Bulletin of Geography. Socio–economic Series No. 17 (2012): 99–107

ISSN 1732–4254 semiannual

BULLETIN OF GEOGRAPHY. SOCIO–ECONOMIC SERIES

journal homepages:
http://www.bulletinofgeography.umk.pl
http://versita.com/bgss

The depopulation of the Bulgarian villages

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Mladenov, C. and Ilieva, M., 2012: The depopulation of the Bulgarian villages.
In: Szymańska, D. and Biegańska, J. editors, *Bulletin of Geography. Socio–economic Series*, No. 17, Toruń: Nicolaus Copernicus University Press, pp. 99–107. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.2478/v10089-012-0010-8

Abstract. The depopulation process in Bulgaria, especially in rural areas, is intensifying due to deepening unfavourable trends in the dynamics of demographic processes. Depopulation is a typical process in the fourth phase of demographic transition in rural areas of Bulgaria. The death rates exceed birth rates in the rural areas in the mid-1970s. The size of rural population and the number of villages in the country has been decreasing in the last decades. A large part of the villages were affected by depopulation processes during the period 1985–2007. A high depopulation level is observed in border and mountainous regions. The depopulation generates an array of different negative trends in the spatial aspect – in socio-economic development, technical and social infrastructure, as well as the erasure of many small villages. The regional development plans need to embed measures for infrastructural development in order to attract and retain residents, utilise natural and cultural-historical heritage, and to stimulate economic activities and the development of various types of tourism, etc.

Article details:
Received: 14 October 2011
Revised: 25 November 2011
Accepted: 21 March 2012

Key words:
Bulgaria, demographic processes, demographic transition, demographic crisis, depopulation, village.

Contents:

1. Introduction

Depopulation study is a very important scientific and applied problem. The relevance of this problem has been constantly increasing in Bulgaria as a result of the ongoing negative demographic processes, the socio-economic transformation, the reproductive and migration behaviour change, as well as the role of family, the religion, etc. Depopulation is the visible synthesised display of the demographic crisis. As a term it has geographical essence for depopulation is always a process in a certain area (territory). The term 'depopulation' signifies a decrease in the total population number (as a result of natural and/or migration decrease). The catastrophic character of that process has not yet been studied because of a lack of detailed statistical data and representative field research data for a low-level territorial unit (settlements).

2. Material and research results: analysis of depopulation

Depopulation analysis allows researchers to identify the reasons which provoke it, the probability for depopulation and its geographic span (Fig. 1). The depopulation process in Bulgaria, as well as in other countries, especially in rural areas, is intensifying due to deepening unfavourable trends in the dynamics of demographic processes (Szymańska, 2009; Szymańska et al., 2009). These negative trends are a result of multiple interconnected factors which have been exercising their influence for a long time – the intensive rural-to-urban migration in the accelerated industrialisation period 1950s–1970s, constantly lowering birth rates, decrease of rural demographic potential, slow rural economic development, negative demographic processes in the recent decades, etc.

The term 'depopulation' from a geographical point of view in this paper stands for population decrease and deterioration of demographic structures to a scale which leads to permanent impossibility of population reproduction in rural areas. Depopulation is a typical process in the fourth phase of demographic transition in rural areas of Bulgaria, where death rates exceed birth rates. This phase began much earlier in the rural areas (in the mid-1970s) compared to the country as a whole (the beginning of the 1990s). This fourth phase was fueled also by crisis of socio-economic situation in the country during the 1990s as well as emigration.

The size of rural population in Bulgaria has been decreasing constantly throughout the second half of the 20th century as a result of many factors (Fig. 2). The relative share of rural population is also declining – from 75.3% (1946), 35.2% (1985) to 29.3% (2007). The analysis shows that during this period the negative trends have worsened – the number and share of population loss in the villages in the periods between censuses have risen (Table 1). These negative trends have continued during recent years and as a result the number of the rural population has decreased by higher rates than the total population of the country (Fig. 3).

