

Population Trends in Serbia and the Implications for Settlement System

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Abstract

Demographic transition over recent decades has led to population decline as well as changes in fertility and mortality rates and household structure in Serbia. Negative natural growth and large scale emigration were partly compensated by refugee flows from the former Yugoslav republics, but this large refugee inflow will not have significant impact on the future demographic changes of Serbia. In the light of the first results of the 2011 Census of population, households and dwellings in Serbia, this paper is focused on contemporary and past population trends and their implications. Along with depopulation, there has also been a decrease in number of households, whereas there has been an increase in the number of settlements with small number of population and the ones without inhabitants, with large regional demographic differences. Significant changes in population pose a number of economic and social challenges for the society and government in the field of public finances, pension fund, health insurance etc., but also in domain of spatial planning and regional development.

Keywords: *demographic trends, population decline, settlement system, 2011 Census, Serbia*

Rezumat. Tendințe demografice în Serbia și implicațiile acestora pentru sistemul de așezări

Tranziția demografică din ultimele decenii a dus la o scădere a numărului populației, precum și la schimbări ale ratelor de fertilitate și mortalitate și a structurii gospodăriilor din Serbia. Bilanțul natural negativ și emigrarea masivă au fost parțial compensate de fluxurile de refugiați din fostele republici iugoslave, însă acest aport semnificativ de refugiați nu va mai avea un impact major asupra schimbărilor demografice viitoare din Serbia. Pe baza primelor rezultate ale recensământului populației, gospodăriilor și locuințelor din Serbia din 2011, lucrarea surprinde tendințele demografice trecute și actuale și implicațiile acestora. Pe lângă depopulare, s-a înregistrat și o scădere a numărului de gospodării, în timp ce numărul așezărilor cu puțini locuitori sau a celor care nu mai au niciun locuitor a crescut, însă cu mari diferențe demografice regionale. Schimbările semnificative ale populației ridică o serie de provocări economice și sociale pentru societate și autorități, în domeniul finanțelor publice, fondului de pensii, asigurărilor de sănătate etc., dar și în domeniul planificării teritoriului și dezvoltării regionale.

Cuvinte-cheie: *tendințe demografice, declin demografic, sistem de așezări, recensământ 2011, Serbia*

Introduction

During the last decade of the 20th century, Serbia had experienced crisis due to political and economic disintegration of Yugoslavia, sanctions and NATO bombing which have had demographic and social consequences. The most important reason which led to population decline was the trend of negative natural growth of population which was recorded for the first time in Vojvodina in 1989 and in Central Serbia in 1992. Since then, the negative trend continues. In the same period there has also been large-scaled emigration of Serbian population.

In the inter-census period 1991-2002, the population of Serbia reduced for 79,000 people. Depopulation was recorded in Central Serbia, but not in Vojvodina. Temporary reduction in the scale of depopulation was influenced with the influx of refugees. Without refugees, population of Serbia would have been reduced for 458,000 people. On the territory of the Republic of Serbia 617,728 refugees from other former Yugoslav republics were registered in 1996 (451,980 in 2001) (UNHCR,

Serbian Commissariat for Refugees, and ECHO, 2002). Data on territorial distribution of refugees in Serbia in 2001 indicate that 40.5% of refugees settled in Vojvodina, 31.2% in Belgrade, 28.3% in Central Serbia without Belgrade, while only 0.1% in Kosovo and Metohija (Lukić, Nikitović, 2004). Large number of refugees settled in Vojvodina due to the effects of social networks, as a result of colonization of the population from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia after World War II. The proportion of the refugee population in Vojvodina amounted to over 9% in 2002. In contrast, share of refugees in the total population in Central Serbia was about 3%. Today, the most dramatic demographic situation is in the Eastern and Southern Serbia, where a small number of refugees settled in in the 1990's. These are also traditionally emigrant zones of the country where a cultural pattern of one child birth exists, so inheritance would not have to be shared.

