

**DEMOGRAPHIC OUTLOOK FOR THE  
SMALLEST RURAL VILLAGES IN BULGARIA**

**Nicolay Tsekov<sup>1</sup>**

Summary

*As the small rural villages in Bulgaria are defined villages with a population of 200 inhabitants. Half of the 5,000 villages in Bulgaria fall into this category, but they occupied only 8.2 percent of the country's rural population according to the census of population and housing in 2011. Due to the prolonged impact of the processes of depopulation on vast, predominantly agricultural areas in the country, the category of the smallest villages increased significantly in scope during the period after 1946. The main reason for such kind of development is depopulation of villages with a population of 500, 1000 or even 2000 people who have passed into the category of the smallest settlements. At the same time, at least a large number of settlements from viewing the category is deleted in the past 6 decades by the complete depopulation, and in nearly 200 existing smallest villages no longer lives. Demographic situation among residents of the smallest villages, located mainly in mountain regions, is very difficult because of the marginal population aging. Only in inhabited mainly by pomacs in Rhodopes mountains small villages a positive natural growth is registered. This region has a chance for sustainable development due to relatively low migration mobility among the youngest rural population in Bulgaria.*

**Keywords:** depopulation, urban categories, decay of urban network, “caliber” of the settlements

The gradual decrease of the absolute and relative rural population in Bulgaria over the last 66 years is just one of the characteristics outlining the ever reduced presence of country, rural economy and rural lifestyle in Bulgaria.

The spatial effect of rural population decline has gained over the years a visible expression in the degradation of rural settlement network and the desolation of a number of very small and small rural settlements. The contraction of the scope of rural settlement network has a long history and its end is on the horizon. The manifestation of this destructive process may be observed almost exclusively among the smallest villages. According to the NSI's classification smallest settlements in Bulgaria

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant professor Nicolay Tsekov – in “Economic and Historical Demography” Research Unit of Demography Department of the Institute for Population and Human Studies at the BAS.  
Contact e-mail: [nick@bgcell.net](mailto:nick@bgcell.net)

are defined to be the villages with a population of no more than 200 inhabitants<sup>2</sup>. The complete population decline in part of these villages would normally lead to the issue of an administrative act whereby the settlements are erased from the National Register of Populated Places of the Republic of Bulgaria<sup>3</sup> for two main reasons: closing over complete depopulation or merger with cities and other villages where the closed settlements with population are transformed into neighbourhoods of the settlement (urban or rural) they were merged into. The 183 rural settlements without population existing in the National Register of Populated Places in Bulgaria, also known as ghost settlements, are ultimately a residue from the desintegration of the rural settlement network in Bulgaria. These are the most visible and conspicuous warnings for the expansion of the territorial scope of processes that are disastrous for this country's demographic and socio-economic development such as depopulation in its final stage, which is the complete depopulation. Extensive farming and mountainous regions are being deserted and this leads to destruction and wastage of a significant part of the national transport, housing and utilities infrastructure. There is no more a province or a municipality left that has been unaffected by these most unfavourable processes and phenomena in the development of the Bulgarian rural countryside. The dominating trend in the development of the nearly 2500 smallest rural settlements is, for the time being, the gradual biological melting of their ageing population and subsequent administrative writing-off from Bulgaria's map. Nevertheless, are there any ways to revive the settlements with a potential for bio-farming or rural tourism by stimulating an investment activity to cover the mountainous and semi-mountainous areas, which are the main natural habitat of this category of villages?

The sense we put into the term of "depopulation" and the term of "population decline" used in this work as a synonym and their construal in both Bulgarian and world sources on this issue are well explained in all our precedent studies on the rural depopulation theme (Цеков, Сугарева, Донеv, Бошиков, 2008: 47-55)<sup>4</sup>. This article uses the term "depopulation" mostly to designate the trends toward decline and complete depopulation at regional and national levels, while the synonym of depopulation, i.e. the term "population decline" is used in the cases where these processes are considered and analysed within the scope of single rural settlements. The term "rural settlement network" refers to the aggregate of all rural settlements located within a certain territory – in this work this is the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria. And the term "demographic potential" designates the aggregate of population over a certain territory, which features a certain pattern of natural and mechanic movement. Therefore, "demographic potential of rural population" is correlated to the aggregate of the rural settlement inhabitants living within the limits of the individual village lands belonging to village parishes.

---

<sup>2</sup> [www.nsi.bg](http://www.nsi.bg)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nsi.bg/nrnm/>

<sup>4</sup> Tsekov, N. Development and trends of depopulation processes in rural areas of Bulgaria over the period 1946 – 2001. Research project approved by the Scientific Council of the IPHS in 2011. IPHS library, p. 3-17.