



IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE MECHANICAL DEMOGRAPHIC MIGRATION IN BULGARIA

S. Ivanov*, D. Savova, T. Terziev, D. Paunov, V. Zheleva

Department of Regional Development, Faculty of Economics, Trakia University,
Stara Zagora, Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on certain demographic processes in Bulgaria during the Covid-19 pandemic in the period 2019-2021. Emphasis is placed on the mechanical migration on various routes. The unexpected intensive flow since the beginning of 2022, as a result of the military actions in Ukraine, which has also impacted a large part of European countries, including Bulgaria, is also taken into account. The PURPOSE of the analysis is to examine the positive and negative effects of Covid-19 pandemic on the demographic situation in the country. Statistical METHODS, synthesis, and analysis of literary sources are used. Statistical data from NSI for previous years for the period of the pandemic are used as a basis for comparative analysis. Articles, scientific publications, and studies by other authors, who examine and describe the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on various aspects of human life, are reviewed. The RESULTS show the impact of the pandemic on people's desire for internal migration and its direction. This determines how and to what extent the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the depopulation of rural areas at the expense of overcrowding in large cities.

Key words: Mechanical migration, urbanization processes, Covid-19, social consequences

INTRODUCTION

The authors define the process of migration as “an act of transfer between two machines. It enables a dynamic load distribution, fault resilience, eased system administration, and data access locality. Despite these goals and ongoing research efforts, migration has not achieved a widespread use” (1).

Other researchers consider that mechanical migration is a “demographic process that consists of changes in the residence of persons who inhabit a certain territory” (2). The authors consider two aspects of this movement by territory - external and internal migration.

Internal migration is considered in four sections: “urban – urban”, “rural – rural”, “urban – rural” and “rural – urban”. In recent years, large migratory trends from rural to urban

areas have been observed, which stimulates the development of the urbanization processes. In its essence, urbanization represents “a rapid increase in the number, role and size of cities. Its consequences are an increase in the urban population, a change in the functions of cities and the spread of the urban way of life” (3).

There are 6 main processes in the development of urbanization: suburbanization/rurbanization, reurbanization, deurbanization, ruralization, pseudo-urbanization, metropolitanization. Most strongly expressed in the years before the COVID pandemic is the process of suburbanization, which consists in the movement of the population to big cities, that offer better work opportunities and a higher standard of living. In a study conducted in 2018, it was reported that one of the biggest problems in Bulgaria's demographic situation is the depopulation of rural areas. The authors present data that signals “an increasing movement of the population from rural areas that urban areas and abroad” (4). The same conclusions have been reached by other researchers aiming to

*Correspondence to: Stefan Ivanov, Department of Regional Development, Faculty of Economics, Trakia University, Stara Zagora, Student Campus, e-mail: stefan.ivanov.20@trakia-uni.bg, authors phone +359875331143

analyze the migration flows and the movement of the population towards rural areas in Bulgaria in 2022 (5).

RESULTS

Analysis of the state of migration processes at European level under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic:

The EU introduced a series of measures aimed at improving the control of external borders and

migration flows caused by the peak of the migration crisis in 2015. The Union has outlined several migration routes: Eastern Mediterranean Route, Western Mediterranean Route, West African Route, Central Mediterranean Route, Route through the Western Balkans.