Census 2011 – Population trends

According to First results of 2011 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings, the Republic

of Serbia (without Kosovo and Metohija because of the lack of statistical data since 1999) had a total population of 7,120,660, meaning that Serbian population reduced by about 377,000 persons or 5% in the period 2002-2011. But, there are several things to be considered when comparing data from the final 2002 census results and the one from the first 2011 census results. There are different definitions of the total population (considering persons abroad, which are outside the country for less than one year, and internally displaced persons from Kosovo and Metohija), but also the boycott of the Albanian ethnic population which resulted in smaller census coverage in Preševo, Bujanovac and Medvedja municipalities, where this ethnic group is majority.

In order to obtain comparable data to the final census results from 2002, the total population in Serbia in 2011 (7.1 million) must be increased by about 80,000 (rough estimates of unlisted are about 60,000 and 20,000 residents which are abroad up to

one year) and reduced for about 200,000 internally displaced persons since they were not included in the total population 2002, which was a political decision. According to Serbian Commissariat for Refugees, there were 210,148 internally displaced persons in Serbia in 2010, comparing to 202,000 in 2001. In this case, the decline in the total population of Serbia is greater than 377,000 persons and it may be around half a million. Given that in the inter-census period negative natural growth was 316,493, it could be concluded that net migration balance in Serbia in the period 2002-2011 was -200,000 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2012a, 2012b).

The preliminary results of 2011 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in Serbia which refer only to the total population, number of persons abroad, number of the households and number of dwellings (Table 1) indicate negative demographic trends with large regional differences.

Table 1 First Census results for the Republic of Serbia and its NUTS2 statistical regions, 2011

Region	Total number of population, 2011	Total number of population, 2002	Absolute increase-decrease 2011- 2002	Total number of persons abroad	Total number of households	Total number of dwellings
REPUBLIC OF SERBIA	7,120666	7498001	-377335	294045	2497187	3243587
Belgrade Region	1639121	1576124	62997	41719	604134	739630
Region of Vojvodina	1916889	2031992	-115103	46031	697437	852229
Region of Sumadija and West Serbia	2013388	2136881	-123493	98274	665878	902997
Region of South and East Serbia	1551268	1753004	-201736	108021	529738	748731
Region of Kosovo and Metohia

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2011a

Statistical territorial division is in accordance with the international standard NUTS (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics). The basic division of the Republic of Serbia is the division into two parts - North (consisting of Belgrade and Vojvodina) and the South (which includes the rest of the state). Serbia is composed of five statistical regions – NUTS2.

Only the Belgrade region recorded an increase in population, while the largest fall occurred in the region of Southern and Eastern Serbia -11%. The most dramatic situation is in the Eastern and Southern Serbia. In the municipality of Crna Trava, this recorded the highest percentage of the elderly in the population for years, the population decreased by 28%. Out of 22 municipalities that recorded population increase in the period 2002-2011, eleven were Belgrade municipalities.

In the period 2002-2011 the average household size falls from 2.5 to 2.2. In Belgrade, there are six percent more households while in the Southern and Eastern Serbia the number of households decreased

by the same percentage. Based on the statements of members of their families, as opposed to the previous census when citizens abroad filled out census forms in embassies, consular offices and churches, 294,045 of Serbian citizens lived abroad.

Demographic Indicators

Negative demographic trends can be seen on the basis of presented demographic indicators:

- Crude birth rate (11.9 in 1991; 9.4 in 2010)
- Crude death rate (11.7 in 1991; 14.2 in 2010)
- TFR (1.6 in 2002; 1.4 in 2011)
- Natural increase -3.3 in 2002; -5.2 in 2011 (Serbia North -3.6; Serbia South -6.6)
- Mean age of population (41.4 in 2010) (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2012a, 2012b)

Negative natural growth of population in Serbia was partly compensated by receiving large numbers of refugees from ex Yugoslav republics Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. But, continuation of the decline in Serbia's total population size cannot be offset by recent refugee influx for several reasons. The

most important of them are: too small number of migrants comparing to the total population size of Serbia; similarity in fertility behavior between refugee and indigenous population; much older refugee population compared to emigrant population; and the processes of refugee repatriation and resettlement (Nikitović, Lukić, 2010).

