

NEED FOR A NEW VISION ON DEMOGRAPHIC POLICY IN THE RURAL AREAS OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

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НЕОБХОДИМОСТ ОТ НОВА ВИЗИЯ ВЪРХУ ДЕМОГРАФСКАТА ПОЛИТИКА В СЕЛСКИТЕ РАЙОНИ НА РЕПУБЛИКА БЪЛГАРИЯ

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Abstract

According to a preliminary assessment of the National Statistical Institute for the number of the population of Bulgaria as of 09/07/2021. (www.nsi.bg), according to the last census of the population and housing stock from 09/07/2021. until 10.10.2021, 1,677,139 people live in the villages. This represents 25.7% of the population of Bulgaria, which as of the indicated date is 6,520,314 people. There are several negative demographic trends, among which is the depopulation of rural areas. The stabilization of the demographic situation in these areas, as an important and necessary condition for the sustainable development of rural areas, necessitates the preparation and implementation of a new vision on the demographic situation in rural areas. This vision must include new innovative approaches and policies of a demographic nature. These approaches must be prepared and implemented as a component of the national policy for the sustainable development of rural areas and overcoming their depopulation in the context of the national demographic policy.

Key words: rural areas, rural population, demographic situation, policies, vision, innovative policies

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Introduction

The preliminary assessment of the population of Bulgaria as of 07.09.2021. (www.nsi.bg) shows three consolidated negative demographic trends, namely:

- Reduction of the population by 11.5% compared to 2011;
- Deepening of the population aging process – the share of persons aged 65 and over has increased by 5.4% points compared to 2011;
- With a total population of 6,520,314 people, 25.7% or 1,677,139 people live in villages.

These main characteristics of the demographic crisis in Bulgaria give serious indications of consolidation and entry into the role of permanent negative trends in the rural areas of Bulgaria. As noted by some authors (Miteva, A., 2015, p. 67-74),

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in Bulgaria 231 municipalities out of 264 municipalities (87.5%) are classified as rural, in which the population is primarily rural.

The future of rural areas in Bulgaria is directly dependent on the demographic situation in the country. In this regard, the subject of the report is the analysis of some aspects, such as the resonance of negative demographic trends in rural areas – unemployment, reduction in the number of family farms, lack of qualified labor, depopulation, etc.

The object of research is the effect of the demographic situation in its crisis dimensions on the agricultural sector in rural areas.

The aim of the research is to mark some innovative approaches and ways to stabilize the demographic situation in rural areas in the context of a new vision on this issue.

For the purposes of the research, the results of a conducted survey are presented, concerning precisely some nuances of the demographic situation in rural areas and the resulting consequences and problems.

Materials and methods

For the purposes of the study, the following were used:

- Literary sources of Bulgarian authors;
- Normative sources (accents from the current legislation);
- Analytical toolkit (normative and analytical methodological apparatus) and survey.

In the survey, the demographic situation is evaluated by the respondents on a scale of 3 to 6 points, such as:

- a/ 3 points – worsened demographic situation;
- b/ 4 points – relatively good;
- c/ 5 points – good;
- d/ 6 points – sustainable and showing positive trends.

For some of the specialized questions, respondents were given the opportunity to give more than one answer.

Results and discussion

Various aspects of the negative impact of the demographic crisis on the situation in rural areas have been examined and analyzed by a number of authors:

- Some authors study unemployment and employment in rural areas of the Republic of Bulgaria, finding that "unemployment in rural areas is higher than in non-rural areas" (Sarov, Boevski, 2021).
- Other authors, researching the importance of small farms in the sustainable development of rural areas, find a decrease in the number of people permanently engaged in agricultural activities in small farms (Fidanska, Koteva, 2020).

- An observation of the continued decline of agricultural holdings – most often small family holdings, is also made by another author (Doitchinova, 2021).

According to the preliminary results of the census of agricultural holdings in the Republic of Bulgaria in 2020 (www.mzh.governmentbg):

- In 2020, 177,000 annual labor units (ALU) of family and non-family labor and seasonal workers were invested in agriculture. The family workforce and those permanently employed in agriculture are 292,000 people. The relative share of family unpaid labor is 79%;

- Regarding the age structure of employed persons, the age group between 45 and 65 years prevails;

- The segment of managers of agricultural holdings also has a deteriorated age structure – 31% are persons aged 65 and over.