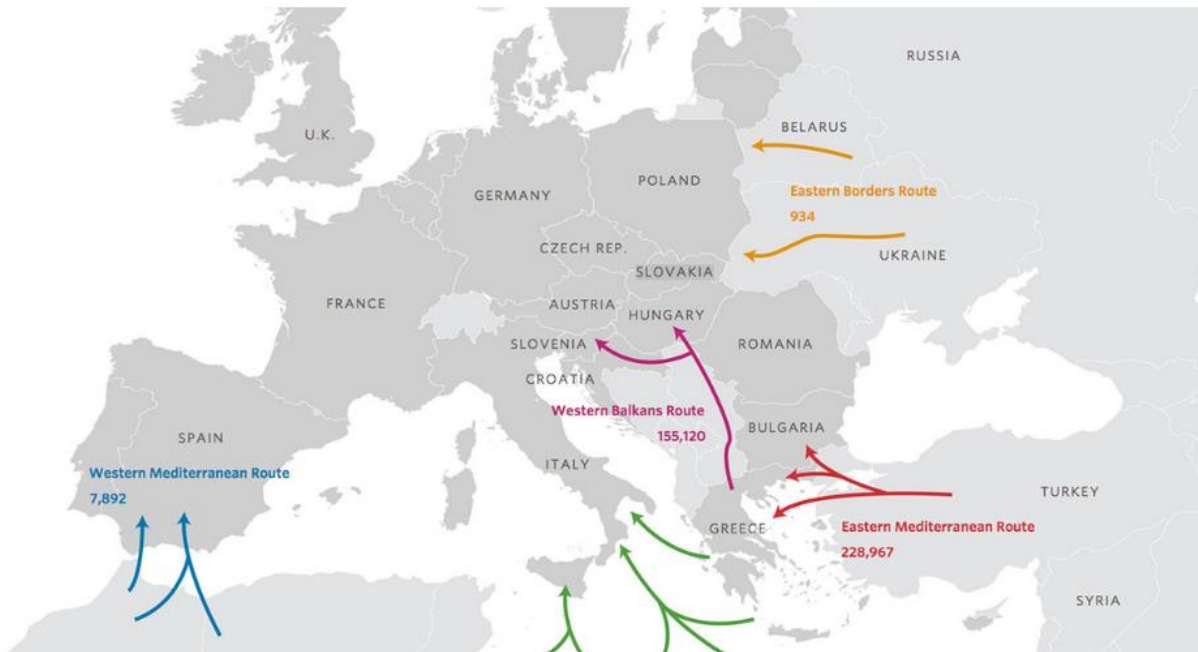


Figure 1. Number of migrants who entered Europe illegally on the main migrant routes in August 2015 (6)

According to the analyzes presented by the EC, the route through the Western Balkans is one of the main and most heavily loaded in recent years. It includes those arriving illegally in the EU, through the following countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, whose goal is to reach Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Hungary. In 2015 a decline was reported, but since 2019, the intensity of migration has resumed. With political and military unrest between the People's Republic of Ukraine and Russia beginning in 2022, millions of people began to seek new refuges to escape martial law. They focused mainly on EU countries, including Bulgaria. As of January 2023, the union reports that it has granted temporary protection to nearly 4 million Ukrainian refugees (7)(Figure 1).

The European Parliament examines the reasons for the depopulation of regions and the aging population in the European Union. The main

demographic trends reported are brain drain, population concentration in cities, population aging and population decline. The main factors leading to the formation of these trends are low incomes in rural or post-industrial areas, favorable conditions for internal migration and the COVID pandemic (8).

According to Eurostat statistics, about more than 297,500 people died in the EU between March and October 2020, compared to the same period in previous years, with a peak in April 2020 (25% more deaths than during the same month of the previous year). The Member States with the highest values of excess mortality were Spain (78.9%), Belgium (73.9%) and the Netherlands (53.6%). Another peak in mortality started in August – September with the second wave of the pandemic (excess mortality in the EU reached the following figures above the average: 8 % in September and 17% in October). The indicator climbed even higher in November 2020 in all EU Member States that

had available data. The Member States which reached the highest values at that time were Poland (97.2%), Bulgaria (94.5%) and Slovenia (91.4%), all three having showed a lot flatter curve during spring. The global EU average in November 2020, however, remained lower than in April 2020 (9).

Analysis of the state of the demographic processes at national level. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic:

External migration

Population migration is a major factor that affects the number and structures of the population, both for the country as a whole and for individual regions and territories.