The number of villages has also been decreasing – from 5,927 (1946), 5,146 (1985) to 5,052 (2007). Historically, this is due to changes in national boundaries (until 1940), foundation of new settlements (as a result of refugee waves), urbanisation, foundation of new industrial settlements in mining regions (which were statistically considered rural), etc. Some villages were erased from the National Settlements register because of their incorporation into nearby towns

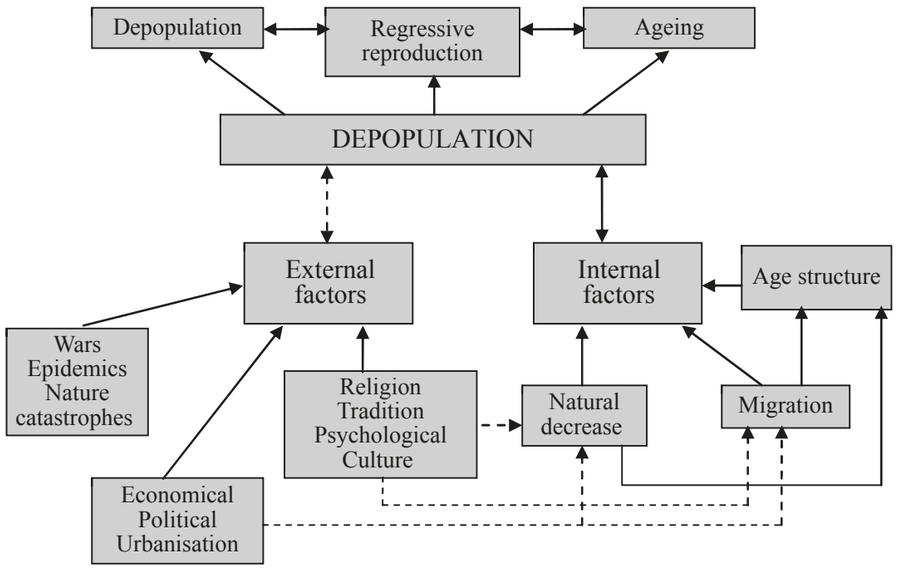

Fig. 1. Major depopulation factors and consequences

Source: Mladenov, Ch. 2009: Geographical analysis of the demographic crisis in Bulgaria – research work qualifying for 'Doctor of Sciences' degree

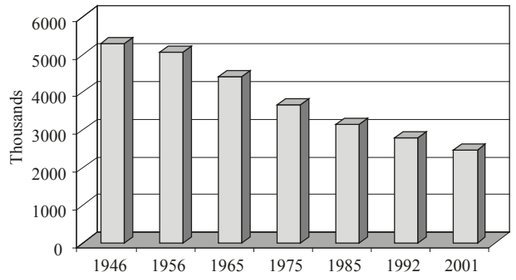

Fig. 2. Number of rural population in Bulgaria according to census data (in thousand people)

Source of data: National Statistical Institute

Table 1. Changes in number of rural population in the periods between censuses

	A	B	C	D	E	F
a	–236.5	–652.6	–737.4	–518.0	–365.9	–328.4
b	–23.6	–72.5	–73.8	–51.8	–50.2	–41.1
c	–0.5	–1.5	–1.8	–1.5	–1.7	–1.6

Explanation: A – 1947–1956; B – 1957–1965; C – 1966–1975; D – 1976–1985; E – 1986–1992; F – 1993–2001; a – total (thousand people); b – relative change throughout the certain period (thousand people); c – average annual change throughout the certain period (thousand people)

(cities) or obtaining urban status themselves. After 1990, some of those previously incorporated villages separated from the urban centres for various reasons. The number of unpopulated villages has been rising in recent years, as a result of negative demographic processes – from 130 (2001) to 170 (2007). The names of 38 villages were erased from the National Settlements register during the period 2001–2007, 24 of them in 2007.

The depopulation process can also be demonstrated by the change in the structure settlements by size. Villages in Bulgaria are divided into 5 categories according to the Administrative and Settlements Arrangement Act (1995): very small (population up to 200 people), small (200–1,000 people), medium (1,000–2,000 people), large (2,000–5,000 people) and very large (more than 5,000 people). The number of very large villages in Bulgaria has decreased from 10 (1985) to 2 (2007), and therefore the large and very large villages are combined in one category in this study – as villages with more than 2,000 inhabitants. The analysis shows that in the period between 1946 and 2007 the number of villages in Bulgaria has decreased by 15%. The most drastic decrease is that of the number of large villages (more than 4 times), which is due mostly to obtaining urban status, and the number of medium villages (more than 2.7 times). Only the number of small settlements has been increasing – it doubled during the period 1946–2007 while the fastest increase was registered after 1985 (Table 2).

