

CONTEMPORARY DEMOGRAPHIC DEVELOPMENT AND PROBLEMS OF DANUBIAN URBAN SETTLEMENTS IN BULGARIA

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Key words: demographic development; Danubian region; urban settlements; demographic situation

INTRODUCTION

The basic goal of the regional development strategies and plans, including the National Strategy for Demographic Development of the Republic of Bulgaria 2006-2030 (<http://www.mlsp.government.bg/bg/docs/demography/demograph.htm>) and The Millennium Development Goals (UNDP, 2003) is to offer means and measures for solving the various problems posed by the demographic situation, according to the specificity of the socio-economic development of each municipality. The aim of this paper is to detect the trends in the demographic development of the Danubian urban settlements and the socio-economic problems that result from their specific demographic situation. The paper focuses on urban settlements located in all municipalities in Bulgaria which have access to the Danube River banks. Those municipalities are linked to one another by the river, which serves as a transport artery, but is not used rationally and on full-scale capacity, because of little or no economic integration between the Danubian municipalities.

There are a total of 23 municipalities bordering the Danube River in Bulgaria, out of which 4 have no urban settlements. The total number of the urban settlements in the discussed zone is 22, 12 of those – situated on the river bank itself (Fig.1.). The analysis is based on the period between 1992 and 2008 during which 2 settlements gained urban status – Slivo pole (in 2002) and Marten (in 2006).

The settlements along the Danube River, especially the urban ones, have always been connected to the river since their foundation. However, the river has always represented a border line, even until today, which eventually leads to a certain level of isolation from the inner parts of the country. This relative isolation hinders, more or less, the overall development of the settlements along the river. This results in

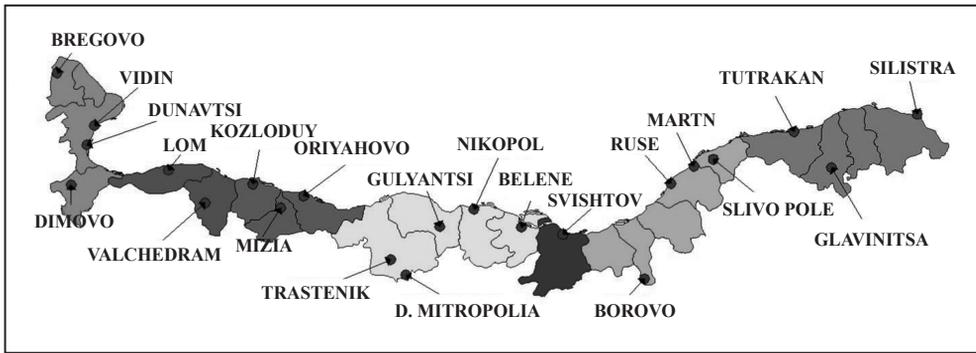


Fig. 1. Location of the urban settlements in the Danubian municipalities of Bulgaria

economic degradation, intensifying of emigration and basically – decrease of the population number.

Most of the Danubian urban settlements have been founded originally as fortresses along the higher right (Southern) bank of the river during Roman period, and later have gained importance as river ports and trade centers. In the following centuries, especially after The Liberation, the multifunctional utilization of the river prospered and this lead to economic development of the areas along the river. The range of human activities related to the river grew and the international river transport developed. The urban settlements along the river gradually gained a number of various functions. It was in those river ports where the national and the regional export-import traffic was realized. The Danubian urban settlements turned into important, multifunctional administrative centers which formed certain impact zones around them.

DYNAMICS OF THE POPULATION NUMBER

The current population dynamics of the Danubian urban settlements in Bulgaria is negative. The population number of all towns in the discussed area had been growing from 1946 till 1990. The three district centers – Ruse, Vidin and Silistra, tripled their population number during that period, mostly through attracting residents from the rural areas in their zones of influence. That process was relatively quick and thus the demographic potential of the rural settlements was exhausted, which lead to stagnation of the population growth by the end of 1970s. (Kiradzhiev, Mladenov, 1990)

The political, economic and social changes following 1990 lead to redistribution of the population in the country. The opening of the national borders, the removal of the settling restrictions concerning the large cities and the economic reformation, triggered many negative trends in the population development. During the discussed period between 1992 and 2011, only two urban settlements increased their population number – the university city of Svishtov (by almost 17 %) and the Bulgarian nuclear power plant hometown – Kozloduy (by over 3 %). All the other (20) urban settlements along the Danube decreased in population number: 2 of them registered a

decrease less than 10 % (the newly proclaimed town of Slivo pole and the largest Bulgarian Danubian city – Ruse). In a group of another 12 urban settlements, the decrease is between 10 and 20 %, while in another 6 towns the decrease is over 20 % (Fig. 3). The highest decrease of the population, as a rule, is registered among the smallest towns, which affects significantly their urban functions and overall development.

