

Overcoming Socio-Economic Inequality as a Condition for Sustainable and Balanced Spatial Development of the Region*



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Abstract. As the spatial structure of the economy is undergoing transformation, we observe the aggravation of a number of problems that hinder sustainable development of constituent entities of the Russian Federation; and a special place among them belongs to significant intraregional differences in socio-economic parameters. Overcoming spatial disparities should become an imperative for the development of the country and its regions in the long term. This confirms the need for further scientific understanding of the complex of issues related to the improvement of regulation of spatial development of regions; this determines the goal of our paper. In the course of the study conducted on the materials of the Vologda Oblast, we have found out that the majority of municipalities have an asymmetrical type of development

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with increasing differences between the areas of concentration of economic activity near major cities in the region and the rest of the territory; this indicates the process of compression of space. The paper proposes an approach to state regulation of spatial development of the region, based on its representation, on the one hand, as a complex system, and on the other hand, as a socio-economic area. Scientific novelty of the approach lies in the fact that it is based on principles and methods that help promote the development and self-development of municipalities, take into account their features and patterns of functioning, and orient municipalities toward solving strategic problems. The study is based on methods such as system analysis and system synthesis, generalization, comparison, and comparative analysis. The results of the study can be used in the activities of regional authorities and local government. Theoretical generalizations contained in the article can be used as materials for scientific discussion.

Key words: uneven socio-economic development, spatial development, region, municipalities, Vologda Oblast.

Introduction

Uneven socio-economic development, which is observed at all levels – from the global to the municipal – is one of the most important issues in the world economy. Against the background of the rapid spread of digital technologies that are radically changing economic, social and political systems, the aggravating inequality, according to K. Schwab, is not just an economic phenomenon, but a system-wide challenge [1]. The complexity and scale of the problem has spurred wide discussions among scientists, government, business representatives, etc.

The Russian Federation is the largest country in the world, occupying 1/8 of the land area; it is characterized by significant differences in all spheres of life; this predetermines the heterogeneity of its socio-economic space. Over the last quarter of a century, Russian regions have faced considerable difficulties on the way toward establishing a market economy: the system transformation of the 1990s led to fundamental changes in interregional economic ties and relations; the weakening of the role of the state led to a sharp decline in social investment; the crises of the 2000s aggravated socio-economic problems; all this made territorial disparities even more pronounced.

Taking into account the huge size of the country, its demographic and national heterogeneity, sharp natural and climatic contrasts, we can assume that the further growth of socio-economic inequality will threaten Russia's national security.

Today, Russia is facing the following task set by President V.V. Putin: to join the five largest economies of the world and to achieve changes not only quantitative, but also qualitative indicators. This, in turn, necessitates finding a solution to the issues of spatial development of the country and its regions. An important step in this direction was made when the Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2025 was developed and adopted. This document focuses on the problems associated with the high level of interregional socio-economic inequality and significant intraregional differences that are growing due to the following trends: transformation of the spatial organization of the economy, infrastructural constraints and the increasing impact of scientific and technological progress¹. Overcoming spatial

¹ Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2025. Available at: <http://static.government.ru/media/files/UVA1qUtT08o60RktoOXI22JjAe7irNxc.pdf>

disparities has become an imperative for the development of the country and its regions in the long term. This confirms the relevance of studying regional socio-economic inequality in order to determine ways to reduce it and ensure equal conditions and relatively equal opportunities for the development of territories and achievement of decent social standards and quality of life throughout Russia.

It is important to note that Russian regions have accumulated extensive experience in regulating spatial development; they use a wide range of methods and tools, and implement state programs aimed at enhancing the development of regions and municipalities. However, the results of the work of authorities at all levels do not give reason to believe that a threat to the integrity of economic space has been overcome; differences in important socio-economic indicators between regions and especially within regions remains significant. This makes it necessary to provide scientific substantiation for the directions and methods to regulate spatial development of the region, which is the goal of this article. To achieve this goal, we address the following tasks: to determine trends in the socio-economic development of municipalities in the region and to identify factors that cause the deepening of territorial inequality; to propose an approach to state regulation of spatial development of the region, taking into account the laws of development of the region as a complex system and as a socio-economic space; to substantiate directions for regulation of spatial development of the region aimed at reducing inter-municipal socio-economic inequalities and promote the effective use of the potential of municipalities; to propose spatial development regulation mechanism that combines the methods and their support systems that take into account the extent of the differences of the municipalities according to socio-economic parameters.