In this regard, for the purposes of the research, an author's survey was conducted among 102 people – owners and users of agricultural land from the South-West planning region. The selection of respondents from this region is related to the fact that its territory is home to the largest in the country Regional Directorate "Agriculture" Sofia region.

The summarized results are presented below in the exposition.

The survey covers two sections, namely:

Section I: Profile of the respondent

1. Total number of respondents – 102 people – 100%.

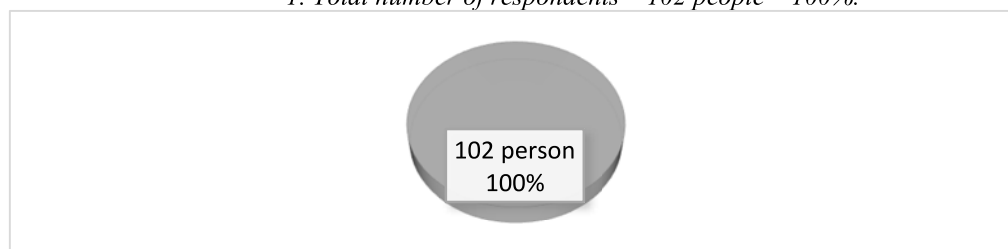


Figure 1. Total number of respondents

2. Gender structure:

a/ men – 68 people or 66.67%;

b/ women – 34 people or 33.33%

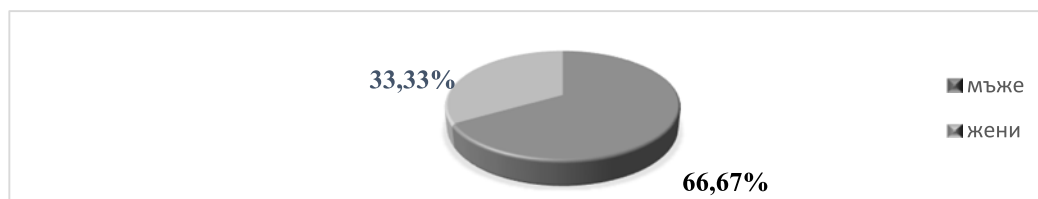


Figure 2. Gender structure of respondents

3. Age structure:

a/ 20 – 30 years old – 17 people or 16.67%;

b/ 31- 40 years – 21 people or 20.59%;

c/ 41 – 50 years – 28 people or 27.45%;

d/ 51+ years – 36 people or 35.29%

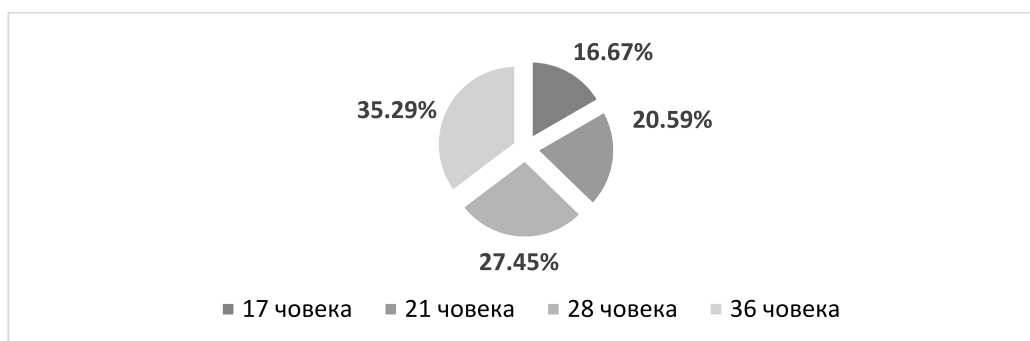


Figure 3. Age structure of the respondents

4. Farmer is from:

a/ up to 5 years – 29 people or 28.43%;

b/ up to 10 years – 38 people or 37.25%;

c/ over 10 years – 35 people or 34.32%.