The number of villages has decreased by 94 during the period 1985–2007, 16 of them became urban settlements. Because of population changes, 1,295 villages have moved into another category. The majority of those settlements (1,252 villages or 24.8% of the total number of villages in the country) have lost population and therefore have moved into the 'lower' category. Only 43 villages (0.8%) have increased their population and have moved to a 'higher'

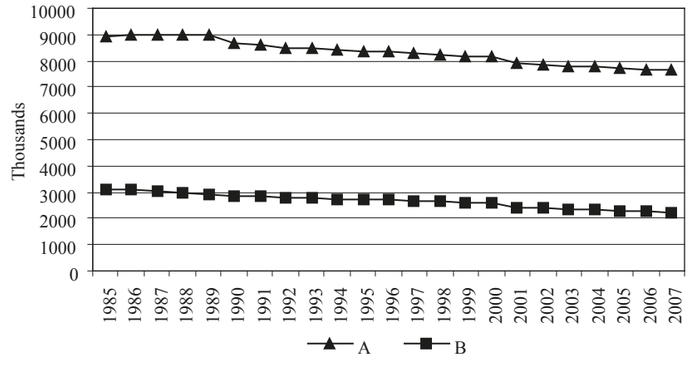

Fig. 3. Number of rural population in Bulgaria (1985–2007)

Explanation: A – Bulgaria; B – rural population

Source of data: National Statistical Institute

Table 2. Change of number and relative share of villages by categories

Census	1946	1956	1965	1975	1985	1992	2001	2007*
				a				
A	1,294	1,310	1,403	1,547	1,767	1,981	2,256	2,369
B	2,723	2,730	2,560	2,421	2,377	2,256	2,115	2,054
C	1,300	1,186	1,070	879	722	635	540	479
D	610	565	520	376	280	226	189	150
E	5,927	5,791	5,553	5,223	5,146	5,098	5,100	5,052
				b				
A	21.8	22.6	25.3	29.6	34.3	38.9	44.2	46.9
B	45.9	47.1	46.1	46.4	46.2	44.3	41.5	40.7
C	21.9	20.5	19.3	16.8	14.0	12.5	10.6	9.4
D	10.4	9.8	9.3	7.2	5.5	4.3	3.7	3.0
E	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Explanation: * – 2007 – current statistical data; A – < 200; B – 200–1,000; C – 1,000–2,000; D – > 2,000; E – total; a – number; b – relative share (%)

Source: Authors' calculation on the data of National Statistical Institute

category. These changes indicate that the depopulation of Bulgarian villages deepens constantly. During this period, the size of population changed in 3,757 villages (74.4% of the total number of villages in the country), but they did not move to another category (Table 3). This indicates conservativeness of the rural settlement network.

Table 3. Changes in the village categories in Bulgaria (1985 and 2007)

		2007				
		A	B	C	D	E
1985	A	**1,646**	11	0	0	1,657
	B	713	**1,645**	22	0	2,380
	C	1	371	**326**	10	708
	D	9	27	131	**140**	307
	E	2,369	2,054	479	150	5,052

Explanation: A – < 200; B – 200–1,000; C – 1,000–2,000; D – > 2,000; E – total;

Source: Authors' calculation on the data of National Statistical Institute

A large part of the villages were affected by depopulation processes during the discussed period. The villages in the Eastern Rhodopes, northeastern Bulgaria and eastern part of Stara Planina Mountains were affected the most because of mass emigration of ethnic Turks by political reasons in 1989. A high depopulation level is observed also in border and mountainous regions, where the natural decrease in the population is high. The loss of the rural population varies between 10 and 20% in other regions of the country (Fig. 4).

