

## **Rural depopulation and the changing scope of the rural settlement network in Bulgaria in 1946-2011**

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**Abstract.** Over the last seven decades, the accelerated depopulation of rural areas in Bulgaria has had a strongly negative impact on the scope and condition of the rural settlement network. The partial and total depopulation of more than 90 % of the villages in the country is extremely detrimental to the development of rural areas in Bulgaria. This article addresses the link between depopulation and the collapse of the rural settlement network. In tracking the dynamics in the number of rural settlements, divided into six categories, a number of regularities have been revealed, which determine the link between the decrease of the number of rural inhabitants in settlements and by settlement categories, and the reduction of the number of rural settlements in Bulgaria during the period 1946-2011.

**Keywords:** “authentic” rural depopulation, “authentic” rural settlement network, settlement categories, distribution of settlements by size, shrinkage of the rural settlement network

### **Introduction**

The rural settlement network represents a spatial scheme of distribution of the rural population; a characteristic particularity of this scheme is that the population is concentrated in numerous settlements with small populations. Only in mountain regions situated higher than 1,700 metres above sea level, and in the densely built-up urban and industrial zones, are there no rural settlements with a constant population. According to data of the National Statistical Institute (NSI), since the end of 2017, the number of village settlements in the country is 4,999 compared with 5,954 registered at the time of the 1946 population census<sup>1</sup>. The fact that the number of rural dwellers has decreased threefold in the period between the 1946 and 2011 censuses has a direct impact on the average

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<sup>1</sup> According to data from Population 2017.

size, and the distribution by size, of the rural settlements. An inspection of the National Register of Populated Places for the period between these two censuses shows that, due to urbanization and rural depopulation in the last seven decades, an average of 16 rural settlements have been deleted from the list each year (National register of populated places 2017). As a share of the settlements that existed by the end of 1946, the decrease of the rural settlement network since the middle of the 20th century and until now amounts to 16 %. This, however, is not a great reduction compared with the nearly threefold decrease in the number of the rural population during that period. The disparity in the speed of the two trends is due to the highly conservative character of the rural network, whose scope is changing at much slower rates compared with the speed of decrease in the number of rural dwellers.

### **Dynamics of the decrease of the rural settlement network by different settlement categories**

The National Register of Populated Places points out the causes why rural settlements are deleted from the register. Prevalent among these is “joined to other settlements”, which applies to 64.1 % of the cases of villages that have disappeared from the administrative map of Bulgaria in the period 1946-2011. The cause “deleted” accounts for 19.6 % of the cases, and “merging with other settlements” accounts for another 14.5 % of small rural settlements that have ceased to exist. Less than 2 % have been deleted from the register in that period due to “closure” and “closure due to merging”. In many cases, the disappearance of rural settlements that had existed for centuries is the result of inhabitants’ dying out due to ageing of the local population after the large-scale migration of people in active age to cities during the second half of the 20th century. The social-economic decline, and the demographic recession related to it, began in many rural settlements with the start of the collectivization of the land and farm inventory in the late 1940s. This process severed the age-old bond of farmers to the land that nourishes them (Gruev 2009, 331-336). What additionally contributed to reducing the role of villages was the adoption of the Soviet practice of imposed “optimization” of the rural settlement network by closure of schools, medical services, bus transport and stores, in a large number of small villages that were declared “lacking prospects for development”. The aim was to economize on maintenance of rural regions distant from cities. The consequences were disastrous for many rural settlements both in the Soviet Union and Bulgaria (Tsekov 1992, 402-408).

