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Post Communist Geo-Demographic Features of Vrancea Rural Space

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ABSTRACT

The change of the political and socio-economic system in 1989 introduced significant modifications in the recent geo-demographic evolution of Vrancea rural space. The analysis of the natural dynamics of the population reveals the increasing vulnerability of the demographic system of rural areas in Vrancea in the context of the decline of the fertility indicators and of a deepening ageing process, illustrated by an increasing deviation between the contingents of young and old population. From the migratory point of view, the post December industrial recession ended up with the massive and forced dismissal of large masses of urban labour force, for which the main subsistence options in the new context were either the urban exodus or the temporary emigration abroad. The present paper outlines the rural return areas of maximum incidence (the piedmont region at the south of Putna river, the largest part of the plain area at the south-east of Focşani) and the areas that still preserve a natural excess, capable to counterbalance the migratory deficit (the Carpathian and sub-Carpathian region overlapping the inferior basins of Putna, Năruja and Zăbala rivers).

1. INTRODUCTION

In order to outline the "erosion" of the demographic system of rural Vrancea in the post communist period, we investigated both the natural and migratory dynamics of the population, revealing the main problems this county has faced beginning with 1990: bottom-up ageing, top-down ageing, and migratory deficit. The largest part of the sub-Carpathian area, the piedmont region at the north of Putna and the south-eastern part of the county have genuinely become declining areas. In obvious contrast to the above mentioned declining areas are the sub-Carpathian communes that have not been affected by the natural deficit or that have only recently experienced it (Tulnici, Nereju, Chiojdeni, Mera), the piedmont area at the south of Putna and certain periurban communes (Câmpineanca, Goleşti, Garoafa, Vânători, Pufeşti) clearly favoured by their high degree of accessibility.

2. THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

This study largely relies on the statistical information provided by the 1992 and 2002 population censuses, and by Vrancea County Institute of Statistics. The data were graphically processed with the help of Philcarto software, whereas ascendant hierarchical classifications were operated in XL Stat.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. General demographic evolution

By comparing the population values of Vrancea communes at the beginning and at the end of the period taken into consideration (1990-2010) the map of the demographic evolution of Vrancea County concisely points out the new discrepancies that have occurred within this rural community during the last 20 years (fig. 1).