Depopulation processes are much weaker in municipalities of which the administrative centres are large or medium-sized urban settlements, as well as municipalities with relatively stable economic development. Areas of rural population growth which have not been affected by depopulation are extremely limited. In the period 1985–2007 these are predominantly villages in the influence zone of cities (Sofia, Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, Varna, Burgas), some medium-sized towns (Haskovo, Pernik, Veliko Turnovo, etc.) and some well-developed smaller towns (Karlovo, Petrich); some villages in areas populated with predominantly Turkish or Roma and Turkish population (for example the municipalities of Dodpat, Devin, Velingrad, Yakoruda, Satovcha, Gotse Delchev, Dobrich, Kotel, Sliven, Nikola Kozlevo, Kaynardzha, Ruen, etc.) and the Black Sea coast, where seaside tourism is well developed (the municipalities of Balchik, Byala, Primorsko, Sozopl, Tsarevo, Pomorie, Nesebar, etc.).

Depopulation is linked directly to the natural increase rate. Since 1985 the so-called contracted reproduction of the population has been typical for the country, featuring low birth rates, higher death rates, low marriage rate, increase of consensual cohabitations, higher divorce rates, comparatively low life expectancy, slow generation replacement, interfamilial planning of the number of children, increase of abortions, and natural decrease in the population. 'The regressive type of reproduction of the rural population is a critical contemporary social problem of Bulgaria' (Ilieva, Mladenov, 2003: 103). The natural decrease of the rural population has begun in 1975, of the urban population in 1994, while the natural decrease of the

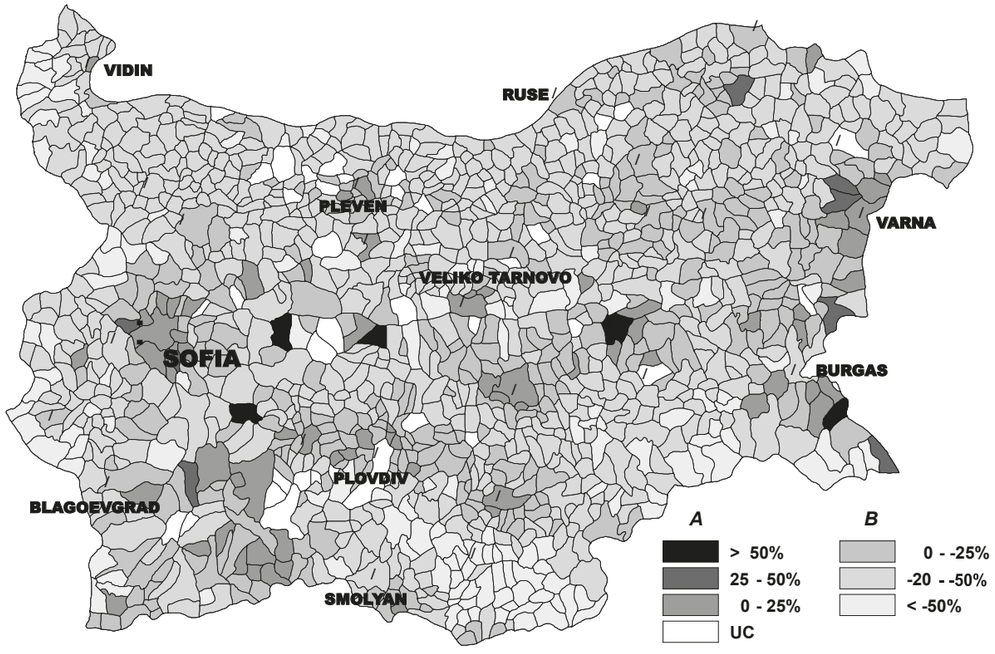

Fig. 4. Population dynamics (1985–2007)

Explanation: A – increase; B – decrease; UC – urban centre-municipality

Source of data: National Statistical Institute

total population in Bulgaria started in 1990. Since 1990 the rural population has constantly maintained a natural decrease of –10‰, more than two times as unfavourable as the national average (Fig. 5). The high level of natural decrease in the population is one of the reasons for spatial discrepancies of the depopulation in Bulgaria (Mladenov, 2006) (Fig. 4).

