

## POPULATION DISTRIBUTION IN BULGARIA

*Chavdar Mladenov*

This study aims to analyze the trends in Bulgaria's demographic development and population distribution during the period between the two census-takings in 1992 and 2001.

In the years of social and economic restructuring Bulgaria's population has steadily decreased. Depopulation is an objective process, which started on a nationwide scale in 1989 although it affected the rural population as early as 1975. At a regional level this process began much earlier (in 1930) and coincided with the trends and destinations of home migrations then. However, it was after the Second World War, when it accelerated, owing to industrialization, urbanization and governmental policy related to the rural population. As a result, the share of the urban population grew from 19.7% in 1887 to 69% in 2001 (census-based data).

Depopulation is a long and adverse process which influences the demographic conditions and the socio-economic progress on national and regional level (*Table 1*). The census-takings in 1985, 1992 and 2001 indicate that the population of the country dropped by 491,000 persons (5.5%) and by 514 000 persons (6.1%) in the first two years so as to reach the figure 7,973,671 in 2001. The population decrease was associated with the trends in natural increase and emigration. In 1985–1992 period the gross natural increase was positive (+4100 persons) while in the years 1992–2001 it markedly dropped and assumed negative values (–336,100 persons). The balance between immigration and emigration was negative: during the first period it was greater than that of the second one (469,200 and 175,000 persons respectively). The greater emigration during the first period should be assigned to the mighty emigration flow in 1989 and to the relatively loose visa restrictions posed by the European countries, Canada and USA when the emigrants could still be granted the status of political refugees. After the adoption of a tough visa regime, the number of emigrants significantly dropped and the population decrease over 1992–2001 was primarily due to the negative natural increase (–336,100 persons). The latter was associated with the aging of the population and with the changes in its reproductive behaviour (average number of children per one woman – below 1.3).

The changes in the population number show a clear spatial differentiation. The territorial redistribution of the population in the years between the two censuses has

Table 1

*Bulgaria's population by years of census*

Year of census	Number of population – in absolute figures			Share of the urban population, %
	Total	In the towns	In the villages	
1887	3 154 375	593 547	2 560 828	18,8
1892	3 310 713	652 328	2 658 385	19,7
1900	3 744 283	742 435	3 001 848	19,8
1905	4 035 575	789 689	3 245 886	19,6
1910	4 337 513	829 522	3 507 991	19,1
1920	4 846 971	966 375	3 880 596	19,9
1926	5 478 741	1 130 131	4 348 610	20,6
1934	6 077 939	1 302 551	4 775 388	21,4
1946	7 029 349	1 735 188	5 294 161	24,7
1956	7 613 709	2 556 071	5 057 638	33,6
1965	8 227 766	3 822 824	4 405 042	46,5
1975	8 727 771	5 061 087	3 666 684	58,0
1985	8 948 649	5 799 939	3 148 710	64,8
1992	8 487 317	5 704 552	2 782 765	67,2
2001*	7 973 671	5 500 695	2 472 976	69,0

\* - Preliminary data

resulted from the socio-economic transformation of the national economy. In the process of adaptation both positive and negative tendencies have taken place. For example, the economic crises have accelerated the motivation for emigration, have delayed the marriages and births, have produced a high level of unemployment, have limited the consumption, etc. In certain regions of the country these tendencies have become rather acute and brought about serious demographic, social and economic problems. Like in the past, certain settlements and regions have excessively grown today in contrast to others.

The urban population continues to raise in percentage share although it drops down in absolute figures. This is primarily due to the lower negative natural increase and to the conditions which prevent people from leaving the towns because of the lower level of unemployment, the higher incomes, the better lifestyle and job opportunities in them, etc. Nevertheless, during 1992–2001 the population in the towns has been declining mainly as a result of the negative migration increase (61% of the total decrease). All categories of towns experience a population decline, excepting the ones with 200,000–300,000 people. In absolute figures this decline is most distinct in the categories of towns with 20,000–50,000 people

(19.6% of the total urban population decrease) and with 50,000–100,000 people (24.7%). This can be ascribed to the negative natural increase, to the conversion of suburbs into independent villages and to the accelerating urban–rural migration. In terms of its relative share the population drop is most marked in towns up to 5000 people (8.9%) while in the remaining categories it ranges from 4 to 5%. The process of town formation has ceased. In 1992–2001 only 2 settlements have been declared towns which belong to the category of small towns. Just 47 towns have a positive natural increase where the Turks, gypsies and the cohort of women in fertile age constitute a large percentage share. Migration increase is observed in 63 towns but it cannot counterbalance the negative migration increase of the urban population in the country. The limited role of the migration increase in the small towns can be attributed to their insignificant social and economic potential, owing to which their functions as urban settlements are disturbed.