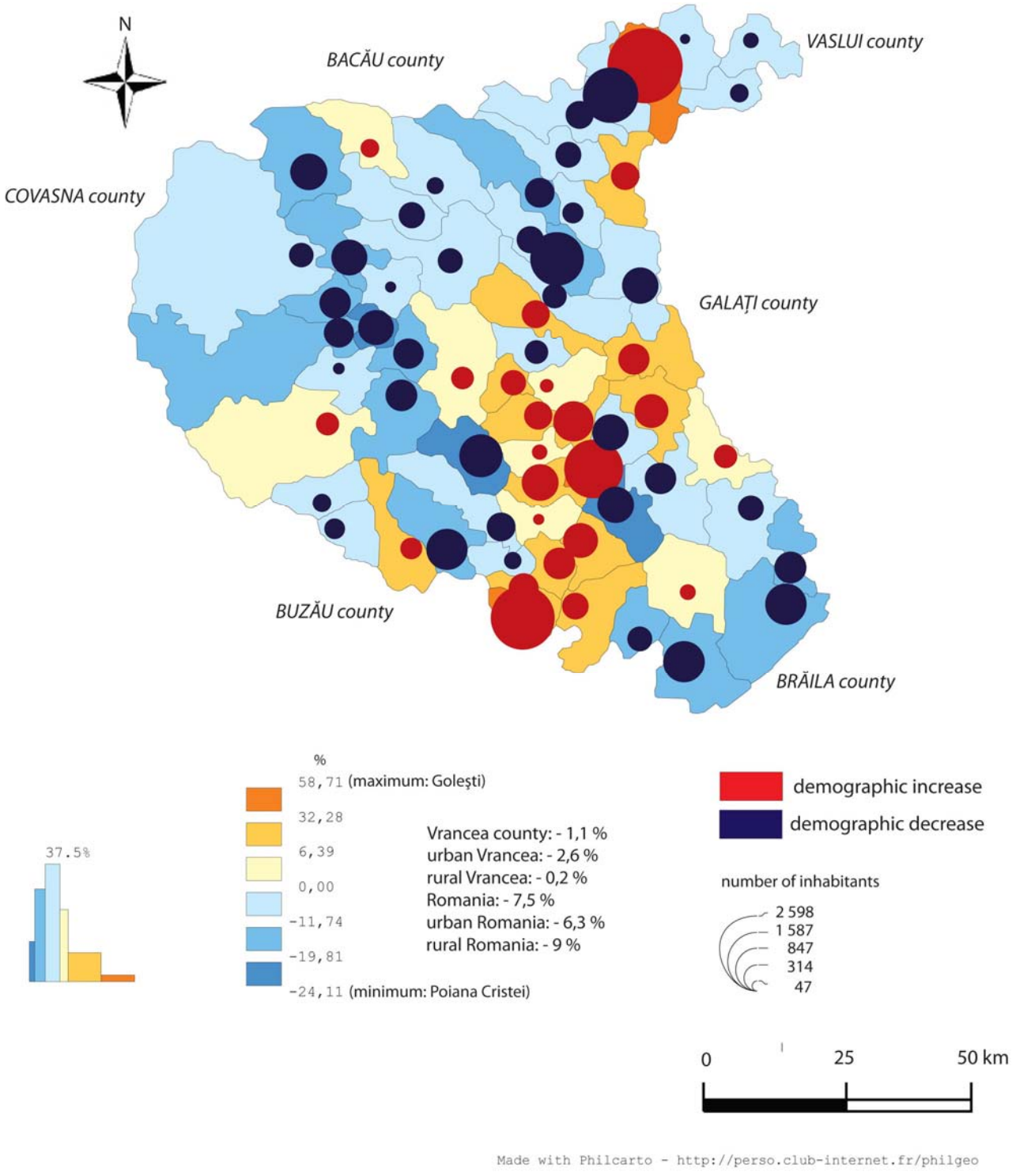

Fig. 1. The demographic evolution of the population of Vrancea County (1990-2010).

Against the background of an average deficit of 1.1% (smaller than the national level of -7.5%) one of the main features that stands out is the direct correlation between the accessibility and urban proximity criteria on the one hand and the intensity of rural return migrations on the other (in the case of the piedmont area at the south of Putna river and of certain periurban communes such as Câmpineanca, Goleşti, Garoafa, Vânători).

A second significant characteristic refers to the role played by the natural dynamics in moderating the population's exodynamic migratory tendencies. We mainly refer here to two categories of rural settlements: firstly, there are two communes that still preserve a demographic conservatism – Nereju and Mera; secondly, there are three communes (Slobozia Bradului, Homocea and Chiojdeni) in which the strong pronatalism behaviour of the population is related to a

certain ethnic-religious matrix (overrepresentation of gypsies and/or Catholics). The map also highlights the areas of maximum incidence of emigration flows in the context of the flexibilization of the country's borders after 1990: the superior basin of Putna, Zăbrăuţi Platform, the south-eastern part of Siret Plain.

3.2. Vulnerability of Vrancea rural demographic system

The vulnerability of the human resource of Vrancea rural space is a certainty and it has a double determination: natural and migratory.

3.2.1. Bottom-up ageing process

As regards the natural dynamics, the deterioration of the natural vitality also entails a double binomial. On the one hand, we deal with a bottom-up ageing of the population, induced by *the decline of the fertility rate*, illustrated by the strong decrease from 73.3‰ in 1992 to 53.9‰ in 2002.

The typology of the general fertility evolution trends during the period 1990-2009 (fig. 2) classifies Vrancea's communes in relation to the recent changes that have occurred in the local population's procreative behaviour during the transition period.

With rates 3 or even 4 times greater than the average (ranging between 145‰ and 174‰), *type 1* (1 commune) expresses a high degree of eccentricity of its attitude to the conscious control of births, which represents the appanage of the gypsy community that holds the majority of the population in Slobozia Bradului, the only exponent of this type.

Starting from a level superior to the county average (79.43‰ as opposed to 56.5‰), *type 2* (15 communes) registers a more rapid rhythm of fertility decrease in the last decade. On the one hand, this fertility pattern is typical of the mountainous and sub-Carpathian area at the south of Putna – the still high fertility level is a reflection of its past dynamism, the tendency of the last years taking place against the background of a more modern behaviour, described by the tendency of family nuclearization. On the other hand, such an evolution type overlaps profoundly rural areas, attached by a subsistence agricultural system, disadvantaged either by their geographical isolation (Tutova Hills) or by the general precariousness of the living conditions (south extremity of Râmnic Plain).

Type 3 (5 communes) represents the nucleus around which the exponents of the south sub-Carpathian elements of the previous type are distributed. Having a fertility rate of about 120‰ at the beginning of the period, this type concentrates the essence of the obstinate preservation of a pro-natalism reproductive behaviour in a context of maximum isolation. The (although late) penetration of some modern mentalities within this very conservative rural environment has eroded the force of this local pattern, graphically illustrated by the highest speed of fertility decrease. In the case of Homocea commune, the plus of dynamism is articulated on a certain ethnic and religious configuration (good representation of gypsies and of Roman-Catholics, more opaque to new demographic tendencies).