Theoretical approaches to the study of spatial development of the region

In the scientific literature, the understanding of spatial development as being uneven was progressing gradually, which was due to the development of productive forces and the emergence of new factors affecting the stratification of economic space [2–4, etc.]. In the second half of the 20th century, against the background of intensifying internationalization of economic life and integration, the interest in the problem under consideration increased, which was reflected in a wide discussion related to scientific research carried out by representatives of the theory of cumulative development [5–8]. It is important to note that such works prove that innovation plays a special role in spatial development. In the late 20th – early 21st century, great interest was aroused by the work of Paul Krugman, which laid out the foundations for the theory of new economic geography [9; 10] and substantiated the fact that the uneven development is largely determined by second nature causes created by human activity. In domestic science the study of problems of socio-economic inequality covers a wide range of tasks, but the focus is on issues related to the study of spatial manifestations of uneven development, elaboration of tools to analyze and assess socio-economic development disparities, and the formation of mechanisms to regulate and study methods aimed at reducing unevenness and overcoming its negative implications [11–15, etc.].

Taking into account the importance of the problem of uneven socio-economic development and its complex nature, we embark on the study of theoretical approaches to the interpretation of the category “region”. According to the analysis of scientific works, we see that the consideration of the region from the positions of systemic and spatial approaches allows us to focus on those of its properties,

which largely determine its uneven development [3; 16–18]. This determined our views that the region, on the one hand, is a complex system with the properties of openness, nonequilibrium and nonlinearity, and on the other hand, a part of space with its inherent properties (density, location, mutual arrangement of space objects, structurality, hierarchy, etc.).

In the course of the theoretical study we have found that in the process of analyzing uneven socio-economic development different concepts are used (“differentiation”, “asymmetry”, “polarization”, “imbalance” etc.); this complicates the understanding of the processes under consideration and the reasons these differences occur, and also leads to the inconsistency of approaches to territorial development regulation. In our previously published article [19] based on the scientific works of V.N. Leksin, A.N. Shvetsov, B.L. Lavrovskii, A.V. Perov and V.A. Popov we prove that socio-economic development inequality, which is an objective property of any territory, goes through three stages: differentiation – asymmetry – polarization; and their change is due to a combination of objective and subjective factors that reinforce the differences in this direction.

In order to identify the causes of socio-economic inequality and to substantiate methods for its reduction, it is necessary to assess the extent of unevenness in the development of territories. The analysis of scientific works has shown that there are various methods that differ in approaches, and in techniques for evaluation and interpretation of results [20–22, etc.]; but, despite their certain advantages, most of them are aimed at solving local problems. Thus we find it necessary to develop a methodological approach to assessing socio-economic development inequality; such an approach should provide a solution

to the following set of tasks: determining the extent of inter-municipal differences and the corresponding stage of inequality; identifying the main factors, the influence on which can help the authorities and management to turn the socio-economic development of territories in the direction of reducing inequality. The main provisions of this approach are given in [23], and the updated results of its approbation will be presented below.