In 2011, positive natural growth of population was recorded in only seven of 162 municipalities (one in Belgrade, one in Novi Sad and others were municipalities with majority of Albanian and Muslim population, namely Novi Pazar, Tutin, Sjenica, Bujanovac and Preševo). In 2010, in 1,140 settlements (24.2%) out of 4,706, no child was born (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2012b). Negative natural growth in Serbia is around 30,000 annually. In 1961 fertility was the last time at a level sufficient to provide generation replacement. Researchers in Serbia have already discussed issues of large number of abortions and economic crisis and unemployment that increases the feeling of insecurity, as reasons of low fertility, which lead to the intensification of the process of postponing births (Rašević, 2008; Rašević, 2006). Trying to answer the question of how many children Serbia does need (Djordjevic, 2004), one has come to conclusion that the main reason for low fertility in Serbia is lack of progression from second to third child.

Population in Serbia is ageing rapidly. In the last fifty years, the share of young age group in the total population of Serbia is almost halved and the share of older population has increased 2.5 times. According to data for 2010 in the total population of Serbia, young people under 14 years of age represent only 15%, which is less than the share of the population over 65 years - 18% (Fig. 1). Mean age of population in Serbia for 2010 was 41.4. "The oldest" is the Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia, where as many as 25% of the population is older than 60 years.

The phenomenon of ageing has become more significant over time. Progressive demographic ageing can be seen in the values of elderly dependency rate. The elderly dependency rate is currently 24.9% and it may increase to 33% by 2030, which would definitely put more pressure on public spending (first and foremost pensions, health care and social services).

With low birth rates, the proportion of young people under 15 has declined for a number of years and is projected to continue to do so in the future. On the contrary, the proportion of those aged 65 and over is rising significantly. Accordingly, the proportion is projected to increase from around 16% of total population in 1998 to 22% by 2025 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2011b).

Moreover, the relative number of people of 80 and older is also rising (1.94% in 2002, 3.14% in 2008).

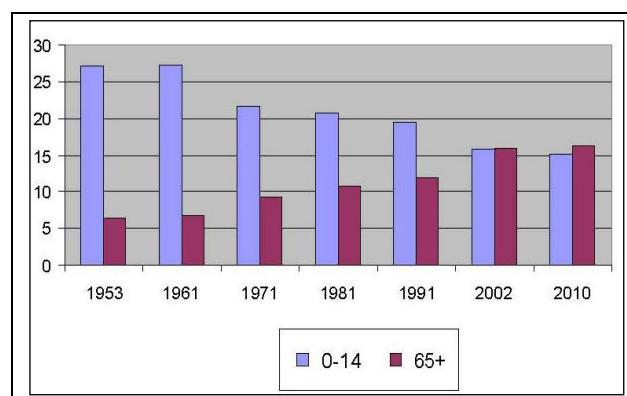


Fig. 1 The share of population 0-14 and 65 in total population of Serbia, 1953-2010

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2011b

The share of pensioners in total population of Serbia was only 2% in 1953. Starting from 1981 census, it continues to increase and their share in the period 1981-2002 was doubled from 8.2% to 16.7%. Average years of using pensions for the fund of employees in 2009 were 16 for men, and 19 years for women (Stojilković, 2011).

Negative demographic trends have affected the reduction in the number of households, but also change in their structure in terms of decrease of average household size and increase in the number of single and single elderly households. Regional differences in the average size of households in Serbia are the result of the different development of certain areas and also differential fertility by ethnicity. It has been shown that the birth rate is highly co-related with the average household size. The average number of household members has been reduced, the share of family households decreased (especially multi-family) and the proportion of one person households increased (Djordjevic, 2008).

When discussing about demography, it is very important to mention some specific groups of population. Serbia still hosts the largest number of refugees and internally displaced persons in Europe. According to UNHCR report, there were 71,350 refugees and 210,000 internally displaced persons in Serbia in 2012 (UNHCR, 2012). These longstanding refugees are in the so-called protracted refugee situation, meaning that they have been in exile for over five years.

Regarding Serbia's readmission agreement with the EU, since 2008 Serbia accepts returnees which are mostly Roma population from Germany, Sweden and Switzerland. According to the report of the Republic of Serbia, Government Commission for monitoring the visa-free regime (funded in February

2011) a total of 5,150 persons returned to Serbia from the EU countries in 2011 (Republic of Serbia, Government Commission for monitoring the visa-free regime, 2012). All those groups of population need help in their economic and social integration, but also affect demographic changes in their settlements and at the state level.