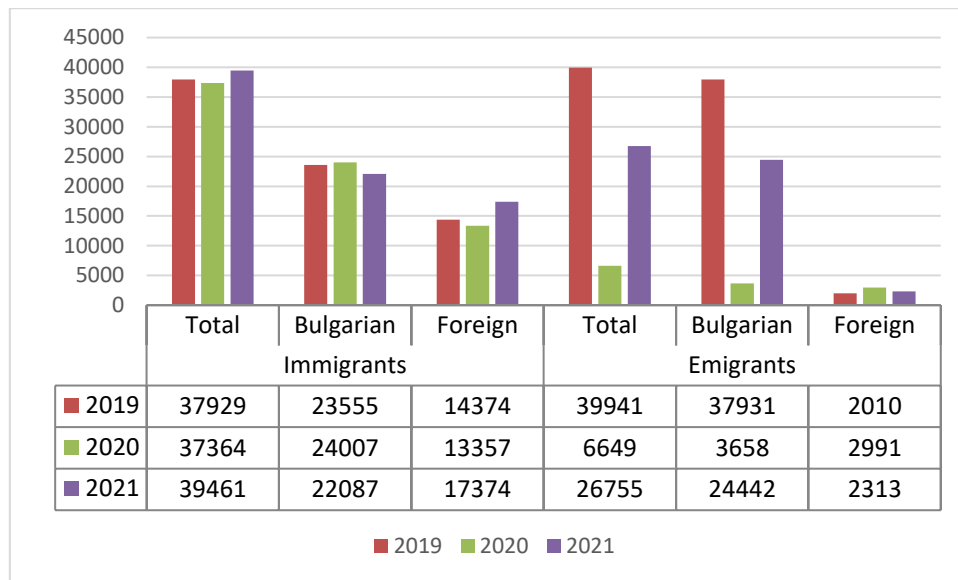


Figure 2. Immigration and emigration by nationality of migrants (10)

According to NSI data, in 2021 there were more incoming migrants returning to Bulgaria. The majority of them were men. Figure 2 shows that 55.97% of those who settled in the country (immigrants) had Bulgarian citizenship, and 44.03% had foreign citizenship, while the majority of them came from countries outside the European Union. At the same time,

emigrants marked a higher percentage, with 91.35% of them owning Bulgarian citizenship.

Internal migration

Internal migration is influenced by socio-economic factors, the development of regions, as well as the living conditions in the respective settlements.

Table 1. Internal migration of the population between cities and villages for the period 2019-2021 (10)

	2019			2020			2021		
	Emigrants		Immigrants	Emigrants		Immigrants	Emigrants		Immigrants
	From the towns	From the villages		total	From the towns		From the villages	total	
In the cities	48755	30889	79644	59049	30108	89157	49766	33560	83326
In the villages	35133	13402	48535	95510	12575	108085	32080	12556	44636
Emigrants total	83888	44291	128179	154559	42683	197242	81846	46116	127962
Migration increase	-4244	4244	0	-65402	65402	0	1480	-1480	0

In 2021, 49766 people, or 38.89% of all migrants, changed their place of residence from one city to another within the country. The persons who moved from villages to cities amounted to 33560, or 26.22%, followed by migrants in the direction from cities to villages, which were 32080, or 25.07%. The smallest relative share of migrants who changed their place of residence from one village to another was 12,556, or 9.81% of all migrants.

The most common reasons for migration are finding professional fulfillment or marriage. Migration to larger cities is associated with greater investments, i.e. in the big city, regional center or the capital, it is easier to find a better employment and career development.

During the Covid-19 crisis, there was a change in the trends from the past, with an increase in the rate of urban-to-rural migration. This was mainly due to the fact that families with children were looking for housing with a yard, or had the option of home office employment.

According to data from a study (11) conducted in 2020, based on information received from the border police of the Republic of Bulgaria, it was reported that a total of 121,698 Bulgarian citizens returned to Bulgaria during the months of March-May. **Figure 3** presents data on the immigration of our compatriots for the months of March-May, with the highest share standing out at the Vidin-Danube Bridge border crossing (26.5%), followed by the Sofia Airport border crossing (24.8%) and border crossing Ruse-Danube bridge (18.3%).