Complying with the general trend but lying at the lowest level, *type 4* (19 communes) describes the most uncertain evolution perspectives of Vrancea demographic system, illustrated by the significant decrease of the fertility rate from 51.23‰ (1.7 children/woman) to only 38.4‰ (1.3 children/woman). The spatial distribution of this type in the periurban area of the county capital city certifies the role played by towns in propagating socio-demographic habits and mentalities. Soveja (as well as other communes in Şuşiţa basin) belongs to this type due to a longer tradition in acquiring a behaviour detrimental to the simple replacement of generations.

Type 5 (14 communes) resembles the previous one but differs from it by showing a slower fertility decrease (from 57.39‰ to 48.52‰). This pattern is mainly typical of the central part of the piedmont area, explaining the generalized natural decline the whole piedmont and plain areas are facing.

The positional coordinates of *type 6* (10 communes) express a rapid tendency of aligning to a anti-natalism behaviour, the initial reticence in front of the rational control of births (illustrated by a general fertility rate of 81.14‰, above the average), leaving soon room to an increased intentionality (the average of the last sub-period was of only 43.26‰). This type is mainly typical of the mountainous and sub-Carpathian basin of Putna and Zăbrăuţi Platform, areas that recorded average fertility rates in the post-war decades.

A second element that has contributed to the devitalisation of the human potential of Vrancea rural space was *the regress of the birth rate (14.5*‰ in 1990, 10.6‰ in 2009), extremely visible on the graphic (fig. 3), the tendency of the last years being of stabilization at an extremely low level (around 10‰). It is a tendency by means of which rural Vrancea seems to dissociate from the obsolete demographic psychology of rural Moldavia, well-known for its demographic energy, the change of the natural surplus in deficit beginning with the year 1994 being preliminary to the insertion of a new pattern of procreative behaviour, derived from the advance gained in the problematization of the conscious control over one's own lineage and the acquiring of an individualist behaviour, together with the suite of (demographic, social and economic) disequilibriums brought about by the change of the type of political and economic experience. Although it can be regarded as a subsidiary element in investigating the population natural dynamics, the correlation between marriage

rate and birth rate is as obvious as possible, the part played by the family in the population's procreative behaviour being indubitable. The recent graphically configured tendency is largely descending after 1990 (of course, except for the 1990 episode of psychological effusion; 8.6‰ in 1990, 4.8‰ in 2009 – fig. 4). The reasons incriminated are manifold – precariousness and vulnerability of the new socio-economic climate, but also the change of the individual perception on marriage, approached in a more "western" manner, reflected not in the removal of the possibility of contracting a marriage but rather in the delay of this moment (precisely against the background of the growing period of completing one's own professional training).