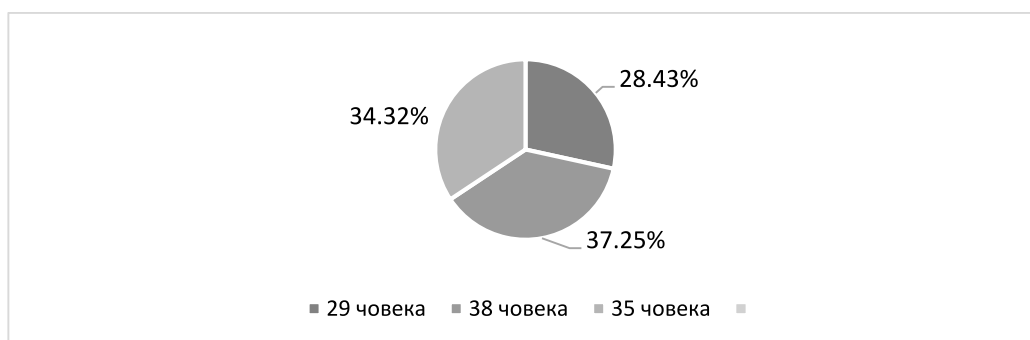


Figure 4. Farmer in years

5. Main residence:

a/ village – 74 people or 72.55%;

b/ city – 28 people or 27.45%

*Figure 5. Main residence***Section II: Specialized questions**

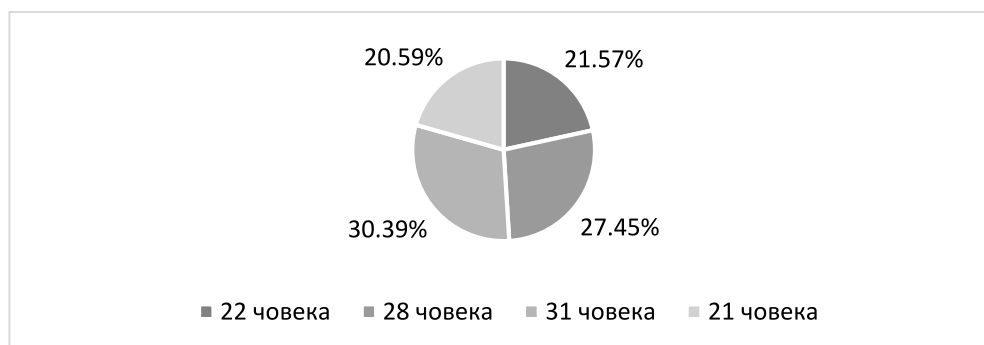
1. Question: Assessing the demographic situation on a scale of 3 to 6 points:

a/ 3 points – 22 people or 21.57%;

b/ 4 points – 28 people or 27.45%;

c/ 5 points – 31 people or 30.39%;

d/ 6 points – 21 people or 20.59%

*Figure 6. Evaluation of the demographic situation on a scale of 3 to 6 points*

2. Question: With a rating of 3 points, the reasons are:

a/ reduction of the population – 22 people or 100%;

b/ depopulation of populated areas – 6 people or 27.27%.



Figure 7. Reasons for rating 3 points

3. Question: With a rating of 4 points, the reasons are:
 a/ sustainability of the population – 17 people or 60.71%;
 b/ presence of young people – 21 people or 75.00%.



Figure 8. Reasons for rating 4 points

4. Question: With a rating of 5 points, the reasons are:
 a/ settlement of people – 22 people or 70.97%;
 b/ young people in agricultural business – 18 people or 58.06%.

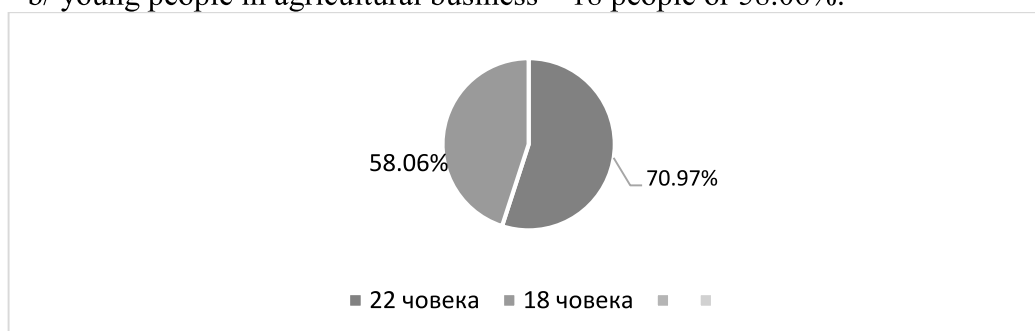


Figure 9. Reasons for rating 5 points

5. Question: With a score of 6 points, the reasons are:
 a/ good birth rates – 11 people or 52.38%;
 b/ purchase of rural properties – 15 people or 71.43%.