Data on the distribution of villages by population into separate settlement categories provides some idea about the uneven territorial distribution of rural settlements. The most vivid mark of depopulation of the rural settlement network in the period 1946-2011 was the deletion, for various reasons, of 909 once independent rural settlements from the country’s administrative map<sup>2</sup>. Another

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to depopulation, rise to city category, or amalgamation with cities, independent rural settlements disappeared in some cases due to evacuation, when they were located on the sites of newly built dams, mining developments, etc. Apart from the disappearance of

indicator is the sharp decrease of the number and share of the largest (with 5,000 or more inhabitants), the larger (from 2,000 to 4,999 inhabitants), and the large (from 1,000 to 1,999 inhabitants) villages, compared with the increase of numbers and shares of the smallest (up to 200 inhabitants), the small (from 200 to 499 inhabitants) and, to some extent, the medium-sized (from 500 to 999 inhabitants) rural settlements. The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 regarding the dynamics of the scope and characteristics of settlement categories in the years 1946-2011 clearly indicate the escalation of depopulation within the rural settlement network during this period, and give a clear idea of the prospects for continuing existence or disappearance of the populated places within the network depending on their size. The trend of increasingly uneven distribution of the rural population across the territory of the country due to the faster disappearance of the smallest and small settlements is typical for mountainous and semi-mountainous regions. The category of largest villages (with 5,000 or more inhabitants) has almost disappeared there: the number of villages and the population in this category decreased drastically between 1946 and 2011. Developments are also dynamic in the other rural settlement categories. Thus, the number of smallest villages (up to 200 inhabitants) has almost doubled in the last seven decades, while the number of their inhabitants has grown only by a third. At the same time, the number of villages with populations over 2,000 inhabitants has decreased five times while the total number of their inhabitants has decreased by more than 80 %.

**Table 1.** Number and share of rural settlements by categories based on their population size in 1946 and 2011

Categories of villages	1946		2011		Average annual rate of change of the population for 1946-2011 (%)
	Number	Share (%)	Number	Share (%)	
<b>Less than 200 inhabitants</b>	1,316	22.1	2,555	50.60	0.39
<b>From 200 to 499 inhabitants</b>	1,256	21.1	1,202	23.80	-0.11
<b>From 500 to 999 inhabitants</b>	1,466	24.6	744	14.70	-1.04
<b>From 1,000 to 1,999 inhabitants</b>	1,302	21.9	425	8.40	-1.69
<b>From 2,000 to 4,999 inhabitants</b>	566	9.5	117	2.30	-2.36
<b>Over 4,999 inhabitants</b>	48	0.8	2	0.04	-4.72
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,954</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>5,045</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>-1.47</b>

Source: National register of populated places 2015.

some villages, quite a few new, independent rural settlements appeared on the map after 1946 due to the division of demographically prospering rural settlements. This phenomenon was above all typical for neighbourhoods populated by ethno-religious communities in the districts of Kardzhali, Smolyan, and Blagoevgrad; in some cases, it was a result of the administrative separation of parts of villages and their official establishment as independent villages.

Compared with the year 1946, the number of villages with populations between 1,000 and 1,999 decreased three times. The number of medium rural settlements, with populations between 500 and 999, decreased by half. The reduction of the category of villages with populations between 200 and 499 is insignificant: their number decreased by 4.6 %. Although the smallest villages make up half of all villages in Bulgaria, one out of eight rural dwellers lived in such villages in 2011. In 1946, however, the proportion had been quite different: only one out of 40 lived there.

Very indicative in this respect is the number of villages that are doomed to complete disappearance in the short term, i.e., those with populations of less than 10 inhabitants. Out of the total 5,954 rural settlements, the 1946 census registered only two villages whose population was near to dying out entirely. In 2011, there were 574 such villages, amounting to 11.3 % of the total number of villages in the country. Villages without a permanent population (the so-called ghost villages) and not deleted from the National Register of Populated Places amounted to 158 in April 2018, and the number of villages with fewer than 10 inhabitants was 566 (National register of populated places 2017). In 1946, only 26 villages (0.4 % of all rural settlements) had fewer than 100 inhabitants. In 2011, their number was 1,808, or 35.8 % of the total number of villages. By the end of April 2018, the number of villages with fewer than 100 inhabitants marked a new increase, up to 1,865 (37.3 %) (National register of populated places 2017).