The biggest reason for unfavorable demographic trends is the negative natural growth. But besides direct demographic losses, there are indirect losses also related to children and posterity, thus decreasing demographic base and further aggravating the disequilibrium between population groups. The stochastic forecast predicts a continuation of the decreasing tendency of Serbia's population size, as the most probable demographic future, which would be reflected in the decrease of current population by 0.7 million inhabitants by 2030 namely by half a million more by 2050 (6.3 million). Depopulation will be contributed by considerably smaller generations born from the middle of the 1980's compared to cohorts born in the period 1971-1984. The expected pressure of the old-aged (65 and over) on the potential workers (20-64) in 2050 will be 46/100 contrary to the present level (28/100). Only a greater inflow of immigrants would contribute to Serbia's experiencing a demographic future according to the middle or high variant of stochastic forecast (Nikitović, 2010).

Policies and strategies for dealing with demographic change

The demographic situation in Serbia is similar to the one in other European countries. In the past fifty years, all these countries experienced declining fertility, delay of births for later age and increasing average age of the population. Negative demographic trends will have far-reaching economic consequences, especially for the sustainability of pension system, social protection and health care systems. That is why in recent years, the Serbian Government adopted documents of strategic type regarding the policy towards population fertility, mortality, population aging and migration as Serbia's response to the demographic problems:

- National strategy on aging 2006-2015 (2006),
- Birth encouraging strategy (2008),
- Law on the health care (2005),
- National program of health care for women and young children (2009)
- Migration management strategy (2009),
- The Strategy of returnees' reintegration based on the readmission agreement (2009),
- National Strategy for resolving problems of refugees and internally displaced persons for the period from 2011 to 2014 (2011) etc.

These documents are aimed at encouraging birth, promoting health in order to reduce mortality rates, establishing monitoring and management of migration flows and the creation of conditions for social integration and social inclusion of migrants. Stationary population, i.e. population in which the next generation will be the same size as the existing one, is defined as the goal of sustainable demographic development of Serbia. Strategic type documents should also enable solving the main problems of the elderly population in Serbia, out of which the poverty is the largest. The focus is on providing more instrumental support with greater participation of home care (Rašević, 2012). The main obstacle to the full implementation of Government strategies is insufficient budget in terms of global economic crisis. So, the state now has the legal and institutional frameworks, but there is not enough money to deal with the demographic issue seriously.

Spatial aspects of population change in Serbia – spatial demographic inequality in the settlement system

Population change in Serbia has its implications to population distribution and settlement system. Regional dimension of demographic change can be noticed through the fact that only the Belgrade region recorded an increase in population, while the largest fall occurred in the region of Southern and Eastern Serbia. Municipalities that have the largest population decrease are at the same time those with very small number of inhabitants. Regional and municipality dimensions of population change are the consequences of the long-term polarization of population and investment. It has already been confirmed that the urban centers at the Danube-Morava corridor are the main axis of the demographic and economic development of Serbia (Nikitović, Lukić, 2003).

Serbia's settlement system is characterized by a large number of settlements with small number of population. The settlement network of Vojvodina is different from the one in other parts of Serbia in terms of higher average settlement size, which is affected by different geographical, historical and political conditions. While the total number of settlements in Serbia increases, the number of settlements with small number of population and settlements without the inhabitants also increases.

Urban settlement system in Serbia consists of 194 urban settlements, where there are 24 towns (4 with more than 100,000 inhabitants). Demographic tendencies manifest themselves in the spatial and functional imbalances in the settlement system. The main effects of the spatial demographic polarization

of Serbia (without data for Kosovo and Metohija) can be seen in the fact that 36% of population is concentrated to only 17 settlements with more than 50.000 inhabitants, while over 35% of the territory is significantly below the average population density. The settlements without any inhabitant (their number increased from nine to eleven in the last

inter-census period) and settlements with small population and unfavorable structure with adverse consequences such as demographic ageing (Table 2) are a major problem. Out of 4,709 settlements (without Kosovo and Metohija), eleven villages without population were registered in 2011 versus 9 ones recorded in 2002.

