Demographical development of Bulgaria during the transitional period

L’évolution démographique de la Bulgarie au cours de la période de transition

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Since 1989, Bulgaria’s population faces a decrease, originally generated by a large number of ethnic Turks who emigrated to Turkey. In the period between 1988 and 2006, the decline reached approximately 1.2 million people. An estimated 71% of this tendency is due to emigration process.

The trends in the basic demographical parameters (birth rate, death rate and natural decrease) are quite negative. According to the official data, the negative balance of migration is over 800 000 people for the period 1989-2006. During the 1990s, as a result of the emigration of many young people and because of the economic crisis (especially in the years 1997 and 1998), birth rates fell down to levels of 7.7‰ (1997) to 7.9‰ (1998). But it is the death rate (14.7‰ in 2006), and not the birth rate, that shows significant difference compared to most EU countries. Infant mortality rate, although lowering its value, is still too high. Another difference is detected in measuring the life expectancy, which is significantly low.

The demographic crisis is not only seen on a national scale, but on a regional level as well. With few exceptions, it has spread over each of the municipalities in the country, though with varying intensity and depth.

I - General view of the demographical picture on a national level.
The demographic crisis

The present demographical situation in Bulgaria has the characteristics of a demographical crisis determined by many factors. As a result, extreme levels of the parameters which define the demographical situation have been reached, and the process of normal reproduction of the population has been permanently affected. On both regional and national level, there is a constant decrease of the population, very low birth rates, increasing death rates, deteriorated demographical structures, etc. According to the last census data (2001) the population of Bulgaria reached 7,929,000 people and the average annual decrease between the last two censuses (1992-2001) was 0.9%. In 2001 Bulgaria took the 20th place in a list of 46 European countries according to its population. The total inhabitants number fell by 1.2 million, of which 71% were due to emigration losses and the rest to natural decrease (fig. 1).

The first signs of demographical crisis were detected in the mid 1980s, when the birth rate fell lower than the level of the so called simple reproduction (14‰ at an average life expectancy of 71 years).

The depopulation process reveals the demographical crisis of the country. On a national level the natural decrease of the population is detected in 1990. The phenomenon is additionally amplified by the negative migration ratio. Under the totalitarian period (1944-1989), when emigration was practically forbidden, the population evolution was determined almost entirely by its natural increase. At the beginning of the transitional period a significant emigration
Fig. 2 - Natural increase of the population 1992-2005.

Fig. 3 - Average age of the population 2001.
Fig. 4 - Phases of demographic crisis.

Fig. 5 - Specific geodemographic regions.
process is initiated which finds its origin into ethnic-political reasons. First the Bulgarian Turks start to leave the country, but in the following years the emigration wave is composed mostly of ethnic Bulgarians. The tendency is then re-enforced by economic (and not political) factors. The GDP per capita in Bulgaria reaches nearly 32% of the EU countries average. Low incomes and unemployment are the main factors resulting in emigration. The number of emigrants can hardly be estimated, but it is assumed that emigration will gradually become more and more temporal rather than permanent. However, the loss of such a significant demographic mass had a major impact on the human potential of the country. As a consequence, the annual flow of money from emigrants to the country raised significant levels (592 million euros in 2006).

The demographical crisis is displayed quite well by the low birth rate, which decreased from 12,1‰ (1990) to the extreme 7,7‰ in the years of economic collapse (1996-1997), and later stabilized at levels varying from 8,0 to 9,5‰ (fig. 2). Such levels are lower than those in many European countries, except for Hungary, Poland, Italy, Austria and some others, and just a bit lower than the birth rate in Romania. Despite the relatively stabilized birth ratios, in 2006 the total fertility rate in the country was 1,38 (1,31 for the urban population and 1,60 for the rural), which is much lower than necessary for simple reproduction. The general births decrease of the transitional period is due to changes that occurred in the reproduction behavior of the Bulgarian population. Other factors, such as significant reduction of the fertile contingents, decreased fertility, financial obstructions, also have a serious impact on the birth rate. During the discussed period, the extra-marital births grew. The relative share of children born out of wedlock rose from 12,4% in 1990 to 49,0% in 2006.

A serious demographical problem in Bulgaria lies in the high level of both raw and infant death rates, as well as the relatively low life expectancy. The current death rate in Bulgaria is among the highest in the EU. Similar levels are measured in Hungary, Latvia and Estonia, but they are much higher than those measured in France, Germany, the UK, Italy, Spain, etc. The lowest general death rate was measured in the early 1960s (7,0‰). It was a result of the post-war life improvement on the one hand, and the relatively low share of the elder generations on the other. From that moment on, resulting from the constant expansion of elder generations, the death rate started to grow and by the end of the 1980s it had reached a level of 12,0‰. During the transitional period the death rate continued to grow (14,7‰ in 2006). Among the factors involved in this evolution figure low incomes of the households, difficulties emerging from the process of healthcare system reformation, lower access to qualified medical care, etc. The premature male death rates resulting from the socio-economic crisis and the stressful life conditions are also significant parameters.