**Table 2.** Population of rural settlements by categories based on their population size in 1946 and 2011

Categories of villages	1946			2011		
	Population	Share (%)	Inhabitants in 1 village	Population	Share (%)	Inhabitants in 1 village
<b>Less than 200 inhabitants</b>	131,435	2.5	100	166,140	8.2	65
<b>From 200 go 499 inhabitants</b>	431,626	8.1	344	394,450	19.5	328
<b>From 500 to 999 inhabitants</b>	1,066,774	19.9	728	528,759	26.1	705
<b>From 1,000 to 1,999 inhabitants</b>	1,808,362	33.7	1,389	589,150	29.1	1,383
<b>From 2,000 to 4,999 inhabitants</b>	1,588,708	29.6	2,807	334,671	16.5	2,721
<b>Over 4,999 inhabitants</b>	334,214	6.2	6,963	12,399	0.6	6,200
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,361,119</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>900</b>	<b>2,025,569</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>402</b>

*Source:* Author's calculations based on data from National register of populated places 2017.

The trends of changes in the least populated settlement category is certainly an indicator of the impact and consequences of rural depopulation for the settlement network. Apart from the statistics on complete disappearance of the population in many villages of this category, there are a number of particularities in the dynamics of the number of smallest settlements and the number of their inhabitants across the different stages of Bulgarian rural depopulation.

The smallest villages that had become completely deserted in recent decades were in many cases deleted from the country's administrative map by the National Register of Populated Places more than ten years after the event. Their places have been taken by other villages close to disappearance that had belonged to more populous settlement categories in the past. In over 70 % of the settlements included in the category of smallest rural settlements, not a single birth has been registered in the last 30 years, which is a telling fact regarding the extremely deteriorated demographic situation in this settlement category (Tsekov 2010, 47-49). The phenomenon of "villages without childbearing women" is especially typical for villages with populations of less than 170 inhabitants. This is undoubtedly a distinguishing mark of Bulgarian rural depopulation.

### **Demographic ageing as a factor in the process of distortion of the rural settlement network**

A comparison between the age-sex pyramids of the inhabitants of different sized village populations gives a clear idea of the connections between rural population ageing and the distortions of the age-sex structures. This comparison is also of key importance for tracing the different speeds of demographic ageing of dwellers in different village categories. The observed differences point to a regressive natural reproduction model dominated entirely by depopulation dynamics in the three rural categories with the smallest populations - up to 1,000 inhabitants. This model displays a vivid tendency towards distortion of the age-sex population pyramids in those categories. The model leads to an excessive widening at the top and a drastic narrowing down of the middle-aged, young and child population segments during the period between the 1946 and 2011 censuses (Table 3).

In the time span under study, the small and smallest villages were viewed as "lacking prospects for development" and were declared "villages with waning functions". The people in many of the smallest villages were prematurely moved out, and the villages were deleted in accordance with the national and district plans for "optimizing" public expenditure for maintenance of the rural settlement network. This policy predetermined the end of the "prospectless" villages in which, due to their "inexpediency", schools, healthcare services and stores were closed down and the regular public bus transport was discontinued (Tsekov 1992, 402-408). This is undoubtedly one of the causes of the much faster ageing and depopulation of the smallest villages compared with the deteriorated demographic situation in the more populous categories of villages.