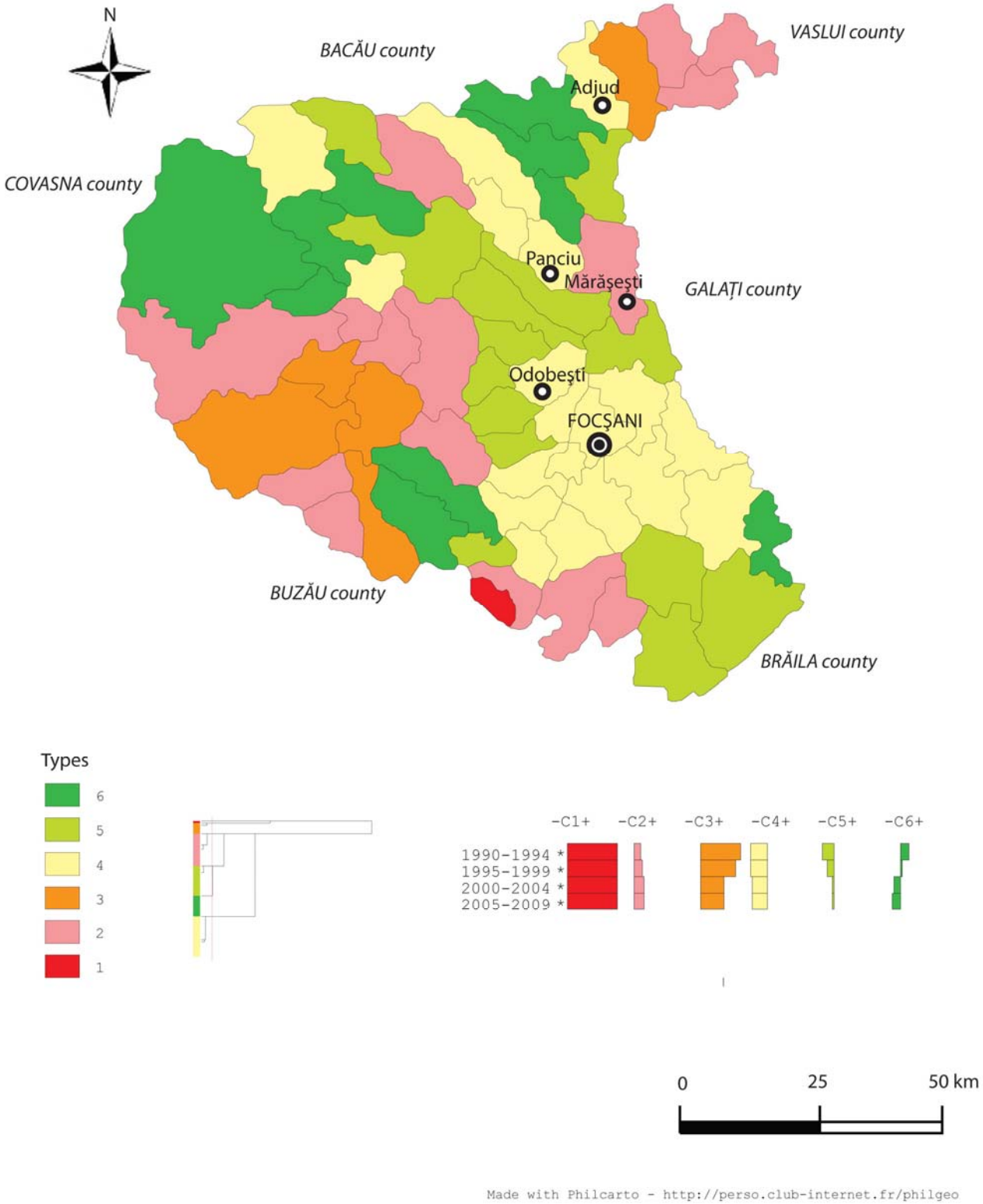

Fig. 2. Typology of the general fertility evolution trends of the population of Vrancea County (1990-2009).

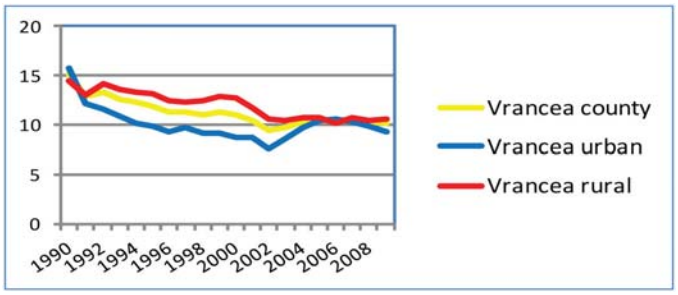

Fig. 3. Birth rate dynamics (‰) in urban/rural areas of Vrancea County (1990-2009) .

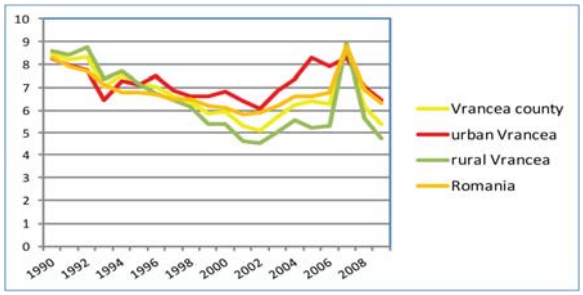

Fig. 4. Marriage rate dynamics (‰) in urban/rural areas of Vrancea County (1990-2009).

