



# Rural Population of Central Serbia: Main Tendencies in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Prospects for the 21<sup>th</sup> Century

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## Introduction

During the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly after the Second World War, rather complex and often contradictory processes took place in villages and in agriculture. The final outcomes of these processes were demographically almost abandoned villages and a long-time crisis in agriculture. Up to the World War II, over 80% of the Serbian population lived in villages (Ciric, 1986). However, villages were completely marginalized in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the process of general global modernization, industrialization and urbanization of society. Moreover, the global changes of villages were, for a long period, under a strong influence of the communist (socialist) ideology, with long-term socio-economic consequences that left noticeable changes in demographic movements.

Without discussing socio-political reasons that have undoubtedly, to some extent, contributed to demographic desertion of Serbian villages, this paper approaches only some of the problems. These problems are indicated up to the point that we consider necessary for the overview of bases of modern demographic processes of the rural population and perspectives of its development. The factors and causes of present demographic condition of rural population are rather complex. Furthermore, in Serbia, insufficient attention is paid to demographic research of villages (and to population active in agriculture in general). For all these reasons, the objective of this paper is to point out, using the available statistical data, the disastrous consequences of the lack of overall demographic strategy and, accordingly, the lack of a more effective demographic policy. This refers not only to rural population, but to total demographic development as well. Estimations on natural movements of rural<sup>1</sup> (and total) population in the nearest future point out the lack of such a strategy as well.

## Main tendencies in population changes

In the period 1948-2002, the rural population of central Serbia, as well as its share in the total population, was continually decreasing (table 1). This process was relatively slow, so that the rural population decreased for 859.500 inhabitants: from 3.457.400 in 1948, to 2.597.900 in 2002 (index 75,1; an average annual decrease rate of -5,3‰). However, due to completely opposite tendencies in total population change (as well as of urban population change), the share of rural population decreased from 83,6% (1948) to 44,8% in 2002.

The decrease of rural population was most intensive in the period 1961-1971: for almost 34.000 per year. In the next period inter censuses (1971-1981), there was a sudden slowing down of the rural population decrease process. The average annual decrease decreased to a bit more than 13.000, while the average annual negative growth rate decreased from -10,3‰ to -4,3‰.

<sup>1</sup> In Serbian statistical services, the so-called administrative-statistical principle is presently used. According to that principle, all settlements are classed either as "towns and urban settlements" or as "other settlements". Such categorization implies that both rural settlements and mixed settlements (according to the classification used in the period 1953-1971) belong to the group of "other settlements". Considering the fact that in this paper it is impossible to discuss the issue of settlement typologies, all settlements that are statistically listed as "other settlements" are herein treated as rural settlements. Population of these settlements is treated as rural population, from 1948 to 2002.

It should be kept in mind that during the 1960s substantial economic and social reforms were carried out, which considerably accelerated population movements from villages to towns. However, it must be said that in this period a number of settlements classified as urban settlements has rapidly increased (from 72 to 116), which directly changed the status of a part of rural population into urban population (Stevanovic, 2004).

In the period between censuses 1981-1991, the trend of rural population decrease continued, again more rapidly. Thus, the average annual decrease of the rural population in this period was of 27.600 (-9,7‰). If we consider the whole period of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this is the most intensive decrease, both in absolute and relative figures, after the record depopulation observed in the period 1961-1971. In the period 1991-2002, the trend of rural population decrease continued, but more moderately. The rural population of central Serbia had an average annual decrease of 9.030 persons (an average annual rate of -3,4‰). The slowing down of the rural population decrease tempo was neither a result of the increased birth-rate (i.e. of positive natural increase), nor of slowing down of migration from villages to towns (although demographic potential of villages decreased long before). This was a direct result of external migrations – immigration of refugees from war affected areas of former Yugoslavia. By moving into rural settlements, the refugees have partially compensated the negative natural increase and emigration of resident rural population. This way, they slowed down the excessive depopulation.

**Table 1. Rural population of central Serbia, 1948-2002.**

Census	Total population	Rural population	Share in total population (%)	Annual increase rate (‰)
1948	4.136.934	3.457.435	83,6	
1953	4.458.394	3.519.557	78,9	3,6
1961	4.823.274	3.442.479	71,4	-2,8
1971	5.250.365	3.103.445	59,1	-10,3
1981	5.694.464	2.973.051	52,2	-4,3
1991	5.808.906	2.697.211	46,4	-9,7
2002	5.794.346	2.597.880	44,8	-3,4

Note: The data for 2002 are given according to the methodology of previous censuses.  
Source: Published Censuses data.

The influences of natural and mechanical component of the rural population changes varied in different periods between censuses during the last four decades. The population of central Serbia is for a long time subject to excessive regression of fertility, birth rate and natural increase, which objectively questions even the simplest renewal of generations. Since the mid 1960s, the birth rate of rural population has been constantly decreasing.

Therefore, in the decade 1981-1991, as well as in the last period between censuses (which also showed an increased death rate), the natural increase in rural settlements of central Serbia was negative, with the tendency of increasing the negative values (table 2). At the same time, the balance of migration was negative during the whole period, which caused obvious depopulation (table 3).