The depopulation in the rural regions of Bulgaria is characterized by: a marked population decline; a decreasing average density; a substantially aging population; a negative natural increase exceeding the negative migration increase; emigration; a low share of employed persons; a low educational and qualification level of the economically active population; a low social and economic status and limited possibilities for better positions; declining settlement functions. A consequence of the disturbances in the natural course of urbanization has been the activation of depopulation processes. Some of the depopulated regions were formed in the past as a result of the socio-economic policy, pursued then, and of the political and historical conditions. The depopulation processes in them were accelerated by the command-and-administer approach of management and by the deformed mechanisms of centralized planning. The territorial conditions and factors were ignored which brought about demographic disproportions. The population concentrated mainly along the urbanized axes around the big cities. During the period of investigation (1992–2001) the rural population has dropped approximately by 309,800 persons or by 11.1%. The population drop has been caused chiefly by the high values of the negative natural increase and by the distinct population aging. On the other hand, the land restitution for unknown reasons has taken quite a long time and the whole organization, referring to property right restoration on land has proved to be highly inefficient. Consequently, the unemployed persons did not have a motivation to orient themselves to the agricultural sector. The alienation of the young people from land and farming, the small profits ensuing from the use of low-efficient farm machines, the land fragmentation, the underdeveloped land leasing, etc., should be added to this. Unfortunately the rural migration has not significantly improved the rural population structures because the people, returning to the villages, are predominantly pensioners and persons in old working age who can hardly find a job under the new labour market conditions. This migration has not changed the demographic situation in the villages where the population aging keeps its high level. Many of the villages continue to be unattractive as locations to work and live in and hence, have lagged behind with regard to services. This holds especially for the

small, scattered, mountain and semi-mountain settlements, for the settlements in the border areas, for settlements specializing in cereal production, livestock breeding and fruit-growing and for the small and middle-sized villages in the plains far away from the urban and industrial centers.

Rural population drop is recorded in all categories of villages: in absolute figures this drop is most substantial in the big and middle-sized villages and in percentage share – in the small ones. The rural population drop is due predominantly to the negative natural increase which is responsible for 80% of it.

In the recent decade the migration increase of the rural population in some villages has become positive (about +3%). It is due mainly to the economic crisis in the country, to the economic restructuring, to the impressive unemployment, to the restoration of ownership over land, to the lower living costs in the villages and to the abilities of farmers to make money from their individual farms. From demographic, geographic social and economic viewpoint this is a favourable process.

At a regional level the areas with positive natural increase (the Western and Eastern Rhodope Mountains, the Eastern Stara Planina and Ludogorie) are few and these with high negative values (the western and central parts of North Bulgaria, The Upper Thracian Lowland, Strandzha, Sakar and the western border regions) rapidly grow in number. The spatial differences in the natural increase are on ethnical and religious basis. Only the region close to the town of Varna makes an exception because younger people have settled there as a result of the development of Varna–Devnya agglomeration and of tourism.

During the years 1992–2001 only part of the municipalities have a positive migration increase while the territories with better demographic parameters are notable for a negative migration increase. About 28% of the municipalities have a positive migration increase. Actually these are localities which have a potential for generating out-migration flows. They are situated primarily in mountain and semi-mountain regions, agriculturally unfit. Most of them are occupied by woodlands. It has to be noted that the problem with forest restitution is still unresolved.

Specific features in the urban population growth and distribution are the mono-centric pattern and relatively even distribution of towns on the territory of the country. Most stable is the population in the towns which perform or have long performed administrative and governmental functions of district (respectively regional) and municipal centers. Owing to their geographical location and functions, the administrative centers have incessantly increased their social, economic and cultural potential and turned into cores, attracting population.

The rural population, excepting a few regions and suburban zones, is declining throughout the country and is passing to a regressive type of reproduction. Since 1975 the natural increase has already become a factor for the rural population drop. The negative natural increase is responsible for over 19% of the total decrease. There are various reasons for the high values of the negative natural increase but most of them have to be sought in the marked population aging, in the reproductive behaviour oriented towards fewer children in the family, in the reduced births in all

groups of fertile ages, in the reduction of the contingent of the most productive child-bearing ages, in the mortality rise resulting from the population aging and the lower quality of medical service, associated with the delayed medical reform. The rural population decrease leads to changes in the distribution of the settlements by categories, ranked according to their size. The small villages grow in number. Particularly fast is the population drop in the dispersed settlements of the mountain and semi-mountain zones in Western Central Bulgaria, the Central Stara Planina, the region of Strandzha–Sakar, Ihtimanska and Sashtinska Sredna Gora. Some of these settlements, numbering over 100, are entirely depopulated. In 2001 more than 1/4 of the villages in Bulgaria had less than 100 people while in the past they were 1/5. This results from the accelerated regressive demographic development in the mid-sized and small villages. Compared with the past, the population marks a 3 to 15-fold decrease on the average. According to the censuses, the average population decrease of one village has changed as follows: from 1038 people in 1946 to 711 in 1975, 623 in 1985, 546 in 1992 and to 545 in 2001. Depopulation processes have started and intensified in regions, inhabited primarily by Turks, as the latter emigrated. In some municipalities the population drop is by 15–65% (Kaolinovo, Vetsnets, Varbitsa, Hitrino, Opaka, Chernoochene, Krumovgrad, Dzhebel, etc.) which has impeded their functioning. Compared with earlier periods, the rural areas with population decline have expanded and the rates of this decline have speeded up. At present, the urbanization, the maintenance of the old practice of rural–urban migration, the economic crisis, the retarded reform in agriculture, etc., continue to influence strongly the aforesaid process. In many rural regions the unsatisfactory working and living conditions are still a crucial factor for population decrease.