The mechanism in which the population number changes is defined by the specific features of the reproductive and the migration behavior of the population in each urban settlement. According to Webb (1963), there are 8 types of population number change – 4 types of population increase and 4 types of population decrease. Among the Danubian urban settlements just 3 types are being observed – 5th, 6th and 8th (Fig.2.). The 2 urban settlements which have increased their population number have done that in type 8 mode – positive migration flow exceeding their natural population decrease. As a result of immigration of relatively young population groups in both towns, their natural decrease rate is low and thus – easily compensated by the positive net migration rate. The age structure of the two urban settlements – Svishtov and Kozloduy, being relatively favorable, enhances them to develop comparatively well in demographic aspect. Their current economic potential, however, is not enough to sustain a positive net migration rate for a long time. Therefore, it is expected that the type of population growth will alter in the future.

In the 20 urban settlements with decreasing population (Fig. 3), the decrease is type 5 and type 6. Both types are equally distributed. Population decrease type 5 (the natural decrease of the population exceeds the negative net migration rate) is typical mostly for smaller towns, but also for the city of Ruse – a city with negative demographic situation. In that group of settlements, the high rates of natural decrease of the population is being sustained by low birth rates (less than 9‰) and comparatively high death rates (15‰ or higher). In this category of urban settlements, the problems of population reproduction worsen by the complex influence of the negative net migration rates. Therefore, in order to face the problems in those settlements, complex programs for stabilization of the socio-economic development are needed, which programs should be created using a “town-specific“ approach – that is - with the consideration of the specific conditions and potentials of each settlement. A prior-

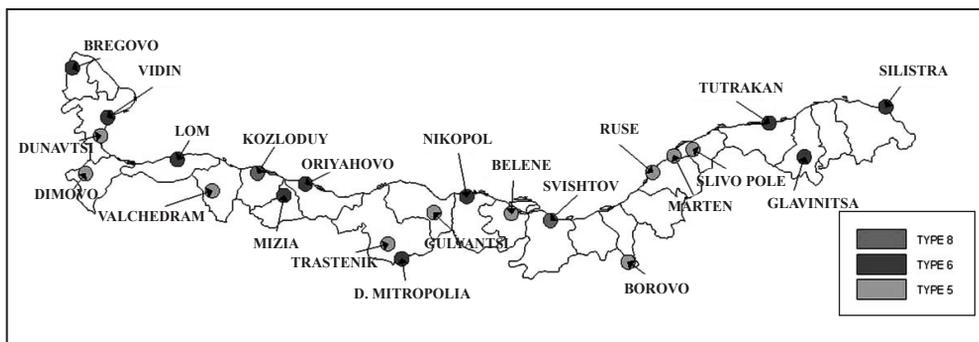


Fig. 2. Type of population change in the Danubian urban settlements in Bulgaria in the period between 1992 and 2011

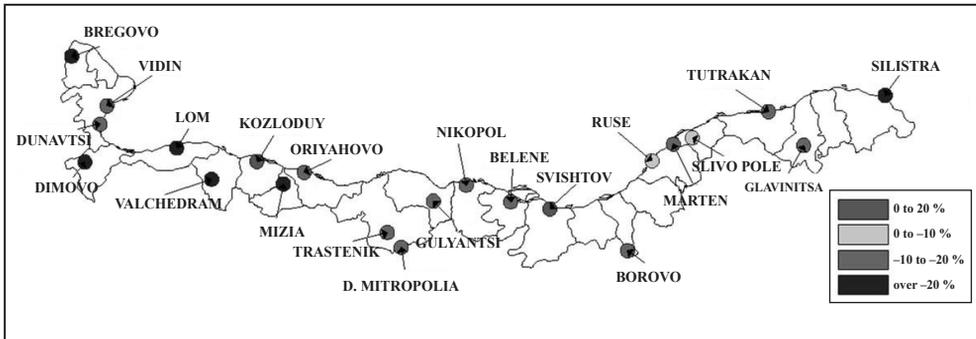


Fig. 3. Relative decrease of population number of the Danubian urban settlements in Bulgaria for the period 1992 – 2011

ity in those programs should be emigration prevention activities and policies on one hand, and policies aiming attraction of new settlers, on the other.

Ten urban settlements decreased their population number in the type 6 mode – in that case the negative migration rate is the main factor and exceeds the natural decrease of the population. The values of birth rates and death rates in that category of settlements resemble the national average values. The main depopulation factor here is the negative net migration rate. As a result, the share of older population grows and thus – the demographic situation as a whole deteriorates. That situation is worse in the smallest towns. Unfortunately, considering the current socio-economic conditions, policies and programs aiming positive change in the future development trends in such settlements, can hardly be implemented. Therefore, the changes that are about to take place in that type of towns are going to occur through natural demographic processes.

POPULATION REPRODUCTION INDICATORS

The population reproduction of the urban settlements in the discussed area is strongly influenced by migration and by the ethnic composition of the population. The latter defines to a great extent the natural reproduction of the population at a given type of age structure. The highest natural decrease of the population is measured in settlements with high shares of Roma and ethnic Turks and in settlements with higher numbers of new settlers.