Table 2 Number of settlements according to population size

Census year	Total number of settlements	Total number of settlements with less than 100 inhabitants	Total number of settlements with less than 20 inhabitants	Total number of settlements without population
1991	4693	465	32	2
2002	4706	707	104	9
2011	4709	975	198	11

Source of data: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

There were also 975 settlements with a less than 100 inhabitants (707 in 2002). We must point out that due to the boycott of the Albanian ethnic population; the 2011 census data on the level of settlements were not available for municipalities Bujanovac and Preševo. Such trend in settlement system is also going on in other nearby countries that are experiencing depopulation. In Slovenia at the end of 2011, 60 out of 6030 settlements were without inhabitants and in the same year, there were 119 such settlements in Croatia (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2012; Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

Long migration activity exhausted most of the demographic potential of rural areas in Central Serbia and Vojvodina. Main internal migration flows have had the same direction since the 60's (towards the capital city, macro regional centers and the main axis of development - the Danube-Morava Corridor). The main sources of migration until the 1990's of the 20th century were the small settlements. Significant reduction of their population indicated that they were losing their overall population growth (Stevanović, 2004). There is a trend of settling in urban settlements and also greater mobility of female population in 2010. In the Republic of Serbia, immigration to the city represented 70.6% of the total number of immigrants, while in villages 29.4% settled. The internal migration mostly involved people in the age cohort 25-34 years. Some villages in the immediate vicinity of major cities have become immigration centers in recent years (Migration Profile of the Republic of Serbia in 2010, Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2011).

Due to the selectivity of migrants by age, the emigration contributed to the accelerated ageing of the village which, among other things, had direct impact on population growth. In 2011 the share of the number of live births in urban areas was 69 percent (two times higher than in other areas), while in other areas it was only 31 percent. It is

indicative that about 200 settlements in the same year had no population younger than 20 years (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2012b).

According to Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses by UN in publications regarding 2011 Census in Serbia for 23 settlements with three or less inhabitants, demographic and socio-economic characteristics of population will be blurred for the protection of personal data.

As a result of polarization of population and investments, the regions which include large urban centers became the most prosperous while the other ones became less developed, which as the result had unbalanced development and regional disparity. The dominance of metropolitan area of Belgrade in the Serbian urban system poses challenges for the regional development.

Contrary to the dynamic development of macro regional centres, there are undeveloped areas with many economic, demographic and social problems. In most of the undeveloped municipalities of Serbia, the population number has the tendency of long-term decrease. Population of undeveloped areas decreases ten times more on average per year than that of the Republic. The analysis of the share of higher and highly educated population in the total population older than fifteen years showed that this category of educated population has fewer representatives (5.5%) in relation to the average of the Republic (11%) for undeveloped areas, as well as for all undeveloped municipalities respectively. Disproportions in the level of education are especially expressed when talking about rural settlements - the share of 2.8% of higher and highly educated while 3.6% was the average of the Republic (Tošić, Lukić, Ćirković, 2009). Intensive process of demographic change within the undeveloped area is reflected in the drastic depopulation. For example, in 1948 the population in Crna Trava municipality was 13,600, whereas in

2011 there were only 1661 inhabitants registered. As of 2010, the crude death rate for Crna Trava was extremely 50.9 per 1000 per year.

Due to the constant decline of the population within the underdeveloped areas and the unfavorable age structure, the human factor is becoming a big constraint to development. Negative demographic trends have resulted in unfavorable educational structure of labor force, which, by its performance, cannot meet the demands of the labor market. These trends are directly related to low economic activity of the area and the high unemployment rate, which was 49.3% in 2008 (two times higher than the national average, 26.7%). Consequently, low employment and economic activity generated the increase in the number of

poor population living in underdeveloped areas. A quarter of the total poor Serbian population lives in Southern Serbia Deepening regional differences affect the very unfavorable demographic indicators in undeveloped areas. In the settlement system of Serbia, the proportion of settlements with less than 20 residents increased significantly in the previous inter-census period (from 2.2% to 4.2%). These are mainly mountainous or border villages in East and Southeast Serbia and on regional border with Kosovo and Metohija belonging to undeveloped municipalities. Municipalities with more than 14 settlements where less than twenty inhabitants live are Dimitrovgrad, Kuršumljija, Novi Pazar and Prokuplje (Fig. 2).