**Table 3.** Age structure of the population in rural settlements by categories

Categories of villages	Distribution of rural population by age groups (%)								
	0-9 years	10-19 years	20-29 years	30-39 years	40-49 years	50-59 years	60-69 years	70-79 years	80 years or more
Less than 200 inhabitants	4.8	5.3	6.5	7.8	9.4	13.6	20.8	21.1	10.7
From 200 go 499 inhabitants	7.4	8.3	9.4	10.3	11.4	13.6	17.2	15.3	7.1
From 500 to 999 inhabitants	8.7	9.6	10.7	11.5	12.3	13.6	15.7	12.4	5.5
From 1,000 to 1,999 inhabitants	9.7	10.3	11.6	12.6	13	13.4	14.1	10.6	4.7
From 2,000 to 4,999 inhabitants	10.9	10.9	13.0	13.8	13.8	13.4	12.3	8.5	3.4
Over 4,999 inhabitants	7.6	7.9	13.0	14.1	15.6	16.4	13.2	8.4	3.8
Rural population 2011	8.8	9.4	10.7	11.6	12.3	13.5	15.4	12.6	5.7
Rural population 1946	18.7	20.8	16.3	14.6	12.3	7.7	6.3	3.4	

Source: Author's calculations based on data from the 1946 and 2011 censuses (Population and housing census 2011).

In 2011, the largest population was that in the category of small villages, comprising rural settlements with populations ranging from 200 to 499 inhabitants. The total number of villages in this category amounted to one fourth of all villages. One fifth of the entire rural population of the country was living in them. The age-sex structure of the inhabitants of this settlement category displays pronounced ageing, although moderate in comparison with ageing among inhabitants of the smallest villages (Table 3).

The dynamics of the number of rural settlements in the category of the smallest villages is one of the main markers of the intensity and direction of changes taking place in the scope of the rural settlement network due to depopulation. It should be pointed out that the majority - nearly three fourths - of the smallest villages had, until 1995, the status of dispersed villages, designated in various parts of Bulgaria as *mahali* (neighbourhoods) or *kolibi* (cabins). This type of kinship-based settlement has played a key role in the dispersion of the rural population throughout the whole history of the country. When certain economic or political changes take place, the settlements “multiply”, i.e., the populated

areas of which they are composed become independent settlements. The population of what were once mahali and kolibi decreased between the years 1946-2011 from 162,764 to 85,234 inhabitants, a growth of 47.6 %. The factor that plays a significant role for the survival, or else waning, of dispersed villages and of the smallest villages is the ethnic composition of their inhabitants.

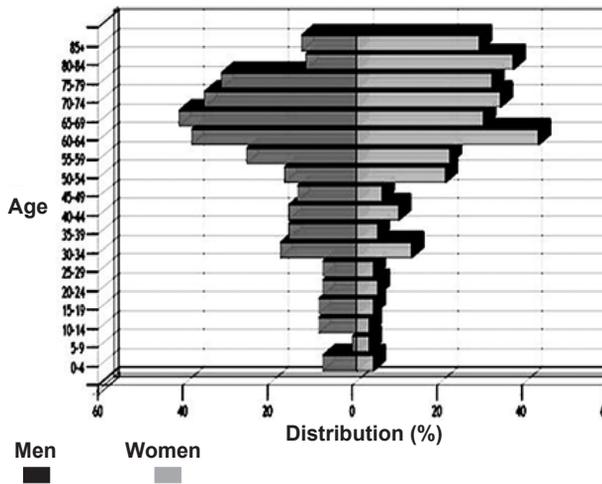
In 1946, the medium-sized villages, with a population between 500 and 999 inhabitants, amounted to one fourth of all rural settlements. At that time, one fifth of the rural population lived in them. In 2011, the age structure of the population in these villages was nearly identical with the age structure of the general rural population of Bulgaria (Table 3). At present, their share in the structure of the rural settlement system has been significantly reduced (Table 2).

The large villages, with a population between 1,000 and 1,999 inhabitants, has made up the backbone of the Bulgarian rural settlement system both in 1946 and today. Both then and now, the relatively largest part of rural dwellers - about one third of their total number - has been concentrated in villages of this settlement category (Table 2). In absolute numbers, the large villages and their inhabitants have decreased threefold in the period 1946-2011.