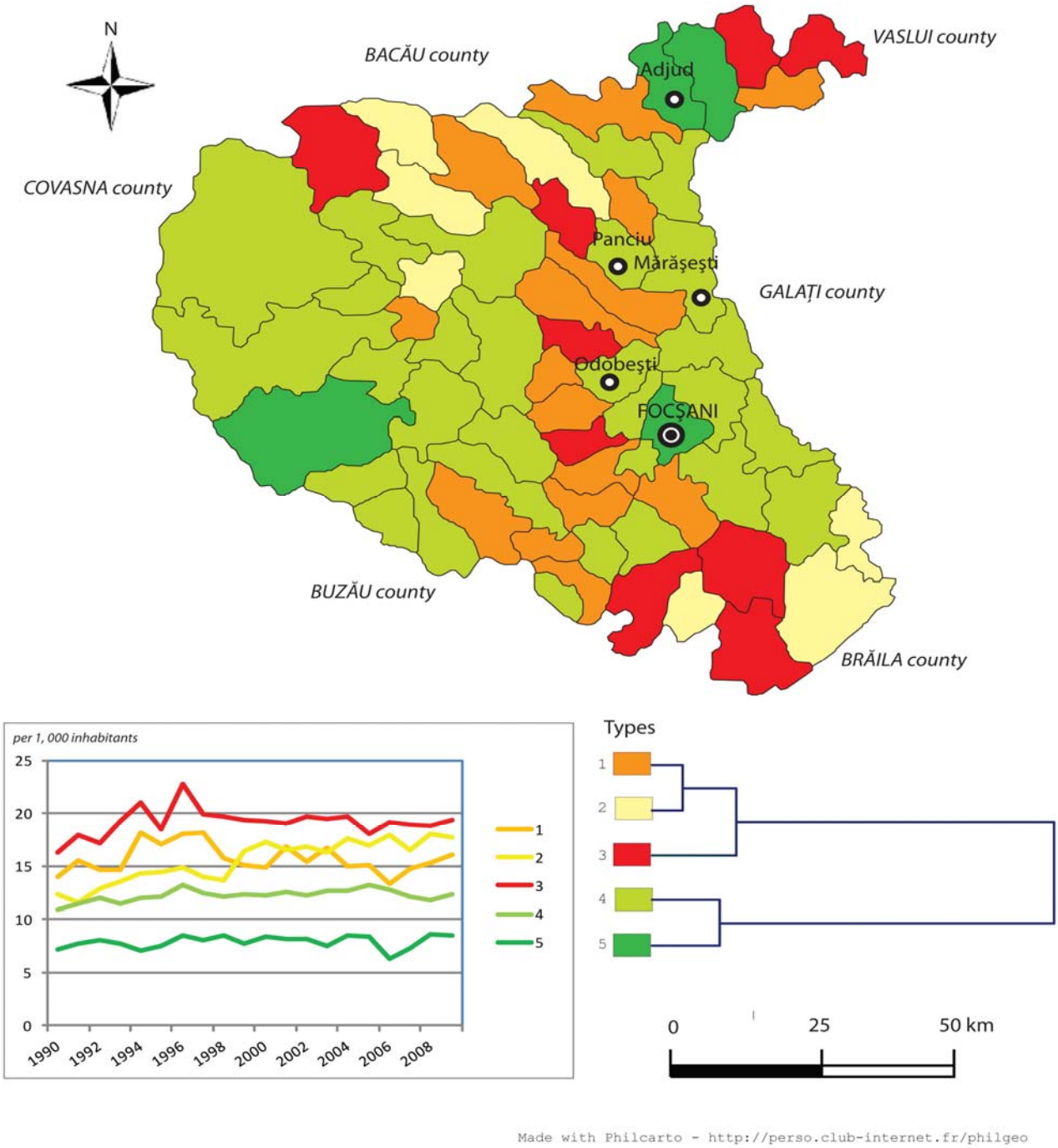

Fig. 5. Death rate typology in Vrancea County (1990-2009).

3.2.2. Top-down ageing process

The top-down ageing process also plays a causal role in the devitalisation of Vrancea rural demographic system, leading to the rapid increase of the death rate after 1990 (12.4‰ in 1990, 14.4‰ in 2009), its dynamics being primed by the socio-economic depression of the post December era.

The death rate typology of the population of Vrancea County (fig. 5) highlights the areas that have experienced an accelerated rhythm of death rate increase during the last decades, constantly performing at a level above the average (15‰ - 20‰ in the last three years):

- the northern part of the county, centred on Şuşiţa and Zăbrăuţ basins (an area in which the advance gained by the demographic ageing process overlaps the precocity of joining an anti-natalism behaviour);

- the southern part of the county, focussed on Râmnic and Inferior Siret Plains, as well as the north-eastern extremity (Tutova Hills) – in the context of a certain depreciation of the quality of the demographic potential (as a consequence of the active reaction to the demand of labour force initiated by the communist urban industry), the inherent disequilibrium of the structure by age groups resulting in the accumulation of old contingents.

In obvious opposition to the above mentioned regions, the largest part of the Carpathian and sub-Carpathian area (Andreiaşu de Jos, Poiana Cristei, Năruja, Paltin, Vrâncioaia, Tulnici, Nistoreşti) comply with the general trend of the rural environment, at an inferior level (12.5‰ in 2009). In this case, we deal with a relatively recent tendency of natalist attitude modernization, providing relative stability to the demographic system by gradually incorporating masses of population and thus keeping the death rate at moderate parameters. Similar directions can be spotted in Râmnic and Siret Plains (Suraia, Milcovul, Vulturu), in which the increase of the last two decades is related to the advance gained by the process of demographic ageing.