The birth rate of the population in Danubian towns of Bulgaria are generally lower than the national average for the discussed period (between 1992 and 2011) and is on the average 8,7 ‰. It has fallen significantly compared to the period between the previous 2 censuses (1985-1992) when it was 13,1‰, but it was another reproduction motivation that influenced the number of children per family at that time. The main reasons for lowering the birth rates are the forced emigration of ethnic Turks (and later the voluntary emigration of Bulgarians as well – emigration abroad or to other parts of the country). This emigration process was triggered by ecological, economic (stagnation, unemployment), political (forced emigration of ethnic Turks

to Turkey in 1989) factors, the combined influence of which, strongly affected the reproduction behavior of the population. The low birth rates predefine a narrowed reproduction type which doesn't allow "broadening" of the sex-age pyramid at its base. This leads to aging of the population from the pyramid base and to sustaining of natural decrease of the population.

The birth rate trends in the region follow the national trends. During the discussed period, the mean annual decrease of the birth rate was 1,1 % which is lower than the decrease of the birth rate observed during the previous period (1985 – 1992), when it was 1,6 % (Mladenov, Traykov, 1995). That is because of the higher birth rates of the population in the cities during that previous period. The lowering of birth rates in some Danubian towns is a result also of interior migration of families traditionally having larger number of kids – such as Roma families, who seek better conditions in the interior of the country, and to a lesser extent – to changes of reproduction behavior.

The Danubian towns can be divided into 3 groups according to the birth rate values: settlements with very low birth rates (less than 8 ‰), with low birth rates (from 8-10 ‰) and approximate to the national average rates (10-12 ‰).

Very low birth rates are measured in 8 urban settlements – with the exception of Silistra and Svishtov, the rest are small towns with limited demographic and economic potential, which have been donating emigrants for a long time and continue to do so. The low birth rates measured in Svishtov come as a result of migration turnover of fertility contingents of students, which realize their reproduction capacities in other places, because of the relatively limited economic potential of the town itself; on the other hand, the local population is quite aged. In the case of Silistra, the low birth rates are due to the high number of ethnic Turks (emigrants) and to the limited economic potential of the town after the economic reformation, which makes the city unable to attract new settlers of younger generations.

The birth rate is considered low in 8 urban settlements, 5 out of which are located on the river banks, including Ruse and Lom, while all the rest are relatively small towns. The low birth rates in that group come as a result mostly of the population aging, together with the comparatively slow economic development combined with limited capacity of the neighboring areas to donate new settlers.

Birth rate levels higher than 10 ‰ – that is - close to the national average value, are observed in 6 urban settlements in the region. With the exception of Vidin and Kozloduy, this value is due to ethnic factors – high share of Roma and/or ethnic Turks, ethnic groups which maintain higher fertility. In the case of Vidin, along with this ethnic factor, the positive influence of overcoming the economic stagnation and the implementation of infrastructural projects, plays a positive role too, while in the case of Kozloduy, the major factor of maintaining a comparatively better demographic situation is the existence and the operating of the nuclear power plant there, which is a factor for better age structure of the town's residents.

The other important indicator of the population reproduction is the death rate. Its parameters are highly dependent on the demographic and socio-economic factors.

The death rate of the total group of Bulgarian Danubian urban settlements for the period between 1992 and 2011 is lower than the national average – 12,2 ‰. It has slightly increased compared to the previous period between censuses (1985-1992) when it was 10,1 ‰. The main reason for that increase of death rates is the aging of

the population because of emigration (in 1989 ethnic Turks, but later – ethnic Bulgarian population as well), combined with unstable functioning of health and social infrastructure.

The death rate trends follow the national trends and those the urban settlements in the country as a whole. The mean annual growth of the death rate value for the discussed period (1992-2008) is 1,13 %, which is lower than the one measured on a national level – 1,39 %.

The death rate varies a lot from town to town – from 9,3 ‰ in Svishtov to 24,6 ‰ in Valchedram. Taking in consideration the national average values, the Danubian towns can be divided into 4 groups according to the death rate values: urban settlements with very low death rate (less than 10 ‰), with low death rate (between 10-12 ‰), with approximate to the national average death rate (12-15 ‰) and towns with very high death rate (over 15 ‰).

Very low death rate is measured only in Svishtov which, being a university center, concentrates a large share of younger population. Three other urban settlements – Vidin, Ruse and Silistra – form the category of towns with low death rates. In that case this is a result of the lesser aging of their population, together with (all three being district capitals) better health and social infrastructure.

In 9 urban settlements in the region death rates are similar to the national average value. Six of those are old settlements located on the river banks. The intensity of population aging in that group of towns resembles the national average, while their limited economic and healthcare potential, both define such death rate values. In the rest of the settlements – another group of 9 – the death rates are very high. Those are mostly small towns with exhausted demographic potential as a result of emigration, and high share of senior residents. The new residents that settle in those towns are basically retired people and representatives of older generations – the so called risk age groups. The economic profile of those settlements – prevalence of agricultural sector, together with the low functional hierarchy level they occupy, hinders the improvement of their age structure through immigration of younger settlers, which keeps the trend of maintaining high death rates.