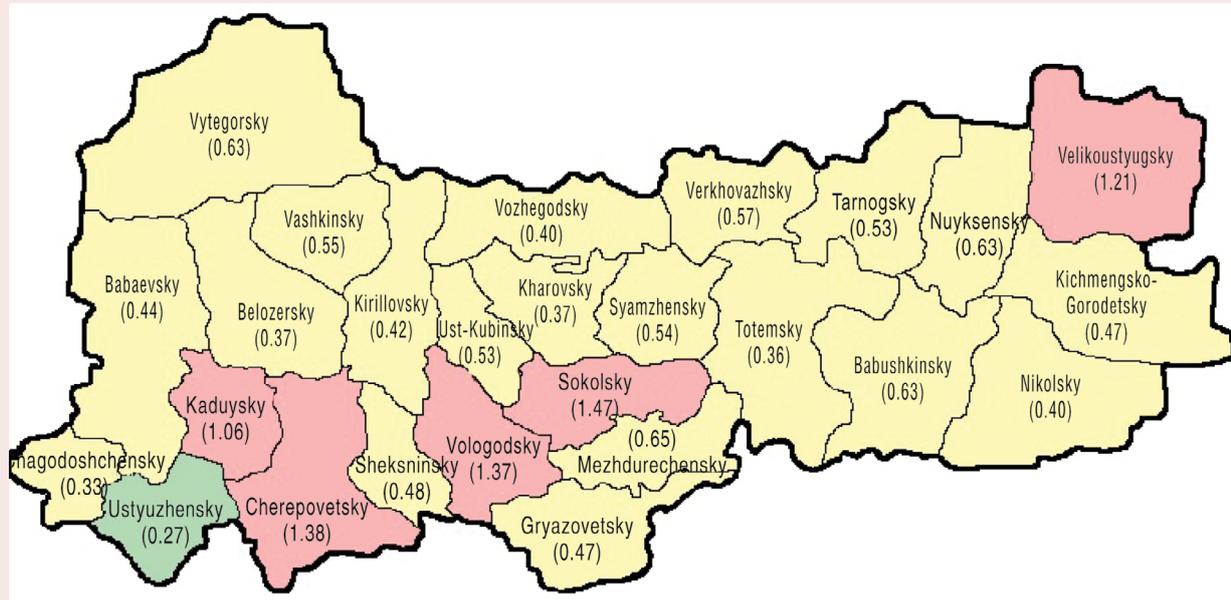
When developing the conceptual scheme for regulating socio-economic development in order to reduce its unevenness, we relied on a number of provisions of the system and synergetic methodology, which combines the principles of consistency and development. The reliability of the conclusions is ensured by the use of general scientific and special methods of economic research.

Research results; analysis and explanation of the results

The works published by scientists from Vologda Research Center of RAS emphasize that the Vologda Oblast has a pronounced intraregional differentiation [24; 25], due to which the stratification of socio-economic space of the territory is going on. This is reflected in the increasing concentration of economic activity and population in two urban districts (Vologda and Cherepovets) and adjacent districts (Vologodsky, Cherepovetsky, Sheksninsky, Sokolsky and Gryazovetsky). However, we find practical interest in studying territorial inequality of municipalities in the region in order to establish their stage of unevenness (differentiation, asymmetry, polarization) and its changes to identify the severity of the problem for the region as a whole and for individual municipalities.

Based on the provisions of the above-mentioned methodological approach [23], we assessed the unevenness of socio-economic

Figure 1. Uneven socio-economic development of the Vologda Oblast (the value of deviation of the level of socio-economic development of municipal districts from the optimal level is given in brackets)



a) 2000



b) 2017

— differentiation stage — asymmetry stage — polarization stage

Note. The optimal value of the indicator is understood as its average value [Baranov V.S. Comparative estimates of socio-economic dynamics of the subjects of the North of the Russian Federation. *Sever i rynek*, 2014, no. 2 (39), pp. 2-6; Evchenko A.V., Stolbov A.G. *Managing Economic and Social Development of a Constituent Entity of the Russian Federation Taking Into Account Intraregional Asymmetry: Theory and Practice*. Apatity: KNTs RAN, 2006. 245 p.]

Source: own compilation.

development of municipal districts of the Vologda Oblast. The results of the analysis not only confirm the conclusions of the Vologda scientists, but also expand the understanding of the processes of intra-territorial socio-economic inequality (*Fig. 1*).