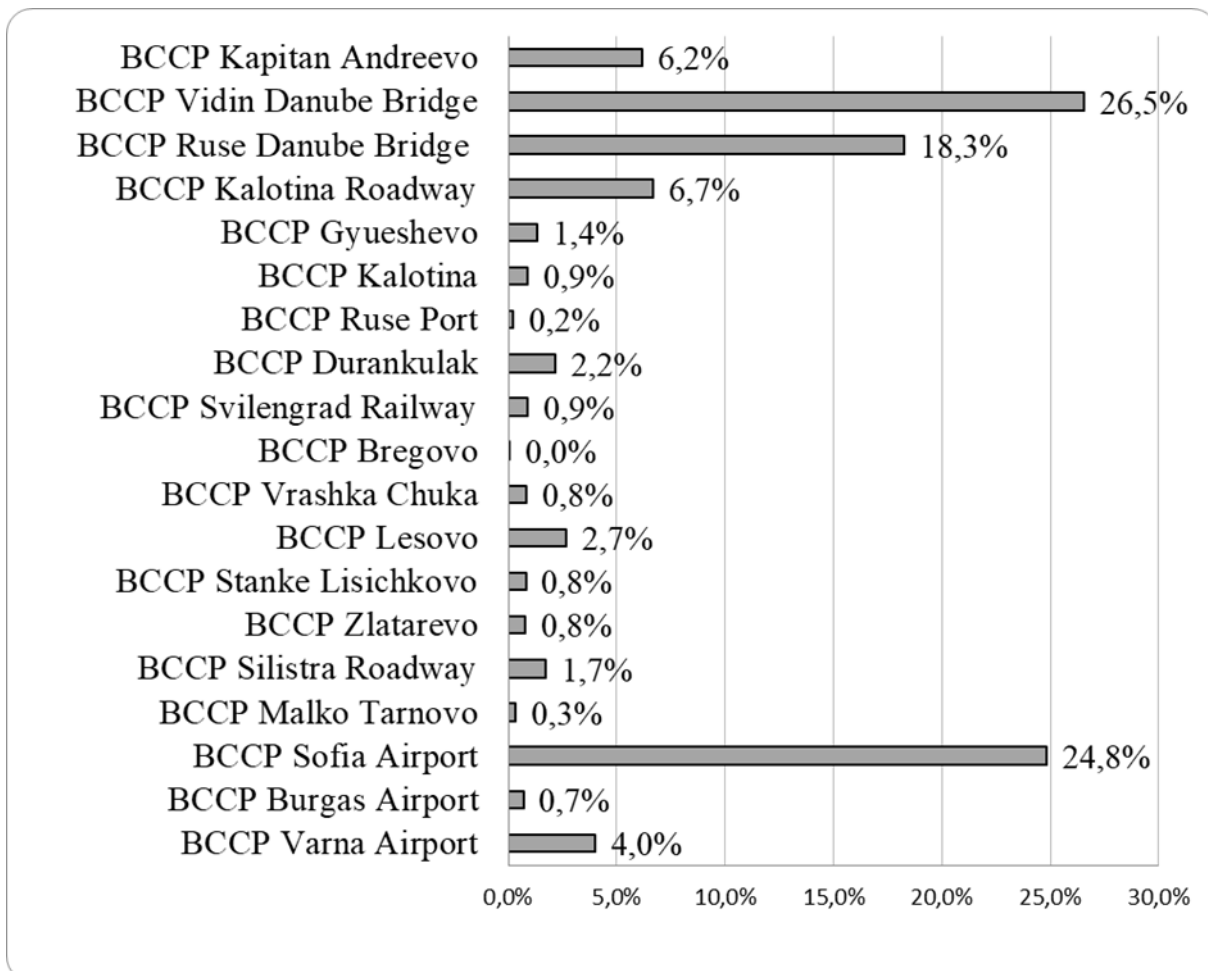


Figure 3. Returned Bulgarian citizens in March-May (2020) (11)

The same study reported several motives, which were key factors for the return of Bulgarian citizens. The main reasons given were most

often related to people's desire to be with their loved ones (45.7%), job loss (32.3%), other (13.4%) and more security (8.7%) (**Figure 4**).