The natural increase/decrease of the population comes as a result of the birth rates and death rates. It indicates to a great extent the reproduction capacity of a population group. During the discussed period, the natural increase of the population of the Danubian towns in Bulgaria is negative (or, instead of natural increase, a natural decrease is being observed) – minus 3,4 ‰ (1992-2008). Prior to 1992 that indicator had positive values of around 3,0 ‰ for the period 1985-1992. As a result of quick lowering of birth rates and comparatively slower death rate growth, a steady trend of natural population decrease has been established. As a whole, its values in the discussed group of settlements are lower than the national average value. The negative values of that indicator clearly show the regressive type of population reproduction. The reasons for that are of demographic, economic, psychological nature etc. That type of population reproduction leads to lowering of population number and to natural worsening of the quality of its demographic structures.

During the period between 1992 and 2011 not a single urban settlement registered natural increase of the population (Fig.4.). It was only in the town of Vidin where the value of that indicator was 0 ‰. In all the other urban settlements it varied between minus 1,3 ‰ (Glavinitsa) to minus 16,7 ‰ (Valchedram). In a group of

11 towns, the natural decrease rates are within 0‰ to minus 5 ‰. Those are settlements of various sizes and the reason for that level of natural decrease is the comparatively better age structure they have (in the case of the larger cities) or the ethnic composition of their population (a factor in some of the smaller towns). In that group of urban settlements, a comparatively steady demographic situation could be achieved by implementing reasonable socio-economic policy combined with relatively small-sized investments. Without those, that group of settlements could quickly move down to the lower category of settlements – those with high values of the natural population decrease and deteriorated complex parameters of the demographic situation.

In another group of 5 urban settlements in the discussed region, the values of the natural population decrease vary between minus 5 ‰ and minus 10 ‰. Those are small towns with low economic potential, deteriorated demographic situation and limited urban and administrative function capacities.

In another group of 5 other towns, the natural population decrease exceeds minus 10 ‰. Those are all small towns located in agricultural areas away from the river itself (Dunavtsi being the only exception). The high negative values of the indicator in that group of settlements lead to destructive demographic and settlement changes. Their profile is featured by low economic potential and relatively significant remoteness from medium and large cities. Those settlements have been donating significant numbers of emigrants for a long period of time, which has eventually lead to progressive aging of their population and thus maintaining regressive type of population reproduction.

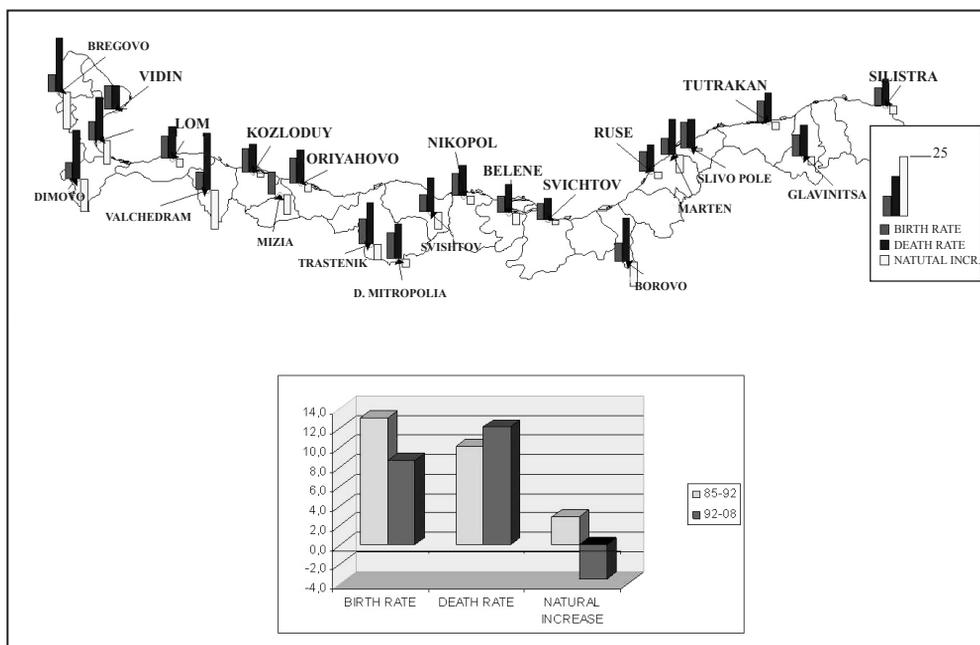


Fig. 4. Natural increase/decrease of the population of the Danubian urban settlements in Bulgaria

The small towns in the Danubian region vary a lot in terms of remoteness and transport-geographic location, as well as opportunities for daily commuting to larger towns. The small towns also vary a lot by economic profile, demographic situation and population reproduction capacity etc. All that, poses serious problems in their overall development nowadays and for the future, and requires “town-specific” approach in the process of developing various programs, strategies and future policies implementation (Mladenov, Traykov, 1999).

MIGRATION OF THE POPULATION

Very important factor for shaping out the population dynamics trends in the Danubian towns is the migration process which is in direct connection with their socio-economic development trends. Migration ‘on the other hand’ affects the demographic situation itself. The importance of migration for the population growth is more significant in the larger urban settlements with comparatively higher economic potential. Thus, for the period between 1947 and 1985, 69 % of the population growth of the city of Ruse was a result of immigration flow. In the case of Vidin that share was 66 %, in Silistra – 56 %, in Svishtov – 56 %, in Lom – 52 %, etc. In the years following 1985 the net migration rate gradually turned negative as a result of economic reformation, unemployment, quality of life, the fall of the settling ban which existed in the large cities, restitution and regaining of land ownership and real estate ownership. Additionally, the change in the structure of the migration flow has also an impact, as well as the changes in the age structure of the population and the changes in psychological perception of the population of places for residence and labor.