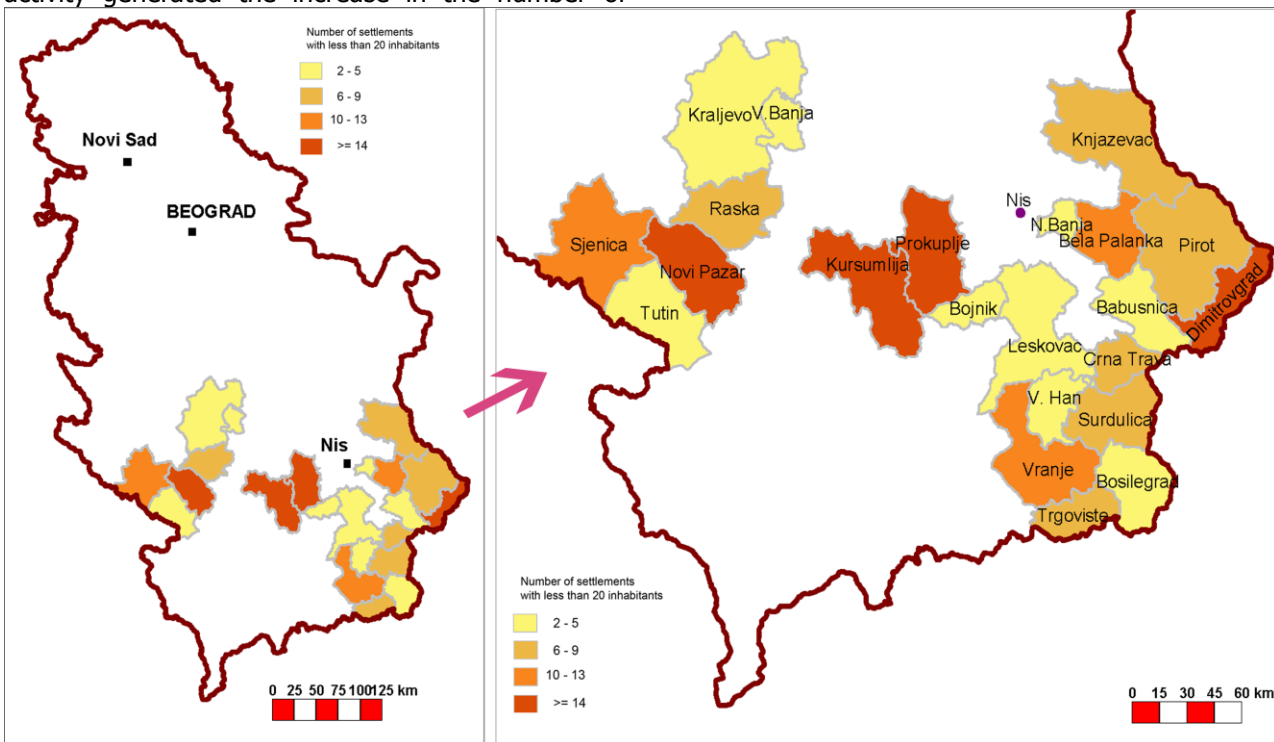


Fig 2 Municipalities in Serbia according to number of settlements with less than 20 inhabitants, 2011

Strategic type documents related to regional development policy

Serbia is in the group of European countries with the largest regional differences. The fact that out of 162 municipalities, 45 are undeveloped clearly shows us the size of regional disparities' problem. These municipalities are mainly located in Southern Serbia. Except for the differences in the development of northern and southern parts of the country, there are large differences in the level of development between rural and urban settlements. According to the first National Report on social inclusion and poverty reduction of the Government

of Serbia in 2008, the relationship between the most and the least developed local authorities, indicated by the level of economic development, amounted to 10:1. In the period 2002 – 2009, the percentages of poor people in rural areas increased from 7.5% to 9.6%, which was twice as high compared to the urban areas (4.9%). Rural households with mixed sources of income are in a better position compared to the farms whose members have no other source of income (National Report on social inclusion and poverty reduction, Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2011).