The main conclusion, following from the assessment of uneven development, the study period of which falls on the years 2000–2017, is that in the region there is an increase in territorial inequality, and the asymmetric type of development remains in the majority of municipalities. Thanks to the social policy pursued by the federal and regional governments, it became possible to restrain the growth of differences in social indicators. However, the differences in economic indicators increased more rapidly; thus, two pole areas were formed, which concentrated the main industrial and agricultural potential of the region: the Vologda–Cherepovets agglomeration and the city of Veliky Ustyug. The first pole was gradually expanded due to the construction of industrial enterprises on the territory of Sheksninsky and Gryazovetsky districts. We should note the increase in the differences between the areas where the most important enterprises of the regional economy are established and the areas adjacent to these territories. This fact is to some extent caused by the increased outflow of labor, financial and other types of resources from underdeveloped areas in the direction of actively developing territories. The situation in Mezhdurechensky, Ust-Kubinsky, Ustyuzhensky, Chagodoshchensky, Vashkinsky, and Syamzhensky districts looks especially depressing. In the 2000–2017 period, these areas experienced the most severe population decline compared to other municipalities; it was due mainly to population migration from these areas. The reasons for the migration are obvious: decline in the standard of living and

quality of life, rising unemployment, and lack of prospects for development. It should be emphasized that the transport and geographical location of some of these areas can be assessed as quite advantageous: they are close to the cities of the region, and to major highways. Nevertheless, the development potential of these territories is decreasing, which leads to a sharp decline in investment attractiveness and to the shutdown of a number of industrial and agricultural enterprises that make up the economic core in these municipal districts. All this proves that the socio-economic space is undergoing compression processes, which are widely discussed at the present time by domestic and foreign scientists [26–28], because these processes are typical of most Russian regions.

The scale and severity of territorial inequality makes it necessary to search for approaches to the regulation of spatial development in order to reduce its disproportions that impede balanced development of regions. As scientific theories in the field of spatial development were evolving, special attention was paid to the study of factors that caused this process, which determined the priority directions of regional policy. In the domestic practice of Russian regions in the framework of the policy of alignment, polarized development, formation of clusters and so-called corridors of development, various tools were used, the theoretical foundations of which are presented in [29–31, etc.]. However, many Russian researchers believe that the policy of alignment has reached its limit of effectiveness, and the course of polarized development has not removed many spatial contradictions, especially at the level of municipalities. According to domestic scientists, in the Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2025, the issues related to inter-municipal inequality have not

been reflected adequately, although the problem itself has been raised. We agree with the author [32], who argues that the concentration of state efforts on the development of large cities and agglomerations is unlikely to contribute to the preservation of the integrity of space; the author also points out the uniqueness of medium-sized and small Russian towns that serve as a foundation for the development of regional economies that ensures a vital property of space – its connectivity.

Measures used by regional authorities and management to reduce inequalities are often fragmented; they do not fully take into account the features of spatial development of territories and their potential; we also observe a lack of coordination of actions between different levels of government. We believe that one of the significant reasons for the low effectiveness of measures of state influence is the lack of accounting for the regularities of development of regions as complex systems that are strongly influenced by the external environment at each point, which causes a change in the behavior of the system and the emergence of unexpected changes in the direction of the processes caused, among other things, by random factors [33]. The impact of the external environment together with the influence of internal factors can transform the existing system of relations between participants of reproductive process and may lead to the violation of the coherence of socio-economic space. Taking into account the above, we can formulate requirements for state regulation of spatial development of the region:

1. State influence should be based on the laws of the functioning of the system.
2. Regulation must be scientifically substantiated and timely.
3. The regulatory system should have a feedback mechanism so as to prevent disruptive and reinforce creative trends.