As a whole, the Danubian towns in Bulgaria maintain a high migration turn-over which is due to their economic instability during the so-called transitional period (the years after 1989). The migration movement of the population has specific spatial features and development trends in the different urban settlements in the discussed region. Those specific features are pretty much defined by the economic-geographic conditions, the geographic location itself, the position of the settlement in the settlements network and the spatial distribution of the different ethnic groups.

The settling intensity index for the 1992-2011 period is 22,9 ‰ but it varies a lot between 7,3 ‰ (Bregovo) and 43,8 ‰ (Svishtov), and is generally higher than the national average. Settling intensity index below 20 ‰ is observed in 7 towns in the region. Those are urban settlements of various functions, size and economic development level. Some of them are underdeveloped because of their remoteness and regressive demographic situation, such as Bregovo, Trastenik etc., which have very limited potential for attracting new settlers. In the rest of the towns in that group, especially the older settlements such as Ruse, Nikopol and Tutrakan, the low settling index is a result of their unsteady economic development in the years of transition towards market economy. In the new conditions their economic and technical etc. infrastructure was unable to operate at a full capacity, which resulted indirectly in reduction of the number of new settlers.

Relatively high settling index of over 20 ‰ is registered in a group of 15 towns in the region. This category is formed by the other two district capitals – Vidin and Sil-

istra, multifunctional towns such as Svishtov and Kozloduy, as well as many smaller towns with no significant functions. In the case of the first four urban settlements mentioned above, the value of the settling index is a result of the existing opportunities those towns offer to the population in their hinterlands (zones of influence). In the case of some smaller towns, settling index values are a result of their location in the zones of influence of some larger towns and thus maintaining higher settling attractiveness (that is the case of the small towns of Dunavtsi, Marten, Slivo pole etc.), whereas in the case of some other small towns, the high settling index value is due to the return of elderly residents or even former emigrants, back to their hometowns (the case of Bregovo, Dimovo, Valchedram, Glavinitsa etc.).

During the period between 1992 and 2011 the mean emigration intensity rate for the Danubian towns in general is 24,5 ‰, which is higher than the national average. However, this index varies a lot – from 4,7 ‰ (Bregovo) to 37,5 ‰ (Glavinitsa). Low rate of emigration intensity is observed in 3 urban settlements only – the small towns of Bregovo and Trastenik, and the city of Ruse. In the case of the first two settlements this is due to their weak economic development, while in the case of Ruse – it is a result of its attractiveness for job opportunities and its relative economic stabilization. High emigration intensity rate (more than 20‰) is observed in all the rest (19) urban settlements in the region. With the exception of Vidin and Silistra – all are medium and small towns. The existing economic base and infrastructure in those settlements doesn't meet adequately the modern requirements and the new market conditions, which is an indirect factor of emigration of the local population. Most of the towns from that group are located in agricultural areas, their economic zones of influence have weakened significantly, but they still operate as municipal centers. Some of the towns are influenced by large shares of Roma or ethnic Turkish population. The high emigration intensity rate of the small towns is also due to their low demographic mass which is easily affected by even a small number of emigrants.

Emigration is a process that involves mostly younger population contingents, which results in gradual closure of various public facilities such as kindergardens, schools, hospitals, bus lines etc.). That leads to formation of a “vicious circle“: major social facilities and services close up, which leads (together with the lack of perspectives for career and family) to additional emigration flow of many young and middle-aged people. The rising of the cultural and educational level of the population in Danubian towns, as well as the employment capacity of the inner parts of the country, are important factors for emigration to other parts of Bulgaria and/or abroad. In perspective, the emigration intensity in the Danubian urban settlements will be defined to a great extent by the demographic situation, as well as the social, economic and settlement development of the different parts of the country.

In the years following 1992, the migration growth of the urban population decreased and in many cases a migration decrease of the population was triggered. This is exactly the case of the Danubian urban settlements as a whole (migration decrease on the average is minus 1,6 ‰). This is a result of the limited capacity of the hinterland to continue to provide migrants on one hand, and of lesser migration attractiveness of the towns because of their economic stagnation and recession, on the other. The migration increase/decrease of the Danubian towns vary from 12,6 ‰ (Svishtov) to minus 9,0 ‰ (Nikopol) – being the two most extreme values (Fig. 5.). The following urban settlements registered positive values of the migration increase of the

population (5 out of 22 total): Bregovo, Dunavtsi, Kozloduy, Svishtov and Ruse. In the case of the first two – it is a temporal process and is not able to compensate the natural decrease of their population, although the migration inflow forms a better age structure.