Natural decrease in the rural population has been observed in 255 out of 264 municipalities in recent years (Fig. 6). The regions of regressive reproduction

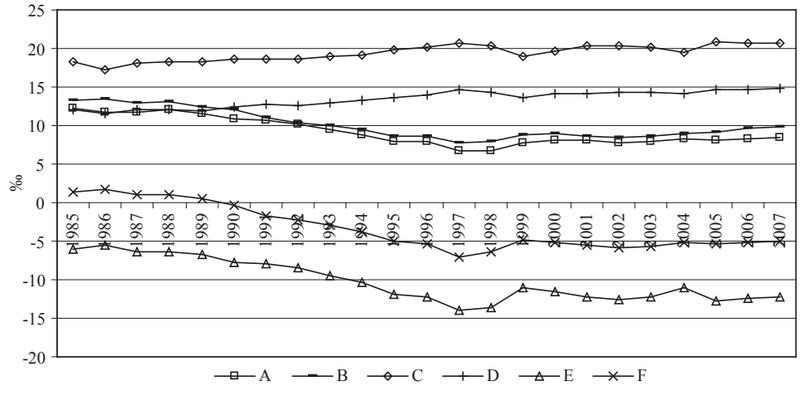

Fig. 5. Natural increase of rural population in Bulgaria (1985–2007)

Explanation: A – birth rate (rural); B – birth rate (Bulgaria); C – death rate (rural); D – death rate (Bulgaria); E – natural increase (rural); F – natural increase (Bulgaria)

Source of data: National Statistical Institute

of the rural population expand and incorporate similar neighbouring areas. That process is typical especially for northern Bulgaria. This region encompasses the areas from the western national borders to the Ludogorie region to the East and from the summit of Stara Planina Mountains (The Balkan Range) to the Danube River to the North. The situation is similar in the western border areas of Sofia district, in Pernik and Kyustendil districts. Therefore these areas represent an extension of the above region in northern Bulgaria to the southwest. The areas of high natural decrease of the population in southern Bulgaria are more limited. Such areas are more compact in the Strandzha Mountain, the Sakar Mountain, in the southern foothills of the Srednogorie region. Natural increase in the rural population is typical only for 9 municipalities (from 264 ones in the country) in 2007. Compared to previous periods the number of municipalities with natural increase of the rural population has declined significantly. Those municipalities are now concentrated only in southwestern Bulgaria (Belitsa, Gotse Delchev, Gurmen, Satovcha, Yakoruda, etc.) where the highest birth rates in the country are observed.

The natural increase is in functional connection with the birth rate. The decay of the patriarchic family in the second half of the 20th century, as well as the industrialisation processes, the lesser development of the rural economy and other reasons led to intensive rural-to-urban migrations whose intensity was highest in the period between 1950s and 1970s. The fertile contingents in the villages diminished dramatically, the reproduction behaviour of the population altered, the birth rates dropped because of demographic and socio-economic processes. These negative trends led to structural changes and as early as in the mid-1970s the depopulation of rural areas was a result of low birth rates, natural decrease and lack of normal generation replacement ability. The prolonged low birth rates in the villages determine the high degree of depopulation. Since 1992 the crude birth rate of the rural population has rarely exceeded 10‰.

The death rates also have a significant impact on the depopulation process. The death rates of Bulgarian rural population started to surpass birth rates in 1975, when depopulation of villages began. From mid-1990s on the rising death rates passed beyond the point of simple population reproduction.