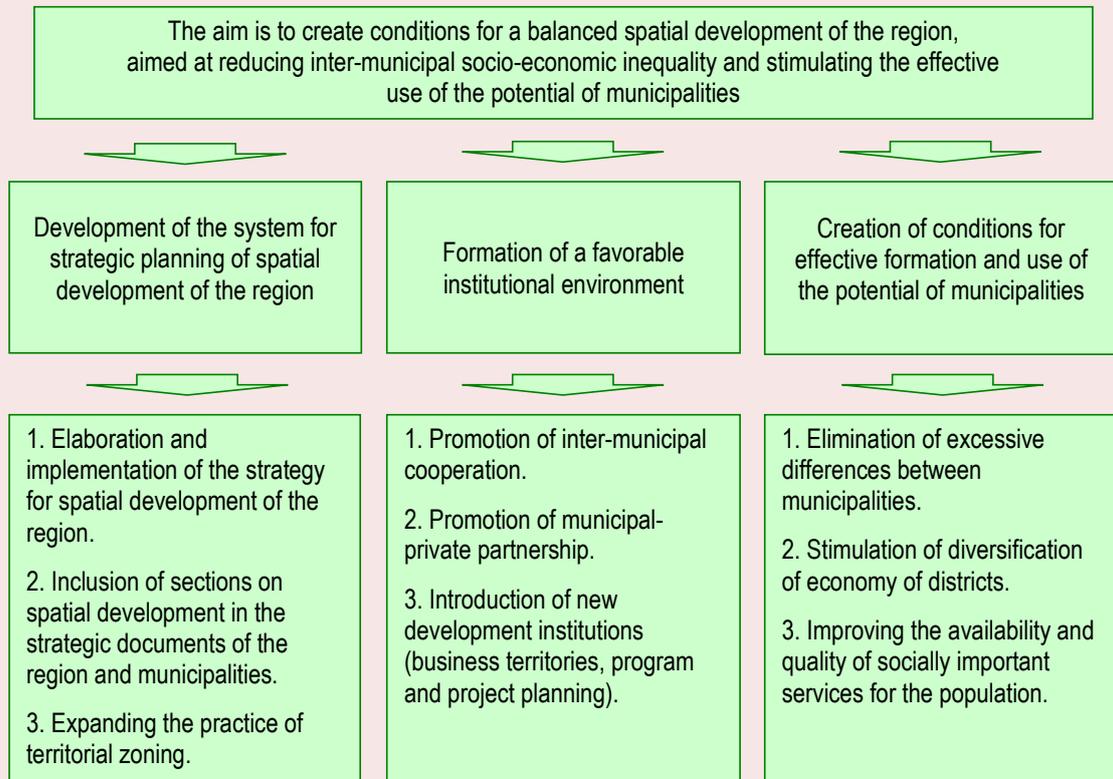
4. The choice of regulatory actions should correspond to the features and nature of the system; this determines the use of a combination of methods and tools.

5. State regulation should initiate the emergence of a synergistic effect.

Based on these requirements, we believe that the foundation of spatial development regulation should rely on the following principles: purposefulness, consistency, effectiveness, focus on strategic objectives, promoting the potential of the territory, differentiated approach, partnership, increasing the role of the local community, promoting inter-municipal cooperation, and feedback.

Public authorities of a constituent entity of the Russian Federation and local authorities represent the subject of regulation; the role of the main coordinator of the process should be assigned to the Department for Spatial Development and Project Management under the Strategic Planning Department of the Government of the Vologda Oblast. These subjects have a direct impact on the development processes through the implementation of the following functions: formation and maintenance of the institutional environment; creation of conditions that stimulate the development of municipalities; ensuring equal opportunities for the development of territories and the lives of their inhabitants. However, we should note that a significant influence on management decision-making is exerted by representatives of business, political parties, trade unions, associations and unions established according to the sectoral and territorial principle, and also by institutional structures designed to assist the participants in the reproduction process. The experience of many Russian regions, including the Vologda Oblast, shows that the regions' inhabitants have become more actively involved in the management of socio-economic processes

Figure 2. Directions of regulation of the region's spatial development



Source: own compilation.

by establishing both formal and informal associations. The economic interests of the population, the business community and the authorities are characterized by a significant diversity and divergence, which requires their identification in order to take into account and harmonize regulatory impacts in the course of substantiating the directions and methods.