3.2.3. Migratory dynamics

The collapse of the communist regime and the replacement of the centralized economy with a market economy set the premises for a new context of causality between political, socio-economic and demographic factors. The endless initiatives of industrial reconversion and restructuring, the large dismissals within the urban industries, the economic, social, demographic and, last but not least, the psychological problems (derived from the emergence of a new phenomenon – unemployment), the decline of the urban living standard, caused the population to come back to the rural environment, in search of an alternative of subsistence. This process was favoured by the adoption of the Land Law in 1991, which stipulated that former land owners were supposed to be given back their land. In this context, starting with 1994, the migratory balance dynamics by environments changed within Vrancea County. Villages, despite the sideslips characteristic to a many times agonizing agricultural system, started to register a migratory increase (up to the highest value of 6.2‰ in 2000), in obvious opposition to urban areas, in which migratory balance rates constantly ranked below -5‰, going down to even -8.5‰ in 2002.

However, at the same time, in the context of the flexibilization of the country's borders and of gaining the free circulation right, emigration has become a fundamental component of the population territorial mobility, the steps forward taken by Romania towards the West immediately reverberating in the external migration dynamics, whose main motivation has been economic.

The migratory balance typology (fig. 6) classifies the communes of Vrancea County into 5 types in relation to the evolution of their migratory balance rates during the period 1990-2009.

Type 1 (13 communes) describes a moderate exodynamic behaviour at the beginning of the period under consideration, replaced by an extremely stable tendency of migratory deficit recovery. This type mainly borders the piedmont area at the south of Putna, the recent positive dynamics being due both to its urban proximity and to the revitalization of the wine sector in the favourable context induced by Romania's integration into the European structures.

Type 2 includes only two communes (Câmpineanca and Goleşti), that stand out through their strongly endodynamic behaviour in the post-communist period, the main motivation residing in their spatial contiguity to Focşani, the county capital city.

Type 3 (18 communes) starts from moderate exodynamic behaviour in 1990, soon replaced by a tendency of balancing the migratory deficit through low values of the migratory increase (0-5‰). The communes included in this type are mainly distributed in the basins of Putna (Valea Sării, Vidra) and Şuşiţa rivers (Soveja, Câmpuri, Răcoasa), but also in Siret Plain, in the proximity of Focşani.

Type 4 (9 communes) can be described as strongly exodynamic in 1990-1994 (-83.6‰ in 1990) due to the very repulsive character of the rural areas it comprises, areas disadvantaged by an extremely limited natural potential. This type covers Tutova Hills (by virtue of their spatial isolation, which plays a negative role, explaining the precocity of the migratory flows) and the south extremity of the plain region (Tătăranu,

Băleşti, Măicăneşti, Ciorăşti, Năneşti – whose repulsive image was amplified after the completion of the agricultural collectivization process, against the background of a minimum functional diversity, unable to occupy the deficit of active population).

However, the last years have brought an equilibration of the migratory deficit, in some years even recording a small migratory increase (up to a maximum value of 4.2‰ in 2000, somehow paradoxically in a low offering profound rural environment.