In 1992–2001 the population has grown only in some parts of the country: the Varna agglomeration, the regions of Plovdiv, Kozlodui, Petrich and Velingrad, and the areas around the inlet and outlet of the corridors cutting through the Sofia basin. The population growth in them is due to the positive natural and the positive migration increase.

In the period of transition in 38.2% of the municipalities the population decrease is associated with a greater negative natural increase and with a smaller negative migration increase. Second come the municipalities (26.7%) where the population decrease results from a negative migration increase, exceeding the negative natural increase. Rather impressive in number have become the municipalities (22.1%) in which the negative natural increase dominates over the positive migration increase. The other types of population decrease are poorly represented.

The tendencies in the population growth and spatial redistribution as well as in the transformation of the settlement systems into settlement macro-systems give grounds to conclude that urban agglomerations and urbanized zones are being formed nowadays in Bulgaria where the organizing functions are performed by the regional or district administrative centers.

The current trends in the population development and redistribution of Bulgaria will continue in the near future of which some will smooth down and others will

exacerbate. At a national level the population decrease will keep its rates due to the low birth rates (associated with the reduced contingent of females in fertile age), to people's inclination of having fewer children in the family and to the growing death rates (associated with the population aging and emigration).

There is a clear-cut polarization in the population concentration. The towns, especially the big and mid-sized ones, will continue to grow. The small towns are expected to develop like the small villages and they won't be able to retain their urban functions. The urban population growth is due chiefly to the natural increase. The rural-urban migration will be considerably reduced because of the population aging and the resultant decreasing number of out-migrants, the delayed structural reform in the economic sector, the high unemployment level, etc. It is the seasonal migrations that might become typical and impetus will be given again to the commuting flows, so common in the past.

The rural population will be further subjected to decline and aging and the regressive type of reproduction will expand and affect larger areas. The depopulation will go on at accelerated rates, turning vast mountainous, semi-mountainous and border regions into depopulated territories. Even the life rhythm in the settlements of favourable economic conditions and geographical location will be irretrievably disturbed. This will seriously impede the production organization and will cause the abandonment or inefficient use of the available land resources, residential buildings and public property. In order to prevent extensive rural areas from being depopulated, the district and regional development plans have to regard with due concern the promotion of agricultural specialization according to the specific natural conditions and economic potential of each territorial unit. No matter how difficult it might be, this problem should be urgently solved because the reorientation of inhabitants to depopulated areas is much more difficult and expensive than retaining their local residents.

The present-day characteristics and trends in the growth and territorial distribution of Bulgaria's population have aroused a number of demographic and demogeographic problems. The latter are closely associated with the social, economic and cultural development of the country and have proved to be essential for certain regions. The process of overcoming the negative and encouraging the positive trends in the population growth and distribution is rather difficult but by no means insurmountable.

In case the functions of the family as an independent productive unit, permanently living in villages, are restored, they might partially reduce the depopulation processes. The increasingly degrading environment in the towns has a favourable effect in this respect as it encourages the rural migration.

With the improvement of the transport access to the villages, there are opportunities to resume the village-to-town commuting which would make the local residents remain in the villages and would even tempt the former peasants, who settled down in the towns, to return to their native villages.

The change of the socio-economic system and the related reforms in the material and intellectual sphere have allowed to abolish the command-and-administer approach, to enhance the role of the local governments, to introduce market mechanisms together with the respective material and moral incentives. Regional planning, individual entrepreneurship and the latest scientific and technical achievements open up bright prospects in this respect. Science-based plans and strategies at a regional, district and municipal level are also helpful. The balanced development of the territorial units will guarantee optimum conditions for living, working and recreation. In the long-run perspective, owing to the economic stabilization, each citizen will be free to choose a place of residence, that will suit best his wishes, health, age and workplace and opportunities will be provided for even population reproduction and territorial distribution. However, it has to be noted that in the future some of the villages will drop off the settlement network because the lack of appropriate natural and economic conditions will hinder their functioning.

#### References

- Broi na naselenieto po naseleni mesta (predvaritelni dannii)*. Sofia, Tsentralno Statisticheskoe Upravlenie, 1976.
- Broi na naselenieto po oblasti i obshtini i naseleni mesta*. Sofia, Natsionalen Statisticheskii Institut, 1993.
- Demografska statistika*. Sofia, Tsentralno Statisticheskoe Upravlenie. Various years.
- Geografia na Bulgaria*. Sofia, BAN, 1997.
- Geshev, G. 1990: Depopulatzia na selskite teritorii v Bulgaria. – *Problemi na Geografiata*. 4.
- Michev, N. 1978: *Naselenie na Bulgaria*. Sofia.