The study shows that there is no coherent judicial organization model. Therefore, the judicial map is a sum of all courts and prosecutor’s offices without a guiding organizational criterion except for the instance control one. Throughout the years, the hierarchical division was supplemented by the atypical for Bulgaria division of jurisdiction according to the accused individuals, as specialized criminal courts and prosecutor’s offices hear cases on the basis of this principle. That leads to drawbacks which become clearly evident when the system needs to be reformed. The reform of the judicial map, translated into plain language, means optimizing the number of courts and prosecutor’s offices due to a change of the economic, demographic and political conditions. While the world is changing, Bulgaria is shrinking and aging - both generationally and technologically. The diminished population, in places reaching depopulation, and the introduction of new technologies, necessitates the restructuring of the heavy institutional apparatus.

Once established, the judicial regions in Bulgaria are difficult to alter. The attempt to regulate the number and location of courts with special laws, most notably those for administrative-territorial division, is not particularly successful. Neither the Law on the Structure of the Courts (AUS) from 1899 nor the radical views of Stamboliiski’s postwar government nor those embodied in the AUS from 1934 are effective or well accepted by all divisions of the professional legal community. The three attempts result in organizational chaos and temporary cost cuts at the expense of subsequent efforts to revive and strengthen the courts.

Considering the initiative for changes to the judicial map aiming at optimizing the system, it is important to also ponder upon a parallel reform of the administrative-territorial division in line with the depopulation of some parts of the country. According to recent IME analyzes, more than 70 municipalities (i.e. over ¼ of all municipalities) do not meet the statutory minimum population criterion.

The above mentioned as well as other similar comparisons speak of the ineffectiveness of the Bulgarian judicial system and represent another argument for the need to reform the judicial map. This does not mean that the magistrates' working conditions should not be improved, but an optimized judicial map would allow for a reduction in the additional costs for buildings and court administration. That appears not too difficult a task if, in parallel with the reorganization of the judicial map, all measures in the Strategy for Judicial Reform in the area of e-Justice strategy are implemented.

Institutional presence on the ground without a particular need for the public service of justice is unnecessary and closing down is attainable. Therefore, a flexible model with clear application parameters should be selected and followed.

The adoption of mechanisms by virtue of which the number and territorial position of courts is dynamical and also revised over a certain period of time is not alien to the Bulgarian legal context. Although in practice it did not work, this approach is inherent to the legal environment in Bulgaria. The effective implementation of this approach means *inter alia* creating a wide range of criteria that are clearly verifiable and reportable both by the statistics and administration and the Supreme Judicial Council’s (SJC) members annually, while the accumulated annual data - even over a longer period of time:

- Number of cases – judges’ workload degree;
- Structure of the population - types of cases, types of courts and their departments, enhancement of specialization, respectively increase of the permanent work places for judges according to the needs;
- Access to justice does not mean proximity, however the low social status or old age means decreased use of modern technology;
- The status of certain “near the border”/remote courts should be taken into consideration;
- Providing the court with the necessary social infrastructure (such as certain services);
- Number of magistrates per capita in a given territorial unit – a standard for a certain number of population is adopted. The idea is not alien to the Bulgarian lawyers – the same principle currently applies to notaries;
- Determining and relating the number of magistrates to the number of cases in a territorial unit – this provides flexibility, but it creates a problem with the secondment of magistrates - a notorious topic in the Bulgarian justice system since it represents a long-standing source of internal (within the system) corruption, undue benefits and unfair career development.

Such a complex model will require consistent efforts by the SJC itself, continuity of its work (by the next compositions of the body), maintaining a competent judicial administration.

Four major impediments to potential reform of the judicial map are again highlighted:

- Political – according to the will of those in power; according to the financial and administrative capacity of the budget to reshape the courts.
- The probable solution is in fact a chaotic mix of closing down courts and prosecutor’s offices due to political motives without taking into account the specific problems of the population and the business. The probability of such an approach taking place is high, judging from the results of the prosecutor’s office structural reform thus far – a public discussion about the already closed 11 prosecutor’s offices was lacking.
- Social – related to the need of citizens’ rights protection and the resolution of disputes which arise thereafter.
- Legal – risk of changing/shifting of the focus from quality of justice to its efficiency; philistinism of justice and superficial hearing of cases (assembly line justice), turning the judges only into units producing outputs not analysts whose work directly impact specific persons and involves different factual and legal difficulty, i.e. risk of creating too tight of a link between budgeting and the judicial “product” (cases).

The model could be best determined through testing of different options in a few judicial regions. The positive results from the judicial map’s restructure will be: decrease in the total costs (Judiciary’s budget managed by the SJC increases annually usually without any justification), a possibility of remuneration increase and improvement of the quality of justice (uneven workload deteriorates the quality and the in-depth analyses of the court acts not owing to the magistrates’ will).

The first step in the judicial map reform’s efforts is an in-depth knowledge about the ongoing processes in each administrative area. This would allow the reform to respond to the specific’s area particularities and needs of justice. This Study represents the first step – a selection of judicial region and analysis of the economic, demographic and social development of the Yambol region.

The Yambol judicial region is of research interest due to the following:

- Its territory encompasses a few regional courts, a district court and an administrative court;
- It is dominated by a relatively economically active city like Yambol. At the same time, the proximity of Yambol to Sliven poses the question if the existence of two district and two administrative courts at such a short distance is necessary?
- The judicial region does not coincide with the administrative-territorial one;
- Due to its geographic particularities, it borders another country and at some places the population is not too dense;
- The region’s features and the decisions based on them are relatable and applicable for other judicial regions in the country.

The conclusions from the economic, demographic and social development of Yambol region which are relevant to the future of the judicial map are the following:

- The region lags behind economically as compared to the average in the country in terms of both output and income. The population declines, ages and emigrates. These processes are likely to continue. In the future, the justice needs will most likely decrease due to the declining population.

- Crime rates are relatively low, and the rate of the crimes solving is high. At the same time, the resource the judiciary utilizes (a high number of judges with a low workload) is large which reduces its effectiveness.

- Poverty rates are relatively low, the infrastructure is developed, and the region’s topography does not require specific terrain separation due to the lack of high mountain ranges. The distances are short and allow optimization of the courts’ network without affecting the quality and access to justice.

The present analysis shall be followed by site visits to the Yambol District Court judicial region and meetings with relevant stakeholders. Following the meetings, the IME team shall present a judicial map reform model for the region.

The entire study (in Bulgarian only) could be found here: https://ime.bg/var//Court-Map-pdf.pdf