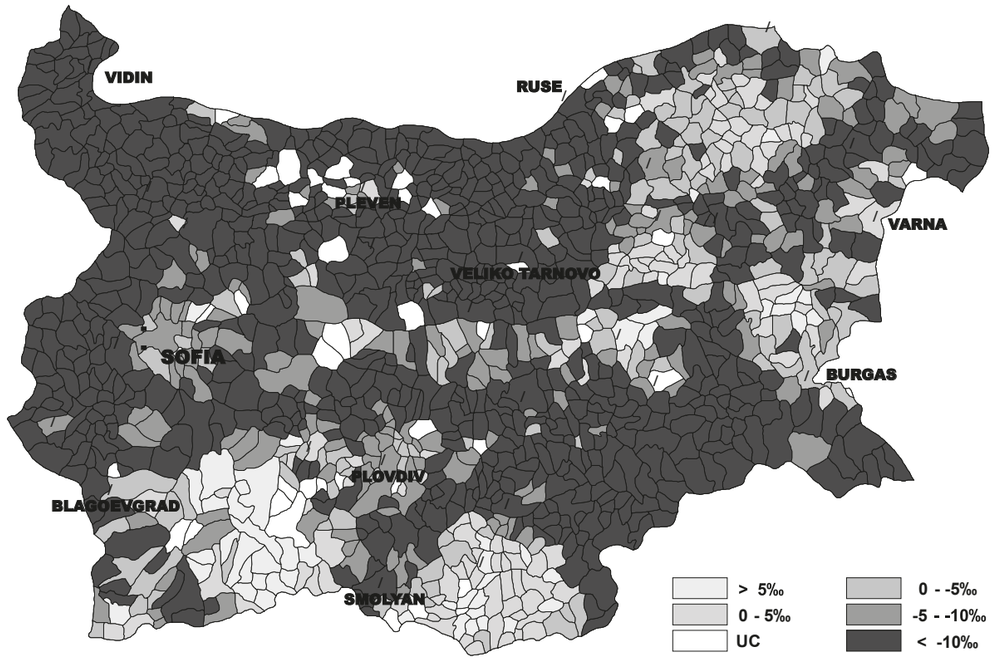

Fig. 6. Natural increase (2007)

Explanation: UC – urban centre-municipality

Source of data: National Statistical Institute

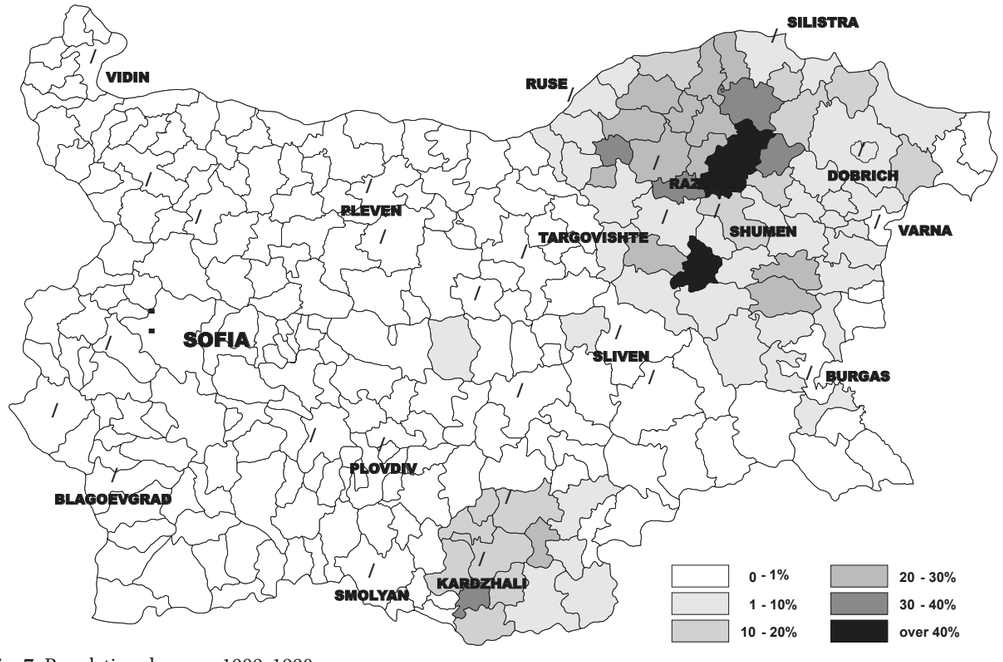

Fig. 7. Population decrease 1989–1990
(Muslim emigration of the population as a whole and not of the rural population alone)

Source: Mladenov, Ch., Dimitrov, E. and Kazakov, B. 2009: Demographical development of Bulgaria during the transitional period. In: *Mediterranee*, No. 110, p. 120.

During the period 1985–2007 the death rates of rural population varied from 18 to 21‰.