The infant mortality case is not different. Before the beginning of the transitional period the trends were good. By that time, the infant mortality was lower than that in Romania, Poland and Hungary for example. However, in the early 1990s it began to grow and reached levels of 15,7‰ in 1997. From that year on, the tendency reversed so as to fall to 9,7‰ in 2006. Despite that positive trend, such levels are still too high for an EU country, although
lower than those in Romania. The comparatively high infant mortality in Bulgaria is partially due to the Roma, and to a certain extent, to the Turkish population of the country, both minority groups which have higher birth rates than the ethnic Bulgarians (fig. 7).

Bulgaria is far behind the majority of the EU countries in another demographical aspect: the average life expectancy. Over the last 30 years it had been set around 71 years (68 for men, 74 for women). During the transitional period a slight growth has been detected and in 2004-2006 the average life expectancy reached 72.6 years (69.1 for men, 76.3 for women). The situation is similar in Hungary and Poland, but still too low compared to the old EU countries.

Under such circumstances, the deterioration of age structure is not astonishing. The average age of the population is constantly growing (41.4 years in 2006, fig. 3). The aging process is revealed by a significant decline of the younger generations (0-14 years), whose share in 1990 was 21% of the total population number, and only 13.6% in 2006. The share of the older generations (aged 65+) on the other hand, grew from 13.4% to 17.2% over the same period. Bulgaria is now among the first ten countries in the world, which have the oldest population. The share of children in Bulgaria is similar to that in Greece, Italy, Spain, and Germany. For this reason, a range of negative demographical and economical consequences are expected in the future.

2 - Spatial aspects of the crisis

There is a certain spatial disparity of the demographical crisis in Bulgaria (fig. 4 and 5). It was in the early 1960s when regions with deteriorated age structure started to form. It was due to continuous internal migration of predominantly young people from rural to industrialized urban areas. This emigration wave was created generally by bad conditions for subsistence in rural areas and the inappropriate state policy, aimed at these regions. As a result of deteriorated age structure, in the 1970s some parts of the country already had a significant share of older generations, and their population came to the point of natural decrease (15% in Northwest Bulgaria, regions along the Bulgarian-Yugoslavian border, Central Stara Planina, or the Balkan range, together with its northern piedmont, Strandzha-Sakar region and the eastern part of the Gornotrakiiska nizina area (the Upper Thracian plain). On the other hand, four other regions, populated predominantly by Muslims, and thus maintaining higher birth rate and lower migration mobility, managed to keep much better demographical parameters. These are the Blagoevgrad district in Southwest Bulgaria (because of large share of Pomaks), Eastern Rhodope region, Northeast Bulgaria and Eastern Stara Planina region. In these defined areas, the rural population had a natural growth of over 10% in the mid 1970s. Along with the ethno-religious factor explaining low mobility, the majority of the Muslims in Bulgaria were engaged in non-mechanized, labor consuming, but in the same time more profitable agricultural activities, such as tobacco growing.

During the transitional period the demographical situation worsened on a national level. In 1990, only few areas that once had a progressive demographic reproduction came to the point of simple reproduction, and districts that were involved in a simple reproduction model changed after 1990 to a recessive standard. In the places where the first signs of demographical crisis were detected, the demographical situation worsened additionally. Thus, in the early 1990s, only six of the 264 country’s municipalities had a birth rate of over 14.0‰, and the highest birth rates were measured in two municipalities populated predominantly by Pomaks in Blagoevgrad district – Satovecha (15.5‰) and Garmen (15.1‰). In the beginning of the 21st century, only two municipalities in Bulgaria had birth rates that could sustain simple demographic reproduction – Nikola Kozlevo in Northeast Bulgaria (populated predominantly by Bulgarian Turks) and Satovecha municipality. This fact shows that the demographical crisis has spread practically over the whole Bulgarian territory. Comparatively stable regions (from a demographical point of view) that once existed, are now long gone. In the period between 1992 and 2001, population growth is registered in 20 (of 264) obshinitsi, which all have developed tourist profile and/or are situated in major cities’ areas of influence. Because of the total crisis spread, municipalities in Bulgaria can only be grouped by the crisis phase – initial, intermediate or final.

3 - Muslim emigration 1989-1990

Despite several large-scale, organized emigration waves of Bulgarian Turks during the whole period from 1878 to the end of the 1980s, this ethnic group has always managed to restore its comparatively high levels of birth rate and natural increase. The emigration of Bulgarian Turks during the 1989 summer lead to the significant demographical decrease of many regions (fig. 6). An estimated 300 000 ethnic Turks emigrated to Turkey in 1989 and 1990 (approximately 1/3 of those “emigrants”, mostly elderly citizens, returned to Bulgaria just several months after their departure). This short-term emigration brought to significant losses of fertile contingents in most of the “Turkish” municipalities in Bulgaria and this resulted in lowering their birth rates in the following period up till today – something which did not happen in the Pomak populated areas, which have now (together with the Gypsies) the highest natural increase and the youngest age structure.