The starting point in the regulation of spatial development, which is of great practical importance, is goal-setting, during which the image of the future state of the object and methods of achieving it are determined. Understanding the content of the problem to be solved and identifying the needs and interests of participants in socio-economic processes are the basis for the formulation of the goal of regulation of spatial development – creating

conditions for balanced spatial development of the region, aimed at reducing inter-municipal socio-economic inequality and promoting the effective use of the potential of municipalities.

Achieving the goal based on the above principles involves finding a solution to a number of interrelated tasks grouped in the following areas (*Fig. 2*).

A necessary condition for sustainable socio-economic development of the region in an unstable external and internal environment should be further improvement of the system of strategic management of the region, which involves the development and implementation of the strategy for spatial development of the Vologda Oblast. This document, integrated into the strategic planning system, becomes a link both in the development of industries

and municipalities of the region, and in the interaction of different hierarchical levels of management related to territorial inequality issues. The importance of this strategic document is also determined by the fact that it should become the basis for the system of regulation of spatial development in the region. The need to strengthen the coordination of actions of regulation subjects and to take into account the specifics of socio-economic processes in municipalities requires that strategic documents of the region and municipal districts should contain the sections that reflect spatial development issues. The most important methods of strategic management and analysis include territorial zoning, the effectiveness of which is confirmed by domestic and foreign practices [34–37, etc.]. There are different approaches to the allocation of zones; it is determined by the goals and relevant criteria, but in most works the authors focus on the allocation of two mutually dependent targets for zoning: the differentiated approach to regional policy and the reduction of inter-territorial differences. We believe that for the Vologda Oblast the problem-resource approach to zoning is the most acceptable one, since it helps not only allocate similar areas according to their socio-economic problems, but also take into account the resource provision of municipalities; this will contribute to the concentration of resources on addressing the most important tasks. In addition we can note that the use of territorial zoning will strengthen the coordination and interaction between the authorities, business community and inhabitants, and will help respond quickly to the changes in the internal and external environment.

Territorial economic and social contrasts, depopulation, polarization of human capital,

low-quality management, according to the author [38], represent serious barriers to the further development of many Russian regions, including the Vologda Oblast; thus, the author emphasizes the need to improve the institutional environment, activate the local community, and find an optimal combination of leveling and stimulating regional policy. Taking into account these circumstances and a number of problems identified during the assessment of the existing system of regulation of spatial development in the region, we believe that an important condition for improving the effectiveness of management actions in the region should be the formation of a favorable institutional environment.

The state of the institutional environment has a significant impact on the behavior and interaction of participants of socio-economic processes, because institutions organize their relations, providing them with certainty and consistency. In the conditions of heterogeneity of the space, limited resources and aggravation of socio-economic problems, the institution of inter-municipal cooperation has a great potential for the development of territories. We should add that the processes of interaction within the Oblast are slow, although heads of municipalities note the expediency and importance of this form of relationship. To overcome the barriers to more active development of cooperation between municipalities, it is necessary to do the following: further improve the legal framework; improve the skills of management personnel by organizing training seminars and exchanging experience with regions that have achieved success in the organization of horizontal ties; create methodological support that helps find a reasonable approach to the choice of forms and methods of inter-municipal cooperation.

Limited financial resources required for the development of territories necessitate the search for new sources and ways to attract them. Russian and foreign experience shows that such a tool is provided by municipal-private partnership (MPP), which helps not only attract private capital in the development of the municipality, but also enhance the role of local community in addressing territorial problems, increase the motivation of business to create a comfortable space for living and development, and create the foundation for long-term partnership of business, government and the public. The objects of MPP agreement are the most important elements of industrial and social infrastructure, the development of which creates favorable conditions for people's lives, thereby creating prerequisites for progressive development of the territories. The widespread use of MPP requires the elimination of administrative barriers, reduction of legislative and regulatory risks and use of project financing to increase the availability of credit resources and reduce financial risks for project participants.