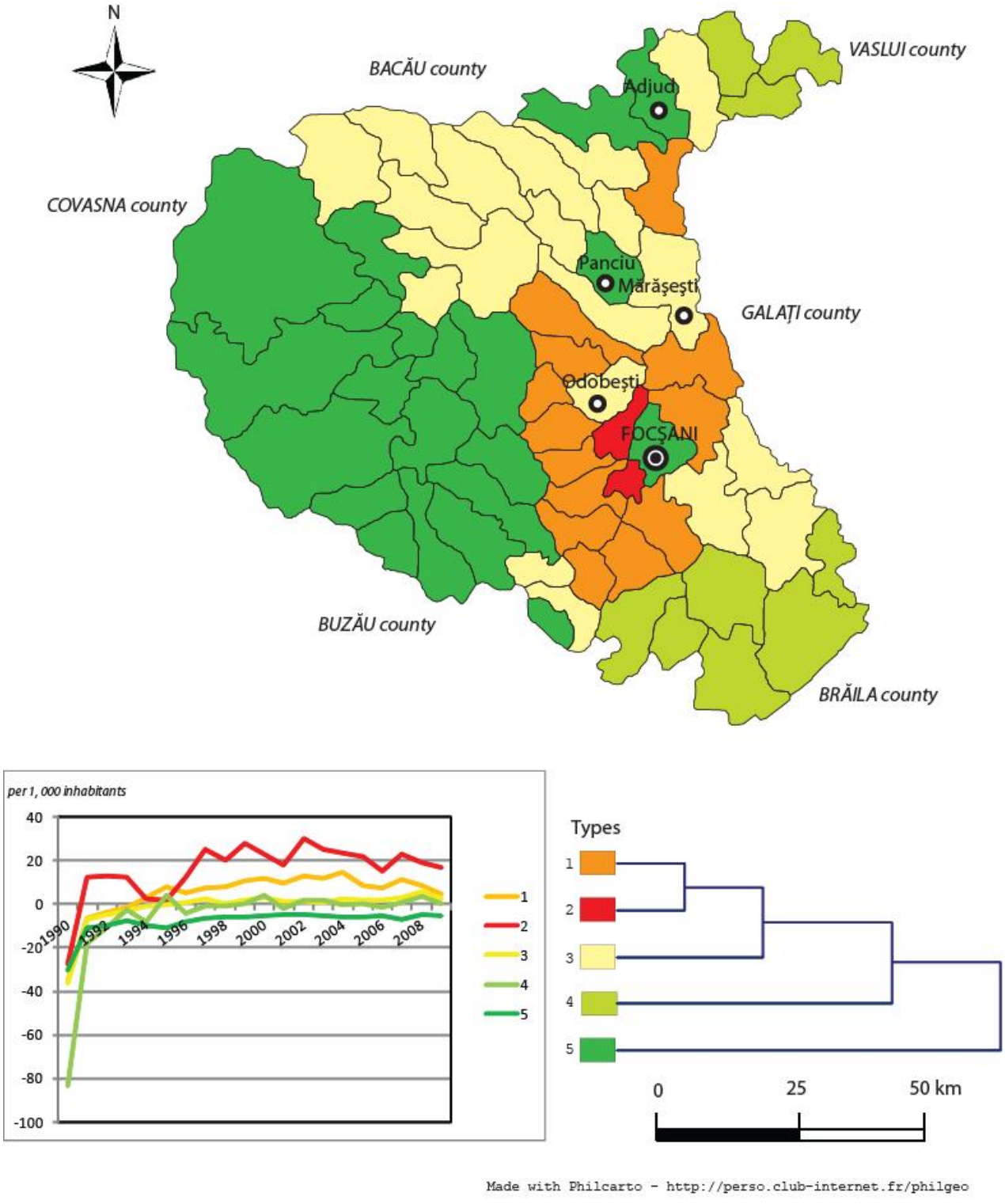

Fig. 6. Migratory balance typology of the population of Vrancea County (1990-2009).

Type 5 (21 communes) preserves its moderate exodynamic character throughout the whole period, the migratory decrease capping at values between -4.9‰ and 6.1‰ during the last decade. The temporization of

the rural exodus is the reflection on the demographic level of the relatively late disenclavation of the central-south mountainous and sub-Carpathian areas, which, due to their high degree of isolation, were little rallied to internal migratory circuits.