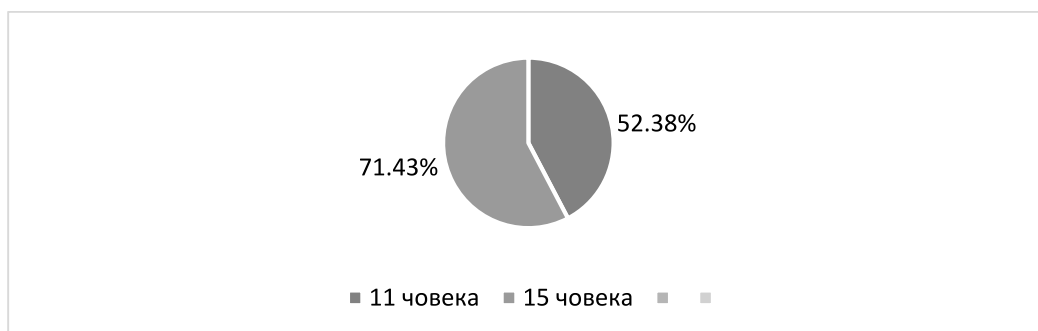


Figure 10. Reasons for rating 6 points

6. Question: It is difficult to engage a labor resource in the agricultural business:

a/ yes – 52 people or 50.98%;

b/ no – 32 people or 31.37%;

c/ not always – 18 people or 17.65%.

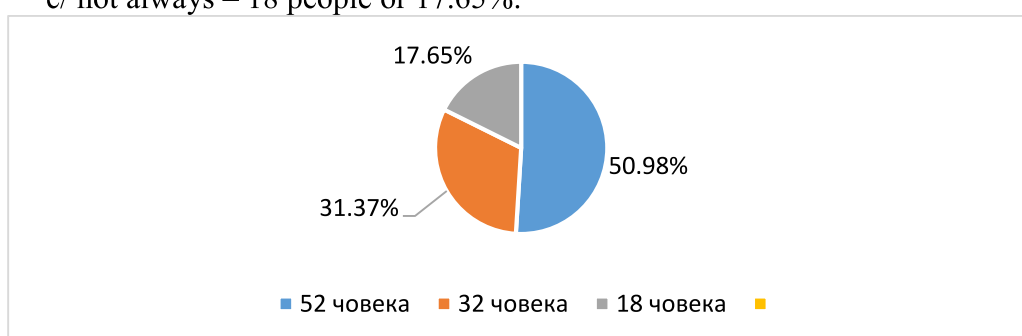


Figure 11. It is difficult to engage labor resources in agricultural business

7. Question: The difficulties are:

a/ quantitative shortage of labor force – 36 people or 69.23%;

b/ lack of qualified workforce – 42 people or 80.77%.



Figure 12. The difficulties are

8. Question: Relationship between labor shortage and the demographic situation:
 a/ yes – 32 people or 61.54%;
 b/ no – 20 people or 38.46%.



Figure 13. Relationship between labor shortage and the demographic situation

9. Question: Arguments "for" the connection "labour shortage-demographic situation":
 a/ depopulation – 21 people or 65.63%;
 b/ aging – 15 people or 46.88%.