**Table 2. Natural movement of total and rural population, 1961-2001.**

Period	Live births		Deaths		Natural increase	
	total	rural	total	rural	total	rural
1961-1970	778.986	472.228	429.428	308.014	349.558	164.214
1971-1980	817.522	378.583	486.851	31.977	330.671	58.807
1981-1990	745.025	313.215	581.090	349.063	163.935	-35.848
1991-2001	668.547	279.776	752.827	405.198	-84.280	-125.422

The already mentioned tendencies of population changes and its components were followed by great changes in all structures of rural population. The most apparent illustration of these changes is a considerable change in the age structure, as well as changes in all economic structures.

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The age structure has been unfavourably changing under the dominant influence of emigration and long-term decrease of fertility, and its changes are reflected in the constant process of demographic ageing. Average age of rural population has increased from 31,2 in 1961 to 42,1 in 2002, while the age index increased from 0,320 to 1,261. the ratio of population over the age of 60 has increased in the same period (1961-2002) from 11,3% to 27,6%.

According to these indicators, the rural population of central Serbia is among the oldest rural populations in Europe (UN, 2003). The ageing of rural population will continue in the future, with very uncertain prospects regarding when and at which level of the demographic development it will stop (Radovanovic, 1999).

**Table 3. Components of rural population changes, 1961-2002.**

Period	Absolute growth/decrease	Natural increase	Balance of migration
1961-1971	-339.034	164.214	-503.248
1971-1981	-130.394	58.807	-189.201
1981-1991	-275.840	-35.848	-239.992
1991-2002	-99.331	-84.280	-15.051

Note: Derived from published censuses data and vital statistics data.

### **Expected tendencies in population changes**

The permanent decrease of rural population, both due to emigration and cease of biological regeneration, has influenced the formation of very unfavourable population structures, which will contribute to continuation of demographical erosion of the rural areas in future. This is also implied by the results of projections up to the year 2032, regardless the type of projection.

This paper gives the so-called mean alternative (in this case, a rather optimistic alternative of the future rural population changes), which starts from the assumption that in the coming decades there will be an overturn in fertility movement. In other words, the assumption is that after the decades of stagnation and decrease of central Serbia rural population fertility, there will be slight increase of the average number of children per woman. According to this alternative, the target total fertility rate is of 1,70, and it would be reached in the last five-year projection period (table 4). Assumptions on death rate were based on the movement of life expectancy in the last decade, with estimations about the influence of a number of factors (psychological and socio-economic) upon the level of death rate in future. Up to the year 2007, life expectancy at birth will remain at the level of the last decade (of 70 for men and of about 75 for women), while until the end of the projection period, with decreased death rate, it would be of about 75 for men and of about 80 for women. Accepted hypotheses on future death rate trends are rather optimistic, especially if changes in the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are considered. Regarding the migration hypotheses, it is considered that, after the exceptional circumstances and the influence of this component at the beginning of the projection period, the migrations will return to normal courses from the year 2012 on. The most significant characteristic of the presented (and expected) alternative of the future central Serbia rural population changes is that the long-term depopulation tendencies will gradually decrease. In the last five-year projection period it will even cease, which will definitely influence the improvement of all structural characteristics and the process of future demographic development.

**Table 4. Projected rural population changes, 2002-2032.**

Year	Total population	Rural population	Share in total population (%)	Annual growth rate (‰)	Total fertility rate (TRF)	
					total	rural
2002	5.794.346	2.597.880	44,8			
2007	5.516.549	2.452.050	44,4	-11,5	1,58	1,52
2012	5.388.343	2.350.999	43,6	-8,4	1,62	1,58
2017	5.272.253	2.280.756	43,3	-6,0	1,66	1,61
2022	5.177.602	2.250.329	43,5	-2,7	1,71	1,65
2027	5.093.957	2.238.075	43,9	-1,1	1,75	1,67
2032	5.026.638	2.243.757	44,6	0,5	1,80	1,70

## Conclusion

All the main tendencies of rural population in central Serbia are unfavourable. Thus, they have contributed to weakening of the total demographic development. Regarding the character of the tendencies, the assumptions about their further unfavourable influence are reasonable, because it is not realistic to expect that the causes of such tendencies will significantly change in the nearest future. The traces of insufficient birth rate have left long-term effects on age structure, so that even with the increase of reproduction, as it is predicted in the mean (and possible) alternative, depopulation and ageing will continue for some time. Apart from that, the losses caused by emigration of rural population have imposed a serious demographic problem, which is even more crucial due to the fact that it has been present for a long time in the conditions of an insufficient birth rate and obvious depopulation. Therefore, the end of the 20th century, characterized by the negative natural and migrational components of rural population, is the time of the greatest demographic disturbances. The greatest mistake that could be made is to expect that, under unchanged circumstances, the unfavourable tendencies of the previous population development could spontaneously be solved. For that reason, the tendencies of population changes in central Serbia in the nearest future (2032) are not based on the low alternative, which means carrying on with the previous tendencies<sup>2</sup>, but on the mean alternative, which implies introduction of a more efficient demographic policy, related not only to rural population, but to the total social development process.

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<sup>2</sup> In this alternative, the rural population in central Serbia would be 1865854 in the year 2032 (RZS,2005), which would be 732000 inhabitants (28,2%) less than in the basic year, 2002.