Internal and external migrations both have an important significance for the character and the development trends of the depopulation. The migration intensity defines the direction and the speed of depopulation. For example, a large number of ethnic Turks emigrated from Bulgaria to Turkey in 1989 for political reasons (net migration of more than 200,000 people). This mass uncontrolled emigration did not affect the population structures much because the whole families emigrated, but it did affect the total number of the population and the reproduction processes. The largest emigration flows were generated in the Eastern Rhodopes region and northeastern Bulgaria. The size of rural population in those regions decreased, or in other words depopulation in those regions occurred 'immediately'. The population loss in many municipalities varied between 20 to 50% (the municipalities of Venets, Varbitsa, Kaolinovo, Hitrino, Dulovo, Zavet, Loznitsa, Tsar Kaloyan, Ruen, Dzhebel, Stambolovo, etc. – Fig. 7). At present, the main reasons for emigration are economical, while emigrants prefer mostly the economically well-developed countries.

The internal migration, along with the natural increase, is another significant component of the depopulation process. As a result of urbanisation, internal migration affects mostly the rural settlements. The main migration flow in the country has been directed from urban to urban settlements during the period after 1985 (Table 4).

Table 4. Internal migrations in Bulgaria

Period	A		B	
	a	b	a	b
1961–1965	51.4	30.3	14.0	4.3
1966–1970	53.6	15.3	22.8	8.3
1971–1975	50.1	11.9	29.2	8.8
1976–1980	46.4	10.1	34.3	9.2
1981–1985	41.7	9.8	36.6	11.8
1986–1990	34.9	10.2	39.9	15.0
1991–1995	25.0	12.0	39.2	23.8
1996–2000	22.8	11.5	41.7	24.0
2001–2007	22.6	10.8	42.7	23.9

Explanation: A – from rural to; B – from urban to; a – urban settlements; b – rural settlements

Source: Authors' calculations based on National Statistical Institute data

In the last two decades the migration flow from rural to urban settlements has been significantly reduced. The exhausted migration contingents in rural settlements decrease in migration influence on the depopulation process. The increasing share of urban-to-rural migration flow during that period also played a constraining role for the depopulation process. Those migrations are not due to suburbanisation alone, which process has not yet been developed to such an extend as in Western Europe or Poland, for example. In many cases the retired population returns to their rural birthplaces. Thus, the rural population size rises in such cases, but this process does not repair the deteriorated demographic structures of the rural population and the socio-economic and territorial development effect of such urban-to-rural migrations is quite limited. The typical age structure of the rural population in Bulgaria is considerably deteriorated and for some of the villages the sex-age pyramid is even 'upside down'.

The migration rate is more than 25‰ (average annual) in more than half of the municipalities in Bulgaria – in Strandzha-Sakar region, Kraishte region, northwestern Bulgaria, the western border areas, the Rhodopes Mountains, Maritsa-Iztok region, Dobrudzha, etc.) (Fig. 8). The rural areas with higher emigration intensity expand in comparison with earlier periods. This results in an expansion of depopulation areas as well. Depopulation is limited in the district centres' zones of influence, as well as industrially developed towns, where enterprises of national significance exist and the emigration intensity is lower.

The net migration rate of the rural population in 124 out of the 264 municipalities in the country is negative during the discussed period, while the trend indicates worsening of the situation. The levels of negative net migration rate are high even in those areas where demographic indicators are better than the national average – the Ludogorie region, the western part of the Eastern Rhodopes Mountains, etc. These areas still have sufficient demographic potential, but they also have significant socio-economic, cultural, educational, everyday necessity problems, etc. The high levels of negative net migration rate combined with intensive emigration can easily lead to depopulation and negative age structure changes, which will contract significantly their reproduction potential.