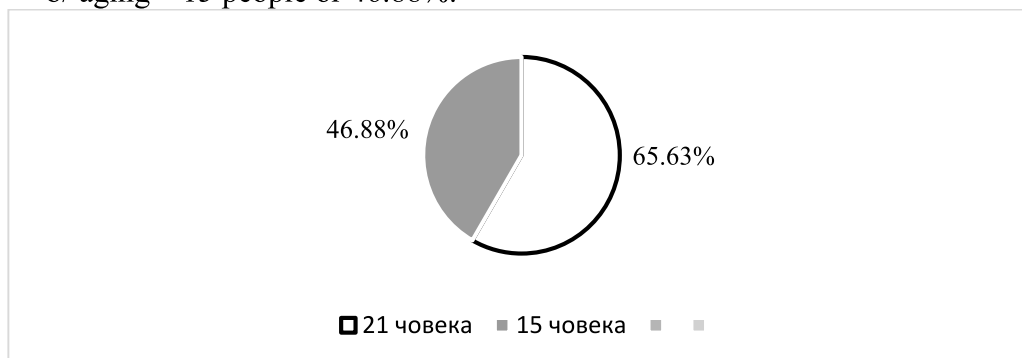


Figure 14. Arguments "for" the connection "labour shortage-demographic situation"

10. Question: The improvement of the demographic situation in rural areas should be:
 a/ element of national agrarian policy – 69 people or 67.65%;
 b/ element of national demographic policy – 58 people or 56.86%;
 c/ both – 83 people or 81.37%.

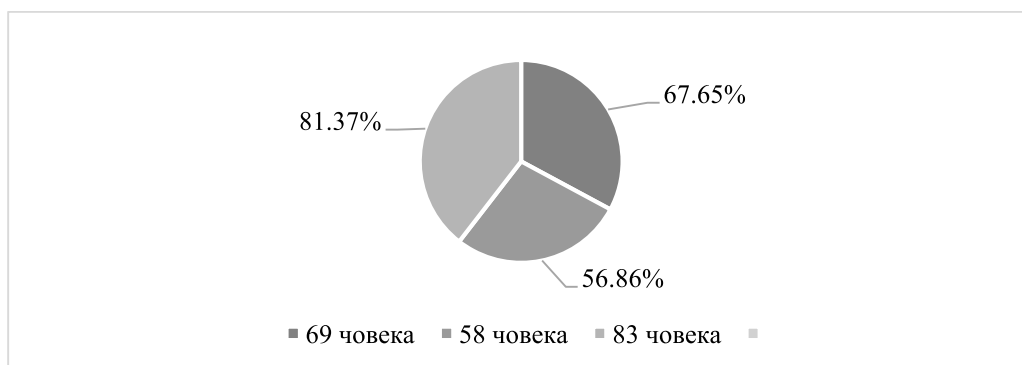


Figure 15. Improving the demographic situation in rural areas

Conclusions

The studied literature on the subject, the statistical data and the summarized results of the survey, impose the following conclusions:

1. Rural areas in Bulgaria are in an unstable demographic situation, the main reason for which is a decrease in the absolute number of the population and corresponding depopulation of settlements;
2. Some more optimistic assessments of the demographic situation are justified by the presence of young people, respectively young people in the agricultural business, settlement of rural areas, purchase of rural properties, etc.;
3. The demographic situation from the point of view of its unsustainability is also a negative factor for creating a sustainable labor resource in rural areas. It is difficult to engage labor resources in the agricultural business, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in terms of qualifications;
4. The opinion is forced that the improvement of the demographic situation in rural areas should be both an element of the national agrarian policy and an element of the national demographic policy.

Based on the above, the following recommendations can be made regarding the development of a new vision on the impact of the demographic crisis in rural areas:

1. Overcoming the demographic crisis in rural areas must be tied to a mandatory package of measures in the following main strategic documents – national demographic strategy (www.mlsp.government.bg), national strategy for regional development (www.mrrb.bg), national security strategy (www.mod.bg) and rural development program (www.mzh.government.bg);
2. Filling the labor vacuum, including highly qualified in rural areas, could be implemented through the application of digitization and digitization in the agricultural sector, for example, the two programs currently in operation: intelligent plant breeding and intelligent animal breeding;

3. It is also necessary to impose a differentiated approach regarding the demographic situation for each rural area separately in view of its specifics and needs for demographic potential and workforce and on this basis formulating and undertaking specific measures to overcome the negative effect of the demographic crisis and building resilience in rural areas.

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3. National Strategy for Regional Development (NSRD) of the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2012 – 2022, developed by the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works;

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