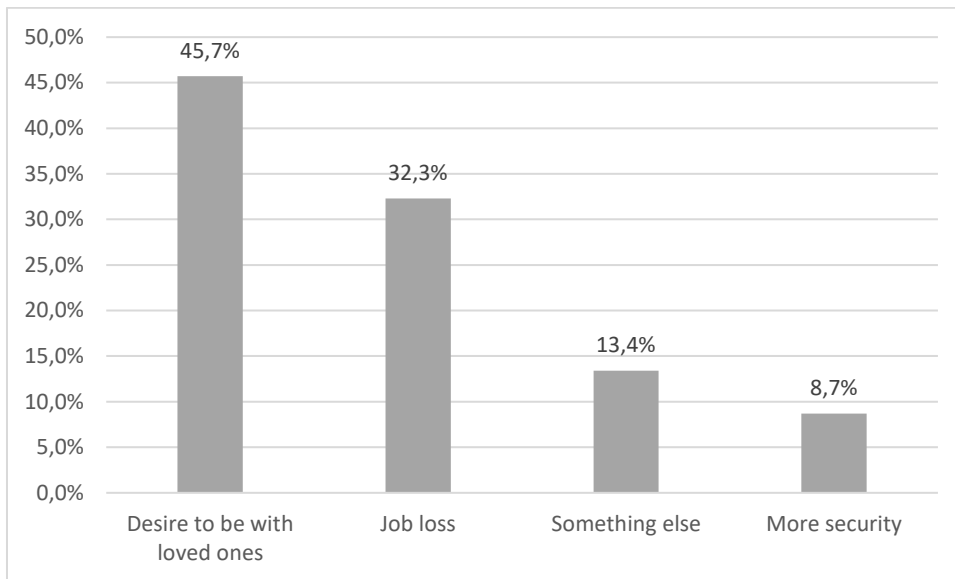


Figure 4. Main reasons for returns (11)

Georgiev also takes into account the desire to plan the re-departure of Bulgarian citizens after the health situation in Europe and the country stabilizes. It found that 64.9% of respondents

would leave Bulgaria again, 10.4% would not leave the country, and the percentage of those who have not yet made a decision is relatively high (24.7%) (**Figure 5**).

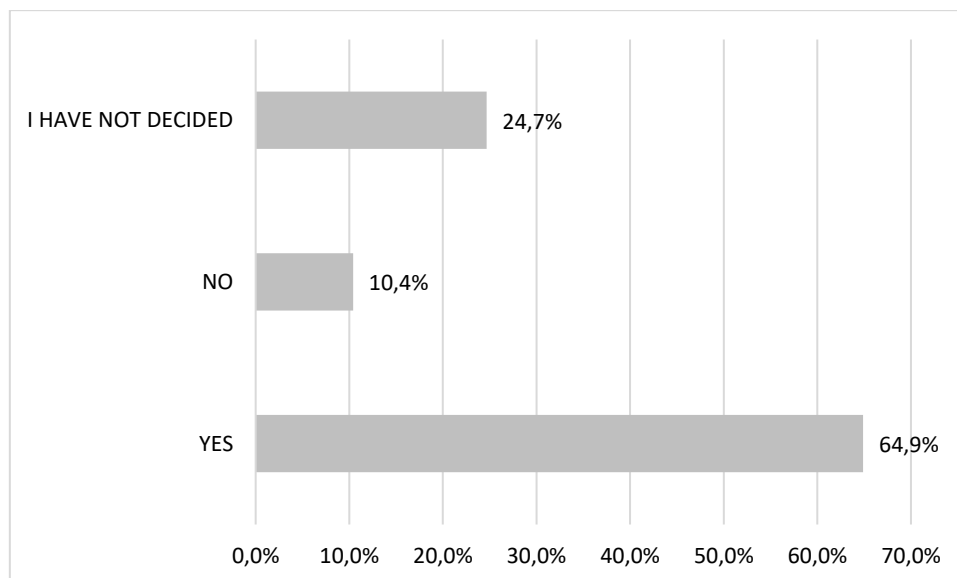


Figure 5. Willingness to depart again (11)

Urbanization is a process of growth in the number of the population, the role and the size of cities. Its consequences are an increase in the relative share of the urban population, a change in the functions of cities and the spread of the urban way of life, which affects the development and dynamics of the population (12).