The 2011 census data indicate that the age distribution of inhabitants in the larger village category, ranging from 2,000 to 4,999 inhabitants, is quite similar to the age structure of the urban population of Bulgaria. The presence of this settlement category in the structure of the rural settlement network is strongly reduced now compared with 1946. At that time, the number of larger villages was five times greater than in 2011 (Table 2).

Compared with 1946, the number of the largest villages in Bulgaria, those with a population of over 5,000 inhabitants, had decreased 24 times by 2011, and the number of their inhabitants, 27 times. The cause of this enormous reduction was that before 1989, there was an on-going campaign to reclassify nearly all 48 largest villages (that had existed 70 years ago) as cities or parts of cities, even though the necessary urban-defining functions, and respective urban appearance, were not present in their case.

Thus far, the overview of the demographic situation by village categories has made it clear that the tendency towards rapid ageing of the rural population is intensifying in a direction that shifts from the more populous to the less populous village categories. The reduced scope of the rural settlement network is a direct result of emigration and ageing of the rural inhabitants; this process is most distinct in the categories of small, smallest and medium-sized villages. The destructive processes related to “ageing” of the rural settlement network is manifest in the complete depopulation and administrative deletion of a large number of villages. The observed changes also lead to inner structural distortions connected with changing proportions between the different settlement categories by their numbers and the population size of the villages they include. A mark of this “ageing” is the increased share of small, and especially smallest, villages in relation to the total number of rural settlements and rural inhabitants in the structure of the rural settlement network during the period 1946-2011. The average size of villages is also decreasing for villages in general and by separate village categories (Table 2). Depopulating medium-sized, and even large, villages with a very aged population are rapidly and increasingly dropping into



**Fig. 1.** Age-sex pyramid of the rural population of Treklyano, a border municipality, in 2011  
*Source:* Prebroyavane 2011.

the category of less populous village categories, while in many cases, they become completely depopulation. The age-sex pyramids of village populations in the three least populous categories within the cores of rural depopulation are completely distorted and have the outline of a funnel with the narrow part turned downward (Fig. 1).

Such extreme distortions are a sign of exceptionally intensive negative demographic and social-economic processes leading to complete depopulation and the appearance of demographic deserts in the middle-term,

and even short-term, period<sup>3</sup>. Though with some decrease in speed, the negative changes in the scope and structure of the rural settlement system is closely following the processes of rural ageing and depopulation in Bulgaria.

### **The impact of rural depopulation on the scope and structure of the rural settlement network**

The data on the average number of inhabitants in a single village for the six settlement categories indicate the tendency towards merging of the total population of all villages in Bulgaria with the population of the 4,797 “authentic” villages<sup>4</sup> that have survived during the period 1946-2011 (Tsekov 2017, 7-22). In 1946, the difference between the average number of inhabitants of all rural settlements and of the “authentic” ones among them was largest in the category of the largest villages, which in their great majority were later declared cities or joined to cities.

The impact of rural depopulation on the distortion of the rural settlement network, and the disappearance of a considerable number of villages from the system, can be measured statistically through the indicators for asymmetry and excess. Distortions of the rural settlement network resulting from depopulation

<sup>3</sup> The definition “demographic desert” refers to territories in which the population density has fallen to less than 10 persons per square kilometer. Source: Pinilla, Ayuda, Sáez 2006.

<sup>4</sup> The rural settlements defined as “authentic” are those that have retained their administrative status of rural settlement throughout the whole period under study. A detailed methodology used to distinguish them is presented in the author’s dissertation thesis entitled “Rural Depopulation in Bulgarian in the Period 1946-2011”, available in the library of the Institute for Population and Human Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

**Table 4.** Values of the arithmetic mean, the median, and Yule’s coefficient, of the number of rural inhabitants by villages

Arithmetic mean of the number of rural dwellers by villages		Median of the number of rural dwellers in a single village		Yule’s coefficient values	
1946	2011	1946	2011	1946	2011
900	402	612	198	-0.0108	-0.0152

Source: Author’s calculations based on data from the 1946 and 2011 censuses.

have led to increased asymmetry in the distribution of rural settlements by size during the period 1946-2011. This is proven when calculating the values for Yule’s asymmetry coefficient, based on the difference between the arithmetic mean and the median of a given statistical population (Kaloyanov 2004, 97-113). In this case, this statistical population encompasses the indicators for numbers of population in all rural settlements according to census data in 1946 and 2011. The values of the Yule coefficient are given in Table 4.

