to state their view on poverty and the fight against it. The survey was conducted in the period from March to May 2024 on the territory of the Northwest Planning Region using the online survey method. The survey card was sent to

pre-specified electronic addresses according to the list of respondents (ministries, departments, state agencies, district and municipal administrations from the NWPR and the directorates and departments assigned to them: “Social support”, “Social protection”, “Child protection”, complexes for social services, multi-specialty hospitals, business representatives, non-governmental organizations, etc.). The author’s aspiration is to obtain a wide range of opinions from specialists having direct observations and an opportunity to evaluate the existing strategic documents and solutions for poverty reduction in the Northwest Planning Region. Answers were collected using the respondent method, and therefore the survey does not claim to be representative, but it does carry significant information.

During the research period, 99 questionnaires were filled out, the information from which is summarized and analyzed in paragraph 3.2.2.

The lack of a comprehensive national policy for dealing with poverty is indicated as the most important cause of poverty in the Northwestern Planning Region. The lack of political will to tackle poverty comes second, followed by poor infrastructure and corruption and the shadow economy. The lack of financial discipline is indicated as the least important reason.

The respondents put the role of the state in the fight against poverty in the first place, followed by local authorities, business and the non-governmental sector. They consider the role of citizens in the fight against poverty to be the least important (namely, they are namely the bearers of poverty), which belittles personal responsibility.

Targeted subsidies are recognized as the most important tool in the fight against poverty in the Northwest Planning Region.

The respondents indicate the following as measures for ensuring the sustainability and adequacy of social payments: support for families with children; providing material support for disadvantaged individuals and families; increasing the size of pensions in order to ensure their adequacy.

The provision of employment for vulnerable groups on the labour market, the protection of labour rights, the improvement of working conditions and the reduction of undeclared employment, and the provision of general and specialised trainings for upskilling and acquiring new ones, as well as for acquiring key competences for vulnerable groups are the most important measures to provide employment opportunities and increase labour incomes through active inclusion in the labour market, applicable in the NWPR in the fight against poverty.

The programs with the greatest recognition are OP “Human Resources Development” and the Rural Development Program for the period 2014-2020, and of the programs launched for the period 2021-2027, with open funding in 2023, the Human Resources Development Program is indicated.

For the respondents, the fight against poverty is: A challenge; A challenge to any society that defines itself as social; A fundamental problem, the solution of which lies in an adequate state policy; A very difficult problem to overcome on a global scale; The fight against poverty and social exclusion must be one of the important objectives of the social policy of every country; A huge challenge that we have to address with joint efforts; Public and social responsibility; State policy; Cause; Will; Effort; A major priority for the work of state and local authorities.

In order to improve strategic planning and meet the challenges in the NWPR, it is essential to take the following steps:

First, to identify and clearly describe the problems of the region in the strategic documents, focusing on poverty and its consequences.

Second, the creation of a meso-scenario plan with measures to prevent depopulation and economic devaluation of the territory.

Third, to include a certified planner in any team dealing with the development of strategic documents.

Fourth, conducting an impartial and expert evaluation of the implementation of the strategic documents and analysis of the reasons for the failure to achieve the goals are crucial.

Paragraph 3.3 Measures for poverty reduction and social inclusion in the Northwest planning region of **CHAPTER THREE** analyzes and summarizes information from strategic documents of the NWPR related to measures for poverty reduction and social inclusion. The evolution of the strategic objectives of the European Structural and Investment Funds for Bulgaria from the period 2014–2020 to the current period 2021–2027 is analyzed, and the most important differences are presented.

The vision, strategic goals, priorities, measures and activities related to the fight against poverty and social exclusion in the Development Strategies of the Northwest Planning Region for the period 2014–2020 are summarized.

The results of executed contracts under Operational programs with a direct impact on the fight against poverty and social exclusion, financed with funds from the European Structural and Investment Funds (2014–2020), as well as those with an indirect impact, are presented.

The third program period 2021–2027 is represented by the programs financed by European funds under shared management (2021–2027) from 2023 and the fields covered in the implemented projects. The amount of funding is indicated.

Bulgaria's choice to use ESIF and the thematic objectives is related to the application of three types of criteria: *development needs*, (normative) *commitments* as a member state and *development potential*.

Paragraph 3.4 Anti-poverty strategic solution model defines a conceptual model for the implementation of strategic solutions and examines its applicability for reducing poverty in the Northwest Planning Region. In the literature and various strategic documents, suggestions for observations of anti-poverty strategies are found, but there is no suggestion of the factor influence to measure

the effectiveness of the anti-poverty strategic solution, which is why the suggestion below is made.