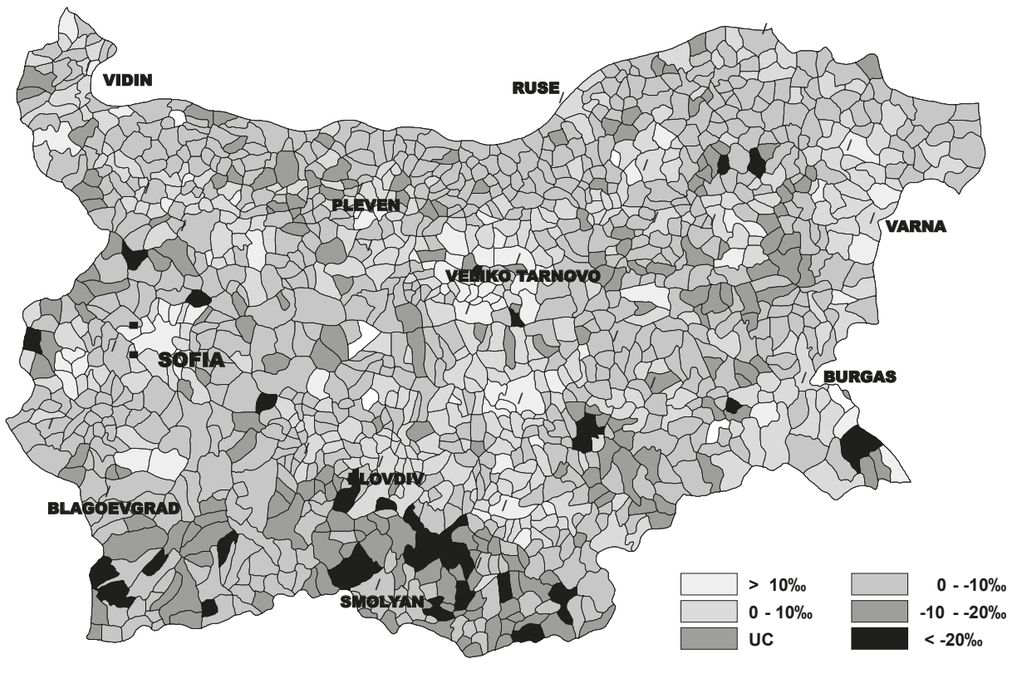

Fig. 8. Net migration rate (2007)

Explanation: UC – urban centre-municipality

Source of data: National Statistical Institute

The rural settlements network has been affected by permanent destructive processes as a result of the negative demographic processes and emigration of labour force from rural to urban settlements. A significant part of the villages have decreased their population number in catastrophic scales and have practically lost their labour force potential. This influences their labour market development (Ilieva, 2009). Another part of the villages, mostly in Central Stara Planina Mountains, the Kraishte region, Strandzha, and Sredna Gora Mountain are endangered by erasure or have already been erased from the Unified Classifier of Administrative-territorial and Territorial Units due to lack of permanent population.

3. Conclusions

The continuation of these processes will lead to depopulation of large areas in the mountainous and the border regions of the country. The living rhythms of villages with a favourable economical-geographic location will be deteriorated permanently. This will be a cause of serious obstacles of an organisational and production nature emerging as well as hampering, or inferior use of their lands, residential and public fund. The closing of schools and health care centres will continue because of the decreasing demographic potential. The small size of the population in some villages limits the election rights of their residents (the minimum number of population required for the residents of a village to have the right to elect mayor according to the law constantly decreases – initially this number was 500, later it changed to 350, while today it is 150). More than 2,000 settlements with population less than 150 inhabitants according to the changes in Administrative and Settlements Arrangement Act in 2007 are deprived of the right to elect mayors. Mayors in this case are appointed by the Municipal Council. Unfortunately, this situation will continue to worsen due to result of demographic development processes.

The depopulation generates an array of other negative trends in spatial aspect – for example, higher motivation of emigration, decrease of marriages and births, negative influence on the economic development and the labour market, as well as incomes and consumption. As a result of depopulation, society suffers big and sometimes irreversible losses which lead to social, economic and settlements destabilisation. This requires a system of preventive measures for the reduction of negative consequences, which measures are to be embedded in the strategies and the plans for national, regional and local socio-economic development. The improvement of transport infrastructure, provision of better public and private services, encouraging of economic activity, increasing the tourism role of the natural, and cultural-historical heritage can influence to the ability of the villages to attract settlers and maintain the number of residents. The improvement of villages' transport accessibility can create conditions for development of various forms of tourism, for revival of daily commuting between rural and urban settlements. This can play an anti-emigration role or can even attract new settlers willing to live in rural settlements.

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