The other 17 urban settlements in the region suffer a migration outflow, respectively – decrease of their population number. Relatively low values of the migration decrease (minus 5 %) are observed in 6 towns – Valchedram, Gulyantsi, Trastenik, Borovo, Marten and Slivo pole. They are all of the small town category, located in the interior of the research area with relatively low industrial development and mainly agricultural in specialization, together with deteriorated age structure and small demographic mass. Average levels of migration decrease (from minus 5% to minus 10%) of the population are measured in 11 towns in the discussed area. In most cases, those towns have a better emigration potential because of the larger share of Roma and ethnic Turkish population they have - both groups typical for having higher values of population reproduction indicators (Glavinitsa, Nikopol, Lom, Dimovo etc.). The maintenance of such an intensive migration decrease ‘however’ will soon lead to negative changes in the age structure of the population in those towns and will significantly reduce their reproduction potential. A certain part of the medium-sized towns with a negative net migration rate are located in agricultural areas, others have a peripheral location and are away from major transport corridors, while a third group of those towns have an outdated socio-economic base (Vidin, Lom, Silistra).

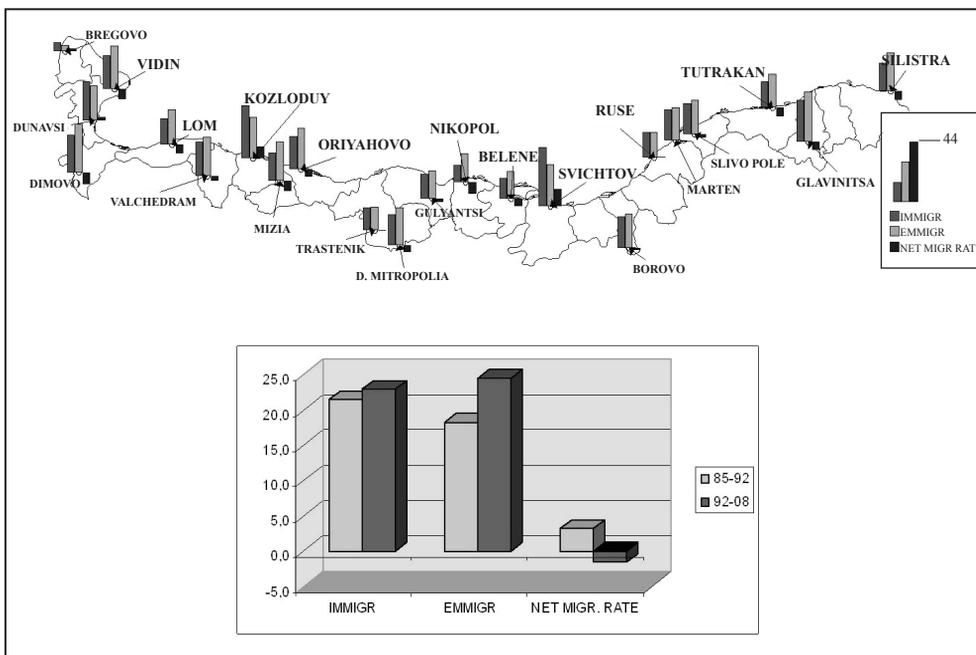


Fig. 5. Net migration rate of the Danubian urban settlements in Bulgaria for the period between 1992 and 2011

In perspective, the majority of the Danubian towns will continue to maintain their negative net migration rate, which will additionally worsen their demographic situation. The scale of seasonal migration will keep growing in all towns with less developed economic potential.

A strong indirect influence on migration is expected from foreign investments, which are tightly connected to the labor market and the unemployment in particular. New job opportunities and sustainable economic activities will reduce unemployment rates and increase employment, thus reducing emigration intensity. A positive influence, preventing the emigration of local population, will be felt if specific social policies are implemented in both – public (state) and private sector.

POPULATION AGING

The age structure of the population is a very important demographic feature, closely related to the demographic crisis. The profile of the age structure at a given moment is a reflection of the demographic and socio-economic development of a given territory or a settlement. The age structure itself, on the other hand, affects the overall development of each urban settlement. The changes of the age structure lead to positive or negative changes of the population reproduction, the economic and cultural development of the settlement. The demographic transition and the negative trends that occurred during that period have led to significant changes in the age structure of the population in the Danubian towns. A steady trend of population aging is observed – the share of the population aged 0-15 drops, while the share of the population aged 60+ - rises. The aging at the base of the sex-age pyramid is a result from lowered birth rates, while aging at the top of the pyramid occurs because of the increased life expectancy in general. As a whole, the age structure of the population in Danubian towns has better parameters than on national level – the share of the population aged 0-14 is 15,5 % (as opposed to 15,3 % on national level), the share of population aged 15-59 is 66,5 % (62,3 % on national level) and that of the population aged 60+ - 18,0 % (22,4 % - national average). The data reveals that for the time being, the aging occurs mostly at the base of the sex-age pyramid which, as mentioned earlier, is a result of the long-term low birth rates. There are 50,3 people at non-active age at every 100 people aged 15-59, which is significantly lower than the national average ratio of 60,4/100 due to the fact that urban settlements (including the settlements in focus) have relatively better age structure. The current demographic development, featured by reduced (narrowed) reproduction of the population and big-scale emigration of economically active population, predefines the further additional burden of the remaining economically active population.