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Fig. 7 - Birth rate and infant mortality rate of the three largest ethnic groups in Bulgaria (2001).
The relative loss of population varied a lot between different “Turkish” settlements and obshtini. Some of them decreased their population number by 50% or more. The percentage of emigrants was higher in the North-eastern region of the country, while in the Eastern Rhodopi area the emigrants were less numerous. This was a result of the selective immigration policy of Turkey—the Bulgarian Turks from the Northeast were allowed to immigrate in a larger scale than those from the Eastern Rhodopi region, while Pomaks and Muslim Gypsies were not allowed to immigrate at all, despite their wish to do so.

4 - Internal migration

Long-past the main feature of the internal Bulgarian migration was its movement from rural to newly industrialized areas. This process was triggered by the communist state policy, which in general deprived the farmers, and rural residents as a whole, of their labour income. Those involved in mining, industrial production and other non-agricultural activities were offered, generally speaking, much better chances of accessing to higher living conditions. As a result the share of urban residents grew (so did the number of new towns) while vast rural areas started to be short of labour force, worsened their population age structure and finally a depopulation process started. By the mid 1970s, the contingent of potential emigrants from rural areas was exhausted to a great extent and the rural-urban migration flows reduced significantly.

During the transitional period, internal migration flows changed their destination. In the mid 1990s, the number of people migrating from towns to villages exceeded the number of people migrating from villages to towns for the first time since several decades. This issued from the economic crisis, which left a large number of urban citizens jobless, and many of them, especially retired people, were forced to return to their rural homes in order to become self-employed farmers. However, the expected much larger migration movement from urban to rural areas as a result of regaining possession of land did not happen, and this reversal phenomenon didn’t last long.

One other important attribute of the post-communist internal migration is the growth of town to town migrations, which exceeded the dominant village-town migration flow. The inter-cities resident mobility is arises from the stagnant or collapsing economy in the majority of small and medium-sized towns, which forced people to seek opportunities in the capital and the largest cities of the country.

5 - The urban-rural aspect

For the period between the last two censuses (1992-2001) urban population has decreased by approximately 250 000 people (4% only), while in the same time the rural population loss reaches around 300 000 (11-12%).

The majority of cities and towns have decreased their population (77% of all), and those that have gained or sustained their residents number, managed to do it in both ways – natural increase and/or positive migration ratio. Emigration (responsible for 61% of the population decline) is a leading factor for reducing the urban inhabitants in Bulgaria. Just the opposite, in rural areas the natural decreased has a leading role.

Basically, the largest cities have lost population, but managed to keep a comparatively steady number of residents. The medium-sized cities of the country show a larger variety of declining situations, according mainly to their economical development during the discussed period. The most significant difference in the population dynamics is detected in the group of smallest towns. Some of these have lost up to 1/3 of their population – they suffer the combined effects of post-communist economic collapse on the one hand, and the ethno-confessional structure dominated by Christian Orthodox Bulgarians (rather than Turks, Gypsies and Pomaks) on the other. This applies mostly to the small towns situated along borders, as in Strandzha-Sakar region (Bulgarian-Turkish border) or along the western border area. It concerns also towns from rural and/or hilly and mountain regions across the country. Some small and medium-sized cities have managed to hold their population thanks to a sustainable economic development during the transitional period. This status refers mainly to three factors: 1) they are situated in the zone of influence of a large city, 2) they remain away from large cities, but have developed economical sustainability based on local resources, and 3) they belong to tourist-attractive regions together with the first effect mentioned.

Between 1992 and 2001 the great majority of the villages' population collapsed. A hundred settlements were completely depopulated. These were villages which economically depend extremely on farming and/or forestry. The share of smallest villages (population below 100 residents) grew up to 1/4 of the total number of rural settlements. Rural areas that have lost a great part of their population are located in the same bordering and/or mountainous regions above mentioned, dominated by small towns with the highest relative population losses.

Significant demographical decline also affected the majority of “Turkish” villages in Bulgaria, regardless of their geographical distribution, due to the “Turkish” emigration discussed earlier. On the contrary, the huge majority of settlements populated by ethnic Bulgarians were affected almost exclusively by a significant natural decrease, no matter if they are located in border and/or mountain areas, intensive farming regions, or in tourist-attractive provinces. The only exception to this general picture is the group of “Bulgarian” villages which are situated in the vicinity of large cities with developed tourist industry (namely Varna and Burgas), and those close to medium-sized towns of the second group above mentioned. Despite the similar dynamics of the population, villages occupied by numerous ethnic Turks still enjoy a much better demographical situation than that of many “Bulgarian” settlements, including the large city suburbs. However, the Pomak settlements and especially those with a high share of Gypsies (Christians or Muslims) reveal the most progressive demographical picture. Such settlements not only sustain their population number, but many of them expanded, regardless of their district economic status.
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