A proposal for an equation to serve as a basis for developing a system for measuring the factor impact of a strategic solution to combat poverty:

$$\mathbf{T = W - D,}$$

Where:

T is Efficiency of the strategic solution to combat poverty;

W is Political Will;

D e Disasters.

W has a maximum weight of **55**, and an exemplary maximum weight of the individual factors is proposed. It can be changed depending on the views of the decision makers. Valuing the factors makes it possible to make a comparative analysis of individual interventions in order to choose the most appropriate one according to the conditions in a given region. The proposed prerequisites and their weights are as follows:

Weight 1. The strategic solution includes more than two partners, representatives of the interested parties, in the planned implementation;

Weight 2. The strategic solution covers disadvantaged people;

Weight 3. The duration of implementation of the strategic solution is up to 1 year from its actual launch;

Weight 4. The strategic solution covers people from minority groups;

Weight 5. The strategic solution covers children;

Weight 6. The strategic solution is sustainable for more than 3 years after the end of its implementation;

Weight 7. The strategic solution is related to providing jobs for more than 10% of the population who have fallen into poverty, depending on the territorial scope;

Weight 8. The strategic solution has a regional scope;

Weight 9. The strategic solution has a national scope;

Weight 10. The strategic solution covers all persons in poverty.

D has a maximum weight of **165**, calculated as the sum of the weights of the proposed elements, which are relevant to the NWPR and can be adapted according to the specifics of the particular region.

The proposed prerequisites and their weight are as follows:

Weight 15. Destructive earthquake;

Weight 15. Destructive flood (deluge);

Weight 20. Pandemic;

Weight 20. Economic crisis;

Weight 45. War;

Weight 50. Nuclear crisis.

It is assumed that at **$T > \text{or} = 20$** and **$D = 0$** , the **Effectiveness of the Strategic solution W has a positive weight** and the expected influence has a beneficial effect, which would be provable after researching real strategic solutions. All this allows for a preliminary prediction of the importance and success rate of strategic solutions related to the fight against poverty, as well as a basic orientation for the authors of policies (strategic solutions) for the fight against poverty.

In order to visualize the applicability of the formula as a basis for the development of a “preliminary assessment of strategic solutions to combat poverty”, several scenarios have been tested, namely for: 1) Increasing wages and minimum payments in the budget sector and providing financial support of the poor, especially in the NWPR, where income disparities are significant; and 2) Upgrading the educational and skill status of the poor: Upgrading the educational and skill status of the poor in the NWPR to increase their chances of employment and economic participation.

The formula proposed by the author aims to unlock discussions in the field and subsequent development and refinement of the Model in partnership with all interested parties, namely: public authorities, NGOs, business, the public

and especially the poor strata of society as potential end users of strategic solutions to cope with poverty. On the basis of the proposal to measure the success of the Strategic solution, a **model of “Success of Strategic Solutions to Fight Poverty in the NWPR”** was developed.

THE CONCLUSION reflects the accomplishment of the research tasks and the achievement of the objective of the dissertation, which proves the research thesis, namely that *poverty in the Northwest Planning Region can be overcome with clear, targeted and innovative strategic solutions expressed in: regional principle of taxation; regional principle in developing strategic national projects and directing investments; empowerment and partnerships with citizens and businesses for efficient and effective participation in joint activities; legislative changes in the direction of transforming the economy into a socially responsible one; holistic approach and digitalization in the strategizing and implementation of anti-poverty policies.*

One-size-fits-all strategic solutions to poverty reduction do not exist. Each region needs to develop its own specific measures to overcome poverty and social exclusion. The choice of priorities is determined by the characteristics of the area (economic, social, political, structural, demographic, cultural) and available resources.

1. The great differences in the cartography of poverty in Bulgaria and the highlighting of the Northwest region as the poorest region in the country and the EU require the active intervention of the state in the implementation of policies in the field of poverty and social inclusion.

Generalizing the problems related to poverty at the regional level most often leads to ineffective solutions and results.

2. The developed and implemented programs and measures, consistent with the horizontal principles: “Equality between the sexes and prevention of discrimination”; “Partnership and empowerment” and “Sustainable development” can be effective in the fight against poverty if resources in the form

of direct targeted subsidies are directed to the poorest and underdeveloped regions and vulnerable groups.