Having in mind the current status of the age structure and the population reproduction regime (at a stationary mode of the population, where the theoretical birth rate in the case of Bulgaria should be around 14 ‰ and average life expectancy around 70 years for the total population – male and female), we classify the age structure as relatively good (share of population 0-15 over 15 % and that of the population over 60 - less than 20 %), relatively deteriorated (shares of the above mentioned age groups: 15-20 % and 20-25 %) and significantly deteriorated age structure (shares respectively up to 15 % and over 25 %).

According to the 2011 census of the population, relatively good age structure of the population is observed in 6 Danubian towns – Svishtov, Vidin, Kozloduy, Nikopol, Slivo pole and Glavinitsa (Fig. 6.). This better state of the age structure is a result of migration inflow and of higher natural increase of the population in the past. The first three towns have explicit regional and subregional functions and as such, attract new settlers, while in the case of the other three it is the low migration activity of their population and their ethnic structure (mainly Roma and ethnic Turks) which plays an important role. The urban settlements with relatively deteriorated age structure – a total of 10 settlements - hold a dominating position in the region. Those are towns of various functional type and size. That group of towns grew mostly because of urban settlements which had relatively good age structure of the population in the past (Lom, Belene, Tutrakan, Silistra etc.) have deteriorated their age structure over the last two decades. The reason for the changes in their age structure is the emigration of ethnic Turkish population and of some Roma residents too. In 5 Danubian towns the age structure is significantly deteriorated (Bregovo, Dunavtsi, Valchedram, Dimivi and Marten). All those settlements are small, with weak socio-economic potential and are located away from the river. All of them were proclaimed towns in the years following 1970, they are located in agricultural areas and exist in the “shadows“ of larger urban settlements or have a peripheral location. In some of the settlements in that category the share of population aged 60 + is over 30 % - this indicates aging from the top of the sex-age pyramid. The main factor for aging in the case with these small towns is the intensive outflow

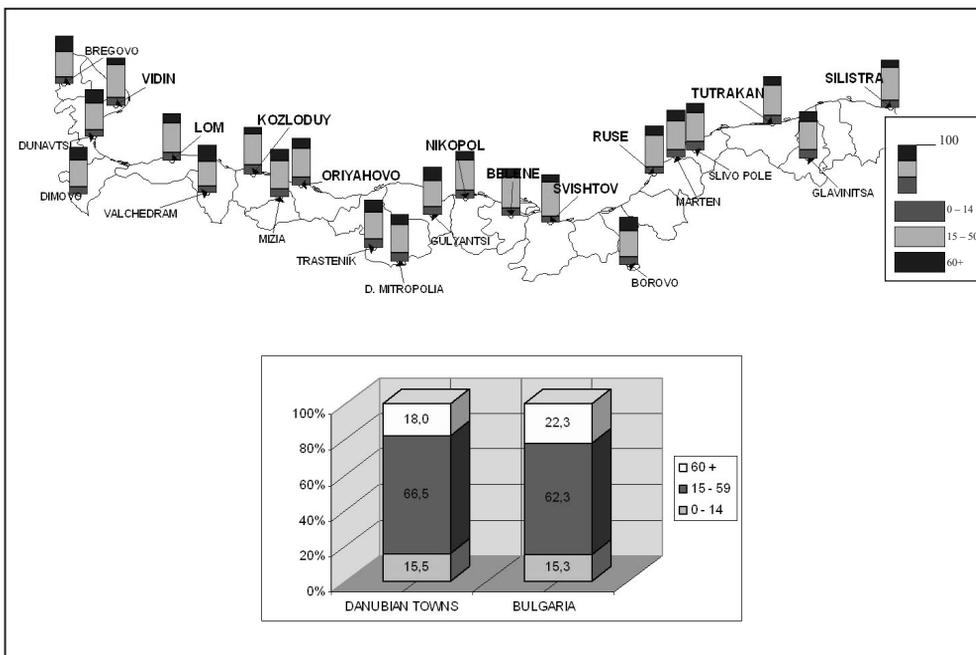


Fig. 6. Aging of the population in the Danubian urban settlements in Bulgaria for the period between 1992 and 2011

of younger residents and the maintaining of low birth rates for a long period of time. The demographic development of these settlements resembles that of large villages, which continue to donate emigrants and thus worsen their age structure. The normalizing of the age structure as a result of high death rates or as a result of new settling of residents is still only but slightly detectable.

The current status of the age structure of the population of the Danubian urban settlements and the trends of their development represent a negative factor for both - population reproduction and for the socio-economic development of the discussed region – population in fertile and economically active age decreases in number. Maintaining these trends will eventually lead to normalizing of the age structure but at much lower population number. This process however will take time, which will have a negative effect on the population reproduction, the labor force, the employment and the multilateral development of the region. It is expected in the near future that the age structure continues its deterioration as a result of ongoing emigration combined with low birth rates. The internal migration, especially the “town-to-town“ migration flow, will also have a significant impact. Thus, a redistribution of population among towns is going to take place, since the demographic potential of the rural population in the discussed region is highly reduced. In that pattern, some of the towns – the more attractive ones - will experience positive effect of migration, while others – the ones with limited socio-economic potential – on the contrary.