Deepening regional differences affect the very unfavorable demographic indicators in undeveloped areas. In recent years the Serbian government has shown increasing awareness of the negative aspects

of the continuing polarization of population and investment, and has adopted strategic type documents related to regional development policy. These documents are aimed at reducing the demographic, spatial, economic and social inequalities. They determine the level of development - categorization and typology of areas undeveloped areas, development policies for stimulating regional development and define institutions that should be holders of balanced regional development. The classification of the country into NUTS regions and areas according to the Law on Regional Development of the Republic of Serbia should be instruments of the balanced and polycentric regional development of Serbia.

The main strategic type documents related to regional development policy in Serbia are:

- Strategy of Regional Development of the Republic of Serbia 2007-2012 (2007),
- The Law on Regional Development of the Republic of Serbia (2009),
- Spatial plan of the Republic of Serbia 2010-2014-2021 (2010).

The classification of spatial units according to development level is important for direction of the funds. According to the Strategy of regional development of the Republic of Serbia for the 2007-2012 period, insufficiently developed areas are economically underdeveloped areas with national income per capita less than 50% of the national average and the areas with specific development problems: demographically endangered regions - population decrease more than 40%, (1971-2002), border zones with structural and demographic problems - population decrease of more than 20% (1971-2002) and unemployment rate higher than 60% and Serbian municipalities in Kosovo and Metohija (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 21/07).

Spatial plan of the Republic of Serbia due to different, numerous demographic, social and economic factors defines another category with specific development problems beside the underdeveloped area and the Serbian communities on Kosovo and Metohija. That is the devastated area. Devastated area includes 20 industrial cities that during the period of transition economy (1990-2008) have lost more than 40% of income and more than 50% of employees in the manufacturing industry. The area encompasses 18.8% of the territory, where a 20% of the population of Serbia lives (Ministry of Environment, Mining and Spatial Planning and the Official Gazette, 2010).

The above mentioned documents set the basic goals of regional development such as the reduction of regional and intra-regional differences in the level of socio-economic development and living standards, development of underdeveloped areas

and the reduction of negative demographic trends. Measures and activities are specifically related to the areas with the particular developmental problems, through the stimulation of investment and capital inflows with greater emphasis on local government.

As a major demographic target, mitigation or stopping the negative demographic trends is stated, with an increase in fertility, reducing the negative migration balance and reaching the level of replacement (stationary population) in the long run, but also demographic revitalization of disadvantaged areas. Space-related objectives are establishing more uniform spatial distribution of the population through the development of small and medium-sized cities and reducing the concentration of population in major cities.

Conclusion

The political and economic crisis, along with transition processes, led to deepening demographic and socio-economic differences of various parts of the Republic of Serbia. The main demographic changes in Serbia are the population decrease and the rapid ageing of its population due to the trends over time in the interplay of decreased fertility, increased mortality and net emigration. Population decrease, jointly with emigration, resulted in imbalance in the spatial distribution of population i.e. spatial demographic inequality in the settlement system.

Deepening socio-economic regional differences affect the very unfavorable population trends in undeveloped areas. Demographic indicators suggests large regional and settlement differences. It is worth noticing the exceptional role of the Belgrade region, as the Serbia's capital and the largest urban agglomeration, in terms of population dynamics and migration. On the other side, the number of settlements with small population or without inhabitants is increasing with the tendency of growth in the future due to demographic trends and disturbed demographic structure in these settlements. So population change in Serbia results in spatial demographic inequality in the settlement system.

Negative population trends have major implications for Serbia. Given the increasing proportion of persons aged 65 and older and an increasing average age of the population, Government finances are facing with shrinking working labor, as well as rising pension and health-care costs. Aware of depopulation problems, unfavorable population structure and regional development imbalances, the Serbian Government has adopted policies and strategies regarding the fertility, mortality, population aging, migration and regional development in recent years. These

documents are aimed at solving the demographic problem and directing the population trends, improving spatial equilibrium population and balance settlement structures, but also at reducing regional demographic and socio-economic disparities. Besides reduction or stopping of depopulation and preserving the required demographic structure, there is a need of improving the educational and economic structure of the population in undeveloped areas and rural settlements according to demands of socio-economic development. Above all it is important to consider the right spatial contexts for the study of demographic problems. Active implementation of the population policy with respect to regional and settlement characteristics in Serbia is of the utmost importance.

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