The formation of a polycentric spatial structure of Russia's economy in general and its regions in particular gives impetus to the development of small and medium-sized cities and raises the question concerning the formation of new development institutions, among which a special place belongs to the creation of business territories and program and project planning of spatial development [39]. We believe that the experience of Yekaterinburg in the implementation of the program and project approach can be used in the Vologda oblast; this will increase the interest of residents in the development of territories, strengthen partnerships between business, the population and the government, and will focus on the solution of strategic tasks.

One of the significant features of regional complex systems is the ability to change their behavior through self-organization; this ability occurs due to the interaction of its components without external influence. Taking this into account and based on the provisions of the concept of self-development of territorial socio-economic systems [18], we believe that the most important direction for regulation of spatial development of the region should be the creation of conditions for more effective formation and use of the potential of municipalities. Implementation of this direction assumes the following:

- first, elimination of excessive differences between municipalities through further development of infrastructure, especially in the field of information and communication technologies, strengthening of inter-municipal relations and increased investment in human capital;

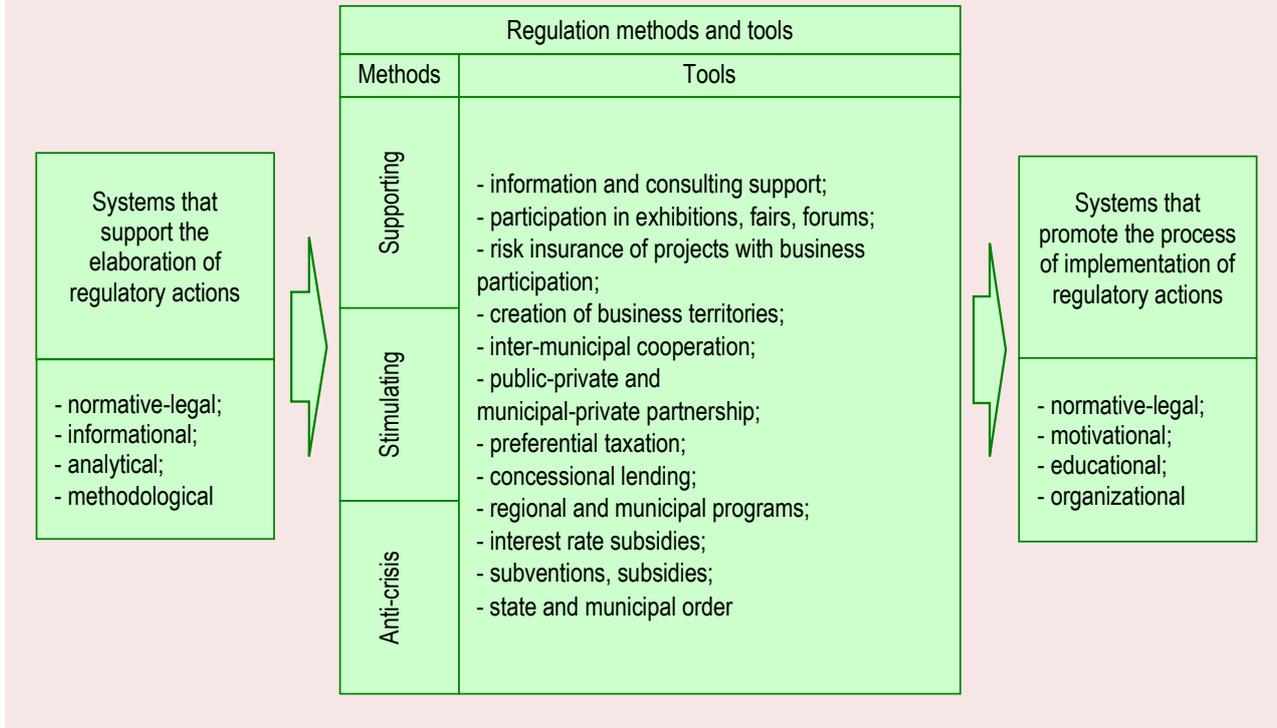
- second, stimulating the diversification of regional economies through the support of small businesses in industries with significant resources for their development, strengthening educational and human resources, the development of new institutions of spatial development;

- third, increasing the availability and quality of social services provided to people by supporting the renewal of the material base and young professionals in the fields of healthcare and education, developing lifelong learning, and improving the forms and methods of social partnership with business.