3. Uniting the efforts of the main entities in the fight against poverty – state, civil society and business.

IV. INFORMATION ON THE SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE DISSERTATION

The theoretical and practical significance of the work and its main contributions are expressed in the following:

1. The thematic scientific publications and good practices in the context of global and national goals and dimensions of poverty are researched and analyzed, on the basis of which main conceptual subcategories are derived to be observed in the development and implementation of policies in the fight against poverty at the regional level.

2. A detailed analysis of secondary data is carried out on the status and trends of main poverty indicators in the NWPR. Significant regional differences in the economic conditions and social well-being of the region are brought out in several aspects, with which untapped potentials of the region are outlined and on this basis the policies to overcome poverty from 2007 until now in the NWPR are critically analyzed.

3. Empirical research is conducted on the opinion of respondents from the NWPR regarding the causes, consequences of poverty, the institutions that have a role in the fight against poverty, and the possible instruments for the implementation of policies. On this basis, the necessity of preparing a meso-scenario plan in the region and a meta-plan approach when preparing the strategic documents at the regional level are derived.

4. An equation is proposed to serve as a basis for developing a system for measuring the factor influence of the Strategic solution for Combating Poverty.

5. A model of “Success of the Strategic solutions for Combating Poverty in the NWPR” has been developed, which will be used in the visualization of the decisions made.

6. A system of indicators for assessing the success of the Strategic Solutions for Combating Poverty is proposed, following the example of the Northwest Planning Region.

V. LIST OF PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION

PAPERS:

1. Nikolova, Tanya. Strategic issues after the end of the first European semester regarding poverty in the Northwest Planning Region // European practices and national reflections in planning: International jubilee scientific-practical conference on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the Department of Strategic Planning. Svishtov, April 24-25, 2015, pp. 453-460. ISBN: 978-954-23-1080-8

2. Marcheva, A., Nikolova, Tanya. Dimensions of poverty in the Northwest planning region/ Tanya Nikolova, Anastasia Marcheva // Economic well-being through knowledge sharing: International scientific conference. T. I. Svishtov, November 9-10, 2016, pp. 422-427, ISBN 978-954-23-1185-0, AI Tsenov <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/226110739.pdf>

3. Nikolova, T. M. Potential development of domestic tourism in the Northwestern region of Bulgaria as an opportunity to reduce poverty // Contemporary trends in tourism development and hospitality industries: Materials of the First International Scientific and Practical Conference. Donetsk : Donetsk National University named after M. I. Tugan-Baranovskogo, April 26–28, 2017, pp. 179-182. ISBN-978-5-905277-88-7

ARTICLES:

1. Nikolova, T. State intervention in the regulation of poverty in the Northwest planning region [Electronic resource] / T. Nikolova // Bulletin of the Priazovsky State Technical University, 2016, Vip. 31(2), pp. 86-98. Series: Economic Sciences. Access mode: [http://nbuv.gov.ua/UJRN/VPDTU_ek_2016_31\(2\)__13](http://nbuv.gov.ua/UJRN/VPDTU_ek_2016_31(2)__13), ISSN 225-6725, Index Copernicus

2. **Nikolova, Tanya.** Analysis of the results of implemented programs and projects for poverty reduction and social inclusion in the Northwest Planning Region. // Scientific Research Annual Almanac of doctoral students. Studies and articles. Svishtov: AI Tsenov, 2017, Volume X, Book 13, pp. 609-627. ISSN 1313-6542.

STUDIES:

1. **Inclusive** business – a tool for poverty reduction and social inclusion. / **Tanya Nikolova** et al. // Scientific Research Almanac D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics, Svishtov, 2017, 24, part II, pp. 66-94. ISSN 1312-3815 Co-authors: Anastasiya Marcheva, Jadwiga Chiburiene, Miglena Vachevska. RePEC, CEEOL, Google Scholar

VI. DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY OF THE DISSERTATION

In connection with the procedure for obtaining the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in the scientific specialty “Planning”, I declare that:

1. The results and contributions in the dissertation on the topic: “Strategic solutions for poverty reduction in the Northwest Planning Region” are original and are not borrowed from research and publications in which the author has no involvement.

2. The information presented by the author in the form of copies of documents and publications, personally compiled references, etc. corresponds to objective truth.

3. Scientific results obtained, described and/or published by other authors are duly and extensively cited in the bibliography.

05.06.2024

Declarant:

(Tanya Nikolova, Ph.D. Student)