The increase in the absolute value of the Yule coefficient for the period 1946-2011 indicates a certain growth of asymmetry (by 1.4 times) in the distribution of rural settlements according to the numbers of inhabitants. Even now, this distribution is moderately asymmetrical, with a shift to the left of the curve that describes it. Undoubtedly, such a change reflects the influence of rural population on the rural settlement network, which is empirically evident in the increasing share of villages in the three least populous village categories, at the expense of the respective indicators for the categories of the large, larger, and largest villages (Table 4).

In statistical theory, the median is considered very suitable for studying asymmetric distributions, such as the distribution of rural settlements by population size. The median’s value always lies between the values of the arithmetic average and the mode, because it is not influenced by the frequency and the extreme values of the distributions under study. Compared with 1946, in 2011 the value of the median of number of rural inhabitants in a single village for the total population of the 5,954 rural settlements existing at that time had decreased threefold (Table 4).

Comparing the average annual depopulation rates by settlement categories, and the scope of these categories, through indicators for the number of settlements included in the categories, the total number of their inhabitants, and the average sizes of the largest, larger, medium, small and smallest rural settlements during the period 1946-2011, we see a close connection between the depopulation trend and the narrowing down of the rural settlement network. Using Yule’s asymmetry coefficient, it is possible to statistically demonstrate the connection between the depopulation of rural regions and, resulting from it, the distortion in scope and structure of the rural settlement network, for the separate rural categories; this connection moves in the direction of sharp in-

crease in the number and population of the less populated settlement categories at the expense of the more populous ones. In this perspective, we may seek an explanation to some tendencies of structure change in the rural settlement network during the period 1946-2011. For instance, the number of the population registered by the census for all the smallest rural settlements has grown by an annual average of 0.39 %. The cause of this demographic growth, which contrasts with the increasing rural depopulation during the period in question, can be found in the rapid depopulation of many villages in the more populous categories, which ultimately end up in the smaller rural settlement categories or even become entirely depopulated and are deleted administratively from the National Register of Populated Places. The situation is most serious in the category of the largest villages. The rise of many of them to the rank of cities or their amalgamation with cities as city neighbourhoods during the second half of the 20th century led to the phenomenon of “administrative” depopulation. The basic result of this trend is the purely mechanical transformation of rural dwellers into urban dwellers. Because of this phenomenon, unrealistically large average annual rates of rural depopulation were registered during the period 1946-2011, rates that often came close to 5 % during the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s (Tsekov 2017, 146-147).

In conclusion, we may summarize that the rural depopulation by settlement categories during the period 1946-2011 did not go on evenly in time and across the territory. The most intensive decrease of the number of rural settlements and their inhabitants is observed in the three most populous settlements categories, which include villages with populations of 1,000 or more inhabitants. There was a sharp increase in the number of the smallest villages, accompanied by an insignificant increase in the share of their inhabitants in the structure of the rural settlement network. Because of the trends occurring during the period under study, this structure changed towards sharp decrease in the average number of inhabitants in a single village by different settlement categories. Considerable changes are also observed in the proportions of the six settlement categories by number of rural settlements included in them and the sizes of the population inhabiting them. Under the influence of the intensive depopulation trend in Bulgarian rural regions, the population size of the settlements that make up their settlement network has become ever smaller. This process is reflected in the increasingly prominent presence of the smallest, small and medium-sized villages in the structure of the national rural settlement network.

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