The central place in the system of regulation of spatial development of the region is occupied by the mechanism that unites a set of methods of influence and the systems providing the performance of its main functions (*Fig. 3*).

Interaction of all the participants of socio-economic processes in the territories occurs

Figure 3. Spatial development regulation mechanism



within a legal field, the rules of behavior within which are developed by regulation subjects. The system of normative and legal support is designed to create an institutional framework for the activities of all participants: it includes normative acts adopted by the constituent entity of the Russian Federation and municipalities, and a package of strategic documents defining the directions of regulation of spatial development of territories.

The development of regulatory impacts is preceded by the collection, systematization and analysis of information, which is represented by the data of state statistics, questionnaires, expert assessments, monitoring, ratings, reporting of municipalities and the constituent entity of the Russian Federation, and scientific works of domestic and foreign publications. Processing of huge information arrays requires methodological support, allowing the analysis

to reveal the features of spatial development and contributing factors, trends, threats, challenges and opportunities to overcome them, i.e. to form the basis for the choice of methods and instruments of state influence. In the process of implementing the regulatory impact, an important role belongs to the support system that forms the motives in the triad: administration bodies – population – business and is aimed at establishing partnerships in the course of addressing strategic tasks to reduce the socio-economic development inequality. We also highlight the educational support of spatial development regulation, which contributes to the improvement of qualification and development of new knowledge and skills. The role of the link between these supporting systems is played by organizational support, which includes a set of institutional structures that form a favorable environment for

interaction between both regulatory entities and representatives of business and people.

The key component of the mechanism for regulating spatial development of the region is a set of methods and tools, the choice of which is determined by the following fundamental principles that we highlight: promotion of the potential of the territory, the differentiated approach, and focus on strategic objectives. A distinctive feature of the mechanism aimed at reducing socio-economic inequalities in the development of municipalities is the fact that the choice of impact tools depends on the stage of non-uniformity corresponding to the degree of fragmentation between districts according to socio-economic parameters. As the differences increase and the stages of unevenness change (differentiation – asymmetry – polarization), the nature of the instruments used (supporting – stimulating – anti-crisis) also changes. We should also note that intraregional socio-economic inequality is influenced by a significant number of factors that differ in content, nature, duration and direction of impact. Therefore, in conditions where the external environment is characterized by instability and the presence of random phenomena, the use of some methods cannot be specified for a long period of time. This emphasizes the need to create a flexible and mobile regulatory system that can respond quickly to any changes by choosing such tools that take into account the properties and features of the regional socio-economic system and the laws of its functioning.

Conclusion

Summing up, we point out that the regulation of spatial development of the region,

aimed at reducing socio-economic inequality, should be considered as one of the priorities for the authorities and management. It is obvious that each region has its own features and problems, which lead to the use of various tools and methods of state influence. However, this does not exclude the development of such an approach to the formation of a system for spatial development regulation, which could be used in different regions. In developing the approach, we proceeded from the understanding of unevenness as a process that goes through three stages in its development, changing under the influence of objective and subjective factors; and by influencing these factors it is possible to reduce the differences between territories. The approach to the regulation of spatial development is based on the principles which help regulation subjects stimulate the development of municipal entities while taking into account their specific features and regularities of functioning and focusing on the solution of strategic tasks. When choosing the methods and tools of regulation, it is necessary to take into account the stage of uneven socio-economic development of the municipal entity; this will help achieve the greatest effect.

The results of our study contribute to the development of theoretical science, because they clarify the concept of “uneven socio-economic development” and substantiate the approach to the regulation of spatial development of the region. The practical significance of our work consists in the fact that it provides an opportunity to use the proposed approach in the activities of regional authorities and local self-government to address the issue of reducing intraregional socio-economic inequality.

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