CONCLUSION

The urban settlements in the Danubian region of Bulgaria have a peripheral (to the major economic axes of the country) existence. The transport corridor which the river represents has only transitional character and does not have any significant positive and sustainable impact on the settlements and the surrounding areas. An additional negative factor is the lack of transport infrastructure facilities to provide better “North-South“ connections.

The economic underdevelopment of the discussed region leads to unemployment problems. The daily commuting is directed mainly to the district capital cities of Ruse, Vidin and Silistra. A general underdevelopment of the hinterland of the Danube River is observed, which is a result of the relatively **low-income nature of agricultural activities and the subordination of the district capitals (providing mainly services and other third sector activities)**. As a result of that and of the peripheral location compared to other industrial centers and larger cities, the Danubian urban settlements have low capacity of preventing emigration of their residents. Thus, especially in small towns and in the villages, depopulation processes spread out more and more.

The main demographic problems of the Danubian towns include the process of depopulation, the regressive type of the population reproduction, the negative net migration rate and the aging process. Based on the analysis of the number, reproduction type, migration and the age structure of the population, the following conclusions can be pointed out:

1. The natural development of the population of Danubian towns is characterized by further deterioration of the demographic parameters and accelerated aging of the population.

2. The reproduction potential of the population is a reflection of the current demographic situation. Population growth is still observed in some towns. The accelerated diminishing of the population of small towns will lead to additional polarization of the population distribution (its concentration in large and medium-sized towns). Therefore, a purposeful migration policy on a national and regional level is needed.

3. The ongoing trend of population decrease leads to their depopulation and changes the settlements network hierarchy. This will lead to changes in the system-creation processes – fewer settlements will maintain their role of system-creating settlements or hubs in the settlement network.

4. In general, demographic aging is characterized by prevalence of population aged 60 + over the population aged 0-14. That leads to negative deformations in the demographic situation, which on their behalf will create new problems of socio-economic nature, administrative-management, and service-providing nature. The negative trends in formation and rational use of labor force will also intensify.

5. The human (demographic) factor turns more and more into a limiting aspect of production and increase of goods and services of all kinds, and also burdens additionally the social care facility infrastructure.

6. The zones of influences of most Danubian towns can hardly be expanded, since most of the settlements have limited socio-economic, environmental and demographic potential (with the exception of the largest Danubian cities such as Ruse, Vidin and Silistra). Their peripheral location reduces the possibilities of solving their problems on their own. At this point, the development possibilities are based mainly on the connections with the inner parts of the country.

7. Some possibilities for stabilization also exist based on the integration with neighboring countries – Romania and Serbia, now possible after the opening of borders and on establishment of new communications and free movement of goods and labor force (at least as far as Romania is concerned). Such activities are observed in a number of Danubian municipalities through implementing cross-border cooperation projects, founding of joint-ventures etc.

8. Some development opportunities exist in the tourism sector, as well as cultural-historical and recreational resources. By expanding and modernizing the existing touristic establishments, new jobs can be created and thus the financial status of the urban settlements could be improved and stabilized.

At the current state of development, regulation of demographic processes is possible only on the basis of natural demographic processes which would lead to normalization of the age structure in conditions of low fertility rates. Therefore, the opportunities provided by the geographic aspect (that is – the regional/spatial approach implementation) of the demographic, migration and the socio-economic policies, should be exploited. These aspects are more effective compared to the activities implemented so far (no regional approach). However, in order to use those opportunities rationally and effectively, a new tax-related and economical legislation is needed. Some adequate tax-imposing or tax-relief policy could also be used on a regional level, in order to stimulate settlements of new residents. Some forms of relief in

the process of privatizing municipal properties, in foundation of new enterprises and services etc., could also be used.

The inclusion of the Danubian part of Bulgaria into the European Strategy for the Danubian Region - a priority strategy to the EU, is supposedly going to accelerate the development of the urban settlements along the river, through closer cooperation in strictly defined areas of politics. Economic stabilization can be achieved through improvement of the whole intermodal transport system along the Danube River, through improvement of the internal river ports' network and logistics, as well as utilizing the opportunities of short-distance navigation.

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Департамент География на НИИТГ – БАН

СЪВРЕМЕННО ДЕМОГРАФСКО РАЗВИТИЕ И ПРОБЛЕМИ НА ПРИДУНАВСКИТЕ ГРАДОВЕ

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(Резюме)

Главната цел на т.нар комплексни социално-икономически програми за стабилизиране на териториалните единици и селищата в тях е да предложат начини за разрешаване на различните проблеми, произтичащи от демографската ситуация, при отчитане на специфичните особености в социално-икономическото развитие на всяка община. Целта на настоящата статия е да разкрие тенденциите в демографското развитие на градовете, разположени по крайбрежието р. Дунав, и основните социално-икономически проблеми, които възникват в резултат на спецификата на демографската ситуация. Във фокуса на настоящото изследване са 23 общини, които имат излаз на р. Дунав. Анализът е базиран на периода 1992–2011 г., през който две селища получиха градски статут – Сливо поле (през 2002 г.) и Мартен (2006 г.).