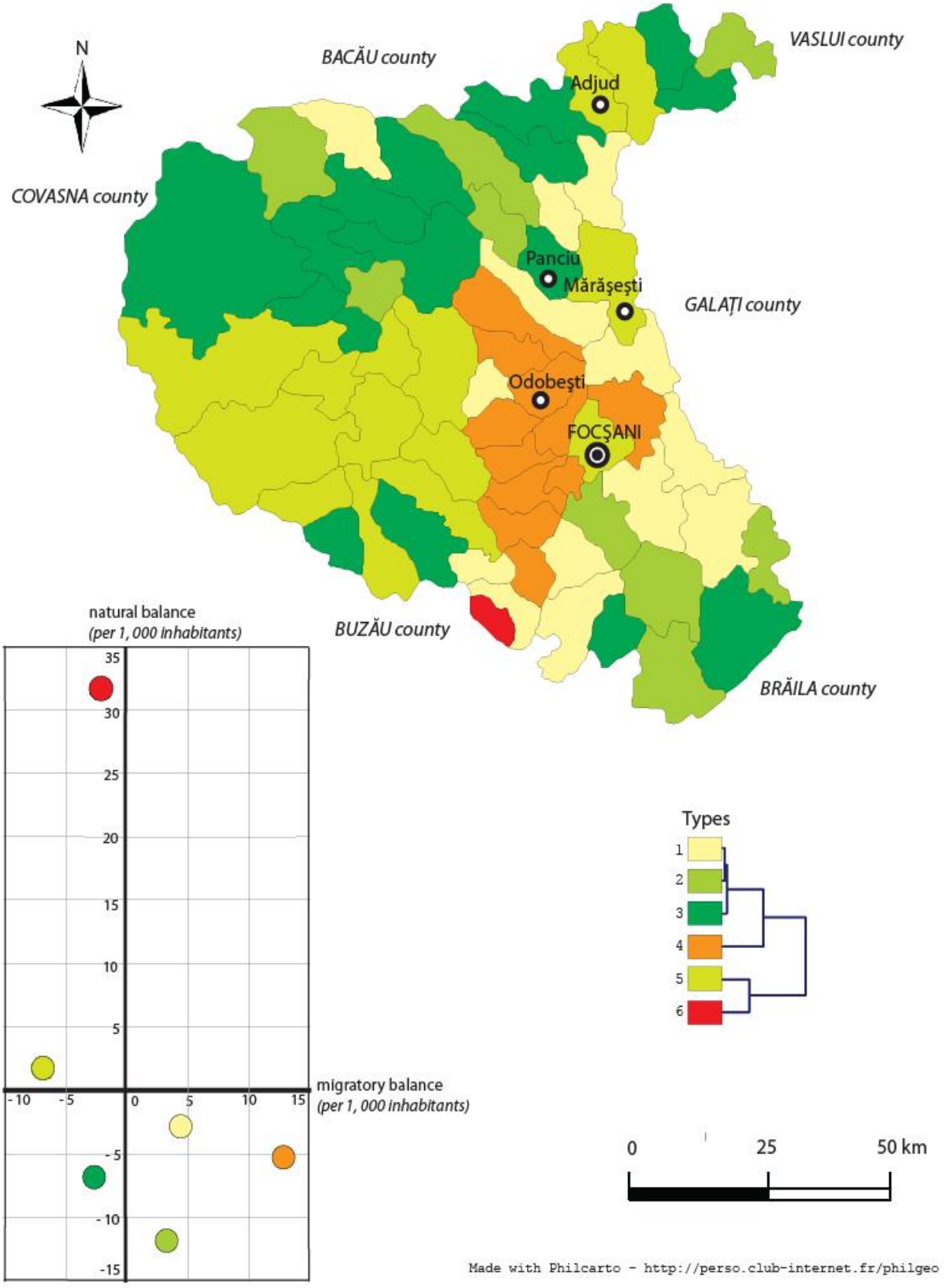

Fig. 7. Recent evolution trends typology of the total balance components of the population of Vrancea County (2005-2009).

3.2.4. Recent total balance dynamics

Figure 7 synthesizes the recent evolution trends of the total balance in relation to the specific correlation between the natural and migratory dynamics. Revealing obvious similitude (differing only in the level of the natural decline in correlation to the prematurity and energy of the rural exodus), the communes included in *types 1 and 2* are mainly located in the south-eastern extremity of the county, overlapping the plain area. Sporadically, they also appear in Tutova Hills (Bogheşti), in the piedmont (Fitioneşti, Străoane, Bordeşti, Tâmboieşti) or in the sub-Carpathians, regions that after 1989 have rallied the migratory circuits of rural return (but at a lower initial level in comparison, for example, to the communes of type 4, actively included in the emigration flows with an economic motivation during the last years).

Type 3 joins the previous types in the Carpathian, sub-Carpathian and piedmont areas at the north of Putna, as well as in the extreme south-eastern part of the plain area, comprising communes in which the natural decline lies at an intermediary level between the two above and in which the rural return, much slowed down during the last years, cannot provide a migratory increase anymore (especially in the context of an active participation at the labour temporary migration abroad).

Although experiencing a natural deficit chronicized through extended rural exodus and early decrease of the fertility rate, the general positive dynamics of *type 4* (characteristic to the piedmont area between Putna and Râmna) is the consequence of the intensity with which these communes have joined the post-communist urban exodus, benefiting from the advantage of their high accessibility, urban proximity and specificity of the local agricultural landscape.

Type 5 is the only one that still preserves positive values of the natural balance (except for type 6, which represents a unique individuality); however, they lie at an extremely discrete level, which cannot balance the chronic migratory deficit. On the one hand, this type circumscribes the Carpathian and sub-Carpathian area at the south of Putna, where the present-day natural increase appears as a reminiscence of its traditional demographic vitality, previously able to counterbalance the moderate migratory exodynamism; on the other hand, besides three towns (Focşani, Mărăşeşti and Adjud), it also includes Homocea (for ethnic and religious reasons already explained above).

The extremely active natural dynamism of Slobozia Bradului (a completely atypical feature in the present context) singularizes this commune at the level of the whole county through its excessively high natural increase: 31.5 ‰ (*type 6*).

4. CONCLUSION

Vrancea County has an obviously fragile rural demographic system, both from the perspective of the natural and migratory dynamics: from the natural point of view mainly because of its distancing from the Moldavian demographic pattern, the 1994 natural balance value of -1.5‰ being preliminary to the insertion of a new type of reproductive behaviour; from the migratory point of view – through aggressive rural exodus before 1989 and emigration after 1989, with extremely noxious effects on the equilibrium of both the structure by age and economic life.

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