According to NSI data, in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, deurbanization occurred in Bulgaria, with 95,510 people moving from

cities to villages in search of a more peaceful place, away from the crowds.

The share of people living in cities in 2021 is 73.02%, which is 0.30% less than the value for 2020, and by 0.70% below the level in 2019. This shows that within the pandemic there is a minimal but still sustainable movement of people out of the cities. At the same time, the national trend shows an increase in the urban population until 2019 and a decline over the next two years (13).

CONCLUSION

In the years before the Covid-19 pandemic, significant migration processes in the direction of development, both internal and external movement, were noticed in Bulgaria. Increased levels of internal migration are expressed in the mechanical movement of the population from smaller to larger settlements, and high values in external migration are characterized by the mechanical movement of part of the population to other countries. This trend in the country leads to depopulation of rural areas, making them an increasingly undesirable place to live. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the pace and direction of migration have undergone changes. From the data presented by the NSI and scientific studies conducted on the subject at the beginning of 2021, it is apparent that the number of people who migrated from a city to a village has increased in percentage compared to the data of previous years. During the health crisis, the village became a desirable place to live for an increasing number of people. The reported change in external migration testifies to an increase in the number of people returning to Bulgaria from other countries, compared to the years before the pandemic.

The depopulation of rural areas at the expense of rapidly growing and developing cities is not a trend observed only in Bulgaria. The state of urbanization in the country is a reflection of the urbanization processes taking place all over the world. The city as a place to live offers a greater opportunity for education, work and human development. Accessibility to more goods and services is also a key element in improving the quality of life. These and many other factors have turned large settlements into an increasingly preferred place to live. The Covid-19 pandemic has largely managed to recall the advantages of rural life. Many young families with children appreciate the freedom that the big house with a yard in the village has to offer. People working online also prefer the tranquility of the village to the hectic everyday life of the city. But these are isolated cases, rather than a mass phenomenon which can drastically change the demographic situation in Bulgaria. It is difficult to predict the future development of the Bulgarian countryside, but

it can certainly be inferred that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a positive effect on the depopulation of rural areas, changing the long-standing direction of the mechanical migration of Bulgaria's population.

REFERENCES

1. Milojić, D., Douglis, F., Paindaveine, Y., Wheeler, R., Zhou, S., Process Migration, *ACM Computing Surveys*, Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 241–299, 2000
2. Dokova, S., Petrov, K., Geodemography, Publishing complex - UNSS, Sofia, p. 132, 2012
3. Petrov, K., Regional demography, Publishing complex - UNSS, Sofia, p. 161, 2020
4. Georgieva-Stankova, N., Yarkova, Y., Mutafov, E., (2018) Can Depopulated Villages Benefit From The Social And Economic Incorporation Of Ethnic And Immigrant Communities? A Survey For Bulgaria, *Trakia Journal of Sciences*, No. 2, pp. 140-154, ISSN 1313-3551 (online), 2020
5. Marinov, P., Mutafov, E., Migration Intensity Flows In The Rural Areas Of Bulgaria, VII International European Conference On Social Sciences, Antalya, Turkey, pp. 891-897, ISBN: 978-625-8377-48-4, 2022
6. Tashev, S., The secondary route of migrants through Bulgaria and the dynamics of congestion on the Western Balkan migration route, 2017
7. EU Migration and Asylum Policy, Official website of the European Parliament, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/bg/policies/eu-migration-policy/>
8. Official website of the European Parliament, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/bg/headlines/society/20210414STO02006/namali-avashcho-naselenie-kakvi-sa-resheniata-zareghionite-v-evropa>
9. Official website of Eurostat, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/main/home>
10. Official website of NSI, <https://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/3058/%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F>